

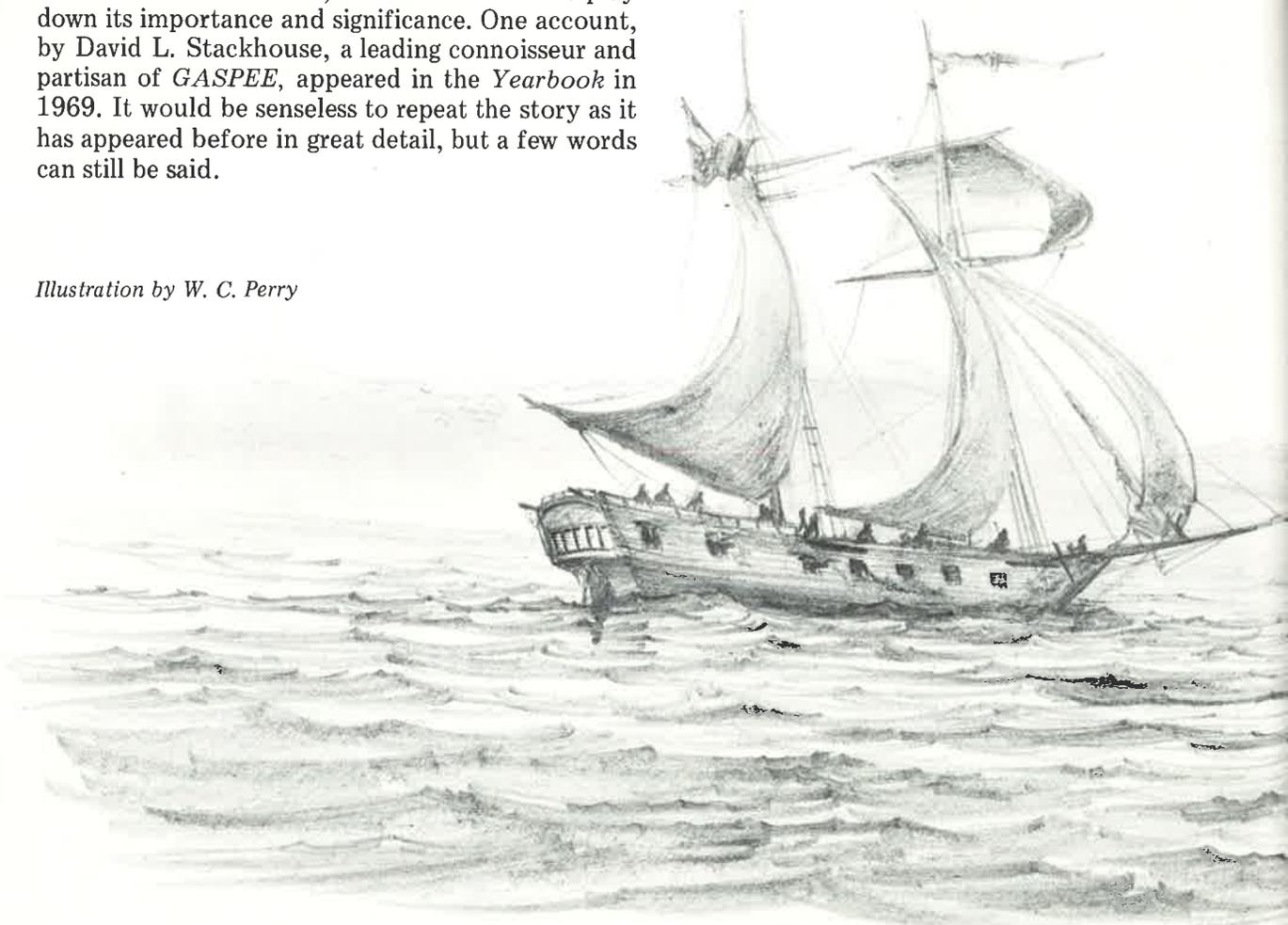
The Gaspee

by John F. Millar

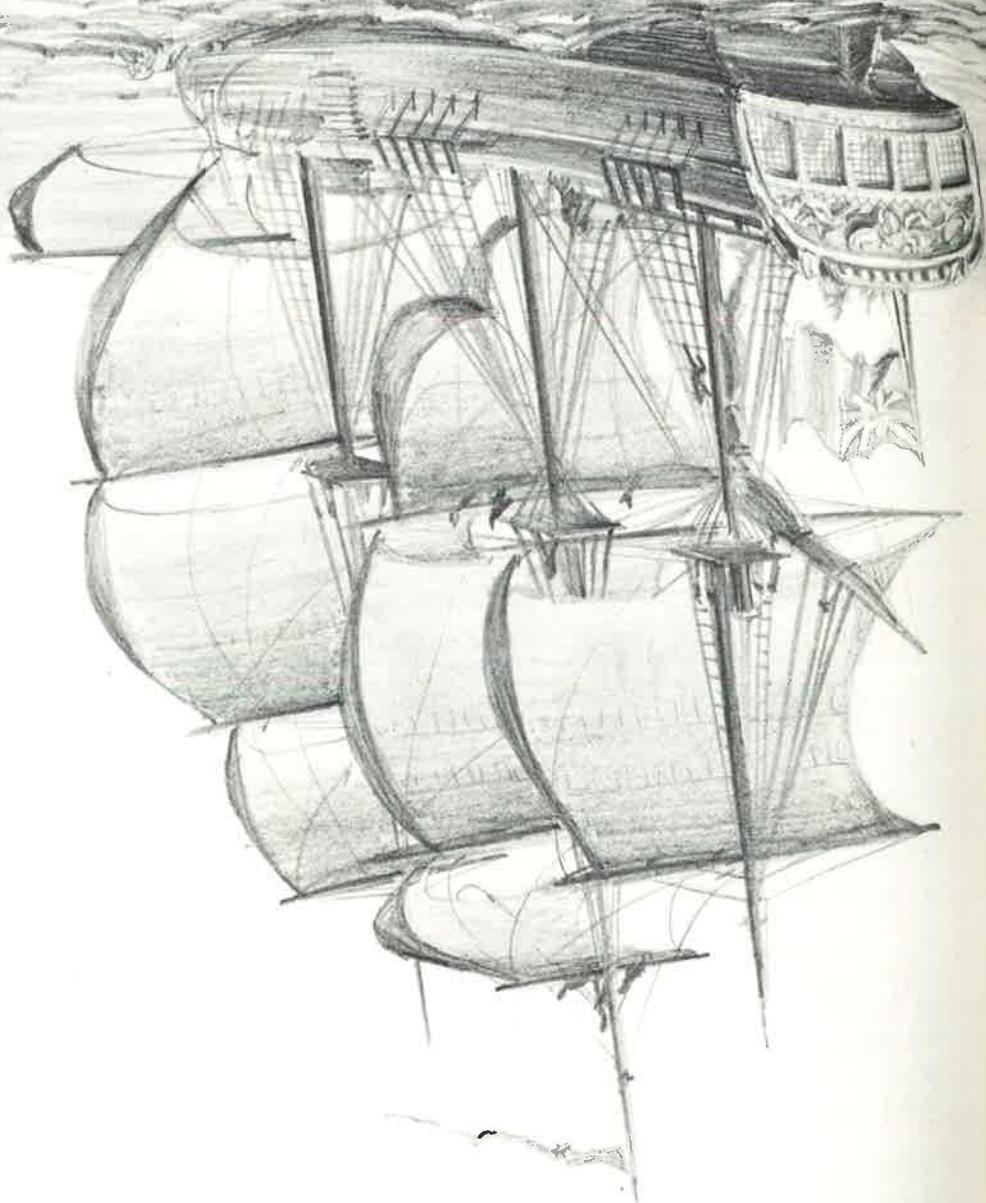
On the night of June 9th to 10th, 1772, a British Customs schooner was burned by angry smugglers. Although such incidents were far from common, it had happened before, and would doubtless happen again. Yet, some historians believe that this particular incident was one of those rare moments that changed the whole course of American history. The schooner's name was *GASPEE*.

In this 200th year of the *GASPEE* incident, countless versions of the burning and its aftermath have been set in print, not only in Rhode Island but around the nation. Some embellished the story, others told it chiefly in the words of the men actually involved in the burning; some glorified it as the First Blow for Freedom, while others tried to play down its importance and significance. One account, by David L. Stackhouse, a leading connoisseur and partisan of *GASPEE*, appeared in the *Yearbook* in 1969. It would be senseless to repeat the story as it has appeared before in great detail, but a few words can still be said.

