

The Conspiracy to Destroy the *Gaspee*

by Dr. John Concannon

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Graphics

TBD. Many available through <http://Gaspee.org/GaspeeGraphics.htm>.

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The highlights of the Gaspee Affair are well known in Rhode Island history. On the afternoon of June 9th, 1772, while chasing the packet sloop *Hannah* suspected of smuggling, the Royal Navy schooner *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 met 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, Lieutenant Dudingston.

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 across the Atlantic to England for trial. This bypassing of the established American continental 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.¹ To assess further threats, the Committees of Correspondence were re-established among colonial legislatures. This simple act of unification was among the first steps leading towards the First Continental Congress and, eventually, the Declaration of Independence. In fact, Thomas Jefferson *et al.* included in the Declaration of Independence at least three grievances against King George III that were directly attributable to the Gaspee Affair:²

- "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."

The Gaspee Affair also played a very large role in the newspaper coverage which drove the spirit for independence in the years just prior to the Revolution. Accounts of the attack on the *Gaspee* and the subsequent commission of inquiry

were front page news, not only within the colonies themselves, but across the Atlantic in Britain. The Gaspee Affair was also the subject of an influential pamphlet, *An Oration on the Beauties of Liberty*, written by Rev. John Allen of Boston. This rebellious reverend 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.³

Michael Barbieri states that, "The real problem for the British was the failure of the efforts in the early 1770's at maintaining the familial connection between Great Britain and the colonies"⁴

But with few exceptions⁵, it has usually been surmised by historians that the attack on HMS *Gaspee* was occasioned by the accidental grounding of the King's vessel giving opportunity for its destruction by angry Rhode Island colonists. But was this really such a serendipitous event? What is presented here is an examination of the evidence that the entrapment and subsequent destruction of the *Gaspee* had actually been planned well ahead of time.

In general, conspiracy theorists do not fare well when in historical circles. 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 14 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 ship 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

Rhode Island and Providence Plantations was founded by religious dissenter Roger Williams *et al.* in 1636. The Charter granted by King Charles II of Great Britain gave the colony many unique rights, such as independent governance, judiciary, and freedoms of religion.⁶ Over the ensuing 136 years to 1772, Rhode Island had become accustomed to functioning as a relatively independent society. However, the rocky land of Rhode Island did not sufficiently support crop or cattle farming to export for profit; its best asset was (and is) Narragansett Bay, and maritime trading had become an essential component of the economy. And as a tip of the triangular trade, the tiny colony also heavily relied on imports of molasses to distill rum for export.⁷ 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 & Indian War, the Crown levied (and later rescinded) a host of taxes on the Colonists; Stamp Act and Townshend Acts, etc., but import duties remained on such items as Sugar and Molasses. Customs regulations also dictated that all such imports be restricted to be within British controlled territory; trading with French or Spanish interests was forbidden. By 1764 the British started to become serious in enforcing these maritime trade laws, much to the resentment of American colonists.

Nick Bunker, writing from the British perspective in *An Empire on the Edge*, 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.”⁸

The *Gaspee*

The HMS *Gaspee* was representative of a class of relatively small and fast revenue schooners 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 ⁹ she took up station in Newport in February 1772 and lost no time in making her 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 considered particularly heavy-handed in performing their duties, plundering Rhode Island ships and cargos, and stealing cattle and supplies from coastal communities up and down Narragansett Bay. The *Gaspee* stopped a sloop found to be carrying rum, the *Gaspee*'s crew beat up the vessel's captain, and the captured vessel and cargo 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.¹⁰

New Insights on the Timing of the Attack

John Brown of Providence had been amassing a fortune in the sea trade, ship-building, privateering, and distilling.¹¹ But with the recent arrival of British revenue enforcement ships creating a stranglehold to their free enterprise, he and others in the sea-mercantile circles were only too willing to take action. And as it turns out, he also had personal experience with just how to lure the *Gaspee* to its demise.

According to Moses Brown's diary ¹², Moses and his older brother John Brown were grounded near Namquid Point (now renamed Gaspee Point) while they were on a sloop bound for Philadelphia on June 8, 1760.

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 till half after 3 morning of the 9th -----

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 12 years later -- in 1772.

