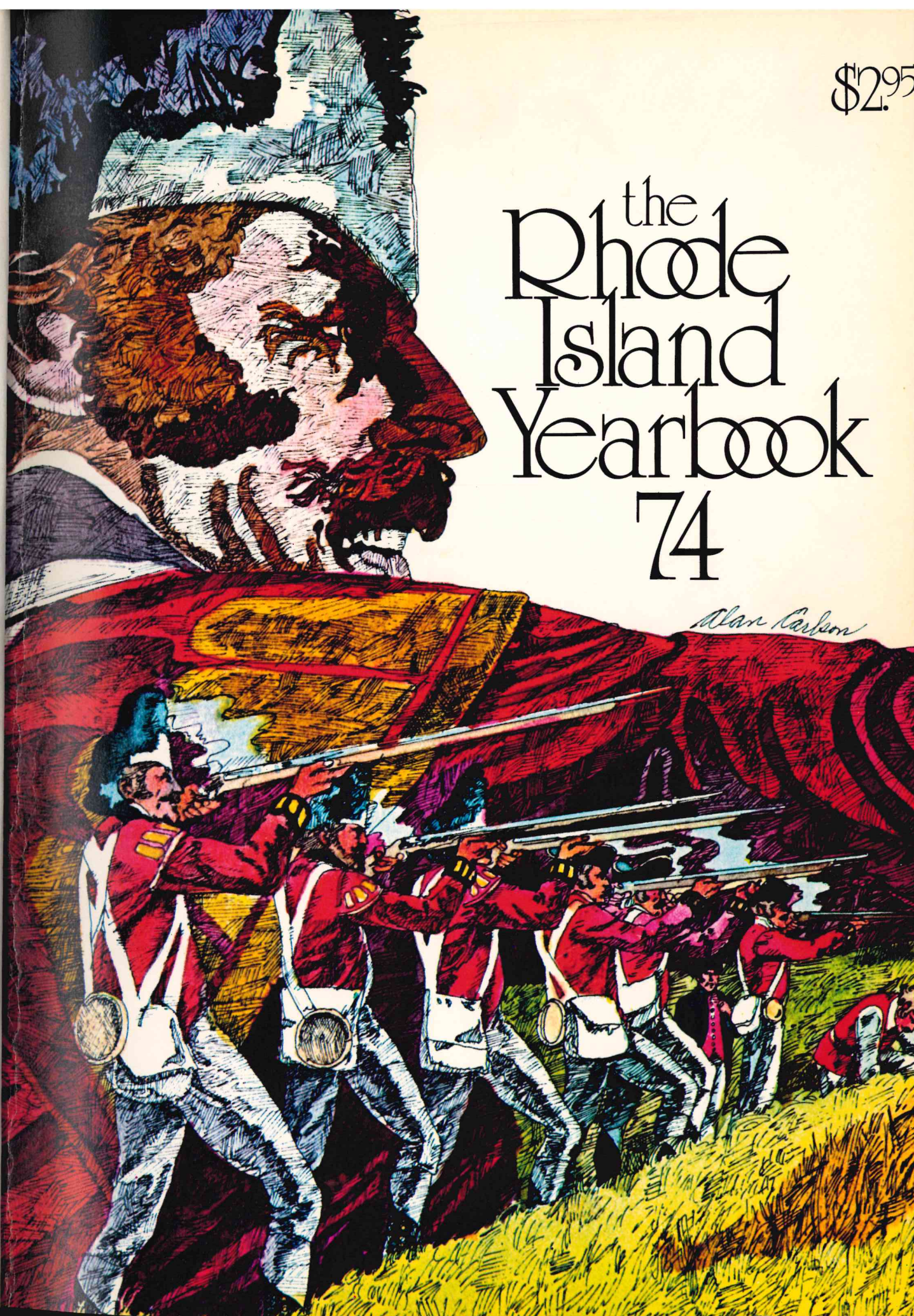


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the Rhode Island Yearbook 74

