

Was Rhode Island independent prior to the Declaration of Independence?

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In conjunction with the

Westerly 250th Commission

Westerly Library and Wilcox Park

Westerly Historical Society



September 18, 1776

At a town meeting at the home of
Major Edwin Bliven.....

“We the subscribers do solemnly & sincerely declare that we believe the war Resistance and opposition in which the United American Colonies are now engaged against the Fleets & Armies of Great Britain, is on the part of the Colonies just & necessary, And that we will not directly nor indirectly Afford assistance of any sort or kind whatever to the fleets and armies during the continuance of the proposed war, but that we will heartily resist in the defence of the United Colonies.”

**Westerly Town Council record –
Vol 3 1745-1778 pages 156-157*



A tale of two
Puritans and two
different
decisions on
migration to New
England.
Their decisions
changed the
course of history
for Britain and
America.



Origins of the Rhode Island

- First settled by Roger Williams in 1636, Rhode Island provided a haven for religious dissidents from Massachusetts.
- “Soul Liberty” the roots of religious freedom, a change of focus.
- Rhode Island’s government was established by a Parliamentary Patent in 1643.
- During the 1660s Rhode Island’s borders were contested by the colonies of Massachusetts and Connecticut.
- Rhode Island needed this border contest clarified, signed by King Charles II, the Royal Charter of 1663 settled the border disputes.

<https://docs.sos.ri.gov/documents/civicsandeducation/teacherresources/Parliamentary-Patent.pdf>
<https://docs.sos.ri.gov/documents/civicsandeducation/teacherresources/RI-Charter-annotated.p>



Rights granted under the Royal Charter 1663

The Royal Charter of 1663 describes that the inhabitants of the Colony

“shall have and enjoy all liberties and immunities of free and natural subjects within any of the dominions of us, our heirs and successors, to all intents, constructions and purposes, whatsoever, as if they, and every of them, were born within the realm of England”

<https://docs.sos.ri.gov/documents/civicsandeducation/teacherresources/RI-Charter-annotated.pdf>

Establishment of Rhode Island government by King Charles II

The Charter provided; *“there shall be one Governor, one Deputy-Governor and ten Assistants, to be from time to time, constituted, elected and chosen, out of the freemen of the said Company”*.

<https://docs.sos.ri.gov/documents/civicsandeducation/teacherresources/RI-Charter-annotated.pdf>



Parliament passes the Naturalization Act 1740

- The independence of Rhode Island was a topic of judicial proceedings in 1761. Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Samuel Ward presided over a case of naturalization of two Newport merchants requesting inclusion as freemen into the colony. They had lived in Rhode Island for a period of seven years as proscribed by a 1740 law passed by Parliament.
- *“Aaron Lopez and Isaac Elizer, Jewish merchants of Newport, applied to the Rhode Island Superior Court for naturalization under this act.”*



Rhode Island Supreme Court Ruling

“The Court unanimously rejected their application, declaring that if the act applied to Rhode Island, which the Court doubted, the act was, to that extent, void, since “by the Charter granted to this Colony it appears that the full and quiet enjoyment of the Christian Religion and a desire of propagating the same were the principal Views with which the Colony was settled and by a [Rhode Island] Law... no Person who does not profess the Christian Religion can be admitted free of this Colony.””

<https://archive.org/details/correspondenceof00ward/page/77/mode/1up?view=theater> The case is fully discussed in Abram V. Goodman’s American Overture, Jewish Rights in Colonial Times, (1947), 52-8.

If Rhode Island had religious freedom, what did the ruling mean?

Contained in the Royal Charter is the following, “to hold forth a lively experiment, that a most flourishing civil state may stand and best be maintained, and that among our English subjects, **with a full liberty in religious concerns and that true piety rightly grounded upon gospel principles**, will give the best and greatest security to sovereignty, and will lay in the hearts of men the strongest obligations to true loyalty.”

Although, individuals had “**full liberty in religious concerns**”, **the role of freeman in the colony meant full participation in the political life.** Jews, Papists (Catholics), Muslims, etc. were not considered Christians and were excluded from political life, voting or holding office. All inhabitants enjoyed religious liberty but, full participation in the affairs of the colony was reserved for Christian men and property owners.

