

Burning the *Gaspée*

Ephraim Bowen



OVERVIEW

In the years prior to the American Revolution, tensions between the American colonists and the British increased, largely over taxes imposed on the colonists. After numerous colonial protests, the British repealed all the taxes on goods except for the tax on tea. At the same time, they increased their patrols in American waters to catch smugglers. Young Ephraim Bowen tells what happened when the British revenue ship *Gaspée* ran aground in Narragansett Bay.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- How effective do you think the townspeople were in sending a message to Britain?
 - Why was the *Gaspée* stationed at Newport?
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In the year 1772, the British government had stationed at Newport, Rhode Island, the schooner called the *Gaspee*, of eight guns, commanded by Wm. Duddingston, a Lieutenant in the British Navy, for the purpose of preventing the clandestine landing of articles, subject to the payment of duty. The Captain of this schooner made it his practice to stop and board all vessels entering or leaving the ports of Rhode Island, or leaving Newport for Providence.

On the 10th day of June, 1772, Capt. Thomas Lindsey left Newport in his packet for Providence, about noon, with the wind at North; and soon after, the *Gaspee* was under sail, in pursuit of Lindsey, and continued the chase as far as Namquit Point. . . . Lindsey was standing easterly, with the tide on ebb about two hours, when he hove about, at the end of Namquit Point, and stood to the westward, and Duddingston in close chase, changed his course and ran on the Point, near its end, and grounded. Lindsey continued on his course up the river, and arrived at Providence about sunset, when he immediately informed Mr. John Brown, one of our first and most respectable merchants, of the situation of the *Gaspee*. He immediately concluded that she would remain immovable until after midnight, and that now an opportunity offered of putting an end to the trouble and vexation she daily caused. Mr. Brown immediately resolved on her destruction, and he forthwith directed one of his trusty shipmasters to collect eight of the largest long-boats in the harbor, with five oars to each, to have the oars and row-locks well muffled, to prevent noise, and to place them at Fenner's wharf, directly opposite to the dwelling of Mr. James Sabin. . . .

About the time of the shutting up of the shops soon after sunset, a man passed along the Main street beating a drum and informing the inhabitants of the fact, that the Gaspee was aground on Namquit Point, and would not float off until 3 o'clock the next morning, and inviting those persons who felt a disposition to go and destroy that troublesome vessel, to repair in the evening to Mr. James Sabin's house. About 9 o'clock, I took my father's gun and my powder horn and bullets and went to Mr. Sabin's, and found the southeast room full of people, where I loaded my gun, and all remained there till about 10 o'clock, some casting bullets in the kitchen, and others making arrangements for departure, when orders were given to cross the street to Fenner's wharf and embark. . . .

The party thus proceeded till within about sixty yards of the Gaspee, when a sentinel hailed, "Who comes there?" No answer.—He hailed again and no answer. In about a minute Duddingston mounted the starboard gunwale in his shirt and hailed, "Who comes there?" No answer. He hailed again, when Capt. Whipple answered as follows—"I am the sheriff of the county of Kent, G—d d—n you. I have got a warrant to apprehend you, G—d d—n you; so surrender, G—d d—n you." I took my seat on the main thwart, near the larboard row-lock, with my gun by my right side, facing forwards. As soon as Duddingston began to hail, Joseph Bucklin, who was standing on the main thwart by my right side, said to me, "Ephe, reach me your gun and I can kill that fellow." I reached it to him accordingly, when, during Capt. Whipple's replying, Bucklin fired and Duddingston fell, and Bucklin exclaimed, "I have killed the rascal." In less than a minute after Capt. Whipple's answer, the boats were alongside of the Gaspee, and boarded without opposition. The men on deck retreated below as Duddingston entered the cabin.

As it was discovered that he was wounded, John Mawney, who had for two or three years been studying physic and surgery, was ordered to go into the cabin and dress Duddingston's wound, and I was directed to assist him. On examination, it was found the ball took effect about five inches directly below the navel. Duddingston called for Mr. Dickinson to produce bandages and other necessaries for the dressing of the wound, and when finished, orders were given to the schooner's company to collect their clothing and everything belonging to them and put them into their boats, as all of them were to be sent on shore. All were soon collected and put on board of the boats, including one of our boats. They departed and landed Duddingston at the old still-house wharf, at Pawtuxet. . . . Soon after, all the party were ordered to depart, leaving one boat for the leaders of the expedition, who soon set the vessel on fire, which consumed her to the waters' edge.