



From Providence, Warwick and Bristol they came to strike the blow for freedom.

First Blow for Freedom

BY DAVID LUDLOW STACKHOUSE

The importance of Rhode Island's "Gaspee Affair" has been largely neglected by historians and history teachers at all levels including our own schools and colleges. In this important article, David Stackhouse, vice president of the League of Rhode Island Historical Societies and acting president of GASPEE II, Inc., traces the frequently overlooked events of history which led directly from the destruction of HMS GASPEE to the American Revolution and discusses the action a group of patriotic Rhode Islanders are preparing to take to put Rhode Island's action of 1772 into correct historical perspective. Editor

WHEN Captain Benjamin Lindsey turned the bow of his good sloop *Hannah* up Narragansett Bay the afternoon of June 9, 1772, the bone in her teeth was the insigne of defiance that would mark the inevitable course of a new nation before the next dawn broke.

What started out as another routine chase, in a continuing and daily series of humiliating harassments, culminated that night in the first armed conflict with the might of Britain's authority and adscititiously in the founding of the Great Republic.

The King's men, in hot pursuit, should have been warned that rebellion was at hand; except, they never

did overtake the *Hannah*, and so, could not even read the signal cast by the Rhode Islander, let alone interpret its significance.

His Majesty's armed customs schooner *Gaspee* was also an American ship, of American design and American construction, purchased in New York for the purpose of subduing the recalcitrant colonials here. But the little native vessel managed to outsmart her arrogant commander, Lieutenant William Dudingston, and run him hard aground on Namquit Point, to become the target of concerted, outright attack — an act of deliberate insurrection.

The *Gaspee* raid proved to be not only the most striking of many major Rhode Island contributions to the cause of autonomy in the New World, but also the real beginning of the American Revolution. The sequence of events then begun led without break into the heart of the fight for independence and set in motion the machinery by which the formation of the First Continental Congress and ultimately the Declaration of 1776 became possible.

The causes that brought about this initial break with Britain were many, and scarcely need rehearsing. However, there was one underlying reason for the whole situation, and that was the fiscal problem of the mother country. At the Peace of 1763, she found herself with a national debt that had doubled in a generation, fol-

lowing the French and Indian Wars in America and a period of general international strife dating back to the first years of the century. She needed the financial support of all her colonies as well as that of the homeland itself, not only to maintain her own superiority but even to survive.

The colonies themselves were not too prosperous, as a result of their participation in the wars. They felt that they had contributed their full share of both blood and money. Moreover, there was a new air of self-confidence among them, bred of success on the battlefield and their mounting sense of being free Englishmen in their own right, no longer subservient to the seat of government 3,000 miles away.

To gain the required support of the colonies, it was necessary to take arbitrary control over them; but attempts at such control produced stiff resistance in America, which had no representation in the lawmaking process and felt the disadvantage keenly. The earlier Navigation Acts, by which England intended to contain the flow of colonial wealth through trade restrictions, had been largely overlooked or successfully evaded during the war years. Revival of these restrictions, immediately peace was declared, aroused the utmost resentment everywhere, particularly in Rhode Island.

Reliable, swift topsail schooners modeled after the sloops long used in the Bermuda trade — the century's major development in sail — had been America's answer to the government bid for control of the shipping lanes. Now the contest spread to land and, with the advent of further restrictions such as the abortive Stamp Act of 1765, became personal and vindictive, even treasonable. In Narragansett Bay the King's vessels were harried relentlessly, his officials severely manhandled, beaten and intimidated. He should have given heed which way the prevailing winds were blowing.

However, the fuse was lit, albeit slow-burning. Thereafter, anything untoward would only serve to speed its flame. During the decade that followed, the single-minded home government itself fanned the fire beyond anyone's power to extinguish it.

More serious incursions upon time-honored rights, far transcending mere money, accumulated finally in the specifics set forth in the Declaration of Independence. The most drastic incursion of all grew out of the Gaspee Affair, sparking the gravest concern of all the colonies, jealous of their long-standing prerogatives of self-government. The matter went deep, for it had been rankling since the beginning of colonization; and its consequences were inescapable.

THE North American colonies had always enjoyed unparalleled freedom, whether from their physical re-

moteness, lack of interest or just plain neglect at home, or preoccupation of the motherland with other things. By now, they were all ensconced in the role of self-determination, fully capable and decided in their own regimen, and not likely to submit to arbitrary power from without.

