

The Conspiracy to Destroy the *Gaspee*

by Dr. John Concannon

With but few exceptions, it has been surmised by most historians that the 1772 attack on the Royal Navy schooner *Gaspee* was a spontaneous response to the accidental grounding of the King's vessel, allowing its opportunistic destruction by angry Rhode Island colonists.[1] But was this really such a serendipitous event? What is presented here is an examination of the evidence strongly indicating that the entrapment and subsequent destruction of the *Gaspee* had actually been planned well ahead of time.

The highlights of the Gaspee Affair are well known in Rhode Island history but are rarely acknowledged outside of the state's own borders. On the afternoon of June 9, 1772, while chasing the packet sloop *Hannah* suspected of smuggling, HMS *Gaspee* ran aground at Namquid Point (since called Gaspee Point) just south of Pawtuxet Village in Warwick. That night, Rhode Island patriots led by Providence merchant John Brown assembled at Sabin's Tavern in Providence and from there rowed down the Providence River, attacked, set fire to, and destroyed the *Gaspee*, and wounded her commander.

The British ministry was quite obviously dismayed, considering this an act of treason. Despite a sizable reward having been offered, efforts by the Crown to learn the names of the culprits were unsuccessful. A royally appointed commission of inquiry was charged with sending any suspects it identified across the Atlantic to England for trial. This bypassing of the established American colonial legal system greatly alarmed public leaders who perceived it as a direct threat to their rights as British subjects and created much disaffection towards the Crown.[2] Michael Barbieri points out that this type of usurpation of rights was a proximate cause of the Revolution. "The real problem for the British was the failure of efforts in the early 1770s at maintaining the familial connection between Great Britain and the colonies." [3]

Thomas Jefferson enshrined in the Declaration of Independence at least three grievances against King George III that were attributable to the British reactions to the Gaspee Affair. They related mostly to the appointment of the commission of inquiry to investigate the affair, with powers to remove any suspect to England for trial:

- 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.[4]

In general, conspiracy theorists do not fare well in historical circles. Some argue that the Gaspee Affair was simply a case of John Brown and others engaging in quick thinking and taking advantage of a situation that arose by accident. But I beg the reader to consider the following essential points:

1. John Brown and other prominent Rhode Island leaders had both the motive and unique tactical resources necessary to entrap and destroy the *Gaspee*.

2. The boats that attacked the *Gaspee* did so in an obviously coordinated fashion from the docks of both Providence and Bristol-Warren, some fourteen miles apart.
3. The timing of the raid occurred during a precise, but narrow window providing tactical advantage.
4. At least some of this group of rebels, including John Brown, were members of the Sons of Liberty and were in direct communication with its leaders.
5. The vessel pursued by the *Gaspee* had been previously carrying large sums of gold or cash, an irresistible enticement to follow it into a trap.
6. Loyalist spies had forewarned the Royal Navy that such an attack on the *Gaspee* was being actively planned.

Background

What became the colony of Rhode Island was founded by religious dissenter Roger Williams in 1636. The Royal Charter of 1663 granted by King Charles II of Great Britain gave the colony many unique rights, such as independent governance, judiciary, and freedoms of religion.[5] Over the ensuing 136 years to 1772, Rhode Island had become accustomed to functioning as a relatively independent society. However, most of farmland of Rhode Island was rocky and did not sufficiently support the growing of surplus crops or cattle farming to export for profit (the Narragansett Planters in what is now Washington County was an important exception). The colony's best natural asset was (and remains) Narragansett Bay. By the mid-eighteenth century, commercial maritime trading, especially in Newport and Providence, had become an essential component of Rhode Island's economy. As a tip of the triangular trade, the tiny colony also heavily relied on imports of molasses to distill rum for export (including for the African Slave Trade).[6] Within this sphere, prominent Rhode Island merchants such as John Brown had also become heavily dependent on the ability to continue their maritime trading—and smuggling activities.

To help offset the costs of defending the American Colonies during the French and Indian War, the Crown levied (and later rescinded) a host of taxes on the colonists: the Stamp Act, the Townshend Acts and others. But during all this time import duties remained on sugar and molasses, key imports from the triangular trade. Customs regulations also dictated that all such imports be restricted to be within British controlled territory; trading with French or Spanish colonies was prohibited. Hence Rhode Island ship captains and merchants resorted to smuggling. After 1764, the end of the French and Indian War, the British started to become serious in enforcing these maritime trade laws, much to the resentment of American colonists.

