

## “The Ship That Started a War”

Many people are taught that the American Revolution began on April 19, 1775, with the shot heard round the world, fired at the Battle of Lexington and Concord. While this is true, the seeds of the American Revolution had been long planted in the hearts of colonists for many years. Events such as the Boston Massacre and the Boston Tea Party are traditionally known as some of the first acts of the Revolution. However, one incident, the *Gaspee* Affair, stands amongst the first and most influential events leading up to the beginning of the Revolutionary War. The *Gaspee* Affair occurred on June 10th in the early morning hours. The plans were set in motion by patriotic colonists determined to oppose the British Crown's economic interference. But why, and for what purpose, was this little-known event important to revolutionary efforts? That question can be answered by tracing back to one of Parliament's many grievances against the colonies, the Stamp Act.

The Stamp Act was one of the many ordinances enforced upon the colonies in order to keep the British Crown in control of the colonists. This act specifically targeted the taxation of any paper good, whether it was printing materials, marriage certificates, or any paper used in the court system; the taxation also covered products such as cards and dice (The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History). The Stamp Act was passed on March 22, 1765, and went into effect on November 1, 1765. It was created to supply Parliament with more monetary resources in order to quarter royal troops in the colonies. Colonists strongly resisted this taxation, coining the famous phrase, “No taxation without representation!” This phrase stemmed from the widely held belief that colonists should not be taxed since they had no representative in Parliament. This act, mixed with the upheaval due to the 1764 Sugar Act, ignited colonists more than ever.

As taxes increased, so did resentment towards the British Crown; “Parliament failed to appreciate the firestorm the new policies were causing” (Schweikart, 70). Soon, schooners and large ships were deployed by King George III to regulate imports to the colonies. One of these schooners, the *Gaspee*, was captained by a widely despised man, Lieutenant William Dudingston. Dudingston was known to often detain ships in harbors along Rhode Island and illegally confiscate cargo (USHistory.org). He was also known to target and chase down ships that belonged to members of the Sons of Liberty, a political group organized by Samuel Adams and John Hancock that opposed the Crown’s taxation. On the morning of June 9, 1772, Dudingston decided to take charge of the *Hannah*, a small packet ship captained by Benjamin Lindsey (Gaspee.org). The *Hannah*, small and quick, headed for Namquid Point of the bay in Rhode Island. As the *Hannah* drew nearer to the shoreline, it quickly turned and sped off; however, as the *Gaspee* had followed the small packet ship into Namquid Point, the larger schooner ran against the bottom of the bay, grounding the royal ship. Colonists in Rhode Island soon heard about the grounding of this notorious ship and began to devise a plan that would send a message to King George.

On the evening of June 9th, tired but passionate colonists gathered at Sabin’s Tavern. Many of the men at the meeting belonged to the Sons of Liberty and were ready to oppose the Crown’s unjust taxation. In the early hours of the morning on June 10th, about fifty-five men headed by John Brown and Abraham Whipple (McGrath, 16) muffled their oars and sailed out to the large ship. Brown exhorted the men to “go and destroy that troublesome ship” (Nelson, 68). Once they arrived at the grounded schooner, they attacked the ship, injuring Lieutenant Dudingston and capturing the rest of the crew. After securing the ship, the colonists then looted the *Gaspee* and then set the royal ship ablaze.

The entire incident was quick. Lieutenant Dudingston was caught by surprise and wounded during the affair. The colonists attacked and set fire to the *Gaspee* but spared and safely held the British sailors in Rhode Island. Throughout the entire ordeal, not one person was killed, and the colonists expressed their opposition to the Crown in a destructive but also life-preserving manner. The colonists considered the *Gaspee* affair to be a great success. Parliament, however, did not see it the same way.

The Crown launched an official investigation into the affair, which was quickly halted because no colonists came forward to provide information and was officially dropped due to “contradictory and lack of evidence” (Rhode Island Department of State). With both the *Gaspee* affair and the investigation circulating Rhode Island, many colonists began to realize that the issues with British government were much greater than simply taxes. A revolutionary spirit had been stirred up due to the *Gaspee* affair, and colonists were more willing and prepared to blatantly oppose the king and stand up for their liberties.

While the *Gaspee* affair is not a well-known incident, it set the ball in motion for action and prepared colonists for the coming revolution. Soon, similar incidents would emerge, such as the Boston Tea Party, resistance in port towns like Charleston, and countless more events in opposition to taxes taking place in New York, Maryland, New Jersey, and even more places. The *Gaspee* affair provided a vision for colonists and inspired a spirit of revolution throughout the colonies. The patriotic resistance of the colonists was felt throughout every colony and town: “If Britain had had her way, the issue would have died a quiet death” (Schweikart, 72). Not long after the incident, the colonies called for a “unity of action” and proposed a meeting where deputies from every colony would gather and discuss issues surrounding British rule (Rhode Island Department of State). The meeting would later form into what is now known as the First

Continental Congress, where a chain of events would occur, forming the Declaration of Independence and eventually igniting the Revolutionary War and absolving all ties between Great Britain and the United States of America.

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