



MARIETTA CHAPTER, OHIO SOCIETY

SONS OF THE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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Keynote Address

Patriots of the Northwest Territory; Commodore Whipple

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Presented at the Memorial Service for Patriots of the American Revolution in the Northwest Territory at Mound Cemetery, Marietta, Ohio, May 26, 2022

Memorial Ceremony – The Gaspee Affair

In just 2 weeks, America will mark the 250th anniversary of the Gaspee Affair, the first armed, open act of rebellion in the American colonies against their British ruler, King George III. That event occurred on June 9th & 10th, 1772 near Providence, Rhode Island where a group of patriots, led by Marietta native Commodore Abraham Whipple, forcibly boarded and burned the British revenue cutter *HMS Gaspee* to the waterline.

As one of the biggest seaports in the entire American colonies at the time, the merchants surrounding of Narragansett Bay...those living in Providence, Newport, and Warwick, Rhode Island...had seen their commerce greatly affected by taxes from Britain. By 1770, the revenue cutter *HMS Gaspee* was sent to the area to enforce the collections of these taxes. The officers and crew were well known to these local merchants for what some of them claimed were the arbitrary collection of additional fees and sometimes the entire confiscation of their ships and cargo, that were then sent off to British HQ to Boston. To these British subjects, these ships and the goods they carried, represented their owner's and crew's financial livelihood and a substantial part of their community's economy.

After a couple of years of complaints through official governmental channels about the *Gaspee*, these American patriots had finally had enough. About 3pm on June 9th, 1772, the officers of the *Gaspee* spotted a small sloop named the *Hannah*, sailing in what they claimed was a suspicious manner, and began their pursuit in the bay. During their chase however, and being much less familiar with that part of the massive Narragansett Bay than the *Hannah's* crew, it ran aground on a sandbar off Namquid Point. The *Gaspee* Captain and some of the crew were then disembarked and went to find assistance to help extract them when high tide was expected to arrive around midnight.

During that process, they unknowingly encountered members of the Sons of Liberty, including leading merchant and future member of the Ohio Company of Associates, John Brown, and one of the sea captains he employed, Commodore Abraham Whipple. In the early evening, an individual beating a drum marched through the streets of Providence, a town of about 4,000 residents, to

announce a town meeting at Sabin's Tavern. It was a perfect choice. If you were going to commit an openly mutinous and treasonous act against your King, you were going to need some liquid courage. They met there at about 7pm, and the Sons of Liberty, led by Brown and Whipple, hatched a plan to rid themselves of the dastardly *Gaspee* that was temporarily stranded nearby.

Whipple and others organized, depending on the different accounts, between 8 and 10 longboats, each commanded by an experienced ship captain. So, at approximately 10pm, a group of between 50 to 80 men set off to destroy the *Gaspee*.

They muffled their oars and rowed out and around the *Gaspee* and approached from the opposite side the lookouts had expected to see their returning crew and their rescuers. When a sentry spotted the first longboat coming from the wrong direction, he alerted the commander, Lt. William Dudingston, who cried out, "Who comes there?" Naval historian and author Sheldon Cohen wrote that Whipple gave the response, "I am the Sheriff of Kent (meaning Kent County). I have a warrant to apprehend you, BLANK BLANK [cursing...] you! So surrender BLANK BLANK you!"

Other accounts stated that Whipple only got out the words, "I am the Sheriff of Kent" before a man named Joseph Bucklin, a passenger in one of the other boats, raised his pistol and fired. The shot hit Dudingston in the thigh. Bucklin then mistakenly cried out, "I have killed the rascal!" Catching the crew entirely off guard, the Rhode Islanders immediately boarded the ship and captured the crew. Whipple and the others would secure the ship, evacuate Lt. Dudingston and his remaining crew, and set the ship aflame for all of the people of the region to see. Remember, this is more than 2.5 years before the first shot was fired on Lexington Green in Massachusetts to mark the first official battle for American Independence. BTW, John Brown would be the last man off of the burning ship.

