

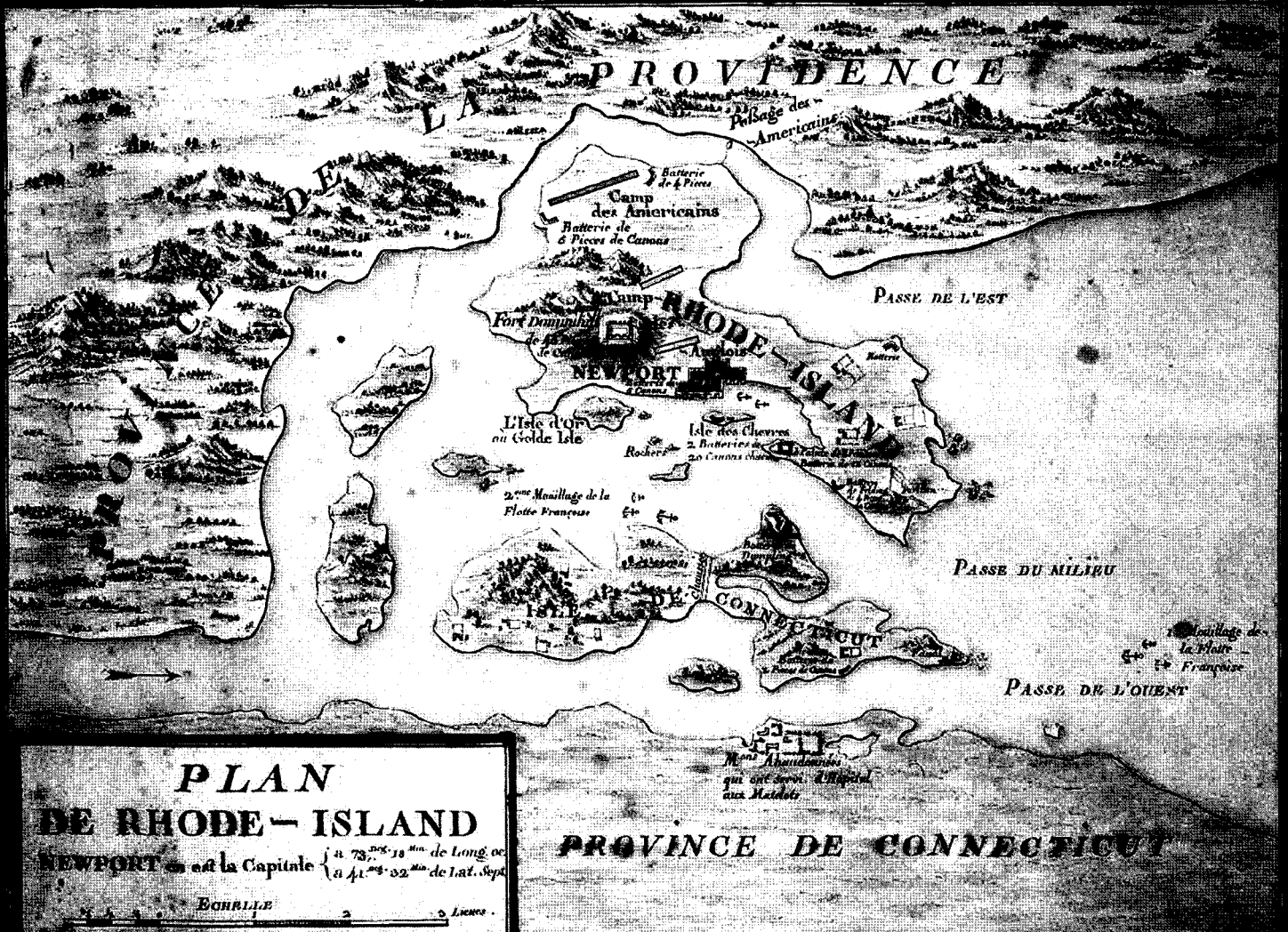
FALL 2004



Rhode Island History

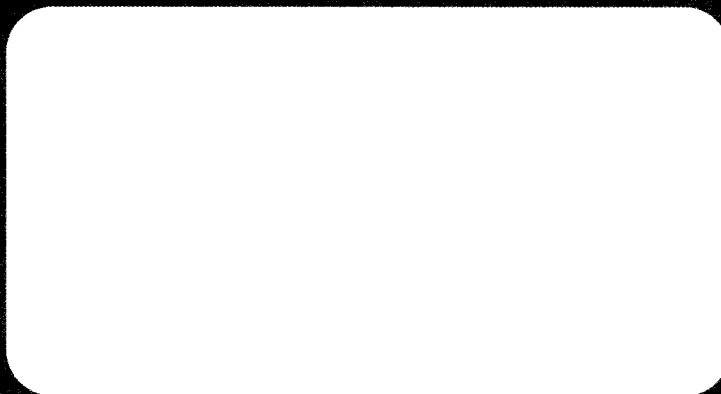
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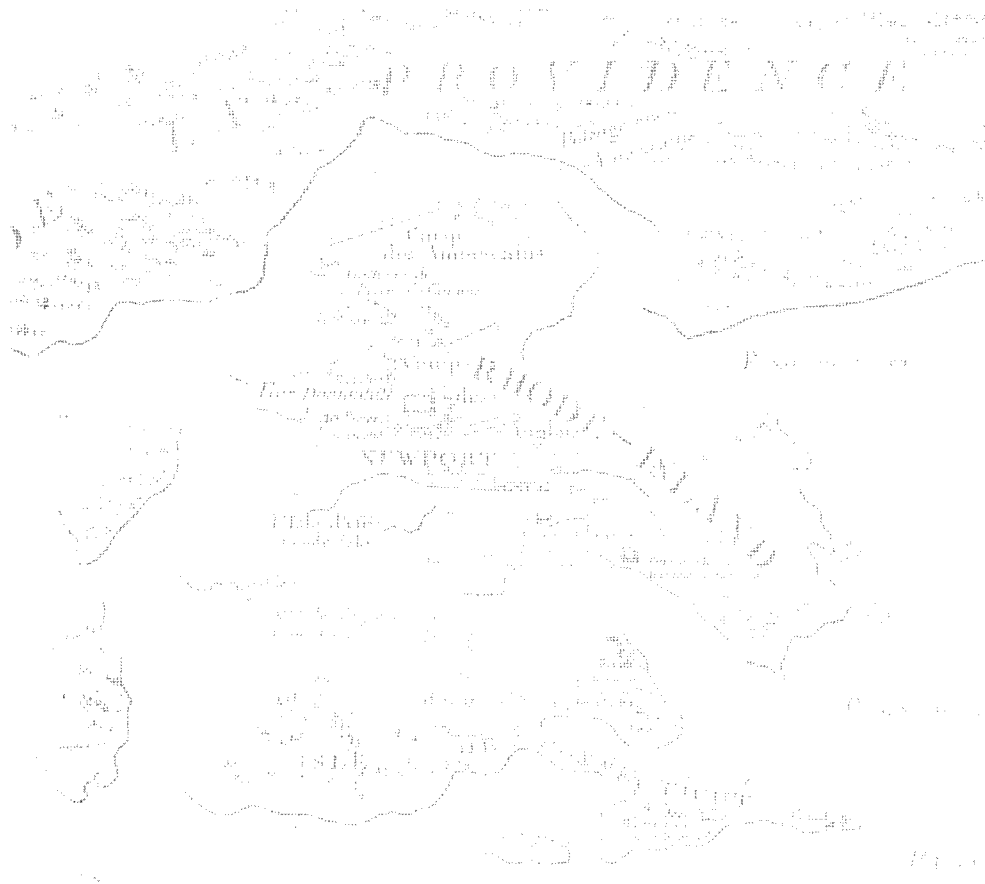
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The Battle of Rhode Island, 29 August 1778: A Victory for the Patriots

PATRICK T. CONLEY

“I don’t get no respect” is a self-deprecating punch line that the late comedian Rodney Dangerfield made a household phrase. In some ways Rhode Island is the Rodney Dangerfield of the thirteen original states: it gets no respect and little recognition from American historians. Perhaps it is because of its diminutive size and small population that its leadership role in the movement towards independence has been obscured by the exploits of Virginia and Massachusetts.

