



THE  
MARINER'S  
MIRROR

**An Historically Interesting & Important Article,  
extracted from an Original Issue  
of this uncommon journal.**

**This is an original article separated  
from the volume, not an offprint or a reprint,  
and does not have a title page or cover.**

*Mariner's Mirror*,  
1977, pp. 129-136

## THE GASPEE AFFAIR

by W. E. May

[spelling regularized-ed]

AMONG people of this country, it is usual to believe that the first violent act of the American Revolution was that known as the Boston Tea Party which took place in 1773. Actually, there had been a number of acts of violence directed against vessels of the Royal Navy which had taken place in earlier years. The hired sloop *Liberty* had been burnt by a mob on 19 July 1769.

The *Gaspee* was one of six schooners and sloops from Marblehead which had been purchased in 1764. After the war with France, when Canada was annexed in 1763, there had been a great outbreak of smuggling in the St. Lawrence estuary and it was decided that this could best be controlled by these small vessels. Each was commanded by a lieutenant and carried a crew of thirty. It soon became apparent that there was just as much smuggling going on along the coast of the American colonies. The vessels from Marblehead had to take on both jobs.

During the early summer of 1772, the *Beaver*, Captain John Linzee, and the *Gaspee*, Lieutenant William Dudingston, were employed cruising to seaward of Rhode Island, intercepting suspected smugglers. This raised considerable ire among the inhabitants of Providence, many of whom were interested in the illegal trade. Trouble was sparked off by a paragraph in the local newspaper, the *Newport Mercury*. The merchants of Providence laid before the Superior Court of Judicature a demand that the captain of the *Gaspee* should be arrested and made to produce his authority for stopping and searching vessels. They pretended that they did not know that she was one of the King's ships, but it seems incredible that men used to the sea should not have been able to recognize the *Gaspee's* pendant and her captain's uniform. When this memorial failed to produce any effect it was decided to try to burn the *Gaspee*, should opportunity offer.

At noon on 9 June 1772 the *Gaspee* parted company with the *Beaver*, leaving her off Gould Island and going up to Namquid Spit [now renamed Gaspee Point-ed.], about two leagues below Providence, where she anchored at 4 p.m.

It is possible that owing to the master being out of the vessel she was anchored in the wrong place. In any event as the tide fell, she took the ground. The master and four men were away taking a vessel to Boston for examination, and this left only nineteen souls on board. She was evidently shorthanded, a common occurrence on this coast where desertion was rife and entering of fresh hands almost impossible. There was no communication with the shore and the boat was employed sounding in the vicinity of the schooner.

The American packet *Hannah*, Captain Lindsey, subsequently claimed that she had been chased by the *Gaspee* and had skillfully led her onto the shoal.

In the evening, as soon as it was known that the *Gaspee* was ashore on a falling tide and could not get off until after midnight, a drum was beaten around Providence to raise a mob. Several important citizens, including Darius Sessions, the Deputy Governor, later gave evidence that they had heard the drum, looked out, and seen that it was only a small band of little boys amusing themselves. They consequently retired indoors. What did happen was that a party embarked in several five-oared longboats, variously estimated as numbering between four and eight. One report stated that about 150 men were involved, but it hardly seems likely that so many could have been got into so few boats. Although most of those who took part were gentlemen and tradesmen there were a few of the commoner sort, who were compelled to join.

At about 12.45 in the morning of 10 June Bartholomew Chivers, who was acting as sentinel on the upper deck of the *Gaspee*, saw the boats approaching. He hailed them and when they did not reply tried to fire his musket, but it misfired seven times. He then called to the midshipman, William Dickenson, and Lieutenant Dudingston hearing him came up also, dressed only in his shirt. The boats were hailed again and this time broke their silence to reply: 'God damn your blood, we have you now!' Dudingston ordered them to keep away and they replied that they had the sheriff with them and that he intended to come on board. The lieutenant answered that the sheriff could not be received on board at that time of night.

Dudingston ordered his men to be turned out and to come up without stopping to dress. He tried to move a gun forward to one of the bow ports, but realizing that it could not be depressed sufficiently to hit a boat which was coming under the bow told the midshipman to open the arms chest and to issue arms to the men. The boats gave three cheers and continued their approach. The *Gaspee's* men fired at them and six musket shots were fired from the boats in reply.