Note that the attack on the *Gaspee* did not occur immediately after its arrival in Narragansett Bay in January; Rhode Island citizens had four to five months to plan an appropriate response. The attack was likely not some sudden, unplanned 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* grounded at about 3 pm was obscured by the high tide that was just starting to recede. This would effectively trap the schooner for at least the twelve hours until the next high tide which would not occur until around 3 am the following morning. This left enough time for Rhode Island Colonists to assemble the attack force which followed.

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 ¹³. John Brown and Abraham Whipple, who together led the raid, attacked at about 12:45 am on June 10th, which is exactly the time of the setting of the moon, thus providing the cover of darkness. Of course, this timing would also ensure that most of the crew of the *Gaspee* were sound asleep as the longboats approached. The *Gaspee* grounded on a Tuesday afternoon and attacked the following night, times not interfering with those who would object to violence on the Sabbath. Even more conveniently, it was 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. ¹⁴

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 the city, 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 1769.¹⁵

The data for the tides and moon also confirm later testimony given about the raid.^{16, 17} 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 be experiencing in modern times.

Detailed weather data recorded by the noted Rhode Island Rev. Ezra Stiles has been recently uncovered from archival files at the NOAA center by Adam Blumenthal of Brown University.¹⁸ Near the time of the attack on June 9th, 1772 winds were from the Southeast, the weather was fair, and the temperature was a somewhat tolerable 44 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. But since the *Hannah* (the boat which lured the *Gaspee* aground) had just returned from New York, it brought back predictions of this fair weather that would typically follow the ship coming from the southwest. 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 Revolution he captured over ten British prize ships at once by posing as a fellow British ship escorting the hapless convoy, but then proceeded to secretively take over their commands one by one.¹⁹

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 situation in the early morning hours would have been in conjunction on less than seven percent of the dates from May through July, 1772. One can certainly suspect 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. Abbas, of the RI Marine Archaeology Project [20](#) uncovered an interesting reason why Dudingston may have been so hot 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 knew about the cash, and that could have been incentive enough for him to risk crossing those shallows."

Of course, it is also quite probable that this information was 'leaked' to Dudingston. As an officer in the Royal Navy he was also charged with enforcing maritime trade laws, and would have been seeking a hefty cut of whatever could be claimed as a customs enforcement prize. In either event, the British ship was apparently all too easy to lure. Nautical custom at the time was for civilian boats to lower their flags 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, the chase was on.

Unlike native Rhode Island mariners, Lieutenant Dudingston of the *Gaspee* had little, if any, 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 the Dudingston's ship having previously traveled further

up the Bay into the Providence River which ultimately trapped him. But it is curious that the pilot, one Sylvanius Daggett, was not on board at the time of the *Gaspee's* demise; he had been transferred six weeks earlier to 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 be easily confirmed by John Brown and his associates who had ships in the Newport area. In fact, some local inhabitants later caught up with Daggett shortly after the attack on the *Gaspee*, and according to the *Providence Gazette* of June 13, 1772:

"We hear that one Daggett, belonging to the 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."

On the other hand, the *Hannah's* Captain Benjamin Lindsey had over the nine years of experience sailing passenger and cargo vessels between Newport and Providence, and had become very well acquainted with the waters of Narragansett Bay. He had been at times employed by John Brown and would have undoubtedly been involved in the planning to trap the *Gaspee*. Coastal transport packets such as the *Hannah* required the ability to get close-in to land in shallow waters and were specifically designed with a shallow draft (how deeply the ship or boat sits into the water). In contrast, the two-masted *Gaspee* had a multitude of responsibilities such as patrolling the rich fishing grounds of the Grand Banks, requiring stability in rough, open waters, and thus a much deeper keel and draft.

As the chase arrived at Namquid Point, the *Hannah* easily skidded over the submerged sandbar. Accounts state that Captain Lindsey then turned slightly into the cove just beyond the Point and feigned to furl his sails, as if confused. Dudingston and the *Gaspee* were suckered into following, hell-bent on catching their prey -- and ran hard aground. The schooner would be stuck for at least the next twelve hours, long enough to set the stage for the attack that would ensue.

