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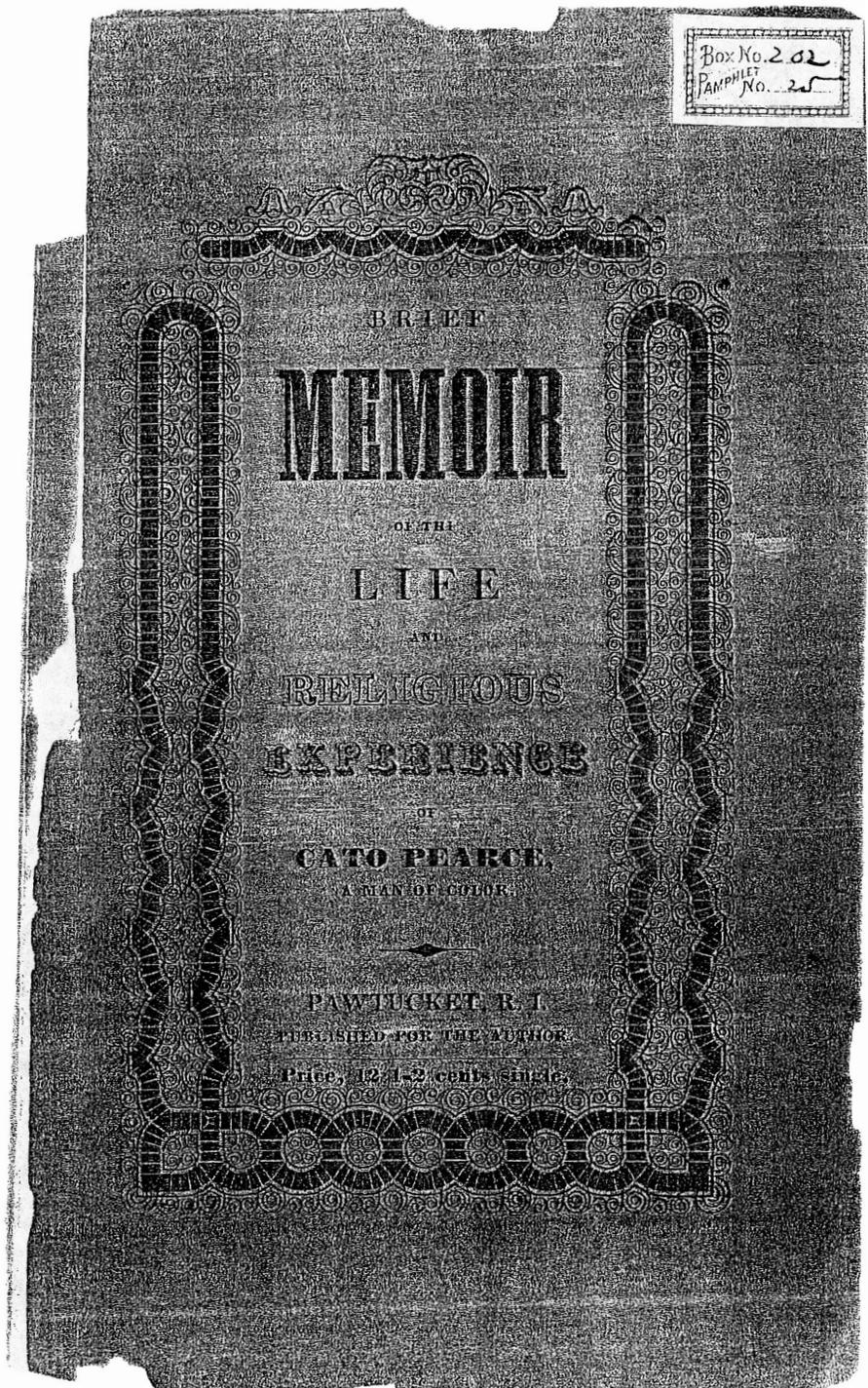
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Cover of *A Brief Memoir of the Life and Religious Experience of Cato Pearce, a Man of Color*. John Hay Library, Brown University.

Cato Pearce's Memoir:

A Rhode Island Slave Narrative

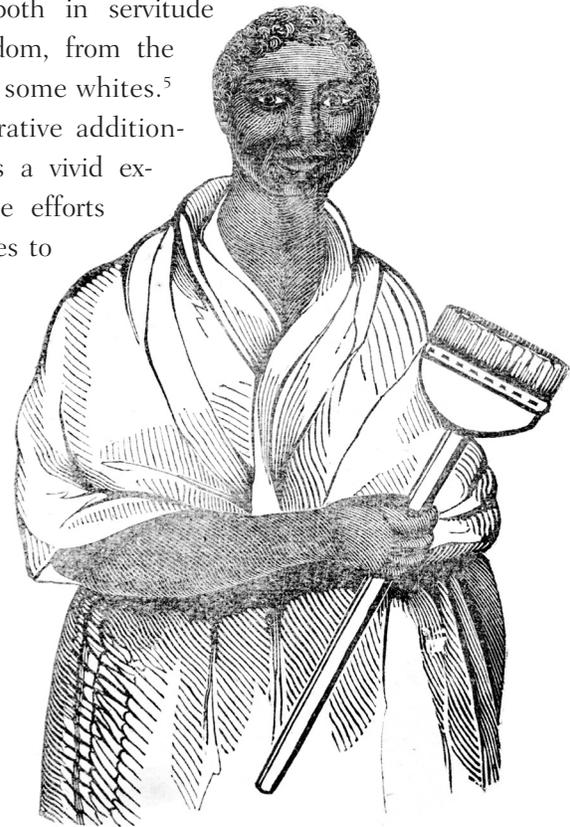
CHRISTIAN M. MCBURNEY

In 1842 an extraordinary pamphlet was published in Pawtucket, a dictated autobiography entitled *A Brief Memoir of the Life and Religious Experience of Cato Pearce, a Man of Color*.¹ Its author, born to slave parents in North Kingstown in 1790, lived at a crucial time for African Americans in Rhode Island, a time when the state's black residents made the transition from slavery to freedom. Because his mother was a slave and he was born after 1784, under Rhode Island's gradual emancipation law Cato Pearce was to be bound as an involuntary servant until he would become free at the age of twenty-one. The memoir describes how at age eighteen Pearce ran away, was caught and whipped by his white master, and later ran away for good; how he was flogged at sea on a merchant vessel; and how he became active as an itinerant evangelical Baptist preacher with the assistance of whites. Finally the memoir recounts a shocking incident when Elisha R. Potter Sr., one of the most powerful white men in Rhode Island, had Pearce imprisoned for leaving work on Potter's farm to preach at a Sunday church service. This article summarizes *A Brief Memoir* and attempts to place the events it describes in historical context.

Only recently rediscovered, Pearce's autobiography is the most complete account of the experiences of a Rhode Island-born African American who moved from bondage to freedom.² Although part of the tradition of slave narratives that became popular reading in the North in the antebellum era, it is not about an escaped slave from the South but about a man who was born of slave parents and raised as an involuntary servant in Rhode Island. The white Rhode Islanders who read Pearce's story were surely forced not only to consider the continuing institution of southern slavery but also to confront the existence of slaveholding in their own

part of the country, as well as the contemporary harsh treatment of even free African Americans.³

Typical of the narratives of former slaves, *A Brief Memoir* describes the hardships and brutality of involuntary servitude, but like several other contemporary New England slave narratives, it also recounts the enormous obstacles facing emancipated African Americans in New England.⁴ These New England narratives commonly show their authors living virtuous lives but nonetheless suffering from white discrimination, yet benefiting, both in servitude and in freedom, from the assistance of some whites.⁵ Pearce's narrative additionally provides a vivid example of the efforts of freed slaves to



Eleanore Eldridge was the subject of one of the best-known memoirs of black Rhode Islanders during the first half of the nineteenth century. Her parents were slaves, but she was born free. From Frances H. Green, *Memoirs of Eleanore Eldridge* (Providence, 1838); RIHS Collection (RHi X3 4807).

join white churches, with the resistance they encountered in mainstream churches and the acceptance they found among evangelicals.

ALTHOUGH SLAVERY WAS not an uncommon condition for people of color in southern Rhode Island when Pearce was born in 1790, it was becoming less common than it had been in colonial times. While blacks had averaged about 2 to 3 percent of the population in the rest of colonial New England, the percentage of blacks in Rhode Island during that time ranged from 6 to 9 percent. The higher percentage of Rhode Island blacks was probably the result of two factors: First, merchants in Newport, Providence, and Bristol took a predominant role in North America in the African slave trade and therefore had easy access to slaves.⁶ Second, the large-scale commercial dairy farming operations that arose in southern Rhode Island's King's County (now Washington County) created a demand for slave labor. On the average, the so-called Narragansett Planters each had about four hundred sheep, one hundred dairy cows and other cattle, and twenty horses, and they traded their surplus farm products to nearby Newport merchants. Slaves were used to clear lands for farming, tend to herds, plant and harvest crops, help transport goods and run errands to Newport, and perform domestic service in their masters' homes.⁷ Each of the Narragansett Planters held from five to twenty slaves.⁸

King's County had the highest concentration of blacks in colonial rural New England, about 10 percent of the total white, black, and Indian population. South Kingstown (then including Narragansett) had the county's highest concentration, averaging a ratio of one black person for every five white persons. North Kingstown had an average ratio of one black person for every ten white persons. Most of these people of African descent were held as slaves during colonial times.⁹

By 1790 slavery was on the decline in Rhode Island for a variety of reasons. First, the state's influential Quaker sect, led by the South Kingstown Monthly Meeting, had

come out against slaveholding on moral grounds in the 1770s.¹⁰ More importantly, the upheaval of the Revolutionary War had resulted in the liberation of many Rhode Island slaves. Some blacks took the opportunity to run away to Newport after that city was occupied by British forces in December 1776 or to leave with the British forces when they evacuated Newport in October 1779.¹¹ That slaves began enlisting in the First Rhode Island Regiment in February 1778 in exchange for their freedom after completing their service is well known, but in fact slaves were joining Rhode Island regiments as substitutes for their masters and their masters' relatives, under the same stipulation, as early as 1777.¹² More than seventy King's County slaves joined and contributed creditable service to the First Rhode Island Regiment, with the survivors gaining their freedom.¹³ In addition, the rhetoric of liberty and equality during the American Revolution made many Americans recognize the incongruity of seeking freedom from Britain while at the same time holding fellow human beings in bondage. By 1784 all of the New England states, including Rhode Island, had either outlawed slavery or enacted statutes for its gradual extinction.

By the time of the American Revolution, slaveholding in southern Rhode Island was in fact no longer as profitable as it had been earlier, and indeed it may have placed substantial burdens on slave owners, who were required to feed and clothe their slaves regardless of the slaves' ages and working abilities. Moreover, instead of following the traditional English practice of giving the bulk of their property to the eldest son, Narragansett Planters divided their farms among their sons relatively equally, with the frequent result that no one son's landholdings were large enough to produce a surplus sufficient for commercial farming so that slaves could be profitably employed.¹⁴

But despite the erosion of support for the institution, Rhode Island did not immediately abolish slavery. Instead, in 1784 it enacted a law that stipulated that "no person or persons, whether negroes, mulattoes, or others, who shall be born within the limits of this state, on or after the first day of March, A.D., 1784, shall be deemed

or considered as servants for life, or slaves." Noting that "humanity requires" that "children declared free as afore-said" remain with their mothers "a convenient time" following their birth, an amendment to the act required "that every negro or mulatto child born after the first day of March, A.D. 1784, be supported and maintained by the owner of the mother of such child, to the age of twenty-one years, provided the owner of the mother shall during that time hold her as a slave." Thus children whose mothers were slaves would themselves be kept in bondage until they reached adulthood.¹⁵

While the gradual emancipation act technically meant that slaves born before March 1, 1784, could be held as slaves for the remainder of their lives, in practice slaves in Washington County (the name was changed from Kings County in 1782) became free at a much faster pace after that date. In 1774 most of Washington County's 911 blacks were held in slavery; by 1790 only 297 of the county's 1,711 blacks were slaves.¹⁶ Shame among whites in holding slaves in light of the ideology of the American Revolution, and the reduced economic need for slaves to work the smaller farms, led most slaveholders to free their slaves. The freeing of the slaves was accomplished through various official and unofficial means. Some masters recorded freeing their slaves in town records,¹⁷ but it appears that in most cases slave owners simply and informally allowed their slaves to go free. Some slaves, perhaps hearing of others being set free, liberated themselves by running away. The masters of these runaway slaves did not always try to recapture them, and those who did try, with the help of advertisements in local newspapers did not always succeed.¹⁸

SOME SLAVE MASTERS stubbornly held onto their slaves. Unfortunately for Cato Pearce, his master was that kind of man. Cato Pearce spent his early days on a farm in North Kingstown with his mother and two siblings; he had little memory of his father, who was a slave on a neighboring farm.¹⁹ Although *A Brief Memoir* identifies Cato Pearce's master as a man named Giles Pearce, census records of the time do not report that Giles Pearce

owned slaves. The transcriber of the memoir may have misheard the first name; most likely Cato Pearce's master was Joshua Pearce, a well-to-do farmer who had sufficient standing in North Kingstown to be selected as a captain of a militia regiment during the Revolutionary War and as a town overseer of the poor for many years.²⁰ Joshua Pearce owned two slaves in 1782 and four in 1790.²¹ Cato's mother, two siblings, and Cato himself were probably his slaves.

Born six years after the passage of the 1784 act, Cato Pearce was not a slave for life; he was entitled to his freedom from involuntary servitude at age twenty-one, but until that time he was what one historian calls a "statutory slave."²² Although Pearce carefully never claims in his narrative that he was a slave, he was nonetheless forced to work for his mother's owner as if he was a slave until age twenty-one. Interestingly, James Mars of Connecticut, who was also born of slave parents in 1790, described himself in his narrative as a slave, even though he knew that under Connecticut's gradual emancipation law he was entitled to his freedom at age twenty-five.²³

Ten Dollars Reward.

RAN AWAY from the Subscriber, in North Kingstown, County of Washington, on the 5th Instant, **A NEGRO WOMAN**, about 27 Years of Age, 5 Feet 4 Inches high, and walks with her Head very upright, had on when she went away, a dark Flannel Short Gown, and Petticoat, a white Petticoat, a Man's Grey Gown, and a napped Felt Hat partly worn. Whoever will return said Negro to her Master, shall receive the above Reward, and all necessary Charges, paid by JOSHUA PEARCE, in North Kingstown, near the Devil's Foot. March 7, 1796.

Advertisement in the March 10, 1796, issue of the *United States Chronicle*.

In 1796, when Cato Pearce was about six years old, his mother—born before 1784 and thus facing a lifetime in slavery—ran away from her master and her family, and Cato never saw her again. "I 'member she told me to be

a good boy and she would bring me somethin' when she came back. She left three children behind her; I was the oldest, and the youngest was only ten months old."

Joshua Pearce was not willing to let Cato's mother go free without an effort to recapture her. In the March 10, 1796, issue of the *United States Chronicle*, a Providence newspaper, he ran an advertisement, offering a ten-dollar reward: "RAN-AWAY from the Subscriber, in North Kingstown, County of Washington, on the 5th instant, A NEGRO WOMAN, about 27 Years of Age, 5 feet 4 inches high, and walks with her Head very upright, had on when she went away, a dark Flannel Short Gown, and Petticoat, a white Petticoat, a Man's Grey Gown, and a napped Felt Hat partly worn. Whoever will return said Negro to her Master, shall receive the above Reward, and all necessary Charges, paid by JOSHUA PEARCE, in North Kingstown, near the Devil's Foot."

What motivated Cato Pearce's mother to run away and abandon her children? We cannot know for certain, but her circumstances suggest possible reasons. Because she was born prior to 1784, she was not covered by the gradual emancipation law and technically could have been held as a slave for the remainder of her life. Perhaps she felt that she would never be freed; perhaps she suffered from intolerable conditions or unwanted attentions from her master; perhaps she was a naturally proud and independent woman (one who held "her Head very upright") who could no longer tolerate her bondage. Whatever her reasons, it seems clear that she wanted to become free so deeply that she was willing to abandon her children, for escaping with them and avoiding capture would have presented obvious practical difficulties. In any event, the state of slavery in which she, her children, and her children's father lived could hardly have provided any measure of family stability.

By 1800 most of the slaves in Washington County had been freed. Of the county's 1,013 black persons recorded in the census of that year, only 124 were still held as slaves. In North Kingstown, where Cato Pearce continued to live, there were 204 blacks, only 39 of whom were still slaves. Many of the freed blacks resided in their own

households. Black heads of households and the number of blacks in those households in North Kingstown included London Wilcox (9), Joseph Hall (5), Cuff Gardner (4), and Caesar Potter (3).²⁴ Many freed slaves decided to leave Washington County and their slave past to start new lives in Providence or other parts of New England. The total black population in Washington County declined dramatically, from a high of 1,711 in 1790 to 1,013 in 1800.

