



NAVAL HISTORY *and* HERITAGE COMMAND

Rhode Island, the American Revolution, and the Origins of the U.S. Navy, 1774–75: Student Packet



“A Plan of the Town of Newport, Rhode Island,” *Atlas of the Battles of the American Revolution*, William Faden (surveyed by Charles Blaskowitz), London, 1777.

Source: Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, Washington, DC.

Essential Question

- ✿ Why did some Rhode Islanders take the radical step of establishing a naval defense force in 1774–75?

Student Packet:

Rhode Island, the American Revolution, and the Origins of the U.S. Navy, 1774–75

Context

Prelude to Revolution

In 1763, the British government was looking for ways to pay the debts incurred by nine years of war against France. As some of that war had happened in defense of Britain's North American colonists, it seemed reasonable to raise taxes on the colonists themselves.

Many colonists, however, protested against the imposition of more taxes and even resorted to violence against British officials. In 1768, the British Parliament sent two army regiments to Boston in order to quell the resistance.

The presence of British troops in Massachusetts only made matters worse for the British government. The colonists' unrest intensified. In response, through the first half of the 1770s, the British government pursued harsher forms of repression until finally closing the port of Boston to trade.

After the closure of the port of Boston and other punitive measures taken by the British government, men of property in the colonies convened the First Continental Congress, in Philadelphia. The purpose of the Congress was to coordinate negotiations with the British government for a solution to the mounting conflict between the colonies and the mother country.

The Rhode Island Assembly

In addition to the Continental Congress, there were other, local representative bodies in the colonies, such as the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts and the General Assembly of Rhode Island.

Delegates to the General Assembly of Rhode Island followed events in Massachusetts with great interest and increasing alarm. The Assembly's delegates, many of them merchants, pursued an increasingly confrontational course against the British government and the Royal Navy in particular, whose ships were interfering with Rhode Island's trade. Nevertheless, plenty of Rhode Islanders saw the danger in confronting the British government and worried about what might happen if the General Assembly continued to antagonize British colonial administrators, the British Parliament, and the British Crown.

Relevant Dates

Rhode Island, the American Revolution, and the Origins of the U.S. Navy

Spring 1774	<p>The British Parliament closes the port of Boston indefinitely, revokes the charter of Massachusetts, placing that colony under the direct control of the king and his agents; caps the number of town meetings in Massachusetts to one per year; limits the powers of colonists to administer their own courts of law; and increases the number of troops to be stationed in Massachusetts. (These troops would be housed in the homes of the colonists.)</p>
Fall 1774	<p>In response to events in Massachusetts, the First Continental Congress convenes in Philadelphia.</p>
Winter 1774	<p>Anti-British feeling among colonists spreads and intensifies.</p> <p>March 1775 Patrick Henry delivers an influential speech in Richmond, Virginia, in which he states, "I know not what course others may take, but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!"</p>
Spring 1775	<p>April 18–19, 1775 Local militiamen at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, attempt to stop British troops from seizing the colony's store of weapons. The resulting battle kills 90 Americans and 273 British.</p> <p>April 23, 1775 In response to the violence at Lexington and Concord and the escalation of hostilities between Massachusetts militiamen and the British Army, the Continental Congress in Philadelphia establishes the Continental Army.</p> <p>June 15, 1775 The Continental Congress at Philadelphia elects George Washington as Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army.</p> <p>June 17, 1775 A colonial fighting force, now authorized to call itself the Continental Army, attacks British troops at Boston and attempts to free the city from British control.</p>
Summer 1775	<p>August 26, 1775 The Rhode Island Assembly requests of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia that "a fleet of sufficient force for the protection of these colonies" be established—that is, a Continental Navy to support the Continental Army created two months prior.</p>
Fall 1775	<p>October 13, 1775 The Continental Congress agrees to take steps toward the creation of a Continental Navy.</p> <p>November 9, 1775 King George III of Great Britain declares the colonies to be in a state of open rebellion and prepares for war.</p>

Source 1. Letter from Captain James Wallace to Vice Admiral Samuel Graves¹

About This Source

<i>Who wrote this?</i>	Captain James Wallace of the Royal (British) Navy
<i>What is it?</i>	A letter to Captain Wallace's commanding officer, Vice Admiral Samuel Graves
<i>Where was it written?</i>	Aboard <i>Rose</i> , a British ship blocking the entrance to Narragansett Bay in Rhode Island
<i>When was it written?</i>	December 12, 1774
<i>Why was it written?</i>	To convey information to Vice Admiral Samuel Graves

Sir,

Yesterday I arrived in this port. . . . I find the inhabitants (they say here of Providence) have seized upon the King's Cannon that was upon Fort Island, consisting of 6 twenty-four-pounders, 18 eighteen-pounders, 14 six-pounders, and 6 four-pounders . . . and conveyed them to Providence.

