

Molasses to Muskets — Rhode Island 1763-1775

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Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Britain's policies toward its American colonies were based on the concept of mercantilism. This political and economic philosophy presumed that the colonies existed in subordinate status solely for England's betterment. Fortunately for America, these mercantilistic doctrines were implemented only imperfectly. There was a wide gap between London's mercantilist legislation and the practical ways colonists used to evade it. So with the end of the great war for empire in 1763, many English leaders believed the time was right to put theory into practice and reorganize the ineffectual colonial system. Legislation of 1760s and 1770s was often designed "not simply as a solution to problems of imperial defense or finance but also as a means to achieve the final and effective subordination of the commercial interests of the Americans to the requirements of the Mother Country," Reaction in Rhode Island to this rejuvenated mercantilism would lead to spirited protest and ultimately to revolution.[1]

Rhode Island's economy and traditionally independent nature would be seriously challenged by attempts to enforce British legislation. Traits of particularism, individualism and independent action which began in the 1630s were reinforced by the charter of 1663. This document incorporated the colony and gave Rhode Islanders the right "to hold forth a livelie experiment" in civil government "with a Full libertie in religious concernements"; thus they were allowed and — in certain respects — encouraged towards self-government. Governor and company were granted all powers of government which "bee not contrary and repugnant unto, butt, as neare as may bee, agreeable to the lawes of this our realme of England, considering the nature and constitutione of the place and people there"; and the inhabitants of the colony were to have the same privileges, liberties and rights "as if they, and every of them, were borne within the realme of England." in essence this charter seemed to insure a future of independent activity on the part of Rhode Islanders.[2]

The economy of eighteenth-century Rhode Island was oriented toward the sea. Excellent harbor facilities at Newport and Providence provided bases for increased commerce. Unfortunately, lack of a developed hinterland — from which raw materials could be drawn and in which manufactured products could be sold — caused Rhode Islanders to be ever more dependent upon a 'carrying' maritime trade. From 1700 on, commerce increased, especially from Newport, where trading was done with most mainland colonies and with Madeira, Surinam, and West Indies. By 1731 the colony had even established direct trade with Holland, the Mediterranean, and England. In 1740 vessels from Newport and Providence for foreign ports had grown to one hundred and twenty, and by 1763 over five hundred and thirty-four ships from Newport alone were involved in overseas and coastal trade.[3]

Rhode Island then in 1763 was an important trading and shipping center. Seed, oil, flax, horses, cheese, and lumber from Rhode Island were limited in quantity; but the addition of fish, flour, and beef from other colonies served merchants well in their dealings with ever-growing West Indian trade. Molasses was the single most important product taken aboard in the islands and after proper distillation in the colony became rum. Rhode islanders used molasses and rum to help pay off their debts in England, to purchase African slaves, and to buy products of other colonies for consumption and export. When the Grenville ministry in 1763 indicated its desire to resuscitate and enforce the Navigation Acts, which colonists had so successfully ignored — particularly the Molasses Act of 1733 — it could be sure of strong protest from the Narragansett Bay colony.[4]

In 1764 the British government did adopt a revised version of the Molasses Act which threatened to ruin the colony's economy. Rhode Islanders desperately needed molasses imported from the foreign-controlled West Indies because British islands could not supply enough, and the new three pence per gallon duty on foreign molasses, if enforced, would not allow merchants a profit. Predictably, the General Assembly sent its complaints about this bill to the king, to no avail.[5]

Although this "Sugar Act" posed a severe problem to Rhode Island commerce, colonists soon devised methods to get around it. Freemen controlled government and courts and thereby helped to thwart enforcement of the act. Smuggling, tax evasion and tying up court cases for years led to effective control over officers of the king and successful defiance of Parliament's authority. Rhode Islanders were determined to continue their independent ways.[6]

Grenville's program for exacting revenue from American colonies reached its height on March 22, 1765, when royal approval was given to the Stamp Act. By the terms of this act, stamps were to be placed on all decisions of civil courts, licenses of various kinds, bonds, deeds, pamphlets, almanacs and newspapers as well as many other articles and documents. In addition to these taxes, which in several cases were very high, Parliament also provided for possible transgressions. Heavy fines and penalties were to be meted out by colonial vice-admiralty courts to anyone who violated the act.[7]

Rhode Island looked on this tax as an infringement of its traditional rights and liberties. On August 7, 1765, a special town meeting was called in Providence for the purpose of expressing the town's dissatisfaction with the act. At this meeting a committee made up of Stephen Hopkins, John Brown and others was appointed for the purpose of drafting instructions to the town's delegates in the General Assembly. Six days later the instructions and resolutions which the committee reported were unanimously accepted. For the most part, these resolutions would soon be espoused with slight modification and addition by the General Assembly.[8]