Census records for 1800 indicate that Joshua Pearce still held three slaves, most likely Cato Pearce and his two younger siblings.²⁵ About 1808 Cato Pearce ran away from his master's farm, leaving his two siblings behind. He was about eighteen years old at the time, and while the gradual emancipation act required his manumission at age twenty-one, he was apparently too impatient to wait for his freedom.

In deciding whether to run away, Pearce may have considered the risk that if he remained in involuntary servitude in Washington County, he might be sold to a southern slave owner; the General Assembly had passed a law in 1779 prohibiting the sale of slaves outside the state, but he may not have trusted his master to abide by that law. Pearce may also have feared that even if his master wanted to manumit him, the North Kingstown town council, following the example of South Kingstown, might somehow prevent it. Until required to do so by the county court in 1808, the town council of South Kingstown, where more than 44 blacks were still held in bondage in 1800, stubbornly refused to authorize the manumissions that were mandated under the 1784 statute.²⁶

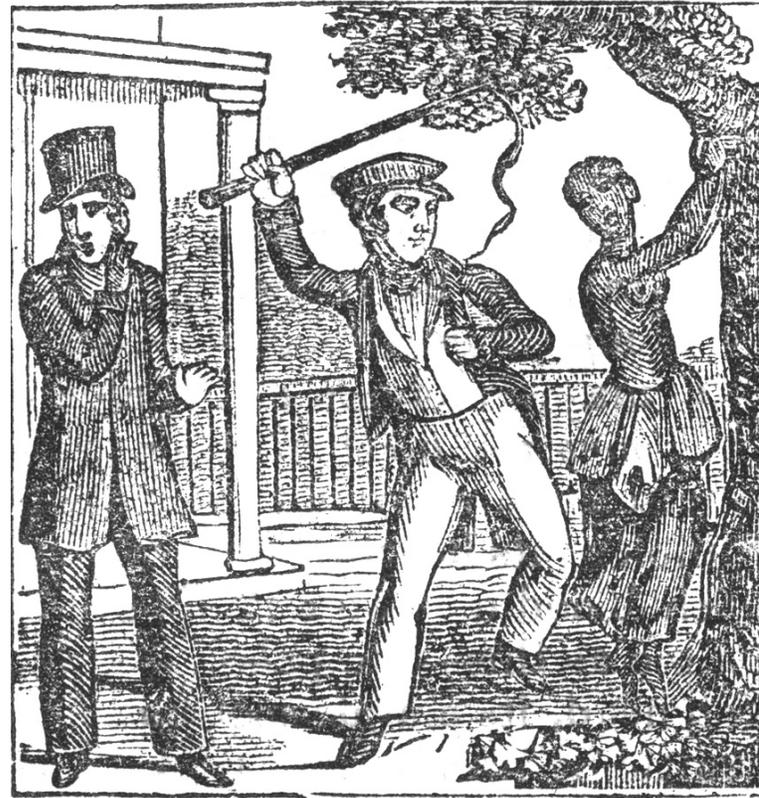
Having fled from his master's farm, Pearce made his way to Providence to look for a job on an outbound ship. It was a logical course of action. While Washington County's black population declined between 1790 and 1800, the black population of Providence increased from 475 in 1790 to 656 in 1800, and when Pearce arrived there, more than half of the town's blacks were living in their own households and a burgeoning African American community was emerging. It would be difficult for Pearce's master to find him quickly in Providence. Moreover, the town was a busy seaport, a place where runaway

black men could escape Rhode Island by finding employment on merchant sailing ships.²⁷

In Providence, Pearce was offered employment by a Captain Bailey on board the schooner *Four Brothers*, bound for Wilmington, North Carolina, with a return voyage to Boston. This sounded like a good opportunity to Pearce, who planned never to return to Rhode Island. But on the return voyage the first mate became ill, and Captain Bailey decided to drop him off in Wickford, Rhode Island, the first mate's home port. Pearce describes what happened next: "We got into Wickford on a Sunday; and at the very time my master happened to be out a fishing. He knew it was the vessel I went in, and came on board and took me on shore. He took all my wages, and gave me a floggin."

These events aboard the *Four Brothers* were likely not coincidental. Cato Pearce wrote that his master, presumably by making inquiries at the docks in Providence, knew what ship had hired him. Joshua Pearce may have passed a message to another ship captain offering Captain Bailey a reward for returning Cato Pearce, and Bailey might then have asked his first mate to feign illness as part of a scheme to return Cato to Wickford.

Cato Pearce's whipping, though harsh and cruel by any standard, was not an uncommon punishment at the time. If a crime was considered serious enough, both white and black convicted persons at the Washington County jail in Little Rest (now Kingston, South Kingstown) were subject to whipping.²⁸ Those unable to pay a fine when convicted of a minor offense could also be whipped.²⁹ These whippings were sanctioned by law and were administered by government officials. But although whipping outside of legal punishment was unusual at this time, Cato Pearce was an indentured servant, if not actually a slave, and masters traditionally had leeway to administer corporal punishment to their indentured servants and slaves. It was not uncommon in colonial King's County for runaway or otherwise recalcitrant slaves to be whipped or to receive other brutal punishment.³⁰ The kind of whipping that Pearce endured was likely still considered an acceptable practice in the community.



Ironically captioned "HOW SLAVERY IMPROVES THE CONDITION OF WOMEN," this drawing of a southern slave master whipping a female slave appeared in the *American Anti-Slavery Almanac for 1840*. The whip, a symbol of slavery, played an important part in Cato Pearce's experiences as well. Ephemera Collection, portfolio 248, folder 1, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.

After his whipping, Cato Pearce went back to work for his master as an indentured servant, without pay and without freedom. Pearce does not spend much time in his narrative discussing his daily life in servitude in North Kingstown, though he does complain that he was not allowed to attend school or religious services: "I many times thought how strange it was that my master was so blind as never to give me any larning, or to tell me anything about 'ligion."

Slave owners in New England rarely sent their chattel to school, for they found that illiterate slaves, not dangerously empowered by education, were easier to control. Rhode Island's gradual emancipation act of 1784 provided that towns should fund the education of the children of slaves, but that provision was overturned in 1785 by a new General Assembly, one less influenced by

the children's need for education than by the burden that such an obligation would impose on taxpayers.³¹ While it appears that free black children were allowed to attend Washington County schools with white children at this time,³² slave masters were not likely to expend much effort on their own to have their slaves' children educated. Thus children of slave parents, such as Cato Pearce, were largely consigned to working at low-paying, temporary agricultural and other manual-labor jobs.

Religious instruction was a slightly different story: some slave owners allowed their slaves to attend church services. Among members of the main religious denominations in Washington County at the time, Anglican slave owners seem to have been more likely than Congregationalists, Quakers, or Baptists to permit their slaves to attend church services.³³ Two years after being caught and whipped by his master for running away, Pearce ran away again. This time he decided to cross the border into Massachusetts, where slavery, in all its forms, had been banned, and there he hired himself out as a farm worker to a white family in Rehoboth. A few years later he again turned to the sea, signing on as a crew member aboard a schooner belonging to a Captain Rogers of New London, Connecticut, for a voyage to the Caribbean islands. It was on this voyage that Pearce would start his own spiritual voyage toward religion.

MOST OF CATO Pearce's memoir concerns his conversion to religion and his work as an evangelical preacher. Such an emphasis on religion was common in slave narratives of the period, and it has been suggested that this was a tactic to help attract sympathetic white readers to abolitionist literature.³⁴ But in Pearce's case, as in many others, religion truly appears to have become a central focus of his life.

Pearce turned to religion at a time when many Rhode Islanders and other Americans were turning to religion as well. It was the beginning of an evangelical religious movement known as the Second Great Awakening.³⁵ Various religious sects in Rhode Island sought to attract new followers among those, including freed slaves, who were

seeking a more personal and emotional experience than that provided by the traditional Anglican, Congregationalist, and Quaker denominations.

Cato Pearce's path to his religious conversion began during an incident at sea. While on the way to the Caribbean aboard Captain Rogers's schooner, Pearce began to pray aloud during a terrible storm. This annoyed the vessel's first mate, who ordered him to stop and not to pray again; but Pearce later resumed his loud praying below the main deck. Hearing him, the first mate called him up on deck, shouting "Didn't I tell you I wouldn't have no more hollerin' and prayin' on board?" Pearce tells what happened next. "Then he hauled me forward and laid me over the windlass, and made one of the hands hold me over while he laid on three or four hard blows with a rope, and made me promise not to pray again. Then I didn't know what to do. . . . I wept a good deal—pretty much all night long." Pearce prudently decided to suspend his praying until he returned to land.

Once again Pearce had been whipped by a white man. Perhaps the circumstances this time would have made the whipping even more acceptable to most of the community, for Pearce had disobeyed an order as a sailor on a vessel at sea. Discipline at sea was often harsh, even beyond the well-known harsh practices of the U.S. Navy; just as slaves could be whipped with virtual impunity in the slave era, sailors aboard American merchant ships could be legally flogged by their officers well into the nineteenth century.³⁶ But that Pearce was flogged merely for the offense of praying aloud supports a historian's conclusion that in the nineteenth century, "[b]lack men suffered disproportionately the capricious nature of shipboard punishments."³⁷

Having spent his wages after returning from the voyage, in about 1815 Pearce hired himself out to James Rhodes of Providence. In coming back to Rhode Island, Pearce may have considered that he was taking a risk: his former master's family might have insisted that he serve three more years as an involuntary servant, claiming that since he had run away at age eighteen, before he was to be freed at twenty-one, he owed three more years of service.

In fact, Joshua Pearce had died in October 1810 at the age of eighty-seven,³⁸ and according to the 1810 census none of his children (nor those of Giles Pearce) owned slaves in North Kingstown. Indeed, there were only ten slaves reported in all of Washington County.³⁹ After 1800 Rhode Island newspapers carried few advertisements seeking the return of runaway slaves, a strong indication that slave owners were no longer pursuing their runaways. If Cato Pearce calculated that his risk of being forced back into servitude was low, he was correct. He would live out the remainder of his life as a free man.

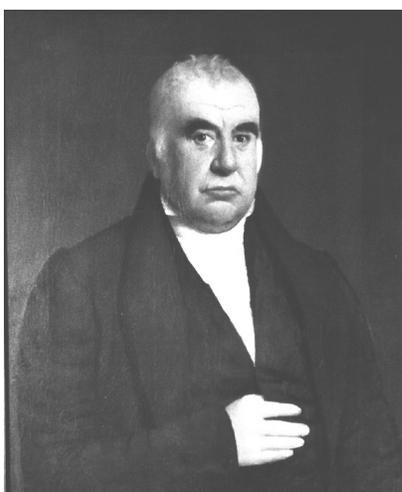
By the time he had returned to land and taken a job with James Rhodes, Pearce had lost interest in religion and had resumed a life of spending his earnings on rum. But then he began joining other people of color in attending revival meetings led by a white preacher, the Reverend V. R. Osborn. When Osborn would ask converts to rise and come forward, some did, but Pearce and many others held back. Pearce's reluctance may have been in part the result of discrimination in Providence's churches at the time. Osborn—who was then the pastor of a Methodist church in Providence—wrote that the town's African Americans faced “a deplorable situation. They had no place of worship, nor was there a congregation in town which desired their attendance.”⁴⁰ Osborn himself was apparently allowed to preach to African Americans only at night, even in his own church.⁴¹ William Brown, the child of Rhode Island slave parents, remembered

that many African Americans in Providence “attended no church at all because they said they were opposed to going to churches and sitting in pigeon holes, as all the churches at that time had some obscure place for the colored people to sit in.”⁴²

One day, at James Rhodes's farm outside Providence, Pearce began to feel physically ill, a consequence of his tormented soul. He then experienced a deep urge to turn to religion, but he did not know how to do it. When Rhodes and his wife discovered the reason for Pearce's illness, they got down onto their knees while another woman from their Congregational church read prayers to Pearce from a prayer book. But Pearce did not respond to this formalism. Seeking a closer, more personal religious connection, he made his way into the woods, found a stand of bushes, got on his knees, closed his eyes, and began to pray:

So I shut my eyes, and glory to God! I don't know whether I was praying or no, but I felt right off delivered from all my 'sress—and oh, how happy I felt! Seemed as if I felt a great burden roll off me. How I come out of the rabbit briers, I can never tell. It seemed as every thing praised the Lord that I see. I looked off into the river and see the vessels, and it seemed as if all of them were sailing right up to heaven. I loved everybody. . . . Then I went back to the house happy and light as a feather—givin' God the glory; and the maid and the children, as soon as ever they see me, begun to laugh. Then I went into the house, and they all seemed glad to see me—rejoiced with me, and I told 'em where I got 'ligion—under the rabbit briers.

Elisha Reynolds Potter Sr. and his wife, Mary Mawney Potter. Paintings on canvas by an unknown artist, circa 1815, Pettaquamscutt Historical Society.



Pearce later left Rhodes to work in Westerly as a farm hand. About 1817 he sought a job aboard a sloop in nearby New London, but the captain, learning that most of Pearce's experience was as a temporary farm worker, instead took him to a farm in Little Rest owned by Elisha Reynolds Potter Sr., one of the most powerful politicians in Rhode Island and one of its wealthiest farm owners. Potter was then looking for help at his homestead farm, and Pearce was hired for the job.

At this time Potter was married to Mary Mawney Potter, from East Greenwich. At first Pearce found Elisha and Mary Potter to be "very clever people" and "had a pretty good time with them." With Mary Potter encouraging Pearce's renewed interest in religion, Pearce asked her if he could attend a Sunday church service three miles away. "Well, Cato," she replied, "you can do all your chores up and go 'arly, if you please." This Pearce did. At the meeting, responding to an open invitation for anyone to speak, Pearce spoke to the congregation—which apparently was mostly white—and was well received. He then asked if he could preach at the next meeting, and the congregation agreed. When he returned to the Potter farm, the overjoyed Pearce told Mary Potter that he "had got meetin' 'pointed to preach," to which she responded that she was much pleased at the news.

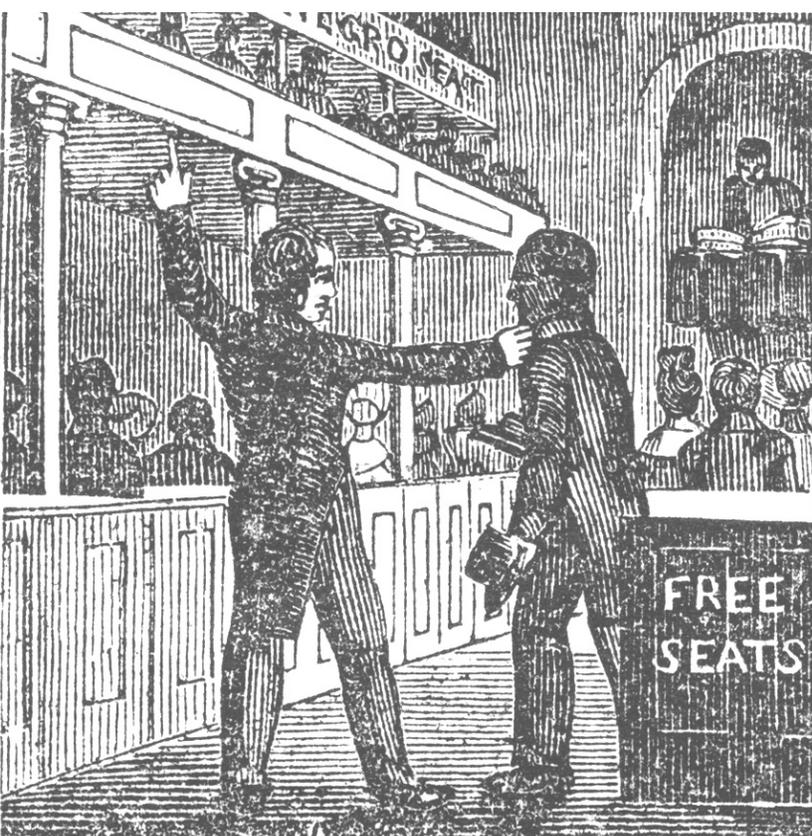
Pearce prepared diligently for his preaching engagement: "I went out into the woods to study what I should say, and sound it out there; and swing my hands." The engagement proved to be a resounding success, and he was asked to preach at yet another meeting. To improve his appearance while preaching, he purchased new clothing with his farm wages, including white gloves, white stockings, and a breast pin, and Mary Potter offered to sew ruffles onto his white shirt. When the day for the next engagement arrived, Elisha Potter drove Pearce in a wagon to Groton, Connecticut, where the church meeting was to take place. In his new clothes, Pearce "thought every body would know I was a minister, and never hardly any body felt as big as I did." "[H]undreds of folks" (again mostly whites) crowded in and around the house where the meeting was to be held, waiting for the preacher to arrive. Pearce managed to squeeze

into the house and introduce himself to the waiting host, even though some of the whites outside, not knowing who he was, told him to go away.

