

Annals of the Town of Providence...[excerpted]

By William R. Staples

Collections of the Rhode Island Historical Society, Volume 5, (Providence: Knowles and Vose. 1843.) pp. 230-231.

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Editorial note — *At least one writer on the Gaspee Affair has questioned whether there was any boat being chased by the Gaspee when it went aground in 1772. It is important to note that John Howland who had been present when the boats left Providence to attack the Gaspee in June 1772, was past RIHS president and on the Publications Committee of this issue of the Collections. While likely a retelling of Ephraim Bowen's most famous account of the attack on the Gaspee, as a Veteran soldier of the Revolution and pre-eminent RI historian of his time we are convinced that John Howland would not allow untruths to be told in this publication.*

In the spring of 1772, the armed schooner Gaspee, commanded by Lieutenant William Duddingston, arrived in Narragansett Bay, to aid in enforcing the revenue laws. These laws had never been much respected in this colony; of course, the visit of this vessel, on such an errand, was far from being acceptable to the inhabitants, especially as her commander seemed inclined strictly to discharge his duty. Difficulties soon arose between the governor of the colony and Lieutenant Duddingston, in relation to their several duties; the effect of which, was, to make the latter still more punctilious and energetic in relation to the revenue laws. He would not allow even the river packets to pass up to Providence, without bringing them to; and, in some instances, he disregarded the very laws he came to execute. On the 8th of June, the sloop Hannah, Captain Benjamin Lindsey, touched at Newport, on her way from New-York to Providence, and reported her cargo to the custom house, then the only one in the colony. On the day following, she started on her way up the river. The Gaspee followed her. Captain Lindsey crowded sail to escape, and knowing well the channel, crossed Namquit Point, where there was water enough for the Hannah, but not enough for the Gaspee. The Gaspee followed him and ran aground on the point. The Hannah pursued her course to Providence, and on her arrival, Capt. Lindsey gave notice of the situation in which he left the Gaspee. Namquit is about six miles below Providence, on the west shore. In the evening of the same day, eight long boats, filled with ship masters and merchants, citizens of Providence, of high respectability, boarded the Gaspee, took out her crew and landed them at Pawtuxet, and set the vessel on fire. On approaching the Gaspee, the Lieutenant discharged his pistols at them, and, in return, was wounded by a musket ball, in the left groin. The vessel was wholly destroyed. The boats returned to Providence before morning.

As soon as Gov. Wanton became informed of this transaction, he issued his proclamation, offering a reward of £100, for the discovery of any person engaged in it. After taking affidavits in relation to it, he transmitted an account of the whole affair, and of the measures he had pursued in relation to it, to the British government. They issued a proclamation, offering a reward of £500, for the discovery of any person engaged in it, and £500, additional, for the discovery of the "captain" of the enterprize, or "the sheriff of the county of Kent," which last title was assumed on the occasion, by one of the most active among the assailants. Subsequently, they appointed a special court of commissioners to inquire into the matter. They met at Newport. But neither rewards nor judicial investigation, led to any discovery of the perpetrators of the deed. Notwithstanding so many were personally engaged in the transaction, that they were called together by beat of drum through the streets, that they met at Sabin's tavern, then one of the public houses more frequented than any other in the town, that they embarked in their boats early in the evening, and without disguise of any kind, no person could be found base enough to betray them. John Brown, well known as one of the most enterprising and wealthy merchants in New-England, took an active part in this affair, if he did not originate it. Abraham Whipple, afterward a captain in the continental navy, had the command of the squadron. The last survivor of the company was Ephraim Bowen. He died in 1840.

Here was the first open and armed opposition to the forces of his majesty, and here the first blood shed in the revolutionary struggle. A Providence man fired the first gun, and at a company of Providence men was the first ball discharged in that contest.