

# A confidential dispatch from Newport (June 10, 1772)\*

\* Written in  
May, 1972

By GARRETT D. BYRNES

From Newport, in the  
*Colony of Rhode Island and  
Providence Plantations,*  
in New England, 10 June 1772.

To the editors of the  
*LONDON GAZETTE:*

WHAT follows is not intended for publication, but for your eyes alone. Intelligence reaching Newport late today reports that the revenue schooner *HMS Gaspee* was destroyed last night in upper Narragansett Bay by persons unknown and her master, Lt. William Dudingston sorely wounded.

Your correspondent in this colony, as soon as more facts are known, will send them to you with all dispatch for publication. There is bound to be an investigation of this latest affront to His Majesty but, the people of the Colony being what they are, little will come of it.

In the meantime, this confidential report on the situation here will enable you to evaluate more precisely the intelligences which are sure to follow. The *Gaspee* affair is related directly to the rise in feeling here against Parliament. Rather than send this situation information by way of the regular monthly mail packet out of New York, I am entrusting it to David Shand of the snow *Tristram*, one of two vessels regularly engaged in passenger and freight voyages between this colony and England. Captain Shand, as soon as his vessel arrives in London, will deliver this to you in person.

This colony numbers about 59,000 souls, including about 1,400 Indians and 3,600 Negroes, most of whom are slaves. The Indians are either indentured servants or live on their own lands in Charlestown in King's County.

*Garry Byrnes, in an earlier incarnation, apparently was the Newport correspondent of The London Gazette.*

The whites, for the most part, are much given to quarreling among themselves. Most of the people are not very religious and those who are are ardent sectarians. The colony produces little wealth so the people look to the sea. They engage in some honest trading voyages to Europe, the wine islands, Africa and mostly to the southern colonies and the West Indies. They are able and fearless sea warriors and much of their wealth came from privateering or outright piracy.

In nothing more than politics does their love for contention find greater gratification. Their squabbles with the adjacent colonies of Massachusetts Bay and Connecticut over boundaries seem, at this moment, to have been resolved so they are limited to fighting among themselves over matters relating to the colony itself.

It is possible, indeed probable, that the population's disposition to and love of controversy traces back to the people who established this colony less than a century and a half ago. Many of them were malcontents and dissenters, notably people like Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, determined to achieve their own personal form of liberty.

The colony is divided into five counties — Newport, King's, Kent, Providence and Bristol. There are 28 towns, the chief of which are Newport with a population of 9,208 and Providence with 4,321.

After 65 years of quarreling with Connecticut, the western bounds of the colony were established in 1728. The eastern bounds until 25 years ago were the Blackstone and Seekonk Rivers, Narragansett Bay and the Sakonnet River. The King and Council in 1746 ended nearly 80 years of border squabbling between this colony and the Massachusetts Bay colony by adding Cumberland, Warren, Bristol, Tiverton and Little Compton to Rhode Island and Providence Plantations and two years ago, that part of Warren west of the

Warren River was set apart as a new town, Barrington.

To help you understand the degree of autonomy which the people of the colony fiercely cherish, I would remind you that the governance is under the terms of the charter granted by His Majesty Charles II on July 8, 1663. John Clarke of Newport, a divine and doctor of physic, acting as agent of the colony at Westminster, was largely responsible for its liberal terms, some believe the most liberal in any charter granted to a colony in North America by the King.

It provides not only freedom of conscience in religious concerns but a form of self government which gives the colonists a remarkable degree of independent action and this they have guarded jealously through their colonial agents in London when it was necessary. Only eight years ago, a cabal of Newport loyalists petitioned His Majesty to revoke the charter on the ground that the political freedom

## The founders of this colony were a contentious lot.

given by the charter had created vicious warring between factions. There has been much warring, indeed, but nothing came of the Tories' petition.

Political power lies in the General Assembly and election to it is always bitterly fought. Under the Royal Charter, Newport is entitled to six deputies or representatives, Providence, Portsmouth and Warwick four each, the other towns two each. In the election last month, Smithfield, Johnston and Barrington each sent only one representative. The members of the upper house are called assistants; each of the five counties elects two. The freemen elect the governor and other general officers, judges and sheriffs. The militia is organized on a coun-

ty basis. The elections occur each year on the first Wednesday in May when the General Assembly sits at Newport.

