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**Washington's First  
Visit to Rhode Island**

R. I. Hist. Soc.



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## Washington's First Visit to Rhode Island

**G**EORGE WASHINGTON enjoyed many pleasant associations with Rhode Islanders of his time. He made four journeys to the colony which had the distinction of taking many initial steps in the direction of independence, and which took a leading part in the struggle which culminated in splendid victory. His able counselor, closest military associate and the second in command of the Continental army was Nathanael Greene, the son of a Coventry blacksmith; one of his most intimate friends and distinguished colleagues was Stephen Hopkins, most illustrious Providence citizen of all times; the great delineator of the Washington features and figure was Gilbert Stuart, talented son of a North Kingston snuff maker; and the circle of Washington's intimate friends, ardent supporters and loyal patriots includes a great host of names familiar to the student of Rhode Island and national history. The letters which Washington wrote to the Governors of the Colony and to others prominent in the activities of those stirring days clearly show, upon perusal, that he held a high regard for the friendships made here as a guest, and for those made later as he continued in the service of his country. The presence of Count de Rochambeau's army in Newport, the many activities of Lafayette in and near Rhode Island, and the ready re-



sponse of all local citizens to the wishes and desires of the Commander-in-chief, who later became their President, should offer unlimited opportunities to trace, with the promise of interesting discoveries, the many connecting links between Washington and Rhode Island.

Washington first enjoyed Rhode Island hospitality in the year 1756 when he stopped for a day or so in Newport on his way from New York to Boston. Unfortunately very little documentary evidence has been uncovered as yet regarding this visit which was made at the time when he held the rank of Colonel in the Virginia militia. The events leading up to that journey, the record of the amusing incident which apparently took place on his twenty-fourth birthday, the identity of his Newport host, and a description of the palatial estate where he was entertained offer sufficient material, however, to piece out a fairly complete description of the itinerary taken.

On February 20, 1755, General Braddock arrived in Virginia from England in command of two thousand crack British soldiers. The Englishman soon heard of the intrepid young soldier of Mount Vernon and immediately asked that Washington become "one of his family" in the renewed campaign against the French and their Indian allies. Washington accepted and reported for duty. Throughout the disastrous expedition which ended in defeat for the English and death for Braddock, George Washington fought with gal-

lantry and escaped unhurt, despite the fact that he had four bullets pierce his coat and two horses shot from under him.

Washington then thought that his military career had come to an end, but soon he was asked by Virginia to raise a regiment of sixteen companies, with himself in command. He began to recruit and mobilize troops at Alexandria and Fredericksburg; he requested that his officers be smartly dressed and his troops well equipped. At this time there was considerable dissatisfaction among the Colonial officers over the King's order that royal commissions should, at all times, outrank those authorized in the Colonies. Thus, as Colonel of the Virginia forces, Washington must take orders and commands from a royal officer of inferior rank. For several months after he took command of his regiment, Washington experienced embarrassment because of this unfair regulation. A certain English captain had been sent to Virginia for service and, although he was actually a provincial officer, he claimed that his former commission as a British regular gave him rank superior to any Colonial officer. This particular individual opposed Washington at every turn, claiming that the Virginia Colonel was subordinate to him, and asserting that he had full control of all ammunition and supplies.

Washington stood this exasperating state of affairs as long as he could and finally, at the request of his fellow officers, he made a journey to Boston to lay the case before

General William Shirley, then commander-in-chief of His Majesty's forces in America. He set out on this trip Wednesday, February 4, 1756, arrived in Philadelphia on the following Sunday, and spent several days of sight-seeing in that city. The next stop was New York where he also remained for a few more days, all of which were taken up with delightful excursions and viewing the wonders of the great metropolis. Two days before his twenty-fourth birthday he continued on his journey to Boston by way of New London and Newport, and in the latter place was entertained at the home of Godfrey Malbone, Senior.