A procedure so extraordinary caused me to visit upon the Governor to inquire of him, for your information, why such a step had been taken. He very frankly told me they had done it to prevent the [weapons] falling into the hands of the King, or any of his Servants; and that they [the colonists] meant to make use of [the weapons] to defend themselves. . . . They intend to procure Powder and Ball and Military stores of all kinds, wherever they can get them.

1. Source: William B. Clark, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Washington, DC: Naval History Division, 1964), 1:15. This source has been edited for clarity and length.

Glossary

King's Cannon

a collection of cannon belonging to the Crown

-pounders

cannon

procedure

event

Governor

Non-enslaved male colonists ("freemen") chose representatives, who in turn elected the governor, in this case Joseph Wanton, elected May 3, 1765, and removed from office on November 7, 1775.

procure

obtain

Powder and Ball

gunpowder and ammunition (cannon balls)

stores

supplies

Questions

1. What have the colonists done and why?
2. Describe Captain Wallace's reaction.
3. Why might an officer of the Royal (British) Navy have this reaction?
4. What do you think might happen next?

Source 2. Report of Vice Admiral Samuel Graves on Actions Taken in Rhode Island²

About This Source

<i>Who wrote this?</i>	Vice Admiral Samuel Graves, Royal (British) Navy
<i>What is it?</i>	A report of events; a narrative
<i>Where was it written?</i>	Boston, Massachusetts
<i>When was it written?</i>	January 6, 1775
<i>Why was it written?</i>	To convey information to fellow naval officers, including Vice Admiral Graves's superiors.

The rebellious proceedings of the Rhode Islanders, in forming a Magazine of Arms at Providence, and seizing the King's Cannon at Fort George, [Rhode Island], made the Admiral lay aside his Design of keeping the *Swan* at Boston . . . ; and he sent her this day for Rhode Island to be employed together with the *Hope* Schooner, [commanded] by Captain Wallace, in the best manner he could for preventing the unlawful Introduction of Arms and Ammunition.

Glossary

proceedings
actions

Magazine of Arms
weapons and/or
ammunition stockpile

King's Cannon
a collection of cannon belonging
to the Crown

Admiral
highest rank in the Royal Navy

Design
plan

Swan
a Royal Navy sailing vessel

Hope
a Royal Navy sailing vessel

Schooner
a type of sailing vessel

Introduction
importation

2. Source: William B. Clark, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Washington, DC: Naval History Division, 1964), 1:57–58. This source has been edited for clarity and length.

Questions

1. Describe Vice Admiral Graves's reaction to the news from Captain Wallace (Source 1), including the actions that Graves plans to take.
2. What effects—economic and political—do you think these actions will have in Rhode Island?

Source 3. Letter from Stephen Hopkins to the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts³

About This Source

<i>Who wrote this?</i>	Stephen Hopkins, a Rhode Island merchant and politician
<i>What is it?</i>	a letter to the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts
<i>Where was it written?</i>	Providence, Rhode Island
<i>When was it written?</i>	April 27, 1775
<i>Why was it written?</i>	to coordinate the efforts of the General Assembly of Rhode Island and the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts, that colony's assembly

Sir,

Yesterday Mr. John Brown, one of the principal Merchants of the this Town, being at Newport, as an Agent for this Colony, appointed by the General Assembly to purchase Provisions, for the Use of this and your Government, was seized upon in a Freight or Packet Boat coming to Providence. He was carried and confined on Board a Man of War lying in Newport; and about 300 Barrels of Flour, in that Packet and another Freight Vessel, taken by the Ship of War. It is said that the Captures are to be sent to Boston for Condemnation. We are greatly alarmed at this open Force and Hostility; and cannot but expect that the worst of Treatment will be offered to our Agent.

We have thought Proper to send you this Notice, to the End that you may detain all such of the King's Officers, or others in his immediate Service, as may be in your Hands, to answer and be accountable for the Conduct and Treatment, which may be had and acted to Mr. Brown, and such as may be captured with him in the said two Vessels; and that you would on your Part in the common Cause do your utmost to make Reprisals of Persons to stand as Security in like Manner, not doubting but you will cheerfully do those Things, which by the Laws of Nature and Nations are justifiable to be done to those who put themselves in a state of War with others.

3. Source: William B. Clark, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Washington, DC: Naval History Division, 1964), 1:231. This source has been edited for clarity and length.