Local and Global Conflicts

- The Pequot War (1636–1638) was the first major conflict between Native Americans and English settlers in New England.
- King Philip's War (1675–1676) was a devastating conflict between Native American tribes of New England and English colonists, along with their Native allies.
- King William's War (1689-1697) was the North American extension of the Nine Years' War.
- Queen Anne's War (1702-1713) was the North American theater of the War of the Spanish Succession.
- King George's War (1744-1748) was a continuation of Britain vs France conflict over North America
- Seven Years War (1756–1763) a global conflict between Great Britain and Prussia vs France and Austria, backed by Spain, Saxony, Sweden and Russia. North American theater, known as the French and Indian War.



The Results of the Seven Years War

- Positive result for Britain was a new colony in Canada whose French speaking inhabitants who were incorporated into the empire.
- Negative result for Britain an empty treasury in need of replenishment. Debt service during the 1770s consumed all the tax receipts and sometimes exceeded it.
- Sugar Act 1764 the act reduced opportunities to trade freely with foreign Caribbean Islands and resulted in stricter customs procedures.
- Stamp Act 1765 the first direct tax on the American Colonies and repealed in March of 1766.
- During the summer of 1767, the British Parliament passed the Townshend Acts to replenish their depleted treasury by taxing the importation of glass, lead, paper, paint, and tea. These taxes were consumption taxes thought to be more acceptable to the American Colonies.

The Rights of the Colonies Examined

Governor Stephen Hopkins - 1764

- New Englanders planted themselves at their own expense and risk.
- Rights enjoyed by the Greeks and Romans whose colonies had the same rights of their mother countries.
- The Colonies are a great distance from the members of Parliament, “who have but little knowledge of their business, connections and interests”.
- Parliament’s Sugar Tax creates a risk of upending the Empire’s rum trade and could hand the trade over to the French.
- The American Colonies defense of the Empire as they shared in the expense but not the spoils of British victories.
- The American Colonies have always answered the call to raise funds in the past, why is Parliament using “unconstitutional method to compel them to do what they have ever done freely”.
- **Note:** Hopkins both owned enslaved people and later in 1774 co-authored a statute prohibiting the further importation of enslaved Africans to Rhode Island.



Rhode Island's resistance to the Townshend and Tea Acts

- Smuggling and armed resistance to the Royal Navy played out in the waters of the second largest bay in the American Colonies all through the 1760s-1770s.
- Starting in 1764 with an attack on the HMS St John.
- RI Governor Stephen Hopkins publishes The Rights of the Colonies Examined in 1764, it was widely read throughout the American Colonies.
- In 1769 they burned the HMS Liberty after she was cast adrift in Newport harbor grounded and burned off Goat Island.
- In 1772, on a shoal off Warwick, Rhode Islanders boarded a revenue schooner, wounded the Commander Lieutenant Duddeston, captured him, and removed his crew. His ship the HMS Gaspee was burned, demonstrating the lengths the Colony would go to resist British direct rule.

<https://archive.org/details/recordsofcolonyo07rhod/page/58/mode/1up?view=theater&q=+St++John>

<https://archive.org/details/recordsofcolonyo07rhod/page/59/mode/1up?view=theater>