Illustration by W. C. Perry



W. C. FERRY



W. C. Ferry
Illustrator

GASPEE was a typical small schooner in the employ of H. M. Customs Service. She was about 68 feet long on the deck, which makes her a little over half the length of the frigate *ROSE* at Newport. She was purchased by the Customs in 1764 in New York, at which time she was nearly two years old, and was built in America or Canada. She carried eight guns (probably four-pounders), and was manned by 20 to 30 crew, under the command of Lieutenant William Dudingston of the Royal Navy. She was named at the time of her purchase after the Gaspe Peninsula in Quebec Province, which may possibly mean that she had been built there.

GASPEE was sent to Rhode Island to try to enforce the customs laws, to curb smuggling and to assist the Customs Collector in the conduct of his work. Although some of the duties and laws were relatively new, most had been on the books for years and simply had not been enforced. After the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763, when the French threat to the peace and security of British residents of North America had been eliminated, a concerted effort was begun by Parliament to raise revenue in America. Naturally, this move was deeply resented by the colonist, and they reacted in various ways. Of all the colonies, Rhode Island reacted the most violently. As early as 1764 the Royal Navy suffered humiliation when their ship *MAIDSTONE* was fired on by Newporters, and that incident was soon followed by others. *GASPEE* herself was in Rhode Island when her sister, ironically named *LIBERTY*, was destroyed and burned in Newport by angry townspeople.

GASPEE's commander, Lieutenant Dudingston (*GASPEE* was too small a vessel to be commanded by a captain) quickly established a poor reputation for himself in Rhode Island. He exceeded his orders both in zeal and execution, and he refused to show his written authority for his actions to the Governor, which was a clear violation of the 1663 Charter of the Colony. He harassed Rhode Island vessels without discrimination; many were undoubtedly smugglers, for Rhode Island was known widely as the port with the most smuggling in the whole of North America, but many were also honest, law-abiding merchants. He impounded vessels, cargo and crew frequently without cause, and showed undisguised contempt for Rhode Islanders.

So it was that he ordered *GASPEE* to give chase to a small local schooner called *HANNAH*, which was proceeding from Newport to Providence on June 9th, 1772. *HANNAH* refused to stop and be searched, but led him a merry chase up the Bay. She took a short-cut over the sand bar at Namquit Point, and when *GASPEE* tried to follow she stuck fast on a falling tide. Some say that Captain Ben-

jamin Lindsey had been planning to do this for a long time, while others contend that he was seriously trying to escape and had nothing else in mind. As for Dudingston, he was in an embarrassing position, and not only from a physical point of view: *HANNAH* had already cleared Customs at Newport, so he had no business chasing her; his real reason to go to Providence was to pick up additional crew, for he was short-handed, and he obviously had chased *HANNAH* out of some perverted sense of the sport of it. If his Admiral in Boston chose to investigate the case fully, Dudingston would probably have to face a Court Martial for exceeding his orders and for needlessly jeopardizing the safety of his ship for fun, especially while he was short-handed.

But Admiral Montagu would shortly have little reason to investigate Dudingston's decision to chase *HANNAH*, for something much more momentous had occurred. When *HANNAH* arrived safely in Providence, her crew quickly spread the word that the hated *GASPEE* was hard aground only just over an hour's row away. Merchants, under the leadership of John Brown, decided to destroy *GASPEE* while she was helpless. This would rid them of Dudingston and would serve as a warning to the Customs Service that Rhode Islanders must be treated with care; the risks involved did not seem too great, for the Crown had done virtually nothing in retaliation following other incidents, such as the burning of the *LIBERTY*.

Therefore, several armed longboats, under the command of John Brown's leading captain, Abraham Whipple, set out for Namquit Point. One early account suggests that the men were wearing Indian disguises, but it is generally agreed now that they were not disguised in any way; many prominent merchants were in the group, and it seems incredible that Dudingston would not have recognized some of them, especially since he was wounded and then attended to by them.

Just before high tide, shortly after midnight, the longboats arrived off the bow of *GASPEE*. They were challenged by a sentry, but there was little he could do to prevent them from storming aboard. In the scuffle, Dudingston was shot and wounded, and it was all Whipple could do to prevent some of his men from finishing him off. No one else was wounded, so Whipple's group landed Dudingston and *GASPEE*'s crew at Pawtuxet, while *GASPEE* burned brightly in the background.

