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Ten Years of Rhode Island History

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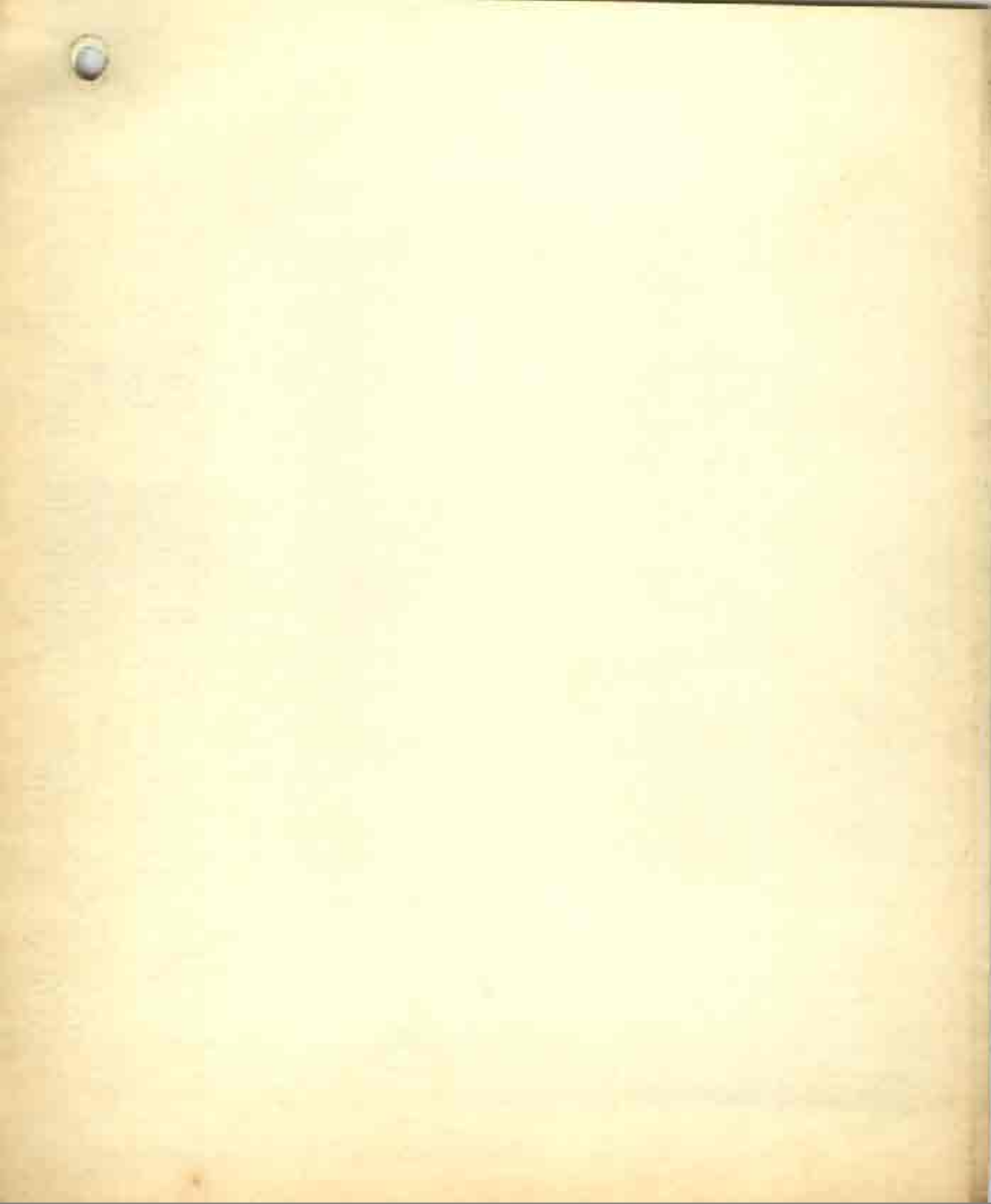
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TEN YEARS OF RHODE ISLAND HISTORY, 1740-1775

The ten years previous to the Declaration of Independence in America are full of controversy and dispute between the Colonists and the English Parliament. In all the political discussions of this time, all the important resolutions, and all the early attempts at resistance, Rhode Island took a prominent part. No province was more dangerously situated or could be more severely crippled by warfare; Newport, especially, stood in imminent peril. The destruction of her commerce would mean ruin to her wealth and power. She was without defense and might be rendered desolate. Yet, throughout Rhode Island a lofty spirit of courage and resolution was shown, and nowhere were citizens more loyal to the cause of freedom than in this colony.