Burning of the HMS Gaspee – June 10, 1772



Letter from Lord Dartmouth to Gov of RI – April 10th, 1773

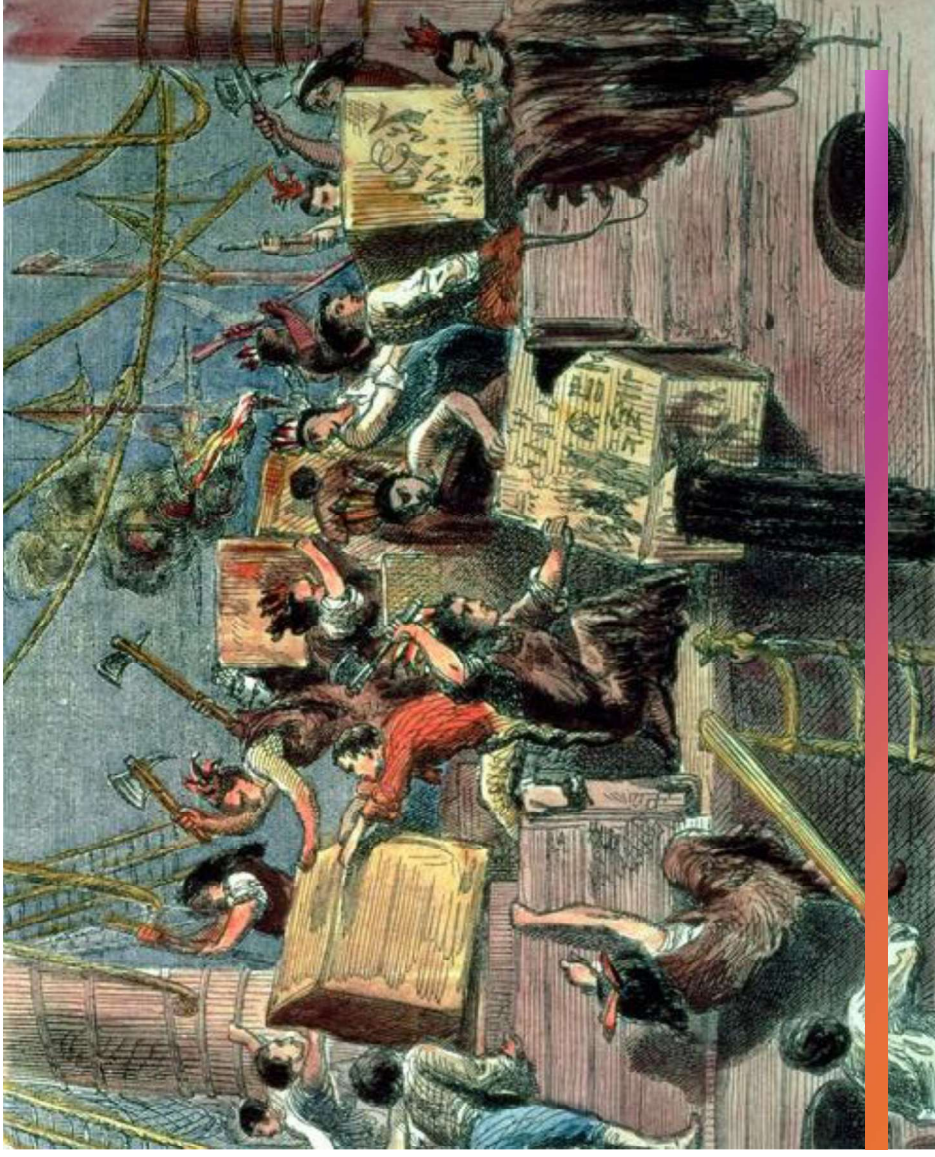
“Having received and laid before The King a Letter from Mr Wanton dated the 16th of February last, on the subject of a claim which he expresses to be a demand of the Colony of Rhode Island upon the Crown, to be reimbursed a sum of money expended by the said Colony for public services in the late War; I have received His Majestys Commands to transmit the letter, and the papers inclosed, to the Lords Commissioners of the Treasury, and as I shall be glad of any opportunity of shewing a favourable attention to the interests of the Colony, I shall not fail to recommend the present application to the attention of the Treasury Board.

Rhode Islanders believed that they ought to be reimbursed for expenses incurred in defense of the empire during the French and Indian War.

1773, the Tea Act backfires

Lord North introduced the Tea Act to Parliament, hoping it would serve several purposes:

- Bail out the East India Company, which was burdened with unsold tea and debt.
- Assert Parliament's authority to tax the colonies.
- Undercut smuggled tea by making Company tea cheaper—even with the colonial tax, due to waiving duties on export from Britain.



January 19th, 1774, at a town meeting in Providence

“Inasmuch as the British Parliament have undertaken to raise a revenue in the American colonies, by a duty upon tea : we, the freemen of the town of Providence, legally assembled in meeting, cannot be silent on so interesting and alarming an occasion. Should we, in this case, omit to assert and express the firmest resolutions to vindicate our rights, it might be construed as a cession of them into the hands of those who have wantonly invaded them in this instance.