Alan Carlson



the French in Rhode Island

by John F. Millar



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It is well known that the American struggle for Independence from Great Britain could never have been successful without the help of friends in Europe - the Dutch, the Spanish and the French. The French were involved in the struggle almost from the beginning in one way or another. In the previous war, known as the *Seven Years' War* from 1756 to 1763, the British had delivered crushing defeats to the French and their Spanish allies on virtually every battlefield. Under the leadership of Admiral Lord Anson, the Royal Navy had swept the French fleets from the seas with such total victories as the Battle of Quiberon Bay; in India, young General Clive had driven the French out of the subcontinent, while in the Americas British victories under men like Wolfe had gained for Britain a whole new empire in Canada, Florida and the West Indies. The French were still smarting 12 years later, and they yearned for a chance to regain their lost territories.

Remembering well the lessons inflicted on them in the *Seven Years' War*, the French were not about to commit themselves to all out conflict with the British unless they could be assured of success. So it was that when the American Colonies rebelled against British rule the French saw in the rebellion a chance to humiliate their old adversaries, but at the same time were extremely cautious about committing themselves to any overt action. Consequently, for the first few years of the War, the French contented themselves with seemingly innocent assistance, such as allowing volunteers like the young Marquis de Lafayette to come to America to fight, or permitting American privateers and Naval vessels to use French ports over loud British protests, and providing secret aid through a dummy corporation known as Hortalez & Cie., whose flamboyant head was Pierre Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, the author of such contemporary favorites as *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*.

The French were impressed that the American rebels had been able to hold out as long as they had against the might of Great Britain, but, despite the clever and forceful negotiating of Benjamin Franklin and others, they were still not sure they could join the fight against Britain with impunity. In fact, they even went so far as to confiscate the 44-gun American privateer *L'Indien* as soon as it had been built in Amsterdam just to prove to the suspicious British that the French were truly neutral. At last, however, the French saw their opportunity: a whole British army under General Burgoyne had been forced to surrender at Saratoga by the rude Colonials. Accordingly, they equipped a fleet and army to send to North America under Charles Hector Theodat, Comte d'Estaing, a mediocre commander

who was given for the occasion the title of both General and Admiral.

In the years since the *Seven Years' War*, the French had been scientifically building up their navy, so that by 1778 their ships were of superior design and construction to the British, and their numbers more or less equal to the British. In addition, their training establishments were turning out good officers for the first time in about 70 years, while the British Navy was riddled with corruption and handicapped with antiquated practices. Clearly, the French had all the statistics on their side. They also had the element of surprise to a certain extent, since the only British fleet in North America was an inferior force under Admiral Lord Howe at New York, and it was too soon for Howe to be expecting reinforcements.

Somehow or other, d'Estaing began to lose the advantage from the very beginning. He left Toulon on 13th April 1778, and did not reach the American coast for an incredibly long 87 days, thus missing a chance to wipe out half of the remaining troops of the British Army, which had been evacuating Philadelphia via the Chesapeake only a few days previous to the French arrival. Undaunted, the French headed north to New York, whither the British had gone. Unfortunately, they found that the British fleet had an advantage over them in being so small, namely that they could get over the bar at Sandy Hook, while the larger and more powerful French ships were stuck helpless outside. D'Estaing then turned around to head for Newport.

Leading British strategists of the Revolutionary War, including Admiral Lord Howe and Admiral Sir George Rodney, maintained that if Britain had to abandon all her North America territory except for one enclave, that one enclave would be Newport. The reasoning was that Newport was a deep water port that was easily defensible, that had more moderate weather than any other port in America, and that was ideally situated to launch an invasion against any other American port from Halifax to Savannah. Hence, it is surprising that not once but twice the commanders in the field totally ignored this strategy; the probable reason for their not having followed it was that New York was considered a more comfortable city in which to live, but, as it happened, comfort cost the British dear.