Source 3. (continued)

Glossary

Agent

someone acting in an official capacity on behalf of the colonists

General Assembly

the legislative body of the colony of Rhode Island, elected by non-enslaved male colonists (“freemen”)

Provisions

supplies, especially food and drink, for sailors of the Royal Navy

your Government

the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts, that colony’s version of a general assembly elected by non-enslaved male colonists (“freemen”)

Freight boat

a cargo vessel, especially for goods and commodities

Packet boat

a cargo vessel, especially for mail

Man of War

a warship with many cannon, capable of doing great damage

Ship of War

a warship of unspecified capacity

Captures

the ship(s), goods, and commodities that have been confiscated by the authorities

Condemnation

transfer of the confiscated ship(s), goods, and commodities to the ownership of the state—in this case, the British state

offered

inflicted upon

Reprisals of persons to stand in as security

hostages

Questions

1. Describe in your own words what has happened to John Brown.
2. Do you trust Hopkins’s account? Why or why not?
3. Why might Hopkins, a merchant, be upset about Brown’s arrest?
4. What is Hopkins hoping to achieve by writing this letter to the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts?
5. How do you think British naval officers might react, should the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts do what Hopkins has asked?

Source 4. Resolution of the General Assembly of Rhode Island⁴

About This Source

Who wrote this?	members of the General Assembly of Rhode Island, composed of local colonists
What is it?	a resolution and record of the proceedings of the General Assembly of Rhode Island
Where was it written?	East Greenwich, Rhode Island
When was it written?	June 12, 1775
Why was it written?	to record events in the General Assembly and to inform the colonists of Rhode Island; Captain Wallace, commanding officer of the British ship <i>Rose</i> ; and the king's officials, both local and throughout the British Empire

It is voted and resolved that his Honor the Deputy Governor be, and he is hereby requested to write James Wallace, Esq., commander of His Majesty's ship *Rose*, now in the harbor of Newport, and demand of him the reason of his conduct towards the inhabitants of this colony in stopping and detaining their vessels; and also to demand of him the packets which he detains.

It is voted and resolved that the Committee of Safety be, and they are hereby, directed to charter two suitable vessels, for the use of the colony, and fit out the same in the best manner, to protect the trade of this colony.

Glossary

packets

letters (as in mail)

charter

rent

Committee of Safety

a sub-grouping of delegates to the General Assembly tasked specifically with managing the resistance to British authority

vessels

ships

fit out

make ready for sailing with the required number of sailors, the required quantity of supplies, and any required repairs or alterations to the vessel itself

4. Source: William B. Clark, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Washington, DC: Naval History Division, 1964), 1:664. This source has been edited for clarity and length.

Questions

1. What has the Committee of Safety decided to do in response to Captain Wallace's blockade of Rhode Island's ports?
2. How do you think British naval officers will react to this action taken by the Committee of Safety?

Source 5. Letter to General Thomas Gage⁵

About This Source

Who wrote this?	George Rome, a merchant in Newport, Rhode Island
What is it?	a letter to General Thomas Gage
Where was it written?	Newport, Rhode Island
When was it written?	August 26, 1775
Why was it written?	to pass valuable information to General Thomas Gage, the king's top official in Massachusetts

Sir,

A few days ago a Gentleman of your acquaintance, whom I shall not Name, waited upon me & said he had intelligence of much importance to communicate to you from the Rebel Congress – he put it under cover to Major Sheriff, & I have committed it to a passenger, (a safe hand) who will call upon your Excellency with it, & communicate verbally such materials as were not committed by writing. – I wish them safe to hand, & that they may arrive Seasonably and have the desired effect.

Glossary

waited upon me

paid me a visit

Rebel Congress

i.e., the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts, representing the colonists there

Major Sheriff

law-enforcement official of the king

**committed it to a passenger,
(a safe hand)**

given it to someone I trust

call upon

pay a visit

Seasonably

in a timely manner

5. Source: William B. Clark, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Washington, DC: Naval History Division, 1964), 1:1235. This source has been edited for clarity and length.

Questions

1. Whose side is George Rome on—the British or the anti-British?
2. Describe in your own words what George Rome is doing in this letter.
3. Why would a merchant like Rome want to avoid antagonizing the Royal (British) Navy?

Source 6. Letter to George Washington⁶

About This Source

<i>Who wrote this?</i>	Deputy Governor of Rhode Island Nicholas Cooke
<i>What is it?</i>	a letter to George Washington
<i>Where was it written?</i>	Providence, Rhode Island
<i>When was it written?</i>	August 30, 1775
<i>Why was it written?</i>	to pass valuable information to George Washington, who was then organizing the resistance to British rule in Massachusetts

Sir,

We have accounts that a number of vessels have sailed lately from Boston, which . . . are designed to plunder the stock along the coast. The General Assembly [of Rhode Island] have ordered it all to be removed from all the islands in this Colony. . . . We have now about three hundred men employed in that business.

The vessel [we were waiting for] arrived on the 28th . . . , at Norwich. She hath brought powder, lead, flints and small arms. What quantity of each I am not certain. They are now on their way by land.