Nick Bunker, in his award-winning book, *An Empire on the Edge*, emphasizes the importance of the Gaspee Affair. He relates that, "Of all the American colonies, Rhode Island was the freest, the most radical, and the one least inclined to follow royal instructions. And so it was here that the countdown to war began." [7]

Enter The *Gaspee*

His Majesty's Schooner *Gaspee* was representative of a class of relatively small and fast revenue ships that the Royal Navy purchased from various American shipbuilders to enforce maritime

law and trade regulations along the East coast. After an extended stint patrolling the Chesapeake Bay area,[8] the schooner began using Newport Harbor as its base in February 1772. Its captain lost no time in making its presence known by stopping, searching, and seizing ships that were suspected of carrying illicit or untaxed goods. The schooner's commander, Lieutenant William Dudingston, and his crew were particularly heavy-handed in performing their duties. They were accused of plundering Rhode Island ships and cargos, as well as stealing cattle and supplies from coastal farms on Narragansett Bay. Once the *Gaspee*'s crew stopped a sloop found to be carrying illegal rum, beat up the vessel's captain, and confiscated the sloop and cargo, which were sent up to Boston to be sold off as a customs prize. Local citizens were incensed, a lawsuit was initiated for illegal seizure, and a warrant was issued for Dudingston's arrest.[9]

New Insights on the Timing of the Attack

John Brown of Providence had begun to amass a fortune in the sea trade, primarily from commercial trading with the Caribbean islands. By 1772, he had also invested in two slave trading voyages.[10] With the recent arrival of British revenue enforcement vessels creating a stranglehold on their traditional "free enterprise," he and others in the sea-mercantile circles were only too willing to act. And, as it turned out, he also had personal experience with just how to lure the *Gaspee* to its demise.

According to Moses Brown's diary, on June 8, 1760, Moses and his older brother John were grounded near Namquid Point while they were on a sloop bound for Philadelphia:

at half after 7 PM, Capt Douglas at the helm, myself and passengers below, run aground on the sunken rocks of off the rocks there lay, the passengers gone ashore to patuxet [Pawtuxet] till half after 3 [in the] morning of the 9th. [11]

The fact that John Brown had the experience of having run aground near Namquid Point certainly gave him time to ponder his fate, observe the actions of the tide and currents, and familiarize himself with the treacherous area during the exact same conditions that would prevail precisely twelve years later.

Note that the attack on the *Gaspee* did not occur immediately after the ship's arrival in Narragansett Bay in January. Rhode Islanders had four to five months to plan an appropriate response. The attack was likely not some sudden defensive reaction by colonists; and in fact, we know that the attack on the *Gaspee* occurred during what would be the best possible tactical circumstances.

The sandbar on which the *Gaspee* ultimately grounded at about 3 p.m. was obscured by the high tide that was just starting to recede. The high tide would effectively trap the schooner on the sandbar for at least twelve hours—until the next high tide, which would not occur until around 3 a.m. the following morning. This left enough time for Rhode Island colonists to assemble their attack force and take small boats out to attack the stranded schooner.

A most important piece of evidence is that the timing of the tides suitable to attract and ground the *Gaspee* were also perfect to provide the cover of darkness for the ensuing skirmish.[12] John Brown and Abraham Whipple, who together led the raid, attacked at about 12:45 am on June 10,

which is exactly the time of the setting of the moon, thus providing the cover of darkness. This timing would also ensure that most of the crew aboard was sound asleep as the longboats approached. The *Gaspee* grounded on a Tuesday afternoon, a time that did not cause concern for those who would object to violence being committed on the Sabbath. It was also pre-scheduled as a militia training day with plenty of young men nearby the docks area of Providence. Some businesses had closed early and other meetings were cancelled.[13]

For the necessary tide and moon predictions, John Brown had at hand his brother Joseph Brown, a well-respected natural philosopher (the word “scientist” was not coined until 1834) who could have competently provided the information necessary to plan such an attack. Joseph had engineered the Hope Furnace ironworks and other factories for the Brown family enterprise, and was a leading architect of Providence, whose works included the First Baptist Church, the Market House, and mansions for himself and his brother. Most pointedly, Joseph Brown had been an integral part of the small group of Rhode Island men who took exacting astronomical measurements of the transit of Venus across the Sun in 1769.[14]

The data for the tides and moon confirm later testimony given about the raid.[15] Witnesses also stated that the *Gaspee* was set afire some three hours after the attack had commenced, or just before dawn. According to our astronomical sources (see endnotes) the “crack of dawn” or civil twilight began at 3:36 a.m., with sunrise scheduled at 4:10 a.m. There was no Daylight Savings Time in the eighteenth century, so this sunrise would have been equivalent to a more familiar 5:10 a.m. EDT we would experience in modern times.

Detailed weather data recorded by Newport Congregationalist minister Ezra Stiles has been recently uncovered from archival files at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration center by Adam Blumenthal of Brown University.[16] Near the time of the attack on June 9, 1772, winds were from the southeast, the weather was fair, and the temperature was a somewhat tolerable forty-four degrees. Some variance may be assumed in that Stiles was usually recording observations in Newport, closer to the ocean, and was using a Benjamin Franklin thermometer of unknown calibration. These were all favorable conditions in which to conduct the attack.

