

The Gaspee Affair Was About the Business of Slavery

Every June, Rhode Islanders gather in Warwick for the weeklong Gaspee Days celebration featuring parades, a 5k race, the blessing of a fleet, and the ritual burning of a model British ship. The festivities commemorate the anniversary of colonial Rhode Islanders exploding the full-sized British vessel *HMS Gaspee* in June, 1772. The 18th century colonists had been rebelling against London's customs enforcement policies and took direct action to destroy the ship and shoot its captain. Though little discussed outside New England, the Gaspee Affair was the first bloodshed between American colonists and the British, and led directly to events culminating in the 1776 war. As the parade committee's trademarked phrase argues, the burning was "America's First Blow for Freedom."TM¹

Like many episodes of the Revolutionary period, the Gaspee Affair is remembered as the heroic action of patriots in the service of tearing down tyrannical British rule. Museums throughout the state reverently memorialize the event, proud of our contribution to national independence. The *Providence Journal, Motif*, other publications run yearly editorials on its importance.² The area where the burning took place is now called "Gaspee Point," countless businesses and streets claim the name, and Rhode Island's right wing lobbying organization goes by the name "Gaspee Project," presumably to claim the event's imagined rebellious, anti-elitist spirit.

Through all this praise, the Gaspee Affair's deep connections to the slave trade are rendered fully invisible. Articles occasionally note that *Gaspee* attackers like John Brown and Simeon Potter were slave traders, but the fact is presented as a side note, a small stain on the character of these otherwise freedom-loving men. A re-examination of the Gaspee Affair, though, suggests that preserving the slave economy was in fact the central issue motivating Brown, Potter and the rest of the attackers. These Rhode Islanders who burned the *Gaspee* were wealthy merchants who had made fortunes in the business of slavery, and were furious that British taxation was beginning to cut into their profits and power. In this context, the Gaspee raid emerges not as a heroic spark for freedom, but rather the self-interested violence of merchants protecting their personal economic and political power.

The Notorious Triangle

While New England's imagination places the full sin of slavery on the southern states, Rhode Island also built its 18th century economy on the business of slavery. Rhode Island's involvement began as a bilateral trade between the colony and the West Indies in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, where New Englanders sold their manufactured goods and raw materials to the slave labor sugar and tobacco plantations on islands like Antigua, Barbados, Cuba, and Jamaica. Rhode Island's own plantations and manufactories produced rum, dairy

products, horses, furniture, candles, and more all to outfit the Caribbean's import-dependent monocultural plantation systems. Without the lifeblood of this outfitting trade, the West Indies' plantation system would have collapsed.³

In 1698, London changed the rules of the slave trade when Parliament revoked the monopoly charter of the Royal Africa Company, thus allowing private merchants to enter the trade. Rhode Islanders enthusiastically got involved, and already from 1725 to 1735, Newport, RI traders sent 25 slave ships and transported 4,000 captives. By mid-century, Rhode Islanders were the most significant slave traders in North America, and Newport was the continent's largest slave trade point of departure. From 1751 to 1760, the colony's merchants transported 10,891 captive humans, compared with 3,675 moved by all the other colonies combined. That number increased to 18,062 from 1761-1770, and Rhode Island continued moving enslaved people well into the 19th century, even after the formal abolition of the transatlantic slave trade.⁴ The list of the top ten largest slave traders in US history is entirely Rhode Islanders, led by the infamous Bristol trader James DeWolf, who was Rhode Island's wealthiest man, and perhaps the second wealthiest man in the country⁵ Particularly given Rhode Island's small population—33,226 in 1750—the effect of such involvement in the trade on Rhode Island's economic and political development cannot be overstated.

To fuel the trade, Rhode Island's domestic industry became increasingly focused on distilling molasses into rum. The alcohol served as a currency in the slave trade on Africa's Windward and Gold Coasts, displacing the French brandy that had been popular in the 17th century. By 1764, Rhode Island held thirty rum distilleries, about one distillery for every 1500 people, including 18 in Newport alone. Rum became the colony's staple export, the backbone of the economy. When Rhode Islanders sold enslaved people to West Indian sugar plantations, they often exchanged them for molasses, which was then brought to Rhode Island's distilleries to be transformed into rum, which was then brought to West Africa to be traded for more enslaved people. The New England-Africa-West Indies systems became known as the triangle trade.

