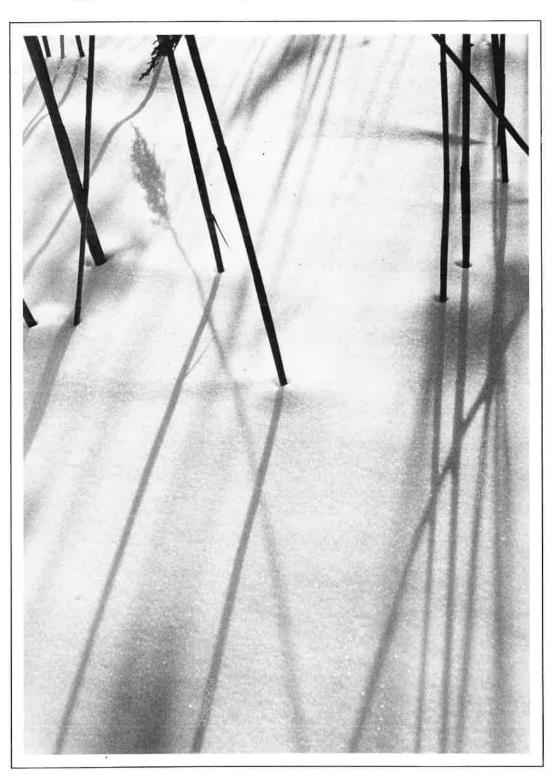# *Rhode Island* review

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by James Anderson

In many ways the state of Rhode Island is the forgotten patriot of America's struggle for independence from Great Britain. Our state was the first to renounce its allegiance to the mother country on May 4, 1776, but even before that the fight for freedom had begun. In 1764 the British ship *Saint John* was fired upon in Newport, and the burning of the *Gaspee* in 1772 was one of the first instances of aggression against England. In 1775 Providence had its own tea party as patriots burned three hundred pounds of tea in Market Square.
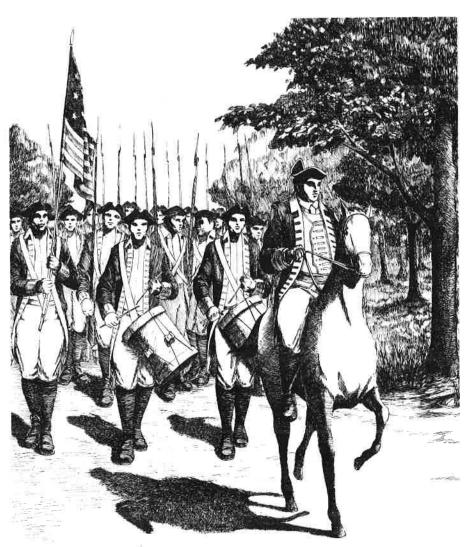
In most contemporary history books little mention is made of Rhode Island's efforts in the Revolutionary War; however, this state suffered the ravages of war for three years while the British occupied the city of Newport and Aquidneck Island. The Battle of Rhode Island, fought in 1778 at Portsmouth, was one of the fiercest battles of the early Revolution, with one fifth of the soldiers involved sustaining casualties.

The occupation of Newport began in December of 1776 when a powerful British fleet appeared in Narragansett Bay and invaded Aquidneck Island. Over 8,000 Redcoats landed at Newport, forcing hundreds of loyal patriots to leave their homes and flee to the mainland.

No sooner was the island taken by the British than plans were drawn to drive the invaders from Rhode Island shores. Troops from all over New England gathered in Tiverton and were quartered at Fort Barton on Tiverton Heights. Colonial lookouts were stationed at High Hill, south of Fort Barton, from which a view of British activities on Aquidneck Island could be observed. Later, a small fort and three cannons were placed on High Hill. Nearby Gould Island was also fortified with a battery of cannon which came to be known as the "Owl's Nest."

Although the proposed action to rid Newport of its unwanted British tenants did not come about until 1778, a number of raids and tactics of harrassment kept the colonists busy in the meantime. Perhaps the most daring of these raids was commanded by Colonel William Barton. With six officers and thirty-six volunteers he left Tiverton and slipped by the enemy's defenses on Portsmouth. He divided his forces and secretly entered the house of General Prescott, commander of the British troops. Prescott was captured and brought to Warwick

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Cove by the courageous Col. Barton.