*They offered their viewpoint on their bonds with Britain; “When we consider that many of our ancestors removed from Britain, and planted themselves here; that the religion, language and customs **of the two countries** are mostly similar, and that there hath been a long intercourse of trade and commerce between them, we are willing, and even desirous, of a continuance of connection between the colonies and Britain, **if it may be had on terms in any measure equal**”.*

<https://archive.org/details/recordsofcolonyo07rhod/page/272/mode/1up?view=theater&q=protest+>

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February 2, 1774, at a town meeting in Westerly

1st. Resolved, That our ancestors, being oppressed in their native country, and denied the liberty of worshipping God according to the dictates of their consciences, had a natural and just right to emigrate from Britain to this or any other part of the world.

2d . That upon their arrival in America, they found the country in the actual possession of the Indian natives, who had the sole and absolute jurisdiction of the same, and a perfect and exclusive right and property in the soil and its produce of every kind.

3d . That they purchased the soil, and with it the jurisdiction of the country, of the Sachems, the then sole lords and proprietors thereof, and accordingly became possessed of an exclusive, natural, and just right and property in the same, with a right to improve or dispose of the same and its various produce, in any manner which they chose, and might have incorporated themselves into distinct or separate societies or governments, without any connection with any European power whatsoever.

4th . That their attachment to their native country and its excellent Constitution made them forget their former sufferings, and hope for better times , and put themselves and the vast territory which they had acquired under the allegiance of the Crown of England, upon express conditions that all their natural, civil, and religious rights and privileges should be secured to them and their heirs forever. This security was solemnly granted and confirmed accordingly in their respective charters , with all the liberties and immunities of free and natural subjects within any of the dominions of the then King of England, & c., his heirs or successors, to all intents, constructions, and purposes whatsoever, as if they or every one of them had been born within the realm of England,' and these privileges have been since confirmed by several acts of Parliament.

5th . That the charter of this Colony doth in the strongest manner possible, grant unto the inhabitants thereof, all those rights and privileges, with complete jurisdiction within the territory they had purchased, and an entire exemption from all' services, duties, fines, forfeitures, claims, and demands whatsoever, except the fifth part of all ore of gold and silver found in the Colony, which is reserved in lieu of all other duties.'

“The Committee of Correspondence, of Westerly, to the Committee of Correspondence, at Boston.”

May 19, 1774

“Gentlemen :

With mingled concern and indignation, the committee of correspondence for this town, have seen an act for blocking up the harbor of Boston.

Rome, designing to destroy the city of Carthage, barbarously required of the Carthaginians that they should forsake their city, and remove their habitations twelve miles from the sea. The consideration of the inveterate hatred, occasioned by the long and bloody wars which had subsisted between Rome and Carthage; the remembrance of several hundred thousand Romans killed in those wars, and several hundred towns plundered by the Carthaginians, are some excuse for the Roman severity; **but the cruel and unnatural treatment which the town of Boston has received from Great Britain, will admit of no palliation.”**

Actions 1774

- March – September RI Town Committees of Correspondence send letters of support and pass resolutions to Boston in the face of the closure of her port by the British Navy.
- New Jersey requests RI General Assembly pass on intelligence reports on British actions in Parliament.
- 12 December 1774, Capt. Wallace, RN reports of cannon stolen from Fort Island and transported by the rebels to Providence.