One of the boats came alongside under the starboard fore shrouds. Dudingston, who had a hanger<sup>1</sup> [<sup>1</sup> Dudingston called it a sword, but the midshipman who classed it as a hanger was probably more correct.] in one hand and a pistol in the other, leant over the side and slashed at the first man who tried to board, the man falling back into the boat. Immediately the lieutenant was hit in two places, his left arm being broken and a ball lodging in his groin. It is not clear whether two shots hit him or whether both shots were caused by the one. Borders now swarmed on board and while their presence was being disputed three other boats came alongside aft and more men got on board, knocking down the lieutenant and his crew. The mob threatened to hang the captain or to knock him on the head with a handspike. He told him that he had been shot by his own men, abused him and called him a 'piratical rascal'. However he succeeded in bargaining with them, finally agreeing to order his men to lay down their arms on the understanding that they should not be hurt. The men were then driven below and readmitted to the upper deck one at a time, when each man's hands were tied behind his back.

Dudingston now asked that his wounds might be dressed and he was at last helped down to the cabin, where two surgeons, who formed part of the mob, bandaged him. He got permission for the midshipman to also come down to the cabin in the hope, as he said

later, that Dickenson would be able to identify the ringleaders afterwards. The lieutenant was told that he would be allowed to take his clothing and papers ashore.

The men were now put into two boats and the two officers forced to follow them. No one had any clothes other than those in which they originally came on deck, though the lieutenant had managed to get a coat thrown over his shoulders. His clothes and papers were now all thrown overboard. The leaders of the mob had no intention of keeping their promise with regard to them and claimed that Dudingston could not expect to retain his property if he did not pay for 'the rum'.<sup>1</sup> [1 Presumably the property of Jacob Green. See below.] His hanger and silver spoons were appropriated by some of the villains.

The boats landed the crew at Pawtuxet, two miles away and returned to the schooner. Five men had to be unbound so that they could carry the lieutenant ashore. About 3:30 AM the schooner was seen to be on fire. Some sixty minutes later three of the boats were seen returning towards Providence and some while after a fourth landed at Pawtuxet.

Dudingston told the midshipmen to get the men on board the *Beaver*. It was not until the afternoon of the next day that Captain Linzee got news of the affair from the Collector of Customs and immediately brought his ship up to investigate and to see what stores could be salvaged. At noon on the twelfth eleven men from the *Gaspee* came on board. This left six unaccounted for. Presumably they had deserted. It was discovered that local authorities had secured the guns and a few stores from the schooner and these were later sent to Halifax.

Also, on the twelfth the sheriff arrested Lieutenant Dudingston for the theft of goods belonging to Jacob Green. The Collector of Customs offered to go bail for him, but Dudingston pointed out that he was too ill to be moved and expressed doubts about his own recovery.

Early in July a negro named Aaron Briggs [or Biggs-ed] appeared on board the *Beaver*. He claimed to have been afloat on the evening of 9 June when he encountered a man called Simeon Potter in a boat with eight men. Potter made Biggs accompany him, and on the way down to the *Gaspee* joined with seventeen other boats. This number is considerably in excess of other estimations of the number of boats involved, but if it is correct it is possible that in the event several boats laid off and took no part in the outrage. When the crew landed it was Biggs who pulled the bow oar. A seaman called Patrick Earle, who had been in the *Gaspee*, claimed that he recognized the negro because he had in fact double-banked his oar when the crew were being landed, having managed to loosen his bonds. This does not seem to agree with other accounts which suggested that all the crew remained pinioned until it became necessary to release five so that they could carry their captain ashore. On 16 July the two men swore before the justices to the truth of their statements. Besides the name of Simeon Potter, Briggs gave those of John and Joseph Brown, Dr. Weeks who was one of the surgeons that had helped to bandage the lieutenant, and of a man called Richmond. When this information was conveyed to the Governor, he announced that Briggs was definitely an impostor who had not been present at the affray, while his former owner tried to have Captain Linzee arrested for stealing him. Linzee was bailed by the admiral.



The lieutenant, master, midshipman and five men were sent home in the *Beaver*, since the admiral stated that he had insufficient ships with him for him to be able to convene a court martial. Dudingston was tried on board the *Centaur* at Portsmouth on 17 October 1772 and was honorably acquitted.

When news of the affair was received in England, orders were sent out for a Commission of Enquiry to be set up. The members of this commission were to be Joseph Wanton, the Governor of Rhode Island and Providence, Daniel Horsmanden, Frederick Smythe and Peter Oliver, the Chief Justices respectively of New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts Bay, and Robert Auchmuty, Judge of the Vice-Admiralty Court of Boston. They were to investigate the case and might offer a reward of £500 for information leading to the apprehension of each of the two ringleaders who had called themselves the sheriff and the captain. These were to be turned over to the Commander-in-Chief so that he could ship them to stand trial. The other participants might be given a free pardon. The Governor immediately published these instructions in the press, thus stirring up local resentment and making it almost impossible for him to find the participants or to bring them to trial.