Given the capabilities of the men who planned the raid it is not surprising that it occurred within such a perfectly timed scenario. And as noted before, John Brown had the personal experience of having run aground on Namquid Point, knew the area well, and had the logistical assets to assemble the raiding parties. His brother Joseph Brown had the astronomical wherewithal to provide the data necessary in planning the attack. Abraham Whipple’s brilliance as a tactical commander was later proven, even more so, when during the Revolutionary War he captured over ten British prize ships at once by posing as a fellow British ship escorting the hapless convoy, but then proceeded to secretly seize the ships one-by-one.[17]

Granted that most experienced boat captains of the time would have been able to predict tides and moonset days ahead of time, but the precision of the window for the trap and subsequent attack on the *Gaspee* points to high-grade intelligence for not only the tides and moon far in advance, but also the location, day of the week, absence of a pilot, weather predictions, and baiting the chase. It was indeed a complex plan.

So, as it turns out, the timing of the tides and moon were perfect for the purpose of the attack which destroyed the *Gaspee*. An afternoon high tide followed by little or no moonlight in the early morning hours would have been in conjunction on less than seven percent of the dates from May through July 1772.

It thus seems likely that the day, time, and course of the *Hannah* when she left the docks of Newport for Providence were deliberately chosen well ahead of time for just the purpose for which she became famous—the destruction of the *Gaspee*.

The Chase

Dr. D. K. Abbass, of the Rhode Island Marine Archaeology Project uncovered an interesting reason why Dudingston may have been so eager to give chase to the *Hannah*:

. . . in the month before the *Gaspee* chased the *Hannah* up the river, the *Hannah* had at least twice been carrying large amounts of cash, not just rum and other local merchandise. It is possible that Dudingston heard knew about the cash, and that could have been incentive enough for him to risk crossing those shallows.[18]

This information could easily have been leaked to Dudingston. As an officer in the Royal Navy, he was charged with enforcing maritime trade laws; but there was a selfish side to his work as well. He had the right to receive a hefty cut of whatever could be claimed as a proper customs enforcement prize. Whatever his motivation, the Royal Navy vessel was apparently all too easy to lure.

Nautical custom of the time was for civilian boats to lower their flag in deference when passing by a vessel of the Royal Navy. The haughty nature of the *Gaspee*'s commander demanded its observance, and when the *Hannah* did not lower its flag as it passed by in Newport, the chase was on.[19]

Unlike native Rhode Island mariners, Lieutenant Dudingston had little or no familiarity with the waters in upper Narragansett Bay. Per standard practice, the *Gaspee* for its first few months in Rhode Island had taken on a harbor pilot knowledgeable of the local hazards involved in navigation, but we have no record of Dudingston's vessel having previously traveled further up the Bay into the Providence River, where he was ultimately trapped.

It is curious that Dudingston's usual pilot, one Sylvanius Daggett, was not on board at the time of the schooner's demise. He had been transferred six weeks earlier to the larger HMS *Beaver*, which was sailing Rhode Island coastal waters for the same purposes as the *Gaspee*. Daggett's transfer off of the *Gaspee* is an item of intelligence that could have been easily discovered by John Brown and his associates.

Some inhabitants of Narragansett caught up with Daggett shortly after the attack. According to the *Providence Gazette* of June 13, 1772:

We hear that one Daggett, belonging to the Vineyard [Martha's Vineyard], who had served the aforementioned schooner, as a pilot, but at the time of her being destroyed, was on board the *Beaver* sloop of war, on going ashore a few days since, at Narragansett,

to a sheep-shearing, was seized by the company, who cut off his hair, and performed to him the operation of shearing, in such a manner, that his ears and nose were in imminent danger.

By comparison, the *Hannah*'s commander, Captain Benjamin Lindsey, had over nine years of experience sailing passenger and cargo vessels between Newport and Providence. He had been employed at times by John Brown and would have undoubtedly been involved in the planning to trap the *Gaspee*.

In addition, coastal transport packets such as the *Hannah* required the ability to get close-in to land in shallow waters and were appropriately designed with a shallow draft (a vessel's draft is how deeply it sits in the water). By contrast, the two-masted *Gaspee* had a multitude of responsibilities apart from patrolling Narragansett Bay, such as guarding the deep, rich fishing grounds of the Grand Banks, which required the vessel to be stable in rough, open waters, which in turn required a deeper keel and draft.

As the chase arrived at Namquid Point, the *Hannah* easily skidded over the submerged sandbar. Captain Lindsey then turned slightly into the cove just beyond the Point and feigned to furl his sails, as if confused. Dudingston and his crew on the *Gaspee* were suckered into following, hell-bent on catching their prey. Suddenly, the schooner ran hard aground. It would be stuck for at least the next twelve hours until the next high tide, leaving plenty of time for the attack that would ensue.