Whether or not they knew of the opinion leading British strategists held of Newport, the French headed straight for it. D'Estaing arrived off Brenton's Reef on 29th July after a week's passage from New York, and anchored several miles out from the land. Their plans had been hastily patched together; since they had been unable to approach the British garrison at New York, they were going to make an

attempt on the next most important concentration of British and German troops in America, those at Newport. The French were to be assisted by a large Continental force under General John Sullivan, and a numerous but motley collection of militia under General John Hancock (the British unceremoniously dubbed the latter *King Hancock*), who were to land at the North end of the island while the French attacked Newport more directly. It was also hoped that the townsfolk would rise up against the British during the confusion, although there was actually little chance of that; it had leaked out of the American headquarters that Sullivan fully intended to lay Newport in ashes after its capture to prevent the British from ever making any use of it in the future, and the result was that local citizens banded together to defend Newport against the attack.

This attitude on the part of the Newporters is hardly surprising. In the first place, the leading active patriots had long since departed because of the British occupation. In the second, there was in the hearts of nearly all Americans, rebel and loyalist alike, a deeply-rooted distrust of the French. Throughout the 18th century, Americans had spent most of their military time defending themselves against French raids or Indian raids led by Frenchmen; how could they suddenly find themselves fighting on the same side? Obviously, Louis XVI was waiting for the opportunity to make the United States into French colonies when the Americans and British had exhausted themselves fighting each other. The patriots were of course delighted to receive French money and military equipment; they were even happy to receive volunteers like Lafayette. A full-scale invasion by French troops, however, was quite another matter: how could one be sure that they would leave again when the fighting was over? By the time the fighting was indeed over in Rhode Island for that year, the patriots had no answers to those questions, and were wrestling with another: in spite of their vast military superiority in the invasion of Newport, was it French treachery that had caused the campaign to be a complete failure?

As soon as d'Estaing arrived off Newport, he began a series of communications with Sullivan. Sullivan got off on the wrong foot by ordering d'Estaing how to position his ships and troops, which did not impress the general/admiral. D'Estaing, for his part, did not disguise his contempt for the American troops, even going so far as to describe the crack Continental brigades of Varnum and Glover as nothing but militia. In spite of the lack of joint planning, d'Estaing agreed to go along with Sullivan's plan.

Sullivan's plan called for the French to make the first move by entering the harbor with their powerful fleet, and landing their sick on Conanicut Island preparatory to landing troops on the west side of Newport while the ships would bombard the British positions. In the mean time, the Americans would cross over to Portsmouth from Tiverton and march on the British from the north. Sullivan upset the French more than a little by launching his attack far ahead of schedule in order to occupy some British positions that had been evacuated, but the attack proceeded smoothly otherwise. At the approach of the French fleet, the British scuttled or blew up the few puny frigates of the Royal Navy that had been patrolling the harbor and added their crews to the artillery batteries. Their position was not hopeful: slightly over 3000 British and German troops plus about 1000 hastily-raised militia defending against 10,000 American troops and about 3,000 French supported by the heavy guns of a large fleet. Surprisingly, General Robert Pigot, in command of the defenders, seemed almost totally calm about his impending doom, according to contemporary diaries.

Pigot was daily awaiting the arrival of reinforcements. As it was, the allies already thought his strength to be about twice what it actually was; Clinton was said to be preparing to move troops up from New York, and two fleets, one from New York under Lord Howe, and the other from England under Admiral John Byron. Pigot's luck was with him: no sooner had the French ships moved into position with some of their men on Conanicut Island, and the Americans landed in Portsmouth, than a British fleet was seen outside the entrance to the harbor. If it were Howe, then d'Estaing intended to annihilate Howe's weak fleet so that it would not be of help to Byron when he arrived; if it were Byron, whose fleet was equal in power to d'Estaing, the French admiral intended to extricate himself from Narragansett Bay as quickly as possible to gain sea room and escape from Byron, who no doubt would soon join up with Howe, his old friend from their midshipman days.