After parting shots were exchanged (it has been reported that the crew of the *Hannah* mooned that of the *Gaspee*),²¹ Lindsey sailed back to Providence, arriving later that afternoon and docking as usual at Fenner's Wharf, directly opposite Sabin's Tavern, wherein the people met, plotted, and departed on their subsequent mission to attack the *Gaspee*. 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 64 men from the immediate Providence dock areas to join in the attack, an attack which could have resulted in them all being hanged if caught. Later testimony tells that many of these men were dressed in well-tailored clothing which suggested their belonging to the merchant class. 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 must also have been quickly sent south to the seafaring town of Bristol. Whether traveling by horse or by boat, the messenger would have spent at least an hour in transit. There, fellow merchant Capt. Simeon Potter was also able to muster enough men for at least one other longboat to join in the attack. It is very doubtful that a boat could be arranged, crewed, and imbedded 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 Bristol-Warren dockside area dressed as Narragansett Indians.²² Along the way from Bristol, Capt. Potter pressed into the raid one Aaron Briggs, an 'indentured servant' (slave) from Prudence Island.²³ Why bother? Briggs happened to be of mixed Narragansett Indian and African-American blood (at the time referred to as Mustee), and a perfect candidate to further the Bristol crew's disguise as Indians. This is also the likely reason that the teenaged Briggs was deliberately seated next to the wounded Dudingston when the wounded commander of the *Gaspee* was rowed ashore after the attack.

The Sons of Liberty

Revolutionary furor had been brewing in the American colonies since before the Stamp Acts in 1764, and no less so in Rhode Island, where the profitable mercantile shipping business had become particularly sensitive to British trade and taxation laws. The Sons of Liberty was noted for acts of violent intimidation, such as the tarring and feathering of tax collectors,²⁴ however in general were well-controlled in their mob activities by leadership from men of means and property. 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. **Later, many of these same community leaders grouped together to form the first Chambers of Commerce**²⁵. 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.

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 Providence²⁶ and Newport,²⁷ and John Brown is known to have been a member.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 subsequent British, annually commemorated the Boston Massacre,²⁹ and helped incite the Boston Tea Party, albeit some 18 months after the burning of the *Gaspee*.

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*:³⁰

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.

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 distain for the increasingly oppressive control by British colonial policy. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr. ³¹ 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.

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*.³² 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 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 independence movement were known to be looking for ways to incite their fellow colonists against the British, and the *Gaspee* represented the continued taxation and oppression by the Crown against Americans.

In his letters of reply to Sessions, Adams seemed to be familiar with events, and did not express any misgivings about the incident. Of these men who corresponded with Adams, it can be shown that Darius Sessions went on to deliberately obstruct the royally-appointed commission of inquiry into the destruction of the *Gaspee*.³³ Chief Justice Hopkins later declared that Rhode Island courts would not cooperate with the *Gaspee* investigatory commission by refusing to hand over any citizen so-indicted to the British Admiralty.³⁴ John

Cole was a lawyer present at the Sabin Tavern during the planning of the attack, may well have participated in it, and later perjured himself before the Gaspee commission by denying any knowledge of such events.³⁵ As previously discussed, Moses Brown's two brothers, John and Joseph, are figured to have led 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*.³⁶ Historian John C. Miller wrote:³⁷

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 scuttlers of the *Gaspee* was a direct encouragement to Bostonians to stage the Tea Party.

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 negligence³⁸.

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 in to Governor Joseph Wanton, then seated in the colonial capital of Newport.³⁹ This led to a series of heated letters between Governor Wanton and Lt. Dudingston, along with his superior officer, Admiral John Montagu, Commander of the Royal Navy for the northeast American coast. It is during this correspondence that Admiral Montagu let slip to Governor Wanton some interesting naval intelligence:⁴⁰

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.

Note also that Admiral Montagu does not mention here either HMS *Beaver*, a larger and more heavily armed brig, or HMS *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 in this case applies only to the HMS *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:⁴¹

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.

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 30 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 predicts that the Rhode Island government would interfere with any investigation.⁴²

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.

Conclusion

Given the preponderance of evidence presented, it is most likely that the burning of the *Gaspee* was all part of a well-planned and executed trap conceived by John Brown, Abraham Whipple, and numerous 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 the first deliberate use of force by colonists to strike America's 'First Blow for Freedom'^{TM-43}

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 of formal armed Revolution — we will happily cede that to Lexington and Concord. We're talking instead about the ideological revolution for independence from Great Britain. As John Adams said, "The Revolution was effected before the War commenced. The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people." ⁴⁴

Notes:

¹ Lawrence J. DeVaro, “[The Gaspee Affair as Conspiracy](#)”, *Rhode Island History*, 32:4 (1973), 107-122. To clarify on 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.

