

HMS Gaspee Incident
Commission of Inquiry Report

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The commander of the *HMS Gaspee*, Lieutenant William Dudingston, is a loyal British subject who performs his duties of enforcing the law with authority. Dudingston and the crew of the *HMS Gaspee* watchfully monitor the waters off the Rhode Island coast in order to expose and punish Rhode Island's many deceitful smugglers. Therefore, the *HMS Gaspee* inspects ships traveling through Narragansett Bay and their cargo to find smugglers and enforce British trade laws, usually by taxing a ship's goods. The indignant Rhode Islanders view Dudingston as a harsh customs official who patrols Rhode Island waters performing inspections that are usually unnecessary as most ships have their goods and official paperwork checked for authenticity in Newport, before reaching the *HMS Gaspee*. However, Dudingston and his crew are persistent and thorough, so they refuse to let other vessels sail away without passing their own examination.

The *HMS Gaspee*'s demand for inspection is considered a nuisance to most colonial trade ship crews because it delays their journey, so Lt. Dudingston is sometimes forced to resort to violence to fulfill a proper inspection. For this reason, "It was only a short time after the offensive operations of the *Gaspee* had begun that letters of protest were sent to her commander by the Governor of Rhode Island. Insolent answers by Dudingston only served to increase the smoldering fires of public indignation. Finally, Admiral Montagu, the Commander of the British fleet, wrote to the Governor, ordering him not to interfere with the operations of the *Gaspee* in any way (<http://gaspee.org/Haley.html>).\" Without colonial legislature interference, consumers on Rhode Island shores quickly develop negative attitudes toward the people aboard the *HMS Gaspee* because the arrivals of high demand imported products are delayed by the

inspection. Also, Rhode Islanders have loved ones on the colonial trade ships whose return home is prolonged by inspection and who may be injured by Dudingston and his crew during inspection. Lieutenant William Dudingston and the crew of the *HMS Gaspee* are not respected by Rhode Islanders and possess a tense relationship with the colonists of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations though they are innocently fulfilling their obligations as customs officials. Dudingston is proud of his service to Britain and he appropriately disregards the Rhode Islander's failure to understand his important position.

The Gaspee Incident arises after a colonial merchant ship, the *Hannah*, audaciously refuses inspection that the *HMS Gaspee's* crew is obligated to perform on June 9th, 1772. Under the leadership of Captain Thomas Lindsay, the *Hannah* sails away from the *HMS Gaspee*, disobeying its orders for the *Hannah* to halt for inspection. People aboard the *Hannah* claim that the ship is already approved by a Rhode Island customs house, so they believe the *HMS Gaspee* does not have probable cause to search the ship. Dudingston and the crew of the *HMS Gaspee* cannot allow word of the *Hannah's* defiance to spread, resulting in other ships following the *Hannah's* example by sailing away from the *HMS Gaspee* without examination. Also, Dudingston and his crew feel they cannot allow the *Hannah* to simply escape inspection without verifying that there are not smuggled goods being transported by the *Hannah*. The people of the *HMS Gaspee* act responsibly by pursuing the *Hannah* to fulfill their duties as customs officials. During the pursuit, the mischievous captain of the *Hannah* utilizes his knowledge of Narragansett Bay by leading the *HMS Gaspee* to shallow waters where it runs aground. The *Hannah* proceeds to sail away from the *HMS Gaspee* toward its

destination of Providence, Rhode Island while the *HMS Gaspee* remains caught in a sandbar at Namquid Point, off the coast of Warwick, Rhode Island.

Upon reaching Providence, Rhode Island, news of the *Hannah's* victory over the *HMS Gaspee* spread to the rebellious Rhode Island colonists, many of whom gathered in Sabin's Tavern of Providence, Rhode Island to plot their method of violently expressing their outrage at the actions of the *HMS Gaspee*. Information among the Commission's discoveries includes a plan of revenge on the *HMS Gaspee*, still disabled until high tide at 3 o'clock the next morning. The plan begins as "John Brown, one of Providence's most respected merchants, instructed his trusted shipmaster, Abraham Whipple, to collect eight of the largest longboats in the harbor, to have the oars and the rowlocks well muffled to prevent noise, and to place them at Fenner's wharf which was nearly opposite the dwelling of James Sabin who kept a house of board and entertainment for gentlemen (<http://www.gaspee.org/AbrahamWhipple.html>)." The approximately fifty men involved in the Gaspee Affair are said to then board the *HMS Gaspee* triumphantly, taunting the crew they despise so unjustly, when a shot is fired and the modest Lieutenant William Dudingston is wounded. His crew becomes chaotic without Dudingston's fine leadership due to his injury, so they are taken ashore by the said offenders to witness the *HMS Gaspee* ignite in a fiery blaze, followed by an explosion due to powder, illuminating the darkness of the early hours of June 10th, 1772.

Certain Rhode Island colonists seem to be angered by the Gaspee Affair's horrible violence against fellow British subjects; Loyalists seem devastated, while others seem smug yet silent in order to protect the safety of the criminals who set fire to the once glorious *HMS Gaspee*. Much of the information in this report is gathered through

the helpful information of anonymous Loyalists, dedicated subjects of His Majesty. Investigation based upon this information leads the Commission to strongly suspect John Brown and Abraham Whipple, though their involvement in the Gaspee Affair cannot be proven with the current amount of available evidence, as most of the stubborn Rhode Island colonists refuse to speak of any possible suspects in this offense against the *HMS Gaspee*. This peculiar silence is in spite of His Majesty's guarantee, that the "Discoverer shall have and receive the said Reward or Rewards of *Five Hundred Pounds* or *One Thousand Pounds* as the case may be (http://www.gaspee.info/history/text_of_proclamation.htm)." Therefore, the Commission of Inquiry assigned to investigate the Gaspee Affair suggests that His Majesty maintain the reward offer or increase it, as time may allow informed colonists to gather the courage to speak their knowledge and an increased reward may convince colonists to talk as well. It is the Commission's firm belief that the culprits of the Gaspee Affair are soon to be discovered and severely punished for their disrespect to Britain's superior rule.

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