After parting insults were exchanged (it has been reported that the crew of the *Hannah* mooned that of the *Gaspee*),[20] Lindsey sailed back to Providence, arriving later that afternoon and docking as usual at Fenner's Wharf, directly opposite Sabin's Tavern. If not actually in the employ of John Brown, Lindsey must have had a close working relationship, for he immediately reported the plight of the *Gaspee* directly to him. Brown then set off his plan to attract others who would join in destroying the British ship; he was not wanting for volunteers.

By the call of a drummer sent out to proclaim the news, John Brown was able to quickly assemble a party of at least sixty-four men from the immediate Providence dock areas to gather at Sabin's Tavern to join in the attack. The men were eager to participate, despite the threat that those who were caught could have been found guilty of treason against the Crown and hanged. It is also noteworthy that an experienced sea captain was placed in charge of each of the eight attacking longboats. This tactical force was too impressive to have been haphazardly recruited.

Word of the plans were apparently also quickly sent south to the seafaring towns of Bristol and Warren. There is some evidence that one or two of the longboats that attacked the *Gaspee* came from this area. Whether traveling by a fast horse or by a sailboat, the messenger would have spent at least an hour in transit. There, fellow merchant Captain Simeon Potter was also able to muster enough men for at least one other longboat to join in the attack.[21] It is very doubtful that a boat could be arranged, crewed, and embedded into the raid in such a short time without considerable preplanning.

Unlike the genteel style of clothing worn by the crews from Providence, oral traditions indicate that the folks from the Bristol and nearby Warren dockside area dressed as Narragansett Indians. This has been cited as the source of the idea some eighteen months later for some irate Massachusetts citizens to disguise themselves as Indians during the Boston Tea Party.[22]

Along the way from Bristol, Captain Potter reportedly pressed into the raid one Aaron Briggs, an “indentured servant” (that is, a servant for a term of years, but not enslaved for life) from Prudence Island.[23] Why bother? Possibly because Briggs happened to be of mixed Narragansett Indian and African American parentage and was therefore a perfect candidate to further the Bristol crew’s ruse to disguise themselves as Indians. This may have also been reason that the teenaged Briggs (according to his own testimony) was seated next to the wounded Lieutenant Dudingston when he was rowed ashore after the attack.

There has been much controversy about the role this teenager, Aaron Briggs, played in the attack on the *Gaspee*. Certainly, he was not involved in any preplanning, nor did he play a significant role in the fracas. He later escaped from his servitude by rowing out to the newly repositioned HMS *Beaver*. Once on board, his testimony provided, he was placed in irons and threatened with being whipped at the yardarm unless he gave information about those responsible for the burning of the *Gaspee*. This made his testimony seem coerced. Or, as historian Steven Park has observed, Briggs may have sought to avoid punishment for running away from his master by claiming to be one of the *Gaspee* raiders.[24] He did indeed seem to know some vital details which would unlikely be known to him unless he had actually been present during the incident. Later on, he was present as the star witness by the royal court of inquiry sitting at Newport investigating the destruction of the *Gaspee*, but the court ultimately decided that his original statements were unreliable and were therefore disregarded.

The Sons of Liberty

Revolutionary furor had been brewing in the thirteen colonies since the Stamp Acts in 1765, and no less so in Rhode Island, where the profitable mercantile shipping business had become particularly sensitive to the enforcement of British trade and taxation laws. The Sons of Liberty were noted for acts of violent intimidation, such as the tarring and feathering of tax collectors.[25] In general, however, they were well-controlled in their mob activities by leadership from men of property and means. Many early members were newspaper publishers, booksellers, and lawyers who had a vested interest in avoiding the Stamp Act that increased the price on their products. But the enthusiasm of the group seems to have been based more on principles of preserving colonial rights than on protecting economic interests, though during that time the two concepts were very much intertwined.[26]

After repeal of the Stamp Act, the Sons of Liberty held large, celebratory reunions, and members gradually adopted elements of Revolutionary fervor. The concept took hold in urban centers within all thirteen colonies, and branches of the Sons of Liberty did indeed plant Liberty Trees in both Providence[27] and Newport.[28]

As they continued their leadership in the immediate pre-Revolutionary years, publishers slanted news coverage in ways that favored the cause of independence. Men like Samuel Adams used the

Sons of Liberty as cover to incite further rebellion against the British, annually commemorated the Boston Massacre, and helped incite the Boston Tea Party

Whatever the economic incentives John Brown and his compatriots harbored for ridding Narragansett Bay of the *Gaspee*, these leaders of Rhode Island society most likely held similarly principled disdain for the increasingly oppressive enforcement of British trade rules and control by a distant government in London. Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr. noted that:

[A]n outstanding example of premeditated lawlessness was the burning of the British revenue schooner *Gaspee* near Providence, Rhode Island, at midnight of June 9, 1772. John Brown, one of the town's leading merchants, not only organized the destruction ahead of time but personally took part in it.[29]

We also know that Deputy Governor Darius Sessions, Chief Justice Stephen Hopkins, former Chief Justice John Cole, and Moses Brown all sought urgent advice from Bostonian Samuel Adams shortly after the British announced their investigatory response to the destruction of the *Gaspee*. [30] But why should these prominent, self-directed men from Rhode Island bother at all to ask advice from a rabble-rouser in neighboring Massachusetts? It is very likely it was because he was the preeminent leader within the Sons of Liberty and quite possibly involved in any plans to disrupt British control within nearby colonies. He and other leaders of the resistance against colonial polity were known to be looking for ways to incite their fellow colonists against the British, and the *Gaspee* represented continued unfair taxation and oppression by the Crown against Americans.

