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Horatio B. Knox

ode Island Educational Circulars

HISTORICAL SERIES—III

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SUGGESTIONS TO TEACHERS.

In primary grades "The Destruction of the 'Gaspee'" should be told by the teacher, and should be simplified and abridged to make the story intelligible to little people and the movement rapid. Three scenes in the drama are peculiarly fitted to appeal to the imagination of the children: the race up the bay, the excited twilight gathering on the "town street," and the actual destruction of the "Gaspee." The story should be treated as a local hero tale, in which a few brave men dared, for love of freedom, to incur the wrath of a great king. Avoid every suggestion of controversy, and assume as a matter of course that the action of our fathers was justified by the equities of the case.

In the grammar grades submit the whole story to the children with its actual historical setting. On the face of it the destruction of the "Gaspee" is simply a case of mob violence against lawful authority, which narrowly missed ending in murder. The action of the Providence men needs justification. Such an act can be justified only by showing that the actors were suffering under intolerable wrongs, and that every lawful means of redress had been exhausted.

If the story of the "Gaspee," therefore, is to be an inspiration to patriotic devotion and self-sacrifice, and not a suggestion to lawlessness, the teacher must show that our fathers adopted the only means left to freemen to vindicate their right to remain free.

Help to this end may be found in some of the general statements of the Declaration of Independence, as far as they apply to local conditions. Official papers and correspondence, such as may be found in the early pages of Vol. VII, Rhode Island Colonial Records,

are also helpful. Added dignity also can be given to the "Gaspee" incident by pointing out the fact that it does not stand as an isolated case, a mere ebullition of local frenzy, but is the opening scene in a great drama which culminated in the birth of a great nation. Thus justified and thus related to our national struggle for freedom, the destruction of the "Gaspee" becomes a story well calculated to nurture in the youth of to-day the heroic virtues of the fathers.

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE GASPEE.

[WRITTEN EXPRESSLY FOR THE SCHOOL CHILDREN OF RHODE ISLAND.]

It was just after sunset on the evening of June 9, 1772, on the main street of what was then the village of Providence, the North and South Main street of the city of to-day.

The shopkeepers were just closing their shops; in front of the quaint colonial houses that bordered the street, groups of people were exchanging the friendly gossip of the little town; the children were having their final romp under the soft summer twilight before going early to bed, when something happened.

Up at the north end of the long street a man suddenly appeared, beating a drum, and ever as he marched gathering around him an increasing throng of curious and expectant people. Once in a while the throbbing drum would quiet for an instant, and in the hush the drummer would make proclamation to the listening crowd. Then on he marched, by the Roger Williams church, past the "great bridge" and along the wharves west of South Main street. Every repetition of his proclamation increased the excitement. Men consulted in eager, what seemed like angry, whispers, then with hot words and menacing gestures, singly and in groups, hurried away in various directions. Presently they re-appeared, some of them apparently having made slight attempts at disguise, some of them with the butts of horse pistols protruding from the pockets of their coats, others armed with flintlock muskets and fowling pieces; but all of them in hot haste making for a certain well-known tavern at the corner of what is now Planet and South Main streets. And still through the gathering shadows of evening throbbed the rat-tat-

tat of that stirring drum. And this is what the drum was saying: "The 'Gaspee' has run aground on Namquit Point, and can not float before three o'clock to-morrow morning. Those persons who feel disposed to go and destroy that troublesome vessel are invited to repair this evening to Mr. James Sabin's house."

But what was the "Gaspee," and what had she done that the peaceful citizens of our village were so easily roused to fury at the mention of her name, and marshalled for her destruction? This question invites the telling of one of the most stirring tales of Revolutionary times.

During more than one hundred years of its early existence Rhode Island had no quarrel with the mother country. For this happy state of things there were several good causes. In the first place, for many years we were but a handful of scattered folk down here in the wilderness, of whom king and parliament knew little, and with whom they could have no possible cause of quarrel. Our trouble was nearer home; Massachusetts and Connecticut, our nearest neighbors, worried us a good deal, claiming, as each did, a large part of our land, which claim they were constantly threatening to enforce. In our weakness we looked for help, and found that really our only possible protector was the king; for, however little the king might know or care about us, Massachusetts, which bothered us so much, was also a source of great vexation to His Majesty. So really, I suppose, when we attracted the king's attention, he was inclined to help us less for our own sake than because of the enemies which we had. At any rate, from that merry monarch, Charles II, John Clarke of Newport, minister and physician, secured for us that fine old charter under which we entered upon our career as the "Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England in America," and under which we lived for almost 200 years.