Once again his preaching was enthusiastically received. Perhaps overwhelmed by his success, Pearce decided not to preach again for a while. One day, however, when Mary Potter sent him on an errand to her father's house in East Greenwich, Pearce found a church service in progress there—something Mrs. Potter undoubtedly knew would happen. He was invited to say a few words, which he did, again to good effect; but he was still not yet moved to continue his preaching.

Pearce then describes in his memoir a dream he had that night in which he was visited by the Lord: how the Lord asked him to preach, which he was suddenly able to do; how he could read the Bible, although he was illiterate; and how the Lord forgave his sins. When the visitation ended, Pearce woke in the middle of the night, filled with joy: "I felt so happy I shouted; I couldn't lay a-bed; and I got up and told Mrs. Potter, and she got up and called the folks; and we had a wonderful time. I felt so happy in the mornin' I couldn't work that day; and I went round and told the neighbors—and in the evening we had a meetin', and had a wonderful time. Then we had meetin's every night; and the Lord was with us and begun a good work, and many souls was converted to God."

Pearce decided that he needed to be baptized, but he did not know which church to join. When his work with the Potters ended, he found a job at Killingly, Connecticut, near the Rhode Island border. One Sunday his employer and some other whites took him to a Congregational meetinghouse, where, in accord with a long-standing practice in New England's traditional churches, he was forced to submit to the indignity of sitting in what he called the "nigger pews"; these were so far away from the pulpit that he could scarcely hear what the minister was saying.⁴³ Pearce was also troubled by the minister's use of notes in preaching his sermon; he could not understand a minister's preaching that way, but "[w]hen a minister preached with spirit," says Pearce, "I could understand that."



"The Negro Pew, or 'Free' Seats for Black Christians," from the *American Anti-Slavery Almanac for 1840*; Ephemera Collection, portfolio 248, folder 1, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress.

Disturbed by the discrimination he had just experienced, after the service Pearce asked the whites in his group where there was a Baptist meeting that he could attend. Former slaves were now free to choose which religious group they would join, and not surprisingly they were likely to reject groups that continued such practices as segregated seating. At a Baptist meeting on the following Sunday, Pearce felt much more comfortable, as there were no separate boxes for blacks, and the minister "preached the spirit" without reading from notes. The congregation appears to have consisted mostly of whites. When the minister discovered that Pearce was a passionate speaker, he arranged for him to speak that evening, with the result that there was a "powerful meetin'" with "many weepin' souls." The meeting continued through the rest of the week.

Finally baptized by the Chestnut Hill Baptist church in Killingly, Pearce preached "both nights and Sundays" at various meetings in the area, including several at his white employer's house.⁴⁴ About 1820, however, he had to suspend his preaching to find a new job, and he was then once again hired as a farm worker at Elisha Potter's homestead farm in Little Rest.

PEARCE'S NARRATIVE INDICATES that some whites were willing to befriend and aid blacks in order to attract them to the whites' religious denominations. But freed blacks tended not to join the more staid Anglican and Congregational churches, which were served by a paid and educated ministry. Congregational churches had made little effort to attract slaves during colonial times in Washington County; Anglican churches, which attracted many slave-owning white elites, tried to attract their slaves as well, but black attendees were forced to sit in segregated and inferior seats at Sunday services.⁴⁵ Washington County's other major religious denomination, the Society of Friends (Quakers), led Rhode Island's moral opposition to slavery beginning in the late eighteenth century, but the quiet and contemplative rites of the Quakers did not attract freed slaves. (It was said that the last two members of the North Kingstown Friends meeting used to sit in silence for the length of the service and then get up and leave without speaking to each other.)⁴⁶

By contrast, various evangelical Baptists and Methodists were successful in their efforts to attract freed slaves. Pearce tells how an evangelical Methodist preacher sought converts among working-class blacks in Providence. While not organized enough as a group to issue antidiscrimination pronouncements, many evangelical Baptists, speaking as individuals, stressed the equality of all souls before God. Pearce found support from two white Baptist elders from North Kingstown, William Northrop and Thomas Cole. Before turning to evangelical religion, Cole had served during the Revolutionary War as a captain and paymaster in the First Rhode Island Regiment, and no doubt he had become comfortable and sympathetic with the Rhode Island slaves and freedmen who filled that unit.⁴⁷

Having been directed to sit in a segregated pew in a Congregational church, Cato Pearce exercised his freedom of religion and sought out a Baptist church meeting, whose congregation was pleased to have him as a preacher. The congregation's white Baptists were seeking an intense, emotional, and personal relationship with God, and they recognized that Pearce could help them attain that goal. Never dominated by an educated and paid ministry, rural Baptist churches provided opportunities for men such as Pearce to become important figures through their preaching and exhortation at evangelical meetings.⁴⁸ For Pearce, preaching was not only a source of pride; it also allowed him to express his own religious fervor beyond merely attending Sunday meetings and listening to educated ministers read their learned sermons. Pearce's story is a good example of how the Second Great Awakening, and particularly the rural Baptist churches, attracted African Americans into the evangelical Protestant fold.

IT IS INTERESTING to note what Pearce's autobiography omits as well as what it contains. For one thing, Pearce makes no further mention of his family after recounting how he escaped involuntary servitude and ran away from North Kingstown for the second time. Presumably he had little or no contact with his father, his mother, or his two siblings; bondage had succeeded in tearing his family apart. Also, unlike the authors of other narratives of contemporary black Rhode Islanders, Pearce does not refer to family relationships between former black slaves and Narragansett Indians, relationships that were quite common at the time.⁴⁹ Pearce himself never married; in effect, his fellow Baptist churchgoers became his new family.

Pearce's memoir contains no mention of churches organized and attended primarily by African Americans. With churches and churchgoers spread across the countryside in rural Rhode Island, it was difficult for blacks to organize their own churches there. Accordingly, blacks and whites typically attended racially mixed services at the same churches. It is not known how many of these churches required African Americans to sit in inferior, segregated seats; while this was the rule in the larger

towns of Providence and Newport,⁵⁰ there may have been some churches in rural Rhode Island, as in Killingly, Connecticut, that did not follow this practice. One indication that this may have been the case is that schools were apparently not segregated in Washington County as they were in Providence and Newport.⁵¹ Another indication is that the Sunday school at the Kingston Congregational Church (founded in 1820) was integrated, with 18 blacks among its 169 students in 1833.⁵² However, some African Americans eventually preferred to practice religion in primarily African American churches. Two such churches were organized in the early 1840s in South Kingstown, at Curtis Corner and at Mooresfield. A community of African Americans had arisen in Mooresfield around the wool mills there.⁵³

Pearce also makes no mention of the well-known African American "Negro Election" festival held each June, a long-standing tradition in the black community, although two of Elisha R. Potter Sr.'s servants were selected as festival "Negro governors." One of these was a man named John Potter, who had been a slave that Elisha Potter had inherited. In August 1810 Elisha Potter brought John before the South Kingstown Town Council and requested it to issue a certificate attesting to John's freedom, which it did.⁵⁴ Local blacks and Indians celebrated John Potter's freedom by electing him Negro governor for a Negro Election festival. One eyewitness described John Potter, dressed in a fine jacket and white top hat, riding Elisha Potter's finest horse to the festival site in Apponaug, cheered on his way by Little Rest villagers.⁵⁵ It is possible that Pearce does not mention the well-known festival in his narrative because, as a deeply religious man, he regarded it as a frivolous and unseemly entertainment.

But Pearce does describe a shocking event, one which shows that former slaves and indentured servants could in some ways be treated as slaves. In the spring of about 1820, when he "had to hire out to work by the month," Pearce was again employed by Elisha R. Potter Sr. Potter had come from relatively humble beginnings, but by 1816, through inheritance, hard work, and wise investing, he had amassed a large estate, including seven sub-

stantial farms, and he needed such temporary laborers as Cato Pearce to plant, tend, and harvest his crops.⁵⁶

A man of commanding presence and enormous size (he stood about six feet four inches tall and weighed around three hundred pounds), Potter had found his true forte in politics. According to “Shepherd Tom” Hazard, Elisha Potter “was, while in his prime, the autocrat, not only of Little Rest, but of the town and county in which he resided, and for many years, the most influential man in the state, being a natural born great man.”⁵⁷ A U.S. congressman from 1796 to 1797 and again from 1809 to 1815, Potter otherwise served almost continuously, from

1793 until his death in 1835, in the Rhode Island legislature, with several terms as Speaker of its House of Representatives. Potter was a conservative who blocked efforts by Rhode Island reformers to extend the vote to white landless laboring men (mostly Irish immigrants) and to abolish corporal punishment of prisoners and the imprisonment of debtors.⁵⁸

Main Street in Kingston (formerly Little Rest), circa 1890. The Washington County jail in which Cato Pearce was incarcerated was located at the end of this block, on the left side of the street. The stone building now at the site—the second jail in the village, built in 1858—currently houses the Pettaquamscutt Historical Society. Photograph, Pettaquamscutt Historical Society.



Elisha Potter's homestead farm was just off Main Street in Little Rest, which at that time had about thirty houses, three taverns, and several general stores, blacksmith shops, and other shops. The village's most important role was as the county seat for Washington County. The county's Court of Common Pleas (which heard most civil cases) and Supreme Court (which heard appeals from the Court of Common Pleas and criminal cases) each met twice each year on the second floor of the imposing courthouse on Main Street. Across the street from the courthouse was the county jail, which consisted of a 1792 jailer's residence and an 1805 frame addition used to house prisoners.⁵⁹

Four weeks after Pearce was rehired, he asked Potter if he could attend a Baptist meeting on the following Sunday, at which he had been asked to preach. Potter agreed, but only if Pearce hired another man to do his chores in case he did not return Sunday night. Pearce accordingly hired a replacement and went off to attend the meeting. After preaching, he was asked to spend the night at the church elder's house, a common practice in the case of guest preachers.

Early the next morning he traveled back to the Potter homestead, arriving before Elisha Potter had finished his breakfast, and he did his expected chores. Pearce did not yet know that Potter had refused to allow the hired replacement on his land, and that Potter was extremely angry about the situation. On a previous occasion Potter had in fact driven Pearce to a preaching engagement, but now Potter had evidently had enough of Pearce's preaching interfering with the farm chores that were to be done.

"When Mr. Potter had done his breakfast," Pearce recalls, "he come out with his horse-whip in his hand. Says he, 'Why wa'nt you here last night to do the chores.' I told him I hired some body. He said he wouldn't have him on his place. He said he hired me. He said he didn't understand why I went away to preach. Says he, 'I won't have no nigger preachers—I'll horse-whip you;' and he swore. Says I, 'Don't strike me, Mr. Potter . . .' Well he said they had a good minister there, and they wouldn't have no nigger preachers, and said he would put me where he could find me. So he went and got the officer—the jailer—and put me into jail."

Pearce was incarcerated for "two nights and parts of two days." Fortunately for him, the county court was in session at the courthouse in Little Rest. This meant that some of the most important men in the state—judges, attorneys, and parties to lawsuits from Providence, Newport, and other towns in the state—were staying at the village. Residing outside Little Rest and Washington County, these men were not totally subject to Elisha Potter's influence. Pearce describes what happened:

Sheriff Allen and a number of the great men came in to visit them that was in prison, and asked me what I was put in for. I told 'em for preachin'—but yet I couldn't help weepin'. [One of the visitors] said, "You won't stay here but a few minutes—he had done perfectly wrong—we will have you out in a few minutes." Then they gave me some money and went out and told Elisha Potter they would give so long to take me out [or] they was goin' to prosecute him if he didn't. About half an hour after that, I could see Elisha Potter through the grate, comin' up the back side and in the back way, and [he] got the jailer to talk with me while he stood down to the bottom of the stairs. And the jailer took me in another room and told me that Mr. Potter said I might go every Saturday night and stay till Monday mornin' and have meetins where I was a mind to. I told the jailer I had nothin' to do with Elisha Potter. "If he had put me in here, amen—if I have got to stay here and die, amen to it: I have nothin' to do with him. I never have stole nor cheated nor done any thing wrong to him. . . ." I said I hadn't nothin' 'gainst Elisha Potter: I loved him as well as ever. At that Elisha Potter come up stairs and said I had better go to work—he liked me well, and I might go to meetin' when I was a mind to. I told him I didn't calculate to work for him any more. Then he told me to go and git my things, and I come out.

When he was released from jail and stepped out into the street, Pearce was immediately "surrounded by many friends and brethren," and he "went singin' through the streets, and felt to give God the glory that I wa'nt put in for anything but preachin'."

DESPITE HIS THREAT—and unlike Cato Pearce's former master Joshua Pearce and the first mate on Captain Rogers's schooner—Elisha Potter did not strike Pearce. By the time of this incident, about 1820, it was probably considered unacceptable in the community to whip a former slave or black indentured servant, even if he remained

low on the economic and social scale.⁶⁰ Rather than whip Pearce, Potter had him jailed. But Pearce had committed no crime; and, in any case, Potter held no town or state government position that would have legally permitted him to order someone to be incarcerated. Yet Potter's informal power in Little Rest was so great that he could use his influence with the local jailer to have a free man thrown into jail merely because that man had failed to abide by Potter's wishes. Informal power in a small rural village could be as effective as power wielded through a government office.

It is unlikely that Potter would have treated a white laborer the way he treated Pearce. Indeed, it is unlikely that he would have treated another black man in the village, George Fayerweather, that way. Fayerweather was born a slave of Samuel Fayerweather, a former pastor of the local Anglican Church. But George Fayerweather had learned to read, and when he was freed, he moved to Little Rest with his Narragansett Indian wife and opened a successful blacksmith shop about 1804.⁶¹ In comparison, Pearce was near the bottom of the economic and social scale, an illiterate black who could manage to secure employment only as a day laborer. Although Pearce and other blacks were free, many continued to work the fields of wealthy white landowners under conditions that were really not very different from those of their enslaved forefathers.

Yet times had changed since slavery days. Early in his story Pearce tells how Mary Potter and other whites encouraged and assisted his interest in religion. In addition, Pearce preached before primarily white audiences, who fully appreciated his skill. And once prominent whites visiting Little Rest learned of his jailing, they were so upset that they threatened to prosecute Potter unless Pearce was released. Having violated current community standards, the hotheaded and influential Potter then not only acceded to public pressure but also, in an act of repentance and humility, invited Pearce to continue working for him, even promising to allow him sufficient time off to attend Sunday services. But in a demonstration of independence and dignity, Pearce rejected the offer, wanting "nothin' to do" with Elisha Potter.

Pearce might have sued Potter for false imprisonment, but local blacks did not have a history of suing in the Washington County court. That court had operated since 1729, but it was not until 1795 that blacks began filing cases there.⁶² Had he instituted a suit against Potter—and, perhaps, especially if he had won such a suit—Pearce would have acquired a powerful enemy in Elisha Potter, an outcome that almost certainly would not have been worth the price.

CATO PEARCE LIVED out the rest of his life in rural Rhode Island. Given the persistent racism in Washington County and their memories of servitude, it is not surprising that many other local black people chose to migrate to Providence or elsewhere in New England. Urban areas in particular gave blacks the opportunity to form their own communities away from domineering farm overseers. The out-migration from Washington County is indicated by the decline of the country's black population from 1,711 in 1790 to 877 in 1810 and 530 in 1850; by contrast, Providence's black population swelled from 475 in 1790 to 871 in 1810 and 1,499 in 1850.⁶³ The 1810 census counted 10 slaves in Washington County, 7 of them in North Kingstown.⁶⁴ By 1820, when the census reported 48 slaves in the entire state (36 of them aged forty-six or older), the county had 7 slaves; in 1830 it had 3, and in 1840 none at all.⁶⁵

Free people of color who stayed in Washington County worked mostly as laborers. "Negro Governor" John Potter was hired as a temporary farm worker by Elisha Potter and other well-to-do white farmers. Daniel Stedman, a struggling white farmer who lived near Wakefield, reported in his journal working side by side with John Potter and other black field workers who were employed on a temporary basis by a prosperous white farmer.⁶⁶ Potter also worked for "Nailer Tom" Hazard, a middling white farmer in South Kingstown, who hired free black women as well to perform his domestic chores.⁶⁷ Such temporary employment was typical among the freed slaves and their children who remained in Washington County.

In his *Brief Memoir* Pearce tells how he continued to live in rural Rhode Island after he was freed from jail in Little Rest, preaching the gospel and converting people to

Christ. He particularly mentions preaching at evangelical meetings in Newport, Block Island, Hopkinton, and Wakefield. On October 12, 1827, Daniel Stedman recorded in his journal that “a black man by the [name] of Cato Pearce in Evening had a meeting at Wakefield to Mr. Ray Allen’s.”⁶⁸ At the conclusion of his memoir, Pearce says that he made his home for many years in Cranston with Deacon Thomas Cole and his wife. Cole was a white Baptist elder who had assisted Pearce in North Kingstown during the period when Pearce first turned to evangelical religion. In the Rhode Island 1840 census Pearce is listed as the head of a household—his first and only such listing—and is described as an agricultural worker living alone in Cranston. Cole appears in that census as his neighbor.⁶⁹

Elisha R. Potter Sr. made several unsuccessful attempts to win election to the U.S. Senate from 1823 until his death in 1835. His illegal jailing of Cato Pearce apparently never became a campaign issue for him. Potter’s educated and refined son, Elisha R. Potter Jr., never mentions the publication of Pearce’s 1842 autobiography in any of his many letters, and Pearce’s jailing did not become an issue in his own successful campaign for election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1843. The younger Elisha Potter likely considered Pearce’s memoir a source of great embarrassment and decided that the best way to handle the situation was to ignore it. The memoir was not, in fact, mentioned in any Rhode Island biography or history until recently.