The burning of the *Gaspee* in June 1772 and the colony’s bold renunciation of allegiance to the king on 4 May 1776 are ignored by many American history textbooks. Further, only a few local antiquarians realize that on 17 May 1774 the Providence Town Meeting became the first official government agency to advance proposals for a general congress of all the colonies to formulate united resistance to the policies of England, or that on 15 June 1774 the General Assembly, in response to the Providence initiative, made Rhode Island the first colony to appoint delegates to the First Continental Congress. Virtually unknown is the Providence Tea Party of 2 May 1775, when rebels in Market Square burned three hundred pounds of the controversial leaf referred to by the town crier as “a needless herb, which for a long time hath been highly detrimental to our liberty, interest, and health.”

Also neglected is the role of Providence’s Stephen Hopkins and Silas Downer as pioneers in the formulation of the federal theory of empire, upon which the colonies based their constitutional objection to Parliament’s insistence on undivided sovereignty.¹ Nor have historians made waves about the role of the Ocean State in the creation of the United States Navy. Rhode Island was the first colony to form its own navy; it furnished the first warship to the Continental navy (the ten-gun sloop *Providence*); and it produced the new nation’s first naval commander in chief (Esek Hopkins).²

Though unnoticed by posterity, Rhode Island’s boldness and defiance did not escape the scrutiny of the mother country. In December 1776 it was payback time for Rhode Island. In that month the British occupation of Newport began, setting the stage—eventually—for the Battle of Rhode Island.³



There is a touch of irony that Rhode Island’s largest St. Patrick’s Day celebration is held annually in Newport, for events on 17 March 1776 determined Newport’s unhappy fate. On that day the much-harassed British army evacuated Boston, a departure that gave a later generation of Irish-American Bostonians an excuse to declare 17 March—the feast day of their patron saint—a state holiday.

During the ensuing months British military and naval strategists fixed their attention on Newport as an alternate site from which to launch their New England operations. Newporters sensed this prospect. When the vote to renounce allegiance to the king was taken in the House of Deputies on 4 May 1776, the tally was 60 in favor, 6 against.

Patrick T. Conley is an attorney-at-law, a real estate developer, and a professor emeritus of history at Providence College. He was the chairman of both the Rhode Island Bicentennial of Independence Commission (ri76) and the Rhode Island Bicentennial of the Constitution Foundation.

Maj. Gen. John Sullivan, commander of the American forces at the Battle of Rhode Island. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 699).



Rhode Islander Esek Hopkins was the first commander in chief of the United States Navy. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 688).

Newport's six-man delegation to the General Assembly furnished the negative votes because they realized the consequences of such treasonable conduct.⁴

During 1776 the seizure of Newport was urged by Sir William Howe, the commander of the American theater of war; his brother, Adm. Richard Howe; Sir Henry Clinton; Gen. John Burgoyne; and Capt. James Wallace, the commander of the HMS *Rose* and the scourge of Narragansett Bay. Newport was then America's fifth largest port and its fifth most populous town. Ensnared in Newport, the British would be a threat to the entire southern New England coast and hold an excellent defensive position on an island protected by its fleet.⁵

Rhode Islanders attempted to prepare for the British invasion by constructing numerous fortifications along the shores of Narragansett Bay. On 6 December 1776 rebel governor Nicholas Cooke, alluding to these defenses, uttered the wildest prediction made by any Rhode Island politician before or since: With the aid of Massachusetts and Connecticut, blustered Cooke to a Newport colonel, Rhode Island would be able "to repel the enemy if they should attempt to make a lodgement in this State!"⁶

On 7 December 1776—a day that should live in Rhode Island infamy—a British fleet under Sir Henry Clinton arrived at the mouth of Narragansett Bay. Clinton's force consisted of seventy ships and transports plus thirteen warships commanded by Sir Peter Parker. Clinton also brought two brigades of British troops and two brigades of German auxiliaries—a total of approximately 6,000 soldiers. By 9 December the troops of Clinton's subordinate, Gen. Richard Prescott, had secured the entire island of Rhode Island (also called Aquidneck). A few days later Conanicut (Jamestown) also fell to the British, thus making Sir Henry the first Clinton to carry Rhode Island.⁷ On the positive side, however, Rhode Island troops proved more agile than their opponents; in losing the bay islands, they sustained no casualties.

On 6 December 1776, one day before Clinton's ships reached Narragansett Bay, another arrival occurred on the opposite side of the Atlantic. Benjamin Franklin was perilously put ashore at the small French port of Auray. His destination was Paris, where the wily and adroit Charles Gravier, comte de Vergennes, awaited him. Vergennes, the French minister of foreign affairs from 1774 to 1787, loathed England. The influential Frenchman relentlessly pursued a policy of *revanche* towards England for despoiling France of its North American colonies in the recently concluded Great War for Empire, waged intermittently from 1689 to 1763. Vergennes succinctly stated his goal: "We shall humiliate our natural enemy, a perfidious enemy who never knows how to respect either treaties or the right of nations; we shall divert to our profit one of the principal sources of her opulence [her American colonies] . . . ; we shall extend our commerce, our shipping, our fisheries; we shall ensure the possession of our islands, and, finally, we

shall re-establish our reputation, and shall assume amongst the Powers of Europe the place which belongs to us.”

Fourteen months later, when at long last it became clear that America was able and determined to make good its claim to independence, Franklin and Vergennes signed two momentous treaties: a pact of “amity and commerce” and another creating a “conditional and defensive alliance.” The American war had now spread to Europe as France attempted to restore the balance of power by recognizing a sovereign state in the New World as its ally. From that point onward, Vergennes skillfully engineered the diplomatic isolation of England—a condition that eventually ensured the independence of the United States. The crafty, indefatigable count is the neglected father of American nationhood.⁸

The Rhode Island Campaign of 1778 must be viewed against the backdrop of these strategic and diplomatic developments. In July 1778 the British were still in control of the island of Rhode Island, and so our newly arrived French allies were directed to assist American forces in removing the invaders.

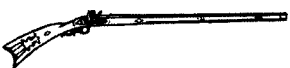


On 17 July 1778 George Washington received a letter from Congress proposing the operation against Newport. Independently and almost simultaneously, the count d’Estaing, the commander of the French expeditionary force, embraced the same project. By mutual agreement Rhode Island became the testing ground for the fledgling Franco-American alliance.

On 22 July Washington sent the orders from Congress to Maj. Gen. John Sullivan, the commander who had been assigned in April to direct the military affairs of the state from headquarters in Providence. When informed of the siege strategy by courier on 24 July, Sullivan, a New Hampshire native of Irish immigrant parentage, had only 1,600 troops and meager provisions at his disposal. His task was to build a besieging army of at least 15,000 troops for a possible assault on heavily defended Newport and work in concert with d’Estaing’s blockading fleet to effectuate a siege.⁹

The military and naval engagements that were launched to liberate Newport can best be described as the Rhode Island Campaign. This project, which consisted of land and sea maneuvers, commenced on 28 July 1778 with the arrival of d’Estaing’s fleet off Block Island and concluded with the arrival of a British relief force in Newport under Sir Henry Clinton on 1 September 1778. News of the departure from New York of that fleet, with its complement of 4,000 troops, prompted the Americans to end their campaign to expel the British from Newport. A masterful analysis of this oft-neglected episode in the War for Independence appears in the late Paul F. Dearden’s *The Rhode Island Campaign of 1778: Inauspicious Dawn of Alliance*, whose intricate detail need not be repeated here.