The intense economic gravity of the West Indies trade and the slave trade meant nearly every profit-driven enterprise in the colony was directly or indirectly complicit, from shipbuilders constructing the slave vessels, to rope makers making the boats' rigging, to tenant farmers growing onions to be fed to enslaved people on the middle passage. The totality of this activity formed what historian Christy Clark-Pujara calls the "business of slavery," and it was Rhode Island's economic lifeblood.⁶ The colonists themselves admitted as much: in their 1764 Remonstrance protesting the Sugar Act, Rhode Island's leaders wrote outright that "the distillery is the main hinge upon which the trade of the colony turns," and assert that the distilleries and associated businesses employed hundreds of people, employed two-thirds of Rhode Island's ships, and 2,200 sailors.⁷

The West Indies and trans-Atlantic trade, as well as the uncompensated labor of enslaved people in Rhode Island, created great fortunes and political power for a new class of merchants. The Wantons and Vernons in Newport, the DeWolfs in Bristol, and the Browns in Providence were among the families who established political and economic dominance in the colony via the business of slavery. These families were the wealthiest people in their respective cities, and they and their allies took political positions and held them for decades. The merchants held such power in the small colony that they took to flagrantly ignoring any rules or regulations, and Rhode Island became known as a hub of privateering, piracy, and smuggling.⁸

Rhode Island itself also had a significant population of enslaved people. Slave ships that unloaded most of their human cargo in the West Indies would also bring some number of captives back to Newport, Bristol, or Providence. By mid-century, some 10% of the population was enslaved, the highest percentage in all of New England. The first enslaved people in the state were Pequot, Wampanoag, and Narragansett peoples, though soon African captives became the largest group. Enslaved people labored in large numbers on south county plantations producing dairy products and horses for the West Indies trades, as well as in smaller numbers in households and in artisan shops throughout the state. Rhode Island imposed horrific violence and strict laws in an attempt to dominate the enslaved population.⁹

Enslaved people in Rhode Island survived and resisted enslavement in a number of ways, from maintaining community festivals such as Election Days, to winning freedom by fighting for the Patriots or escaping to the British during the war, to countless daily acts.¹⁰ Recently free Black Rhode Islanders also quickly took to organizing in the 18th century.¹¹ To give one of many examples, in 1780, free Black male Newporters founded the first Black mutual aid society in the United States, the Free African Union Society (FAUS), also known as the African Union Society (AUS). Members included prominent organizers such as Newport Gardner and Zingo Stevens. Their outward correspondences and internal meeting minutes thoroughly condemned slavery, racism, and the slave trade throughout the Atlantic world. FAUS members and their descendants would go on to form and lead other organizations throughout the 19th century, and helped lead to the city's abolition and school desegregation movements.¹²

The Gaspee Raiders

The leaders of the Gaspee raid, and nearly all of its participants, were those who had grown rich through this business of slavery. Eyewitness accounts of the Gaspee attack note the rebels “appeared rather above the common rank of mankind...withruffled shirts, and appeared as store-keepers, merchants, and masters of vessels.”¹³ A brief examination of the attackers biographies confirms that they were nearly all wealthy men who had made fortunes in the West Indies trade, the triangle trade, and the broader slave economy. A few of the men confirmed as attackers were John Brown, Abraham Whipple, Simeon Potter, Ephraim Bowen, and Joseph

Tillinghast, all wealthy and powerful members of the small colony's merchant elite.

John Brown had made his fortunes in a variety of exploits, including rum distilling, candle making, and slave trading. While his modern defenders quickly point out that he only directly oversaw a small number of slave voyages, he invested in many more, nearly all his enterprises were bound up in the business of slavery, and he personally owned enslaved people. He went on to become Rhode Island's most vocal defender of slavery and the slave trade, publicly fighting with his brother Moses over the issue, and working against abolition in various government posts.¹⁴

Simeon Potter was an infamous slave trader, privateer, and pirate, and owned at least 11 enslaved people, more than any other resident of Bristol, RI. He made fortunes in the West Indies and triangle trades, both directly and by pirating other ships. Potter's sister, Abigail Hazel Potter, married Marc Anthony DeWolf, who then gave birth to James DeWolf. Simeon Potter became a mentor to James, teaching him the intricacies of slave trading, including how to evade authorities cracking down on the trade, helping lead James and his family to become the largest slave traders in US history.¹⁵