In his letters of reply to Deputy Governor Darius Sessions, Samuel Adams seemed to be familiar with events and did not express any misgivings about the incident. Of the men who corresponded with Adams, Sessions went on to deliberately obstruct the royally-appointed commission of inquiry into the destruction of the *Gaspee*. [31] Chief Justice Hopkins later declared that Rhode Island courts would not cooperate with the *Gaspee* investigatory commission by refusing to hand over to the British Admiralty any citizen so-indicted. [32] John Cole was a lawyer present at the Sabin Tavern during the planning of the attack, he may well have participated in it, and he later perjured himself before the *Gaspee* commission by denying any knowledge of such events. [33] As previously discussed, Moses Brown's two brothers, John and Joseph, likely took the lead in planning the attack. It can be reasonably extrapolated that all of these same gentlemen could have been involved in the plans well ahead of time and were probably in correspondence with Samuel Adams and men of like ilk well before the actual raid on the *Gaspee*. Historian John C. Miller wrote:

It was well known that the Sons of Liberty regarded the *Gaspee* affair as a test case Certainly, the failure of the British government to punish the wreckers of the *Gaspee* was a direct encouragement to Bostonians to stage the Tea Party. [34]

The *Gaspee* Affair also played a very large role in the newspaper coverage which drove the spirit of resistance to Crown rule in the years just prior to the Revolution. Accounts of the attack and the subsequent commission of inquiry were front page news, not only within the colonies themselves, but across the Atlantic in Britain. A mere five weeks after the attack (July 18, 1772)

at least one London newspaper reflected British anxiety about this resurgence of the Sons of Liberty and the destruction the *Gaspee*:

The conduct of Rhode Islanders, on the foregoing occasion, it is thought, will be productive of much disturbance in America. If our government resents it with the spirit they ought we shall have fresh exclamations from the sons of liberty beyond the Atlantic; and if they do not, the colonies are immediately discharged from their dependence upon England.[35]

The Gaspee Affair was also the focus of an influential pamphlet, *An Oration on the Beauties of Liberty*, written by Reverend John Allen of Boston. This radical minister decried the actions of an unjust British government and went so far as to seriously question the legitimacy of the King's rule over America. This sermon was often quoted by John Adams, James Otis, and other Revolutionary leaders, and was among the most published pamphlets during the pre-Revolutionary years.[36]

Finally, as to motives for the attack, it was not likely some sudden ill-thought-out act of desperation to protect their molasses and rum smuggling. John Brown, Abraham Whipple, and others on the team undoubtedly foresaw that the British would react to any attack by filling Narragansett Bay with yet more ships to stranglehold their enterprises. Rather, the Sons of Liberty more likely directed the attack as a strategic challenge to British authority in the colonies. The cited correspondence between the leading men in Rhode Island and Sam Adams gives credence to such a "conspiracy theory." Unfortunately for historians, the members of the Sons of Liberty, by design, were not apt to keep copies of incriminating correspondence. John Harris points out that:

Samuel Adams did not seek credit. Thus, mystery will always surround the precise details of how things were brought about in the formative period of our revolution. John Adams has told of seeing Samuel Adams tearing up the evidence and tossing it into the fire or to the winds so no one would come to grief because of his negligence.[37]

Local Intelligence

It was men like John Brown from the ranks of the sea-faring culture of Rhode Island who were most interested in removing the obnoxious vessel plying the waters of Narragansett Bay. By March, Brown and his compatriots prevailed upon Deputy Governor Darius Sessions, seated in Providence, to present their complaints to Gov. Joseph Wanton, then seated in the colonial capital of Newport.[38] This led to a series of heated letters between Governor Wanton and Lieutenant Dudingston, along with his superior officer, Admiral John Montagu, commander of the Royal Navy in North America. It is during this correspondence that Admiral Montagu let slip to Governor Wanton some interesting naval intelligence:

BOSTON, 6th April, 1772

I am also informed the people of Newport talk of fitting out an armed vessel to rescue any vessel the King's schooner may take carrying on an illicit trade. Let them be cautious

what they do; for as sure as they attempt it, and any of them are taken, I will hang them as pirates.[39]