As early as 1660 the Navigation Acts of Charles II had compelled them "to procure their merchandise in British ships, to produce only those commodities which Great Britain did not produce", and as far as possible to trade with her alone. These acts greatly hindered the rapid growth of commerce in Rhode Island and it was only through smuggling that Newport and Providence became important commercial centres.

Another Act, which, had its provisions been complied with, would have brought disaster to commerce, was passed in 1733, in order to stop the illicit trade which had sprung up between the colonies and the French West Indies. This was the hated Sugar or Molasses Act, requiring that the prohibitory duty of sixpence per gallon on molasses and five shillings per cwt. on sugar, be paid when these products were imported into British Plantations from foreign colonies. Rhode Island protested against this act and Richard Partridge sent a petition to the Board of Trade in England, being the first to declare that as Englishmen, the colonists should not be taxed without representation in Parliament. Although the law went into effect, the tide of commerce was scarcely disturbed; but April 5, 1764, the act was renewed with more severe measures to enforce it. A duty was also added on wine, coffee, spice and many foreign goods. A British ship was stationed at Newport "to encourage fair trade and prevent smuggling".

The renewal of this act and the precautions taken to enforce it aroused a universal sentiment of opposition which had lain dormant thirty years or since the first introduction of the act. Stephen Hopkins, the commanding figure in Rhode Island at this time, wrote then his famous "Remonstrance" which is known as one

of the very earliest open assertions for colonial rights, and it placed him among the leaders of public opinion in America.

The close of the Seven Years' War with France gave England new cause and opportunity to disturb the Colonists. They had rendered her loyal service but she was not content with that and suddenly claimed the absolute right to tax her subjects in America. Now sparks of opposition flashed forth in this colony, and their ardent glow was reflected from all the others. Every remonstrance on the part of the colonists, however, tended only to exasperate Great Britain and soon the Stamp Act was proposed in Parliament and the next spring passed both houses. It required that all deeds, notes, bonds, etc. should be null and void unless written on Stamped paper for which a duty must be paid the Crown. With the adoption of this act, March 8, 1765, the epoch which more immediately preceded the Revolution begins. In Newport violent demonstrations were made upon news of the proposal of a Stamp Act. Effigies of three prominent Royalists were burned by the indignant citizens and the next day the houses of these men were plundered and they were obliged to seek refuge on British ships.

Special town meetings were called at Providence, Newport and other places to instruct their deputies how to act in the

General Assembly regarding the stamp duties. The feeling of insecurity and alarm was so great everywhere that it led to the calling of a Congress at New York in the fall of that year. The Commissioners from Rhode Island were Metcalf Bowler and Henry Ward. In regard to the Stamp Act the General Assembly of Rhode Island had passed September 16, six resolutions which were more energetic than those of the other colonies and which pointed to separation from the British crown unless the grievances were removed. Organizations under the name of "Sons of Liberty" now sprung up in all the colonies but it was at Providence that the Daughters of Liberty originated. These young women were extremely patriotic and agreed to have nothing to do with British manufactures until the home government should be less tyrannical.

Another interesting indication of patriotism was the planting of Liberty trees everywhere. These are of importance in the history of this period, for under their branches enthusiastic meetings were often held and vigorous action resolved upon.

The Stamp Act was to go into effect November 1, 1765, and the day before, all the royal Governors took an oath to sustain it, except Samuel Ward, "Governor of Rhode Island who stood alone in his patriotic refusal". The fatal day dawned upon a

nation united in its determination of resistance. The wheels of all industry were still; America had rebelled and England was obliged to submit. The obnoxious Act was repealed March 18, 1766 and when the news reached America there was universal joy. In Providence the King's birthday was celebrated with wild demonstrations of delight; and at a ball given the following evening it is recorded that "there was the most brilliant appearance of ladies this town ever saw".

