



Gaspee Days Committee

PO Box 1772, Pilgrim Station

Warwick, RI 02888-8883

(401) 781-1772

gaspee.com

gaspee.org

The Gaspee Days Committee is a civic-minded, nonprofit organization that operates many community events in and around Pawtuxet Village, including the famous Gaspee Days Parade each June. These events are all designed to commemorate the 1772 burning of the hated British revenue schooner, HMS Gaspee, by Rhode Island patriots as America's 'First Blow for Freedom'™

Media Fact Sheet The Burning of the Gaspee

Last Updated 05/2024

Unless otherwise specified, most sources can be found on-line in:

[The Documentary History of the Destruction of the Gaspee](#) -- by William R. Staples at:

<<http://gaspee.org/StaplesGaspee.htm>>

- ❑ The Rhode Island Charter granted to Roger Williams, et al by King Charles II gave the colony unique political, judicial and religious independence. This became problematic for the Admiralty in the latter 18th Century as Rhode Island officials interfered with Royal Navy attempts at enforcement of maritime trade laws and collection taxes on goods shipped.
- ❑ The colony of Rhode Island thrived on the sea-trade, and its citizens often bypassed the Royally-appointed customs officials by engaging in the smuggling of rum, molasses, and other contraband. See <<http://gaspee.org/Gabbard.html>>
- ❑ The HMS *Gaspee* was part of a class of small, fast, revenue cutters commissioned by the British Admiralty in 1764 to put an end to smuggling along the colonial American coast. Most were built in the Boston area. By 1768, the *Gaspee* was re-rigged as a two-masted schooner, with eight cannon, a crew of approximately 26, and commanded by one Lieutenant William Dudingston (pronounced in British as Lef'-tenant). See <<http://gaspee.org/Rigging.html>>
- ❑ The *Gaspee* took station off Newport in February 1772 and wasted no time in enforcing trade laws by stopping and interfering with the maritime traffic within Narragansett Bay. Lt. Dudingston quickly gained a reputation for heavy-handedness and was widely disdained by the citizens of Rhode Island.
- ❑ Wealthy Providence merchant, John Brown, and other prominent citizens petitioned Deputy Governor Darius Sessions and RI Governor Joseph Wanton to investigate claims of piracy and theft on the part of the *Gaspee*. This led to a series of insults being hurled between Admiral John Montagu, the Commander of the Royal Navy in the American regions, and Governor Wanton.
- ❑ Civil suits were filed against Dudingston in retaliation for his brutality and thievery, and a warrant had actually been issued for the arrest of Dudingston.
- ❑ Exasperated, John Brown and other merchants (many of whom were in the distillery business) probably planned the destruction of the *Gaspee* well ahead of time. Brown had the occasion to previously run aground on Namquid Point (now Gaspee Point) back in 1760, and knew the treacherous nature of the area well. See:
<<https://allthingsliberty.com/2018/03/conspiracy-destroy-gaspee/>>

- On June 9th, 1772 a New York to Providence packet sloop, *Hannah*, captained by Benjamin Lindsay, after clearing customs in Newport, set sail for Providence. Lindsay deliberately refused to lower his flag in deference to the patrolling *Gaspee*, and a chase began up Narragansett Bay. Captain Lindsay knew the waters and hazards of the Providence River perhaps better than anyone, having captained this packet route between Newport and Providence for many years.
- At approximately 3 pm, just after high tide, Lindsay and the *Hannah*, chased by Dudingston and the *Gaspee*, tacked just beyond Namquid Point in Warwick and furled his sails in a feign of confusion. Dudingston, seeing his chance to overtake his prey, took the bait, and gave prompt chase across the submerged sandbar sticking out from Namquid Point (since called Gaspee Point), and ran hard aground.
- The crew of the *Hannah*, delighted at their success in the grounding of their attacker, promptly mooned the crew of the *Gaspee*, and then proceeded up the Providence River to report the British schooner's plight to John Brown. See: <http://gaspee.org/1829SaturdayEveningPost.htm>
- John Brown hurriedly assembled local sea captains to plan the details of an attack on the *Gaspee* so that the British customs vessel could no longer annoy local merchant shipping. A drummer was sent out in the streets of Providence to invite other persons willing to take part in the destruction of His Majesty's schooner to meet at the tavern operated by James Sabin, located at what is now the intersection of South Main and Planet Streets.
- The men that volunteered for the escapade were mostly in their late teens and twenties, some were apprenticed in boat building, but all were to be led by experienced sea-captains. The tactical commander of the attack was Abraham Whipple, who went on to great service in the early US Navy. See <http://gaspee.org/GaspeeRaiders.htm>
- At 10 pm, seven or eight large long boats, each carrying eight men, set out from Fenner's Wharf, across the street from Sabin's Tavern, and proceeded down the Providence River to where the *Gaspee* sat helplessly aground. Their faces were blackened with camouflage, oarlocks were muffled, and strict tactical silence was enforced.
- The flotilla met up at Pawtuxet Village with another boat or two sent over from Bristol shortly before the attack. See: <http://gaspee.org/EzraOrmsbee.html>. The moon having set around midnight and tactical surprise assured, the attackers proceeded at about 1 am on June 10th to where the *Gaspee* lay marooned.
- An alert sentry aboard the *Gaspee* spotted the approaching boats and called out the alarm. After being warned by the sentry to stand off, Abraham Whipple yelled out that he was the Sheriff of Kent, and had come to arrest Lt. Dudingston.
- Shots were fired from a pistol or two by the crew of the *Gaspee*, but there were no officially reported casualties on the colonial side (But Lt. Dudingston later testified that he understood that one of the raiders was killed and quietly buried ashore). See: <http://gaspee.org/StaplesAppendices.htm#APPENDIXB>