Note also that Admiral Montagu does not mention here either the *Beaver*, a larger and more heavily armed brig, or the *Swan*, an armed sloop, as being the target of the colonists' plot. Both ships were also patrolling the waters around Newport at the time for the same reasons. He mentions only the "King's schooner," which applies only to the *Gaspee*. Governor Wanton was perturbed at the contemptuous attitude these British officials had for the colony of Rhode Island, and replied in kind to Montagu:

RHODE ISLAND, May 8, 1772

... The information you have received "that the people of Newport talked of fitting out an armed vessel to rescue any vessel the King's schooner might take carrying on an illicit trade," you may be assured is without foundation, and a scandalous imposition, for upon inquiring into this matter, I cannot find that any such design was ever made, or so much as talked of, and, therefore, I hope you will not hang any of his Majesty's subjects belonging to his colony upon such false information.[40]

Whatever the leanings of Governor Wanton, it's obvious that he would have little direct information about any such plot. He presided in Newport, some thirty miles south of Providence where the actual plotting would later be made to rid Rhode Island of the *Gaspee*. The citizens of Providence, on the other hand, were more concerned with ensuring the freedoms of its maritime trade (and smuggling), on which so much of its burgeoning economy depended.

There is yet more evidence that a plot had been afoot to destroy the *Gaspee* in the letter from Newport tax collector Charles Dudley to Admiral Montagu written a month after the attack. In his letter Dudley correctly predicted that the Rhode Island government would interfere with any investigation.

I shall first of all premise that the Attack upon the Gaspee was not the effect of sudden Passion & forethought: her local circumstances at the time she was burnt did not raise the first emotion to that enormous act, it had been long determined she should be destroyed ... Evidence of respectable men will not be wanting to prove that this insult on His Majesty's Crown & Dignity was begun in the most public & open manner, nor will you want good Testimony to shew that the intention was spoke of many days before the Event. If Admiral Montagu will interest himself in promoting an inquiry into these things: not under the influence of a Governor & Company of Rhode Island but under the high Authority of a British Senate.[41]

Conclusion

Given the preponderance of evidence presented, it is most likely that the burning of the *Gaspee* was part of a well-planned and executed trap conceived by John Brown, Abraham Whipple and others several weeks beforehand. The significance of this act cannot be underestimated, for rather than the attack on the *Gaspee* being simply a footnote in history, it was in fact an intentional act by colonists to strike America's "First Blow for Freedom." [42] British

overreaction to the *Gaspee* Affair, such as appointing the commission of inquiry and empowering it to send suspects across the Atlantic ocean to be tried for alleged offenses, added to the disaffection of many American colonists.

The *Gaspee* Affair contributed directly to the unification movement of all the colonies, which, when formally united, became the United States of America. One can forever argue the point of which colonial fracas against the British was the earliest. But as to the first shot, it depends on when you define the “start” of the Revolution. We’re not talking here about the formal start of the Revolutionary War; we will happily cede that to Lexington and Concord. We’re talking instead about the ideological revolution that arose in the thirteen American colonies, nourished by British attempts to subvert the liberties long cherished by American colonists. As John Adams famously said, “The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people.”[43]

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Footnotes:

[1] Arthur M Schlesinger, Sr. “Political Mobs and the American Revolution, 1765-1776,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 90:4 (1955), 245.

[2] Lawrence J. DeVaro, “The Gaspee Affair as Conspiracy,” *Rhode Island History*, 32:4 (1973), 107-122. To clarify the subject matter, DeVaro’s paper dealt with quite a different topic: fears amongst colonists that there was a conspiracy within British government to use the Gaspee Affair as pretext to further restrict American colonial rights and privileges.

[3] Michael Barbieri, “Vermont in the American Revolution,” *Journal of the American Revolution*, February 2019 at ____.

[4] Thomas Jefferson, *et al.* “Declaration of Independence,” July 1776, at <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

[5] The complete charter is presented on-line by the Rhode Island Secretary of State: sos.ri.gov/divisions/Civics-And-Education/charter-1663. It was still the governing document for the State of Rhode Island until 1843, after the Dorr Rebellion.

[6] For more information about the Triangular Trade see Stanley Lemons, “Rhode Island and the Slave Trade,” *Rhode Island History*, 60:4 (2002), 95-104.

[7] Nick Bunker, *An Empire on the Edge, How Britain Came to Fight America* (London: Random House, 2014), 49. Bunker’s award-winning book emphasizes the importance of the Gaspee Affair as a cause of the American Revolution.

[8] Davis Bevan to the *Providence Gazette*, July 15, 1772, quoted in *The Bridge* (historical community newspaper of Pawtuxet Village, Rhode Island), 42:1 (Spring 2015), 15.

[9] Samuel W. Bryant, “Rhode Island Justice — 1772 Vintage”, *Rhode Island History*, 26:3 (1967), 65-71.

