

INTERNATIONAL WARS AND THE REVOLUTION

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In the last years of the seventeenth century and the first years of the eighteenth, relations between Rhode Island and England passed through a brief but sharp crisis. The principal cause was Rhode Island's alleged failure to cooperate in the seizure of pirates frequenting its seaports. To this accusation, numerous others hardly less serious were added, and proceedings were begun to revoke the Rhode Island charter.

Only the most extraordinary good luck served to delay an adverse decision; in the end, the later campaigns of Queen Anne's War intervened to divert official attention from the case. Meanwhile, Rhode Island had at last taken action against the pirates. For a half century thereafter, England paid little attention to the internal affairs of the American colonies.

During the last decades of the seventeenth century and the first half of the eighteenth century, the Society of Friends was an important influence in Rhode Island government. Quakers first came to Rhode Island in 1656 or 1657 as refugees from religious persecution in the Bay Colony.

Although Roger Williams was strongly opposed to Quaker beliefs, he welcomed as fellow citizens all those who were "distressed for conscience." The official Rhode Island policy of withdrawal to Aquidneck during King Philip's War has been attributed by some to Quaker principles.

After 1750, Quaker influence in government began to wane, and a growing rivalry between the towns of Newport and Providence came for a time to dominate the political scene. This was symbolized by a fierce struggle for the governorship between Stephen Hopkins of Providence and Samuel Ward of Newport and Westerly.

The Hopkins-Ward controversy began in 1754 and continued nearly to the time of the Revolution. Though it was a personal as well as a regional dispute, it served to emphasize the growing political power of the town of Providence.

Finally, as the Revolutionary crisis approached, a new and more serious division of political loyalties put a temporary end to petty local disputes. In Rhode Island, as throughout the colonies, it was the outcome of a series of international wars which set the stage for a clash between England and America, between Tory and Patriot.

Colonial Powers

As the European colonies in North America increased in population and economic value, old-world international rivalries were intensified and projected into the newly settled areas.

At mid-seventeenth century, the principal colonial powers of North America were Spain, which claimed the entire continent; England, which had planted colonies in Virginia and New England; Holland, which had settlements at Manhattan and along the Hudson Valley; and France, which was exploring the North from bases in the St. Lawrence Valley.

The rivalries of these nations frequently led to armed conflicts, some of which directly involved the people and the fortunes of Rhode Island.

Dutch Wars

By a series of naval wars extending from 1652 to 1674, Holland was driven from New Netherlands and eliminated as a North American power. In these con-

flicts, the role of Rhode Island was limited to the preparation of defenses against attacks which did not occur and to small scale privateering.

French Wars

Soon after the conclusion of the Dutch Wars, France became England's most dangerous rival. While the ambitions of the French king threatened the stability of all Europe, French explorers, traders, and missionaries carried the flag of France from the St. Lawrence to the Great Lakes country and then down the Mississippi.

The French program of expansion, European and world-wide, came into direct conflict with a not dissimilar program cherished by the English. A series of wars resulted.

King William's War

The first, known in American history as King William's War (1689-1697), was essentially European in origin. The principal issue was succession to the throne of the Palatinate. In America, French and English colonies and their Indian allies exchanged a few blows by land and by sea but without decisive results.

As in the Dutch Wars, Rhode Island's part was limited principally to the manning of its own defenses and to privateering. The latter activity displayed a tendency to degenerate into piracy, thus causing a serious rift in relations between Rhode Island and England.

Queen Anne's War

The second in this series of wars, known in American history as Queen Anne's War (1702-1713), was likewise primarily a European conflict. The principal issue was the succession of a Bourbon to the Spanish throne, left vacant by the death of the last Spanish Hapsburg. In this war, as in later wars, the Spanish were allied with the French. The American colonies launched and suffered attacks with few lasting results but the transfer of part of New France to England.

Rhode Island, though accused in 1706 of failing in its military obligations, denied the charge and in the end won commendation for supplying both men and money to the expeditions of 1707, 1709, 1710 and 1711. The colony's first preference, however, was for naval and privateering activity. Much was accomplished in both lines.