- ❑ In one of the longboats, 19 year–old Joseph Bucklin saw his prey in Lt. Dudingston, quickly took aim, and felled the captain with a musket shot that passed through his arm into his groin area. See: <<http://gaspee.org/JosephBucklin.htm>>
- ❑ The attacking boats deliberately approached towards the bow of the *Gaspee* so that her cannon were not able to bear down on them. The members of the eight or nine boats were quickly unloaded onto the deck of the *Gaspee* and, after a brief struggle, the crew of the King's schooner surrendered.
- ❑ The crewmembers of the *Gaspee* were tied up, put into the boats, and imprisoned overnight in a cellar of a house in Pawtuxet Village. They were released the following morning, and were allowed to rejoin the British fleet at Newport.
See: <<http://gaspee.org/Cellar.html>>
- ❑ Lt. Dudingston was carried below deck, where he was tended to by a young medical student, John Mawney. Dr. Mawney successfully removed at least part of the musket ball from Dudingston's groin, and was able to staunch the flow of blood with compresses. See <<http://gaspee.org/MawneyBio.html>>
- ❑ The Lieutenant was then placed into a boat and set into the house of Joseph Rhodes at Stillhouse Cove in Cranston. There he was tended to during the following days by another doctor until well enough to travel to Newport where he continued his recuperation.
- ❑ Dudingston was later acquitted at court-marshal proceedings for the loss of his ship, and eventually achieved the rank of Rear Admiral in the Royal Navy.
See: <<http://gaspee.org/StaplesAppendices.htm#APPENDIXB>>
- ❑ Meanwhile, John Brown, Abraham Whipple, et al. proceeded to rifle through the papers in Dudingston's cabin and plundered the few things of value aboard. The only known remaining item is a silver goblet on display at the RI Historical Society Museum in, ironically, the house of John Brown. See: <<http://rihs.org>>
- ❑ By about 5 am, their work completed, Brown and his compatriots set torch to the vessel. The fire exploded its powder stores and the *Gaspee* burnt to its waterline. The British later sent a boat to salvage what little remained of the cannon and iron from the ship, and local citizens scavenged what was left. Ephraim Bowen, who gave the most retold story of the attack, carved at least four canes from timber salvaged from the boat. See: <<http://gaspee.org/Bowen.html>>
- ❑ The attacking boats returned to Providence at dawn and the members dispersed after being warned not to discuss the events. One young lad, Justin Jacobs, paraded atop the Great Bridge in Providence while wearing Dudingston's Royal Navy beaver hat. He was quickly and soundly admonished by others.
- ❑ To their great credit, Rhode Island citizens kept mum about the attack. Most, if not all, of these people were interrelated by blood, marriage or employment to other raiders. It was therefore, also a matter of keeping family members and close friends safe that greatly contributed to secrecy of the identities of the attacking men.
- ❑ Many of the names of the brave Rhode Island citizens that took part in the attack have been lost to time. Of the approximately 64 attackers, we have been able to ascertain the names of only half the number of individuals who took part: Paul Allen, Ephraim Bowen, Aaron Briggs, Abial Brown, John Brown, Joseph Brown, Joseph

Bucklin Jr., Samuel Dunn, Abel Easterbrooks, Nathaniel Easterbrooks, Caleb Godfrey, Samuel Godfrey, Rufus Greene, John Greenwood, Benjamin Hammond, Joseph Harris, John B. Hopkins, Justin Jacobs, Joseph Jenckes, John J. Kilton, Hezekiah Kinnicut, Abner Luther, Daniel Martin, John Mawney, Simeon H. Olney, Ezra Ormsbee, Benjamin Page, Simeon Potter, Christopher Sheldon, a Captain Shepard, Benoni Simmons, James Smith, Turpin Smith, Robert Sutton, Thomas Swan, Amos Sylvester, Joseph Tillinghast, and Abraham Whipple.