[10] See Christian McBurney, *Dark Voyage: An American Privateer’s War Against Britain’s African Slave Trade* (Yardley, PA: Westholme, 2022), 71-72. John Brown was the creative force and main investor behind the voyage that is the focus of McBurney’s book. It must be noted that John Brown also took part in, and even defended, the detestable slave trade. *Ibid.*, 191-92. Still, as stated in a *Providence Journal* editorial of October 11, 2017, at page A14, “Vandals attack Columbus,” “Any fair study, of course, would look at historical figures in the context of their times, rather than entirely divorced from the world in which they lived.”

[11] Moses Brown. “Diary. Journal of voyage to Philadelphia, 1760,”. Moses Brown Papers (Misc. MSS. I, 8) SS, Series II: Subject Files, Box 3, folder 62, Rhode Island Historical Society Library. I am indebted to the late *Gaspee* historical researcher Leonard Bucklin, Esq. for rediscovering this passage.

[12] For more information on this tactical planning of the attack on the *Gaspee*, and to confirm the astronomical data likely used, one can consult any of a variety of sources for Pawtuxet Cove (Latitude +41.7617, Longitude -71.3883), which is one mile north of Gaspee Point.

June 9, 1772 to June 10, 1772 Local Standard Time		
Date/Day	High Tide/Ht.	Low Tide/Ht.
06/09/1772 Tuesday	2:16 pm 5.1 ft.	8:03 pm 0.6 ft
06/10/1772 Wednesday	2:39 am 4.5 ft.	8:07 am 0.2 ft

The moonset was at 12:47 am and waxing gibbous showing 63% of the moon surface.

Here, we consulted the Tide Graph app (Tidegraph.com) and confirmed this tide data with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (tidesandcurrents.noaa.gov). Moon data was confirmed using data from United States Naval Observatory Astronomical Applications Department (aa.usno.navy.mil/). All three sources make available such astronomical data even at times in centuries long past. Bryan Aamot of Brainware, LLC, developer of the TideGraph, confirmed in an email to the author that the app does not present Eastern Daylight Savings Time in data before EDT was first enacted in 1918, and is therefore correct for 1772. Slight adjustments must be made in that the concept of time zones was not in use until 1888, something necessitated by the advent of relatively fast rail trains requiring a standard time reference. The apparent local time (Local Solar Time) then in common use in Rhode Island in 1772 would have been approximately four minutes later than the calculated times and has been adjusted in the table above. It is noteworthy that the burning of the *Gaspee* is one of the very few incidents in American history for which this type of data is important.

[13] This author has been informed by two different Masonic members that oral traditions exist that the meetings of the St. John’s Masonic Lodge in Providence were canceled the night of June

9th, 1772, due to “pressing business”. Unfortunately, written records were not kept or have been lost.

[14] See Benjamin West, *An Account of the Observation of Venus Upon the Sun, the Third Day of June, 1769, at Providence, in New-England. With some Account of the Use of those Observations* (Providence, John Carter Press, 1769). West, a Rhode Island College (now Brown University) professor, worked with Joseph Brown on the transit of Venus.

[15] Ephraim Bowen, in his account of the incident, stated that when the *Gaspee* ran aground around 3 p.m., the tide was ebbing (progressing from high tide to low tide) and that John Brown rightly concluded that the ship would remain aground until at least well after midnight. Ephraim Bowen, *An Account of the Capture and Burning of the British Schooner “GASPEE” broadside* (Providence: B. Cranston & Co, 1839). See corrected version at Gaspee.org/Bowen.html. As to the moonlight present, Rhode Island Deputy Governor Darius Sessions testified the moon had shone very brightly at 9 p.m. Samuel W. Bryant, “HMS *Gaspee* —The Court Martial,” *Rhode Island History*, 23:3 (1966), 65-72. In a later deposition, it was affirmed that by the time of the initial attack at around 12:45 a.m., the moon had just set and it was dark. William R. Staples, ed., *The Documentary History of the Destruction of the Gaspee* (Providence: Rhode Island Publications Society, 1990), 80. For a more detailed discussion of the tides, see footnote 12 above.

[16] Adam Blumenthal, personal e-mail to the author, March 2017. Mr. Blumenthal, as an Adjunct Professor at Brown University, created a Virtual Reality experience on the *Gaspee* Affair at < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WCSCY_5REw>.

[17] Sally Wilson, “Who was Commodore Whipple?,” in *Revolutionary Portraits: People, + Places and Events from Rhode Island’s Historic Past*, collected by the Rhode Island Short Story Club (Providence: Rhode Island Bicentennial Foundation, 1976), 6-15. See also Sheldon S. Cohen, *Commodore Abraham Whipple of the Continental Navy* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2010), 98-104.

[18] D. K. Abbass, “What’s the *Gaspee* and What’s Not, What’s Passé and What’s Hot, and Why the Public Should Care,” paper presented at the 50th Anniversary *Gaspee* Days Maritime History Symposium, May 29, 2015.

[19] Hubert Bancroft, ed., *The Great Republic by the Master Historians*, Vol. II (New York: R.S. Belcher Co., 1902), ____.