This elective system of government has produced factions which fight each other viciously and venally. Only freemen may vote. Being a freeman means owning real estate worth 40 pounds or land which would rent for 40 shillings a year. The eldest sons of freemen also are entitled to vote. In the general election of 1770, there were 3,662 voters, only 38 per cent of those entitled to vote.

The anger of most of the colonists against taxes imposed by the Parliament at Westminster and the increasing activities of His Majesty's collectors, revenue vessels and the impressment of seamen has, in the last two or three years, tended to unify the colonists and soften the traditional political antagonisms among themselves.

Thus, the bitterness which prevailed between the followers of Samuel Ward of Westerly and Stephen Hopkins of Providence for about a dozen years after 1755 has quieted. These men are skilled in all the intricacies of politics and during the years they were at each others' throats, they divided the colony so evenly that their factions controlled the government about equally, election to election.

Ward, a Newport man by birth, was the leader of the southern half of the colony. A patrician, a large land holder and trader, he had the support of the wealth in Newport and King's County.

Hopkins from Providence was, and is, a coldly practical man whose major financial support in politics came from men like the four Brown brothers, so often called John and Josie, Nick and Mosie.

Having the power to impose rates, the faction in office placed the heaviest burden on the towns of the opposing faction and as often as not, these towns went tax delinquent, confident that after the next election, the political power would shift

and taxes could be reversed to bear on the other side.

This system of governmental control rewards the faction in power and for this reason, the factions—especially during the period when Ward fought Hopkins—sought considerable sums of money from their wealthier supporters and, one way or another, bought votes.

**I**n the century since the horrors of King Philip's War, this colony has seen a steady increase in population and a slow gain in wealth. Except for the growing spirit among a large part of the people against Parliament's imposition of a variety of taxes, a spirit of which the *Gaspee* affair is a disquieting symptom, there is a general sense of well-being here.

To finance its government, the colony in 1710 began a succession of banks, so-called, which were letters of credit or paper money. The rapid and inevitable depreciation in value of this currency prompted the learned Dr. James MacSparran of the Narragansett Church to observe, "The Nova Anglians in general, the Rhode Islanders in particular, are perhaps the only people on earth who have hit on the art of enriching themselves by running into debt."

In the last few years, this issuance of paper money has ceased and the currency is on a sounder basis. The General Assembly in 1763 established the weight and value of gold and silver coins and these standards prevail but trading is a matter of some complexity because of the variety of this coinage — English crowns and half crowns, shillings, six pence, Spanish milled dollars, half and quarter dollars, the five Moidore piece, the Double Johannes, Doubloon or four Pistole piece, Two-and-a-half Moidore, Moidore, Guinea, the half Moidore and half Guinea, the half Johannes, and so on down to the English farthing and half-penny.

Much of the trading is by simple barter, especially by the farmers who exchange their tobacco, flax,

►9



## DISPATCH

# Smugglers do well here

Indian corn and other produce for goods in the towns.

After the two ships *Tristram*, Captain Shand, and *Providence*, Captain Gilbert, arrived in the colony from England in April, the merchants of Newport, Providence and East Greenwich quickly offered for sale a variety of imports — garden seeds, broad cloths, mantuas, gloves, stockings, calicoes and chints, muffs and tippets, pins, spices, gilt buttons, table knives and forks, long and short clay pipes, felt hats, nails from two penny to 24 penny, and a wide range of books including Bibles and Testaments, arithmetics, books on navigation, Aesop's *Fables*, Watts's *Psalms*, Clark on *The Attributes of God*, account books and writing paper.

The sea trade of the colony is principally to southern colonies on the main and to the Caribbean islands, but there are also a few voyages to Great Britain and Ireland, southern Europe and the wine islands. During the past year, imports recorded at the custom house here included coffee, molasses, brown sugar, cocoa, cotton, hides, limes, salt, rum and seven Negroes.

Outgoing cargoes to foreign ports included pearl and pot ash, cranberries, horns (9,200), bar and pig iron, ivory and mahogany (transhipped

### Imports included coffee, rum, salt and seven Negroes.

from other ports), tar, turpentine, rice, rum, whale fins, oak and pine boards, barrel staves, spermaceti candles, furniture, bread and flour and beeswax.

The sea captains of the colony are much given to smuggling which accounts for the presence of several of His Majesty's ships in Rhode Island waters. The Rhode Island mariners also openly traded with the enemy during the recent war with the French and Indians and used that period of conflict to legitimize their frequent and profitable sorties as privateers and pirates.