The stamp Act was followed by a tax which struck at the last hope of freedom and was meant to show the right and power of the British Government to bind the Colonists. This tax, proposed May 13, 1767, required that an import duty of threepence a pound be placed upon tea in America, and that glass, lead, paper and paints be taxed. The act kindled anew the spirit of resistance. Providence and Newport followed Boston in resolving not to import or use goods brought from Great Britain, but to encourage home industry, economy and manufactures. These resolutions were thoroughly spread and generally adopted throughout the country and the colonies united in forwarding to England petitions against the tax.

Great hostility was shown towards the revenue officers and in Providence a collector of these duties was violently assaulted

and then tarred and feathered.

In the midst of such disturbances an interesting event occurred in Narragansett Bay which is known as the first overt act of the Revolution. The British ship, Liberty, stationed in those waters to prevent smuggling, captured two small vessels and brought them into Newport harbor. Trouble arose because of this and the people of Newport forced the Liberty's crew ashore and then boarded, scuttled and sunk the ship. Her boats were drawn through the streets in triumph and burned in the upper part of the town. Attempts were made to arrest the offenders in this movement but proved unsuccessful.

After the destruction of the Liberty, a whole squadron of ships under Admiral Wallace was sent into the bay to watch over His Majesty's subjects in Rhode Island.

In May 1770, the Revenue duties, with the exception of that on tea, were repealed, and after considerable discussion in the Assembly, it was decided to rescind the non-importation agreements in this colony. However, the tax on tea with the acts of trade and the efforts made by the troops and armed vessels to enforce them, kept up a continual irritation and soon a bold step was taken here which turned the attention of all the colonies and England to Rhode Island. June 9, 1772, the

Gaspee, a British man-of-war placed in Narragansett Bay to prevent smuggling, gave chase to a sloop sailing from Newport to Providence. The Gaspee following closely a cunning course of the lighter vessel ran aground on Namquit Point and that night was burned by a party of brave men from Providence. This daring deed was immediately followed by a royal proclamation, offering large rewards for evidence to convict those taking part in the affair. One of the most noteworthy things to be mentioned in our State's history is the loyalty with which those citizens were protected. The act had not been done in secret and the actors were well known, yet not one of them was apprehended or punished.

In the May session of the Assembly in 1773, Rhode Island formed a committee of correspondence"whose duty it was to communicate with other Colonies respecting important acts and resolutions of the British parliament".

The East India Company of London, now began forcing tea upon the colonists and in December of this year the "Boston Tea Party" occurred. The people of Newport, fearing that tea would be sent there, adopted resolutions against its importation and encouraged all towns in the colony to do likewise. Most of them followed her example proclaiming that they would have nothing whatever to do with the irksome weed.

A little later the Boston Port Bill astonished the citizens

of that town and aroused indignation throughout the country. The other colonies read their doom in the measures pursued against Massachusetts. When news of the Port Bill was received in Providence, a town-meeting was called and the people resolved to assist their afflicted neighbors, to promote a General Congress and to favor a complete cessation of trade with Great Britain, Ireland, Africa and the West Indies "until such time as the Port Bill of Boston shall be reinstated in its former privileges". Rhode Island was the leading colony in aiding Boston in her time of need, and in completing the arrangements for united effort and resistance.

In her distress Boston received large sums of money and provisions from all parts of the country. In Providence, Newport, Jamestown, East Greenwich and Westerly, subscriptions were taken and generous amounts were contributed for the sufferers of Boston. In the records of South Kingston we find it voted on the last Tuesday in August 1774, "that a free contribution be put forward in this town in order to relieve the distressed inhabitants of said town of Boston, and that Nathaniel Hawkins be and is hereby appointed to carry a subscription paper for that purpose to all the inhabitants of this town for each person to subscribe what he, she or they think Proper".

Later, in October, this same town voted "that Nathaniel Hawkins and Henry Reynolds be the persons to Collect all the Sheep given for the Relief of the Poor Sufferers in the Town of Boston as also the money subscribed for the purpose and to lay the same out in good fatt Sheep".

From the making and carrying out of such liberal resolutions in almost every town throughout this and other Colonies we can readily see how Boston was tided over the period of distress in which her ports were closed to all foreign trade.