The exact route followed by Washington on his journey to Newport from New York is still somewhat in doubt although Sparks the historian definitely includes New London in the itinerary. There is no doubt as to his presence in Newport several days later since, in his own handwriting, he made a most amusing entry in the expense account of his trip. Among the Washington manuscripts in the Library of Congress can be found, among the items for February, 1756, the following record of cash expenditures which has a definite connection with Newport:

"By cash to Mr. Malbones servants	£4	Rhode
to a Bowle broke.....	£4	Island
	£8	in Virga
		Cury"

Sparks also recorded that Washington

passed through Providence on this same trip but there are no other references to this point. He may have traveled by horseback from New York as far as the Conanicut ferry landing in Rhode Island and crossed to Newport by water or he may have taken the long way around to that destination by way of Providence. The latter route seems improbable since he had no particular reason for visiting Newport except to make a social call. The same theory applies to the last leg of the journey, which took him from Newport to Boston. At that time Providence was not an important town, and unless Washington had some particular reason for visiting it, he probably would not, on leaving Newport, make the detour to that town. He very likely took a direct route to Boston, crossing at Bristol Ferry and Miles Bridge, avoiding the ferry at Warren, through Swansea and Rehoboth, leaving Providence on the left, and avoiding the ferry over the Seekonk River. Washington stopped at Cromwell's Tavern in Boston; presented his case to General Shirley, who sustained him in his contention regarding the relative ranks of royal and provincial officers; he made many friends among those he met in Boston including John Adams, and he returned promptly to his command in Virginia.

The broken bowl incident suggests that Washington's stay-over as a guest of Godfrey Malbone in Newport might have included a jovial birthday party since the host



was the envied leader of society at that time; he entertained his friends lavishly and, it was said, he always set a princely table. Col. Malbone was a native of Prince Anne County, Virginia, and his home was near the city of Norfolk. He came to Rhode Island about 1700 and he was a man of sturdy frame and character. In early life he ran away to sea and became bound out as an apprentice to a ship-master. During this apprenticeship, by the death of one of his relatives, he became entitled to large holdings of land in Virginia. He finally settled in Newport where he married a Margaret Scott and soon became an eminently successful and highly respected merchant. His home, where Washington visited, was built about the middle of the century and it was pronounced the most splendid edifice in all the Colonies. It was built of stone, two stories high, and the roof was surmounted with a cupola which commanded an extensive view of the ocean and Narragansett Bay.

The Malbone farm comprised several hundreds of acres extending north to Coddingtong's Cove and the place was, for many years, the resort of all the gay, fashionable and wealthy folks of the Colony. It was recorded that the gardens adjacent to the great mansion were laid out in an enchanting manner, and that they embraced ten acres lined with graveled walks, and that they were beautifully ornamented with fruit trees of the rarest and choicest kinds, flowers, and shrubbery of every description. Three arti-

facial ponds, with silver fish sporting in the water, gave to the place a most romantic appearance. It is easy to picture young Washington, on this combination business and pleasure excursion, finding himself completely at home amid such splendor and extravagant display of wealth. Born of a well-to-do family he had acquired a taste for fine things and he was never at a loss in the presence of ladies and gentlemen who aspired to high standards of etiquette and social formality. Since both Washington and Malbone were natives of Virginia there must have been some acquaintance between the two families in earlier years, otherwise it is difficult to conclude why it was that Washington went to Newport and stayed a night or two with the Malbones.

Very likely the young Virginia Colonel enjoyed at this palatial home the choicest epicurean delight of the day, and incidentally the one which was responsible, in a way, for the complete destruction of the elegant dwelling. Dun-fish it was called. The process of cooking dun-fish was quite unusual; they were placed in soak over night, then taken out and sewed up in a napkin, and simply simmered over the fire; they were then served whole with melted butter and boiled eggs. A variety of other choice dishes went to make up this popular meal which was featured by the *piece de resistance*. It was during the preparation of one of these meals in the year 1766 that the servants in the Malbone kitchen permitted

the woodwork above the fireplace to catch fire. The flames spread rapidly and before help could arrive from the town, about one mile away, the building was enveloped in a sheet of flame, and soon its walls crumbled and fell. The name "Malbone" has been retained to designate the estate which stands today where once George Washington enjoyed typical old Rhode Island hospitality—when the wine was passed around after dinner, and then followed "the feast of reason and the flow of soul."

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upon request

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**T**HE PROVIDENCE INSTITUTION FOR SAVINGS, familiarly known as "The Old Stone Bank," is in its own right a historic institution of Rhode Island. Founded in 1819 as one of the first mutual savings banks in the country, it has since contributed vitally to the development and life of this community.

Proud of its own historical significance, "The Old Stone Bank" has adopted this method of educational advertising to bring to light much that is of value and significance in the colorful annals of Rhode Island and national history.

The sketches and vignettes of old-time Rhode Island and Rhode Islanders that are broadcast weekly and then printed in this form are selected from local historical records which are full of the picturesque, romantic, and adventurous. In the hope that these glimpses into the lives, customs, and environment of our progenitors may be both revealing and inspirational to young and old, this booklet is presented with the compliments of

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