The most profitable marine ventures aside from privateering have

been the voyages to the African coast where rum distilled in the many still houses in Providence and Newport is exchanged for slaves which are traded in the West Indies for sugar and molasses which in turn are brought to Rhode Island to make rum for the subsequent voyage. About half the imported molasses is used for sweetening or to make homemade beer.

The streams in the colony provide power for many saw mills, grist mills and fulling mills. On the outskirts of the town of Providence is a paper mill. Southwest of Providence, the four Brown brothers have a forge called Hope Furnace which turns bog iron into anchors, cannon, kettles and pig iron. There is another furnace near East Greenwich at Potowomut. The lime for the forges comes from the village of Limerock where the supply is plentiful.

The Rhode Islanders build their ships in Providence, Newport and on the Pettaquamscutt River in South Kingstown. The cordage for the vessels comes mostly from the several rope walks in Newport. The timbers and planking for these vessels come from the woodlands west of the Narragansett Bay.

In Providence and Newport, factories make hundreds of spermaceti candles and much of the case matter for these comes from the whale fishery at Nantucket. The candle makers recently organized a cartel which controls the price paid for the head matter as well as the finished candles.

To round out my report on trade and commerce here, it may be helpful to you in London to know what the prices are for some common commodities. *The Providence Gazette and Country Journal* recently gave these prices current:

By the bushel—wheat, five shillings; rye, three shillings nine pence; Indian corn, three shillings; flaxseed, three shillings; salt, two and eight; potatoes, one shilling; oats, one and four.

By the hundredweight—flour, 18 shillings; ship bread, 16 and 6; sugar, 36 to 50 shillings.

By the gallon—West Indies rum,

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## DISPATCH

## 'After several snowfalls in March, upwards

two and six; New England rum, one and eight; molasses, one and six; linseed oil, four shillings.

By the barrel—beef, 40 shillings; pork, 72 shillings; cyder, 12 shillings; turpentine, 13 and 6; soft soap, 15 shillings.

By the pound—Bohea tea, five and eight; coffee, one and two-and-a-half; chocolate, one and six; butter, seven to nine pence; hog's lard, six pence; bayberry wax, nine pence.

By the box—spermaceti candles, one and nine; tallow candles, 7 ½ pence; soap, 5 ½ pence.

By the ton—pig iron, six pounds 12 shillings; bar iron, 24 pounds; spermaceti brown oil, 20 pounds; hay, 48 to 60 shillings.

By the cord—walnut wood, 12 shillings; oak, 10 and 6.

Getting from place to place in the colony, as it has been from the beginning, is most comfortably done by boat. There is a regular packet service between Newport and Providence. In April, Capt. Benjamin Lindsey announced that his new sloop *Joseph* during the summer would make fortnightly trips between Providence and New York.

From Newport, two ferries cross to Jamestown and west of that island, a north and a south ferry connect with the main, carrying men and beasts. At the north end of Aquidneck, Howland's ferry crosses the Sakonnet River to Tiverton and another ferry gives passage to Bristol. There is ferry service between Warren and Barrington and also between Rehoboth and Providence at Narrow Passage on the Seekonk River.

Travel by road is mostly by horseback. The roads are poor and rocky but there is stage coach service once each week between Providence and Boston. The stage travels the post road, crossing from Massachusetts Bay to Rhode Island over the bridge at the great falls of Pawtucket. This bridge was damaged by the spring floods; the General Assembly a month ago authorized 90 pounds for repairing it, providing that Massachusetts Bay colony repair the abutment on its side of the river.

From Newport, there are east and west main roads to the north end of the island. Crossing the ferry to

Bristol, the road follows the old trail of the Wampanoags through Warren and Barrington to the narrow passage ferry and into the town of Providence. Travelers going west from Newport cross the Jamestown ferries and arrive at Tower Hill where there is a tavern much esteemed. Benjamin Franklin considers it one of the best between Boston and New York. Accommodations at the ferry houses are indifferent and travelers are well advised to carry their own victuals and drink.

From Tower Hill, the post road west goes through the pleasant Narragansett country, following the old path of the Pequot Indians.

The road south from Providence is well traveled and follows the Pequot Path through Pawtuxet, East Green-

wich and Updike's Harbor to Tower Hill. Through the hilly country west and north of Providence, the roads are rocky and many farmers wait for the heavy snows and then take their produce to market. After several falls of snow in early March this year, upwards of 300 sleds arrived in Providence on a single day.