The Rhode Island Campaign was not the same as the Battle of Rhode Island. The campaign was of five weeks’ duration and involved troop movements and naval actions throughout Aquidneck Island and the lower bay and a running fight between English and French fleets in the Atlantic Ocean many miles to the south of Block Island. The battle was a one-day encounter that occurred on 29 August 1778 in the town of Portsmouth as British forces, half of whom were Germans from Hesse and Anspach, advanced north from fortified Newport in an attempt to turn the American evacuation of Aquidneck into a rout.



The campaign got off to a promising start. Immediately after his arrival on 28 July, the count d'Estaing (really a lieutenant general and a landsman rather than an admiral) dispersed his fleet to blockade the west, middle, and east passages of Narragansett Bay. His armada consisted of twelve ships of the line, four frigates, and four troop ships carrying nearly 4,000 soldiers, including two battalions of the famed Irish Brigade, composed of Catholic expatriates in the service of France.¹⁰ The British panicked at the sight of this superior force. The British commander, Sir Robert Pigot, sank his transports to block the harbor and set nine of his warships afire to prevent their capture as prizes of war. Marine archeologists have been uncovering the remains of these vessels since the Revolution's bicentennial in the 1970s.¹¹

Though d'Estaing was anxious to proceed with the assault upon the 6,700-man British garrison based in Newport, Sullivan could not possibly raise an army for that project on four days' notice. General Washington was able to spare about 2,220 Continental troops from his army, and he dispatched that number to assist Sullivan. Under the command of the twenty-one-year-old Marquis de Lafayette, the brigades of Rhode Islander Gen. James Mitchell Varnum (consisting of 998 men) and Gen. John Glover of Massachusetts (928 men) and the regiment of Massachusetts native Col. Henry Jackson (309 men) arrived in Providence on 3 August. The proposed siege forces rapidly assembled at a staging area centered upon Fort Barton in Tiverton. (The fortification was named for Col. William Barton of Warren, who had led a daring raid in July 1777 that seized Gen. Richard Prescott, the British commander in Newport. Prescott had since been exchanged and had returned to Newport with Clinton; Barton was seriously wounded while chasing the British force that raided Bristol and Warren in May 1778.)

Sullivan issued frantic calls for militia and volunteers throughout Rhode Island and the neighboring states of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. By 11 August, after the Americans had moved unopposed across the Sakonnet, or East Passage, at Howland's Ferry, his army totaled nearly 11,000 men.¹²

The increasingly impatient d'Estaing had awaited the American invasion of Aquidneck for nearly two weeks. Unfortunately for the success of the mission, when the move finally came on 9 August, it coincided with the arrival of a British reinforcement fleet under Lord Richard Howe. D'Estaing, who had begun to debark his troops on Jamestown, reloaded them, pulled together his scattered ships (except for those guarding the Sakonnet crossing), and moved on 10 August to engage Howe's slightly smaller squadron, despite a vehement protest from Sullivan. In departing, d'Estaing left a glimmer of hope: I shall return, said he.

The skillful British admiral led the French general on a merry ocean chase, which was interrupted by a violent gale that severely damaged and dispersed both fleets. On 13 August, in the aftermath of the long-remembered two-day storm, d'Estaing's rudderless and dismasted flagship, the ninety-gun *Languedoc*, was attacked by the *Renown*. Three British broadsides killed 60 men and wounded many more. On 16 August, with the ships still at sea, a battle between the French *César* and the British *Isis* left 60 more French sailors dead and about 100 wounded. This ocean phase of the Rhode Island Campaign took twice as many lives as the Battle of Rhode Island.¹³

The fierce August storm not only ravaged the French and British fleets; it dampened the spirit of Sullivan's raw recruits, who wallowed for two days in drenching, driving rain. Further depressing American morale was the departure of the French and an awareness of the recently strengthened and discouragingly formidable defenses that Sir Robert Pigot and his professional troops had erected just north of Newport, from Green End to Tonomy Hill to Coddington Cove.



As part of the mobilization to recapture Newport, Gen. James Mitchell Varnum and his brigade arrived in Providence on 3 August 1778. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 616).

The Americans encountered these defenses when they moved south on 15 August to establish siege lines near Newport. Sullivan's entrenchments and batteries were centered on Honeyman's Hill on the Green End side of Pigot's defensive wall. One unit was commanded by Lt. Col. Paul Revere of Boston. Sgt. Jeremiah Greenman described the action laconically: "Cannading & bumbarding each other Night and day,/holding our Selvs in readiness for an attack at the first Notification."¹⁴

On 20 August, after five days of artillery exchanges between the besiegers and Pigot's entrenched troops, d'Estaing's crippled fleet returned, as promised, to Rhode Island waters, dropping anchor at 5:00 P.M. off Brenton's Point. However, the boost to morale produced by the sight of d'Estaing's ships was as short-lived as the French presence. Through an emissary, d'Estaing informed Sullivan that the extensive damage his ships had sustained in the gale forced him to sail to Boston for repairs. He then departed, taking the three frigates and the brigantine in the Sakonnet River with him; but still worse for the Americans, he took his 4,000 soldiers to Boston with the crippled fleet. This course of action was urged upon d'Estaing by his captains, but American wrath descended upon the count alone.

On 22 August, the day the French ships and troops sailed away, Sullivan called a council of his officers, during which a formal protest was drafted and signed by Sullivan and his generals, including Nathanael Greene, James Mitchell Varnum, John Glover, and John Hancock of Boston (who was used to signing controversial documents). The tenor of the missive to d'Estaing is evident in the concluding description of the French departure, which the angry and dejected Americans described as "derogatory to the honor of France, contrary to the intentions of His Most Christian Majesty and the interest of his nation, and destructive in the highest degree to the welfare of the United States of America, and highly injurious to the alliance formed between the two nations."¹⁵

Lafayette fumed when he read the harsh remonstrance, and he became even more irate when Sullivan told his discouraged troops in his general orders of 24 August that he hoped the abandonment would prove America able to procure by its own arms that which "our allies refuse to assist in obtaining." This "insolent" statement prompted Lafayette to express his indignation in a letter to Washington: "I am more upon a warlike footing in the American lines than when I came near the British lines at Newport," he declared.¹⁶

D'Estaing took the criticism by Sullivan and others stoically. When the censure of the French came to Washington's attention, he advised Sullivan that "prudence dictates that we should put the best face upon the matter, and to the world, attribute the removal to Boston, to necessity." Upon hearing of the dispute, Conrad Gerard, the new French minister, wrote from Philadelphia to Vergennes that "unfortunately this is a nation of hot-heads." But when all was said and done, the alliance survived.¹⁷

According to a count transmitted to Washington by Nathanael Greene, by 23 August the land forces available to Sullivan had shrunk from nearly 15,000 to 8,174. With daily desertions by the hundreds, said Lafayette's French aide, the ranks of the rapidly depleting militia furnished a "laughable spectacle. . . . All the tailors and apothecaries in the country must have been called out. . . . I guessed that these warriors were more anxious to eat up our supplies than to make a close acquaintance with the enemy."

With his prospects dimming, his ranks dwindling, and his gunpowder drenched by the recent deluge, Sullivan decided to lift the siege of Newport and evacuate the island. The likelihood of British reinforcements influenced the general's decision as well.¹⁸



The pullback proceeded gradually, beginning on the evening of 24 August. Finally, with most of the army's stores, artillery, and baggage removed to the north, on 28 August Sullivan and his officers gave orders to fall back to a line of defense extending across Portsmouth and centered upon the former British fort on 200-foot-high Butt's Hill in the northeast sector of the town. The Americans broke camp at 8:00 that night, and by 3:00 the following morning Sullivan's army had assumed the British-built defensive positions, from which they could give protection to the anticipated evacuation. The American forces had dwindled to slightly over 5,000 men on this day of battle.