Abraham Whipple was a ship captain working for the Brown brothers, trading rum, enslaved people, and other goods between the colony and the West Indies. He was also the brother-in-law to RI Supreme Court Justice, former colonial governor, and future Declaration of Independence signer Stephen Hopkins¹⁶ Joseph Tillinghast was heavily involved in the West Indies trade, primarily shipping to St Croix, and sometimes working directly for the Brown brothers. He owned multiple enslaved people, and operated two wharves in Providence where he sold rum and goods imported from the Caribbean.¹⁷ Ephraim Bowen grew wealthy via a large rum distillery he owned in Pawtuxet Village.¹⁸ Several other prominent Rhode Islanders with ties to the slave and rum trades, including Nathanael Greene and Esek Hopkins, also likely took part in the attack.

The Crown Clamps Down

With the end of the Seven Years' War, also known as the French and Indian War, in 1763, Britain succeeded in vanquishing the French and Spanish from most of eastern mainland North America. The outcome brought significant safety and stability to English settlers who had lived in fear of Spanish and French incursions, but it also put London into great debt, and the Crown began to focus on more seriously managing and taxing its colonies.¹⁹

Decades prior, Britain enacted the Molasses Act of 1733, which taxed molasses traded between British subjects and non-British islands, such as Spanish Hispaniola or French Martinique. The law should have deeply constrained the business of slavery, as the main

currency for New England traders was rum made of molasses obtained in the West Indies. But Rhode Island traders flagrantly evaded the laws, and continued to freely trade with Spanish, Dutch, and French colonies. The British, militarily occupied in spreading empire in south Asia and elsewhere, largely turned a blind eye.²⁰

In the 1760s, following the war, London began an intensified system of taxation in the colonies in order to pay its post-war debts. The Crown passed a set of new taxes, notably the Sugar Act of 1764, which attempted to update the Molasses Act by reducing the tax on molasses, but ramping up enforcement. The rum trade became seriously regulated for the first time, as British boats began navigating New England's shores, seizing and searching smugglers, and fining and confiscating boats.²¹

The new customs enforcement enraged Rhode Island's merchant elite. Stephen Hopkins, the 15 year governor of colonial Rhode Island who made his wealth in the West Indies trade, penned *Rights of the Colonies Examined*, one of the foundational documents of the revolution. Here, in condemning British taxation, he bluntly admits Rhode Island's heavy dependence on the business of slavery: "Putting an end to the importation of foreign molasses at the same time puts an end to all the costly distilleries in these colonies, and to the rum trade to the coast of Africa."²²

Hopkins goes on to repeatedly declare that any British taxation reduced the colonists to "slaves": "...those who are governed at the will of another, or of others, and whose property may be taken from them by taxes or otherwise without their own consent and against their will, are in the miserable condition of slaves."²³ Thus this future signer of the Declaration of Independence pressed the bizarre conclusion that London taxing colonists' involvement in the trade of literal enslaved people entailed the enslavement of colonists. The metaphor would be echoed by countless future American revolutionaries.

Fear of Abolition

The colonial ruling class was further angered by the growing belief that Great Britain was uniting with free and enslaved Indigenous and Black people, as well as Catholics and other groups consider outsiders, to limit White Protestant colonists' autonomy. White Protestant colonists felt themselves unique within the British empire, imagining themselves as British subjects with the same rights and privileges as any White man within England itself. Following the 7 Years' War, however, Britain shifted its policies, and began granting other subjects certain rights. The Proclamation Line of 1763 limited White expansion past a certain line, in a concession to Indigenous peoples whom Britain did not feel equipped to continue war with. The Crown also began debating giving Catholics in newly-conquered Canada some rights, which culminated in a full list of rights outlined in the Quebec Act of 1774. The Continental Congress

denounced the Act as "dangerous in an extreme degree to Protestant religion and to the civil rights and liberties of all America."²⁴

Most shocking to colonists, however, was the shifting imperial policy on slavery. Great Britain in reality had no interest in abolition, and in fact earned enormous sums off the slave trade and the slave plantations across its empire. But because of constant slave uprisings in the Caribbean and elsewhere, growing domestic protests, and self-interested imperial calculations, British administrators had been inching toward granting certain rights to enslaved people for some years.²⁵

