

## The Rebel Flame

BY MATHIAS P. HARPIN

Newport, the capital of His Majesty's Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, was located on the southern tip of the island of Rhode Island. To the north was the town of Middletown and beyond, Portsmouth. The time of which we speak was 1765. It was a time to be reckoned with in the history of our State. At that time Newport with its population of 7500 was rated as the fifth largest town in North America.

The town's chief asset was its harbor, unquestionably one of the finest in this part of the world. But it wasn't only the harbor that made this town long remembered by visitors. There was the light house at Beaver Tail on Jamestown island and Fort George on Goat Island. There was Long Wharf with its drawbridge in the middle to admit vessels. Going uptown there were other sights—the Redwood Library, the brick market house, almshouse, work house, school house, custom house and churches.

Indeed—there were churches! This colony's guarantee of religious freedom had brought all kinds of churches here. But of all the churches—old Trinity Episcopal with its slender spire reaching up to scratch the sky was most imposing. Thames Street was something else to see. It was paved. Beginning at the Parade, it went down to the old town cove. From the east side radiated streets, alleys and lanes which led into the built-up section of town. The west side of the cove was all wharf. This was the heart of business in the entire colony.

Watching over all this from the Parade was the big brick colony house designed by Richard Munday. This was the seat of government. Obviously this was a wealthy town. Its wealth came principally from the triangle trade—rum, slaves and molasses.

Of the 212 slave ships operating in North America 112 of them were registered to Newport merchants. To these were credited 10,000 of the 17,048 slaves recently delivered at Charleston, S. C.

In addition Newport enjoyed a world-wide reputation as a vacation place. Each year hundreds were attracted to these shores. Visitors arrived early in May and remained until late October. They had named this town "the garden of America." Maybe it was the climate that brought them here. All agreed it was no ordinary climate. The air was of a rare fragrance, suggesting plowed earth and open sea. It soothed tired nerves, stirred the mind, awakened the appetite and, generally speaking, promoted good health.

The town was a victualling station for His Majesty's fleet in North America, the other places being Charleston, S. C., Boston and Halifax. Ships of His Majesty's fleet dropped anchor here at regular intervals to pick up supplies. Christopher Champlin held the contract as victualling agent.

Of course a town of this size had to have a newspaper. James Franklin Jr. had founded the Newport Mercury in 1758. This newspaper replaced the Newport Gazette which his late father, brother of the famous Benjamin Franklin, had established. On the death of James Franklin Jr. in 1762, his brother-in-law Samuel Hall had continued as publisher.

All of this is by way of introduction to the series of events which, starting in 1765 shook Newport to its very roots and threatened its very existence for a long period of time. It all started with the arrival of the news that the government at home (England was always "home" to the Rhode Island colonists, even at this late date) was going to enforce the old Acts of Trade and Navigation.

At first there was quiet rebellion revealed in a few protests spoken in homes, counting houses, taverns and shops. This was followed by respectful remonstrance. Then for a little while things quieted down. Just as normalcy arrived, it became known that an influential man in the community was advocating that His Majesty abolish the colonial charters and substitute governors responsible only to the Crown. This man was Martin Howard Jr., an attorney. One of his strongest supporters was Dr. Thomas Moffat, a well-known local physician.

One night an angry mob descended on the homes of Howard and Doctor Moffat and turned their residences into a shambles. Next the mob rushed to the home of Augustus Johnston, one time attorney general, and warned him not to accept the post of tax collector under

## Town Described. Tax Program Brings Trouble. Remonstrances. Attorney Suggests Abolishment of Charters. Smuggling on Large Scale. Narragansett Patrol. Gaspee Affair

His Majesty's new tax program. With this he complied for the time being.

Also resolutions were drawn up and taken from house to house asking people not to buy certain English goods that were taxed.

Feeling against taxes kept mounting. In town meeting taxpayers adopted a resolution finally in which it was stipulated: "It is for liberty, that liberty for which our fathers fought; that liberty which is dearer to a generous mind than life itself that we now contend."