² Thomas Jefferson, *et al.* [Declaration of Independence](#), July 1776. Many on-line examples give the text with commentary.

³ Steven Park, [The Burning of His Majesty’s Schooner Gaspee: An Attack on Crown Rule before the Revolution](#). (Yardley, PA: Westholme, 2016), 77-98.

⁴ Michael Barbieri, *Dispatches: The Official Podcast of the Journal of the American Revolution*, Episode 02: "Vermont in the American Revolution". February 17, 2019.

⁵ Arthur M Schlesinger, Sr. “Political Mobs and the American Revolution, 1765-1776”, [Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society](#), 90:4 (1955), p. 245.

⁶ The complete charter is presented on-line by the RI Secretary of State at: <http://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.

⁷ For more information about the Triangular Trade see Stanley Lemons, “[Rhode Island and the Slave Trade](#),” *Rhode Island History*, 60:4 (2002), 95-104.

⁸ Nick Bunker, [An Empire on the Edge](#) (London: Random House, 2014), 49.

⁹ John Concannon, “[The HMS Gaspee Prior to 1772 — “Better Here than in Philadelphia...”](#)”, *Gaspee Virtual Archives*, <http://gaspee.org>. (Last revised 5/2013).

¹⁰ Samuel W. Bryant, “[Rhode Island Justice — 1772 Vintage](#)”, *Rhode Island History*, 26:3, (1967), 65-71.

¹¹ It must be noted that John Brown also took part in, and defended the detestable slave trade, however his own business ventures at the time were usually more indirectly related, *e.g.*, distillery operations. As stated in a recent [Providence Journal](#) editorial of October 11, 2017, p.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.”

¹² Moses Brown. "Diary. Journal of voyage to Philadelphia, 1760". RI Historical Society Library. Moses Brown's papers (Misc. MSS. I, 8). SS, Series II: Subject Files, Box 3, folder 62. I am indebted to the late Gaspee historical researcher [Leonard Bucklin, Esq.](#) for rediscovering this passage.

¹³ 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 just north of Gaspee Point.

June 9th, 1772 to June 10th, 1772 Local Standard Time

Date/Day	High Tide/Ht.	Low Tide/Ht.	Moonset	Moon Phase
06/09/1772 Tuesday	2:16 pm 5.1 ft.	8:03 pm 0.6 ft	12:47 am	Waxing gibbous 63%
06/10/1772 Wednesday	2:39 am 4.5 ft.	8:07 am 0.2 ft		

Here, we consulted the Tide Graph app < <http://www.tidegraph.com> > and confirmed this tide data with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration < <https://tidesandcurrents.noaa.gov> >. Moon data was confirmed using data from US Naval Observatory Astronomical Applications Department < <http://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 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 (personal e-mail to the

author). 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 4 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 that can be analyzed using such data as presented here.

¹⁴ Personal communication to the author (2017) by David C. Lavery, Right Worshipful Grand Historian, [Masonic Grand Lodge of Rhode Island](#), *et al.* that the logbook of the St. John's Masonic Lodge in Providence contained an entry to the effect that the meeting that night of June 9th, 1772 had been cancelled due to 'pressing business' in Providence. Unfortunately, the records were severely damaged, perhaps by the Great Gale of 1815 or other calamity after the lodge moved to what is now the Market House in central Providence.

¹⁵ 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).

¹⁶ Ephraim Bowen, in his account of the incident, stated that when the *Gaspee* ran aground around 3 pm, 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 <http://gaspee.org/Bowen.html>.

¹⁷ As to the moonlight present, Rhode Island Deputy Governor Darius Sessions testified that while the moon had shone very brightly at 9 pm, his later deposition of the *Gaspee* crewmen affirmed that by the time of the initial attack at around 12:45 am the moon had just set and it was dark. Samuel W. Bryant, ["HMS *Gaspee* —The Court Martial"](#), *Rhode Island History*, 23:3, (1966), 65-72.

¹⁸ Adam Blumenthal, personal e-mail to the author, March 2017. Mr. Blumenthal is the Virtual Reality Artist in Residence at the Granoff Center of the Creative Arts at Brown University. He is currently developing a [Virtual Reality experience on the Gaspee Affair](#).