The editor who transcribed Cato Pearce’s autobiography and arranged to have it printed, probably at his own expense, chose to remain anonymous, possibly for fear of a libel suit against him by the family of Elisha R. Potter Sr. or Joshua Pearce. Who was the editor? The introduction shows him to have been deeply interested in religion, well educated, and sympathetic to the plight of African Americans. It is probable that he was a white minister with abolitionist sympathies. That the pamphlet was backed by abolitionists is indicated by its inclusion of an abolitionist hymn at the end, with an engraving of a kneeling black female slave, her wrists confined by chains. The editor—who, like Pearce, may have been a Baptist—ends his introduction by naming Pawtucket as

the pamphlet’s place of publication. It is possible that the editor was Ray Potter, a prominent Baptist minister who was a leader of the Pawtucket Anti-Slavery Society.⁷⁰

The editor of Pearce’s autobiography states that one of his goals in publishing the pamphlet was to benefit Cato Pearce financially. He likely had two other goals in mind as well: to advance the cause of abolishing slavery in the South and to promote the civil rights of blacks in Rhode Island. The year of the pamphlet’s publication, 1842, was an important one for Rhode Island abolitionists, who were seeking to garner support for the effort—ultimately successful—to restore to the state’s black men the right to vote, a right that had been revoked in 1822.⁷¹ The portrayal of Pearce, a sincere and deeply religious man striving to maintain his dignity and independence in the face of sometimes brutal racial discrimination, surely must have aroused readers’ sympathy for both black slaves in the South and disfranchised black men in Rhode Island. (It may be noted, though, that the editor perhaps inadvertently undercut Pearce’s stature in the eyes of white readers by calling attention to Pearce’s illiteracy, by commenting that Pearce’s “native intellectual faculties do not appear below mediocrity,” and by transcribing Pearce’s nonstandard speech.)

Given the participation of whites in recording, arranging, and editing the text of slave narratives, the authenticity of Pearce’s autobiography might be questioned.⁷² There are, however, strong indications that the memoir is accurate and reflects Pearce’s voice. In addition to considerable corroborating evidence—from the newspaper advertisement seeking Pearce’s runaway mother in 1796 to a journal entry mentioning Cato Pearce’s preaching at a religious meeting in 1827—there is the fact that the depictions of Pearce’s harsh treatment at the hands of whites were apparently never challenged by those whites or by their families. Moreover, the editor’s attempt to transcribe Pearce’s colloquial speech, as well as the colloquial speech of southern Rhode Island whites, gives the memoir an air of authenticity that many other slave narratives lack.⁷³

For more information and educational materials on this subject, see under Education at www/rihs.org.

A
BRIEF MEMOIR
OF THE
LIFE AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

OF
CATO PEARCE,
A MAN OF COLOR.

**TAKEN VERBATIM FROM HIS LIPS AND PUBLISHED FOR HIS
BENEFIT.**

PAWTUCKET, R. I.
1842.

HYMN.



BONDAGE.

HARK! and hear the captive pleading,
Listen to his plaintive cry,
Look, and see the tears a-falling—
“Must I in my bondage die?
When I stood in my own country,
With my children by my side,
Cruel white men came upon me,
Dragged me o'er the deep so wide.

Of I think of my sweet children,
And my dear companion too:
I no more on earth can see them—
I must bid them all adieu:

I will try to live so faithful
To that God that rules on high,
That I may obtain his favor,
And with him shall reign on high.

I must wait until that moment,
When the trump of God shall sound,
And the nations will be gathered,
There to hear their awful doom;
There I'll meet my dear companion,
That I bid a long adieu;
There I'll meet my smiling children,
And my blessed Savior too.

Then let cares like a wild deluge,
Roll upon this mortal frame;
Death shall soon break off my fetters,
Then I'll drop the tyrant's chain;
Soon I'll pass from grace to glory,
Soon I'll shout my sufferings o'er,
There, where all the groans of sorrow
Never can be heard no more.

Notes

1. An original copy of *A Brief Memoir*, the only known copy to the author's knowledge, is in the John Hay Library at Brown University. Neither the publisher nor the person who transcribed Pearce's story is named in this copy.
2. Credit for rediscovering Cato Pearce's narrative should go to Robert K. Fitts; see his authoritative study on slavery in colonial Narragansett, *Inventing New England's Slave Paradise: Master/Slave Relations in Eighteenth-Century Narragansett, Rhode Island* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 105-6. Focusing on colonial slavery rather than post-1784 emancipation, however, Fitts's work refers only briefly to Pearce's narrative.
3. For slave narratives, see Marion Wilson Starling, *The Slave Narrative: Its Place in American History*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C.: Howard University, 1988), and Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979).
4. The most fascinating New England slave narrative is the autobiography of Venture Smith, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, A Native of Africa; but Resident above Sixty Years in the United States of America, Related by Himself* (1798). A slave in southern Rhode Island, then in Long Island and Connecticut, Smith succeeded not only in purchasing his own freedom but in working many years and purchasing the freedom of his wife, his three children, and three other slaves as well. Another African American autobiography is *Life of James Mars, a Slave Born and Sold in Connecticut* (1864). Mars was born after Connecticut enacted its gradual emancipation law, but like Cato Pearce he was required to serve as an indentured servant into adulthood. Both Smith's and Mars's narratives are reprinted in Robert J. Cottrol, ed., *From African to Yankee: Narratives of Slavery and Freedom in Antebellum New England* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1998), and Arna Bontemps, ed., *Five Black Lives* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971). Two narratives of Rhode Island African Americans who were born free and were never in involuntary servitude, but whose parents were slaves, are those of Eleanor Eldridge and William J. Brown. Cottrol, *From African to Yankee*, 33-48, 73-202; William J. Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown of Providence, R.I.*, edited by Joanne Pope Melish (University of New Hampshire Press, 2006).
5. James Mars credits a white man, a Captain Lawrence, with preventing Mars's master from selling Mars into permanent slavery in the South, and thus with enabling him to ultimately become free under Connecticut's gradual emancipation law. Venture Smith's master permitted Smith to earn wages after his farm work was completed, and these wages allowed Smith to eventually purchase his own freedom.
6. For the black population in New England and in Rhode Island, see Lorenzo J. Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England* (New York: Atheneum Press, 1969), 27-33, 74-76, 85-88; Fitts, *New England's Slave Paradise*, 84. For Rhode Island's predominant North American role in the African slave trade, see Jay Coughtry, *The Notorious Triangle: Rhode Island and the African Slave Trade, 1707-1807* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984); Charles Rappleye, *Sons of Providence: The Brown Brothers, the Slave Trade, and the American Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006). Rappleye's book also details the widespread flouting of Rhode Island laws prohibiting participation in the slave trade by merchants from Newport, Bristol, and Providence.
7. See Christian M. McBurney, "The Rise and Decline of the South Kingstown Planters, 1660-1783" (honors thesis, Department of History, Brown University, 1981), chaps. 2-5, and "The South Kingstown Planters: Country Gentry in Colonial Rhode Island," *Rhode Island History* 45 (1986): 81, 85-86; Fitts, *New England's Slave Paradise*, chap. 3; William Davis Miller, "The Narragansett Planters," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 43 (1933): 49-115.
8. The largest number of slaves recorded in the inventories of deceased persons in King's County was 19, held by Daniel Updike, the owner of Smith's Castle, near Wickford, at his death in 1757. North Kingstown Probate Records, North Kingstown Town Hall, 9:44.
9. The King's County towns included South Kingstown (then including Narragansett), North Kingstown, Charlestown, Exeter, Richmond, Hopkinton, and Westerly. King's County had 554 blacks in 1730, 749 in 1748, and 911 in 1774. South Kingstown had the most blacks, averaging about 400 from 1730 to 1774; North Kingstown averaged about 200 blacks during those years. See Edwin M. Snow, ed., *Report upon the Census of Rhode Island, 1875* (Providence: Providence Press Company, 1877), xliii.
10. In 1769 the South Kingstown Monthly Meeting of the Society of Friends, led by former slaveholder Thomas Hazard, became the first Quaker group to raise the issue of abolition with the New England Yearly Meeting. In 1773 a committee of South Kingstown Quakers reported that "they don't find there is any held as slaves" by fellow members of the South Kingstown Quaker meeting. Caroline Hazard, *Narragansett Friends' Meeting in the XVIII Century* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1899), 149 (quoting from South Kingstown Monthly Meeting records). By 1782 the New England Yearly Meeting reported that none of its Quaker members held any slaves; Quakers who acquired slaves after that date, probably from inheritance, freed them. Records expressly indicate that 14 slaves were freed between 1757 and 1786. *Ibid.*, appendix. It is likely that there were slave emancipations by South Kingstown Quakers that were not recorded in the monthly

- meeting records, which tended to focus on members who reluctantly gave up their slaves rather than on those who did so voluntarily.
11. According to diaries of a Newport Loyalist and a British officer, on five separate occasions a total of 19 black men, women, and children escaped by boat from the southern Rhode Island mainland to the freedom of British-occupied Newport. Fleet S. Green, "Newport in the Hands of the British: A Diary of the Revolution," *Historical Magazine* 4 (1860): 37-38, 70; *The Diary of Frederick Mackenzie, Giving a Daily Narrative of His Military Service as an Officer of the Regiment of Royal Welsh Fusiliers during the Years 1775-1781 in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), 1:145, 213, 257. The "Book of Negroes," a list of 3,000 blacks who departed New York City on British ships when the British army evacuated that city in 1783, includes 24 African American men and women who were Rhode Island slaves prior to the war but who left with the British army as free persons when it evacuated Newport in October 1779. Most of these persons had been slaves in Newport or other parts of Aquidneck Island. See Graham Russell Hodges, ed., *The Black Loyalist Directory: African Americans in Exile after the American Revolution* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996).
 12. In 1777 two black slaves who had escaped from South Kingstown to British lines in Newport informed a British officer that "the Country people . . . find it so difficult to raise men for the Continental Army, that they enlist Negroes, for whom their masters receive a bounty of 180 dollars and half their pay; and the Negro gets the other half and a promise of freedom at the end of three years." *Diary of Frederick Mackenzie*, 1:145. Caesar Babcock of Hopkinton, London Hazard of South Kingstown, and William Wanton of Tiverton were slaves who gained their freedom by serving in the Rhode Island militia as substitutes for their masters and other whites prior to 1778. See Revolutionary War Pension Applications, Microfilm Files, National Archives, Washington, D.C. A study of Rhode Island black soldiers in the Revolution indicates that a number joined Rhode Island regiments before 1778. *African American and American Indian Patriots of the Revolutionary War* (Washington, D.C.: Daughters of the American Revolution, 2001), 59-63.
 13. The act permitting the enlistment of slaves appears in John Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., 1858-62), 8:358-60. A partial muster roll of slaves is in James Arnold, ed., *Narragansett Historical Register* (Providence: Narragansett Publishing Co., 1882), 1:313. For a summary of recent scholarship, see John Wood Sweet, *Bodies Politic, Negotiating Race in the American North, 1730-1830* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003) 197-209.
 14. For example, land bequeathed to the Perry brothers by their father in 1782 resulted in the following division: Samuel, 200 acres; Jonathan, 200 acres; William, 64½ acres; John, 64½ acres; Samuel, 50 acres. Southern Rhode Island began to resemble the rest of rural New England, with farmers on small or middling plots struggling to produce a surplus. See McBurney, "South Kingstown Planters," *Rhode Island History*, 81, 91-92.
 15. Rhode Island's 1784 gradual emancipation legislation appears in John Bartlett, *Records*, 10:7-8, 132. For more on the emancipation of slaves in Rhode Island, see Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780-1860* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998), 71-73 and chap. 3; Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, chap. 6.
 16. Only 124 slaves were reported in Washington County in the 1800 census. *1800 U.S. Census, Washington County, Rhode Island* (Wichita, Kans.: S-K Publications, 1998), 101-11. Statewide, the number of slaves in Rhode Island declined from 958 in 1790 to 380 in 1800. Bureau of the Census, *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1790, Rhode Island* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1908); *Second Census of the United States, Rhode Island, 1800*, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
 17. Some slaves were officially freed by their masters' wills. The will of Elisha Reynolds of Little Rest freed two slaves and dealt with the eventual freedom of the daughter of one of his slaves; the will also requested that funds from his estate be used to support his freed slaves if necessary. South Kingstown Probate Records, 6: 241 (Nov. 14, 1791), South Kingstown Town Hall. Funds from Reynolds's estate were in fact used to purchase shoes and other necessary goods for an elderly male slave, Tom Reynolds. See Elisha Potter's Account Book, 45, Pettaquamscutt Historical Society. The will of Benjamin Peckham of South Kingstown granted freedom to one slave after seven years. South Kingstown Probate Records, 6:263 (Dec. 7, 1790). The will of Dr. Samuel Watson of North Kingstown immediately emancipated "my Negro man named Wolfe." North Kingstown Probate Records, 17:124 (Apr. 16, 1803), North Kingstown Town Hall. Some slaves born after 1784 were officially freed through a provision in the emancipation law that allowed a town council, upon the request of a slave owner, to manumit a slave and relieve the master of future financial responsibility for that slave. The South Kingstown Town Council emancipated six slaves in this way between 1784 and 1802. See Jean C. Stutz, *South Kingstown Town Council Records* (Kingston, R.I.: Pettaquamscutt Historical Society, 1988), 231 (1788), 236 and 239 (1789), 261 (1790), 304 (1793); South Kingstown Town Council Records, 5:287 (1800).

- At least in Washington County, neither of these methods of freeing slaves apparently involved certificates of manumission. The only reference to such certificates in Washington County that the author is aware of are referred to in Herbert Wiseby's biography of the religious leader Jemima Wilkinson. Wilkinson, who preached an egalitarian message and was firmly against slavery, persuaded a wealthy Narragansett Planter who converted to her sect, William Potter of South Kingstown, to manumit his slaves. Wiseby mentions two certificates of manumission for Potter's slaves, dated March 27, 1780, which were witnessed by two members of Wilkinson's sect. Herbert A. Wiseby, *Pioneer Prophetess: Jemima Wilkinson, the Publick Universal Friend* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1964), 46. Presumably these certificates were not official town documents. In Providence, on the other hand, it was common for slave owners to file manumission certificates in the town property records. See Austin Meredith, "Survey of Manumissions in Providence, R.I., Town Records," www.kouroo.info (summary at pp. 19-20; several manumission certificates quoted). Meredith's study also includes references to informal certificates of manumission that were handed to slaves in Newport, but none from Washington County have been found.
18. The will of Joseph Perkins stated that if a male slave of his who had run away were to return, he should be treated as free. South Kingstown Probate Records, 6:215 (Oct. 28, 1789). There is no indication that Perkins ran a newspaper advertisement to seek the return of this runaway. In his will, Perkins also gave a small farm to a black male former farm worker of his, who may at one point have been his slave.
For newspaper advertisements of Washington County slave owners seeking the return of runaway slaves between 1784 and 1800, see Maureen Alice Taylor, *Runaways, Deserters, and Notorious Villains from Rhode Island Newspapers*, vol. 1, *The Providence Gazette, 1762-1800* (Camden, Maine: Picton Press, 1995), 134, 151, 157, 168; Maureen Alice Taylor and John Wood Sweet, *Runaways, Deserters, and Notorious Villains from Rhode Island Newspapers*, vol. 2 (Rockport, Maine: Picton Press, 2001), 103-4, 125, 128-29, 137, 162, 171, 180.
 19. The author could not find in the list of Washington County slaveholders the man Cato Pearce said was his father's master, James Hazard. Pearce's father may have been a slave of John Hazard, who resided in North Kingstown and had seven black slaves in 1790. Bureau of the Census, *Heads of Families*, 46.
 20. John Bartlett, *Records*, 3:564; North Kingstown Town Council Records, 14:154 (1797), 15:1-2, 58, 67, 135 (1798).
 21. Jay M. Holbrook, *Rhode Island 1782 Census* (Oxford, Mass.: Holbrook Research Institute, 1979), 92; Bureau of the Census, *Heads of Families*, 45.
 22. Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 88-89. In federal census surveys these "statutory slaves" were listed as slaves.
 23. Mars called his narrative *Life of James Mars, a Slave Born and Sold in Connecticut*. See note 4 above.
 24. *1800 U.S. Census*, 101-11.
 25. *Ibid.*, 106.
 26. The gradual emancipation law included a provision releasing slave owners who freed slaves born prior to 1784 and between the ages of twenty-one (for a male) or eighteen (for a female) and thirty from further obligation to financially support the freed slaves, on condition that the town council determine that the freed slaves were healthy. Bartlett, *Records*, 10:7-8. The condition was intended to allow towns to prevent unhealthy black persons who could not support themselves by working from becoming charges on the towns' taxpayers. Yet the South Kingstown Town Council refused to authorize manumissions of healthy slaves, claiming that they had little means to support themselves and might become town charges. In 1804 the town council refused to manumit a slave named Cesar, owned by Wilkinson Browning, on the grounds that "the Town ought not to be put in jeopardy of any expense whatever." South Kingstown Town Council Records, 6:22 (Aug. 13, 1804) and 24 (Sept. 12, 1804). Another rejected manumission led to a lawsuit brought by Elisha Gardner of South Kingstown, who in 1796 inherited a female slave named Patience from his uncle Caleb Gardner, who had been a Narragansett Planter and a significant slaveholder. On August 11, 1806, at a meeting of the town council in Little Rest, Gardner presented Patience and requested "that this Council would manumit said Patience," as her circumstances fell within the 1784 emancipation law. Still concerned about freed slaves becoming town charges, the council rejected the request, and Gardner filed suit in the county courthouse. When the probate court ruled against him, he appealed to the county's supreme court, which in October 1808 reversed the probate court's decision, ruling that "Patience be manumitted and forever hereafter liberated and emancipated." *Elisha R. Gardner v. South Kingstown Town Council*, Washington County Court of Common Pleas, October 1808 sess., 397; South Kingstown Probate Records, 6:362 (Nov. 22, 1796) (will of Caleb Gardner, with his grandson Elisha Gardner as co-executor); South Kingstown Town Council Records, 7:38 (Aug. 11, 1806) (council rejecting Gardner's first manumission request), 7:39 (Sept. 8, 1806) (council rejecting Gardner's second manumission request), 7:54 (Dec. 12, 1808) (council paying attorney fees in manumission case).
The situation in South Kingstown, in which a local government body denied the manumission of slaves in clear contradiction to a state law, was due in part to the failure of the Rhode Island General Assembly to provide means for freed slaves to support themselves. Freed slaves were not