Rhode Island also acted first in appointing representatives to the General Congress. These were Stephen Hopkins and Samuel Ward, who for so long had been political rivals. Copies of her resolutions were sent to all the colonies and it was soon decided that delegates from each should meet at Philadelphia in September of that year. This general assemblage of the wisest men of the country proved a great impulse towards liberty, and from that time on, the power of the colonies began to be realized.

The feeling against Tories in Rhode Island was very bitter all through these years; and as they began to migrate thither from the closed town of Boston, action was taken against them and they were forced to go elsewhere. In East Greenwich, Stephen Arnold, a citizen of Warwick, unjustly charged with Tory principles, was hung in effigy. *causing great confusion at that time*

It was about this time that great activity began to be shown towards raising a militia and it was in this movement that Nathaniel Greene's name first became well known.

An order had been issued in Great Britain, Oct. 19, 1774, prohibiting the exportation of arms and ammunition to the colonies and ordering British troops in America to seize any military stores there~~found~~. In December it was voted in the General Assembly of Rhode Island that most of the cannon, powder and shot, stored at Fort George, be immediately removed to Providence. This was accomplished the next day and Gov. Wanton distinctly told Admiral Wallace, in answer to his inquiry as to the act, that it was done to prevent him from seizing the guns, and that they would be employed against any enemy of the colony.

The use of tea had been given up and on December 12, about three hundred pounds of this "forbidden luxury" were burned in the public market place of Providence. In this act even old ladies were^{seen} sacrificing their precious beverage, while bells were tolled and a "spirited son of liberty went through the streets with brush and lamp-black, obliterating the word tea on all the shop-signs."

April 19, 1775, with the battle of Lexington, the revolution fairly began and from that time on, movements in Rhode

Island were so rapid that it is impossible to trace them all. The chartered and independent companies of militia were mustered with universal enthusiasm, and the next day a thousand men were on their way from Providence to the scene of conflict.

Two days later the Rhode Island Assembly passed an act for raising "an army of observation" consisting of fifteen hundred men for the "preservation of the liberties of America". Brigadier General Nathaniel Greene was appointed commander of this army. This ^{was} greatly opposed by Gov. Wanton and others who feared it might bring fatal consequences to the charter, involve the country in civil war and sever all allegiance to the mother country. Because of the Governor's opposition he was suspended from office.

Another regiment under Capt. Olney had previously marched from this colony to give aid to the patriots of Massachusetts. Throughout the Revolution, Rhode Island made every effort to assist in the success of the general cause and sacrificed large sums of money and hundreds of her best and bravest men.

The first real naval action of the Revolution was that of June 15, when Capt. Abraham Whipple, in command of a war-sloop, opened fire upon a packet, which belonged to the colony but which Admiral Wallace had detained and placed in his own

service. The affair occurred off the shores of Conanicut Park, Jamestown, and resulted in the capture of the packet by Capt. Whipple. The necessity of a navy was now seen and it was at once decided to equip two vessels for the service of the colony. In the fall of this year, Rhode Island delegates were the first to suggest in Congress the great need of a fleet of sufficient force to protect the colonies.

In the fall of 1775, four thousand troops were enlisted for one year; and two independent companies, the Kingston Reds and a troop of horse in Providence, were chartered. An act was passed by which the estates of Tories became the property of the Colony and death was to be the penalty for any correspondence with the enemy.

Early in the next year, (Jan. 13, 1776,) an engagement took place on Prudence Island. Two hundred and fifty British had landed there, possessed themselves of a hundred sheep, and burned several houses. The British were driven to their ships and after doing some damage on Patience and Hope Islands, returned to Newport. The next month they descended upon Point Judith and took away many cattle and sheep, causing great excitement at that place.

After the British evacuation of Boston the citizens of

Newport feared that they would next attempt to enter their port and every effort was made for its defense. General Washington was requested to march through Rhode Island on his way to New York and a grand reception was prepared for him at Providence. However, finding that his services were not needed, Washington and his troops remained only a day or two in that city.

May first, ¹⁷⁷⁶ the last Colonial Assembly of Rhode Island convened and declared itself independent of British rule. Two months later the Declaration of Independence freed all the colonies, and a new period of American history begins. The colonists had now a definite purpose, an ideal cause for which to strive, and all past glory in their triumph, all present tributes to their honor, and all future expressions of gratitude, can never repay the debt due those who fought and suffered for the independence of America.