Through the efforts of Roger Williams in Providence, Samuel Gorton in Warwick, and the merchant ship-owners of Newport, who had created the wealthiest seaport on the Atlantic coast, Rhode Island was the most favored of all; and, as always, Rhode Island assumed the lead in maintaining that position.

To begin with, there was the original charter of the colony, granted in 1644, when, for the first time in history and contrary to all English law, the separation of church and state was sanctioned by Charles I. Then the Charles II Charter of 1663 bestowed complete autonomy in matters of taxation and the courts, the most liberal document ever issued by the Crown and the basis of resistance to British tyranny a century later.

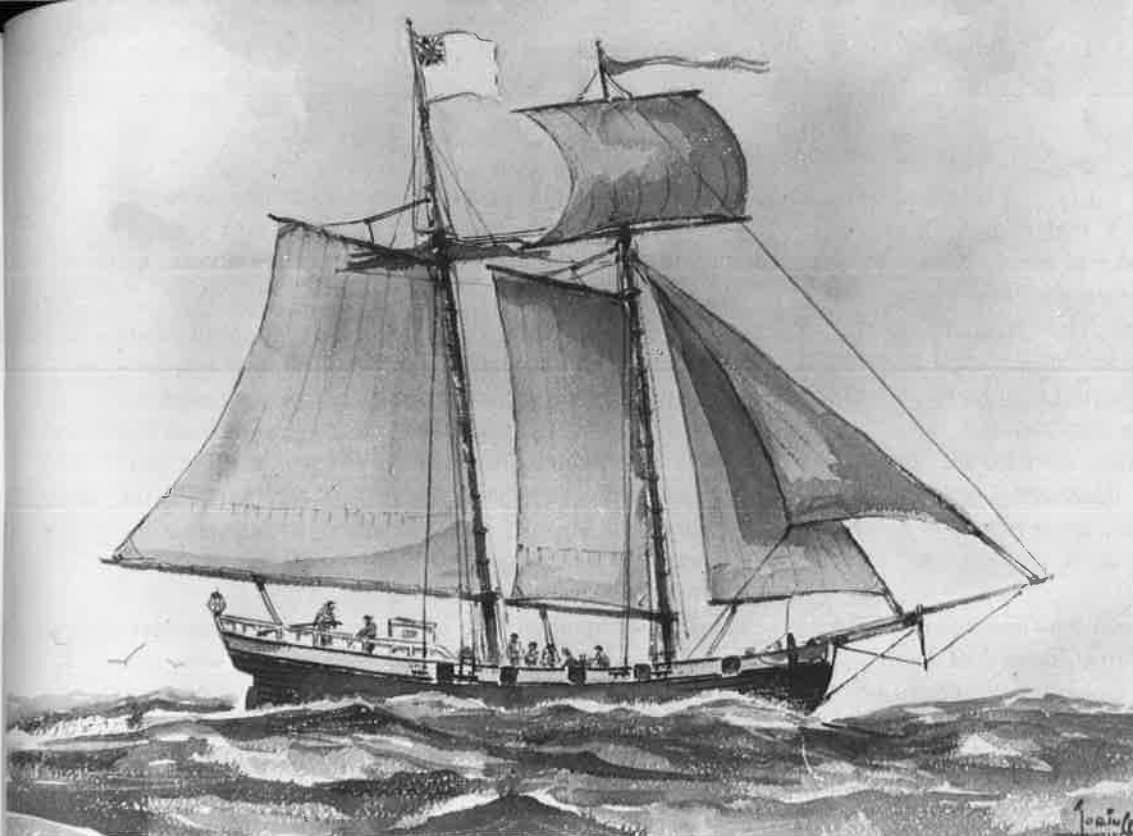
For instance, in response to the Stamp Act itself, the General Assembly passed a resolution stating that it alone had "exclusive rights to lay taxes and imposts upon the inhabitants of this colony and any other attempt to vest such power is unconstitutional and tends to destroy both English and American liberty."

These are unmincing, stern and forthright words. Together with the differentiation between Americans and the mother country, they presage the action and the terminology arising from the Gaspee Affair, seven years later.

Not a penny's worth of stamps was issued in Rhode Island, but two of the King's vessels were severely ransacked and the homes of his collectors destroyed in Newport, without punishment to any offender. In Providence, the King's man was driven out of his job and replaced by the recording secretary of the Sons of Liberty!