Organizations known as Sons of Liberty and Daughters of Liberty began to organize. The Sons of Liberty assembled under trees to discuss events of the day. William Read became so fired with patriotism for the cause that he gave a piece of land at the north end of Thames Street on which to plant a tree of liberty. Henry Marchant, a young attorney, later to become a member of Congress, wrote the deed for Read, conveying to the grantees "in trust and forever hereafter to be known by the name of the Tree of Liberty . . . as emblematical of public liberty."

Elsewhere other developments were having a tremendous influence on Newport. For instance, the first graduation exercises of Rhode Island College, now Brown University, took place Sept. 17, 1769, and the feature of the commencement was a debate on the subject: "Whether British America can, under her present circumstances, consistent with good policy effect to become an independent state." James Mitchell Varnum, later to become judge of the Supreme Court of the North West Territory, upheld the affirmative while William Williams took the negative.

"And now, my countrymen," Varnum said with utmost eloquence, "let me as a friend to American liberty, stand forth and exhort you to be fast and immovable in defense of your rights."

Admiral Montague, commander of the fleet in the area, had reached his wit's end trying to enforce His Majesty's laws, especially in Newport and the Narragansett Bay area. Smuggling was going on at an increasing rate. One day he received a letter from the Admiralty directing him to instill respect in the public's mind for His Majesty's officers and laws.

Montague had just the man for this difficult assignment. He was Lieutenant Dudingston. His ship was the schooner Gaspee with tender. Montague summoned him and instructed him to intensify the Narragansett patrol.

Up and down Narragansett Bay the Gaspee sailed, stopping every little packet and sloop and rowboat, seizing property and sending vessels and crews to Boston to be tried. Townspeople objected. This was unlawful. Persons arrested should be tried in the county where the alleged crime was committed. Dudingston didn't care. He had his orders.

Soon shipping in and out of Newport was completely paralyzed. Even on board the ferries operating between the island of Rhode Island and Jamestown and between Jamestown and the mainland there was fear of Dudingston and the Gaspee.

One night the Gaspee got stuck on a sand bar in the Providence River off the Warwick shore. Dudingston tried to lighten his vessel to get free. But he was wasting his time. His vessel held fast to the sand. It became known in Providence that the Gaspee had run aground. Local merchants determined to board her, arrest Dudingston on charges of plundering vessels and destroy the hated schooner.

Dudingston was taken prisoner by the Providence raiding party. His ship was set on fire. On June 12, 1772, Abraham Whipple, sheriff of Kent County, placed Dudingston under arrest on a warrant sworn out by Jacob Greene and Company charging the British officer with having taken a Greene vessel and cargo unlawfully. Brought into the Court of Common Pleas, he was found guilty and fined.

This Gaspee affair, as it was called, shook the whole British world. It was called "high treason" or "levying war against the king." A commission arrived to begin hearings, hoping people would talk and the guilty would be found. Instead the commission got nowhere.

(Continued in next Issue of Hinterlander)

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## Gaspee Commission Condemned. — Legislature Calls For Union of Colonies. — Newport Mercury Increases Coverage, Abolishment of Slavery Sought.—Moses Brown Won To Cause.

Persons arrested for the Gaspee affair were to be sent to England to be tried. General Gage at Boston was ordered to hold himself in readiness to respond with troops in case trouble broke out in Rhode Island while the commission held hearings.

Newspapers became filled with complaints. One writer called the commission "a court of inquisition more horrid than that of Spain or Portugal." Said a letter in the Newport Mercury, "To be tried by one's peers is the greatest privilege." On arrival, the Gaspee commission would vacate the colony's charter, it was said. Meanwhile, British men-o-wars dropped anchor in Newport harbor waiting to take on the prisoners that the commission would apprehend.

Rhode Island in General Assembly adopted a resolution pointing out that "nothing less than a firm and close union of the colonies in the most spirited, prudent and consistent measures can defeat the designs of those who are aiming to deprive them of their inestimable rights and privileges."