At dawn, when the British gazed northward toward the American siege lines in Middletown, they saw the empty American breastworks. General Pigot, a fifty-eight-year-old warrior who had served heroically at Bunker Hill, immediately decided to pursue the Americans and disrupt their departure. Had he known of Sullivan's defensive plan to protect the evacuation, he might have reconsidered his decision. Forced to leave a garrison behind to secure his Newport base, he could—and probably did—mobilize only 5,000 of his 6,700-man army for the chase and eventual battle. They would not encounter American soldiers on the march, facing north towards Tiverton; instead, they would meet well-entrenched troops, effectively commanded, numerically equal, and advantageously deployed.



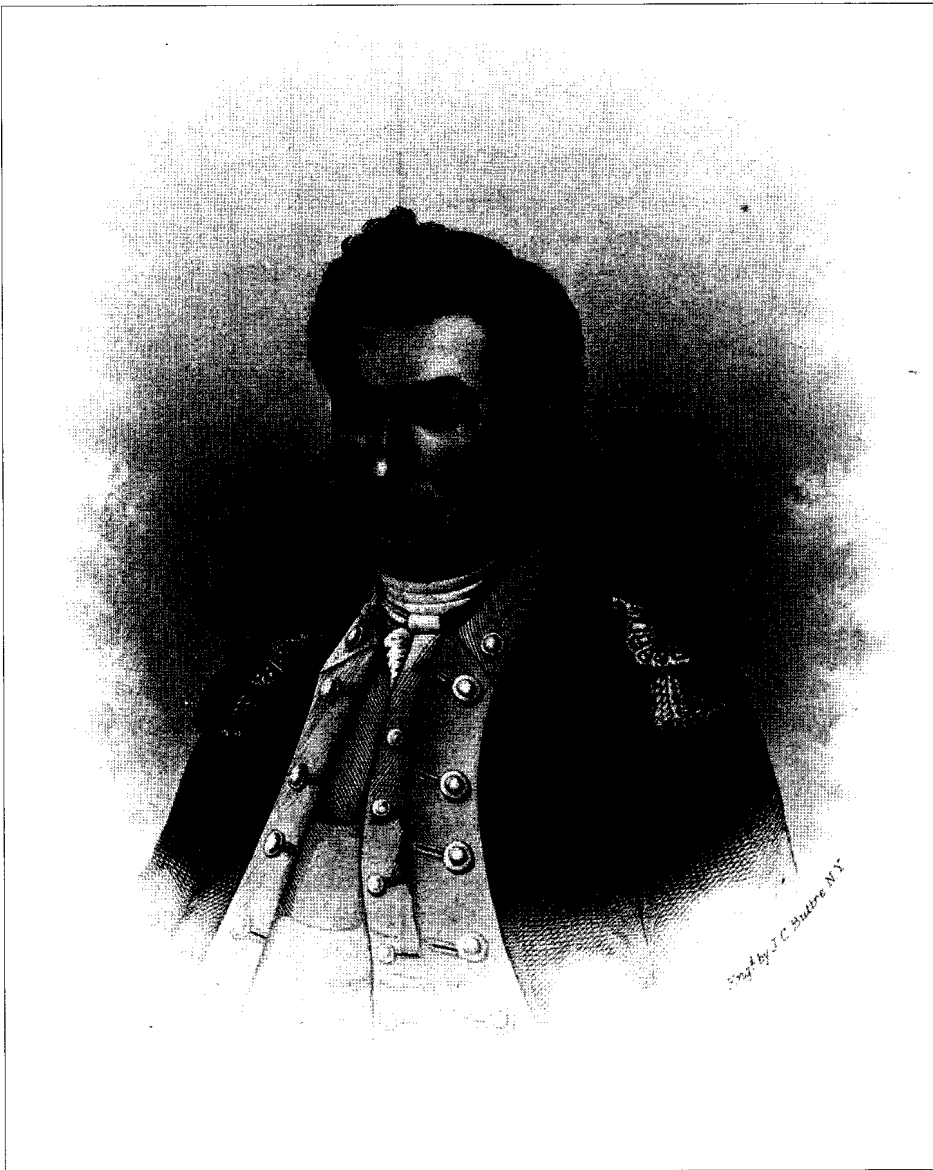
Maj. Silas Talbot, along with Col. John Laurens, led the American troops blocking West Main Road in Portsmouth. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7723).

As the British and Germans moved to within three miles of the American line, nearly all of Sullivan's forces were formed for battle. Two units had been sent southward as skirmishers to slow the British advance. Americans blocking West Main Road (the American right) were led by Col. John Laurens and Maj. Silas Talbot, and Col. Henry Beekman Livingston patrolled the East Road. Shortly after 7:00 A.M. these units met the enemy, and the Battle of Rhode Island began. One noteworthy aspect of these initial encounters was the ambush of Lt. Col. John Campbell's British regiment near the Union Meeting House along East Main Road. Campbell, who had led an expedition that pillaged and plundered Warren and Bristol in May 1778, suffered heavy casualties.

In the face of superior force, the daring and effective skirmishers retreated to the relative safety of the entrenched American positions. One advance unit, atop Quaker Hill, was saved from encirclement and capture when Sullivan's aide-de-camp, Col. John Trumbull, the son of Connecticut's revolutionary governor, spotted the enemy troop movements from the commanding view afforded by Butt's Hill and

galloped across an open meadow and up Quaker Hill, with musket balls whizzing by him, to order the American advanced force to make a hasty withdrawal.

Sullivan had formed three lines of battle. The first was in front of the fort on Butt's Hill and extended on the left to the Sakonnet River and on the right to Narragansett Bay. On



Col. Christopher Greene and his brigade formed the center of the American line of battle. RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 9193).

the left, or east, facing Quaker Hill, stood Gen. John Glover. In the center was Col. Christopher Greene, temporarily detached from his First Rhode Island Regiment to lead a brigade. To Colonel Greene's right was Col. Ezekiel Cornell, whose brigade abutted West Main Road. Across that highway, facing Turkey Hill, was the brigade of Gen. James Mitchell Varnum. Holding the redoubt that anchored the right wing on the Narragansett Bay shore was the First Rhode Island Regiment (of only battalion size). This unit included the so-called Black Regiment—over 100 men of color, most of them black slaves who were promised their freedom in return for their service in the Revolutionary cause—a detachment commanded by Maj. Samuel Ward Jr., the son of the former Rhode Island governor. Guarding the right flank were troops under Lt. Col. Henry Brockholst Livingston. Protecting the much shorter left flank was a force led by Brig. Gen. John Tyler.

A second line took positions to the rear of Butt's Hill. On the west stood Gen. James Lovell's brigade of Massachusetts militia, which engaged in the combat, and a brigade under Gen. Jonathan Titcomb, which held its position throughout the fighting to safeguard the main evacuation route to Howland's Ferry. A third line, a small reserve force that did not see action, was stationed near a brook about one-half mile north of Butt's Hill.¹⁹

During the ebb and flow of the opposing armies, the tide of battle changed all along the front. On the American left, Glover repulsed the British right wing and held it at bay. The longest and bitterest fighting occurred on the American right. Three times British and German infantry charged the forces commanded by Rhode Island's own Nathanael Greene, and three times the brigades of fellow Rhode Islanders Varnum and Christopher Greene helped to beat them off.