A deeper threat in the Stamp Act lay in its enforcement in the Admiralty Courts, which automatically meant trial without jury, implicit therefore in the Act, and again contrary to Rhode Island charter law. This was echoed even more strongly in the enactment of the Townshend Acts of 1767, which set up three Vice-admiralty courts within the colonies themselves, supplementary to the main court at Halifax; together with a lengthy schedule of import duties.

The new court at Boston, which also served Rhode Island, was much too close for comfort; it brought the whole nefarious scheme home to the least concerned. A general boycott ensued, and worse. Rhode Islanders, long conditioned to smuggling as a legitimate business



The GASPEE as painted by Paule Loring.

operation under the Navigation Acts, resorted to a great increase in such trade, because of the new taxation — bringing armed vessels quickly to the scene.

At the prospect of a general flare-up, duties on all except one item were withdrawn within the year; but Parliament and the Exchequer let it be clearly known that the tax on tea was to be continued as official token of their power to levy imposts, directly counter to colonial tradition. Although no tea was imported through Rhode Island, the threat remained.

Repeal of the bulk of the Townshend Acts in 1768 mollified the colonies, temporarily. There were celebrations, fireworks, and toasts of loyalty in Providence as elsewhere. But it was the calm before the storm. The pressure of authority continued with renewed vigor in enforcement of the old Navigation Laws, especially painful in Rhode Island's sensitive trading port.

The firing and scuttling of the *Liberty*, at dock in Newport harbor in 1769, was the worst of many such incidents up and down the coast, prior to the burning of the *Gaspee*. Whether this offense was the first overt act against the British Government, may be left to the historians. It did not start the Revolution.

Certainly, the Boston Massacre of 1770, widely proclaimed by the indefatigable Sam Adams, was not such an act, but a pure mischance that occurred when someone's musket went off accidentally and people were killed before level heads restored order. The famous Tea Party that closed the Port of Boston in 1774 was similarly labeled, but still a year and a half away when Rhode Island patriots bearded the British lion off Namquit Point in Warwick, Rhode Island, the night of

June 9-10, 1772, three years before the battle of Concord and Lexington.

There is no doubt the Gaspee raid was a distinct act of premeditated aggression, however extemporaneous — the first armed conflict, with shots fired and blood shed on both sides — the "First Blow for Freedom" in the fight for American independence. From that moment, there was no return.

WHEN the *Gaspee* reached Rhode Island waters in March of 1772, she immediately set about making life miserable for shipping on the bay. Vessels were stopped and searched illegally, their cargoes confiscated and sent without recourse to Boston, even after they had properly cleared customs.

The commander of the *Gaspee* never bothered to present his credentials or even make a courtesy call, despite a formal request by the colonial authorities. Complaint to his superior in Boston brought no satisfaction from the Honourable Admiral Montagu. Free Rhode Islanders, loyal for a century, turned against the government that had turned on them.

The hated vessel, unexpectedly trapped by the astute Captain Lindsey, was shown no mercy. Her end was guaranteed when she went ashore about three o'clock, which would have been 52 minutes after ebb tide, on the afternoon of that momentous day in American history. Extreme low tide was at 8:07 that evening; and she could not possibly free herself much before the next high tide, about half past two in the morning.

Meantime, a force of some 150 men and boys gathered to the beat of drums at Sabin's Tavern in

Providence, preparing for the foray that ventured forth in eight longboats at 10 o'clock that night. They were joined by a boat from Bristol and another from Pawtuxet as the summer moon, nearing its first quarter, set a few minutes after midnight.¹ They took the government vessel without difficulty in the darkness of what one witness described as a gathering cloudcover, attacking from the bow to avoid the ship's guns.

The wounding of the ship's commander and the incarceration of her crew at Pawtuxet Cove, the pillaging and burning of the vessel, are a matter of record. H.M.S. *Gaspee* was finished as a menace on Narragansett Bay.

The destruction of the *Gaspee* was announced in the *Providence Gazette and Country Journal* of Saturday, June 13, 1772,² along with Governor Wanton's offer of a £100 reward for information leading to the arrest of any persons connected with the attack. This was augmented by royal proclamation on August 26, offering an additional £500 for the conviction of the leader and £500 for any other member of the raiding party. The rewards were never claimed.

It is noteworthy that the reward offered for the leader alone was roughly equal to the value of the boat, a goodly fortune for some poor colonial. Yet no one squealed. Captain Abraham Whipple was absolutely safe. It has been called the best kept secret in history.