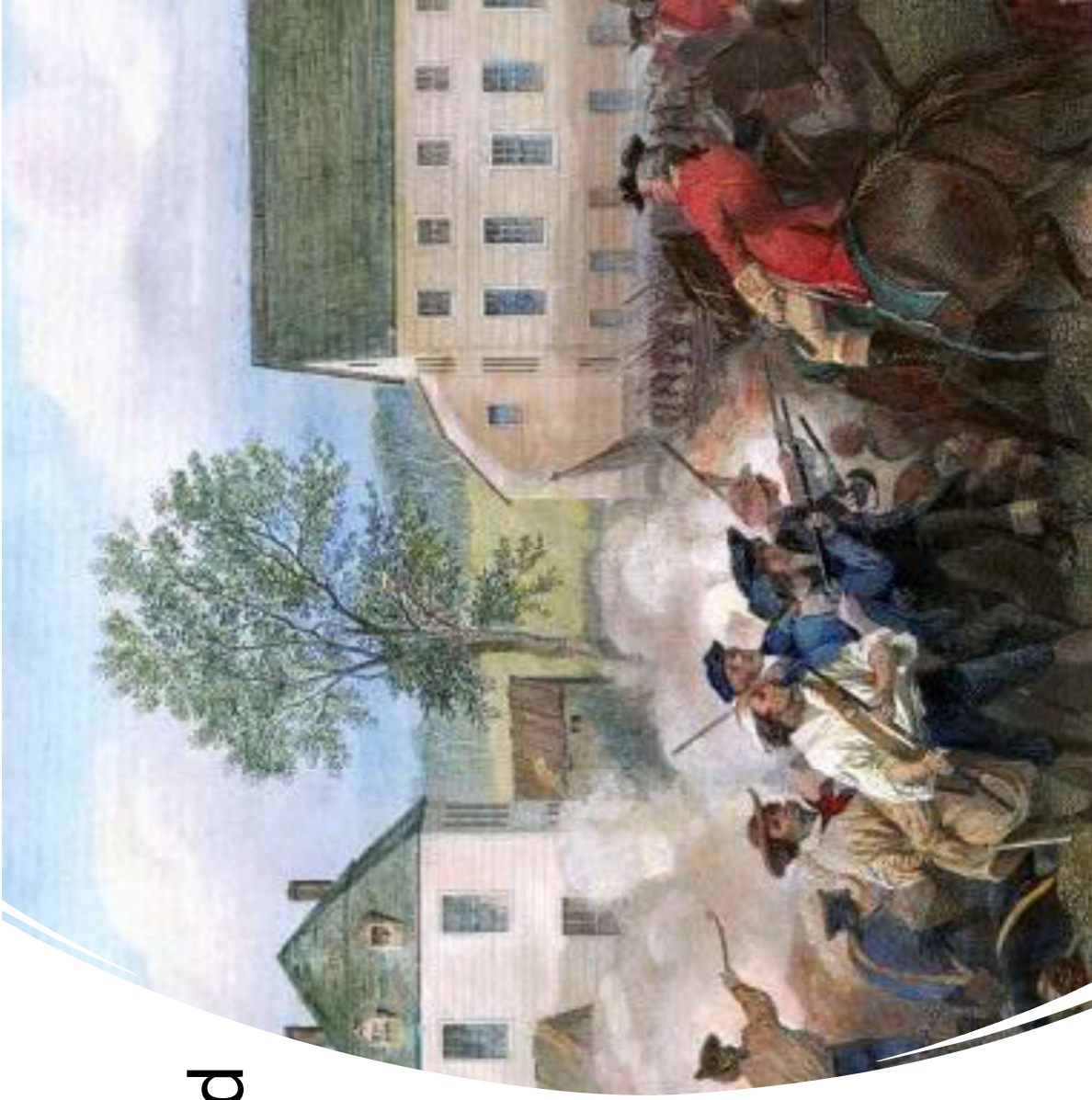


Rhode Island General Assembly 1774

- 13 June 1774 – voted to join other colonies in a Continental Congress and voted to send Stephen Hopkins and Samuel Ward as RI Delegates.
- 13 June 1774 - **Ban on importation of slaves**, whereas, the inhabitants of America are generally engaged in the preservation of their own rights and liberties, among which, that of personal freedom must be considered as the greatest; **as those who are desirous of enjoying all the advantages of liberty themselves, should be willing to extend personal liberty to others.....and in case any slave shall hereafter be brought in, he or she shall be, and are hereby, rendered immediately free,** so far as respects personal freedom, and the enjoyment of private property, in the same manner as the native Indians.
- Acts were passed to formed militia, ranger, and artillery companies during 1774.
- 19 October 1774 Lord Dartmouth conveys an order from Whitehall forbidding the importation of gunpowder to RI.
- 2 November 1774 Lord Dartmouth orders the Gov Wanton to report every three month on any government official who is absent and the reason for the absence.

1775 Actions involving Rhode Island and other Colonies

- April 19th Battles of Lexington, Concord and Battle Road.
- April 19th Siege of Boston begins.
- May 10th Americans capture Fort Ticonderoga
- June 17th Battle of Bunker Hill
- June Invasion of Canada begins.
- August Bermuda Gunpowder Plot
- October 7th Bristol shelled and burned by ships of Capt. Wallace, Royal Navy forces.
- Sharp increase in trading with the French islands of the West Indies
- December Battle of Quebec, invasion of Canada ends in failure.