The trends coalesced into a set of court cases leading to the landmark Somerset judgement—centered on the enslaved James Somerset's successful petition for freedom—which effectively ended slavery within England itself. The case began in 1771 and was decided in June, 1772, the very same month Rhode Islanders burned the *Gaspee*. The decision terrified the colonies, as settlers feared the Crown would soon outlaw slavery across the colonies. Settlers imagined London would use enslaved people against them, arming Black and Indigenous people just as they had done to fight the Spanish in Havana. Of course, as the Somerset decision occurred concomitantly with the *Gaspee* attacks, its unlikely it directly influenced them, but the imperial trends leading to Somerset had certainly influence colonists prior to June, 1772.²⁶

Britain would not ban slavery in its empire for many decades. Yet even minuscule shifts away from full settler autonomy on questions of slavery terrified the colonial ruling class. Numerous works, such as Robert G Parkinson's *Common Cause*, Gerald Horne's *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*, and the Blumrosens' *Slave Nation*, have outlined just how much fear colonists had that Britain was stoking Black and Indigenous uprisings to destroy them. The feeling was strong enough to make its way directly into the Declaration of Independence, which lists amongst its complaints that “[King George] has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavored to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare, is undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions.”

The Gaspee Attack

By the mid 1760s, then, the Crown's interference in the business of slavery, coupled with broader political trends in the empire, had turned Rhode Island's elite largely against London. Following the new regulations of the 1760s, British vessels now patrolled Narragansett Bay, seizing illegal rum ships. Rhode Island merchants quickly responded in 1764 with a Remonstrance addressed to the Lords of Trade in London, followed by Stephen Hopkin's *Rights of the Colonies Examined*. In 1764, Rhode Islanders fired cannons from Fort George at *HMS St John* in response to its confiscation of rum. In 1769, the British customs ship *Liberty* seized two

boats belonging to the New England merchant Joseph Packwood and held them in Newport. In a prelude to the Gaspee Affair, Rhode Islanders responded by forcibly boarding the *Liberty*, then scuttling and burning the vessel.²⁷

British ships continued patrolling New England waters, and in early 1772 the *Gaspee* entered Narragansett Bay and began chasing down Rhode Island rum smugglers. The elite grew to revile the ship's Captain William Dudingston for his particularly zealous enforcement. In February 1772, the *Gaspee* captured a ship belonging to future revolutionary war hero Nathanael Greene, then confiscated the boat and its 12 hogsheads of undeclared rum. The British, fully knowing the likelihood of the rum and ship ending back in merchants' hands if it passed through the corrupt Rhode Island courts, brought the ship and its cargo to Boston. Rhode Island's merchant princes interpreted the seizure and inter-colony transfer as an intolerable attack on their economic interests and authority.

On June 9, 1772 the *Gaspee* began chasing the Rhode Island rum ship *Hannah*, and ran aground on a sandbar outside Warwick. Captain Dudingston decided to wait until the tide returned before attempting to free the ship. The smaller *Hannah* escaped to Providence, where its captain Thomas Lindsey informed merchant leader John Brown of the *Gaspee*'s vulnerable position. Brown decided to seize the rare opportunity. He riled up the other scions of the colony, and they decided they would row out to destroy the demobilized British vessel. As discussed above, these attack leaders were all wealthy men with deep connections to the business of slavery, including Brown, Simeon Potter, Joseph Tillinghast, Ephraim Bowen, Abraham Whipple, and likely others such as Esek Hopkins and Nathanael Greene. The leaders marched a drum through town to recruit more men, likely forced a number of enslaved men to join them, then secured boats and began toward the British.

The colonists approached the *Gaspee*, and demanded that Dudingston abandon the ship. Dudingston refused, so the colonists shot him through the groin and arm. The rebels swarmed the ship, disarmed and brought the crew ashore, and stole the ship's logbooks and documents. The attackers told Dudingston they would return his papers if the Captain promised to release the rum he had seized from Nathanael Greene's vessel. Brown, Whipple, and company then lit the boat on fire and retreated to the beach, where they watched fire consume the *Gaspee* until it reached the magazine and the ship exploded.