In Providence, reaction against the Stamp Act was fairly calm and orderly but the attitude of the people of Newport was quite the opposite. Late in August riotous behavior and mob violence were directed against several persons and their property. Among them were stamp distributor Augustus Johnston, both Dr. Thomas Moffat and Martin Howard, who were deeply resented because of publicly expressed affection for the crown and alleged writings in support of the Stamp Act. For two days the town was in turmoil. Johnston, Howard, Moffat and a few others noted for their loyalty to the king's government retreated to the harbor and safety of British man-of-war *Cygnets*. The turbulence finally quieted down. Augustus Johnston returned to town and resigned his post, but Moffat and Howard elected to leave and set sail for England.[9]

Rhode Islanders expressed dissatisfaction with the Stamp Act in ways other than mob activity. In September 1765 the General Assembly met in East Greenwich and added its voice to protests against the act. First of all, the Assembly voted to send Metcalf Bowler and Henry Ward to the upcoming conference in New York — the Stamp Act Congress. These two men were given detailed instructions and the power to cast the colony's support for any measures which would bring about relief from the accursed act.

Next the Assembly adopted a series of resolutions similar to those Patrick Henry had proposed to the Virginia House of Burgesses in May. These Rhode Island resolves were six in number. The first two declared that the people of the colony had the same rights and privileges as the natural born citizens of Great Britain. Number three stated that they had always been "governed by their own Assembly, in the article of taxes and internal police." In the fourth resolve they stated that only the General Assembly could levy imposts and taxes on the colony, and for any other power to do so would be unconstitutional and have "a manifest tendency to destroy the liberties of the people of this colony." The fifth resolution, one which had not been accepted in Virginia, declared that Rhode Islanders were "not bound to yield obedience to any law or ordinance designed to impose any internal taxation whatsoever upon them," unless the act were levied by their own Assembly. Finally, all colony officials were directed to continue as though the new act had never been passed, and the Assembly would guarantee indemnity and support. In other words, the Stamp Act would not be binding on Rhode Islanders despite what the Crown had ordered.[10]

When time came for the Stamp Act to go into effect, inhabitants of Rhode Island ignored it. The actions of Governor Ward were indicative of general feeling throughout the colony. In December he received from the lords of the treasury a letter of instructions with regard to the new act. The letter requested him to give his aid and assistance to the distributor of the stamps and to see that the stamp master "appoint under Distributors in every proper Town and place" in the colony. Finally, he was asked to "be very attentive to the Detection of any Frauds which may arise." [11]

Governor Ward answered the letter as soon as he was assured that the stamp master had relinquished his office. With that, he informed the lords commissioners of the treasury that stamp distributor, Augustus Johnston, had resigned and then explained that people were so against the act "that no Person I imagine will undertake to execute that Office." Also, he declared that continued operation of the act "would be attended with swift & inevitable Ruin to the Government" of Rhode Island. This letter is indicative of the attitude of Rhode Islanders as well as of the character of Samuel Ward — a colonial governor who refused to take the required oath for executing the Stamp Act.[12]

Rhode Island — "the licentious republic" — had acted accordingly during the Stamp Act controversy. The "outcast of New England" had in some instances led the way in gaining repeal of that hated act in 1766. Many of the arguments and methods used against British governmental authority which were first attempted in the 1760s would come to the aid of the colony in later disputes with the Crown. Rhode Island would continue to be a thorn in the side of the home government.

It was not long before Parliament was again attempting to raise money from the colonists. The so called Townshend duties on paper, glass, paint, lead, and tea went into effect in 1767 and the General Assembly accordingly sent its protest to the king. As usual, the petition emphasized the rights of the colony granted by the 1663 charter. The Assembly denied Parliament's authority to tax and said it was "an infringement of those rights and privileges derived to us from nature, and from the British constitution, and confirmed by our charter, and the uninterrupted enjoyment of them for more than a century past." [13]

It would take more than petitions based on constitutional principles before the Townshend duties were repealed. Colonists realized from previous experience that economic pressures worked best in winning Parliament to their way of thinking. Non-importation agreements were needed before the duties were abrogated. From 1768 to 1770 non-importation agreements were established throughout the colonies and many of the merchants around Narragansett Bay reluctantly obeyed. In 1770 when all the levies, except on tea, were removed, effective non-importation broke down. Business had been hurt enough, and merchants of Rhode Island were quick to join in resumption of trade with the mother country.[14]

After 1770 there was a period of relative calm in the colonies. Business adapted itself to Parliament's regulations and most colonists attempted to establish a satisfactory relationship with the British government, but in Rhode Island things were different. Rhode Islanders had their own methods for dealing with the Crown and its officers.

In March 1772 the commissioners of customs dispatched the armed schooner *Gaspee* to Narragansett Bay. Its purpose was to prevent violations of revenue laws and to put a halt to the illicit trade so successfully carried on in the colony of Rhode Island. The overzealous activity of the *Gaspee's* commander, Lieutenant William Dudingston — in stopping everything afloat under the pretense of enforcing the acts of trade — quickly angered many people.[15]

On June 9, 1772, it was learned that the *Gaspee* had run aground while chasing the sloop *Hannah* up the Providence River. That night John Brown and others from Providence attacked the schooner, wounded its commander and then destroyed the ship by fire.