That the *Gaspee* was an armed vessel, there can be no doubt. She is so referred to in a letter of Admiral Montagu dated April 8 that year. She is likewise mentioned in a letter of Dudingston's to Montagu, written two days after the event; as well as in the newspaper account next day; in the King's charge to his Commission of Inquiry, appointed September 4 to investigate the matter; and elsewhere.

That Dudingston was stupid in refusing to register his mission with the local authority, is obvious. That he acted quite illegally in seizing 12 hogsheads of rum, for example, the property of Jacob Greene & Co., of Warwick, and shipping them to Boston for adjudication, is beyond question. That the British Admiralty in Boston backed him up, was the real rub. Not only by colonial charter, but by act of Parliament, the case belonged in Kent County.

Ironically, in the very issue of the paper that announced the "very disagreeable affair" of the destruction of the King's vessel, there is a story of the gala celebration of that same King's 35th birthday on June 4 in Boston, when the Governor's guards, a regiment of militia, and a company of grenadiers and artillery engaged in exercises on the training field. At high noon, volleys were fired on King Street; and the guns at Castle William answered those of the men-of-war at anchor in

the harbor — all followed by fireworks in the evening. Leading the many toasts drunk by the Royal Council assembled, was the Honourable Admiral Montagu.

THE Royal Commission proceedings opened January 5, 1773 at the State House in Newport and concluded with a final report on June 22, one year after the event that brought it into being. During more than five months of assiduous investigation, it was able to produce no evidence whatsoever as to the possible involvement of anyone, and adjourned without one indictment, "there being no probability of our procuring any further light on the subject."³

A true account of this amazing outcome, considering that everyone knew who the conspirators were and that they included the most prominent and influential men in the colony, awaits fuller historical research. Almost certainly, strings were pulled in political and financial circles, to reach such a conclusion. At any rate, the strictest silence prevailed on the part of everybody, so well maintained that to this very day little is known about the actual participants; and the *Gaspee* Affair itself is almost lost to history.

Even more remarkable was the effect of the investigation upon the thirteen colonial governments in America. The Commission had been charged to discover the participants in the raid, and to send them to England for trial. This was contrary to all colonial law, and a serious threat to all American liberty. The other colonies quickly got wind of it.

Herein lies the real significance of the *Gaspee* Affair, establishing its importance as the prime mover that brought the colonies together and led them without surcease along the road to freedom. In a matter of weeks, Committees of Correspondence were formed, to exchange information about the *Gaspee* situation between each colony and all the others, on a continuing basis.

Committees of Correspondence had been formed a number of times before, as far back as 1763, when Providence, New York, and Philadelphia joined in mutual communication; but these were all concerned with regional and sectional problems of a temporary nature. Now, for the first time and with a united purpose, never to be relaxed again, all the colonies joined together, to question the action of the *Gaspee* inquiry and its meaning for them as a whole. Its scope was universal, as events were to prove; the end was independence, and a new nation.

1. Meteorological data supplied by Professor Charles H. Smiley, Department of Astronomy, Brown University.
2. Vol. IX, No. 440
3. Cf. *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England*, Vol. 7, edited by John Russell Bartlett, Providence, 1862.

On March 12, 1773, while the Commission was still in session and within a year of the *Gaspee's* appearance here, the House of Burgesses of Virginia appointed a committee of eleven, including Peyton Randolph, Richard Henry Lee, Patrick Henry, and Thomas Jefferson, to write to Metcalfe Bowler, Speaker of the House of Representatives in Rhode Island, to find out what was going on.

Concerning "reports of proceedings, that tended to deprive them of their ancient legal and constitutional rights," the Virginia committee was instructed "that they do without delay, inform themselves particularly of the principles and authority, on which was constituted a court of inquiry, said to have been lately held in Rhode Island, with powers to transport persons accused of offences committed in America, to places beyond the seas, to be tried."

The committee was also ordered to open correspondence with each of the other colonies and to transmit to all of them a request that they appoint similar committees to maintain communication with each other, jointly and severally, "from time to time."

Rhode Island answered from Newport on May 15, when a committee of seven was named to reply to Virginia and to transmit its correspondence to all the other colonies, as suggested. The Committee consisted of Stephen Hopkins, Metcalfe Bowler, Moses Brown, John Cole, William Bradford, Henry Marchant, and Henry Ward.

New Hampshire replied on May 27, Massachusetts on May 28, and Connecticut on June 25, each addressing itself directly to Rhode Island and presumably, Virginia. In each case, the wording, the intent, and the conclusion was the same: to ascertain what was going on in Rhode Island and to correspond mutually about such information. They picked up the Virginia plan unanimously and responded enthusiastically to its purpose, employing such words as "constitutional rights," "subversion," "freedom," "liberty," and "union," the latter still spelled with a small letter.