From Providence, roads run west through Coventry and Voluntown to Norwich and New London; through Plainfield and Canterbury to Hartford; through Smithfield, Gloucester, Killingly, Sturbridge and North Hampton to Albany; and through Belchertown, Northfield, Cornish and Lebanon to Dartmouth College.

The postal service improved greatly after Benjamin Franklin became deputy postmaster-general in 1753.

Post riders carry the mail between Boston and Newport by way of Providence in both directions on Tuesdays and Fridays. On Tuesdays at noon, a post goes west from Providence to New York and the southern colonies, returning with mail from those regions on Friday to meet the post from Boston to Newport and to give the post from Newport the mail for Boston.

The quality of living in this colony is at its best in Newport, now more prosperous than it ever has been. The town maintains a sea commerce of more than 200 vessels. The main street extends for a mile in a straight line along the harbor with the docks on the west side. At the foot of the Parade, Long Wharf, with a draw



# of 300 sleds arrived in Providence in one day'

bridge giving entrance to a sheltered cove, runs out to the Point.

The waterfront is always busy with its ferries, coasting vessels and those engaged in the foreign trade. Activities of the town center largely around the Parade, at the head of which stands the Colony House designed by Richard Munday and built in 1739-40; in this building, the General Assembly meets and court is held. At the foot of the Parade, where Long Wharf begins, is the graceful brick market building designed by Peter Harrison and completed this year after a dozen years of building. The building is open in the ground floor.

Mr. Harrison also designed the house of worship used by a large colony of wealthy Sephardic Jews who are active as ship owners, merchants and manufacturers. The synagogue was completed nine years ago.

On the hill above the town near Governor Arnold's stone mill is a

fine library, equal to any in the North American colonies. It was built in 1748 to plans drawn by Peter Harrison and stands on land contributed by Abraham Redwood, a wealthy Antigua planter now resident here. Mr. Redwood also contributed 500 pounds sterling for the purchase of books in England.

Other notable buildings are Trinity Church, the meeting house of the Seventh Day Baptists as well as many large and elegant residences occupied by the wealthy gentlemen of the town.

Providence, the second most important town in the colony, has recovered from the Indian attacks of a century ago when half the town was destroyed.

The largest building is the college edifice at the top of the hill above the Parade which is on the river where the bridge crosses to the Weybosset side. The edifice is the sole building, except for the Rev. James Man-

ning's house, of Rhode Island College which was chartered eight years ago and was first located in Warren. This colony, so given to argument and controversy, was given a chance for further dissension when the college announced it would move to the town which would contribute the most money to it.

The struggle to have the college lay between Newport and Providence, both towns pledging large sums, and Providence was chosen after the four Brown Brothers and Stephen Hopkins and their associates were able to best Newport. There are many who believe that this large college building, designed after the lines of the College of New Jersey at Princeton, is entirely too large and never will be filled.

The Colony House in Providence is a brick building erected ten years ago and near it stands a brick school house. The churches for the most part are small and at the north end

of the town. The General Assembly last year authorized a lottery for the construction of a market building on the Parade and the scheme for the lottery was published on April 28 in *The Providence Gazette and Country Journal*.

As one travels through this colony, regional differences are much apparent. The Isle of Aquidneck is a veritable garden spot because of the richness of the soil and here are located many fine country estates. It is relevant to mention that of Mr. Redwood whose gardens and orchards have a surprising variety of plants and trees and hot houses in which he grows oranges, lemons, limes and other tropical plants similar to those in his native Antigua. The original forests have largely disappeared and small coasting vessels provide Newport and the island with firewood from as far away as West-erly and Connecticut.