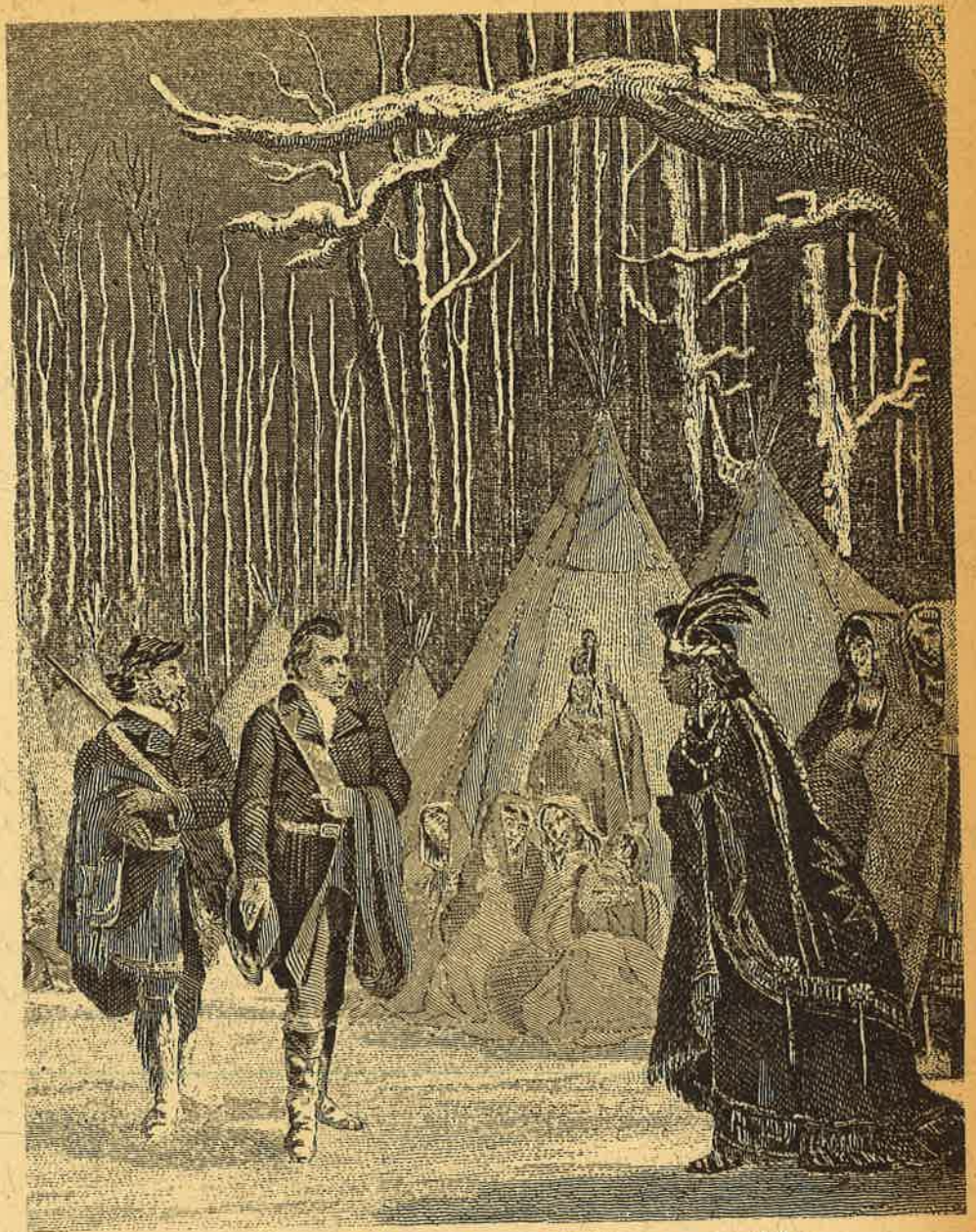
King George's War

The third great colonial war, the major phase of which is known in American history as King George's War (1744-1748), broke out in 1739 over an Anglo-Spanish commercial dispute. At that point the conflict was known as the War of Jenkin's Ear. Next year, the issue was complicated by a disputed succession to the Austrian throne.

Several nations immediately took up the cause of one or the other of the claimants. France entered on the side of Spain in 1774, and war continued until 1748. In America, naval attacks were suffered by English, French and Spanish colonial ports. Privateering was rife. The most notable action was the seizure of French Louisburg by English colonial forces; but the prize was returned to the French by the treaty of peace.