From the king's point of view, perhaps the giving of that charter was not a very wise thing to do. You see it set us up in almost complete independence at a very early age. We were born, we grew

up, we bought, we sold, we elected general courts and governors and judges; we made and unmade laws, we enjoyed "full liberty in religious concernments," we built ships and traded with our neighbors and foreign countries, we laid and collected our own taxes, and expended the money as we pleased, and for generations quite forgot that across the seas there lived a long-armed king and a meddlesome parliament who might, if they chose, assert a right to interfere in our affairs. So when interference did come we were surprised, then angry, then even more ready to fight than those coloines which had been always quarrelling with the home government.

And how did interference come?

O, that's an old story. Every school boy and girl knows about the Stamp Act, and the tax on tea, and the Sugar Act. Well, we Rhode Islanders did about what they did up in Massachusetts. We hung in effigy Johnson, the stamp distributor, and his helpers, Moffat and Howard. We pillaged their houses and made them promise to be good Rhode Island patriots forever and a day. We burned the tea in Market square, Providence, instead of brewing it in the harbor; we made speeches and passed resolutions, and in general conducted ourselves as freemen ought when their dearest privileges are attacked. Every child of Rhode Island has reason to be proud of his Revolutionary ancestors. They undoubtedly helped furnish King George III and his counsellors many unhappy half-hours.

You see by the year 1763 Rhode Island had grown to be a very busy little colony, and we all naturally took to the water, because we had this beautiful Narragansett Bay reaching its long arms up so far from the ocean and tempting us to sea. In that year Rhode Island citizens owned more than 500 sail. In navigating these craft there were employed more than 2,200 seamen. We wanted to sail to Cuba, Hayti, and Porto Rico and bring home sugar and molasses; we wanted to visit Europe, Africa, and even Asia, to engage in profitable trade; we wanted to send our ships to New York, Philadelphia and Chesapeake Bay, just as we do to-day. But the king's government had passed laws forbidding us doing most of these things.

Many of these laws had been in existence a hundred years, only they had not been strictly enforced; custom-house officers had been negligent, smuggling had been easy, and so we had sailed and traded pretty much as we liked, regardless of the law. In 1763, however, the king and his ministers suddenly resolved that the laws must be obeyed, and men and ships were sent over to enforce them. This instantly bred trouble along all the Narragansett shores. The sight of armed ships patrolling the waters of our bay, chasing and overhauling our craft, big and little, and insolently seizing goods which were being brought to Rhode Island wharves in Rhode Island ships, was too much for Rhode Island loyalty. Trouble began at once.

As early as 1764 His Majesty's ship "St. John" made herself so unpopular that the citizens of Newport planned her destruction. She was saved by the arrival of a second ship, the "Squirrel." In the same year the frigate "Maidstone" so angered the people that 500 furious Newporters seized her long boats, lying at the wharf and later, amidst howls of derision, burned them on the common in front of the courthouse.

Five years later the armed sloop "Liberty" got herself even more heartily hated because of her unnecessary zeal and insolence, and so, one night, was cut adrift, ran aground, and was later scuttled and burnt by angry citizens of Newport.

You see our forefathers had an idea that, according to the charter given to us by King Charles, neither king nor parliament had any right thus to interfere with our local affairs, and so they believed they were doing no wrong to resist in every way they could. I suspect they were right on both points, but they were never able to persuade George III to agree with them, and the trouble went on.

Thus far all the chances for action and all the glory had been Newport's. But Providence was soon to have her opportunity; and when it came her citizens showed themselves quite as ready as the people of Newport to bravely resist what they believed to be injustice and wrong.

In March, 1712, there appeared in our bay the armed schooner "Gaspee," commanded by Lieut. William Duddingston. Now this brave lieutenant seems to have come to Rhode Island with the idea that we were all either pirates or smugglers. He was on fire, too, with a zeal for His Majesty's service which in the end proved of little service to his royal master.

Under his command the "Gaspee" began the fiercest sort of a campaign. She became an unbearable nuisance. According to an old account that has come down to us, Lieut. Duddingston "stopped all vessels, including small market boats," plying between the different towns along the bay, "without showing his authority for doing so; and even sent the property he had illegally seized to Boston for trial, contrary to act of parliament which required such trials to be held in the colony where the seizures were made." Among the articles thus seized were twelve hogsheads of rum belonging to Nathaniel Greene, Jr., who, we Rhode Islanders like to believe, proved himself in later years the greatest general of the Revolution except only Washington. Our good governor, Wanton, protested vigorously against such conduct, first to Lieut. Duddingston, then to Admiral Montague at Boston. He particularly asked by what right the king's officer thus conducted himself within a self-governing colony like Rhode Island. The governor got little satisfaction from Lieut. Duddingston, who only grew more and more saucy, and seemed never so happy as when he was dashing up and down the bay, firing shots across the bows of all the little craft he could overhaul, and turning our peaceful Narragansett into a place of terror. Neither did Admiral Montague's letter soothe very much the wounded feelings of the king's subjects in Rhode Island. Here are some of the things he said: "I shall report your insolent letters to my officer (Lieut. Duddingston), to His Majesty's secretary of state, and leave to them to determine what right you have to demand a sight of all orders I shall give to officers of my squadron; and I would advise you not to send your sheriff on board of the king's ship again on such ridiculous errands . . . I am also informed the people of New-

port 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."