The result of this open defiance, and first act of American Independence, two things occurred: an extensive manhunt for the perpetrators that resulted in a trial that didn't go anywhere due to convenient faulty memories and frequent sicknesses amongst the witnesses that rendered them unfit to testify. The second was the legendary tale where British Royal Navy Captain James Wallace, commander of the *HMS Rose*, wrote an open letter to Whipple...the sheriff of Kent...and therefore the only person specifically identified by the *Gaspee* crew. Wallace posted a notice in Providence that stated, "You, Abraham Whipple, on 10th of June, 1772, burned His Majesty's vessel the *Gaspée*, and I will hang you at the yard arm!"

Whipple's defiant reply was: "Sir, always catch a man before you hang him." Obviously, since Whipple is buried here in Marietta, he was not caught and hanged before the American Revolution began in April 1775.

There were others who participated in the raiding party that night who have ties to Marietta besides the aforementioned Whipple and his employer, John Brown. First, Whipple's brother-in-law, Capt. John B. Hopkins, would command the longboat that contained the shooter, Joseph Bucklin. There is speculation by historians of whether or not Hopkins gave him permission to fire or if Bucklin acted independently. At the outbreak of the Revolution, Capt. Hopkins and Whipple would be given equal rank in the colonial fleet under the Commander-in-Chief of the Navy and John's father (and therefore Whipple's father-in-law) Commodore Esek Hopkins. This group may find it of interest to know that John Paul Jones, the so-called "Father of the American Navy" was a junior officer to

Hopkins and Whipple, which is why I call Whipple, “the Grandfather of the American Navy.” Undoubtedly Abraham Whipple’s wife, Sarah (Hopkins) Whipple, who is buried here behind me, would have kept her brother John and the rest of her family well informed throughout the rest of her life of the happenings here in Marietta and the Mid-Ohio Valley.

Dr. Solomon Drowne, one of the prominent physicians in Providence was part of the planning process and was at the wharf when the longboats set out, but did not personally participate in the raid. He was called to testify in court about his knowledge and role in the Gaspee Affair, but like all of the others who testified, he had a terrible, though temporary, case of amnesia. Dr. Drowne would be one of Marietta’s earliest settlers, arriving here just a month after the 48 pioneers. He traveled here with Gen. James Mitchell Varnum, who’s grave we’ll visit later this morning at Oak Grove Cemetery, as his personal doctor. Despite his best efforts, Varnum would die of consumption. Dr. Drowne would give Varnum’s funeral oration here in Marietta in January 1789 and would be the keynote speaker at the 1-year anniversary of Marietta’s founding. Although many of his Drowne relatives would also move to this area and be part of the river trade in Marietta and Belpre, due to health issues, Dr. Drowne eventually moved back to Rhode Island and is therefore often overlooked in our local history.

Although I found no other Marietta settlers among the other known Gaspee raiders, planners, or witnesses, I did find the following other members of the Ohio Company of Associates. Further investigation is needed on their land dealings, but they were at the very least investors in the expedition and experiment of western settlement here at Marietta.

One of those men was Capt. Joseph Tillinghast, a sea captain and commander of one of the other longboats that night. Mercy Tillinghast, wife of Dr. Solomon Drowne’s, was Joseph’s sister. There are other Tillinghasts from Providence who would be early settlers of this area, but their connection to Capt. Joseph is unknown at this point. Next is Welcome Arnold. Welcome (yes, that’s is given name) was one of the key planners in the raid and a probable participant. He and John Brown were local leaders of the Sons of Liberty and were informed by the captain of the ship being chased, *Hannah*, of *Gaspee*’s condition and also encountered some of the British crew.

Another Ohio Company member was Dr. John Mawney. Dr. Mawney wrote a first-person account of the Gaspee attack years after the war. He was said to have known several people who had been shot and/or killed in the Boston Massacre in 1770 and therefore was highly motivated to participate in the raid. He also personally treated Lt Dudingston’s leg wound when they boarded the ship. And finally, there was Ohio Company investor, lawyer, and future US Senator, Theodore Foster. He did not participate in the raid, but was one of the clerks involved in the investigation and deposition of witnesses.

As we approach the 250th Anniversary of the burning of the Gaspee and the other anniversaries to come that marked milestones in American Independence, let us heed the words written on the monument in Oak Grove Cemetery overlooking the graves of Gen. Varnum and other early Marietta pioneers, “Names pass away, but deeds live on.” May God Bless our country and the patriots that have gone before us and those who continue to fight for our freedoms every day. Thank you!