King's County, with its large

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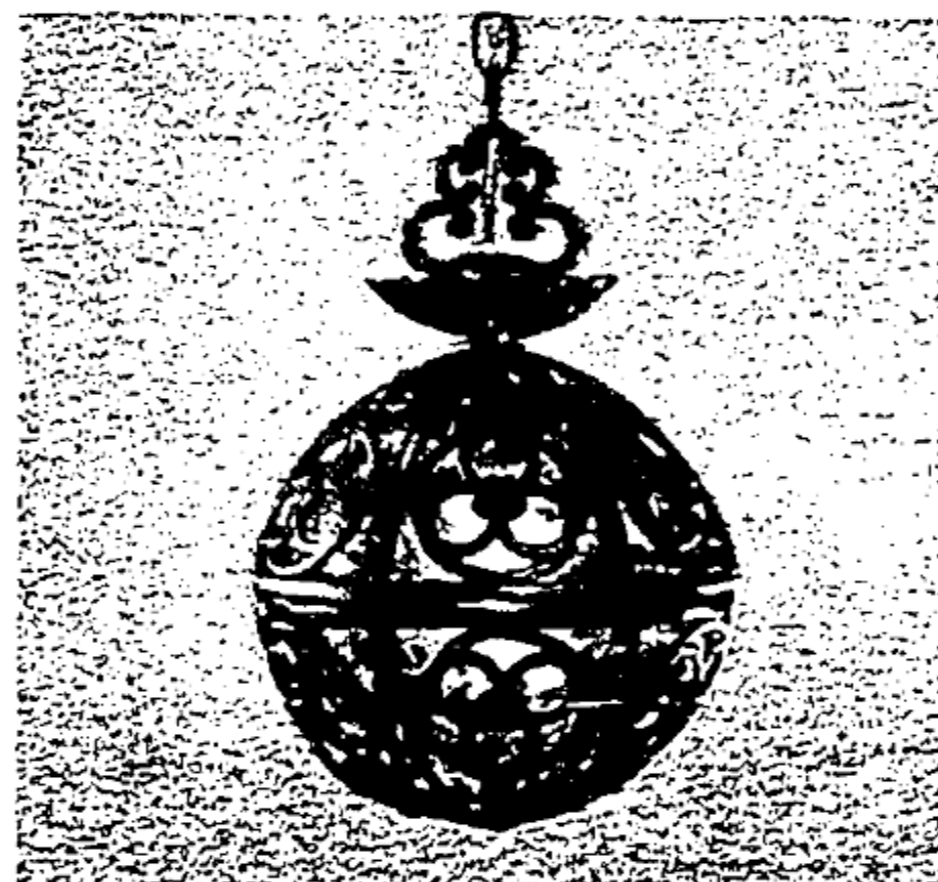
