

Presidents Message:

Greetings to my fellow compatriots. After one of the hottest summers in many years, I hope we are heading into cooler and more enjoyable weather.

Since my last message, we have had a couple of very nice events. Flag Day at the Dunes Club was most entertaining. Even though it was a DAR sponsored event this year, the RISSAR was well represented. Our guest speaker talked about her genealogical research in support of her Mayflower Society Application and provided many sources for information for those who are interested in doing more research. If you have never attended one of these luncheons, you don't know what you are missing.

July 6th saw the first BOM meeting to be held at the caretaker's cottage at the Nathanael Greene Homestead. David Proccacini, the RICAR, along with the Weaver Family deserve great credit for their undertaking of cleaning, and painting the cottage which was left in shambles by the previous caretaker (now that is an oxymoron). Please see the published minutes of the meeting for more detail. We look forward to more meetings in this location.

Most recently, the RISSAR hosted a dedication and wreath laying at the newly installed headstone for Captain John Peck Rathbun. The stone is located in the memorial grove of the Exeter Veterans Memorial Cemetery in Exeter, RI. This is immediately adjacent to the location where we hold the Veterans Day Ceremony. The ceremony, which was valiantly supported by the SAR, DAR, and the Rathbun Family Association despite the brutal 98 degree heat, was the culmination of a long struggle to obtain a monument for a true hero of the Revolution. I look forward to having a yearly commemoration of this stone as we do for Thomas Cole & Stephen Olney.

Our next event is the yearly luncheon at the Clark-Cooke House Newport on Monday, Sept 30. Further information be sent out later.

Hope to see you there.

John "JC" Collins

HISTORY | BURNING OF THE GASPEE

A page from R.I.'s past

Doctor donates earliest newspaper account of Gaspee blaze

By THOMAS J. MORGAN JOURNAL STAFF WRITER

PROVIDENCE — What might be regarded as the birth certificate of the nation has surfaced after two centuries, and years in private hands. Thanks to a Providence donor, it has landed in the lap of the Gaspee Days Committee, people with a unique interest in the matter.

It's a copy of the June 13, 1772, edition of the Providence Gazette, a weekly newspaper that reported an odd happening four days prior in Narragansett Bay. As the British revenue ship Gaspee lay stranded on a mudbank off Namquit Point (now Gaspee Point) off Warwick, waiting for high tide to set it free, colonists on longboats boarded the schooner in the dark of night, shot and wounded its captain, sent the crew ashore and set the Gaspee ablaze.

It had been the most serious act of rebellion to date, the first rung on a ladder that led to the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. The Gazette story is seemingly the first published account of this momentous act.

This slap at the British Crown may have been big news, but the story ran on Page 3, said Mark Tracy, a pediatric neurologist at Hasbro Children's Hospital. Such inside play for stories was typical of the day. The front page was

generally set in type days before, with the inside pages reserved for “breaking news.” At any rate, there were only four pages to that edition.

Tracy shrewdly acquired the newspaper at auction and offered it to the Gaspee Days Committee with the requirements that it be preserved and placed on public view.

Interestingly, next to the tale of the burning of the Gaspee stands an advertisement placed by William Wanton, colonial governor, who seemed apoplectic regarding the incident:

“I do hereby offer a Reward at One Hundred Pound Sterling, Money of Great-Britain, to any Person or Persons who shall discover the perpetrators of said Villainy, to be paid immediately upon the Conviction of any one or more of them.”

He didn’t get any takers.

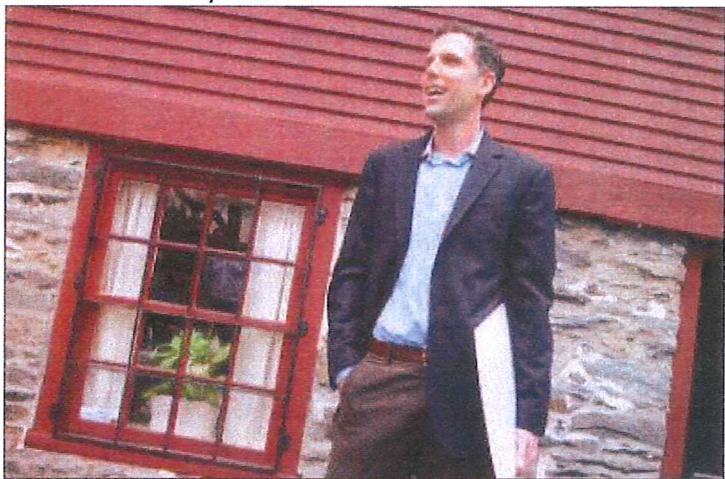
After its long sleep, the venerable linen-and-rag Gazette changed hands Monday evening at a ceremony in a Providence Preservation Society building at 21 Meeting St., across from the Shakespeare’s Head Building, where the Gazette had been published.