In town meeting, Newport seconded a resolve of a Providence town meeting calling for the creation of a Congress. In the interim the Port of Boston had been shut up by the British Navy as a result of the Tea Party Dec. 18, 1773. Rhode Island's heart went out to the people of Boston. This state in General Assembly suggested that all trade with Great Britain cease immediately until such time as the port of Boston was reopened to trade. If the British shut up the port of Boston, they could shut up any port in British America, it was felt.

By this time Solomon Southwick had acquired the Newport Mercury from Samuel Hall and immediately became one of the foremost leaders of the movement for independence. Immediately Southwick had a sign painted showing the famous divided serpent and over it the words, "Join or Die" and hung the sign outside the Mercury office door. Now he referred to his place as being located "at the sign of the Divided Serpent." Every move that Newport made was sure to be reported in the Mercury. (1)

Again Newport called for greater unity among the colonies. In early June 1774, the General Assembly meeting in Newport voted "that a firm and inviolable union of all colonies in councils and measures is absolutely necessary for the preservation of their rights and liberties . . . that a convention of representatives from all the colonies ought to be holden in some suitable place as soon as may be . . ."

Former Governors Stephen Hopkins and Samuel Ward, once bitter political enemies but now firm friends were named delegates to a Congress to be held in Philadelphia. They had patched up their personal differences and agreed this was no time for disunity within party ranks on either side.

Meanwhile the Rev. Dr. Samuel Hopkins, pastor of the Congregational Church, taking advantage of all this talk about liberty and independence, sought to bring matters to a head regarding the abolition of slavery against which he had become America's foremost spokesman.

Doctor Hopkins published a handbill entitled—"Dialogue Concerning the Slavery of the Africans" together with an address to the "Slave Holders" and sent copies to members of the new Congress. With Dr. Ezra Stiles, also pastor of a Congregational church, later to become president of Yale, Doctor Hopkins merged forces to create a fund to educate and send back to Africa John Quamine and Bristol Yamma, both former slaves, "to open a door for the propagation of Christianity among their poor, ignorant, perishing, heathen brethren."

Mrs. Sarah Osborne, uncrowned goddess of a praying circle, predicted that war was inevitable and began making herself heard as an apostle of peace.

Suddenly Doctors Hopkins and Stiles won a leading citizen of Providence to their cause. This man was Moses Brown. He had been an importer of slaves. Now he was regretful of every minute spent in the abominable traffic. On April 28, 1774 Moses Brown was admitted into the Society of Friends and joined forces with Doctors Hopkins and Stiles in obtaining passage in the General Assembly of an act abolishing slavery in Rhode Island.

Doctor Hopkins wrote: "This Moses Brown . . . has been convinced of the iniquity of slavery and his sin in practicing it has lain heavy on his conscience . . . he thinks it his duty to do all in his power to put a stop to this traffic . . ."

Newport merchants lost no time conforming to the resolves of the Congress, and committees of inspection came around making sure that boycotted English goods were not purchased. Committees also went around asking for donations of food and cash to help the poor people of Boston, and Moses Brown, with members of the Society of Friends, went to Boston to bring relief to the citizenry, thus established America's first war relief.

Action in the General Assembly hinted of things to come: Fort George in Newport harbor was ordered stripped of cannon, powder and shot; the office of major general of the colony's armed forces was created; permission was granted to march Rhode Island troops to the aid of neighboring colonies should they be attacked or invaded. Fire arms of the colony were ordered distributed. Several military companies were incorporated, among them the Kentish Guards which still exist. One day out of each month was ordered reserved as drill day. Two annual musters were decreed.

When Captain Wallace of HMS Rose found Fort George stripped of cannon, he was indignant. "What's the meaning of this?" he wrote to Governor Joseph Wanton of Newport.

"To prevent them from falling into the King's hands or those of his servants," the Governor replied. "We mean to use these guns to defend ourselves against any power that shall offer to molest us."