The third assault, launched at 2:00 P.M., determined the outcome of the battle. Despite the resistance of four American regiments, the relentless advance of the British and Germans carried them one hundred yards to the rear of Major Ward's redoubt, manned by the First Rhode Island Regiment. At this critical point, Nathanael Greene led a counterattack with some 1,500 men (a number some historians have mistaken for the total number of American forces engaged in the daylong conflict). Leading the American surge was Col. Israel Angell's Second Rhode Island Regiment and Gen. James Lovell's second-line brigade. Lt. Col. Henry Brockholst Livingston, guarding the flank with his Continental troops, also rushed into the endangered sector, leading Col. Henry Jackson's regiment in a furious bayonet charge that sent the enemy scurrying back to the



At a critical moment in the battle, Maj. Gen. Nathanael Greene led some 1,500 American troops in a counterattack against advancing British and Germans. RIHS Collection ((RHi X3 582).

safety of Turkey Hill. Nathanael Greene described the scene: “We soon put the enemy to rout, and I had the pleasure to see them run in worse disorder than they did at the Battle of Monmouth.”²⁰

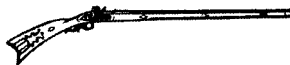
Anchoring the beleaguered right flank of the American army, the First Rhode Island Regiment, consisting of 202 officers and men of whom approximately half were men of color, withstood not only repeated assaults but also a naval bombardment from four British ships that leveled several broadsides against the American coastal position before withdrawing to escape fire from two 24-pound cannons fired from a redoubt on Bristol Point. Two black soldiers were killed and nine were wounded during the battle, in which the unit earned praise for displaying “desperate valor.” Attacking Germans suffered much heavier losses in their brave but futile attempt to dislodge Ward’s defenders.²¹

At 7:00 P.M. two more British regiments arrived from Newport, and skirmishing and artillery exchanges continued until nightfall. Earlier in the day Nathanael Greene had urged a full-scale counterattack, but Sullivan prudently refrained. His soldiers had not slept since dawn on 28 August, many had suffered heat stroke on the very hot and humid day of battle, and the enemy was holding high ground on Turkey and Quaker Hills (220 and 280 feet high respectively). As daylight ended, so too did the Battle of Rhode Island.

Lafayette, to his chagrin, missed the battle. He had been on a round-trip mission to Boston in a futile attempt to secure d’Estaing’s return. The admiral offered to march his troops to Sullivan’s aid, but his fleet was far from ready. Sir Henry Clinton’s fleet, on the other hand, was ready, willing, able, and at anchor off Block Island with a cargo of 4,000 British soldiers.²²

At 6:00 P.M. on 30 August, Sullivan gave the order to evacuate the island. The crossing, directed by General Glover and executed by mariners from Marblehead, Salem, Newburyport, and Boston, was masterful. Exactly two years earlier Glover had directed the evacuation of General Washington from Long Island, and it was also Glover who ferried Washington’s army across the icy Delaware on a bitterly cold Christmas night in 1776. The Sakonnet was duck soup, and the passage to Bristol Point just as smooth.

The withdrawal was aided greatly by farmers from as far north as Attleboro and Taunton and from all the Massachusetts towns in between, who furnished large numbers of wagons and draft animals to facilitate the exodus of Sullivan’s sizable force. Lafayette, having arrived from Boston, assisted the evacuation until its conclusion; one of the last to leave the island, the marquis established temporary headquarters in Bristol before returning to Washington’s staff on the Hudson.²³



The Battle of Rhode Island must be placed squarely in the American victory column. Historians, when they notice it at all, have hesitated to call it a win, perhaps because they view it as an integral part of an unsuccessful campaign. Using that flawed logic, one could state that Long Island, Brandywine, Savannah, and Camden were not British triumphs because the British campaign to subdue America failed.

Pigot’s mission was to disrupt the American evacuation. That effort was stymied so completely that the evacuation was not even contested by Maj. Gen. Richard Prescott, Pigot’s second-in-command, from his Portsmouth base on the following day. During the thirteen-hour battle the British and Germans had been repeatedly driven back, and their 248 casualties—38 killed and 210 wounded—were a loss eclipsed in only a handful of their Revolutionary War engagements. Only American fatigue, the heat, the British-

held high ground, and the threat of Clinton's reinforcements saved Pigot's army from being overrun in a counterattack.

The persistent Pigot had eventually prevailed at the Battle of Bunker Hill, driving the rebels from their perch, but at Butt's Hill he never came close to dislodging the Americans. With the Sakonnet at their backs, Sullivan and Greene repeatedly repulsed their adversaries and yielded not an inch of their main defensive line. The British and Germans simply butted their heads against a wall so stout that retreat was their only sane and tactical alternative. Sullivan's evacuation of Rhode Island, which began on 24 August, was executed with such smoothness and success precisely because his victory in Portsmouth on 29 August foiled Pigot's attempt to disrupt it.²⁴

The Battle of Rhode Island was not merely a clear-cut American victory; it was also a battle of major proportions unrecognized by most American historians. Not only was the encounter very high on the British casualty list; the 30 Americans killed and 137 wounded also placed it 17th among the 1,331 wartime engagements painstakingly ranked by Professor Howard H. Peckham for the number of their American casualties. The combined total of Americans killed and wounded at Portsmouth is exceeded in New England military annals only by the casualties at Bunker Hill, where 140 were killed and 271 were wounded.²⁵

The Rhode Island confrontation was conducted on a much larger scale than the combat at either Bunker Hill or Lexington and Concord. The running skirmishes of April 1775 extending from Lexington and Concord to Cambridge involved approximately 5,500 combatants; at Bunker Hill a total of 5,500 soldiers were deployed by both sides, of which 1,000 Americans were held in reserve and saw no direct action.²⁶

In Portsmouth, Sullivan mobilized and deployed nearly his entire army of at least 5,000 men on or within a half mile of his main line, and most saw action. Pigot eventually used at least 5,000 of the 6,700 troops under his command, withdrawing some units and sending out replacements from his adequately defended Newport base.²⁷ Thus approximately 10,000 troops were deployed in Portsmouth on 29 August 1778, making the Battle of Rhode Island far and away the largest military encounter in New England history. The history books ignore that fact! Two of the most highly regarded recent histories of the war fail to mention the battle at all. In *The Winning of Independence*, a comprehensive history of the Revolution written for its bicentennial, the respected, methodical scholar Professor Marshall Smelser mentions only the Sullivan-d'Estaing feud. Robert Middlekauff goes no further in *The Glorious Cause* (1981), a history of the Revolution included in the prestigious series entitled *The Oxford History of the United States*.²⁸

Amazingly, the U.S. Army's Center of Military History has also forgotten this encounter. In the narrative portion of its detailed bicentennial volume *The War of the American Revolution* (1975), the Battle of Rhode Island is not even mentioned as a footnote to the brief analysis of the clash between Sullivan and d'Estaing (though the battle is listed in the "Army Chronology").²⁹

Equally discouraging, the site of the clash has been ignored. A small park honoring the Black Regiment has been created at the junction of Routes 24 and 114, but the command-and-control center of the American defenders atop Butt's Hill is virtually hidden and difficult to access. One must follow a winding, unmarked dirt path leading upward from the end of Butts Street to the hill's flat crest, which overlooks the campus of Portsmouth High School, home of the "Patriots." The site itself still contains well-defined earthworks, but it is overgrown, litter-strewn, and neglected. The historic height, visible for miles around, is now topped (and blighted) by a circular concrete water tank.

In contrast to the grand monuments that grace Lexington, Concord, Bunker Hill, Bennington, and most of the major Revolutionary War battlefields south to Georgia, Butt's Hill is marked only by a four- by six-foot granite slab, now tilted and nearly illegible, placed there in 1928 by the Newport Historical Society. Again, recognition and respect elude Rhode Island; and Rhode Islanders do little to rectify the situation.