The sweet spirit of the admiral, shown in this last gentle promise, brought small comfort to our vexed and worried sailors, shipowners, and traders.

Meanwhile, here was the "Gaspee" again, working her own sweet will, pouncing alike on the innocent and the guilty, and getting herself hated worse and worse every day.

Such was the state of things when, on June 9, 1772, the packet "Hannah," Capt. Benjamin Lindsey, left Newport for Providence. She had gotten a few miles up the bay when the "Gaspee" glided out from behind an island and fired a shot across her bow as a signal to heave to. Capt. Lindsey paid no attention to this flattering invitation, but with a good breeze went scudding away toward Providence.

The "Gaspee" was a smart little craft, but the "Hannah" had wings, and so led her enemy a pretty chase up the bay for twenty-five miles. Late in the afternoon, when off the long point of sand which runs out into the bay below the mouth of the Pawtuxet, then known as Namquit Point, Capt. Lindsey turned sharply toward the west. The "Gaspee" endeavored to cut across the shallow water on the point, and ran hard and fast aground. After this cute maneuver, the "Hannah," with a saucy little flirt of her sails, went frisking away to the north, and anchored in Providence harbor about sunset.

Lieut. Duddingston didn't dream of it, but the "Gaspee" had made her last voyage. Capt. Lindsey upon arriving in Providence hunted up Mr. John Brown, one of the leading citizens of the village at that time, and a member of a family honored and famous in Rhode Island from the days of Roger Williams till now. The two men instantly resolved that the "Gaspee" must be destroyed.

There was no time for a plot, no time for stealthy action, no time for inventing adequate disguises. The next tide would float their

enemy. It was now or never. Mr. Brown instantly ordered one of his shipmasters to collect eight of the largest dories in the harbor, to muffle the oars and rowlocks, and bring the boats to Fenner's wharf, directly opposite the "house of board and entertainment for gentlemen," kept by Mr. James Sabin, at the corner of what is now South Main and Planet streets. What followed we know from an account dated August 29, 1839, written by Col. Ephraim Bowen, the last survivor of the men who attacked the "Gaspee." That scene we have pictured at the beginning of our story.

It was no mob that came together that June evening to strike the first sturdy blow for American freedom; but the solid business men and good citizens of Providence. Here are some of the names: Capt. Abraham Whipple, chosen commander of the expedition. You may see his portrait, if you wish, at the Historical Rooms on Waterman street. Capt. John B. Hopkins, John Brown, who, two years before, had laid the corner-stone of University Hall, the first building of Brown University. Joseph Brown, his brother; Dr. John Mawney, Benjamin Dunn, Samuel Dunn, Benjamin Page, Joseph Bucklin, Joseph Tillinghast, Samuel H. Olney, Col. Ephraim Bowen.

And now it is ten o'clock, and long since dark, so you must see the rest of our story by your imagination. All the plans have been laid, and across the street from Mr. James Sabin's marches a band of silent, resolute men. At the quiet word of command they embark, call at "Captain Cook's wharf to take in staves and paving stones," then row silently on past Fox Point, struggle hard against the incoming tide around Field's Point, and from thence straight away toward their stranded victim.

It was a moonless night, and the assailants were close aboard. Capt. Whipple arranged his boats so as to approach directly upon the bow of the schooner, where she could not bring her cannon to bear upon them. And now they were paddling gently along within a stone's toss of the "Gaspee" when they were hailed with "Who comes there?" followed by the instant order to "stand off." Capt. Whipple, with several one-syllable words which we are not going to print,

roared out that he was the sheriff of Kent county and was come for the commander of that vessel, and was going to have him dead or alive. He closed with a sharp order for the men to spring to their oars. They sprang with a will. But by this time Duddingston was on deck, cutlass and pistol in hand, while several harmless shots were fired by his men. A return shot, fired by Joseph Bucklin, brought the lieutenant to the deck with a shattered arm and a bullet lodged in the groin. It was all over sooner than we can tell it. The boats were alongside, the men swarmed aboard, the crew of the "Gaspee" threw down their arms, and the first in a long series of daring and successful naval exploits in American history had been performed.

Dr. Mawney instantly applied his surgical skill to dressing the wounds of Lieut. Duddingston, and so skillfully, we are glad to say, that in a few weeks the officer completely recovered. Placing the wounded lieutenant and his crew in boats, Capt. Whipple and his men set them ashore on the Warwick side of the bay, and then, just as dawn was breaking, set fire to the "Gaspee" and rowed back to Providence, leaving her to burn to the water's edge and blow up.