Came election time in April, 1775. Some of the revolutionary leaders felt that Wanton was not entirely on their side. Newport men went to the mainland and urged Deputy Governor Darius Sessions to use his influence to get Governor Wanton's name off the ticket on the grounds that he was "inimical to the freedom and welfar of the colony."

Sessions pulled a surprise. He had handbills printed and widely circulated saying that Wanton would not in any way "betray the trust which you have been pleased to repose in him." Wanton was elected as the chief magistrate. On election day the battle of Lexington took place.

*(Continued in next Issue of Hinterlander)*

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— MEMBERS — PLEASE! —

We are embarking on a new year of activity and service as members of the Western Rhode Island Civic Historical Society; let us all check our status quo accordingly. Be sure our Dues Cards are up to date, to help keep everything in running order, as well as renewing our efforts for the good of the Society in the new year we are starting.

## The Rebel Flame

BY MATHIAS P. HARPIN

Governor Wanton's Dedication To Principles Leads To His Ruin. — R. I. Raises an Army. — Nathanael Greene Becomes Brigadier. — John Brown Arrested. — Intensified Bay Patrol.

In this critical hour the General Assembly met in special session at Newport, and when the session closed the legislators had passed an act creating an Army of Observation. Such action was without precedent in the entire history of the colonies.

"At this very dangerous crisis of American affairs," the act said, "at a time when we are surrounded with fleets and armies which threaten our immediate destruction . . . it appears absolutely necessary to this assembly that a number of men be raised, embodied, properly armed . . . to continue in this colony as an Army of Observation, to repel . . . violence that may be offered to the inhabitants" The total to be raised was 1500 men

Governor Wanton was up in arms. The hot heads who had thought this up were leading the citizens into civil war. He had gone along with all their ideas of resistance and obstructions and everything else that they had thought of, but this . . . this would result in "fatal consequences to the charter privileges and involve the country in a civil war."

In protest, Wanton stayed home when it came time to be sworn in. A letter came. Would he accept the office of governor to which he had been elected? Replying, Wanton urged reconciliation with the parent state, pointing out that the prosperity and happiness of the people was founded on a connection with Great Britain. In a few weeks he was censured. Next he was denied the office. Nicholas Cooke was elected in his place.

In the succeeding months Governor Wanton was to undergo great personal hardship. All of his real estate was to be confiscated, and he was to die a broken man.

Now who was going to be brigadier general of Rhode Island's Army of Observation? This was a big question at the time. It would take a man of courage. For all kinds of implications were carried in the commission which the brigadier was to receive. It said: ". . . to command, guide, conduct the same or any part thereof. And in case of invasion or assault of a common enemy to disturb this or any other of His Majesty's colonies in America . . . you are to alarm and gather together the army under your command . . . and expel, kill and destroy them . . ."

Nathanael Greene, a deputy from Coventry in the legislature, volunteered for the post.

While all this was going on, Captain Wallace, on board HMS *Rose* patrolled the waters of Narragansett Bay seizing vessels. The effect of his many seizures practically shut-up Newport harbor. Among those captured and sent to Boston for trial was John Brown of Providence.

Though many prominent men pleaded for Brown's release, Vice-Admiral Graves would not let him go. It remained for Moses Brown to rescue his brother. When Brown returned, he brought a message from General Gage suggesting that delegates from the colony of Rhode Island be sent to Boston to negotiate a peaceful settlement of the growing controversy. But nothing he could say could change the course of events.

One day Captain Wallace and his men were attacked on a Newport street. Wallace managed to get back on board his ship. Training his guns on the town, he ordered the mob to disperse.

"Disperse or I shall order my ships to fire the town in every quarter." Wallace said.

Forays on the maritime trade continued and reached such a stage that the General Assembly felt impelled to establish its own naval force. Two vessels were chartered. One was to have a crew of eighty; the other, thirty. Abraham Whipple, sheriff of Kent County, was placed in command as commodore. This was another unprecedented act so far in colonial America.