As a result of this deed, the king established a committee of inquiry to look into the *Gaspee* affair. The powers of this commission were very broad. It could summon anyone before it and even send persons involved in the incident to England for trial. Committee members were authorized to apply to General Gage and Admiral Montagu at Boston for military support and protection if they thought that necessary.

Here was a direct threat to Rhode Island's traditional independence. The accomplishments of the committee, however, were negligible. Allegedly, no one in the colony recognized or knew of any of the members of the raiding party, and the events of the night on which the *Gaspee* was destroyed drew a complete blank from the colonials. Rhode Islanders would give no aid to any outside force which threatened their liberties. The King's commission was significant in that it gave rise to the establishment of legislative committee's of correspondence, and to the adoption by many colonial assemblies of resolutions which were to move the colonies one step nearer to revolution. Once again Rhode Island was in the forefront of independent action.[16]

From 1773 on, Parliament continued with its string of unbroken blunders. Tea Act, so-called "Coercive Acts" designed to punish Massachusetts Bay, and Quebec Act establishing new controls over western lands — all appeared as threats to the American colonies. It is not surprising then that Rhode Island would be willing to send its two most distinguished citizens — Samuel Ward and Stephen Hopkins — to the first meeting of the Continental Congress. The Revolution was merely waiting for Lexington and Concord.[17]

Throughout 1760s and 1770s Rhode Islanders reacted strongly against attempts of the British government to intensify control over the colonies. New mercantilist legislation appeared to curtail Rhode Island's liberal and independent "charter privileges." Even local politics were threatened. Internal political factionalism had been going on since 1757 when Rhode Island was divided between Newport based followers of Henry Ward and the Providence clique led by Stephen Hopkins. As a result of this struggle, a politically mature population of freemen conducted its own affairs undisturbed by authority of Parliament. True, the Ward-Hopkins controversy had ended with a Hopkins victory by 1770, but the populace feared that any encroachment by England was potentially dangerous. Legislation and taxation by any outside power had to be stopped. Therefore, when Rhode Island revolted it did so to preserve its liberal "charter privileges," its local economy and politics, and its traditionally independent nature.[18]

Notes:

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1. Thomas C. Barrow, "Background to Grenville Program, 1757- 1763," *William and Mary Quarterly* 22:1 (January 1965) 104; "Project for Imperial Reform: Hints Respecting Settlement for our American Provinces, 1763," *William and Mary Quarterly* 24:1 (January 1967) 108-126.

2 John Russell Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony or Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England*. 10v. (Providence, 1856-1865).

3. James B. Hedges. *Browns of Providence Plantations: Colonial Years* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952) xiv-xv. Frank Greene Bates. *Rhode Island and Formation of the Union* (New York, Macmillan, 1898) 31-32.

4. "Remonstrance of the Colony of Rhode Island to the Lords Commissioners of Trade and Plantations," Bartlett 6:378-383.

5. General Assembly petition complaining about this "Sugar Act" and the forthcoming stamp tax, Bartlett 6:414-416.

6. David S. Lovejoy, *Rhode Island Politics and the American Revolution: 1760-1776*. (Providence: Brown University Press, 1958) ch 2.

7 Bernhard Knollenberg, *Origin of the Anirriian Revolution, 1759-1766* (New York: Macmillan, 1960) 226. Arthur Meier Schlesinger, *Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution: 1763-1776*. (New York: Columbia University, 1918) 65.

8. William R. Staples. *Annals of the Town of Providence*. (Providence: 1843) 210-214.

9. *Newport Mercury*, September 2.1765, p.3. Edward S. Morgan and Helen M. Morgan, *Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953) 144-148.

10. Bartlett 6:449-452.

11. Charles Lowndes to Stephen Hopkins, Whitehall, September 14, 1765, Letters to the Governor of Rhode Island, v. 7, p.32. RI Archives. It is interesting to note that Lowndes did not know that Samuel Ward had been Governor since May 1765.

12. Samuel Ward, Newport, December 26, 1765, Letters from the Governor of Rhode Island, v 1, p159, RI Archives. Samuel Green Arnold, *History of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations*, v.2 (New York, 1860) 263.

13. Bartlett 6:560.

14. Lovejoy 142-147.

15. Bartlett 7:57-192. Cohen. "When They Burned the Gaspee." *Providence Sunday Journal*, June 4, 1972 ("Rhode Islander," 19-22).

16. Merrill Jensen, *Founding of a Nation: A History of the American Revolution, 1763-1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) 424-433.

17. Bartlett 7:246-247.

18. Lovejoy, 14, 18, 90, 127, 194. For further evidence concerning importance of charter rights as a cause for revolution see Portsmouth Town Meeting, October 4, 1784, Town Meetings. v. 1, p. 384, Town Clerk's office.