Massachusetts' 15-man Committee, like the others, was ordered to inform itself on conditions in Rhode Island "that gave power to transport accused persons overseas to be tried," with the assertion that "the rights and liberties of all are systematically invaded."

On June 3, Thomas Cushing, Speaker of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts, wrote further to the Speaker of the House in Rhode Island in this vein:

"... that the authority assumed and now forcibly exercised by Parliament over the colonies, is utterly subversive of freedom in the latter; and that while His Majesty's loyal subjects in America have the mortification daily to see new abridgements of their rights and

liberties, they have not the least security for those which at present remain . . .

"Should the authority now claimed by Parliament, be fully supported by power, or submitted to by the colonies, it appears . . . that there will be an end to liberty in America."

Noting that the policy of the administration had been, for many years, to disunite, in order to govern the colonies, he lauded the Virginia proposal as "a very wise and salutary measure. This House is well assured, that the firm and lasting union now in prospect . . . would at this day have harmonized most happily together.

The same effects are yet to be expected from such a union."

Connecticut's reply made reference also to "a happy union" of the colonies; and South Carolina wrote to Mr. Bowler, July 22, that "A close and firm union of the colonies is most certainly necessary for the general welfare." Announcing its adoption of the Virginia resolutions, South Carolina asserted that "The novel, unconstitutional court of inquiry, set up in your province . . . requires the united efforts of the colonies."

Such were the first effects of the *Gaspee* raid and inquiry. But the greatest was yet to come. The other seven legislatures did not meet till Fall or later. But by the year's end, all except New Jersey had answered the Virginia and Rhode Island letters; and by March 16, 1774, each had unanimously adopted the plan to unite, excepting Pennsylvania. The latter's reply, July 22, 1774, came as a bombshell in the form of a proposal as "an absolute necessity that a congress of deputies from the several colonies, be held as soon as conveniently may be."

Thus was directed to all the colonies, as an aftermath of the *Gaspee* Affair, the resolve to form what



The *GASPEE* cup and saucer, an 1872 reminder of the *Gaspee* Centennial.

has come to be called the First Continental Congress, convened September 5th of that year. From that to the Declaration of Independence lay an unbroken line, extending back to the midnight raid off Namquit Point, since called Gaspee Point, in Warwick, Rhode Island.

In the meantime, of course, the closing of the Port of Boston in March had had its full effect, becoming a major topic of the correspondence, now augmented by Committees formed in individual towns and cities. The subject of union as the only possible solution of their difficulties was freely discussed in letters that passed between the towns of one state and the legislatures of others. Westerly and Newport, Rhode Island, were among those that corresponded with the Committee at Boston in May of 1774; and the people of Providence, on November 21, voted in Town Meeting to forward £125 "lawful money" for the relief of the distressed inhabitants of Boston and Charlestown, through their respective Committees.

"Join or Die!" was the indignant cry of the Rhode Island gentlemen, in a message circulated from Newport, May 30, 1774, relative to the plight of Boston. "The generals of despotism are now drawing the lines of circumvallation around our bulwarks of liberty; and nothing but unity, resolution and perseverance, can save ourselves and posterity from what is worse than death — slavery!"

Not surprisingly, Rhode Island was first in the field with a fully trained and equipped unit, when Nathanael Greene arrived at the Siege of Boston at the head of our colonial militia.

From that explosive night of the Gaspee Affair, Rhode Island never wavered in the fight for freedom; nor afterwards, as the scene of another sadly neglected event, the longest campaign of the war, when she endured the three-year Battle of Rhode Island (1776-79), in which the French and Americans drove the British from New England forever.

She re-affirmed her leadership by her unilateral Declaration of Independence, May 4, 1776, two months before that of the Continental Congress. These documents were flowers that stemmed from the noble root implanted at Gaspee Point, four years earlier.

THE *Gaspee*, was one of six similar schooners, varying from 90 to 120 tons, built and purchased in America by the British Navy between 1764 and 1768, for use as revenue and dispatch boats in New England waters. Four of these, including the *Gaspee* and another called the *Chaleur*, were already in commission as merchant vessels or employed in the fisheries. The other two were under construction, probably for the same service.

All were the contemporary type of tops'l schooner mounting six to ten guns, as refitted for Navy use; with two large square topsails on their respective masts, conventional fore-and-aft sails below, two jibs, and a huge, light squaresail that could replace the foresail under suitable weather conditions.