When Wallace heard who Whipple was; that he was the one wanted for participation in the Gaspee affair, he sent him a note saying that when caught Whipple would be hanged at the yard arm.

Whipple replied: "Always catch a man before you hang him."

One night five vessels which Wallace had seized and held at Newport were cut loose during the night. Bitter and faster events moved, the tension increasing every day.

Rhode Island's Army of Observation was gone and been absorbed into the continental army under Washington at Cambridge. All able-bodied men in the colony were under orders to stand by to bear arms at a moment's notice. Beacons were erected on the high hills around the colony, to be ignited in case of invasion and warn the country-sides for miles around, even into Connecticut.

Sailor men from on board British vessels were seized on Newport streets and held contrary to their wills. Captain Wallace sailed into the harbor, pointed his guns at the town and ordered that the sailors be released or he would blow the waterfront to smithereens. Town officials, on releasing the sailors, called them "deserters."

On Aug. 7, 1775 the *Pennsylvania Packet*, reporting this incident in its columns urged every honest American to rise up in opposition.

Christopher Champlin, His Majesty's victualling agent, was accosted by a mob on the street one day and warned to cease furnishing supplies to the King's vessels. Soon hunger stalked the British naval force. They began raiding the shore towns. Descending upon a farm bordering the shore, the British raiders made off with sheep, swine, beef critters and fowl until the legislature ordered the shore farms abandoned and the stock driven inland out of the reach of the enemy.

Rhode Island knew from the beginning that its little navy was no match for the British, and so the General Assembly sought help in a resolution calling on Congress to begin "the building and equipping an American fleet as soon as possible . . ." Such a force "would greatly and essentially conduce to the preservation of the lives, liberty and property of the good people of these colonies."

Acts were passed making it illegal to furnish food to the British navy. All persons delivering foodstuffs into Newport were required to register. John Collins was named food registrar. More and more acute grew the food shortages. Even local residents were starving along with the British. To make matters worse, colony troops were stationed outside Newport keeping watch on the townspeople to make sure that no food got through to the British. Esek Hopkins, later to become commodore of the first American navy, was in charge of these troops.

Then and there the first exodus out of Newport began. The East Road, the West Road, both were clogged with fleeing residents. Small wonder. There was hardly anything left to eat in the town. Now engrossers seized upon the situation to make money, jumping up the price of carting and the wharfage of goods. A committee of the legislature finally arrived to fix prices.

One day Captain Wallace dropped anchor in Bristol harbor. Accompanying Wallace's vessel the *Rose* were the *Glasgow* and the *Swan*, both with armed tenders. Days had passed since crews on these vessels had had red meat, and the men were hungry. They demanded food of the townspeople and being refused, whereupon they bombed the town, doing extensive damage.

Somehow some food did manage to get through to the British anchored in Newport, and the news of this action got out, soon being reported in the press all over America. This gave Newport a black eye. The town was now called the Tory Capital of America. All because townspeople had been compelled to supply the British navy to save their necks. General Hopkins arrived in town armed with warrants for the arrest of prominent men suspected of feeding the British

(Continued in next issue of *Hinterlander*)

— MEMBERS — PLEASE! —

Are you doing your part as an active member of the Society? Have you started the new Historical Society Year with a Dues Card up-to-date?

## The Rebel Flame

BY MATHIAS P. HARPIN

## Esek Hopkins Named Commodore of U. S. Navy. — Incident Involving Cannon for Newport. — Suffering in Newport, R. I. Many Arrests. — Rhode Island Declares Its Independence.

In the interim the New England delegation, especially Rhode Island, had clamored for a naval force. Out of this clamor came the appointment of a Marine Committee of which Stephen Hopkins was appointed chairman. Hopkins obtained the appointment of his brother Esek as commodore of the fleet. General Hopkins was in camp in Middletown, just outside Newport, when news of his appointment arrived dated Philadelphia Nov. 6, 1775.

