



View of Newport
from the harbor.

Our History flows with the Tide

By BRADFORD F. SWAN

THE IMPORTANCE of having an arm of the sea — a navigable bay — extending into the land can hardly be overestimated. Wherever this geographical phenomenon has occurred, there a prosperous state has developed.

In North America one thinks of such waterways as the Gulf of St. Lawrence, San Francisco Bay, Puget Sound, Chesapeake Bay, Delaware Bay, and, of course, Narragansett Bay. Narragansett Bay, especially, has served as a highway for water-borne commerce for virtually the entire length of the state.

It has been the state's most valuable physical asset. No one ever had much in the way of praise for Rhode Island's rocky glacial soil as farmland, but the bounty of the bay has been famous.

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Once it teemed with runs of shad and squeteague, herring and pogeys. Not so long ago its oyster beds were famous, and it is still a remarkable producer of the hard-shelled clam, called, in its various sizes, littleneck, cherrystone, and quahaug.

Until the development of machinery driven by steam power and the resultant rise of manufacturing, Rhode Island's whole existence — or at least its commercial prosperity — centered upon Narragansett Bay. The great waterway provided an easy route for the transport of everything from soldiers coming down from Massachusetts Bay to fight the Pequots along the Connecticut shore, to barrel staves and Narragansett Pacers for delivery to the sugar planters of the West Indies.

THE BAY was a haven for privateers from the middle of the 17th Century, when

they were sent out to prey upon the Dutch, to the War of 1812, when England was the enemy. Vessels of all sorts, from the Bristol slavers to the great French fleet under Count d'Estaing to Edward Carrington's China clippers, sailed into Narragansett Bay. Today we tend to remember the big and famous vessels, and forget the tremendous commercial traffic carried on by the hundreds of smaller ones, like the brig *Charming Polly* from East Greenwich and the brig *Rising Sun* of Providence.

When steamboats began to ply its waters, Narragansett Bay really reached the apogee of its importance to the state. Side-wheelers and propeller-driven steamers went up and down the bay daily, carrying excursionists to Rocky Point and Newport and Block Island, departing nightly for New York, and just going out for daytime sightseeing or moonlight sails.

Of course Narragansett Bay has seen its
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share of historical events, too. It was in the upper waters of the bay that the British revenue cutter *Gaspee* ran aground in June, 1772, on what was then known as Namquit Point. On the night of Tuesday, June 9, she was boarded by a band of patriots who are said to have been urged to the task by no less a personage than John Brown himself. The party of colonists burned the *Gaspee* and wounded her commander, Lieutenant Dudingston, who was finally set ashore by the raiders. The burning of the *Gaspee* has been widely regarded as the first overt act of the colonists' rebellion which led, finally, to the outbreak of the American Revolution.

In that war, incidentally, what little Navy the colonists had, the armed sloop *Katy*, commanded by Abraham Whipple, one of the first captains of the American Navy, sailed from Providence down Narragansett Bay.

THE NAVY has used Narragansett Bay ever since. In fact, the bay and the Navy are virtually inseparable, and the fact that the bay drew the Navy to Newport and to Quonset Point is one of the most important developments in Rhode Island's economy.

It was down Narragansett Bay, after the Revolutionary War, that the Brown brothers and their fellow adventurers sent the ship *General Washington*, bound for the Orient to establish the flourishing trade between this state and China.

Dozens of this nation's sea-going heroes first got their feet wet in the salt water of Narragansett Bay. Today the bay remains an active channel for the state's commerce, but its waters are plied by huge tankers delivering oil and gasoline to the tank farms and refineries on both shores of the upper bay. Great foreign freighters take on loads of scrap metal at India Point, where once the white-painted excursion boats took aboard ladies in sweeping skirts and gentlemen in bowler hats or straw boaters, off for a day's sail on the spanking waters of Narragansett Bay.

Great aircraft carriers follow the ghost of *Katy* down the East Passage, and the destroyer squadron ties up at docks near Newport harbor where once the French fleet dropped anchor and set ashore its gallants to charm the belles of Newport. Hundreds of sleek motor yachts and swift sailboats have replaced the chugging excursion steamers. Gone are the oyster boats, but the tongers still drag a living from the shellfish beds in the coves and mud flats of the bay.

It has changed during the centuries, and yet it is the same. □