- given any money or property by the state, leaving them with little alternative but to work as servants for their former masters. A second factor in the situation was the system of handling poor relief in Rhode Island towns. Since colonial times town councils had the duty of caring for inhabitants who could not support themselves, and money was allocated grudgingly on a case-by-case basis. This was not a system designed to handle a large number of emancipated slaves who previously had not been permitted to educate or support themselves. Not until later in the nineteenth century would poor relief take the form of placing the poor in "town farms" or asylums, where they could be supported relatively cheaply. A third factor was the town council's judgment that the freedom of a slave was of less importance than the potential addition to the burden of the town's taxpayers. Prof. Joanne Pope Melish deserves credit for uncovering the Patience Gardner case in her perceptive *Disowning Slavery* (p. 98), which focuses to a considerable extent on southern Rhode Island. There is no record in the North Kingstown Town Council Records of any attempted manumissions under the 1784 emancipation legislation.
27. Robert J. Cottrol, *The Afro-Yankees: Providence's Black Community in the Antebellum Era* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press 1982), 41-50. For black men hiring themselves out on merchant ships, see Jeffrey W. Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1997), 220-22. For Rhode Island newspaper advertisements seeking runaway slaves and warning shipowners against hiring them, see note 18 above.
28. For example, in 1808 George Northrop, a white man, was convicted of theft and whipped. Christopher Bickford, *Crime, Punishment, and the Washington County Jail: Hard Time in Kingston, Rhode Island* (Kingston, R.I.: Pettaquamscutt Historical Society, 2002), 46. In 1818 Thomas James of West Greenwich was convicted of stealing about forty-five dollars in cash and goods from Thomas Taylor's general store in Little Rest and was sentenced to six months in jail and to be whipped "39 stripes on the Naked Back." Washington County Superior Court, April 1818 sess., 69-71.
29. Many of the prisoners who could not pay their fines and were therefore subject to corporal punishment were black. In 1802 Plato Babcock, a black man, was found guilty of theft, served at least five months in jail, and was whipped by jailer Robert Helme; the whipping, according to Helme, "paid his fine for stealing." In 1807 Prince Watson, another black man, was whipped when he did not pay his fine of five dollars for a theft conviction. Bickford, *Crime*, 46.
30. An early historian of slavery in the Narragansett Country, Elisha R. Potter Jr., reported that the conditions of slavery there were relatively mild compared to those in the colonial South. See Wilkins Updike, *A History of the Episcopal Church in Narragansett, Rhode Island*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Merrymount Press, 1907), 169-74 (quoting Potter's address to the Rhode Island House of Representatives); Elisha R. Potter Jr., *An Address Delivered before the Rhode Island Historical Society, on the Evening of February Nineteenth, 1851* (Providence: George H. Whitney, 1851), 13-14. These relatively mild conditions were probably based in part on the number of slaves on large New England farms, typically fewer than ten, compared to the number of slaves on southern plantations, sometimes in the hundreds. In the South, where slaves frequently outnumbered whites, fear of slave revolts was more prevalent, and slave owners therefore imposed harsher measures to control their slaves. Narratives by former northern slaves commonly mention the slaves' dread of being sold to plantations farther south than Delaware or Maryland. Starling, *Slave Narrative*, 8-9. At the beginning of his narrative, James Mars explains that "the treatment of slaves was different at the North from the South; at the North they were admitted to be a species of the human family." *Life of James Mars, in Cottrol, From African to Yankee*, 53. One historian of New England slavery concludes that "[s]laves were treated more kindly in New England than elsewhere in colonial America." Lorenzo J. Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England*, 327. Nonetheless, slavery everywhere, at its core, was based on terror, which white masters used to keep slaves from rebelling, running away, or disobeying. Despite the traditional view that slaves in the Narragansett Country were treated mildly, there are reported examples of harsh punishments being meted out there: Thomas R. Hazard, *Recollections of Olden Times* (Newport, R.I.: John Sanborn, 1879), 126, tells of a runaway slave tied to a stake and dying in a swamp; Fitts, *New England's Slave Paradise*, 108-9, discusses the likelihood that slaves had their toes cut off as punishment; Daniel Goodwin, ed., *A Letterbook and Abstract of Out Services, Written during the Years 1743-1751, by the Revd. James MacSparran* (Boston: Merrymount Press, 1899) 52, describes pothooks being placed around the neck of an abused runaway slave; Irving H. Bartlett, *From Slave to Citizen* (Providence: Urban League of Greater Providence, 1954), 15, relates that a Quaker woman was accused of "encouraging the unmerciful whipping or beating of her negro man slave, he being stripped naked and hanged by the hands in his masters house"; Sweet, *Bodies Politic*, 71, describes a slave owner striking a slave on the head with iron tongs. By the 1770s there were indications in Washington County that some of the more brutal excesses of slavery such as these would no longer be tolerated. See Christian McBurney, *History of Kingston* (Kingston, R.I.: Pettaquamscutt Historical Society, 2004), 49-50.
31. John Bartlett, *Records*, 10:7-8, 132.
32. Thomas R. Hazard recalled having attended the one-room schoolhouse at Tower Hill, South Kingstown, some-

- time about 1810, "with black Suke Watson on one side of me." Thomas R. Hazard, *The Jonny-Cake Papers of "Shepherd Tom"* (Boston: Merrymount Press, 1915) 8.
33. See note 45 below.
 34. Foster, *Witnessing Slavery*, 83.
 35. For more on the Second Great Awakening in rural Rhode Island, see Daniel Jones, *The Economic and Social Transformation of Rural Rhode Island, 1780-1850* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), chap. 5.
 36. See Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 72; Nathaniel Philbrick, *Sea of Glory, America's Voyage of Discovery: The U.S. Exploring Expedition, 1838-1842* (New York: Viking, 2003), 38-39.
 37. Bolster, *Black Jacks*, 73.
 38. "Washington and Kent County Deaths and Marriages" (manuscript in the Rhode Island Historical Society), 97.
 39. Third Census of the United States, 1810, Rhode Island, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
 40. W. McDonald, *History of Methodism in Providence, Rhode Island* (Boston, 1868), 54.
 41. *Ibid.*; Robert Glenn Sherer Jr., "Negro Churches in Rhode Island before 1860," *Rhode Island History* 25 (1966): 9, 12.
 42. William J. Brown, *The Life of William J. Brown*, in Cottrol, *From African to Yankee*, 75, 99.
 43. For the New England practice of giving black churchgoers inferior seating, see Lorenzo J. Greene, *Negro in Colonial New England*, 283-84.
 44. For background on the Killingly Congregational Church and the Chestnut Hill Baptist Church, see Ellen D. Larned, *History of Windham County, Connecticut* (1880; reprint, Westminster, Md.: Heritage Books, 1998), 330-35, 432-37; Richard Bayles, *History of Windham County, Connecticut* (1889), 942-43, 948-49. The Chestnut Hill Baptist Church where Pearce was baptized was built in 1807 and was replaced in 1838 in East Killingly with the Union Baptist Church, part of which still stands. *Windham County Transcript*, March 25, 1976, 5. The First Congregational Church of Killingly, which Pearce may have visited, was replaced in 1818 with a meetinghouse that still stands in what is now Putnam, Connecticut. Letter from Marilyn Labbe of the Killingly Historical Society to the author, April 6, 2006.
 45. Only a few marriages involving blacks and Indians are recorded in the book of marriages kept by the Congregational minister in Washington County from 1736 to 1776. See William Davis Miller, *Dr. Joseph Torrey and His Record Book of Marriages* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1925). By contrast, the register of the Anglican St. Paul's Church in South Kingstown recorded that the Reverend James MacSparran, the church's rector from 1721 to 1757, catechized "near about or more than 100" blacks. Goodwin, *Letterbook*, 85. Samuel Fayerweather, MacSparran's successor until 1775, catechized slaves. Carl L. Woodward, *Plantation in Yankeeland* (Chester, Conn.: Pequot Press, 1971), 131-32. For segregated seating in Anglican churches, see Fitts, *New England's Slave Paradise*, 152.
 46. Edward Field, ed., *State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations: A History* (Boston: Mason, 1902), 2:119.
 47. William Northrop served as pastor of the First Baptist Church in North Kingstown from its inception in 1782. J. R. Cole, *History of Washington and Kent Counties, Rhode Island* (New York: W. W. Preston, 1889), 425-31. Thomas Cole's military service, from October 1776 through December 1781, is recorded in Revolutionary War Service Records, Rhode Island 1st Regiment, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
 48. For more on Baptists in rural Rhode Island, see Jones, *Economic and Social Transformation*, chap. 5.
 49. The authors of two narratives of Rhode Island African Americans, Eleanor Eldridge and William J. Brown, who were born free but whose parents were slaves, discuss their partial Narragansett Indian heritage. See Cottrol, *From African to Yankee*, 33-48, 73-202.
 50. Sherer, "Negro Churches," 10-12.
 51. See Irving H. Bartlett, *From Slave to Citizen*, 50-53; note 32 above.
 52. South Kingstown Sabbath School Society Record Book, Wells Papers, Pettaquamscutt Historical Society.
 53. *History of the State of Rhode Island* (Philadelphia: Hoag, Wade & Co., 1878), 298; Sherer, "Negro Churches," 9, 23-24.
 54. South Kingstown Town Council Records, 7:69 (Aug. 10, 1810).
 55. For the Negro Election festival in the Narragansett Country, see Updike, *Episcopal Church*, 177-79; McBurney, *History of Kingston*, 138-40. Jonathan Helme's reminiscence of John Potter's election appears in "Recollections of South Kingstown," *Providence Journal*, Oct. 31, 1874, and is reprinted in Christian McBurney, *JAILED FOR PREACHING: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF CATO PEARCE, A FREED SLAVE FROM WASHINGTON COUNTY, RHODE ISLAND* (Kingston, R.I.: Pettaquamscutt Historical Society, 2006), appendix A, and in McBurney, *History of Kingston*, appendix B. The last Negro Election festival in the Narragansett Country was thought to have occurred in 1812, with another servant of Elisha Potter, Aaron Potter, elected as the governor (see Thomas R. Hazard, *Recollections of Olden Times*, 121-22), but a recently published journal reports a Negro Election festival in Wakefield in 1827: Henry Clay Oatley Jr., ed., *Daniel Stedman's Journal, 1826-1859* (Greenville, R.I.: Rhode Island Genealogical Society, 2003), 26.
 56. An Account of the Real and Personal Estate of E. R. Potter, August 21, 1816, Elisha R. Potter Sr. Papers, series 6, box 2, folder 9, Rhode Island Historical Society.

57. Thomas R. Hazard, *The Jonny-Cake Papers*, 149.
58. For background on Elisha R. Potter Sr., see McBurney, *History of Kingston*, 108-17, 146-48, 168-70, 175-79.
59. Bickford, *Crime*, 10-12.
60. Based on the chronology of Pearce's memoir, the author estimates that Pearce was jailed about 1820. The earliest the incident could have occurred was 1810, when Elisha Potter married his second wife, Mary Mawny Potter; the latest the incident could have occurred was 1828. Pearce states that the sheriff at the time he was jailed was a man named Allen. Samuel D. Allen died in 1828 while serving as sheriff of Washington County. *Newport Mercury*, May 10, 1828; see also the death notice in the *Providence Patriot*, April 9, 1828.
61. For background on George Fayerweather and his family, see McBurney, *History of Kingston*, 147-50. Elisha Potter's Account Book, 45, records a payment by George Fayerweather for permission to graze his horse in Potter's pastures.
62. These were cases in which recently freed slaves were seeking payment from white farmers who had hired them. Whites likely approved of these cases because if the black workers were not able to recover fees owed to them, they might become public charges and a burden on town taxpayers. In the August 1795 term of the Washington County Court of Common Pleas, *Quash Peckham* (probably a former slave of Benjamin Peckham near Little Rest) and his wife Lydia (the former slave of Elisha Reynolds of Little Rest) filed a suit against a white Hopkinton man for failure to pay fees owed for their labor. Quash and Lydia Peckham were not represented by attorneys, and when the defendant's attorney filed a response, they withdrew their case and were assessed for court costs of \$6.41. *Quash and Lydia Peckham v. Zephaniah Brown*, August 1795 sess., 195. But within the next two years two free black laborers retained attorneys and successfully sued their white employers for amounts owed to them, \$90 and \$55, plus court costs. *Prince Vaughn v. John Westcott*, August 1796 sess., 248; *Cudjo Babcock v. Joshua Perry*, August 1797 sess., 331. In 1765 the county court had considered whether a slave who was sued for trespass by a white Narragansett planter could even appear and testify in court or pay damages; the court allowed the slave to testify and the case to proceed. McBurney, *History of Kingston*, 46.
63. Snow, *Census of Rhode Island, 1875*, xliii.
64. Third Census of the United States. In 1810 Rhode Island still had 109 slaves, with the greatest concentrations in Bristol (34) and Block Island (26). In the 1790s and early 1800s Bristol was a key port for illegal slave traders, who were probably responsible for the town's large slave population. Rappleye, *Sons of Providence*, 303-4, 337-38. It is possible that slave owners on remote Block Island were sufficiently removed from the full force of the popular opposition to slavery that they felt little shame in owning slaves.
65. Fourth Census of the United States, Rhode Island, 1820; Fifth Census of the United States, Rhode Island, 1830; Sixth Census of the United States, Rhode Island, 1840; National Archives, Washington, D.C.
66. Oatley, *Daniel Stedman's Journal*, 9, 85 (Potter), 31 (Pearce).
67. For references to John Potter from 1820 to 1830, see Caroline Hazard, ed., *Nailer Tom's Diary, Otherwise the Journal of Thomas B. Hazard of South Kingstown, Rhode Island 1778 to 1840* (Boston: Merrymount Press, 1930), 549-50, 560, 583, 584, 721. For references to Nailer Tom hiring Nabby Potter to wash his clothes and clean his house in 1821 and 1822, see *ibid.*, 566, 568, 571.
68. Oatley, *Daniel Stedman's Journal*, 31. Ray Allen was a white Baptist residing in Wakefield.
69. Sixth Census of the United States, 77.
70. See Deborah Bingham Van Broekhoven, *The Devotion of These Women* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 32-35, 62, 102-3.
71. For the restoration of black voting rights in Rhode Island, see Patrick T. Conley, *Democracy in Decline: Rhode Island's Constitutional Development, 1776-1841* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1977), 345, 372; McBurney, *History of Kingston*, 240-42. For the antislavery movement in Rhode Island, see Van Broekhoven, *Devotion of These Women*, *passim*.
72. For an argument that Venture Smith's African American viewpoint can still be gleaned from his narrative, see Robert E. Desrocher Jr., "Not Fade Away": The Narrative of Venture Smith, an African American in the Early Republic," *Journal of American History* 84 (1997): 40, 43-45.
73. Most New England slave narratives were written by educated whites using their own diction and dialect. By contrast, in Pearce's narrative there is an attempt by the editor to imitate the informal dialect used by both whites and blacks. In some instances white editors of black narrators added colloquial speech to make the narratives more entertaining for whites. See Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 169-83. However, the use of colloquial speech in Pearce's narrative would appear to be authentic, as Pearce was a child born of slaves and never received a formal education. Pearce's editor also used colloquial speech for some whites, including Elisha R. Potter Sr. and his wife Mary. Pearce's narrative could be useful for the study of nineteenth-century vernacular in Washington County.