Rhode Island participated actively in King George's War. Two companies of 100 men each were enlisted for the disastrous Vernon expedition of 1741 against Carthagena on the northern coast of South America. About nine-tenths of the New England contingent was lost. Rhode Island also participated in the unsuccessful expedition of 1741 against Santiago, Cuba.

When France entered the war, several hundred Rhode Island men and the colony sloop *Tartar* were enlisted for operations against Louisburg, Cape Breton. Captain Fones of Rhode Island is credited with having dispersed an enemy fleet sailing to the relief of the besieged town. Privateering, however, was Rhode Island's



As an officer of the Militia, George Washington pays a visit to an Indian Village in 1753.

major contribution to the war effort. The colony's privateersmen took no fewer than 100 prizes.

French and Indian War

The fourth in this series, known in American history as the French and Indian War (1754-1763), broke out as a distinctly American conflict. In 1756, general war in Europe followed (Seven Years' War), though Spain did not come in to support France until 1762, the year before the treaty of peace.

It was during the period of Spanish neutrality that Rhode Island ships and merchants gained notoriety for persistent trading with the enemy in the West Indies. The principal issue, from beginning to end, was empire—in America and in India. In America the English colonies were attacked from the south by the Spanish and from the north by the French. The English, on their part, launched attacks both naval and military, north and south.

Though privateering was again Rhode Island's most important contribution, the colony's land troops were more active than in previous wars. At one time, over 1,000 were in service. The French and Indian War was a disaster for the French in America. Montreal and Quebec were captured; and by the terms of the peace treaty, the French empire in North America entirely ceased to exist. All French claims east of the Mississippi were surrendered to the English; Louisiana was ceded to Spain as compensation for losses suffered in the cause of France. Thus in 1763, English America bordered Spanish America along the entire length of the Mississippi.

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Victory in 1763 brought with it a heritage of post-war problems which in the end were to prove more costly to England than all of the colonial wars combined. These problems revolved about the vast territories newly acquired, about the heavy financial burdens of war debt and post-war policy, and about the disturbing spirit of independence manifested by some of the colonists.

Having taken counsel, the English government determined on a program to strengthen colonial administration, to maintain peace in Canada, Florida, and the Mississippi Valley, and to raise a colonial revenue. Each of these measures was eminently unpopular in America, but the question of a colonial revenue proved to be the principal pivot of controversy.

At the close of the French and Indian War, the British public debt amounted to 18 pounds per person; the public debt of the colonies, 18 shillings per person. In England the tax payers were clamoring for relief. To help defray the expenses of the new colonial policy, Parliament in 1764 passed the Sugar Act, imposing a tax on imports of foreign molasses into America.

This was the first instance of a parliamentary act designed for the express purpose of raising a colonial revenue. The Sugar Act provoked a storm of protest. Governor Hopkins of Rhode Island drew up a remonstrance pointing out that in Rhode Island alone, "upwards of thirty 'distil' houses . . . for want of molasses, must be shut up, to the ruin of many families, and of our trade in general . . ."

Nevertheless and in spite of renewal protests, Parliament proceeded in 1765 to a still more objectionable revenue measure, the Stamp Act, whereby a tax was levied on all legal and commercial papers, pamphlets, newspapers, almanacs, cards and dice. Immediately rioting broke out and British goods were boycotted. At Newport two prominent citizens who defended parliamentary policies were hanged in effigy and their houses plundered.

The Rhode Island General Assembly resolved that it had "the only exclusive right to lay taxes and imposts upon the inhabitants of this colony . . ." and the Newport Town Council asserted that "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." In 1766 a new ministry in England repealed the Stamp Act and reduced the duties imposed by the Sugar Act.

Within a few months, however, still another ministry was in power and the attempt to raise a colonial revenue was renewed. By one of the Townshend Acts of 1767, duties were imposed on imports of glass, lead, paint, paper and tea. Upon the urging of Massachusetts, the colonies responded with a boycott of British merchandise.

The Rhode Island General Assembly endorsed the Massachusetts plan, the members considering that they were "obliged, in duty to themselves and to their country, to approve the sentiments contained in it." The boycott was well maintained at Providence, but its effectiveness at Newport was impaired by a growing Tory sentiment in some sections of the merchant community.



Sir William Howe,
British Commander-In-Chief, 1775-1778.