No one claimed responsibility for the attack. In the following weeks, the furious British launched an inquiry into the incident. A commission was formed in Newport to investigate, and the King of England issued a large reward for anyone with information. The British threatened to extradite the attackers for trial in England.²⁸

Governor Joseph Wanton—a member of Newport's wealthy Wanton family, who had made their fortunes in the West Indies and triangle trades—was appointed as head of the

commission, and clearly had little interest in prosecuting his co-conspirators. Rhode Island Chief Justice Stephen Hopkins simply declared that the colony's courts would not cooperate with the British, and refused to hand over any indicted citizens. The lawyer and later judge John Cole, who likely participated in the attack and at minimum was present at the attack planning site, perjured himself in court by denying any knowledge.²⁹ Lieutenant Governor Darius Sessions, who had also made his money in the West Indies trade, shared in letters that he was deliberately impeding the investigation. Wanton, Hopkins, and Sessions conspired to stall and ultimately derail the investigation.³⁰

Colonists, British officials, and the commissioners all knew who had led the attack, yet no one would testify against them. The collective silence was likely a reflection of the actual solidarity of White colonists, but court records also show that the ruling class intimidated anyone attempting to testify, going so far as to post armed guards along roads where witnesses would travel to report to the British.³¹ Eventually, one man came forward: Aaron Briggs.

The Witness

Aaron Briggs was a man of likely Narragansett and African ancestry enslaved on a farm on Prudence Island, RI. Briggs was only 17 at the time of the *Gaspee* burning, and may have been set to be freed at the age of 24.³² In the days following the attack, Briggs escaped on a boat and rowed out to a British ship stationed in the bay. He told the crew that he had been forced to participate in the *Gaspee raid* and was able to identify the ringleaders. Initially, the British chained him and threw him into the brig, treating him as a runaway. After realizing his utility to the *Gaspee* investigation, the British agreed to take his testimony.³³

Enslaved people in the Americas escaping to one European power or another had a long history. The Spanish repeatedly encouraged people enslaved in British America to win their freedom by escaping to Florida or Cuba. The British issued similar proclamations to people enslaved by the Spanish, French, or Dutch, depending on shifting war alliances. A few years later in 1775, as the war was beginning, Lord Dunmore, the last colonial governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation that any enslaved person in North America who left their master and joined the British and served in the military would be granted their freedom. Thousands of enslaved people would free themselves via crossing into British lines. The colonies were not yet at war with Britain, and so the British did not initially accept Briggs, but Briggs' decision to defect to the British side was perhaps a move based on historical understanding.³⁴

According to Briggs, on the night of the attack he was rowing on an errand for his master when he encountered a boat led by slave trader Simeon Potter, who forced him to join his men in the attack on the *Gaspee*. Briggs recounted intimate details of every part of the raid, and could identify Potter and Brown, whose names he had overheard during the ordeal. His account

matched the testimonies of the British crew and Captain Dudingston.³⁵

Now that the silence had been broken, the colonists' strategy shifted to discrediting Briggs as a witness. Briggs' owner testified against him in court, as did, presumably forcibly, the enslaved people who live alongside Briggs.³⁶ Though Briggs was likely the only person in the debacle struggling for real freedom, Rhode Island officials decried Briggs as having a "weak and wicked mind," and denounced his story as baseless. The colonists were furious that a man of color was being allowed to testify at all, and claimed he was scamming the British in order to gain his freedom, or that the British were coercing him. So much echoed broader colonial fears that London was using people of color against White Protestant settlers.³⁷

In an extraordinary decision, the commission ruled that it did not have sufficient evidence to bring charges against anyone involved in the attack. It was widely known on all sides that Brown, Potter, and others were responsible, yet these men were not even summoned to testify. Such was the power of Rhode Island's merchants that they could fully derail the investigation. The smear campaign against Briggs was so complete that even his thorough testimony did not lead to conviction. The British seemed to understand the futility of the case, and feared pressing the matter further. Even British Navy head Admiral Montagu repeatedly refused to travel to Newport to attend the commission in person, seemingly out of fear of violent reprisal.

The raid on the *Gaspee* and subsequent commission stoked anti-British fervor among elites throughout North America. In the immediate wake, the Virginia House of Burgesses created their Committees of Correspondence to share information between the colonies, and other colonies followed suit. These Committees were some of the first bodies to solidify the colonies, and an important precursor to the First Continental Congress. The House of Burgesses short statement specifically notes the need for the committee in the wake of a "court of inquiry, said to have been lately held in Rhode Island."³⁸