Vigilant 26

Remarks

The first of Middle parts Mod. & fair Weather latter hozy at 1st M stood up as far towards Bristol Ferry as the Pilot would take Charge of the Ship the Rebels kept a constant fire of 14 Ave Guns on the Ship from a Battery above the Ferry most of which shot fell a lose on board and the rest passed over between the Mast & the and kept firing that at the Rebels posted on Wind Mill and Lecher hills at 2 observed the African Troops closely engaged with the Rebels in a Wood between both sides stood close in and anchored with a spring on the cable to show the Wood, but before the Spring could be hauled taut the Rebels began a Cannonade from three 24 pounders the three first shot killed the Ship and the others fell all round her, received orders from Captain Gammie to move, D. but the cable and Spring and came to sail employed standing off and on frequently exchanging shot with the Enemy most of whose shot went over the Ship, three excepted which went thro the sails, at 6 the Cannonade on shore began to abate D. received orders from Captain Knowlton to anchor on the Strand of the British Army during the night with the Repriual King and the Sphynx with the other two armed vessels stood over and anchored under the Point of Providence Island went the remaining part of the small 10th cable with a spring as before to the Sheat Anchor at 8 anchored with D. in 9 ft. Water and hoisted to 1/3 of a cable at 5 AM observed the Sphynx & two armed vessels under sail working towards us shore short at 8 being a fresh Gale got down Topgallant Yard & hoisted to 2/3 of a cable anchored here his Majesty's Ship Sphynx with the above two vessels, found the British and Rebel Forces posted on the same Ground as Yesterday and a Cannonade continue at intervals also observed the Rebels busy engaged, finishing their Work on Porters Point.

The Forgotten Ships of the Battle of Rhode Island:

Some Unpublished Documents

D. K. ABBASS

The August 29, 1778, Battle of Rhode Island has consistently been described from the military point of view.¹ In those descriptions the presence of the participating British ships is usually overlooked or only briefly mentioned. With the discovery of previously unpublished documents in the National Archives in London (originally called the Public Records Office), the contribution of these ships to the Battle of Rhode Island may now be assessed.²

BEGINNING ON DECEMBER 6, 1776, British and Hessian troops occupied Aquidneck and Conanicut Islands, and from there they moved to control the waters of Narragansett Bay. Their presence intensified the earlier British interference with Rhode Island shipping and trade, and this led to increased local hostility against the occupying troops.

With the alliance of 1778 between France and the Continental Congress, the French government sent a fleet of large warships under the command of Charles Hector Théodat, Comte d'Estaing, to assist the American cause. The fleet's first choice of military target was the British at New York, but when the French arrived in midsummer, the deep draft of their large vessels meant that they could not easily pass the bar at Sandy Hook and therefore could not reach the city. The fleet then turned to its second choice of military target, the British and Hessians on Aquidneck and Conanicut Islands, then under the command of Maj. Gen. Sir Robert Pigot. As d'Estaing's ships moved toward Rhode Island in late July, American general John Sullivan assembled his troops on the mainland.

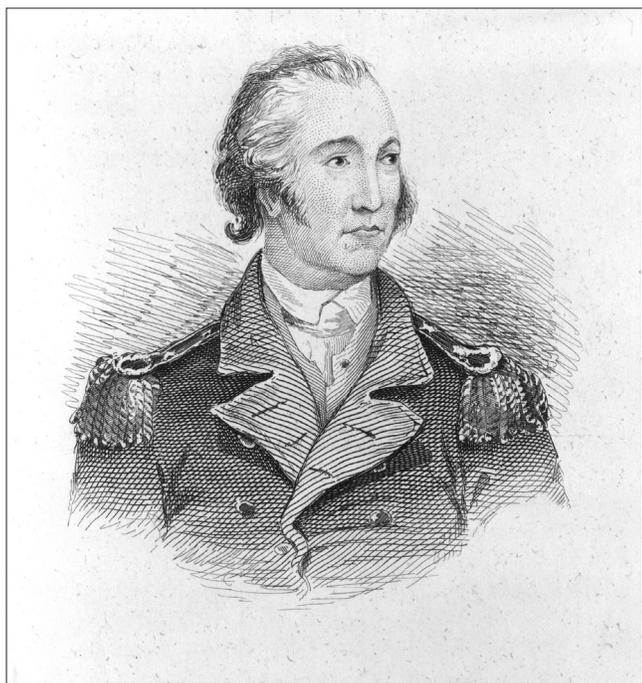
With the arrival of the French fleet at the mouth of Narragansett Bay on July 29, the British prepared their defenses: they destroyed Royal Navy vessels to



Admiral Charles Hector Théodat, Comte d'Estaing, commanded the French fleet that came to the aid of the Americans. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 564).

avoid their capture, scuttled a number of privately owned transports to blockade and protect the city of Newport, and withdrew behind a reinforced system of earthworks around the city.³ Meanwhile, it was taking more than a week for d'Estaing and Sullivan to agree on a cooperative plan by which to attack the British, and for Sullivan to organize his American troops.

The French fleet entered the middle passage (now called the East Passage) of Narragansett Bay on August 8, and the next day Sullivan moved onto Aquidneck Island to take advantage of the British retreat to Newport. When a British fleet under Adm.



The American forces on Aquidneck Island were led by General John Sullivan of New Hampshire. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 5370).

Richard Howe arrived at the mouth of Narragansett Bay to challenge the French on August 9, d'Estaing retrieved the troops he had put ashore on Conanicut Island and sailed into the North Atlantic the next day to confront Howe. With the fleets gone, the Americans moved south to Honeyman's Hill in Middletown, and on August 15 they put Newport under siege. The expected battle at sea never materialized, because both the British and French ships were badly damaged by a major hurricane. On August 20 d'Estaing returned to the mouth of Narragansett Bay, and having announced that he would go to Boston to repair his ships, he sailed away two days later. Although weakened by expiring enlistments and desertions, the Americans continued their siege of Newport for another week, but Sullivan's efforts to convince the French to return to Rhode Island were unsuccessful.

Meanwhile, Admiral Howe had repaired his ships at New York, and on August 25 he sailed for Rhode Island. When he discovered that the French had

gone on to Boston, he followed but sent three small armed ships to Newport with the promise that Gen. Henry Clinton was on his way from New York with four thousand reinforcements. The three ships that arrived at two o'clock in the afternoon of August 27 were the twenty-gun *Sphinx*, the twenty-gun *Vigilant*, and the sixteen-gun *Nautilus*. General Sullivan, still maintaining the siege along Newport's eastern perimeter, took notice of the three British ships and soon knew of Clinton's imminent arrival.⁴

On August 28 Capt. John Brisbane, commander of the Royal Navy force in Rhode Island, "hoisted his broad pendant on board His Majesty's Ship *Sphinx*" because his flagship, the frigate HMS *Flora*, had been scuttled in Newport Harbor when the French entered the East Passage on August 8. Brisbane then sent the *Vigilant* north to protect Coddington Cove, and he had the *Spitfire* galley and a newly arrived privateer brig, the *Reprisal*, anchor off Stoddard's Landing, near the intersection of today's Defense Highway and Green Lane. (This *Spitfire* was probably the American vessel that had been captured at Fall River the previous May; it should not be confused with the Royal Navy's *Spitfire* galley sunk in the Sakonnet River in July.) The next day the *Nautilus* sailed for New York.⁵

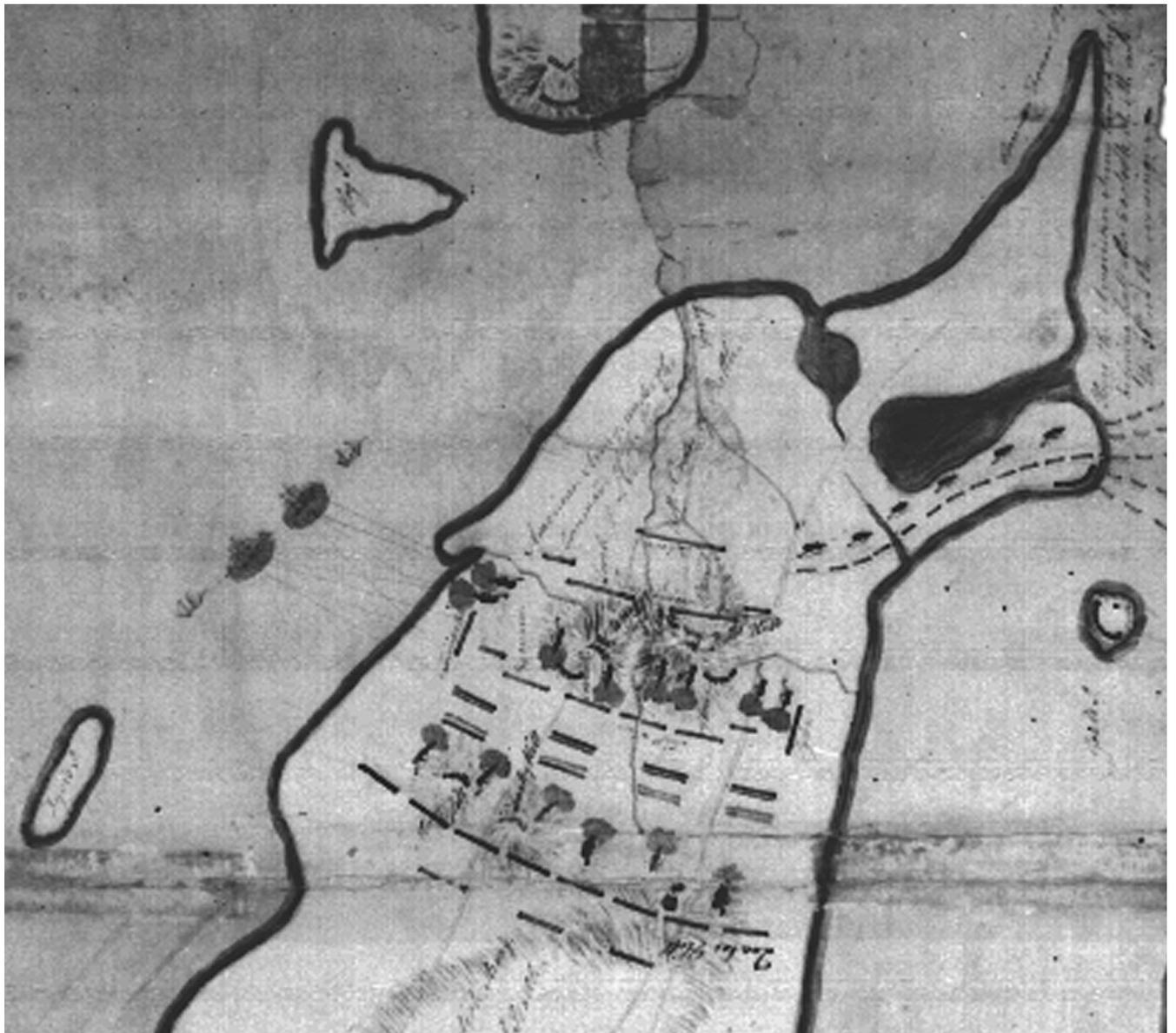
By this time the besieging American force had diminished by half, partly by desertions but mainly through the expiration of militia enlistments. Informing Sullivan that there were no more troops available to be sent, Rhode Island governor William Greene unrealistically recommended that Sullivan obtain reinforcements from neighboring states. With no hope for immediate relief and British reinforcements on their way, the Americans held a council of war on August 28 to determine the best course of action. The decision was to return to the north end of Aquidneck Island and to wait there for the return of the French fleet or the arrival of French troops overland from Boston. The Marquis de Lafayette (serving as a major general with the American forces) then rode to Boston to press for d'Estaing's return.⁶

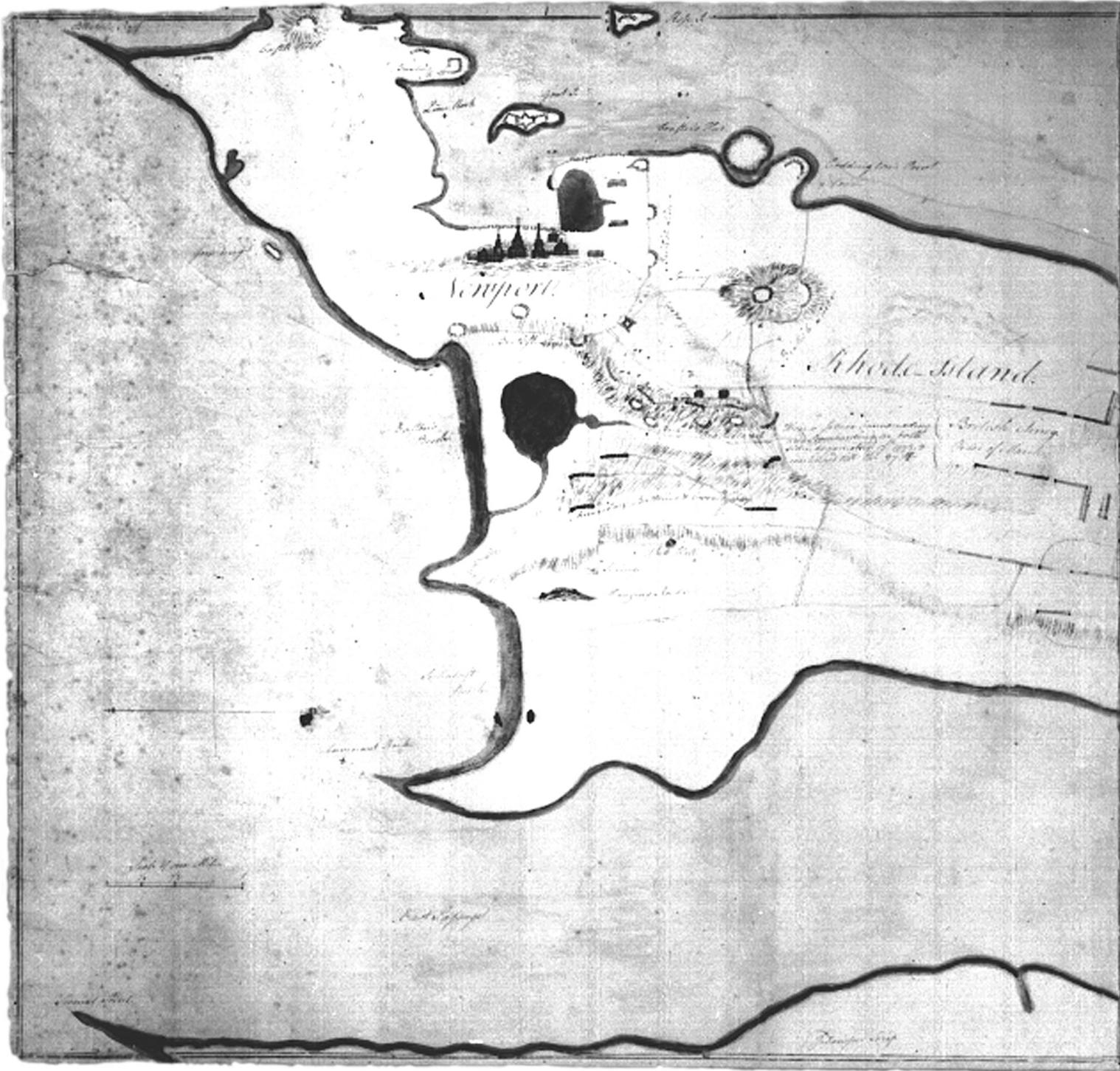
The Americans retreated to the north end of Aquidneck Island early on August 29. When their withdrawal was discovered at daylight, British and Hessian troops followed and engaged the Americans on the roads leading to Quaker and Turkey Hills in Portsmouth. When the Americans took to their strongest position in front of the fort at Windmill Hill (now called

Butts Hill), the British took up their position at Quaker Hill and the Hessians at Turkey Hill.