[20] “The Destruction of the *Gaspee*,” *Saturday Evening Post*, August 22, 1829, VIII: 421. This is a fine example of the gentility of early nineteenth century style prose: “*Hannah*’s crew shouted with exultation, and some few gave a parting salutation, with their faces to the opposite point of the compass, from those with whom they were parting company.”

[21] Ezra Ormsbee Revolutionary War Pension Application, August 24, 1833, File, S21404, Revolutionary War Pension Applications, National Archives.

[22] Wilfred H. Munro, *The History of Bristol, Rhode Island, The Story of Mount Hope Lands* (Providence, 1860). See excerpted Gaspee Song at Gaspee.org/Song.html. Note that the lyrics can be best sung to the music of “Yankee Doodle,” a common tune for derisive lyrics, even before the Revolution. For more on the *Gaspee* raiders see Christian McBurney, “Gaspee Raid Inspires Boston Tea Party Raiders to Disguise Themselves as Narragansetts,” *The Online Review of Rhode Island History*, December 15, 2023, at <https://smallstatebighistory.com/?s=gaspee>.

[23] Staples, ed., *Documentary History*, _____. Staple’s work was originally serialized in 1845 editions of the *Providence Journal*. See also further discussion at Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, “Aaron Briggs, African American Patriot in the Gaspee Affair-His Complex Struggle for Freedom,” *The Bridge* (historical community newspaper of Pawtuxet Village, Rhode Island), 38:1 (Spring 2011), 1.

[24] See Steven Park, *The Burning of His Majesty’s Schooner Gaspee: An Attack on Crown Rule before the Revolution* (Yardley, PA: Westholme, 2016), 61.

[25] The Sons of Liberty have been long victims of identity theft. Even during the American Revolution some imitation groups sprung up under the guise of Sons of Liberty as scams to steal money from people. A recent internet search confirms that the term “Sons of Liberty” is in the public domain. Besides the new Sons of Liberty brewery and distillery located at Peace Dale, Rhode Island, several web sites use the name in various forms—usually right wing or religious fundamentalist groups, particularly those with an anti-taxation theme. None can be traced legitimately to the original Sons of Liberty.

[26] Miller, John Jay, “Sons of Liberty: organization and influence, 1765-1766” (2012), in *Legacy Theses & Dissertations (2009 - 2024)*, 36 at <https://scholarsarchive.library.albany.edu/legacy-etd/704>.

[27] Edward Field, ed., “Events Preceding the Outbreak of the Revolution,” *Manual of the Rhode Island Society of the Sons of the American Revolution, 1893-1899* (Central Falls, RI: Freeman & Sons, 1900), 163 (quoting part of speech given at the tree’s dedication by Silas Downer).

[28] “Original Deed of the Newport Liberty Tree,” *The Historical Magazine, and Notes and Queries Concerning the Antiquities, History and Biography of America*, Ser. IV, vol. 2 (Morrisania, NY: Henry B. Dawson, 1868), 91.

[29] Schlesinger, “Political Mobs and the American Revolution”, 245.

[30] As republished news from London in the *Virginia Gazette*, October 15, 1772, pg 1, col 1.

[30] Darius Sessions, *et al.* to Samuel Adams, December 25, 1772, in S. A. Wells, “Samuel Adams and the American Revolution,” manuscript in the Lenox Library, Lenox, MA, Vol. I., 363-365 and 370-371.

[32] Richard M. Deasy, Introduction, in Staples, ed., *Documentary History*, xxix.

[33] This according to Ezra Stiles in his diary entry for January 20, 1773, and in his letter to Elihu Spencer of February 16, 1773, in Franklin Bowditch Dexter, ed., *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1901), vol. 1, 337 and 349.

[34] "Chief Justice John Cole (1715-1777)", *Gaspee Virtual Archives*, Gaspee.org/JohnColeEsq.htm.

[35] John C. Miller, *Origins of the American Revolution* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1943), 327, 328.

[36] See Steven Park, *The Burning of His Majesty's Schooner Gaspee: An Attack on Crown Rule before the Revolution* (Yardley, PA: Westholme, 2016), 80-94.

[37] John Harris, *America Rebels* (Boston: Globe Newspaper Co., 1976), 7-8.

[38] Staples, ed., *The Documentary History*, 3.

[39] *Ibid.*, 6.

[40] *Ibid.*, 7.

[41] *Ibid.*, 132.

[42] This phrase is a trademark of the Gaspee Days Committee. "First Blow for Freedom" was embodied on *Gaspee* commemorative teacups sold in Providence around the time of the 1875-1876 United States Centennial. Sadly, Rhode Island had completely forgotten to acknowledge the earlier 1872 centennial of the burning of the *Gaspee*. *Chicago Tribune*, April 23, 1875, p 4, col. 5.

[43] John Adams to Hezekiah Niles, February 13, 1818, in Adams Papers, Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-6854>.