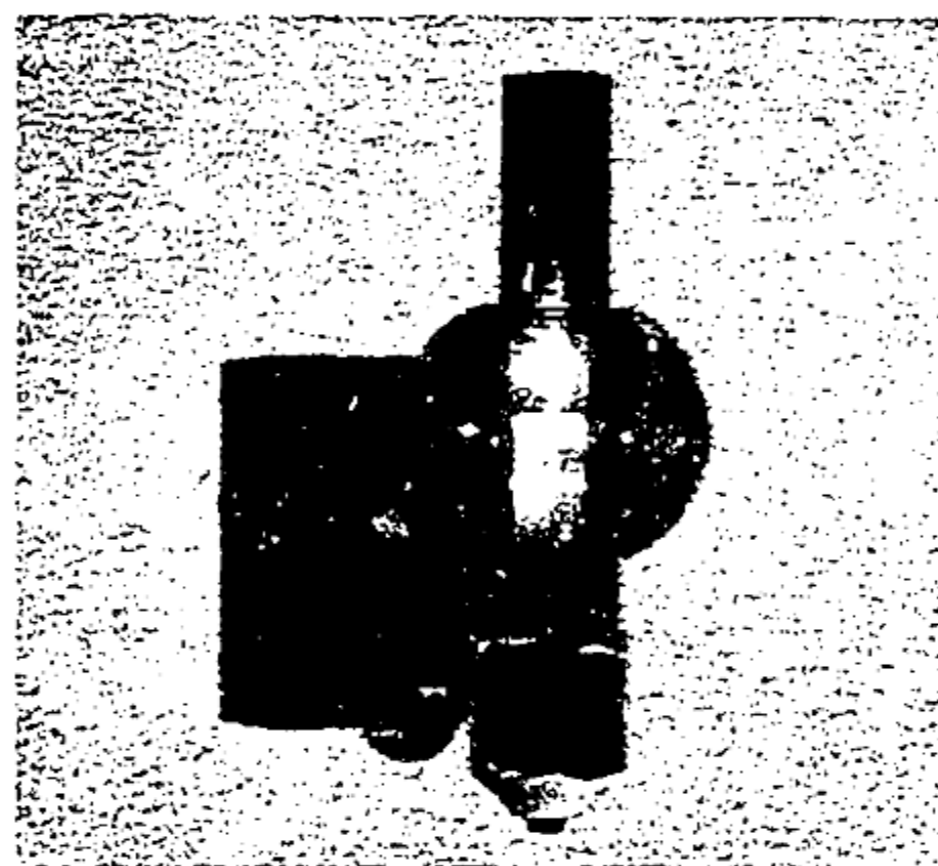
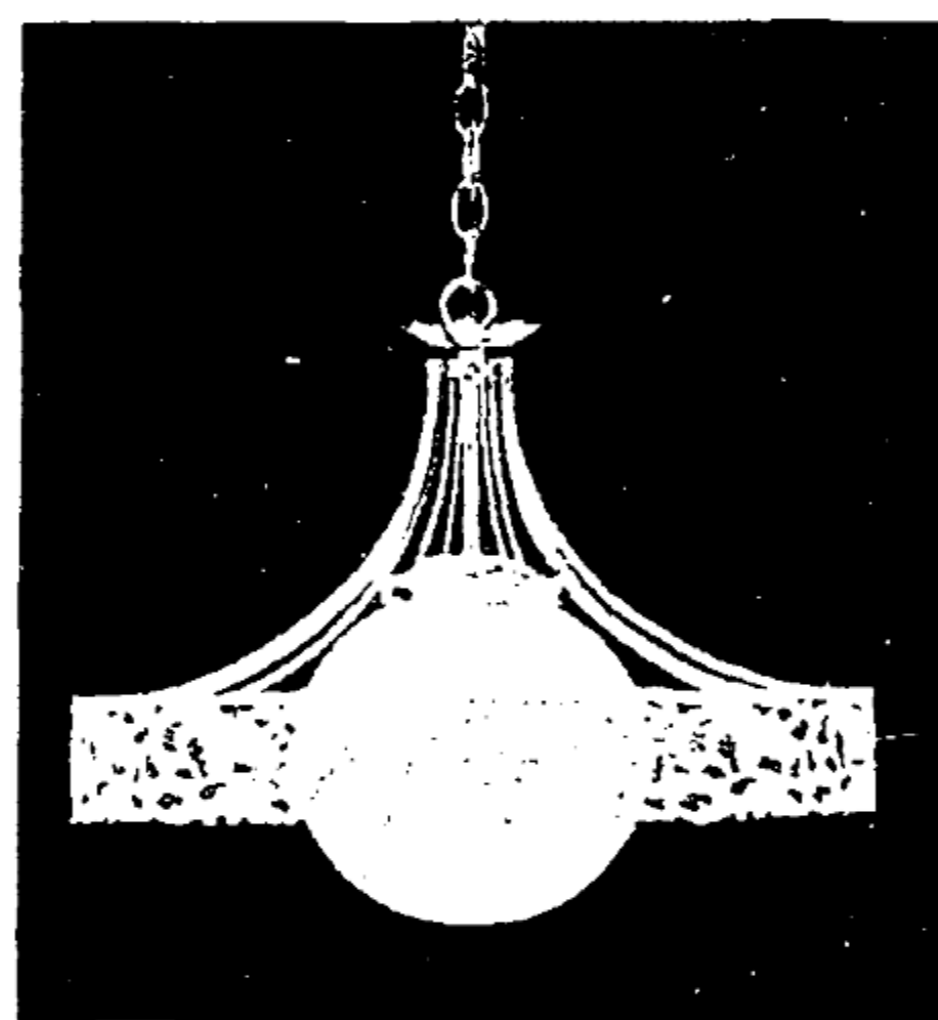
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