In the 1760s...

Maritime trade was an important part of the Rhode Island economy. When the British Parliament imposed new taxes to help pay off debt accumulated during the French and Indian War, those taxes affected everyone who bought and sold goods in the colony. Many local merchants resorted to smuggling to avoid taxation.

This led to...

Britain retaliated by stationing naval vessels in New England waters to patrol for smugglers. HMS Gaspee was one of these vessels, sent toNarragansett Bay in February 1772. Her commander, Lieutenant William Dudingston, quickly gained a reputation for his aggressive pursuit of local ships and cargo.

On June 9, 1772, a group of Rhode Islanders took matters into their own hands.

The attackers

Sir, A considerable number of the inhabitants of this Colony have complained to me of your having, in a most illegal and unwarrantable manner, interrupted their trade, by searching and detaining every little packet boat plying between the several towns.

The Governor’s letter prompted an angry response from Admiral Montagu of the Royal Navy:

I am also informed, the people of Newport talk of fitting out an armed vessel to rescue any vessel the King’s schooner may take carrying on an illicit trade. Let them be cautious what they do; for as sure as they attempt it, and any of them are taken, I will hang them as pirates.

With Gaspee aground, they planned and carried out an attack.

Governor Wanton issued a proclamation offering a reward for information about the attackers. Two months later King George issued his own proclamation and established a commission to investigate. The king also declared that anyone accused of participating in the attack would be sent to England for trial. This infuriated colonists who believed they had a right to be tried in their own community.

The Gaspee Commissioners spent six months investigating; however, most Rhode Islanders claimed to know nothing about the attack or offered contradictory accounts. Finally, on June 23, 1773, the Commissioners submitted their final report to King George. They concluded that the information they had gathered about supposed participants did not induce a probable suspicion, that persons mentioned therein… are guilty of the crime aforesaid.

No one was ever brought to trial for the Gaspee attack.

The Gaspee attack and the investigation that followed highlighted growing tensions between colonial governments and the Crown. Did colonists have the right to be tried on their native soil? How much power did local governments really have?

These and other fundamental questions about sovereignty and colonists’ rights eventually led to full-scale revolution in 1775.