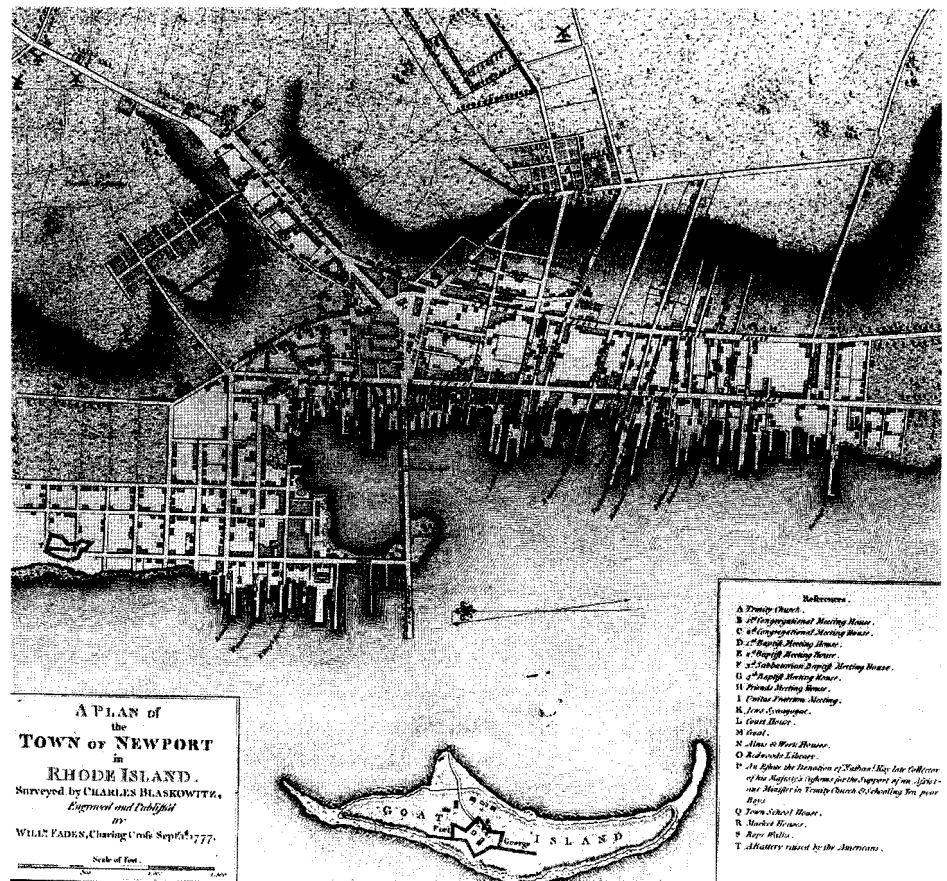
The Rhode Island Campaign, unlike the battle, was a failure that has dimmed and obscured the luster of the American victory on 29 August 1778. It was, however, a military and naval event of major proportions that, apart from the battle, saw 8 Americans killed in action during its five-week duration. It involved nearly 15,000 troops on the American side (including the 4,000 soldiers briefly debarked by d'Estaing) and nearly 11,000 British and German troops (including the 4,000 men brought by Clinton's relief expedition on 1 September). A campaign such as this—one involving troop movements in excess of 25,000 men and the presence of three battle fleets (d'Estaing's, Howe's, and Clinton's)—deserves more notice from military historians than they have accorded it. The siege of Newport was comparable in size and scope to the siege at Yorktown.³⁰

The Rhode Island Campaign not only failed to achieve its objective; it also spawned some serious aftershocks. It angered the British sufficiently to prompt devastating raids on New Bedford, Fairhaven, and Martha's Vineyard led by one of Clinton's subordinates, Gen. Charles Grey. Between 6 and 11 September Grey's marauders burned over a hundred ships, torched warehouses, and foraged at will along the coast of southeastern Massachusetts. Not until October 1779, thirteen and a half months after Sullivan and Lafayette left Aquidneck, did the British evacuate Newport—and they did so voluntarily.³¹

The campaign also put a chill on the new alliance between France and America. The nearly unavoidable difficulties in achieving a smoothly coordinated Franco-American military and naval venture created much American ill-will towards our French allies that was not dispelled until the benevolent occupation of Newport by Rochambeau's army in 1780-81 and the crucial role played by the French land and sea forces during the Yorktown siege. As Paul Dearden so aptly phrased it, the Rhode Island Campaign was a most "inauspicious dawn of alliance," but it served as a dress rehearsal for Yorktown.³² By 1781 both Americans and French must have profited from their earlier mistakes.

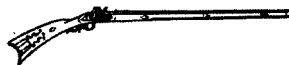
The British presence in Newport, made more ruinous by the siege, dealt a severe blow to the City by the Sea. Its exposed location, the incidence of Toryism among its townspeople, and its temporary occupation by the British combined to produce both a voluntary and, at times, a forced exodus of its inhabitants. In 1774 Newport's population was 9,209; by 1782 that figure had dwindled to 5,532. Conversely, the population of Providence—more sheltered at the head of the bay, and a center of Revolutionary activity—remained stable at around 4,300 during these turbulent times. The Revolution was a blow from which Newport never fully recovered; the British occupation adversely affected both its population and its prosperity. From this period onward, numerical and economic ascendancy inexorably moved northward to Providence and the surrounding mainland communities.³³

Once the American claim to independence was vindicated and recognized by the mother country in the Treaty of Paris, two minority groups who had played a major role in the Rhode Island Campaign and in the war effort, Roman Catholics and blacks, saw the discriminations against them lifted by a grateful Rhode Island General Assembly. Mindful of the decisive role of Catholic France in the winning of independence, in 1783 the state legislature removed the political disability against Roman Catholics by giving members of that religion (including some French soldiers who returned to Newport) "all the



Map of Newport, surveyed by Charles Blaskowitz, 1777. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 1384).

rights and privileges of the Protestant citizens of this state.” In the following year the General Assembly rewarded the service and heroism of Rhode Island’s Afro-Americans by passing a law that provided for the gradual ending of slavery by extending freedom to all children born of slave mothers after 1 March 1784.³⁴



Great crusades like the Rhode Island Campaign of 1778 are directed by great leaders. In August 1778 Rhode Island had such men in abundance. To recognize a few and to relate their eventual fate is a good way to humanize and to end our saga.

Gen. John Sullivan (1740-1795) moved from the ocean to the wilds of central New York in 1779 to conduct a moderately successful campaign against the fierce Iroquois allies of England. After returning to his native New Hampshire, he became governor of the Granite State in 1786 and a staunch supporter of the Constitution.

Twenty-two-year-old Col. John Trumbull (1756-1843), who made the heroic dash up Quaker Hill, became “the Painter of the Revolution.” His many canvasses included portraits of Washington and, arguably, our nation’s most famous painting, *The Signing of the Declaration of Independence*.

Lt. Col. Henry Brockholst Livingston (1757-1823) of New Jersey, only twenty-one when he guarded Sullivan’s right flank, went on to become a leading New York Federalist and an associate justice of the United States Supreme Court. His distant cousin, Col. Henry Beekman Livingston (1750-1831), the adroit leader of the East Main Road skirmishers, was the younger brother of Chancellor Robert R. Livingston, who administered the presidential oath of office to George Washington. Henry Beekman resumed residence

on his large Hudson River estate and remained prominent in New York social and economic circles until his death.

Col. Henry Jackson (1747-1809), whose Continental regiment made the bayonet charge that repulsed the most serious British advance, served as major general of the Massachusetts militia and commanded the 800-man column that marched into New York City when the British finally evacuated that strategic site on 25 November 1783.

A tragic fate befell Col. John Laurens (1754-1782) of South Carolina, who directed the skirmishers along West Main Road in the opening hours of the battle. Colonel Laurens, the son of Henry Laurens, incumbent president of the Continental Congress, fought with gallantry throughout the Revolution. He was an aide to Washington at Yorktown, where he helped to draft the terms of General Cornwallis's surrender. Ironically, the captured British general was soon exchanged for Henry Laurens, the father of John, who had been apprehended by the Royal Navy on a diplomatic mission to the Netherlands. On 27 August 1782, in the waning days of the war, the promising career of John Laurens was aborted when he was killed trying to prevent a large body of British troops from landing on the South Carolina coast near Combahee Ferry. He was among the last dozen Americans to be killed in action during the War for Independence.