The only plans which exist are those of the *Chaleur*, the largest of the lot, and two smaller schooners purchased later, the *Hallifax* and the *Sultana*, each of 50 tons and armed with deckrail swivel guns only. An incomplete design labeled "Marble Head Schooner,"⁴ from the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, England, bears the names of two more, the identical *Sir Edward Hawke* and the *Earl of Egmont* that were built in New York in 1767, presumably as naval vessels for the Jamaica station.

As might be expected, the two naval vessels show a finer form than the others, since they were designed specifically as fighting ships and not expected to carry cargo. Their hull shows a sharp bow that was undoubtedly fairly fast and a good seaboard of the type of "Virginia model," so-called, forerunner of the famous Baltimore Clipper developed more than half a century later.

The two small schooners, on the other hand, were of the heavy, commercial type, with a full bow and rather slow, used as transport vessels. They were built along the lines of a large ship, bulky and unwieldy in miniature.

Between these extremes lie the merchant vessels exemplified by the *Chaleur*, with a medium bow and probably fast in moderate weather, though poor to windward in heavy going. As a model for the *Gaspee*, she would be smaller, in the middle size range, barely larger than the naval vessels cited.

The form is not necessarily a slow one, despite comparison with modern yachts. In moderate winds the shape of the stern is more important than the bow, and the 18th century schooner had well formed runs. The bluffness of the bow, by modern standards, might show poorly in a heavy sea, but on Narragansett Bay where the *Gaspee* was stationed, she would surprise a lot of present day sailors.

Fortunately, the precise dimensions of the *Gaspee* are recorded in the Admiralty Dimension Book⁵, as follows:

49' 0" — length on keel for tonnage

19' 10" — extreme beam

7' 10" — depth of hold

102-44/94 registered tons (R.N.)

Her deck length is estimated at 68 to 69 feet; her

4. Reg. No. 4520, Box 64, Admiralty, Whitehall.

5. Cf. Charnock: *History of Marine Architecture*, 3 vols. London, 1801.



The Aborn farmhouse in Pawtuxet where the GASPEE prisoners were taken.

draft, at 8 to 9 feet depending upon amount of ballast. Contemporary accounts say she carried eight guns, which may have been small, and a crew of about 30, approximately half of which would have been marines. At the time of her capture, she was on her way to Providence with only 19 men aboard, to pick up additional crew from Boston.

Little is known of her previous history. The *Chaleur* was nine months old when purchased for the revenue service in 1764 for £500. The *Gaspee* was one year seven months old at time of purchase. Both names were new; their original names, unknown.

A reasonable reconstruction of the *Gaspee* makes her bow a little less bluff than the *Chaleur*, but not so fine as the "Marble Head Schooner;" with the added advantage that the *Chaleur* is the only one for which dimensions of framing and spars are available. This detailed knowledge of her type, coupled with the known dimensions of the *Gaspee*, rather severely limits such reconstruction to a truly valid representation.

Details such as the set and rake of her masts and her 35-foot bowsprit, depend upon her current commander, then as now; since the rigging of a ship of sail has always been subject to the whims and experience of her master, even under strict naval discipline.

Preliminary plans and specifications for this reconstruction have been prepared by William Avery Baker,

naval architect at the Hart Nautical Museum, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in Cambridge — designer of the *Mayflower II* at Plimoth Plantations. They were commissioned by the GASPEE II Corporation of Rhode Island, which was organized as a non-profit corporation, February 1, 1968, for the purpose of raising funds to build the *Gaspee II*. Those plans are presently out for bid to six shipyards in New England.

The foregoing information on the *Gaspee* was supplied by Mr. Baker and by Howard I. Chapelle, Senior Historian, Department of Science and Technology, at the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C., who is also a naval architect and authority on ancient wooden vessels, and official consultant for the GASPEE II Corporation.⁶ The responsibility for interpreting this information is the author's.

It is the purpose of the Corporation to have the *Gaspee II* in the water in time for the 200th Anniversary of the Burning of the *Gaspee* in 1972. As a patriotic, educational, and tourist attraction, she will enable Rhode Island to lead the country in the observance of the forthcoming National Bicentennial Celebration; just as the destruction of her counterpart led the colonies in the original fight for independence with the "First Blow for Freedom" in 1772.

6. Cf. Howard I. Chapelle: *The History of American Sailing Ships*, New York, 1935.