To enforce post-war policies, especially those relating to maritime commerce, the English government maintained numerous patrol vessels in American waters. Colonial resentment found expression in a series of incidents, several of which occurred in Rhode Island.

As early as 1764, Newporters climaxed a riot with crewmen of the British schooner *St. John* by firing upon the vessel with cannon. When called to account, they replied that the gunner had acted by authority and that they would answer for it when they thought it necessary. Next year a Newport mob, angered by impressment of American seamen, seized and burned one of the boats of the British vessel *Maidstone*.

This was followed up in 1769 by still more violent action. Newporters, incensed at the arbitrary manner in which Captain Reid of the *Liberty* discharged his duties, seized him while on shore and forced him to order his crew off the vessel. The Newporters then scuttled the *Liberty*. The leaders were never apprehended though a reward of 100 pounds was offered.

Most famous in this series of incidents was the burning of the British revenue schooner *Gaspee*. The activities of this vessel had long been a source of exasperation to colonial merchants and seamen. On the night of June 9, 1772, the *Gaspee* ran aground at Namquit Point (now known as Gaspee Point) while chasing the sloop *Hannah* up Narragansett Bay. News of the *Gaspee's* distress was received at Providence as a call to action. That same night, to the beat of drums, volunteers rallied at Sabin Tavern and having equipped themselves, proceeded by whaleboat, rowing silently, to Namquit Point.

As the raiding party approached the *Gaspee*, challenges were exchanged. Lt. Dudingston, commander of the stranded vessel, mounted his starboard gunwale, partly clad, and was immediately shot in the abdomen by one who mistakenly cried, "I have killed the rascal!" The raiders quickly overpowered the British crewmen, put them on shore, fired the *Gaspee*, and left her to burn to the water's edge. This time the British offered 500 pounds for the identification of perpetrators, but as in the case of the *Liberty*, the reward went unclaimed.

After the *Gaspee* affair, tensions rose to a climax. In 1773 Rhode Island formed a Committee of Correspondence for cooperation with the other colonies. On December 16 of that year, the Boston Tea Party was staged to protest a British plan for stimulating the sale of taxed tea.

This defiant action, which caused the British to retaliate with coercive legislation known as the "Intolerable Acts," was vehemently discussed and approved by town meetings in Rhode Island. The Bristol Town Meeting boldly asserted that the time might come when the people would be "provoked to renounce their allegiance and assert an independency."

The colonial spirit of "independency" was the rock on which Britain's North American empire was finally wrecked. Accustomed for more than a generation to little or no taxation and to nearly complete freedom in the management of their internal affairs, the Americans were disposed to resent every British attempt to strengthen colonial administration. Free from the menace of New France, strong and self-confident, the thirteen colonies prepared to resist.

In 1774 Rhode Island gave support to the calling of the Continental Congress, naming as delegates the former political rivals Stephen Hopkins and Samuel Ward. In 1775, on receipt of the news of Concord and Lexington, the General Assembly created an Army of Observation (most of the troops later joined Washington's Continental Army). In 1775 the Assembly commissioned its own navy, consisting of two units, to protect the colony's trade. Before the year was out, this force had attacked and captured a vessel of the royal navy.



Major General John Sullivan.
He commanded at Newport in 1778.

On May 4, 1776, the Rhode Island General Assembly climaxed its program of resistance by formally declaring freedom from Britain. This action, taken two months before the Declaration of Independence at Philadelphia, made Rhode Island the first sovereign state established by Europeans in the New World.

