

Preparing for the worst

By HARRY BAKER

IN MANY RESPECTS, Rhode Island was at the center of the ferment leading to the Revolutionary War. The colony was also among the most vulnerable to British attack, with its 130 miles of coastline, several harbors, two navigable rivers and an economy predicated upon manufacture and commerce. It isn't surprising therefore that Rhode Islanders began preparing to defend themselves early.

There was iron in the peat bogs, and by 1765 when the furnace at Cumberland was ready to extract this metal in its first firing, Stephen Hopkins wrote that there was wanted "a barrel of good molasses to make beer for the people" who would "blow" the furnace. In that same year, Moses Brown bought all the iron ore he could dig in 999 years from a tract in Gloucester.

Hope Furnace was then being built by the Browns to exploit Scituate bog iron, and they asked farmers within a two-mile radius to join in donating 5,000 cords of wood for charcoal to fire it. By 1766 pig iron was being produced; nine years later the Browns were casting cannon, and boring them by water power.

In Coventry, the Greens were making cannon, and there was a forge at Saxonville. Others were busy, and by 1775 the production of pig and bar iron in the colonies exceeded that of England, almost all of it directed to defense.

Lotteries are not new here. In 1774, Jeremiah Hopkins petitioned the General Assembly to grant him one that could raise \$200 for tools, stating that "he sufficiently understands the business of a gunsmith" to do his part by producing arms at Coventry. Westerly town fathers were preparing

Harry Baker of Wickford is an expert on Colonial furniture and other artifacts of the era.

by ordering the "store of lead now in the town be run into bullets."

Barnard Eddy counted the small arms in Providence a year later, reporting that he found 569 guns, 67 of which were "public stock." Edward Martin, Stephen Jenckes, Thomas Bicknell, Prince Keene and others were busy making guns, bayonets, and ramrods, and Elihu Peck was turning out gunstocks. These Providence guns were of sound quality, none apparently the "light trash arms" that George Washington deplored elsewhere.

The city fathers took no chances on the British surprising them and seizing their guns. They ordered that all small arms in Providence be divided into three lots to be kept in different places by three "discreet men."

A powder mill was set up in Johnston, and by way of supplies saltpeter mills in East Greenwich were being

neck Island were scattered and ineffective.

Settlers in Portsmouth and Middletown joined Newporters to fortify their island. Cannon faced the Sakonnet River, and a fort was erected at Bristol Ferry. Forts were built on Tonomy Hill, Coddington's Cove and Point, Brenton's Point, Castle Hill, and later at Goat Island. In all, 18 fortifications and earthworks were constructed on Aquidneck Island.

British ships could be moved at will, and the 8,000 Redcoats they kept in Newport were a constant threat to all of Rhode Island. Only a warning system could counter the situation, and Rhode Islanders settled on fire beacons as a means of communication. In Cumberland they raised a mast on Beacon Pole Hill, and Chopmist Hill had its wooden tower. Another was at Tower Hill in the "Narragansett Country," and the

The beacon in Providence could be seen from Newport and Connecticut.

operated by Rich and Mathewson on Division Street near what was then an "old windmill." Nathan Miller of the latter town was forging good bayonets, and local coopers who had served shipping there were making wooden canteens.

Newporters faced the guns of a British fleet clustered in their harbor in 1775, and despite the earthworks and "forts" they raised, the city was occupied. The British could concentrate withering firepower from their ships anywhere the fleet might move; against this the defenses of Aquid-

neck Island were ready.

Providence erected the greatest beacon of all on College Hill near Prospect and Meeting Streets. A committee comprised of Joseph Brown, Joseph Bucklin and Benjamin Thurber had a spar 80 feet long raised there, with a kettle (probably filled with tallow-soaked kindling) suspended from a crossarm. All was in readiness, and as "Master of the Beacon," Mr. Brown ordered it tested on August 17, 1775.

The test verified its effectiveness. Others throughout the colony marked their sights upon it for future reference: they saw it clearly in New-

port, and Pomfret, Connecticut reported it quite visible. Providence could muster help.

At Providence harbor, Esek Hopkins rose to the task of countering British warships. He loaded old hulks with combustibles that could be nudged in flames against any vessel approaching, and readied an iron boom-chain to bar them from entering. To further discourage an enemy, he mounted cannon on a "floating battery" that could be brought to bear on ships. The British never tested his defenses.

Newporters suffered most of all. British warships could level the city, and the troops they landed seized all residents had for subsistence. Eight thousand fled the city, among them Solomon Southwick, publisher of the *Newport Mercury*, who buried his press, loaded his type cases, ink, and paper, and ceased publication. Not for long. Southwick set up at once in Rehoboth, began publishing again, and his circulation increased!

Elsewhere, these aggressive colonists were preparing for full-scale conflict. James M. Varnum of East Greenwich proposed to George Washington that a battalion or perhaps even a regiment of blacks could be raised here. These men were then slaves, but their owners were themselves engaged in combat and most were agreeable. Every black who enlisted became a freeman, receiving all bounties and wages of the Continental Army.

There were the black troops General John Sullivan was to send in to cover his retreat during the Battle of Rhode Island, and their performance marks one of the great pages in the history of the Revolution. In three downhill charges by Hessian mercenaries, black soldiers died by the score, but they yielded never an inch. In the end, the Hessians were slaughtered, the blacks pursued them, and the day was saved. □