Of the notable Rhode Island commanders of the siege and battle, only Col. Christopher Greene (1737-1781) shared Laurens's fate. This kinsman of Nathanael Greene and colonel of the First Rhode Island Regiment commanded a brigade defending the American center with the same ability and determination that had won him a sword from Congress in 1777 for his command of strategic Fort Mercer on the Delaware River. He was killed on 14 May 1781 by Tories who staged a night raid upon his farmhouse headquarters near Croton River, New York.

Nathanael Greene (1742-1786) of Warwick fared better as the one Rhode Island revolutionary universally recognized by American historians, a recognition gained by his service as quartermaster general of the Continental army, as Washington's most reliable strategist, and as the dogged and determined leader of American forces in the South who pursued the army of Cornwallis to its trap on the Yorktown peninsula. Greene was much appreciated in the South, and when he was beset by postwar financial problems, the grateful state of Georgia awarded him the confiscated estate of a wealthy Loyalist near Savannah. Greene accepted, but in 1786, within a year of his relocation, he died of sunstroke at the age of forty-four.

Maj. Silas Talbot (1751-1813) of Providence became Rhode Island's most versatile Revolutionary warrior. He distinguished himself both as an army officer and as a hugely successful naval captain and privateersman. Later in life he served as a U.S. congressman from New York and as a commander of the frigate *USS Constitution*, "Old Ironsides."

Samuel Ward Jr. (1756-1832), the son of a Rhode Island governor and the commander of the Black Regiment during this battle, became a prominent merchant and businessman and the grandfather of Julia Ward Howe, the author of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Most formidable of all—not excepting Nathanael Greene—was Gen. James Mitchell Varnum (1748-1789), who had founded the Kentish Guards in 1774 and made the original suggestion to Washington for the recruitment of a black regiment in Rhode Island. In February 1778 the General Assembly responded to Varnum's initiative by passing an act providing for the recruitment of slaves, whose masters were to be compensated by the state, and permitting the enlistment of free Negroes, mulattoes, and Indians in a "colored regiment." After the war Varnum became a prominent attorney who was an early expounder of judicial review as counsel in the famous Rhode Island case of *Trevett*

v. *Weeden* (1786). He died at age forty-one in Marietta, Ohio, while serving as one of the first judges of the Northwest Territory, an area that he regarded as a new frontier for his ample talents and leadership ability.³⁵

British general Sir Robert Pigot (1720-1796) returned to England, where he lived a life of style and grace as a baronet until his death. Maj. Gen. Richard Prescott (1725-1788), Pigot's second-in-command at the battle, regained his Newport command in mid-1779 and directed the British evacuation in October of that year. After the war he returned to England, where he received a final promotion to lieutenant general prior to his death.³⁶

Charles Hector Théodat, comte d'Estaing (1729-1794), suffered a serious wound and a major defeat at Savannah in October 1779 before returning to France, where his advice and that of Lafayette influenced the government to finance Rochambeau's 1780 expedition. During the French Revolution d'Estaing remained loyal to the royal family and exchanged friendly letters with the doomed queen, Marie Antoinette. Such support was rewarded with a trial and execution by guillotine, that device invented by French liberals to get the edge over their conservative opponents.³⁷

The zealous Lafayette (1757-1834) remained active throughout the remainder of the conflict both as emissary and soldier. At the Yorktown campaign, where the combined French forces outnumbered the Americans, Lafayette commanded the light division for the final action against Cornwallis. "Liberty now has a nation!" Lafayette exclaimed after the victory. He survived the French revolutionary upheaval and declined leadership posts offered by both Napoleon and Jefferson.

At the invitation of a fellow Revolutionary War veteran, President James Monroe, Lafayette made a triumphal tour of America from August 1824 to September 1825 as an honorary U.S. citizen. Everywhere the gallant Frenchman was welcomed with "frenzied enthusiasm." In August 1824, forty-six years after the Rhode Island Campaign, Lafayette made his fourth and final visit to Rhode Island. Cannons fired, bells rang, dignitaries stood at attention, and girls threw flowers in his path. At long last, Lafayette realized his earlier objective: he had taken Rhode Island by storm!³⁸



Charles Hector Théodat, comte d'Estaing. Engraving after a painting by F. Sablet. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 564).



Marquis de Lafayette. Engraving, Magazine of American History, December 1878. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 597).

Notes

1. Documentation of this litany of defiance can be found in Patrick T. Conley, *Democracy in Decline: Rhode Island's Constitutional Development, 1776-1841* (Providence, 1977), 57-63.
2. Hope S. Rider, *Valour Fore & Aft: Being the Adventures of America's First Naval Vessel* (Newport, 1978), 3-35; Edward Field, *Esek Hopkins, Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Navy . . .* (Providence, 1898).
3. Paul F. Dearden, *The Rhode Island Campaign of 1778: Inauspicious Dawn of Alliance* (Providence, 1980), is the only book-length scholarly monograph detailing Rhode Island's military and naval events of late July and August 1778. Dearden's book, the first draft of which was written under my supervision as a graduate seminar paper, is factually accurate and analytically sound. This essay relies heavily upon Dearden's work, differing only in emphasis and perspective by attempting to draw a sharp distinction between the Rhode Island Campaign and the one-day battle and to view the latter as a significant military engagement and a clear-cut American victory.
4. Glenn W. LaFantasie, "Act for All Reasons—Revolutionary Politics and May 4, 1776," *Rhode Island History* 30 (1976): 39-47.
5. Dearden, *Rhode Island Campaign*, 5-10.
6. Edward Field, *Revolutionary Defenses in Rhode Island* (Providence, 1896), passim; Nicholas Cooke to Col. John Cooke, 6 Dec. 1776, Letters from the Governor of Rhode Island, 2:70, Rhode Island State Archives.
7. Dearden, *Rhode Island Campaign*, 6-8. Don N. Hagist, ed., *General Orders, Rhode Island: December 1776-January 1778* (Westminster, Md., 2001), is the only orderly book known to exist containing British general orders given in Rhode Island during the years of occupation. This detailed document was not available to Dearden or other historians of Revolutionary Rhode Island.
8. On Franco-American diplomacy, see Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (Bloomington, Ind., 1957), 16-69; Jonathan R. Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution* (New Haven, Conn., 1985, 73-96; and Esmond Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986) 256-96.
9. *Letters and Papers of Major General John Sullivan*, 3 vols., ed. O. G. Hammond (Concord, N.H., 1930-39), 2:89-90.
10. Dearden, *Rhode Island Campaign*, 46-49.
11. For a summary of this recovery effort by its director, see D. K. Abbass, "Underwater Archaeology in Rhode Island," in Carol V. Ruppé and Janet F. Barstad, *International Handbook of Underwater Archeology* (New York, 2002), 89-99.
12. Details of the troop buildup can be gleaned from several eyewitness accounts, most notably *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, vol. 2, ed. Richard K. Showman (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980), 461-79; Sullivan, *Letters and Papers*, 2:89 ff., 3:640-44; *The Diary of Israel Angell, 1778-1781*, ed. Edward Field (Providence, 1899), 1-11; and *The Writings of George Washington*, 39 vols., ed. J. C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, D.C., 1931-44), 12:185 ff. For a view from the ranks, see *Diary of a Common Soldier in the American Revolution, 1775-1783: An Annotated Edition of the Military Journal of Jeremiah Greenman*, ed. Robert Bray and Paul Bushnell (DeKalb, Ill., 1978), 124-27. The most authoritative compilations on American troop strength are found in Charles Lesser, ed., *The Sinews of Independence: Monthly Strength Reports of the Continental Army* (Chicago, 1976), 77, 85, and Edward Field, *State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations: A History*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1902), 1:490. On Barton's exploits, see J. Lewis Diman, *The Capture of General Richard Prescott by Lt. Col. William Barton* (Providence, 1877).
13. Dearden, *Rhode Island Campaign*, 71-82; Field, *State of Rhode Island*, 1:492-96; *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 2:480-86.
14. Dearden, *Rhode Island Campaign*, 93-108; *Diary of a Common Soldier*, 128; "Letter of Paul Revere," *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings* 13 (February 1874): 251-52.
15. General Sullivan and his officers to the Count d'Estaing, 22 Aug. 1778, in Sullivan, *Letters and Papers*, 2:245-46, and John Laurens to Washington, 23 Aug. 1778, in Jared Sparks, ed., *Correspondence of the American Revolution: Being Letters of Eminent Men to George Washington*, 3 vols. (Boston, 1853), 2:179-80.
16. Lafayette to Washington, 25 Aug. 1778, in Sparks, *Correspondence*, 2:184-86.
17. Washington to Sullivan, 28 Aug. 1778, *Writings of George Washington*, 12:369; Gerard to Vergennes, in Edwin M. Stone, *Our French Allies* (Providence, 1844), 78n.
18. Greene to Sullivan, 23 Aug. 1778, and Sullivan to Greene, 23 Aug. 1778, in *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 2:492-96; Charles A. Moré, *The Chevalier de Pontgibaud, a French Volunteer*, trans. and ed. Robert B. Douglas (Paris, 1898), 66-67.
19. My synopsis of the Battle of Rhode Island has been gleaned from four principal secondary sources—Dearden, *Rhode Island Campaign*; Field, *State of Rhode Island*, 1:488-505; Samuel G. Arnold, *The Centennial Celebration of the Battle of Rhode Island, at Portsmouth, R.I., August 29, 1878* (Providence, 1878); and Anthony Walker, *So Few the Brave: Rhode Island Continentals, 1775-1783* (Newport, 1981)—and from the letters, diaries, and