Either way, d'Estaing ordered his ships to sea with the first fair wind. The enemy proved to be Howe, who immediately arranged his ships so that they could best resist the French attack. While they were thus maneuvering, the so-called fair wind turned into a hurricane. Both fleets were badly damaged by the storm, but Howe's ships were the more seaworthy and so survived better. When the storm was over, in two separate actions, two British 50-gun ships came across the two largest French ships, each of 80 guns, in a crippled state. The Preston fought the Tonnant without decisive re-

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sult until darkness, and the little *Renown* nearly captured d'Estaing aboard the massive *Languedoc* when night intervened. The British had hoped to continue the action in the morning, but the arrival of other French ships caused them to return to New York and much needed repairs. D'Estaing reassembled his crippled ships in Newport, smarting from the disgrace of having been thoroughly out-generalled by Howe's weaker fleet.

By this time, news was received by the French that Byron was only a few day's sail away. Accordingly, on 21st August, d'Estaing reembarked his men and set sail under jury rig for Boston, which he knew was a much safer port in which to make the major repairs his ships needed. Considering that Byron could well have intercepted the French en route, given the right winds, it is now very clear how important d'Estaing considered finding a safe place to make repairs. Yet, the army commanders in Portsmouth did not see it that way. Sullivan threw a temper tantrum when he heard that d'Estaing had left his troops unsupported, and Lafayette rode the 70 miles to Boston in seven hours to try to talk him out of his change in plans. Lafayette, who while he was in the Newport area is said to have slept under the bed and his valet to have slept in the bed for fear of assassination, was positive that a battle was about to take place. If d'Estaing supported the American troops even for one day the British troops would be wiped out and American Independence virtually guaranteed. D'Estaing could not be moved, and Lafayette, eager not to miss the battle, rode back in just over six hours; he was too late. The Battle of Rhode Island, which Lafayette called "The best-fought action of the War," and which consisted of the orderly withdrawal of the American forces for Aquidneck Island with scarcely a casualty, was almost over, and the dream of a quick end to the War was gone with it.

Byron arrived in the harbor, and Clinton soon reinforced the garrison, and Newport was impregnable. The first stroke of the French Alliance had ended in disaster, not so much because of its casualties, which were few, but because of its failure to reach a very real objective, and because of the flurry of accusations that followed between the French and the Americans as to who had been responsible. The bad taste left by this fiasco and its aftermath was both bad for American morale and likely to have endangered the success of any future Franco-American joint operation.

American confidence in the French alliance was shattered, and there was much talk about French perfidy among Americans of all stations, from the lowliest private of militia to the members of the Continental Congress. No one had time to notice

one footnote to the story: in the French fleet under d'Estaing were two of France's most illustrious naval heroes: Louis Antoine de Bougainville, Captain of the 74-gun *Guerrier*, had circumnavigated the globe a decade earlier in a tiny frigate *La Boudeuse*, following the British frigate *Dolphin*'s two voyages; in the first of these, the *Dolphin* had been commanded by the same John Byron who had just now chased Bougainville away from Newport. One wonders if each knew of the other's presence in the opposing fleets. The other French hero was Pierre Andre Bailli de Suffren, captain of the 64-gun *Fantasque*. He had been twice captured by the British in previous wars, and was openly critical of d'Estaing's timidity. After the Newport *debacle*, Suffren was given command of a French fleet off the coast of India, where he distinguished himself so much that when news of the peace arrived the British captains, his former enemies, personally manned the oars of an admiral's barge to row him ashore at Capetown.