WAR

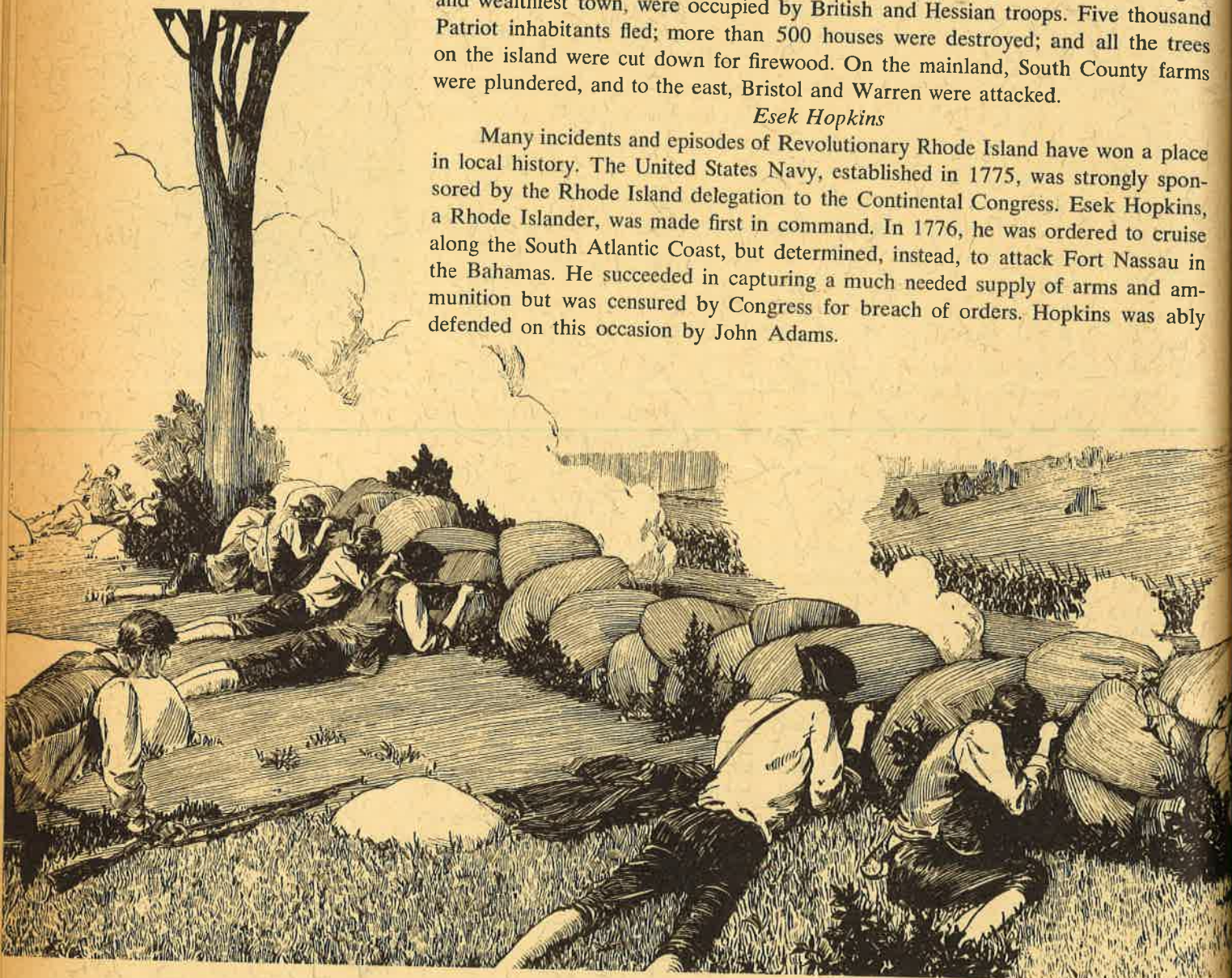
Rhode Island regiments participated in every major campaign of the war. They were at Boston, Quebec, Long Island, Harlem, White Plains, Princeton, Trenton, Brandywine Creek, Germantown, Red Bank, Mud Island, Valley Forge, New Brunswick, Monmouth, Springfield and Yorktown.

Rhode Island officers won fame with the Continental Army, General Nathanael Greene ranking second to General Washington himself. At sea, Rhode Island officers were prominent in the infant United States Navy and Rhode Island privateers were active.

Although no decisive actions were fought on Rhode Island soil or in Rhode Island waters, the state suffered more than any of its northern neighbors. From 1776 to 1779, Conanicut and Aquidneck, including Newport, the state's largest and wealthiest town, were occupied by British and Hessian troops. Five thousand Patriot inhabitants fled; more than 500 houses were destroyed; and all the trees on the island were cut down for firewood. On the mainland, South County farms were plundered, and to the east, Bristol and Warren were attacked.