The heaviest fighting took place that afternoon along the western shore of Aquidneck Island, over contested ground between Turkey Hill and Lehigh Hill to the north. By four o'clock the Hessians had tried three times to overrun the American position at the advanced redoubt commanded by Maj. Samuel Ward Jr., but 138 former slaves who were with the

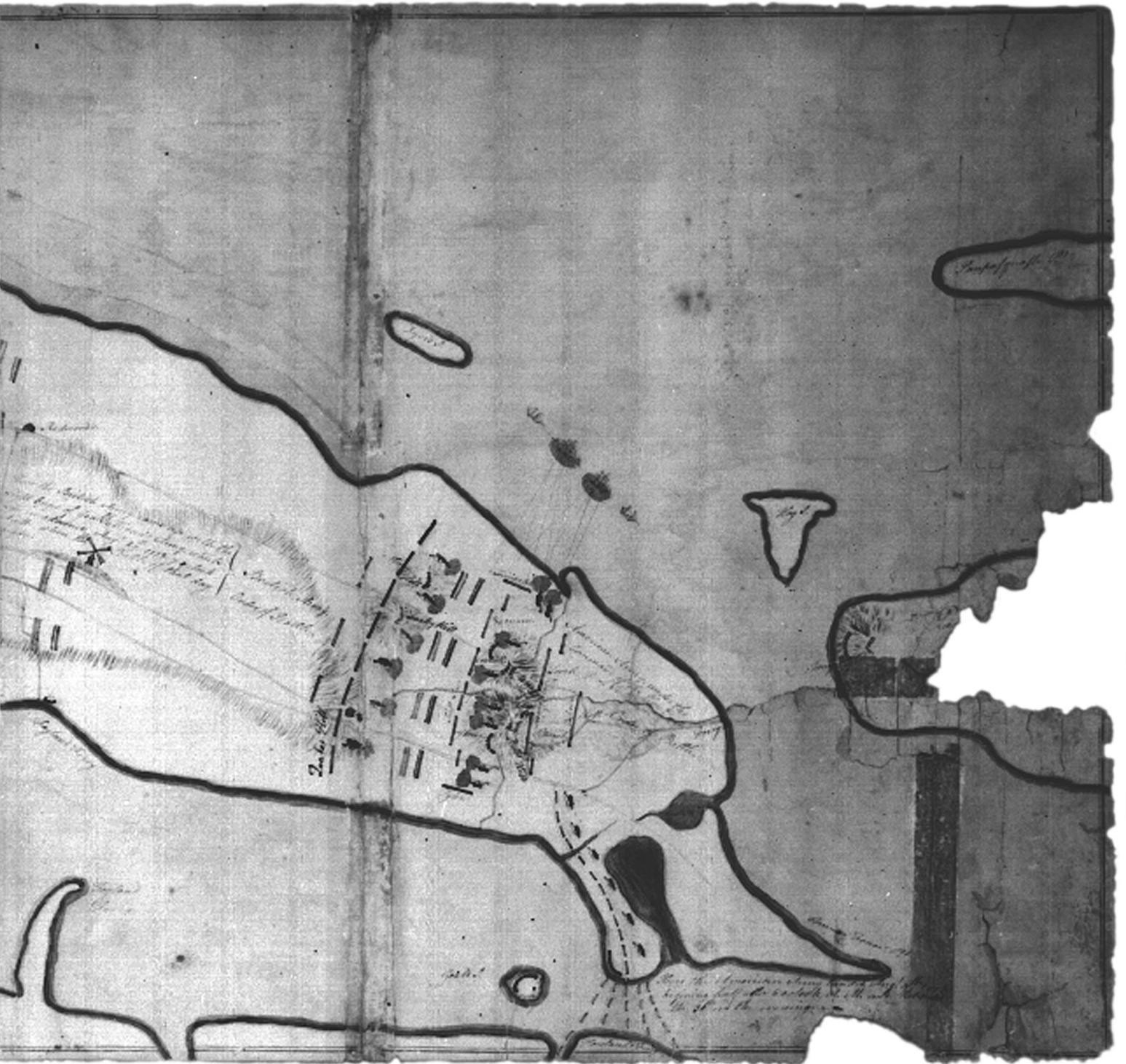
This detail from a 1778 map shows British ships firing into the American lines from west of Aquidneck Island. Rhode Island State Archives.





Aquidneck Island and the Battle of Rhode Island. Map, 1778, Rhode Island State Archives.

First Rhode Island Regiment (the “Black Regiment”) withstood the assaults.⁷ If Ward’s redoubt had fallen, the Hessians would have gained a position behind the American line, and Sullivan’s army would have



been in peril of capitulation and capture. Traditional histories describe how four British ships attacked the Americans during this time but were forced off by cannon brought to the shore.

The remainder of the day saw continued cannonades and skirmishes by the armies of both sides, but the event ended in a stalemate when both Sullivan and Pigot refused to continue the engagement. August 30

saw only desultory cannon fire, and when it became clear that the French would not return to Rhode Island, Sullivan and the American troops crossed to the mainland that night. They left Aquidneck Island none too soon, for the next day the British reinforcements under Clinton arrived from New York.⁸

THE HISTORY OF the siege of Newport and the Battle of Rhode Island has been described in detail a number of times, but how the Royal Navy ships stood off the Aquidneck Island shore to support the British is usually mentioned only in passing.⁹ This is probably because these descriptions are drawn from military, not naval, sources. One such source is the diary of British officer Frederick Mackenzie, who was very critical of the *Vigilant's* failure to continue its bombardment:

As soon as the Troops marched out in pursuit of the Rebels, The Sphynx, and Vigilant, with the Spitfire Galley and the Privateer Brig, got under way with the wind at N.E. and worked up the passage between Rhode-Island and Prudence, in order to annoy the Enemy's right if there should be an opportunity. The Vigilant got up in time to have some shots at the right of the Rebels when drawn up in front of the Artillery Redoubt, but they turning some 18 prs [18-pounder cannons] against her from thence and from Arnold's point, she dropt lower down, and anchored with the other vessels opposite Slocum's. We were of opinion that had the Vigilant continued in the position she had gained, and persisted in cannonading the Enemy's right with her 24 prs she would have galled them exceedingly, and possibly have enabled us to turn that flank. 'Tis certain there was no necessity for her moving back so soon as she did.¹⁰

"The ground between the hills is meadow-land, interspersed with trees and a small copse of wood," General Sullivan reported to Congress. "The enemy began a cannonade upon us about nine in the morning, which was returned with double force. Skirmishing continued between the advanced parties until near ten o'clock, when the enemy's two ships of war and some small armed vessels, having gained our right flank and began a fire, the enemy bent their whole force that way, and endeavored to turn our right, under cover of the ship's fire, and to take the advanced redoubt on the

right."¹¹ Contemporary American maps show the ships stationed just offshore near Arnold's Point, with the American cannon facing them from the shoreline.¹²

These maps and descriptions of the battle, especially the report that the ships were driven off by cannon fire from the shore, deserve closer study. Eyewitness accounts from the naval perspective, giving new details and correcting a minor error in the military reports, appear in three recently discovered documents: the logs of the *Vigilant's* captain, mate, and mate [master?].¹³

The error—the most obvious difference between the military and naval reports—is in the number of vessels involved in the offshore action. According to previously published military histories, the *Vigilant*, *Sphynx*, and *Reprisal* were joined by a fourth armed but unnamed vessel. However, the captain of the *Vigilant* noted the presence of the *Sphynx*, the *Reprisal*, and "the other two armed vessels," and the *Vigilant's* mate and mate [master?] also reported "Plying the Sphynx and three other armed vessels."¹⁴ All three logs therefore agree that five, not four, ships were in the fight, the two small armed vessels remaining unnamed.

More important for an understanding of the maneuvers in the battle is the fact that the *Vigilant* (and probably some of the other vessels) rounded Arnold's Point toward Bristol Ferry to gain a position behind the American force. This movement would have supported the Hessians, who were also trying to get behind the forces on the American right. Two officers from other Royal Navy ships commented on this purpose when they described the small fleet's movements. The captain of the *Falcon*, a British sloop of war that had previously been sunk in Newport Harbor, wrote in his log that the *Sphynx*, *Vigilant*, *Spitfire*, and *Reprisal* "sailed up to cut off the Rebel's retreat, who had Evacuated their Batterys when our Troops Pursued them and an Engagement ensued."¹⁵ Midshipman John Peter Reina of the HMS *Juno*, a British frigate sunk earlier along the west coast of Aquidneck Island, wrote, "The Sphynx 20 gun ship and Vigilant galley, which arrived on the 27th, were sent up the River to cut off the retreat of the Rebels, but

they could not effect it, not getting past the batteries at Bristol Ferry.”¹⁶

The *Vigilant* logs confirm that getting behind the American troops was the ships’ primary goal. The captain of the *Vigilant* reported that while his vessel was anchored in Coddington Cove on August 29, he received orders to cut off the American retreat at Bristol Ferry, and that to comply, the crew “Tacked ship occasionally” as the ship sailed north, which meant she was working into the wind. The mate and mate [master?] also reported that the ship sailed and “plied” with “the wind on end.” These statements about the progress of the *Vigilant* are consistent with log notations that the wind was coming from the northeast. By 10:00 A.M. the ship was in a position to see the British and Hessian troops engaged with the Americans, and at 11:30 A.M. (or meridian, noon, according to the mate) she fired its 24-pounders to support the Hessians who were driving the Americans out of the woods between the combatants’ lines. The *Vigilant* also fired at Americans who were “turning a work up” as the vessel passed Portsmouth Point.

The logs, then, show that the HMS *Vigilant* sailed around Arnold’s Point to get behind the American lines, where she faced the two 24-pounders at the Bristol Ferry battery. For the British ships to be threatened by such cannon fire, they would have to have been within two miles of the battery, and this would have put them north of Arnold’s Point.¹⁷

Although it is clear from the logs that the *Vigilant* was within this cannon range, the Americans did little damage to the ship and did not force her to retreat. “At 1 p.m. stood up as far towards Bristol Ferry as the Pilot would take Charge of the Ship,” the *Vigilant*’s captain reported. “The Rebels kept a constant fire of heavy guns on the ship from a battery above the ferry, most of which shot fell close on board and the rest passed over, between the masts etc. and kept firing shot at the rebels posted on Windmill and Quaker Hills.”¹⁸ The mate [master?]’s log gave a similar description: “At 1 p.m. being well up with Bristol Ferry the enemy began

to fire from the Fort at the same. Several shot went through the sails and fell thick round us, but no other damage. Being informed by the Pilot there was not water to come nigh the fort, we bore up and ran down along the Island. Fired several shot at the Rebels on Portsmouth Point.”

It is clear from these accounts that the *Vigilant* fired on the Americans from her position north of Portsmouth Point (probably Arnold’s Point) but abandoned the approach to Bristol Ferry because of the limitations of the ship’s draft and maneuverability. A former East Indiaman, the *Vigilant* was described as “an old North Country ship cut down and so reconstructed as to carry fourteen 24-pounders and to draw only 11 1/2 feet water.” This large vessel had apparently been the transport *Empress of Russia* before being taken into the Royal Navy’s service.¹⁹

The channel from the west to Bristol Ferry is on a northeast axis between the shallows on the north toward Hog Island and the shallows on the south toward Arnold’s Point. In the middle is “a shoal part dry at spring tides” that is a particular impediment to safe passage.²⁰ It clear that the *Vigilant*’s draft was too great for the shoal area, and ships cannot sail directly into the wind. With the wind from the northeast that morning, the *Vigilant* would not have been able to pass directly through the Bristol Ferry narrows and would have had to tack back and forth over the dangerous shallows, so the pilot would not allow the vessel to continue.

At 2:00 P.M. the *Vigilant* saw another close engagement between the Hessians and the Americans in the woods between their lines, so she “ran down towards Portsmouth Point,”²¹ fired at the Americans building an earthwork there, and anchored at 3:30 about a mile to the south of the point. It was in this area that the frigate HMS *Lark* had burned and exploded earlier in the month. Mackenzie described the loss of that ship: “The Explosion of some of our Frigates was very great, particularly that of the Lark, which had 76 barrels of powder in her Magazine. The house of one Wilcox in the Swamp, near which The Lark blew up, was set on fire by some of the burning pieces

of wood which flew from her, and was totally consumed in a short time. Some pieces of burnt wood fell in the Redoubt at Windmill [Butts] hill.”²²

Although there is no mention of the *Lark*'s debris in the logs of the *Vigilant* (a few remnants of the lost vessel can still be found in the shallow offshore waters of this area today), it is possible that the debris was an impediment to British ships sailing near the shore. In any case, before the *Vigilant* could be settled, the Americans began their cannonade against the fleet, forcing the ship to cut its cable and to abandon her anchor. This is the event so often described by military historians. By then the wind had come around from the southeast, and the *Vigilant* came to sail, “standing off and on” (again indicating the impossibility of sailing into the wind), as she continued to exchange fire with the Americans, this time receiving little damage. By 6:00 P.M. the fighting had diminished, and at 8:00 the *Vigilant* anchored near Prudence Island north of Dyer Island.

After the small British fleet had watched the intermittent cannonading of both sides on August 30, at five o'clock the next morning the *Vigilant*'s captain noted that the Americans had crossed Howland's Ferry to the mainland. The *Vigilant* then returned to her anchorage, probably at Coddington Cove, while the *Sphynx* sailed for Newport. On the morning of September 1 the *Vigilant* returned “up the River” to retrieve the anchor she had abandoned two days before when she was forced off by American fire. On September 3 she returned to Newport, and from there she set out for New London that night.

THIS CHRONOLOGY CLEARLY reveals previously unappreciated naval factors contributing to the Battle of Rhode Island. First, there were five, not four, British ships present, and their main purpose was to reach Bristol Ferry, secure that position, and cut off the American retreat. This plan failed not because of the American cannon fire from Bristol Ferry but because of the wind direction at the time and the shallow depths of the waters near the channel north of Arnold's Point. Only in the face of these circumstances did

the *Vigilant* run south and anchor “to scower a wood where the enemy lay,” from which place she was driven off by American cannon fire. Although these facts do not change the interpretation of the battle or our understanding of its outcome, they do provide a more balanced description of the battle's naval actions.

The following transcriptions from the logs of three of the *Vigilant*'s officers provide details of the battle that have not been published before. It should be noted that the dates in the logs were for days measured from noon to noon, not midnight to midnight. For the ease of modern readers, conventional dates have been inserted, navigational information has been summarized, some spellings have been modernized, punctuation has been supplied, and abbreviations have been spelled out. Photocopies of the original documents are on file at the offices of the Rhode Island Marine Archaeology Project in Newport and at the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission in Providence.

Captain's Log of HMS Vigilant (ADM 51/1037, pp. 25-27, National Archives, London)

August 27 [noon, August 26, to noon, August 27; approaching Rhode Island]:

. . . At 5 [A.M.] saw Block Island bearing north 2 or 3 leagues. At 6 the centre of Ditto West Northwest 2 leagues. . . . At 8 Point Judith Northwest by West 2 or 3 miles. Made the signal to the Sphynx for a sail to the windward. The Sphynx & Nautilus in company. At noon observed English colours flying on Rhode Island.

August 28 [August 27-28; coming into Newport]:

. . . Running in for Rhode Island Harbour. At 4 PM anchored off Brenton's Point in 4 fathoms and veered to 1/3 of a cable.²³

August 29 [August 28-29; at the Battle of Rhode Island]:

Winds: Northeast, East Southeast, Northeast, East Northeast
Bearings and Distance at Noon: Standing off and on off Bristol Ferry, Rhode Island Harbor.

Remarks: Moderate and fair winds. At 3 PM weighed and came to sail up the River.²⁴ At 5 anchored with the small bower and spring fast to the anchor off Carrington [Coddington] Cove in 8 fathoms; veered to 1/3 of a cable. Gold [Gould] Island West Northwest, Bishop Rock South by West 1/2 mile; distance offshore 1/2 a mile. At 12 heard the report of musquetry at distinct intervals. At 4 the above continued with the addition of some field pieces. At 5 [A.M.] observed the Rebels had evacuated their post and the firing heard during the night and judged to be the British troops in pursuit of them. At 1/2 past 7 AM received orders to weigh and try to cut off the retreat of the Rebels at Bristol Ferry. Employed working up to ditto in company with the Sphynx and three armed vessels. At 10 observed the British and Hessian troops engaged with the Rebels who had posted themselves on Quaker and Windmill Hills,²⁵ and our people had got possession of the next commanding ground, a very heavy cannonade continued till noon, and frequently large columns of rebels advancing down into a small wood between the two lines. At 1/2 11 finding the Hessians closely attacked by the enemy in the above wood, stood close in and fired several shot to facilitate the operations of the Hessians, who were by this time driving the rebels out of the wood and retreating to their strong ground who were now in such numbers as to cover the whole of the above hills and nearly down to Portsmouth Point where I observed them turning a work up. Stood close in and fired several guns with round and grape [shot] among those people which only disturbed them for the time. Tacked ship occasionally as did his majesty's ship Sphynx and other vessels.