6. Source: William B. Clark, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Washington, DC: Naval History Division, 1964), 1:1260. This source has been edited for clarity and length.

Glossary

are designed

are planning

plunder

steal in great quantities

stock

livestock (horses, cows, etc.) and other military and agricultural supplies

powder

gunpowder

lead

lead as ammunition in hand-held guns

flints

small, shaped stones used in the ignition locks of hand-held guns

small arms

hand-held guns

Questions

1. What are the British about to do?
2. How do you think the General Assembly of Rhode Island heard about these British plans?
3. How has the General Assembly of Rhode Island reacted to the news?
4. Given the information contained in this letter, do you think that the British had good cause to fear Rhode Island's anti-British colonists? Do you think British naval officers are overreacting?
5. Whose side is Deputy Governor Nicholas Cooke on—the British or the anti-British?

Source 7. Report by the Committee of Safety⁷

About This Source

<i>Who wrote this?</i>	members of the Committee of Safety, a committee of the General Assembly of Rhode Island
<i>What is it?</i>	report on a meeting of the Committee of Safety
<i>Where was it written?</i>	Rhode Island
<i>When was it written?</i>	August 31, 1775
<i>Why was it written?</i>	to record decisions of the Committee of Safety and to inform the public of those decisions

Whereas it appears To this Committee that George Rome of Newport, Merchant, hath made it his Constant practice for Some Time Past To Supply the Enemies of this Country with Provisions and other supplies whereby they are Better Enabled To prosecute their hostile intentions against us –

It is therefore Resolved by this Committee that Daniel Mowry Junr. Esqr. take with him such Aid and Assistance as he shall Think fit and With them Repair To Newport. . . . And Take George Rome into Custody, and Bring [him] Before this Committee.

Glossary

prosecute their hostile intentions
attack

Aid and Assistance
money, supplies, and men with useful skills

Repair
travel

take . . . into Custody
arrest

7. Source: William B. Clark, ed., *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* (Washington, DC: Naval History Division, 1964), 1:1271. This source has been edited for clarity and length.

Questions

1. What has the General Assembly resolved to do and why?
2. Do you think the General Assembly's resolution here is justified?
3. Who are the "Enemies of this Country" (note: enemies is plural), and which "Country" is this, exactly?
4. What do you think might happen to Rome, his family, and their friends?
5. How might news of Rome's arrest and the arrest of people like him affect individuals and communities in Rhode Island?

Name _____ Date _____

Worksheet (Formative Assessment)

Directions: Write your answers in complete sentences.

A. Explain the actions of the Committee of Safety and the General Assembly of Rhode Island. Why are they arming themselves at coastal forts and taking to the seas in armed vessels?

B. Explain the actions of the British naval officers. Why are they so alarmed by the actions of the Committee of Safety and the General Assembly of Rhode Island?

Name _____ Date _____

Worksheet (continued)

C. Use the documents to fill in the following graphic organizer with bullet points:

How have British naval officers caused an escalation in the tensions between the colonies and Britain?	How have Rhode Islanders caused an escalation in the tensions between the colonies and Britain?

Name _____ Date _____

Homework (Summative Assessment)

Realizing that the tiny colony of Rhode Island could not possibly win a conflict with the Royal (British) Navy without assistance from the other colonies, the General Assembly of Rhode Island discussed sending a request to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia, where delegates from every colony were meeting to coordinate the resistance to British authority.

Choose one of the following options:

Option 1: You are a delegate to the General Assembly of Rhode Island, and you must persuade your fellow delegates to send a letter to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia that argues for the establishment of a combined naval force for all the colonies. In your speech, which you will draft in the space provided (below), you must use concrete examples from the sources to demonstrate the validity of your arguments.

Option 2: You are a merchant from Providence, Rhode Island, and must write on behalf of yourself and your merchant associates to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. In your letter, you must use concrete examples from the sources to demonstrate the validity of your arguments. You may argue either for or against the establishment of a combined naval force for all the colonies.

Extension Exercise

You are a very prominent merchant from Newport, Rhode Island. Your trade is in sugar and rum from the Caribbean. It is August 1775, and you are trying to decide where you stand. Your main issue is this: You would like to support Rhode Island and the other colonies in establishing a naval force capable of defending the colonies' trade from the increasingly aggressive actions of the Royal Navy, but you worry that doing so might be morally wrong—that is, an affront to the king himself and therefore treasonous.

Today is the day you're going to make a decision and take a stand. You are going to write an essay and have it published for all to read.

Whichever option you choose, you must justify it by using examples from the sources above and examples from your textbook and/or other assigned readings about the relationship between Britain and the thirteen colonies since 1763. Although you're from Rhode Island, you have contacts throughout the colonies and correspond with them regularly by mail.

Limit your response to three pages, 1-inch margins, double-spaced, Times New Roman font, size 12.