Reverend John Allen penned one of the most influential pamphlets of the era, "An Oration on the Beauties of Liberty," in the immediate wake of the Gaspee Affair, and used the events as a prime driver for his arguments. Allen's work quickly became among the most popular colonial pamphlets, and was widely quoted by John Adams, James Otis, and other revolutionaries. "An Oration" repeatedly compares British taxation of White colonists to slavery, and explicitly lays bare settlers' fears of Aaron Briggs and Black and Indigenous people generally: "The British now attack the life, the soul, and capitol of all your liberties—to choose your judges and make them independent upon you for office or support, and erect new courts of admiralty to take away by violence the husband from his family. To be confin'd and tried for his life by the accusation of a negro."³⁹

Revolution and Aftermath

Taken in context, then, it seems that the *Gaspee* attacks were motivated more by a desire to maintain the lucrative business of slavery than any patriotic ideals. The attackers' activities during and after the revolution further reveal that their primary concern was the pursuit of personal profit. John Brown's post-*Gaspee* career perhaps best illustrates the point. Brown led the *Gaspee* attacks and eagerly advocated for the revolution, but once it began he repeatedly acted to the detriment the rebels in order to secure personal fortune. For instance, in the early days of the war when supplies were low, he sold George Washington a shipment of much needed gunpowder, but gauged the price up by 50%, which Washington noted was "most exorbitant."⁴⁰

More elaborately, early in the war Brown embarked on a trip to the Continental Congress where he secured himself and his friends contracts for the construction of the first Continental Navy. He then diverted those resources to building and outfitting privateers for his own enrichment and only delivered his promised naval ships when they were rendered useless by the British blockade of Narragansett Bay. Many notable revolutionaries publicly condemned Brown, including his former friend and associate Esek Hopkins, who was serving as head commander of the Continental Navy. Because of his disloyalty, Brown successfully conspired to have Hopkins fired from his position.⁴¹

In 1777, when the colonies appear to be losing the war, Rhode Island took note of British strategy and offered freedom to any enslaved people who would serve in the colony's militia. Over 140 Black and Indigenous men signed up for what became the Rhode Island 1st Regiment. One of the Brown family's enslaved people, a man named Prince, walked to Providence to join the Regiment from a farm in nearby Massachusetts. After the Browns learned of his enlistment, the family petitioned the state assembly in protest, saying that because Prince was from Massachusetts, he was not eligible to earn his freedom through Rhode Island military service. The Browns won and Prince was forced back into slavery.⁴²

After the revolution, the now independent states drafted the Articles of Confederation, which originally containing a federal tax on imports meant to lift the war-torn new country out of heavy debt. Rhode Island was the sole opponent of the tax, as its merchant class, again led by John Brown, refused to allow a federal government to collect tax on the triangle and West Indies trades.

Revolutionary icon Tom Paine personally came to Rhode Island to convince the state to accept the tax, publicly decrying the "ten or a dozen merchants, who have self-interest in the matter...are drawing themselves away from the common burdens of the country, and throwing them upon the shoulders of others. And this, forsooth, they call patriotism." In response, the merchants mercilessly ridiculed Paine in the press as a drunkard and "mercenary writer" and

drove him out of the colony after less than a month. The merchants fully leveraged their political might and killed the federal tax, helping plunge the early United States into a half-decade of economic chaos until the Constitution, which allowed for Federal taxation and monetary policy, was ratified in 1787.⁴³

While most Americans were brought to economic ruin by the war, Brown and his friends ended the conflict with increased wealth. John Brown constructed his Providence mansion—today the John Brown House Museum—right after the war in 1786. He established himself as Rhode Island's foremost slavery advocate, often sparring with his brother Moses in newspapers. He continued to finance transatlantic slave ships, even after doing so was illegal under the federal 1794 Slave Trade Act, and was the first person to be tried in court under the law.⁴⁴

Joseph Tillinghast refused to directly serve during the Revolutionary War, instead putting his efforts into privateering for personal gain. He enlisted one of the enslaved men he owned to serve in his place in the militia. After the war, he continued to operate his shipping business to the West Indies, and to sell rum and other goods on his Providence wharves.⁴⁵ Simeon Potter also appears to have disappeared during the Revolution itself, and in fact refused to pay taxes to support the fledgling revolutionary government. After the revolution, he continued running his merchant empire, and worked closely with the DeWolfs in the continued slave trade. He sent multiple letters to James DeWolf helping him negotiate higher prices for enslaved people, and advising him on how to subvert US taxation and the Federal Slave Trade Act.⁴⁶ A DeWolf descendent, Charles DeWolf Brownell, painted the now standard image memorializing the *Gaspee* attack. Brownell is also known for painting scenes of rural Cuba, where he lived for some time on the DeWolf's sugar plantations.⁴⁷