- memoirs of participants, most notably Nathanael Greene, John Sullivan, Israel Angell, Jeremiah Greenman, John Trumbull, and Samuel Smith. Indispensable for the British viewpoint is *The Diary of Frederick Mackenzie*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1930), 2:365-91.
20. Greene to Washington, 28/31 Aug. 1778, *Papers of Nathanael Greene*, 2:499-502.
 21. In addition to the accounts of the battle cited above, one should consult Sidney S. Rider, *An Historical Inquiry concerning the Attempt to Raise a Regiment of Slaves by Rhode Island during the War of the Revolution* (Providence, 1880), and Walker, *So Few the Brave*, 128-33, on the conduct and composition of the so-called "Black Regiment."
 22. D'Estaing to Sullivan, 30 Aug. 1778, in Sullivan, *Letters and Papers*, 2:277-79.
 23. George A. Billias, "General Glover's Role in the Battle of Rhode Island," *Rhode Island History* 19 (1959): 33-42; Field, *State of Rhode Island*, 1:497-98, 503.
 24. Sir Henry Clinton regarded the encounter as a failure. According to Christopher Hibbert, *Redcoats and Rebels: The American Revolution through British Eyes* (New York, 1990), "Pigot, so Clinton complained, had been too headstrong and energetic in his pursuit. Eager to throw the rebels off the island, he had failed to destroy them; he had made the same kind of mistake that Sir William Howe had made against Washington in New York. This time, however, it was not because a British commander had been too cautious, but because he had been too impetuous. 'Knowing I was coming,' Sir Henry wrote, 'he should have been a little less so'" (p. 233).
 25. Howard H. Peckham, ed., *The Toll of Independence: Engagements and Battle Casualties of the American Revolution* (Chicago, 1974), 3-4 and passim. My statements concerning the relative ranking of the Battle of Rhode Island are based upon an engagement-by-engagement analysis of Peckham's tabulations. Benedict Arnold's 6 September 1781 raid on New London resulted in 85 Americans dead and 60 wounded, but most of the casualties were executions that occurred after Forts Griswold and Trumbull surrendered. *Ibid.*, 90. My only point of disagreement with Dearden's account relates to the bloody nature of the battle. Dearden slipped one by his professor in a footnote to his chapter on the events of 29 August when he parenthetically observed that "It should be noted . . . that in comparison with a number of other Revolutionary engagements, the Battle of Rhode Island was hardly among the most sanguine" (Dearden, *Rhode Island Campaign*, 131 n. 38).
 26. Peckham, *Toll of Independence*, 3-4. In his 1902 history of Rhode Island, Edward Field concluded his narrative of the battle as follows: "The desperate attempt to turn the American flank had failed, and the battle was already won by Sullivan. The British retreated to their camp, closely pursued by the victorious Americans" (*State of Rhode Island*, 1:500). Field's assessment has been largely ignored.
 27. Military historian Anthony Walker concurs in my estimate of the number of British troops engaged, but he fixes the total manpower available (including Loyalists) at 7,139. *So Few the Brave*, 54-62, 66. Another local military buff, Walter Schroder, who is fluent in German, is preparing a history of Britain's German auxiliary troops in Rhode Island during its occupation. According to Schroder, the Germans had six regiments in August 1778—four from Hessen-Cassel and two from Anspach—and they equaled the British and Loyalist soldiers in number. This statement is substantiated by Captain Mackenzie's *Diary*, 2:322, 324, 346, and by German sources consulted by Schroder. According to German historian Max von Eelking (1813-73), the German casualties on 29 August were 19 killed and 96 wounded. A translation of von Eelking's account appears in Samuel Arnold's *Centennial Celebration*, 35-65.
 28. Marshall Smelser, *The Winning of Independence* (Chicago, 1972), 254-55; Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York, 1982), 430-32.
 29. Robert W. Coakley and Stetson Conn, *The War of the American Revolution: Narrative, Chronology, and Bibliography* (Washington, D.C., 1975), 66, 113-14. This work grossly understates the number of American troops involved in the battle, confusing the 1,500 men used by Nathanael Greene in counterattack with the total number of American combatants.
 30. These estimated figures are derived from an examination and comparison of all the various sources previously cited. At Yorktown a British force under Cornwallis numbering about 10,000 surrendered to about 11,000 American and 9,000 French soldiers and sailors. *Ibid.*, 132-33.
 31. On the Massachusetts raids, see Mackenzie, *Diary*, 2:389-91. George Otto Trevelyan, the greatest and most thorough British historian of the Revolution, regarded the occupation of Rhode Island as an unwise misadventure. For any effect the thirty-four-month presence of British troops in Newport "produced upon the general result of the war, they might have been as usefully, and much more agreeably, billeted in the town of the same name in the Isle of Wight." *The American Revolution*, 4 vols. (New York, 1899-1907), 3:20.
 32. This statement is the theme of *Rhode Island Campaign*, which Dearden subtitled *Inauspicious Dawn of Alliance*.
 33. Conley, *Democracy in Decline*, 72.
 34. *Ibid.*, 71-72.
 35. The biographical profiles presented here have been culled from Mark M. Boatner III, *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution* (New York, 1974), and John A. Garraty and Mark C. Carnes, eds., *American National Biography*, 24 vols. (New York, 1999). Sullivan, Trumbull, Laurens, and Nathanael Greene are the subjects of modern book-length biographies.
 36. Boatner, *American Revolution*, 868-69; John C. Fredrickson, *America's Military Adversaries: From Colonial Times to the Present* (Santa Barbara, Calif., 2001), 392-93.
 37. Boatner, *American Revolution*, 349-50.
 38. Howard Willis Preston, "Lafayette's Visits to Rhode Island," *Rhode Island Historical Society Collections* 19 (1926): 1-10. The most detailed biography of Lafayette's turbulent life is by Louis R. Gottschalk, whose five volumes cover the career of the marquis through the French Revolution.

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