See: <<http://gaspee.org/GaspeeRaiders.htm>>

- ❑ The morning after the attack, Deputy Governor Sessions traveled to Pawtuxet to ascertain the facts and to interview Lt. Dudingston. While Dudingston refused to discuss the issue, Sessions was able to put together the essential facts by interviewing the crew members of the *Gaspee*.
- ❑ Sessions immediately sought counsel from several prominent local civic and judicial leaders. It quickly became apparent that there might be grounds for severe recriminations by the British against the Colony, such as rescinding the precious Charter from the King that gave them such independence.
- ❑ It was decided to publicly cooperate in offering a reward for the perpetrators, but to privately proclaim ignorance during any ensuing investigation. So as to enhance the image that the Rhode Island government was cooperative, Sessions advised Governor Wanton, in Newport, to immediately post a reward for information on any of the culprits. See: <<http://gaspee.org/Wanton.gif>>
- ❑ Representatives of King George III were highly incensed at the burning of one of His Majesty's warships and saw the need for definitive action lest all of the colonies rebel. A proclamation was made increasing the reward, and an investigatory commission was impaneled to find and indict the culprits. See: <<http://gaspee.org/KingGeorgelInstructions.htm>>
- ❑ This commission was authorized by the British government to send any perpetrators found directly to England on charges of treason. This attempted circumvention of local American courts, and of sending persons charged with a crime across the sea was a singular insulting threat to the relative independence of all the colonies.
- ❑ Samuel Adams, the great Bostonian revolutionary, was asked for advice by Dep. Gov. Sessions and other local politicians. His response was that he perceived the threat as being an attempt to initiate the rollback of the liberal Rhode Island charter. In his writings, Adams formulated the idea of starting up the Committees of Correspondence between the Colonies to discuss such threats. Based on the threatened liberties posed by the *Gaspee* commission of inquiry, the Virginia legislature shortly thereafter acted with the formal establishment of such permanent Committees of Correspondence. This was, therefore, the start of unification movement of the Colonies on the road to independence. See: <http://gaspee.org/SamAdams.html>
- ❑ John Allen, an itinerant Baptist preacher, gave a sermon in Boston that defended the rights of Colonists to attack the *Gaspee*, and accused the British ministers of plotting the enslavement of the Americans. This sermon was widely published and became influential in formulating the ideas of the necessity of American independence. See <http://gaspee.org/Allen.html>

- One of the *Gaspee* attackers apparently did not go along willingly. A biracial indentured servant (ie., slave), Aaron Briggs, was impressed into the attack by members of the boat from Bristol as it was on its way to join the raid. A few days after the raid Briggs escaped his servitude on Prudence Island and shortly found himself on board the HMS *Beaver*, a British warship in Narragansett Bay. Under the threat of being whipped at the yardarm, Briggs related details of the attack, and named some individuals, including John Brown, as fellow raiders. See <<http://gaspee.org/Briggs.html>>
- Sessions quickly rounded up witnesses willing to discredit Briggs and anyone else that would be of use in identifying any of the culprits. By creating counter-testimony, Sessions was able to effectively obfuscate the subsequent investigation.
See: <<http://gaspee.org/SessionsBio.htm>>
- Mistakenly, the British government did not realize that the attack on the *Gaspee* originated in Providence. The Royally-appointed commission investigating the destruction of the *Gaspee* met in January 1773 in Newport, forty miles to the South, and was severely hampered by bad winter weather and the inability of subpoenaed witnesses to travel.
- Some people willing to give testimony at the commission were threatened by other citizens with bodily harm if they attempted to do so. The few remaining witnesses examined were chiefly crewmen from the *Gaspee*. No one could recall any names of the culprits; the attack had taken place on a moonless night, so identification was nearly impossible.
- In either event, Chief Justice Stephen Hopkins offered that the Rhode Island judiciary would not permit the delivery of any identified attackers to the British, as it contradicted Rhode Island law that, based on British law, required local trial by a jury of peers.
- The investigatory commission met again in June, 1773, but once again failed to turn up enough evidence to indict, and closed up their business frustrated. The inability of the Commission to gather enough evidence to hand down indictments was the result of the combined efforts of an uncooperative Rhode Island populace, judiciary, and governmental officials. See: <<http://gaspee.org/CommissionersReport.htm>>
- It is quite probable that the destruction of the *Gaspee* was planned and executed with the help of the Sons of Liberty well ahead of time. The Sons were looking to incite the colonial population against the British, and the *Gaspee* made a perfect target. The coincidence of the timing of the tides necessary to trap the *Gaspee*, and of the moonless night necessary to assure tactical surprise of the attack gives evidence that this event could only have happened on the night of June 9th-10th, 1772, and required preplanning by John Brown and other conspirators. Boats sent from both Providence and Bristol also needed preplanning to coordinate their attack.
See: < <https://allthingsliberty.com/2018/03/conspiracy-destroy-gaspee/> >
- When the time came to cut ties with the Mother Country, the American leadership assembled in Philadelphia in July of 1776 drew up a list of grievances against King George III. Included in this document were some injustices that were directly attributable to the *Gaspee* Affair: "He has combined, with others, to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our Constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his assent to their acts of pretended legislation. For depriving us, in many cases, of

the benefit of trial by jury; For transporting us beyond the seas to be tried for pretended offenses.” Yes, **this** is where we really find the *Gaspee*; enshrined within the words of our Declaration of Independence. < [Declaration of Independence: A Transcription | National Archives](#) >

- Further research information is available on-line at the Gaspee Virtual Archives at <http://gaspee.org>.