Nathanael Greene—the revolutionary war hero and merchant whose rum was confiscated by the British just before the *Gaspee* attack—was granted a former Loyalist slave plantation in Georgia. He lived on and oversaw the plantation until his death. His widowed wife, Caty Greene originally of Block Island, opened the plantation to inventor Eli Whitney. Whitney invented the cotton gin there in 1793, dramatically accelerating the spread of cotton plantations and slavery across the south in order to supply northern textile factories in Rhode Island and elsewhere.⁴⁸

21st Century Controversy

In 2018, scandal rocked the Rhode Island *Gaspee* Days parade as a Civil War reenactment outfit marched with a Confederate flag through the streets of Warwick. There was a public outcry, and the *Gaspee* Days committee issue an apology, which closed with the line, “Moving forward, the Committee will review all parade applications of American history more closely to ensure a family friendly parade.”⁴⁹

While it is undeniably a positive step to remove the Confederate flags, the statement perfectly illustrates New England's historical amnesia on slavery. We condemn slavery as a southern sin while fully ignoring our own deep involvement. We remove the Confederate symbol, yet hold a cheerful parade celebrating the actions of Rhode Island slave traders to perpetuate the trade.

Rhode Island's 18th century economy was fully embedded in the business of slavery. The colony's leaders made fortunes in the direct transatlantic trade, as well as through exchanging goods, molasses, rum, and enslaved people with the sugarcane plantation colonies in the West Indies. The Gaspee attackers were Rhode Island's wealthiest men, those who most benefitted from the slave economy. When Britain began taxing and regulating that business, these men vocally protested, defending their trade first in print, then with attacks on the Crown's vessels. Their protest escalated into the burning of the Gaspee, the subsequent derailing of the investigation, and the continued agitation to fully break with Britain. Their supposed fight for liberty was in fact a fight for the freedom to profit from the business of slavery. As John Adams himself later admitted, "I know not why we should blush to confess that molasses was an essential ingredient in American independence."⁵⁰ For Rhode Island's elite revolutionaries, molasses and the broader business of slavery were certainly the main ingredients of rebellion.

- 1 Gaspee Days Website, accessed online June 7, 2020 <http://www.gaspee.com/about>
- 2 For example, see Daniel F Harrington, "The Gaspee, the hero, and the Dud " Providence, Journal, June 2 2015, accessed online June 7, 2020 <https://www.providencejournal.com/article/20150602/OPINION/150609901>; Patrick T Conley, "The Burning of the Gaspee," June 8, 2019, accessed online June 7, 2020 <https://www.providencejournal.com/opinion/20190608/my-turn-patrick-t-conley-the-burning-of-gaspee>; in Motif, see, for example, "True Tales of Rhode Islanders, Full Gaspee Day Story," June 5, 2019, accessed online June 7, 2020 <https://motifri.com/drawntogaspee/>
- 3 Christy Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 13-23
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 Leonardo Marques, "Slave Trading in a New World: The Strategies of North American Slave Traders in the Age of Abolition" *Journal of the Early Republic* 32 (June 2012): 233-260
- 6 Irving H. Bartlett, *From Slave to Citizen: The Story of the Negro in Rhode Island* (Providence: Urban League of Rhode Island, 1972), 5-16; Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*, 13-23
- 7 James A Rawley and Stephen D Behrendt, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade: A History* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 305.
- 8 For more on the DeWolfs, see Cynthia Mestad Johnston, *James DeWolf and the Rhode Island Slave Trade*; for the Brown family see Charles Rappleye, *Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, The Slave Trade, and the American Revolution*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); for the Wantons, see Sarah Deutsch, "The Elusive Guineamen, Newport Slavers, 1735-1774," *The New England Quarterly* Vol. 55, No. 2 (June 1982): 229-253
- 9 Akeia A. F. Benard, "The Free African American Cultural Landscape: Newport, R.I., 1774-1826." (Ph.D. diss., University of Connecticut, 2008), 100-106.
- 10 Clark-Pujara, *Dark Work*, 41-60, 70; Benard, "The Free African American Cultural Landscape," 122-144.
- 11 *ibid*
- 12 A summary of the FAUS, ABS, and related organizations' history is available in the Newport Historical Society's Finding Aid, Newport Historical Society, accessed July 20, 2019, <https://collections.newporthistory.org/Detail/collections/142>. For a more in-depth history of the groups, see Benard, "The Free African Cultural Landscape," 131-144. For the groups' complete documents, see the Free African Union Society & African Benevolent Society Records Collection, Newport Historical Society ms.095, Newport, R.I.
- 13 William Read Staples, *A Documentary History of the Destruction of the Gaspee*, (Providence: Knowles, Vose, and Anthony), 45
- 14 Rappleye, *Sons of Providence*
- 15 Johnson, *James DeWolf*, 15-16
- 16 Steven Park, *The Burning of His Majesty's Schooner Gaspee* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2016),16; Sheldon S. Cohen, *Commodore Abraham Whipple of the Continental Navy: Privateer, Patriot, Pioneer*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, Series: New Perspectives on Maritime History and Nautical Archaeology, 2010).
- 17 Wayne G. Tillinghast, *The Tillinghasts in America: The First Four Generations*. (Providence: RI Genealogical Society, 2006); Gaspee Virtual Archive biography of Captian Joseph Tillinghast, accessed online, June 7, 2020 http://www.gaspee.org/JosephTillinghast.htm#Wayne_G._Tillinghast
- 18 Nel Slocum, "Link with the Past—Reminiscences of the last survivor of the party that burned the Gaspee," *Tribune*, June 24, 1906, accessed online, June 7, 2020 <http://gaspee.org/Slocum.html>