“The paper is in extraordinary condition,” Tracy said earlier Monday. “It looks 40 years old, not 240 years.”

Tracy, who said he paid \$2,000 for a stack of newspapers from 1772 and 1773 that included the Gaspee report, said the idea of searching out the first account of the Gaspee incident came to him last year when he read a story in The Providence Journal about the auction in Boston of several lots of Rhode Island newspapers from that period.

“This was the really significant news in 1772,” Tracey said. “Certainly, somebody at Skinner (Skinner Auctioneers and Appraisers) didn’t know their Rhode Island history and missed it.”

Instead, he said, the auction house concentrated on describing the batches of newspapers — from the estate of an unnamed Providence collector — in terms of the coming Boston Tea Party and other events that would become cardinal in American history.



Donor Mark Tracy outside the Shakespeare's Head Building on Monday in Providence, where the newspaper was printed.

He said most of the papers offered at auction contained “just typical events of the colony at the time and don’t have a bunch of exciting news, which is why this was so much under the radar screen.”

In fact, he said, the batch that held the June 13, 1772, edition “was the least interesting described lot of all of them.”

“[Skinner] did not at all mention burning of the Gaspee. I was really lucky. I was reading through [the auction house descriptions] after reading The Providence Journal article, and 1772 clicked.”

Tracy was not able to inspect the batch of newspapers in person. “I thought maybe it’s in there, maybe it’s not.

But they were supposedly from the estate of a Providence collector, and I had to ask why would a Providence collector want the specific date 1772,” he said. “I bid on it, but I couldn’t confirm [the target newspaper edition] was in there until I went and picked it up.”

There it was, he recounted, “in the pile, like all the others, in order of dates.”

Carol Deming, president of the Gaspee Days Committee, said she was surprised when Tracy “left a message on our Gaspee phone line and said, ‘I have an unusual donation.’”

Deming said the contribution of the Providence Gazette coincides with the acquisition by the Pawtuxet Rangers of a copy of their 1774 charter. She said the Rangers have taken the charter to a company in Andover, Mass., that specializes in preserving old documents. “So before we do anything, we are going to go visit [Andover] and see what they suggest.”

She said the Gaspee Days Committee has already approved the idea of placing the restored newspaper at the Pawtuxet Rangers Armory for display.

The Constitution of the United States and the Declaration of Independence are preserved in Washington under glass in an atmosphere of noble gas to keep oxygen from eating away at their paper and ink. Would such precautions be needed for Rhode Island’s latest Revolutionary-era documents?

"Will it have to be kept in the dark?" Deming wondered. "In a certain climate?" Those are questions for the preservationists to answer.

As for Tracy, "I believe in Providence around that time there were probably fewer than 4,000 total residents. I can imagine how many of these newspapers actually were printed, probably 600 or 700 or less."

That his copy survived all this time seemed a wonder to him. "I like to think of the people's hands who were reading about the incident. I like thinking about who actually read about it and whose newspaper this was."

And his thoughts on donating it?

"It's such a spectacular piece of history that it should make all Rhode Islanders proud of being a Rhode Islander," he said. "I just wanted to help raise the profile of the event and provide public access — seeing it, hopefully, help it come alive. Despite all the great work of the Gaspee Days Committee, historians and amateurs alike just don't understand how pivotal this was in the founding of our country. It's pretty exciting that it happened here."



THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL/BOB THAYER

A copy of the Providence Gazette from June 13, 1772, carries the first published account of the burning of the British ship.

On the book shelves

We have two we would like to recommend by way of our local Providence Journal.

David Brussat:

I've spent much of the past two decades reading and rereading the sea novels of the late Patrick O'Brian, who from about 1970 to 2000 wrote 21 volumes of a continuing saga. Beginning with "Master and Commander," the story follows Captain Aubrey and his "particular friend" Dr. Maturin on missions for the Royal Navy in ships of war around the world during the Napoleonic era. If you are a fan of Jane Austen or Alistair MacLean, you will love O'Brian. His literacy, wit and historical knowledge are of another age, and an extended exercise in the pleasure of reading. I so testify even though I don't care a whit about boats.

Irving Sheldon:

Another book I am looking forward to is Ian W. Toll's "Six Frigates," about the precarious founding of the U.S. Navy. The Economist said that it is as exciting as any of Patrick O'Brian's fictional seafaring tales.

Upcoming SAR events:

- RISSAR Fall Luncheon – Monday, September 30 (Cooke House)
- RISSAR Board of Managers – Saturday, October 19
- RISSAR/OFPA/Dar Veteran's Day memorial – Sunday, November 10
- RISSAR Veteran's Day Luncheon – Sunday, November 10
- RISSAR JPR memorial CPT Thomas Cole – Saturday, December 7
- RISSAR Christmas Luncheon – Saturday, December 14
- RISSAR Board of Managers – Saturday, January 4 2014