When General Hopkins took leave of his troops for Philadelphia to take over the fleet, the Rhode Island troops were left without a commander. Governor Cooke asked that Major Gen. Charles Lee be sent here to take command. It was expected that British troops evacuating Boston would make a landing here. Lee arrived wearing the uniform of the Virginia infantry. He went directly to Newport and summoned the Town Council to a meeting. Lee made a long speech, stressing the belief that this town needed to get back its self-respect which it had lost in the eyes of the colonies. A mass meeting of all the townspeople must be called, he pointed out, and all must take the test oath. ( ) Newport must be given a chance to redeem itself in the eyes of the world, Lee said. That morning when the people assembled he asked them to repeat after him an oath promising not to aid the fleets and armies of Great Britain directly or indirectly unless authorized to do so by the Continental Congress or the Legislature.

Time passed. It was now April 29, 1776. Suddenly the new American navy dropped anchor in Newport harbor and Admiral Hopkins came ashore. He asked that a town meeting be called. This was promptly done, and the commodore addressing the townspeople said he had just returned from Bermuda and had captured great quantities of warlike stores, including cannon, and if the people were willing to take up arms and make a stand against the British, should they invade the island of Rhode Island, he would let them have some of this booty. It was voted to accept guns and defend the town whereupon the admiral unloaded the cannon and sailed away. Immediately it was ordered that work of building fortifications around the town be undertaken. A fine was ordered imposed on those who wouldn't help, and a collector of fines was named.

When word was received in Congress that the new admiral had left cannon at Newport, indignation roused up the entire group of representatives, for even in Congress Newport was regarded as the Tory capital. And to think that the admiral had dared give these people guns! And without permission, too! For who had given him such authority? He must go back to Newport and repossess the cannon and Congress would tell him where they should go.

Admiral Hopkins returned to Newport. They must give back the cannon. He had made a mistake. A battle of the cannon ensued. Governor Cooke wrote to Congress pleading that they not take the guns away. The response which Newport had made on the arrival of the guns, their desire to defend the town "gave every friend to the United Colonies a new spring, as many of us looked upon Newport as worse than lost to the common cause." Congress finally decided to take only six cannon away from Newport, leaving the remainder of the twenty in the town.

Meanwhile Congress debated the question of independence, many and varied issues crowding into the debates. In the interim at Newport Governor Cooke ordered Gen. William West, successor to General Hopkins as commander of Rhode Island's troops, to commence

rounding up people suspected of being unfriendly to the Grand Cause. The drive was conducted house to house. Many were seized. As if this wasn't excitement enough Col. Henry Babcock, second in command of the troops, went berserk and had to be relieved of his command on the grounds that he was "at times deprived of the perfect use of his reason and thereby rendered unfit to command."

Finally it was the memorable Fourth of May, 1776. The General Assembly of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations was called into special session at the Colony House. When that session was over the legislators had declared their independence of Great Britain. Let the Congress wait until July Fourth, if it would. Henry Ward, secretary of the colony, in closing his books recording the proceedings in the past had always written—"God Save the King!" This time he wrote: "God Save the United Colonies!"

On July 12, the General Assembly met again. There was only one item of business of great importance. That was the Declaration of Independence, as received from the Congress. This was approved. In the text of the resolution, the legislators "do solemnly engage that we will support the said general Congress in the said resolution with our lives and fortunes."

Next it was voted to read the Declaration of Independence at noon on July 13 at Newport. Yes, Newport, because Newport had so long hovered between support and non-support of the Grand Cause. The sight upon the Parade that day! There stood the colony's brigade in command of General West broken up into 13 divisions, one for each colony. Brass field pieces rubbed. Oak carriages and wheels singing.

Major John Handy, adjutant to General West, was chosen to read the Declaration from the balcony of the Colony House on account of his stentorian voice. Toward the end thirteen shots were fired from the colony's cannon on Fort George, now re-named Fort Liberty. This was followed by a discharge of musketry from the thirteen divisions, each one firing one volley in succession. And so the revolutionary war began.

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THE HINTERLANDER

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