Immediately, the genial Governor Joseph Wanton issued a proclamation offering a reward of a hundred Pounds for information leading to the arrest and conviction of any members of the raiding party. Although there had been 150 men in the party, no

one stepped forward to claim a reward, and, based on previous events, that should have been the end of the matter. However, when the news of the incident reached London, the King himself took an active interest in the enquiry, and offered a new reward of five hundred Pounds, and an additional five hundred Pounds for each of the leaders. Ironically, *GASPEE* herself had only cost five hundred Pounds when she was purchased. Once more, no one came forward, even though a pardon was offered to any of the raiders who would confess and inform on others in the party.

A special Royal Commission of Enquiry was therefore convened six months after the incident at Newport's Colony House. The Commission was composed of leading jurists from the other Colonies, and it had been granted the unusual power — and duty — of sending any suspects back to Britain for trial, which was a fundamental abridgement of the Rhode Island Charter: a man had the right to be tried in the jurisdiction where he allegedly committed the crime. The reason for this drastic step was obviously that no Rhode Island jury would convict anyone of the crime, while a London jury would most likely convict anyone of it. Whilst the enquiry was thus being conducted, leaders of the other Colonies became alarmed at the apparent destruction of Rhode Island's Charter, and established Committees of Correspondence to keep each other in touch about this and other similar dangers. These Committees soon concluded that matters were too difficult to be handled through their cumbersome structure, so they recommended that a Continental Congress be called to consider how to react. Once Congress had been established, there was no turning back.

The Royal Commission, meanwhile, had no luck in turning up any useful evidence on the *GASPEE* incident, so it adjourned in June, 1773. The secret was still safe, although two years later, Commodore Wallace of the frigate *ROSE* had learned some of it, for he wrote Whipple a letter, warning him that he knew of his involvement and that he should be hanged. Whipple replied simply: "Sir, always catch a man before you hang him." Whipple then went into hiding, pausing only briefly to drive ashore one of the smaller vessels of *ROSE*'s fleet. When he was finally captured at the fall of Charleston in 1780, he was given a parole instead of a hangman's noose.

Because of Rhode Island's small size and its lack of political power, the *GASPEE* incident, as well as other Rhode Island contributions to the winning of Independence, has been largely ignored in the writing of history books, and has been forgotten even in Rhode Island. However, a public-spirited group of citizens in the communities of Warwick

and Cranston, which include the village of Pawtuxet where *GASPEE*'s crew were deposited on shore, started celebration in June each year to commemorate the incident. The Gaspee Days Committee has sponsored a bigger celebration every year for several years, culminating in the 200th anniversary in 1972, but scheduled to be continued in the future as well. Gaspee Days has attracted national attention for some of its events, which include a colonial ball, a colonial parade, races for power boats and sailing yachts, a clambake, an arts festival, a fireworks display and various contests. All who participated agree that Gaspee Days is a great success; it helps to publicize Rhode Island, it brings many tourists to the Warwick and Cranston area, and it provides a good time for all. The Committee has succeeded in putting a dramatic spotlight on The First Blow for Freedom.

But was it The First Blow for Freedom? Because the *GASPEE* enquiry led directly to the establishment of Committees of Correspondence, which in turn called for a Continental Congress, the *GASPEE* incident is obviously of great significance, greater perhaps than the more famous Boston Tea Party, which occurred over a year later. Earlier blows, such as the burning of the *LIBERTY*, were isolated events, really unconnected to the general struggle. Those who want to point a finger to a particular moment and say that at such a moment the Revolution began, if indeed there was such a moment, might conclude that the burning of the *GASPEE* was the most appropriate incident. However, is adding the word 'Freedom' to the label stretching the case? While many of those involved in burning *GASPEE* later turned out to be important patriots, it cannot be said that their motives were pure and patriotic in 1772. Their purpose was simply to get rid of the latest threat to their traditional pastime and business of smuggling. Our Revolutionary heroes have been carefully whitewashed before being presented to the American public. Because we could not understand today what pressures our Revolutionary leaders had to face, we are not encouraged to think about many of them as smugglers first and patriots second, or about idealists throwing themselves into improbable alliances with opportunists and downright criminals. Yet, of such things are revolutions made, and if we can dare to hold our own Revolution up to such a bold light, we can proudly say that the *GASPEE* burning was indeed the First Blow for Freedom. Let us dispel the myths from our Revolutionary history, for the truth is strong enough to stand by itself, and we are now mature enough to be exposed to that truth as we approach the 200th anniversary of our Independence.