August 30 [August 29-30; at the Battle of Rhode Island]:

Winds: Southeast, South Southeast

. . . At 1 PM stood up as far towards Bristol Ferry as the Pilot would take charge of the ship. The Rebels kept constant fire of heavy guns on the ship from a battery above the ferry, most of which shot fell close on board and the rest passed over between the mast head and kept firing shot at the rebels posted on Windmill and Quaker Hills. At 2 observed the Hessian troops closely engaged with the Rebels in a wood between both lines. Stood close in and anchored with a spring on the cable to scour the wood, but before the spring could be hauled taught, the Rebels began a cannonade from the 24 pounders. The three first shot hulled the ship and the others fell all around her. Received orders from Captain Graeme to move ditto.²⁶ Cut the cable and spring and came to sail. Employed standing off and on, frequently exchanging shot with the enemy, most of whose shot went over the ship, three excepted which went through the sails. At 6 the cannonade on shore began to abate ditto. Received orders from Captain Brisbane to anchor on the flank of the British army during the night with the Reprisal brig and the Sphynx with the other two armed vessels, stood over and anchored under the north end of Prudence Island. Bent the remaining part of the small bower cable with a spring as before to the sheat anchor. At 8 anchored with ditto in 9 fathoms of water and veered to 1/3 of a cable. At 5 AM observed the Sphynx and two armed vessels under sail working towards us. . . . Anchored here his Majesty's Ship Sphynx with the above two vessels, found the British and Rebel Forces posted on the same ground as yesterday, and a cannonade continued at intervals. Also observed the Rebels busily engaged, finishing their work on Portsmouth Point.

August 31 [August 30-31; anchored between Prudence and Aquidneck Islands, north of Dyer's Island]:

. . . At 2 AM heard the report of musquetry on Rhode Island. At 5 AM observed the Rebels had evacuated Rhode Island and retreated across Howland Ferry during the night. . . . At 1/2 past 9 weighed and came to sail. At 11 the Sphynx weighed and sailed for Newport.

Mate [Master?]'s Log of HMS Vigilant (ADM 52/2063, part 3, National Archives)

Thursday, August 27 [noon, August 26, to noon, August 27; approaching Rhode Island]:

Winds: Southwest by West, Southwest. West Northwest off too, West by North, off.

Remarks: . . . At 5 AM: Saw Block Island north of us about 3 leagues.

10 AM: Point Judith Northwest by West 2 or 3 [leagues].

12 noon: Steering for Rhode Island. The Light House North

by East and point Judith West Southwest. Latitude observed 41 34 North.

Friday, August 28 [August 27-28; coming into Newport]:
Winds: Southeast and Southwest, ditto.

Remarks: First and latter parts moderate & fair, the middle Fresh breeze & cloudy. PM Running into Rhode Island Harbour in company the ships as before. At 4 anchored, as did the other ships in said harbour, by the small bower in 7 fathoms and veered to 1/3 cable off Britton's [Brenton] Point. At 6 shifted our berth higher up and anchored in 14 fathoms. Veered to 1/2 cable. Fort on Goat Island East, Light House Southwest by West and Rose Island North 1/2 East. Received on board to the use of the ship a schooner rigged boat compleat with sail & other necessaries.

Saturday, August 29 [August 28-29; at the Battle of Rhode Island]:
Wind: Southeast to Northeast.

Remarks: Moderate and fair weather. At 3 PM we weighed and came to sail and proceeded up the River; at 5 anchored in Corrinton [Coddington] Cove by the small bower in 8 fathoms water. At 7 AM received orders to weigh and proceeded up towards Bristol Ferry. Weighed and came to sail and plied, the wind being on end. Fired a few shot at the Rebels who were engaged with the British Army. At 11 ordered plying as above, the Sphynx and 3 armed vessels in company.

Sunday, August 30 [August 29-30; at the Battle of Rhode Island]:
Wind: Northeast to Southeast and round to Southwest.

Remarks: First part moderate, middle fresh breeze & latter a strong gale. At 1 PM being well up with Bristol Ferry, the enemy began to fire from the fort at Ditto. Several shot went through the sails and fell thick round us, but no other damage. Being informed by the pilot there was not water to come nigh the fort, we bore up and ran down along the Island. Fired several shott at the Rebels on Portsmouth Point. At 1/2 past 3 we anchored by the small bower in 3 fathoms water, in order to scower a wood where the enemy lay, having a spring on the cable, but before we could get the ship in that position, were fired on by the rebels from a covered ground, hulling us long shot. The Captain ordered the cable to be cut, which was completed with by cutting it at the bits. The navy veered to the southwest, plied down along the Island. Ship unbent the sheet cable from the spare anchor and bent the remnant to ditto. At 8 we anchored by ditto in 9 fathoms. Dyer's Island South 1 [mile?]. At 7 AM veered to 2/3 cable. At 8 down top gallant yards, blowing strong. Got a 24 pounder on the quarter deck.

Monday, August 31 [August 30-31; anchored between Prudence and Aquidneck Islands, north of Dyer's Island]:

Wind: Southwest and NE Quarters.

Remarks: First part fresh gale and cloudy. Middle and latter moderate with ditto with ditto weather. . . . At 10 weighed and came to sail towards our anchorage. At 11 the Sphynx weighed and proceeded for Newport. At 11 ordered plying toward our anchorage.

Tuesday, September 1 [August 31-September 1; at Newport]:
Wind: SE, Ditto.

Remarks: Moderate and cloudy. At 1 PM we anchored by the small bower in 13 fathoms water. At 7 we weighed and came to sail and ran up the River and anchored by the best bower in 7 fathoms water. AM are employed in getting the small bower anchor. Got Ditto and spliced the cable. Portsmouth Point Northeast by East 1 Mile laying short.

Wednesday, September 2 [September 1-2; off Portsmouth]:
Wind: Southwest, Northeast Quarter.

Remarks: Fresh and latter part moderate and fair weather, the middle fresh breeze with squalls and rain. Reeved a new cat fall. Bent the best bower cable to the spare anchor, having unbent the small there from. At 2 PM weighed the anchor and warped a cable's length to the southward and then anchored by the small bower being bent to the proper anchor in 9 fathoms water and veered to 1/3 cable. The people employed occasionally. Above position East Northeast.

Thursday, September 3 [September 2-3; off Portsmouth]:
Winds: Northerly, North Northeast, North Northeast, North by West, North.

Remarks: 1 PM Moderate and fair weather. Weighed and came to sail and proceeded towards Newport.

4 PM: Anchored by the small bower in 7 fathoms with the North Battery East by North 1/2 Northerly, Rose Island West Northwest 1/2 a mile, Newport Harbor.

8 PM: Weighed and came to sail and proceeded out of the harbour, in company several men of war and armed vessels and transports with troops. Anchored at 9, brought to without the lighthouse. Main topsail to the main. A 1/2 past 10 bore up and made sail as did the fleet per signal from the Commodore. At 12 shortened sail. Fresh breeze and clear. 2-5 AM Shortening and making sail occasionally to keep by the Commodore.

6 AM: New London Light House North by West 3 leagues.

9 AM-noon: Turning to windward. Tacked occasionally. Fresh breeze and fair weather. New London Light House North Northeast 1/2 East 2 leagues.

Mate's Log of HMS Vigilant (ADM 52/2063, part 5, National Archives)

August 27 [noon, August 26, to noon, August 27; approaching Rhode Island]:

. . . Block Island bearing north at 3 leagues. Steered for Rhode Island.

August 28 [August 27-28; arrived at Newport]:

. . . PM running into Rhode Island Harbour in company with the above ships. At 4 PM anchored in 14 fathoms. Veered to 1/2 cable. Fort on Goat Island east 1/2 a mile. Received a longboat for this ship's use, schooner rigged, complete.

August 29 [August 28-29; at Coddington Cove, then to Portsmouth]:

. . . At 3 PM weighed and came to Sail and proceeded up the Harbour, Round the Island [Coaster's Harbour]. At 5 anchored in Corinton [Coddington] Cove by the small bower in 8 fathoms with lay short. At 7 AM received orders to weigh. Ditto weighed and came to sail. The wind on end, we plied toward Bristol Ferry in order to intercept the enemy's retreat. Fired several shot at the enemy, engaged with our troops as we passed at Meridian. Plying the Sphynx and three other armed vessels Inc[luded].

August 30 [August 29-30; at the Battle of Rhode Island]:

. . . At 1 PM being well up with Bristol Ferry the enemy began to cannonade from the Battery at Ditto Ferry, but did no great damage. Bore up and ran down towards Portsmouth Point. Fired some guns at the Rebels throwing up a breast work on Ditto. At 1/2 past 3 we anchored about 1 mile below Ditto with the small bower in 3 fathoms water with a spring on the cable in order to scower a wood to where the Rebeles had lodged themselves but afore we could, our guns were fired on from under cover by an 18 [pound] ordnance hulling with every shot. The Captain ordered the cable to be cut. Cutt Ditto at the bits, the wind at that time having veered to the southwest. We plyed down along the Island. Unbent the sheet cable from the spare anchor and bent the remnant of small to ditto anchor. At 8 anchored by ditto in 8 fathoms.

August 31 [August 30-31; anchored between Prudence and Aquidneck Islands, north of Dyer's Island]:

At 10 AM weighed and proceeded towards our anchor. The Sphynx weighed and proceeded for Newport at Meridian.

September 1 [August 31-September 1; anchored between Prudence and Aquidneck Islands, north of Dyer's Island]:

At 1 PM anchored by the small bower in 13 fathoms water. At 7 weighed and ran up the river and high the small bower cut away. AM are employed in getting the said anchor ditto, and spliced the cable.

September 2 [September 1-2; anchored between Prudence and Aquidneck Islands, north of Dyer's Island; retrieved abandoned anchor]

September 3 [September 2-3; return to Newport and depart for Long Island Sound]:

. . . At 1 PM weighed and came to sail and proceeded towards Newport. At 3 anchored at ditto. . . . At 8 weighed and came to sail in company with several men of war and transports with troops on board and proceeded towards New London, shortening and making sail occasionally. At 6 AM New London Light House North by West 3 Leagues.

For more information and educational materials on this subject, see under Education at www/rihs/org.

Notes

1. The standard works on the topic are by Paul F. Dearden, "The Siege of Newport: Inauspicious Dawn of Alliance," *Rhode Island History* 29 (1970): 17-35, and *The Rhode Island Campaign of 1778: Inauspicious Dawn of Alliance* (Providence: Rhode Island Bicentennial Foundation, 1980). More recent is the essay by Patrick T. Conley, "The Battle of Rhode Island, 29 August 1778: A Victory for the Patriots," *Rhode Island History* 62 (2004): 51-65. A similar description of the battle appears in Gerald M. Carbone, "Behold Our Fellows Chasing the British," *Providence Journal*, June 25, 2006, one of the articles in a series on Nathanael Greene.
2. Copies of these documents were made through the generosity of Henry H. Anderson Jr., with support from a National Park Service American Battlefield Protection Program Grant, and transcripts were included in a four-volume report to the National Park Service. See D. K. Abbass, *Rhode Island in the Revolution: Big Happenings in the Smallest State* (part 1, *A Chronology of the War in Rhode Island* [2006]; part 2, *The Ships Lost in Rhode Island* [2006]; part 3, *The Land Sites* [2004]; part 4, *Bibliography and Appendices* [2006]). The report is now in its updated second edition (2007-8) and is available to the public from the Rhode Island Marine Archaeology Project, Box 1492, Newport, R.I. 02840.
3. Preliminary studies of these vessels are in a report to the Naval Historical Center: D. K. Abbass, *Naval History and the Submerged Cultural Resources of Rhode Island* (2000), available from the Rhode Island Marine Archaeology Project. More detailed histories are in Abbass, *Rhode Island in the Revolution*, part 2.
4. Robert C. Bray and Paul E. Bushnell, eds., *Diary of a Common Soldier in the American Revolution, 1775-1783: An Annotated Edition of the Military Journal of Jeremiah Greenman* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1978), 127-28; Dearden, "Siege of Newport," 30; Thomas C. Amory, *The Military Services and Public Life of Major-General John Sullivan, of the American Revolutionary Army* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1968), 79; Richard K. Showman, ed., *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*. vol. 2 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 497.
5. Logs of the HMS *Nautilus*, ADM 52/1883, ADM 52/1883, part 4, National Archives, London. Pagination in the ships' logs is inconsistent or lacking.
6. Dearden, "Siege of Newport," 30, 31; Showman, *General Nathanael Greene*, 2:499, 503 n. 2.
7. Amory, *Major-General John Sullivan*, 82, 86; James E. Garman, *A History of Portsmouth, Rhode Island, 1638-1978* (Newport: Franklin Printing House, 1978), 17; John T. Pierce Sr., *Historical Tracts of the Town of Portsmouth, Rhode Island* (1991, Portsmouth: Hamilton Printing Company, 1991), 111; Gary Alexander Puckrein, *The Black Regiment in the American Revolution*. (Providence: Brown University Afro-American Studies Program and Rhode Island Black Heritage Society, 1978); Richard Sullivan, "The Role of the Black Regiment in the Battle of Rhode Island," (typescript, 1973, Rhode Island Marine Archaeology Project archives).
8. Dearden, "Siege of Newport," 32; George Washington Greene, *Historical View of the American Revolution* (1865; reprint, Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1970). 447.
9. See, e.g., Dearden, *Rhode Island Campaign*, 124-25.
10. *Diary of Frederick Mackenzie: Giving a Daily Narrative of His Military Service as an Officer of the Regiment of Royal Welch Fusiliers during the Years 1775-1781 in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New York* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), 383.
11. Amory, *Major-General John Sullivan*, 86.

12. One example is manuscript map 00569 (undated, but apparently made shortly after the Battle of Rhode Island) in the Rhode Island State Archives. There is a similar map in the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society.
13. One of the mate's logs may have been kept by the *Vigilant*'s master, since it included sailing instructions that the ship's master would have determined.
14. Captain's log, ADM 51/1037, mate's log, ADM 52/2063, part 5, mate [master?]'s log, ADM 52/2063, part 3, National Archives. "Plying" meant sailing back and forth, sometimes tacking to sail into the wind.
15. Log of the sloop of war HMS *Falcon*, ADM 51/1336, National Archives.
16. John F. Millar, "A British Account of the Siege of Rhode Island, 1778," *Rhode Island History* 38 (1979): 83.
17. The extreme range of a 24-pounder was between that of an 18-pounder, 2,500 to 2,870 yards, and that of a 32-pounder, 2,900 yards. Nathan Miller, *Sea of Glory: The Continental Navy Fights for Independence 1775-1783* (New York: David McKay, 1974), 94 n.5.
18. The captain's statement that the *Vigilant* "shot at the rebels posted on Windmill and Quaker Hills" is somewhat confusing. Windmill Hill (now called Butts Hill) was Sullivan's stronghold, but Quaker Hill, on the east side of Aquidneck Island, was held by the British. Since it is not likely that the *Vigilant* would have fired at such a distant British-controlled target, the captain probably was in error on the name; he may have meant Lehigh Hill. In any case, it is clear that the *Vigilant* continued her bombardment of the American line.
19. Log of the *Falcon*; Michael J. Crawford, ed., *Documents of the American Revolution*, vol. 10 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1966), 500, 514; Mackenzie, *Diary*, 376, 80; Gen. Robert Pigot, "Battle of Rhode Island," *Scots Magazine*, October 1778, 543-46, reprinted in *Rhode Island Historical Tracts* no. 6 and *Newport Historical Magazine* 2 (1882): 253-56 (see especially p. 255); Simeon Thayer, "Journal of Capt. Simeon Thayer," *Rhode Island Historical Society Collections* 6 (1867): 76-77.
20. Shown on a published map by Charles Blaskowitz, *A Topographical Chart of the Bay of Narragansett in the Province of New England . . .* (London: Faden, 1777).
21. "Portsmouth Point" was probably Arnold's Point.
22. Mackenzie, *Diary*, 329-30.
23. In the eighteenth century Brenton Point (today the name of the southwest corner of Newport Neck, at the approach to Narragansett Bay) was the name given to the peninsula on which Fort Adams State Park is now located. A fathom is 6 feet; a cable length (120 fathoms, or 720 feet, in the United States) is 1/10 of a nautical mile, or 608 feet, in Britain.
24. The phrase "sail up the River" meant sailing north in Narragansett Bay.
25. The Americans were apparently on Windmill (Butts) Hill and had not yet abandoned Quaker Hill to the British.
26. Graeme was probably the captain of the sloop of war *Kingsfisher*, which had earlier been burned in the Sakonet River.

as the Pilot would
lose on board and the rest passed
at at the Rebels posted on Windmill and
an Troops closely engaged with the Rebels on the
mer, stood close in and anchored with a Spring on the
d, but before the Spring could be hauled tight the
made from three 24 pounders, received orders from Captain
others fell all round her, received orders from Captain
sore, D. But the Cable and Spring and came to sail
of and on frequently exchanging shot with the Enemy
shot went over the ship, three accepted which were
at to the Cannonade on shore began to abate D. received
Captain Kenesha to anchor on the Plank of the
of the night with the Reprisal Brig and the Spring
the two armed vessels stood over and anchored und
Prudence Island bent the remaining part of the Sm
th a Spring as before to the sheet anchor all anchored
two armed vessels under sail working towards
where his Majesty's Ship, Synce w
tick and the Rebel Forces for
made continue