The British were quick to strike back, however. With five hundred troops the Redcoats landed on the shores of Bristol, where they terrorized the inhabitants, vandalized property, and killed livestock. Finally, Colonel Barton arrived with two hundred volunteers and drove the British back to Portsmouth.

Help arrived for the colonists on July 29, 1778 when the French fleet, commanded by Count D'Estaing, appeared off the coast of Newport and blockaded the British in Narragansett

Bay. On July 30th two French frigates entered the Sakonnet River, trapping three British galleys. When the British attempted a retreat, they were caught by cannonfire from High Hill. One of the galleys, the *Kingfisher*, was hit by cannonfire. Her crew blew up her powder magazines and abandoned ship; for more than a hundred years her rotting timbers could still be seen near the shore of High Hill. The remaining two galleys were burned by their crews rather than be taken by the French.

Rhode Island added a new dimen-

sion to warfare by enlisting Negro slaves in the Continental Army. These Negro volunteers were given their complete freedom, as well as the wages and benefits of the army. They were called the "Black Regiment", and were commanded by Colonel Christopher Greene, cousin to Nataniel Greene.

With the arrival of the French allies, plans were made to recapture Aquidneck Island. On the morning of August 10, 1778, American troops left Fort Barton and crossed the narrow channel in boats that had been gathered from all over southern New England for the purpose. While American and French troops massed on Portsmouth, a new British fleet appeared off the Rhode Island coast. French warships left the bay to meet it, and both fleets were caught in a terrible storm just as they joined battle.

Both the French and the British suffered damage from the battle and the storm, and both fleets left Rhode Island shores for repairs. The French ships sailed to Boston, leaving the Colonial troops at Portsmouth to fend for themselves.

On August 29, 1778, "The Battle of Portsmouth" took place at Portsmouth. Most of the fighting occured between Butts Hill and Turkey Hill. The "Black Regiment", stationed near Butts Hill, held their positions and turned back Major Lossberg's Hessian troops, inflicting heavy los-

ses upon the enemy. The battle raged throughout the day, leaving the Americans with the superior position by nightfall. The patriots had withstood the powerful British attack.

But without the French fleet to back them up, hopes of a successful invasion of Newport were destroyed. The two armies maintained their positions on August 30th and exchanged cannon fire as the day wore on. That night the American troops retreated across the bay and returned to Fort Barton. When the smoke had cleared and the action was over, there were 657 American casualties, and 1,023 British.

Although the Battle of Rhode Island was not decisive in itself, it did prove that the patriots could stand up against a superior British force and inflict heavy casualties. This was a boost to morale that the Colonial Army badly needed in 1778.

It is interesting to note some of the famous heroes of the American Revolution who were in Rhode Island during the campaign of 1778. General John Sullivan of Massachusetts was the Commander-In-Chief of the Colonial forces. The French hero, the Marquis de Lafayette, and Rhode Island's own Nathaniel Greene were his assistants. John Hancock, first president of the Continental Congress was here, along with Paul Revere and Captain Stephen Olney (the Rhode Islander who led his troops over the British

defense at Yorktown, an action resulting in the British troops' surrender to Washington).

Although the attempt to drive the British from Newport failed, Rhode Islanders remained active until the enemy left of its own accord in October of 1779. In October of 1778 Major Silias Talbot, in command of a small sloop and sixty men, captured the British galley *Pigot*, a two hundred ton vessel armed with eight heavy guns. In a daring raid, Talbot boarded the ship and captured her without any loss of life.

Today many of the historic sights of Rhode Island can still be seen by anyone interested enough to find them. Fort Barton is well preserved, with informative plaques, a reconstructed viewing tower, and a beautiful hiking trail for those interested in nature. High Hill still exists, though it is privately owned. The fort at Butts Hill is intact also; however, its poor appearance is an injustice to those brave men who died there. Along route 114 in Portsmouth is a well deserved memorial to the "Black Regiment" of Rhode Island, the freed slaves who fought so courageously for their newly adopted country.

Indeed, these historic places and the events that occurred there should not be forgotten; they should remain as a reminder to all Americans of the large part this small state played in the struggle for freedom.

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