The Commission sat in Newport in January 1773. Rear-Admiral Montagu came over from Boston to attend, travelling overland. His subsequent claim for travelling and subsistence expenses from 11 to 21 January amounted to £62.13s. While he was at Newport his flag was hoisted on the *Mercury*, Captain Robert Keeler. The *Mercury* fired the customary salute, but the fort at Newport failed to do so. The Admiral complained and excuses were made that the day was not suitable and that the officer commanding the fort could not fire a salute without orders, but there is no doubt that the omission was intended as a deliberate insult. The matter was reported to the Admiralty who referred it to the Secretary of State and so to the King. The attention of the Governor was drawn to the necessity of ensuring that customary salutes were fired, and he replied to the effect that no one expected the Admiral or knew that his flag had been hoisted. Montagu's presence had been requested by the Commission and the *Mercury's* salute must have drawn everyone's attention to the hoisting of the flag.

The Commissioners examined Aaron Briggs and two or three of the *Gaspee's* former crew, then declaring that nothing could be done further without the attendance of Lieutenant Dudingston to give evidence against his attackers. For this reason, and on account of the inclement weather, sittings were postponed until the end of May. The admiral had already written to the Admiralty asking for the return of the officer, but in reply he was told that the voyage would endanger Dudingston's life and that Midshipman Dickenson and Able Seaman Chivers should be able to give all the evidence required and would be sent instead. They duly arrived on 29 April in the brig *William Charles Ackworth*. Rear-Admiral Montagu obtained permission from the Admiralty to leave the senior captain present to represent the Royal Navy at subsequent sittings of the Commission, to enable him to carry out the proper functions of his command elsewhere.

In the meantime, in a letter date 8 February and addressed to the Secretary of State, Frederick Smythe had disassociated himself from the action of the Governor, which in his opinion militated against justice. He did not see how the ringleaders were to be brought to their just deserts. No one was likely to give any evidence against them. The

magistrates dare not move, because their appointments were dependent upon popular vote and they would come up for re-election during the summer.

In the opinion of Smythe the negro, Aaron Briggs, was an impostor. There was some evidence to suggest that he was actually in bed ashore at the time of the attack. Subsequently running away, he had enlisted on board one of His Majesty's ships. When his identity was discovered it was proposed that he should be returned to his master and it was not until then that he came forward with his story. It is suggested that during his time on board he had made friends with Earles and that they had concocted the tale together. There were obvious discrepancies between his evidence and that of others, though Smythe did not mention them, particularly as to the number of boats involved.

The Commission sat again in May and June 1773, examining Dickenson and several men from the *Gaspee*. They accepted evidence that the negro was lying, having been ashore at the relative time. Captain Linzee was accused in his absence of having threatened to hang Briggs at the yardarm if he did not agree to implicate local residents. Dickenson stated that of the two surgeons who had bandaged the wounds of the lieutenant, one was very young, appearing to be only about eighteen. Some time afterwards they chanced to meet on shore and the surgeon went out of his way to enquire after the health of his patient. There cannot have been many eighteen-year-old surgeons in the colony, but the Commission decided that it would be quite impossible to find him. Able Seaman Peter May stated that he had recognized one of the ringleaders as a man called Green who had been on board the *Gaspee* some weeks before when his sloop had been intercepted. The Commission announced that there were many men in the colony named Green and as May did not know the Christian name it was impossible to find him! There could not have been all that number of men called Green who had owned or commanded sloops intercepted by the *Gaspee*, so that it should not have been difficult to find the man if the Commission had wished to do so. The obvious link with the Jacob Green who had sought to have Dudingston arrested was not explored. Altogether it seems pretty clear that in spite of its protestations the Commission had no desire to lay the blame for the burning of the *Gaspee* on anyone except her own commanding officer. The Governor complained that Dudingston had not shown his commission to him, before carrying out the orders of his admiral. If he had done so the whole incident could have been avoided! The suggestion is preposterous.

On 28 August 1772 Dudingston was promoted to Master and Commander and appointed to the *Bonetta* sloop in recognition of his behavior during the attack on the *Gaspee*. That this promotion should have been made some seven weeks before he was tried by court martial for the loss of the schooner would seem to have been most unusual. He recovered from his wounds and subsequently held other commands, living until 1816 as a superannuated rear-admiral.