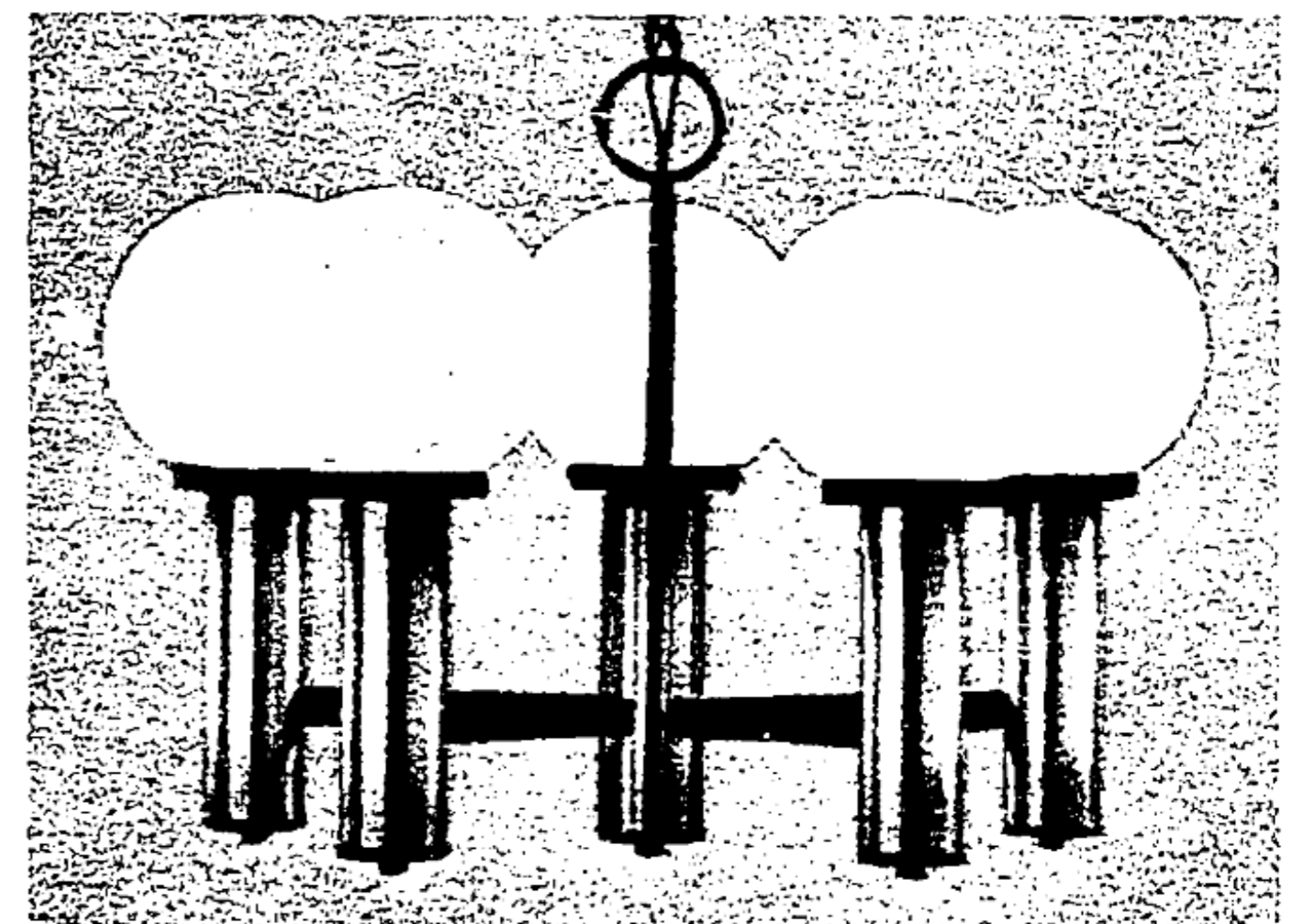
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## DISPATCH Noted for women, geese