Such is the story of the actual destruction of the "Gaspee." But something quite as interesting and remarkable remains to be told. You must remember that in the eye of the law these men of Providence were pirates, and the penalty for piracy is death. There is no doubt, either, but the king's government would have enforced the law, if any member of that expedition had been detected. And here is the really wonderful thing about the whole affair. The destroyers of the "Gaspee" were assembled in the public streets by the beating of a drum, they gathered at a public house to organize, they went forth without disguise, embarked from a public wharf, and when the deed was done, returned to town after daylight the following morning. Every detail of the affair must have been known to hundreds of people. Governor Wanton instantly offered a reward of $500 for information leading to the detection of the men who had done the deed. The king followed by offering $5,000 for the

betrayal of the leader of the expedition, and $2,500 for any one of "the common offenders." The king also appointed a commission of five men, surely faithful to him, who came to Rhode Island and for months tried by every means in their power to discover the destroyers of the "Gaspee." But none could be found within the limits of our State poor enough to be bribed, mean enough to be bought, or cowardly enough to be frightened into a betrayal of the brave men who struck the first blow in the great struggle for freedom, which had to be fought. And this I deem a more splendid thing, and a greater glory to the men of Rhode Island in 1772, than any deed of arms however daring and successful.

Nearly three years after the destruction of the "Gaspee," John Brown, the organizer of the expedition, came near meeting the penalty for his daring deed. One week after the battle of Lexington, in 1775, two flour ships, bound for Providence, were stopped by the "Rose," Captain James Wallace, and John Brown, the owner, found on board one of the ships, was detained and sent to General Gage at Boston to answer for his suspected connection with the "Gaspee" affair. Brown's friends may well have been apprehensive for his life. He was certainly guilty, and the result at Lexington probably had no tendency to season British justice with mercy. But it so happened that Moses Brown, John Brown's brother, had been kept in profound ignorance of his brother's rash conduct. So, believing his brother innocent, he set out for Boston, got through the lines somehow, saw Chief Justice Oliver and Admiral Graves, and so won their confidence by his evident honesty and sincerity that they accepted his assurances of John Brown's innocence and released him. The brothers returned to Providence mounted on one horse—John in the saddle and Moses on behind—and were welcomed with joyful demonstrations.

For many years after the Revolution four survivors of the "Gaspee" affair were conspicuous figures on all patriotic occasions in Providence, invariably appearing in Fourth of July parades. These four

men were Turpin Smith, Ephraim Bowen, Benjamin Page, John Mawney.

The banner which they carried, faded and torn, may still be seen in the collection of the Rhode Island Historical Society. There also may be seen a silver goblet, taken from the "Gaspee" by Abraham Whipple on the morning of June 10, 1772.

Perhaps we can close this account of the destruction of the "Gaspee" no more fittingly than by quoting in full a song descriptive of the deed, written by some lively patriot of the time:

SONG.

'Twas in the reign of George the Third,
Our public peace was much disturbed
By ships of war that came and laid
Within our ports to stop our trade.
Seventeen hundred and seventy-two,
In Newport harbor lay a crew,
That played the part of pirates there,
The sons of freemen could not bear.
Sometimes they weighed and gave them chase,
Such actions sure were very base.
No honest coaster could pass by
But what they would let some shot fly;
And did provoke, to high degree,
Those true born sons of liberty;
So that they could no longer bear
Those sons of Belial staying there.
But 'twas not long 'fore it fell out
That William Duddingston, so stout,
Commander of the "Gaspee" tender,
Which he has reason to remember,
Because, as people do assert,
He almost had his just desert,
Here on the tenth day of last June,
Betwixt the hours of twelve and one,
Did chase the sloop, called the "Hannah,"
Of whom one Lindsey was commander.

They dogged her up Providence Sound,
And there the rascal got aground.
The news of it flew that very day,
That they on Namquit Point did lay.
That night about half after ten
Some Narragansett Indian men,
Being sixty-four, if I remember,
Which made the stout coxcomb surrender;
Then set the men upon the land,
And burnt her up, we understand;
Which thing provoked the king so high
He said these men should surely die;
So if he could but find them out,
The hangman he'll employ, no doubt;
For he's declared, in his passion,
He'll have them tried a new fashion.
Now for to find these people out
King George has offered very stout;
One thousand pounds to find out one
That wounded William Duddingston.
One thousand more he says he'll spare,
For those who say they sheriffs were:
One thousand more there doth remain
For to find out the leader's name;
Likewise five hundred pounds per man
For any one of all the clan.
But let them try their utmost skill,
I'm apt to think he never will
Find out any of those hearts of gold,
Though he should offer fifty fold.

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