Esek Hopkins

Many incidents and episodes of Revolutionary Rhode Island have won a place in local history. The United States Navy, established in 1775, was strongly sponsored by the Rhode Island delegation to the Continental Congress. Esek Hopkins, a Rhode Islander, was made first in command. In 1776, he was ordered to cruise along the South Atlantic Coast, but determined, instead, to attack Fort Nassau in the Bahamas. He succeeded in capturing a much needed supply of arms and ammunition but was censured by Congress for breach of orders. Hopkins was ably defended on this occasion by John Adams.





General William Barton of Warren. He captured General Prescott.

The troubles of Esek Hopkins, however, were not yet over. During 1777 the British Navy bottled up his fleet in Narragansett Bay. He was again summoned by Congress but feeling that he was being unfairly treated, he refused to appear. As a result he was dismissed from service early in 1778. Despite these misfortunes, Esek Hopkins continued high in the esteem of his fellow townsmen. In later life he was elected General Assemblyman from North Providence and a trustee of the College of Rhode Island, the future Brown University.

Capture of General Prescott

A famous military exploit was the capture of Major General Prescott, commanding officer of British forces on the Island of Aquidneck and well known for his objectionable conduct. Lieutenant Colonel William Barton conceived the plan in the hope that Prescott might be exchanged for the recently captured American General Charles Lee.

On the night of July 9, 1777, Barton and 40 volunteers proceeded by rowboat from Tiverton to the west shore of Portsmouth, taking care to avoid detection by British patrol vessels. By foot Barton and his men silently approached the isolated



Esek Hopkins.

farmhouse where Prescott was known to pass the hot summer nights.

Eluding or overpowering the sentries, they entered, seized their victim, and carried him off, much discomfited, to the mainland. A few days later the general's chagrin was somewhat eased by the receipt, under flag of truce, of his wardrobe, including hair powder and a large supply of perfumery.

Pigot Galley

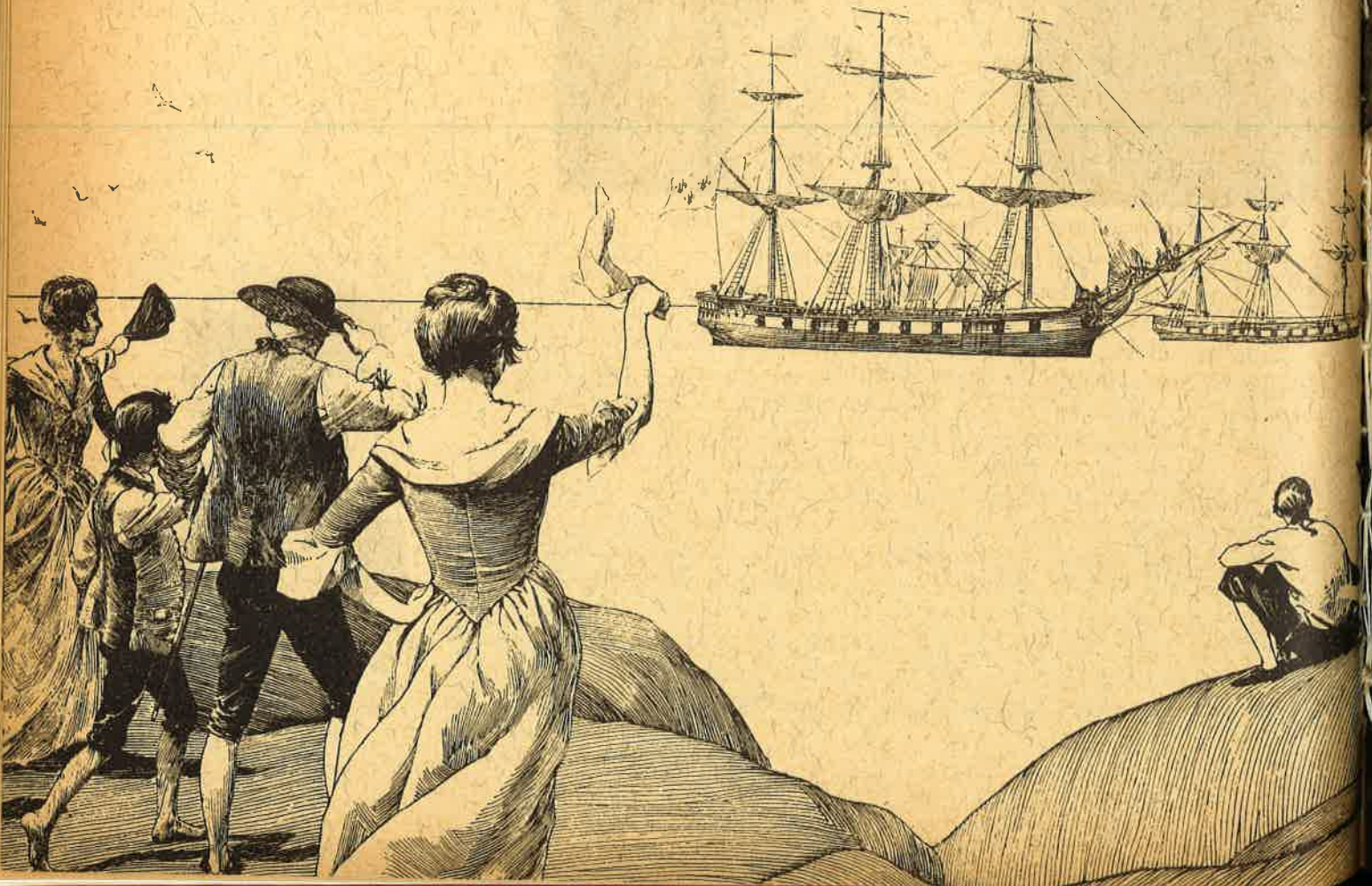
Next year the *Pigot Galley*, a 200 ton British blockade vessel stationed at the mouth of the Sakonnet River, was the victim of another bold exploit. On the night of October 28, 1778, a sloop under the command of Major Silas Talbot, armed with two three-pound cannon, made a surprise attack.