- 19 Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 65-68
- 20 Rappleye, *Sons of Providence*, 42-47
- 21 *ibid.*
- 22 Stephen Hopkins, "The Rights of the Colonies Examined," 1764, accessed online June 7, 2020 <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N07846.0001.001/1:2?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>, 13
- 23 *ibid.*, p 16
- 24 Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom*, 73-79
- 25 Alfred, Ruth, and Steven Blumrosen, *Slave Nation: How Slavery United the Colonies & Sparked the American Revolution*, (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, 2005), 1-72; Gerald Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 209-215
- 26 *ibid.*
- 27 Rory Raven, *Burning the Gaspee: Revolution in Rhode Island* (Charleston: The History Press, 2012), 23-25
- 28 Park, *The Burning of His Majesty's Schooner Gaspee*, 15-27
- 29 *ibid.*, 45
- 30 Natalie Robinson, "Revolutionary Fire: The *Gaspee* Incident," accessed online June 7, 2020 <http://www.gaspee.org/Revolut2.htm>
- 31 Staples, *The Documentary History of the Destruction of the Gaspee*, 31
- 32 In court documents, Briggs is alternatively referred to as a "mulatto" and a "negro." Historians differ on how to interpret his ancestry, but many believe him to be of mixed African and Narragansett ancestry.
- 33 Park, *The Burning of His Majesty's Schooner Gaspee*, 74
- 34 Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1-45; Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*, 203-208
- 35 Staples, *The Documentary History of the Destruction of the Gaspee*, 33-34
- 36 Staples, *The Documentary History of the Destruction of the Gaspee*, 48
- 37 *ibid.*, 54; Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*, 203-208
- 38 John Russell Bartlett, *A History of the Destruction Of His Britannic Majesty's Schooner Gaspee in Narragansett Bay*, (Providence: A. Crawford Greene, Printer to the State, 1861), 137
- 39 John Allen, "An Oration on the Beauties of Liberty," 1772, Accessed online <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N10250.0001.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>, p 27
- 40 Rappleye, *Sons of Providence*, 196
- 41 *ibid.*, 199-209
- 42 *ibid.*, 184
- 43 *ibid.*, 215-222

- 44 *ibid*, 215-312
- 45 Tillinghast, *The Tillinghasts in America*
- 46 Johnson, *James DeWolf*, 46, 70
- 47 Met Museum, "Charles DeWolf Brownell," Accessed online June 7, 2020
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/816791>
- 48 David Hoffman and Tess Hoffman, *North by South: The Two Lives of Richard James Arnold*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), xiv
- 49 Gaspee Days' Parade Statement, June 16, 2018, accessed online June 7, 2020 <http://www.gaspee.com/news/parade-statement>
- 50 John Adams to William Tutor, August 11, 1818, Quincy, Massachusetts. Charles Francis Adams, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States Vol. X*, 345. Accessed online, June 7, 2020,
<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/adams-the-works-of-john-adams-vol-10-letters-1811-1825-indexes>