

# When they burned the Gaspee

For a time it appeared the flames might ignite rebellion throughout the colonies

*Some Rhode Islanders see the attack on the Gaspee as the opening of the American Revolution. Most professional historians don't go that far. However, they do see the incident as a significant step—one of many—toward independence.*

*They say that the greatest significance may be in the reaction to the burning: the threat of the Crown to take any offenders caught to England for trial sent shivers rippling throughout the colonies.*

*Joel Cohen, an assistant professor of history at the University of Rhode Island, has closely examined the burning of the Gaspee and its significance to the American Revolution. Here is his report:*

By JOEL COHEN

**ALTHOUGH** the destruction of the *Gaspee* occurred some three years prior to Lexington and Concord, it was a significant factor leading to the Revolutionary War. The musket ball which struck down the commander of the *Gaspee* may well have been an earlier "shot heard 'round the world." There can be no doubt that the *Gaspee's* demise signified the end of a period of calm and the beginning of a series of events which eventually would lead to revolution.

His Majesty's ship *Gaspee*, armed with eight guns, made its first appearance in the waters of Narragansett Bay in March, 1772. She was dispatched to Rhode Island by the Commissioners of Customs to prevent violations of the revenue laws, and to put a halt to the illicit trade which had been so successfully carried on in that Colony.

The commander of the *Gaspee*, Lieutenant William Dudingston, immediately embarked upon a vigorous enforcement program with regard to the revenue acts. However, his tactics of stopping everything afloat quickly angered the people of Rhode Island. He and his crew boarded small vessels, fired on others, stole food and animals from various farms, and, on the whole, conducted themselves in a very obnoxious and piratical manner.

The complaints from Providence people became so numerous that Deputy Governor Darius Sessions submitted the question of the legality of Dudingston's actions to Chief Justice Stephen Hopkins of the Superior Court. Hopkins did not hesitate to give his opinion, which was that Dudingston's actions were illegal, because he had not shown the Governor his warrant nor been sworn "to a due exercise of his office." Sessions then passed on this information to Governor Joseph Wanton, at Newport, who proceeded to make the Colony's complaints known to both Lieutenant Dudingston and his commanding officer in Boston, Admiral Montagu.

The Admiral quickly espoused Lieutenant Dudingston's side in the matter, and stated in a nasty and insolent letter to Governor Wanton that Dudingston's commission superseded all local jurisdiction. Governor Wanton's answer was speedy, spirited, and dignified. The exchange of correspondence among the three men indicated that little assuagement of the nuisance of the *Gaspee* could be expected through the ordinary official channels.

**O**n June 9, 1772, during the time of growing protests and rapidly rising tempers, the *Gaspee* chased the sloop *Hannah*, a Providence packet,

out of Newport harbor and up the Providence River. Not having her regular pilot on board at the time, the *Gaspee* ran aground on Namquit Point (ever since called Gaspee Point) near Pawtuxet, at about three in the afternoon. Captain Benjamin Lindsey of the *Hannah* continued to Providence and informed John Brown and other leading merchants of the *Gaspee's* predicament. Brown calculated that the *Gaspee* would not be able to free itself from the sand bar until around midnight.

John Brown and Captain Abraham Whipple quickly organized a party of townspeople who met at Sabin's Tavern to plan the destruction of the *Gaspee*. About ten o'clock that night, the Providence men, who wore no disguises but were sworn to secrecy, left Fenner's Wharf in nine long boats to carry out their mission to destroy the ship.

As they approached the *Gaspee*, the attacking party was challenged by the bow watch. Soon shots were being fired on both sides and Lieutenant Dudingston fell to the deck wounded. The ship was then quickly

**No one came forward to claim the generous reward.**

taken by the superior Providence force. Lieutenant Dudingston, whose wounds had been dressed by Dr. John Mawney from the attacking group, and his crew were then landed on the Pawtuxet shore and the vessel was burned. The Providence men then rowed home and silently dispersed.

When Governor Wanton received news of the attack on the *Gaspee*, he immediately offered a reward for information which would lead to the capture and conviction of any of the

participants. Although the reward (a hundred pounds) was a generous sum, not one person came forward in an attempt to claim it.

As one might expect, the King was quite upset over the destruction of the *Gaspee*, and took rather extraordinary measures to discover and punish the perpetrators of the deed. On August 26 George III offered 500 pounds for information leading to the conviction of each man involved in the incident, with an additional prize of 500 pounds for the two leaders of the expedition as well as for the man who shot Dudingston.