General Assembly 1775

- 3 March 1775, Lord Dartmouth to the Gov. Wanton, that the Fort, in the Harbour of Rhode Island, had not paid the proper Respect to the British Flag; The King, who is justly incensed at such an Indignity.
- 22 April 1775, An Act for establishing a military company, by the name of the United Company of the Train of Artillery, in the town of Providence.
- May 1775, The removal of Joseph Wanton, Esq. as Governor of the colony due to his refusal to sign the commissions for the officers appointed to command the colony's troops. That the acts or actions of Wanton are null and void and no person shall operate under his authority.
- June 1775, established post offices and post riders to join with other colonies in order and to preserve intercourse between them.
- On the 6th of November 1775, the General Assembly voted to have, “representatives of each county as a committee to collect a well authenticated account of the hostilities committed by the **ministerial troops and navy within this colony, since March last**”.
- By November of 1775, the initial actions of the Revolution were taking place at Lexington, Concord, a siege of Boston, and the battle of Bunker Hill. Other actions included a rebel offensive into Canada, an American raid on Bermuda that carried off needed military stores, and in Rhode Island the shelling of Bristol.
- 1775 a pivotal year and despite all these military actions, the General Assembly ended what can be considered a rebellious session with these words, **“God save the King”**.

March of 1776, in an act for the outfitting of armed vessels, passed the General Assembly

- The General Assembly citing the provision in the Royal Charter: *"That it shall, and may, be lawful to..... exercise in arms, martial array ; and put in warlike posture, the inhabitants of said colony, for their special defense and safety ; and to lead and conduct the said inhabitants"*.
- **From the Royal Charter**, "it is hereby declared, that it shall not be lawful to or for the rest of the Colonies to invade or molest the native Indians or any other inhabitants inhabiting within the bounds and limits hereafter mentioned, they having subjected themselves unto us, and being by us taken into our special protection, without the knowledge and consent of the Governor and Company of our Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations".

<https://docs.sos.ri.gov/documents/civicsandeducation/teacherresources/RI-Charter-annotated.pdf>

<https://archive.org/details/recordsofcolonyo07rhod/page/481/mode/1up?view=theater>



May 3rd, 1776, Rhode Island's Independence Day and beyond.

The last step in asserting their full right to govern themselves came with their renunciation of their loyalty to King George III on May 3rd, 1776 two months prior to the Continental Congress declaring independence. Rhode Island military units and individuals would continue with Continental forces until the British surrender at Yorktown. General Nataniel Greene 2nd in command to Washington, Commodore of the Navy Esek Hopkins, and the 1st Rhode Island Regiment serving from the Siege of Boston until final victory at Yorktown.

– **13 June 1776,
General Assembly passes
the Test Act**

- **TEST ACT** - An Act empowering the members of the upper and lower houses of Assembly, to tender to such of the inhabitants as are hereinafter mentioned, a declaration, or test, for subscription. "I, the subscriber, do solemnly and sincerely declare, that I believe the war, resistance and opposition, in which the United American Colonies are now engaged, against the fleets and armies of Great Britain, is on the part of the said colonies just and necessary; and that I will not, directly nor indirectly, afford assistance of any sort or kind, whatever, to the said fleets and armies, during the continuance of the present war; but that I will heartily assist in the defence of the United Colonies."
- **Penalty for those who do not subscribe to the Test Act** And be it further enacted by the authority aforesaid, that in case any such suspected person shall refuse to subscribe the same,.....**summons, and call the person so refusing, before him, and make inquiry into the reasons of his refusal; and if he shall continue such refusal,...** member shall issue his warrant, directed to the sheriff of the county where the person so refusing shall dwell.....their property searched and all arms and ammunition seized.....



Rhode Island's break is complete

- 19 August 1776, the Rhode Island General Assembly ends their session with the words, "God save the United States".