While the above account is mainly derived from papers in the Public Records Office, the *History of the Destruction of His Britannic Majesty's Schooner Gaspee in Narragansett Bay on the 10th June 1772*, by John Russell Bartlett, 1861, prints documents pertaining to the case. From these it appears that on 22 March 1772 Governor Wanton wrote to Dudingston demanding his authority for searching ships. The lieutenant replied reminding the Governor that he had waited on him when the schooner first arrived

and had been prepared to show his commission but that at that time the Governor did not appear to be interested. He very properly forwarded copies of the correspondence to Admiral Montagu who wrote to the Governor assuring him of the standing of the *Gaspee* in a letter which Bartlett describes as 'insolent'. In his reply the Governor stated that Dudingston had told him that he acted on his own authority and had none other. Dudingston may have been obsessed with his own importance, it has been known to happen to other junior officers in command, but he is unlikely to have made any such claim. One thing is clear. The authorities of Rhode Island knew by May, even if they had not been sure before, that the *Gaspee* was acting under the orders of the Admiral, and was not a pirate as some had claimed.

In 1826 four survivors of the affair were feted. One of these was Ephraim Bowen who gave an account of the affair and the names of some of the ringleaders. From this it appears that the prime mover was John Brown and the man who pretended to be the sheriff was a merchant captain called Abraham Whittle. When the lieutenant was seen leaning over the side of the *Gaspee* a man called Joseph Bucklin called out that he could kill him and borrowed Bowen's gun for the shot.

Since 1966 the *Gaspee* affair has been commemorated annually in the locality by ten 'Gaspee Days' of junketing to celebrate the 'First Blow for Freedom'.

---

## NOTES

### SCHOONERS

After Canada was ceded to England in 1763 there was some fear that smuggling would occur in the St. Lawrence, and it was felt that this could best be controlled by the purchase of six schooners for the Royal Navy. These were usually referred to as Marblehead Schooners but in fact three were purchased at Boston and three at Halifax during May 1764. It was soon found that their services were required also along the coasts of the American colonies, and they with some replacements and some additions continued to the time of the Revolutionary War.

J. J. Colledge in his *Ships of the Royal Navy*, published in 1969, has omitted some of these vessels and has given incorrect dates for others, so it has been thought useful to give a complete list. There were other schooners purchased as the war progressed, but these have not been included, except where the old names have been reused and confusion might otherwise result.

*Chaleur*, said by Colledge to be the first schooner to serve in the R.N., but she was only one of six and though always rated as a schooner was originally sloop-rigged. Built about 1763, purchased at Boston, May 1764 for £500. 117 tons. Sold December 1768.

*Gaspey*, or *Gaspee*. Rated as schooner but originally sloop-rigged. Built about 1762, purchased at Halifax May 1764, for £420. 102 tons. Burnt by the mob at Rhode Island 9 June 1772.

*Gaspey*, or *Gaspee*, Brig. Purchased in North America 1774. Taken by the Americans November 1775. Recaptured April 1776 and sold.

*Halifax*, Schooner. Built at Halifax 1767, purchased 1768 for £550. 83 tons. Wrecked 1s February 1775.

*Halifax*, Schooner. Purchased in North America, 1775 for £810. Sold about 1784.

*Halifax*, Sloop, 18 guns. Captured from the Americans 1780. Sold 1781 or 1782.

*Hope*, Schooner. Built about 1763, purchased at Halifax May 1764 for £545 9s 3d. 105 tons. Condemned December 1775.

*Hope*, Brig. Built Philadelphia as *Sea Nymph*. Purchased December 1775. Rerated as 8-gun sloop. Sold 1779.

*Magdalen*, Schooner. Built about 1761, purchased at Boston May 1764 for £432, 15s.. 90 tons. Sold at Quebec September 1777.

*St. John*, Schooner. Built about 1762, purchased at Boston May 1764 for £500. 90 tons. Condemned February 1777.

*St. Lawrence*, Schooner. Built about 1762, purchased at Halifax May 1764 for £445. 115 tons. Struck by lightning and blown up June 1765.

*St. Lawrence*, Schooner. Purchased at Halifax July 1767. Sold 1774.

*St. Lawrence*, Schooner. Purchased in North America 1775 for £810. 114 tons. Disposed of after 1783.

*Sultana*, Schooner. Built as a pleasure craft. Purchased in England March 1768. 52 tons. Could only mount eight swivels. Sold August 1773.

In addition to the above, two schooners, the *Earl of Egmont* and *Sir Edward Hawke*, were built to order for the Royal Navy at New York in March 1767. They were employed in the West Indies and were sold in England in August 1773.

The National Maritime Museum holds draughts for the *Chaleur*, first *Halifax*, *Sultana*, *Earl of Egmont* and *Sir Edward Hawke*.

HAROLD M. HAHN  
W. E. MAY