plantations, supports a way of life which resembles that of Virginia and the Carolinas more than anything in Nova Anglia. The landed gentry here, relying on the labor of slaves, derive their wealth from field crops, dairy herds, horse breeding and sheep. Their trading and social relationships are with Newport. In the last few years, the income of the Narragansett planters has declined.

West and north of Providence, the country is niggardly but in Providence itself, there is growing evidence of wealth. The leading men here are coldly practical, extracting income from commerce at sea and manufactures at home.

Bristol County has shown allegiance in politics to the Providence persuasion. From the sea, the privateers of Bristol draw increasing wealth but some travelers remark that Bristol is most notable for its women and geese, without adding, as they always do about the women

of Newport, that they are enchanting.

The wealth of Newport and, to a lesser degree, of Providence has attracted artists and artisans of much skill. The joiners, pewterers, silversmiths and clock makers have no equal in the colonies. Newport, in Messrs. Townsend and Goddard, has furniture makers beyond compare.

Newport has had a printer since 1727 when James Franklin, brother of Benjamin, set up in business here. Providence's first printer was William Goddard in 1762. *The Newport Mercury* is a weekly newspaper now printed by Solomon Southwick and it shows more disposition to loyalty to His Majesty than does *The Providence Gazette and Country Journal*, established in 1762 and now printed by John Carter. Both of these printers publish excellent almanacs and

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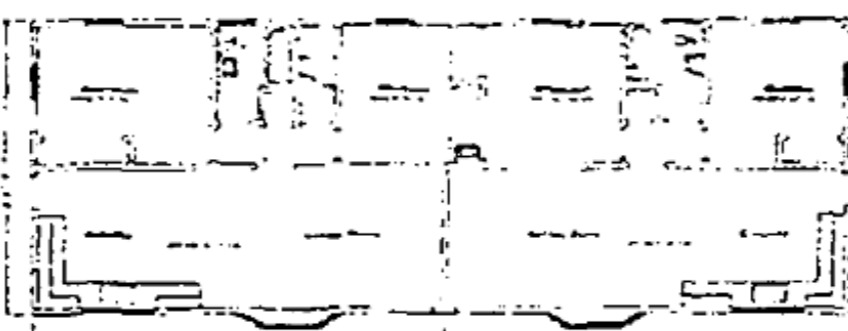


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## DISPATCH The taxes are ignored

Mr. Southwick now has ready a second edition of Capt. Benjamin Church's history of King Philip's War, edited by the Rev. Ezra Stiles with a biography of Captain Church by Mr. Stiles.

There are few schools and for that reason, most of the people are uneducated. The young men who are schooled attend private institutions, often conducted by clergymen, for which there is a scholarship fee.

The colony has had a few doctors of physic and surgery almost from the beginning. Dr. Clarke, responsible for obtaining the Royal Charter, was one of the earliest. Newport has doctors schooled in England and Scotland; several of these are Loyalists. Providence in the early years relied on Dr. Richard Bowen, across the river in Rehoboth, and his descendants have since practiced in Providence. Two years ago, Dr. Joseph Joslyn, much given to the bottle, came to East Greenwich from Scotland, and since 1740, Dr. Dutee Jerauld, who learned physic from his father in Medfield, Massachusetts Bay, has practiced in Warwick.

Of the learned men in the colony, and there are many, notably in Newport, none compares with Ezra Stiles, minister of the Second Congregational Church in this town since 1755. He is a man of strong prejudice; he cannot abide the Anglicans, worries that the Church of England will send a bishop here, and is certain, probably rightly, that there is a small group of Tories in the colony who act as secret agents, informing Westminster about the activities of those whose loyalty to the Crown is open to question. Mr. Stiles in other respects is an open-minded man who has taught himself many languages, attends the services of other sects including the Jews, keeps an excellent diary and raises silkworms. Although the hated Anglicans managed to gain control of the Redwood Library, he serves as its librarian because this gives him access to the finest collection of books in the colony.

So much for the general aspects of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations on the day after the destruction of HMS *Gaspee*. This latest affront to the Crown can be attributed primarily to the fact that the colonists here, under their liberal

charter, while giving lip service to loyalty to Britain, believe that it is their right to govern themselves.

The *Gaspee* affair is a logical and probably inevitable outcome of this belief, shared by a majority of the people of whatever political faction. The Rhode Island colonists have consistently ignored and resisted the taxes imposed on the American colonies by Parliament. The activities of His Majesty's ships have engendered much ill will here because of the impressment of Rhode Island seamen and the harassment of the colonists at sea and ashore. Frequently, landing parties from His Majesty's vessels have stolen wood, cattle and swine from the inhabitants.

Newport has seen rioting, the destruction of one of His Majesty's ships and a boat from another, the Tory partisans who sought repeal of the Royal Charter were burned in effigy on the Parade in Newport

**'Expect to receive further intelligence of disloyal acts.'**

and subsequently were obliged to flee the colony in fear for their very lives.

Symbols of the strong feeling here stand in Newport and Providence. At the north end of main street here and at the Olney tavern in Providence are Liberty Trees. The colonists gather in large numbers on the anniversary of the repeal of the hated Stamp Act at their Liberty Trees to sustain their determination to defy Parliament and to remain free to manage their own affairs.

Over many years, the people here have chosen to ignore the succession of taxes imposed upon them by Britain. Utter inaction followed General Gage's recent request for quarters in Newport for a British regiment to be sent here to enforce the laws. The papers necessary to the Stamp Act never got ashore; they remained in the hold of one of His Majesty's ships in Newport harbor.

The people of the colony love to quarrel among themselves. In their resistance to control from the Mother Country, however, they are united. So be not surprised to receive further intelligence of disloyal acts and insubordination in the days to come. **GOD SAVE THE KING!**