Rhode Island post Revolution

- Eleven of the thirteen original colonies saw fit to draft state constitutions the exceptions of Connecticut and Rhode Island. They continued using their Royal Charters until 1818 and 1843, respectively.
- The use of the 1663 Charter demonstrates that Rhode Islanders viewed the post-Revolutionary period as they had the colonial period, in that they considered it a continuance of their self-governing.
- 1843 Dorr War or Dorr Rebellion (1841-1842, an internal Rhode Island civil conflict over suffrage) resolution resulted Rhode Island drafting it's first constitution, which took effect in May of 1843.



Summary

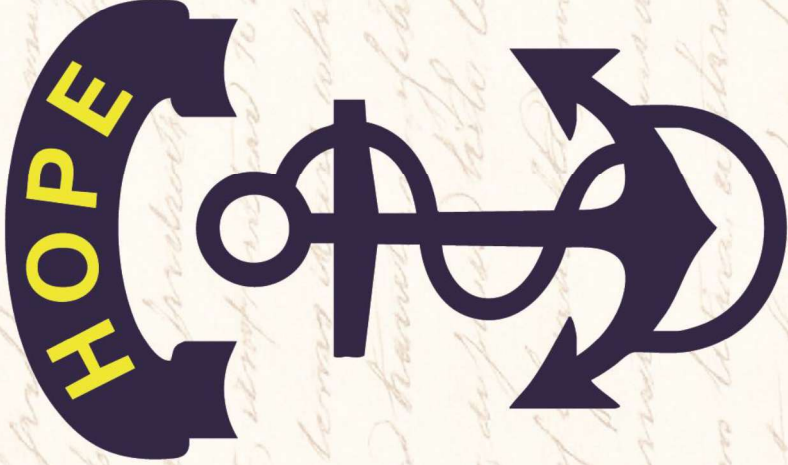
- *Rhode Islanders had rights equal to Englishmen under the Charter of 1663.*
- *England has a Parliament and Rhode Island has a General Assembly, Rhode Island enjoys the rights of self-rule and no royal Governor as other Colonies had assigned to them by the King.*
- *Rhode Island and New England in general grew strong through international trade and a whole lot of smuggling.*
- *Wars in North America saw RI and her sister Colonies organize for the own defense and the Colonies supported the British forces with up to half of their strength in the field during the French and Indian War.*
- *Rhode Islanders saw themselves as partners in empire not subjects of one, the English Civil War was a political struggle between the Parliament and the Crown. This conflict was America's struggle between an English Parliament vs American Assemblies; it was viewed by many on both sides as yet another struggle over political rights and at times another Civil War.*
- *Political mismanagement by the British Prime Ministers North and eight others who refused to seek American agreement around the subject of taxation and political rights.*
- *Rhode Island founded by Williams in 1636, it was 140 years old by 1776, enjoyed a high degree of self rule.*
- *Finally, the American Colonies had been at war from 1636 Pequot War – 1763 the end of the French and Indian War, a 127 years of on an off conflict, these weren't farmers, mere colonists they had in fact evolved into people who could defend their interests and would not be intimidated by a legislature an ocean away.*



Summary Continued

- Small size is an advantage.
- Rhode Island never had a royal Governor except a temporary New England Governor Sir Edmund Andros 1686-1688, who never visited Rhode Island.
- Narragansett Bay dividing the colony making both offensive and defensive operations difficult.
- Rhode Island was able to prepare and defend herself for war despite her vulnerabilities to amphibious operations.
- Occupation on Aquidneck Island only starting in December 1776, leaving the rest of the colony unmolested.

Coming soon



1776

PALE ALE

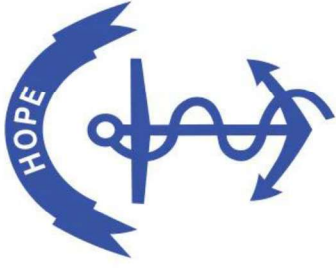
GOVERNMENT WARNING: (1) ACCORDING TO THE SURGEON GENERAL, WOMEN SHOULD NOT DRINK ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES DURING PREGNANCY BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF BIRTH DEFECTS. (2) CONSUMPTION OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES IMPAIRS YOUR ABILITY TO DRIVE A CAR OR OPERATE MACHINERY, AND MAY CAUSE HEALTH PROBLEMS. 12 FL. OZ.

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Was Rhode Island the Colony that was Independent before Independence?

Q&A