After he had repaired his ships in Boston, d'Estaing set sail for the West Indies, where he committed several blunders; then he took part in the unsuccessful siege of Savannah, and finally went back to France. The British garrison at Newport was overjoyed at their good fortune, but somewhere along the way the lesson of their narrow escape from d'Estaing had been lost; only a year later, Clinton ordered the British forces out of Rhode Island for good to assist him to repel an expected attack on New York by Washington. This left Newport wide open for a year until the next French invasion of America.

On 10th July 1780, Jean Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, Comte de Rochambeau arrived in Newport as Commander-in-Chief of nearly 6,000 French troops with a fleet under Admiral d'Arsac de Ternay. The crossing was uneventful, except that de Ternay refused to allow his warships to chase a small British squadron which they almost certainly would have captured, and so already it looked like a repeat performance of the d'Estaing operation. When Rochambeau arrived, he found the memory of d'Estaing was his worst enemy in America.

For all that the townsfolk of Newport had more or less enjoyed the period of the British occupation, it did not take more than a few weeks replete with splendid parades and parties for the warmth and charm of Rochambeau and his officers and men to win the hearts of Newporters. A recent book, *The American Campaigns of Rochambeau's Army*, edited by Howard C. Rice, Jr. and Anne S.K. Brown shows through the diaries of three of Rochambeau's men what life was like in Newport during the French occupation.

Newport had never been quite so well entertained. The French wrote in rapture about the beauty of Newport's girls. They were amazed to see a simple, unadorned beauty, such as they were not used to seeing in sophisticated France, and they loved it. One French officer scrawled with his diamond ring on a window pane of the Wanton-Lyman-Hazard House *Charming Polly Wanton*; Polly, for her part, was mentioned more than once in the French journals of the period, but she held out for an American officer. One American custom that the French were never able to understand was that of *bundling*, whereby a young man and lady, though unmarried, were encouraged to sleep together in the same bed but with a large board to separate them.

The gaiety lasted for most of the year, and was only marred by one tragedy, and even that was attended with much pomp and ceremony. Admiral de Ternay was suddenly taken ill with a fever. He was brought to the Nichols-Wanton-Hunter House on Water Street (now Washington Street), and died two days later on 15th December 1780. He was buried at Trinity Church following a large impressive funeral procession, and Louis XVI sent over an enormous marble stone with a long Latin inscription (including a few mistakes) that can be seen in the back of the church. Lafayette, who would have been expected not to have liked such a weak commander, wrote a eulogy that concluded with "*We have sustained a great loss.*"

Lafayette also said in his eulogy that he suspected that de Ternay's death was actually caused by grief at being blockaded by the British. Things were not as calm at Newport as the heavy schedule of parties would lead one to suspect. The British, realising their mistake in not having held onto Newport, commenced a blockade that began three days after the French arrival. The British fleet was far superior to the small French force that had escorted Rochambeau to Newport, but, since it was under the leadership of Admirals Arbuthnot and Graves, two of the more indecisive and inept of the British officers in America, it really posed little threat to the French presence in Newport. After de Ternay's death, command of the French naval force passed to the Chevalier Destouches, who in turn was superseded in May, 1781 by the independent-minded Admiral Comte de Barras.

The lack of activity (other than social activities) on the part of the French troops in Rhode Island because of the naval situation mightily disappointed the Americans, and all their old feelings of antipathy towards the French that had been aroused by d'Estaing's visit began to well up again. Lafayette sympathized strongly with these American

feelings, and he repeatedly urged on Washington and Rochambeau the policy of attacking New York even without naval superiority. Naturally, they turned him down each time, however tempting the idea may have seemed. Lafayette also wanted for himself the duty of liaison between Washington and Rochambeau, especially since the latter spoke no English, but Rochambeau would have nothing to do with the idea; he had known Lafayette from infancy and loved him in a filial way, but apparently did not feel that Lafayette was the best man for the post. Lafayette then went south to take command of troops fighting Cornwallis and his subordinates in the Virginia area.