In the confusion the crew of the *Pigot Galley* fled below, leaving their commanding officer to resist alone and be quickly overpowered. Discovering that his vessel had been taken by a mere sloop, the young lieutenant threw himself on the deck weeping in humiliation and at the thought of a ruined career.

Battle of Rhode Island

Most famous of Rhode Island Revolutionary episodes is that called the Battle of Rhode Island. In 1778 France determined, or was persuaded, to renew the struggle with Britain which had taken such a disastrous turn in the French and Indian War. Entering into alliance with the British colonists in rebellion, the French dispatched a powerful fleet under the Count d'Estaing to American waters.

The arrival of this fleet at Narragansett Bay roused Rhode Islanders to the hope that the British might be dislodged from Newport. To support the effort a large contingent of New England troops (including a colored regiment) was assembled, and two brigades of the Continental Army were assigned to the commander of the Rhode Island District, General Sullivan. Finally, General Washington made available the services of Rhode Island's own General Nathanael Greene and of the distinguished French volunteer, General Lafayette.



Faced with this array of strength and talent, the British land forces withdrew to the southern part of Aquidneck. Prospects, however, were altered by the unexpected appearance of British naval units which lured the French fleet away from shore. At this point a heavy storm carried both French and British out to sea, so crippling the former that the Count d'Estaing refused to return to his supporting action at Newport, making instead for Boston. Meanwhile, the American land troops, having unsuccessfully attempted to carry out their mission, were in retreat.

On August 29, 1778, British and Hessian troops attacked the American forces at Butts Hill in Portsmouth; the Americans held firm until night and then withdrew across Howland's Ferry to Tiverton under cover of darkness. General Lafayette, having ridden to Boston in seven hours to seek aid from Count d'Estaing, returned in six and one-half hours in time to superintend the removal of the rear guard from island to mainland.

VICTORY

The outcome of the Battle of Rhode Island was profoundly discouraging to the people of the state. Events elsewhere in the theater of war, however, repaired the failure, and on October 25, 1779, the British evacuated Newport.

The Patriots immediately took steps to confiscate the property of local Tories, including many of the town's first citizens. This work was hardly well under way when in July, 1780, a French fleet mounting 700 cannon and commanded by the Chevalier de Ternay appeared. It conveyed French troops 6,000 strong, under the command of General Rochambeau.

For one brilliant year, Newport and Providence played host to General Rochambeau and his gallant command. Then, after conference with Washington at Newport, General Rochambeau mustered his troops for the historic march southward and for the climax on October 14, 1781, at Yorktown.



General Rochambeau.

*The French Army of 6000
arrives in 1779.*

*Courtesy of State Street Bank & Trust Co.,
Boston, Mass.*