As an added inducement, the King agreed to pardon any man who took part in the affair and informed on the others. This offer, however, did not pertain to the leaders and the man who shot Dudingston. Furthermore, on September 2 the King established a committee of inquiry to investigate the *Gaspee* incident.

Two days later the King issued his instructions to the committee. First of all, they were to inquire into and report all circumstances which were related to the destruction of the *Gaspee*. Secondly, they were empowered to summon before them all persons who might have any information pertaining to the incident. Thirdly, if any offenders were discovered, they were to be sent to England for trial. Finally, the commission members were authorized to apply to General Gage and Admiral Montagu for military support and protection, if they thought it necessary.

**U**ntil then, Rhode Islanders had never been made accountable for their acts of violence upon the King's officers and vessels. Therefore, when George III established the *Gaspee* Commission with the

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# Approaching the Gaspee



## GASPEE

## 'Shocking to Humanity,' said the Gazette

power to send people to England for trial, Rhode Islanders were extremely shocked and most of their shock and anger is clearly visible in the newspapers of the time.

Before the first session of the Commission in January of 1773, the newspapers in Rhode Island began a bitter and noisy attack upon the Commission and its intended mission. The *Providence Gazette* took up the cause in December of 1772. It held that due to the established Commission, every friend of Rhode Island must be greatly alarmed. The idea of seizing people at the points of bayonets and shipping them to England for trial, "where, whether guilty or innocent, they must unavoidably fall Victims alike to Revenge or Prejudice, is shocking to Humanity, repugnant to every Dictate of Reason, Liberty and Justice, and in which Americans and Freemen ought never to acquiesce."

Newport's Henry Marchant said the matter "has opened Consequences more alarming to America, than the news of the greatest Armament that France or Spain ever boasted of being upon our coasts. . . ."

Ezra Stiles, pastor of the Second Congregational Church in Newport, noted in his diary the opinions of several prominent persons concerning the attitude of Chief Justice Hopkins. Stiles said: "Then he declared in the Assembly that if the Commissioners should apply to him to apprehend any persons for delivering to the Admiral, that he would not do it, and would use his Authority in hindering every Officer in the Colony from doing any thing to this End." Stiles asked Metcalf Bowler, who was a justice of the Superior Court, what he would do if requested by the Commission to issue a warrant for an arrest which would result in a trial in England. Bowler's reply was that "he never would do it." While the Commission was in session, many Rhode Islanders re-

fused to appear before it when summoned to do so.

Further evidence of Rhode Islanders' displeasure is visible in an incident involving Admiral Montagu. The Admiral had agreed, at the commissioners' invitation, to come to Newport and witness the proceedings, and aid them in whatever manner possible. But when he sailed into Newport harbor the men in the fort on Goat Island did not salute him. This so angered Montagu that he refused to call on Governor Wanton, and he complained to the Lords of the Admiralty.

The General Assembly of Rhode Island also had a reaction to the King's commission. A week before the commissioners arrived in Rhode Island, a motion was placed on the floor of the Assembly in which spirited action, a declaration of rights, and a denial of the jurisdiction of the commissioners were called for. The Assembly, however, postponed any decision on the motion until they

could ascertain just what the commissioners' line of action would be. Two weeks later the Assembly agreed, after a heated debate, to leave the whole question alone.

After two sessions of inquiry into the affair of the *Gaspee*, the King's commissioners had uncovered very little useful information. The people of Rhode Island had remained understandably quiet about the circumstances. The Commission, after meeting with the judges of the Rhode Island Superior Court, unanimously agreed that whatever evidence they had collected was insufficient to warrant any seizures. Thus, the commissioners made out their report for the King and adjourned for good on June 23, 1773.