In the spring of 1781, Washington met twice with Rochambeau, once at Wethersfield, Connecticut, and once at Newport, to discuss the strategy of the proposed campaigns for that year. Washington was received with great honors, including a thunderous salute and an impressive parade between double rows of impeccably dressed French troops in their white uniforms with colored lapels. Washington stayed with Rochambeau in his headquarters at the Bowler-Vernon house at the corner of Mary and Clarke Streets, and the first night he was feted at an enormous formal ball, while the town was brilliantly illuminated.

With pleasantries past, the two generals soon got down to business. The two British armies left in America were concentrated in New York City and Charleston. The most impressive blow would be to dislodge the British from New York, which both men dearly desired to do. However, they realized that the War would probably have to end no matter which British army they defeated, and that New York was probably too well defended to ensure success. Moreover, if the French were to lose the battle in New York, the War would almost certainly have to end immediately as well - and this time with a British victory. Therefore, they decided that it would be best to make a move towards New York, but without actually attacking it unless and until the odds improved. In the meantime, it was known that French Admiral de Grasse was expecting to bring a powerful fleet up from the West Indies, and so they would be ready to cooperate with de Grasse whenever he arrived.

Two things happened to alter the plans. In the first place, it was learned that Cornwallis had moved his whole army into Virginia thus putting Lafayette in grave danger, and in the second, Clinton in New York had received a detailed copy of the secret plans drawn up by Washington and Rochambeau. The result was that the French moved immediately. They left Newport on 9th June, picking up the few troops who had been quartered in Pro-

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vidence. They left Providence on the 18th, heading west on the Monkeytown Road, leaving de Barras behind in Newport with his small fleet and the army's artillery. He had been asked to take the fleet to Boston where it would have been safer from British attack than in Newport, but he refused.

Every schoolboy knows what happened next; how de Grasse arranged to meet Washington and Rochambeau in the Chesapeake, how they did so and thereby cornered Cornwallis in Yorktown, how the British fleet failed to dislodge them, and how, with the aid of the artillery brought down by de Barras, they beat Cornwallis into surrender in October, and how that brought about the end of the War and the reality of American Independence.

What America seems to have forgotten, however, is the role that Rhode Island played in all of this. For that matter, Rhode Island's participation in the whole struggle has been largely forgotten, even in Rhode Island itself.

Rhode Islanders should be proud to know that in the burning of the Revenue Schooner *Gaspee* the first blow was struck for freedom, a year and a half before the Boston Tea Party; that because of the blockade by the frigate *Rose* Rhode Islander, Stephen Hopkins introduced the bill in Congress that created the Continental Navy in October 1775, and that Ezek Hopkins, his brother, was the first Commander-in-Chief of that Navy, William Vernon of Newport was the first Secretary of the Navy, and most of the important officers were from Rhode Island, as was the first ship of the Navy, the *Providence*; that Rhode Island renounced its allegiance to the British Crown on 4th May 1776, two whole months ahead of the rest of the country; that the Continental Army's top general under

Washington was General Nathanael Greene of Rhode Island; that Rhode Islander Stephen Oliver was the leader of the final attack at Yorktown; and that the French visits to Newport were crucial to the success of American Independence. A pride in heritage like this one can be a force in building the economy of Rhode Island's future.

John Millar is one of Rhode Island's leading experts on the Revolutionary War period. His interest is so deep that he went to great efforts to build the only reproduction of a ship of that period. The H.M.S. Rose is berthed in Newport for public inspection. His articles on the Gaspee and Operation Clapboard appeared in the 1973 Yearbook.

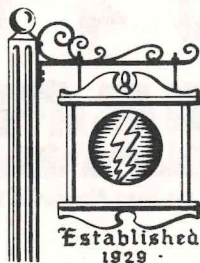
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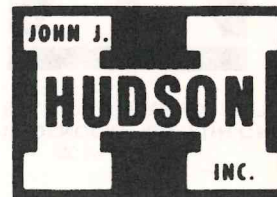
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