¹⁹ 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.

²⁰ 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 29th, 2015).

²¹ "[The Destruction of the Gaspee](#)", *Saturday Evening Post*, August 22, 1829. VIII: 421. This is a fine example of the gentility of early 19th 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."

²² Wilfred H. Munro, *The History of Bristol, RI--The Story of Mount Hope Lands*. (Providence, 1860). See excerpted Gaspee Song at: <http://www.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.

²³ William R. Staples, [The Documentary History of the Destruction of the Gaspee](#). (Providence: Knowles, Rose & Anthony, 1845). See further discussion at: <http://www.gaspee.org/AaronBriggs.htm>.

²⁴ The Sons of Liberty have been long a victim of identity theft. Even during the 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 within Rhode Island, several web sites usurp 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.

²⁵ Jordan Pellerito, "Looking for Lafayette" in *Conversations at the Washington Library*, podcast, July, 29, 2019.

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ "Original Deed of the Newport (RI) Liberty Tree", *The Historical Magazine, and Notes and Queries Concerning the Antiquities, History and Biography of America*. IV: 2, (Morrisania, NY , Henry B. Dawson, 1868), 91.

²⁸ David S. Lovejoy, *Rhode Island Politics and the American Revolution, 1760-1776*. (Providence: Brown University Press, 1969), 120-121.

²⁹ *American Military History Podcast*, Episode 02: "Boston Massacre Fallout, Gaspee Affair, and the Boston Tea Party", Jul 15, 2015, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ew7WwZfU-0&t=627s>.

³⁰ As republished news from London in the *Virginia Gazette*, October 15, 1772, page 1, column 1.

³¹ Schlesinger, "[Political Mobs and the American Revolution](#)", p. 245.

³² [Darius Sessions et al. to Samuel Adams](#), December 25, 1772. S. A. Wells, *Samuel Adams and the American Revolution*, Vol. I., 363-365 and 370-371.

³³ "RI Deputy Governor Darius Sessions (1717-1809)", *Gaspee Virtual Archives* at <http://gaspee.org/SessionsBio.htm>. (Last revised 7/2009).

³⁴ This according to Ezra Stiles in his diary entry for 20 Jan 1773 and his letter to Elihu Spencer of 16 Feb 1773, in [*The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*](#), ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1901), 1:337, 349.

³⁵ “Chief Justice John Cole (1715-1777)”, *Gaspee Virtual Archives* at: <http://gaspee.org/JohnColeEsq.htm>. (Last revised 7/2009).

³⁶ We also have some hard evidence (*sic*) that the Sons of Liberty were directly involved in the raid on the *Gaspee*. The historical marker c1891 for the original site of the Sabin Tavern reads as follows:

"SONS OF LIBERTY" ---

UPON THIS CORNER STOOD THE SABIN TAVERN IN WHICH ON
THE EVENING OF JUNE 9TH 1772 THE PARTY MET AND
ORGANIZED TO DESTROY H.R.M SCHOONER GASPEE IN THE
DESTRUCTION OF WHICH WAS SHED THE FIRST BLOOD IN THE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION

Many elder statesmen alive at the time of the demolition of the Sabin Tavern undoubtedly knew some of men who participated in the raid; the last survivor was Col. Ephraim Bowen who died in 1841. It therefore seems logical that the plaque truly acknowledges the Sons of Liberty as having had a hand in the plot to destroy the *Gaspee*.

³⁷ John C. Miller, [*Origins of the American Revolution*](#). (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1943), 327, 328.

³⁸ Harris, John, *American Rebels*. Boston: 1974, p7.

³⁹ Staples, [*The Documentary History of the Destruction of the Gaspee*](#), 3.

⁴⁰ [*Ibid*](#), 6.

⁴¹ [*Ibid*](#), 7.

⁴² [*Ibid*](#), 132.

⁴³ 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 American Centennial. But sadly, Rhode Island had completely forgotten to acknowledge the earlier 1872 centennial of the burning of the *Gaspee*. *Chicago Tribune*, April 23, 1875, p4, col. 5.

⁴⁴ [From John Adams to Hezekiah Niles](#), 13 February 1818. Adams Papers, *Founders Online*, National Archive.