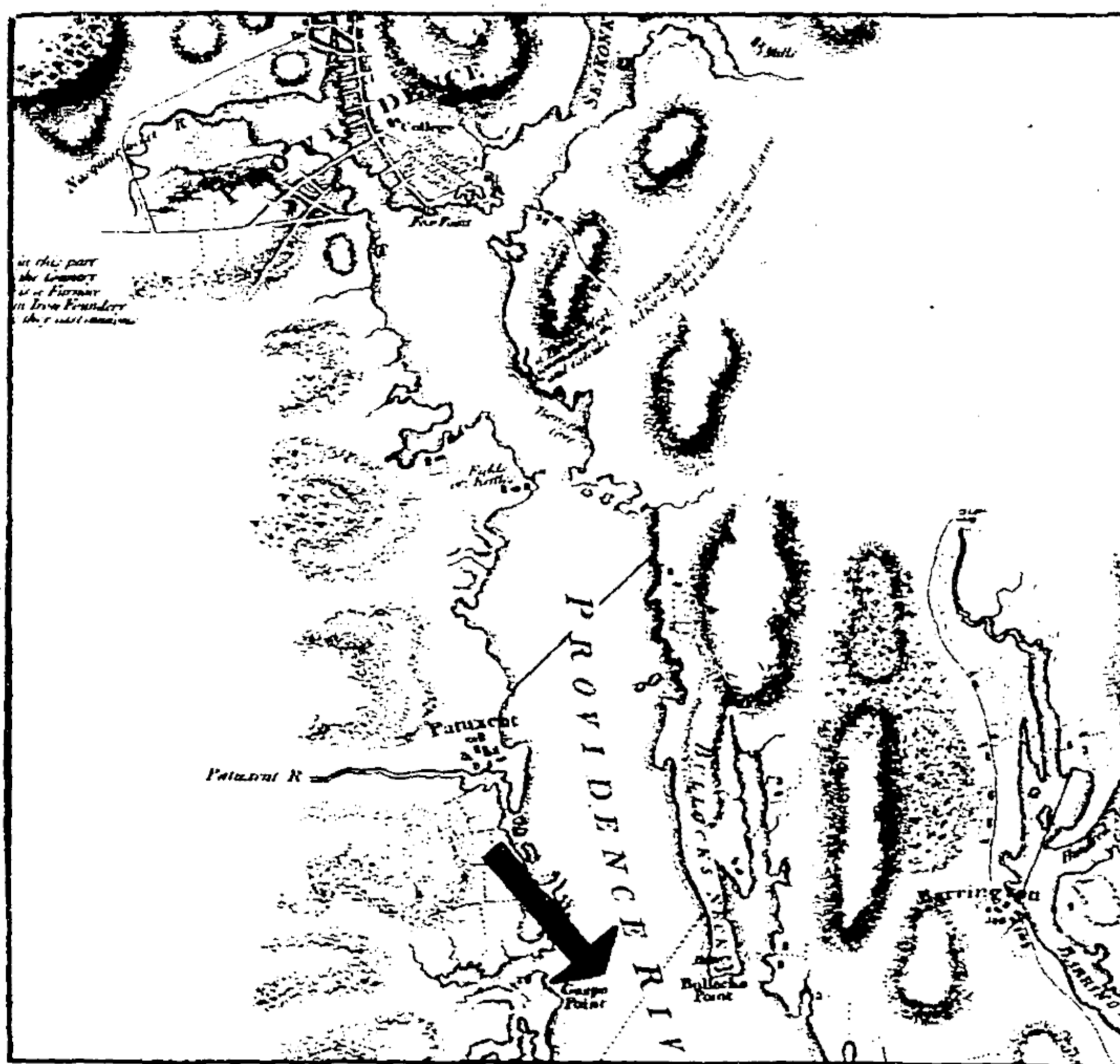
Throughout the colonies the *Gaspee* incident and the King's Commission created quite a stir. It led to the creation of legislative committees of correspondence and to the

adoption by colonial assemblies of resolutions which were to move the Americans one step closer to union and independence.

In Virginia the House of Burgesses on March 12, 1773 appointed an eleven-man "Committee of Correspondence and Inquiry." Consisting of men such as Thomas Jefferson, Patrick Henry and Richard Henry Lee, the committee was instructed "to obtain the most early and authentic intelligence of all such acts, and resolutions of the British Parliament, or proceedings of the administration, as may relate to, or affect the British colonies in America; and to keep and maintain a correspondence with our sister colonies, respecting these important considerations; and the result of such their proceedings from time to time to lay before the House." They were further enjoined "to inform themselves particularly of the principles and authority on which was constituted a court of inquiry, said to have been lately held in Rhode Island, with power to transport persons accused of offences committed in America, to places beyond the sea to be tried."

By the end of 1773 ten of the colonies, including Rhode Island, had followed Virginia's lead and created their own Committees of Correspondence. The committees did not play a very major role in the movement for independence because subsequent events witnessed the transfer of power to revolutionary conventions, congresses, committees and mobs. However, they served as a symbol of America's growing disenchantment with the mother country.

Thus it was that the incident of the *Gaspee* awakened the sympathy of colonists from New Hampshire to Georgia, and helped in stirring them to resistance against England. Slowly but surely Americans were moving toward freedom, and the *Gaspee* affair was an important event in the series of actions which ultimately led to independence. □



SCENE of the action from the Blaskowitz chart of 1777.