

**RHODE ISLAND MARINE
ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT**

Box 1492
Newport, RI 02840
March 5, 1997

Ms. Kymberlee Keckler, Remedial Project Manager
Federal Facilities Superfund Section
United State Environmental Protection Agency
Region 1
John F. Kennedy Federal Building
Boston, Massachusetts 02203-0001

Dear Kymberlee:

Thank you for the copy of your letter of 24 February to James Shafer regarding the potential for historic shipwrecks to be in the vicinity of several study areas at NETC.

You may find helpful an article that I am publishing in the Proceedings of the American Council of Underwater Archaeology; I gave a paper at their conference in January and the enclosed is the text submitted to the editor. It will be protected by copyright, so please don't distribute it. However, it will give you an overview of the historical importance of the area.

I have more specific data for each site that will be presented to the Navy History Center in the final report (in progress) for a Department of Defense Legacy grant. Our task in that effort is to evaluate submerged cultural resources that are Navy responsibilities, and to recommend a plan for their management. These sites include not only all lost US Navy vessels in Rhode Island waters, but the remains of the Revolutionary War fleet and the German submarine off Block Island.

You can see by the text of the enclosed that I have used some of the data from our RAB discussions and publications in a creative way to answer some questions in archaeology. This is a useful adjunct to the documentary materials available in libraries and historical societies.

Please let me know if you have any questions about this work and if I may be of further assistance.

Sincerely,



D. K. Abbass, Ph.D.
Project Director

TEXT OF AN ARTICLE IN PRESS (1997)

PROCEEDINGS OF THE AMERICAN COUNCIL OF UNDERWATER ARCHAEOLOGY

NOT FOR PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION

D. K. ABBASS

The Rhode Island Revolutionary War Fleet: 1778-1996

In 1778 a Revolutionary War skirmish, called the Battle of Rhode Island, might have changed the course of events and shortened the war. Leading up to the battle the British burned as many as sixty-seven American craft and sank on purpose as many as twenty-five of their own ships. The remains of many of these vessels are still to be found in Rhode Island waters.

Rhode Island: 1778

Narragansett Bay divides the state of Rhode Island into two unequal vertical slices. Newport, on Aquidneck Island, lies at the mouth of the Bay and is the best sheltered deep water harbor between New York and Boston. (Crane 1992) Providence and Fall River, north at the head of the Bay, provided access to Boston and interior New England. Control of the Bay, and especially control of Newport as a safe harbor, became a prime consideration during the northern campaigns of the American Revolution. (Dearden 1980:6)

British troops occupied Newport on December 8, 1776. This action secured a much needed naval base and trapped a small American fleet in Providence. (Dearden 1980:8; Conley 1986:54)

On May 25, 1778, the British raided Warren and Bristol, villages to the north of Newport. They burned 58 American bateaux and small vessels in the Kitemuit River and a privateer sloop in

Warren Harbor. On May 31 they also burned nine large boats in Freetown (now called Fall River, Massachusetts). The opening of the Bay and the recovery of Newport became an important goal for the Americans. (Steinberg and McGuigan 1976:162)

Attempts to retake Newport were futile until the French alliance in 1778. The strategy called for French ships to control the waters of the Bay while American troops attacked Newport from the land. When Admiral Charles Hector Theodat, Count d'Estaing, arrived with his French fleet on July 29-30, he cut off access to the Bay and threatened Newport. The British torched their own galleys Spitfire and Alarm, and the sloop Kingfisher on July 30 in the East Passage (now called the Sakonnet River).

Four British frigates trapped in the Center Passage (now called the East Passage) tried on August 2 to make the safe harbour of Newport; they failed due to adverse winds and tides. In order not to allow their vessels to fall into French hands, the British captains intentionally burned and sank the frigates Lark, Orpheus, Cerberus, and Juno along the western shore of Aquidneck Island. Although some sources such as the Mackenzie diary indicate that the Pigot Galley was burned at the same time, (Covell 1933:29-30) Silas Talbot captured the Pigot on October 28 in the East Passage. (Richman 1861:233)

Just off Newport lies Goat Island, to the west and north of which there were anchored as many as fifteen British transports. These were sunk on August 3 and 5 to deny the French ships close access to the city. On August 8 the British scuttled the sloop of war Falcon, the frigate Flora, and the Grand Duke of Russia in

Newport harbor proper.

The American general John Sullivan and his troops crossed from the mainland to the north end of Aquidneck Island on August 9, and on the same day the British fleet under Lord Richard Howe arrived off Narragansett Bay. D'Estaing sailed out to meet Howe on the 10th. A great storm arose that lasted until the 13th and scattered and damaged both fleets. From August 13 to 16 the two engaged, inflicting further damage to their ships and crews.

Meanwhile, Sullivan continued his preparations for an attack on Newport and awaited the return of the French allies. When d'Estaing returned to Newport on August 20 he announced his intention to sail to Boston for provisions and to repair his damaged vessels. Despite Sullivan's protestations and Lafayette's pleas, d'Estaing abandoned the American effort on Aquidneck Island on August 22. With the loss of French support, and the subsequent desertion by many of the American troops, General Sullivan had no option but to withdraw the siege. On August 28 he moved his troops to the north end of Aquidneck Island where the pursuing British troops caught them. Four British ships newly returned to the Bay lent aid to the troops. Despite intermittent fighting, Sullivan held his ground until he received word that d'Estaing would not return and that Howe's fleet then lay off Block Island. On the night of August 30 Sullivan successfully led his troops across the Sakonnet River to the American stronghold on the mainland. (Dearden 1980)

This event is called the "Battle of Rhode Island". A once promising American/French military/naval campaign ended in

failure, spawned bitter feelings between Sullivan and d'Estaing, and left the British in control of Newport.

When the focus of the Revolutionary War turned to the southern campaigns, the British abandoned Newport and French troops occupied the city in July 1780. (Conley 1986:59) British and French charts of the period indicate the location of some of the sunken British ships. (Nebenzahl 1974:Map 34; Marshall and Feckham 1976:n.p.)

In the years following the Revolution, little attention was paid to any of the sunken British vessels, although some vessels may have been salvaged. For instance, a nineteenth century history of Warren claims that some of the timbers in the town's Masonic Temple came from British ships sunk in Newport during the Revolutionary War. (Steinberg and McGuigan 1976:152) Little is known about the fate of the Sakonnet River vessels; the ships are not in their original resting places, although local lore indicates that divers may have found some of them.

Other vessels remained where they were sunk. For instance, a history of the Linzee family notes that the Falcon, commanded by John Linzee at the Battle of Bunker Hill but under other command in Newport, had "never been raised or explored". (Linzee 1917:555) On the other hand, nineteenth and twentieth century dredging of Newport harbour may have disturbed the remains of the Falcon, Flora, and the Grand Duke of Russia. (Olsen et al. 1972:66; Bond et al. 1990:38)

Comparison of historic charts showing the sunken transports with the modern footprint of Goat Island suggests that one or

more of the transports may now be under dry land. In the nineteenth century there was a long breakwater to the north of Goat Island, built to protect Newport's steamship landings on the nearby Aquidneck shore. (Sampson and Murdock 1921) In the twentieth century Goat Island was home to the Naval Torpedo Station, an installation that grew to cover much of the island during World War II. Today debris from the demolition of the Station covers the north end of Goat Island, including the breakwater, and a hotel and parking lot now sit on the site.

The four burned frigates sunk to the north were probably damaged beyond salvage and lay relatively undisturbed until the twentieth century. The Lark, Orpheus, Cerberus, and Juno were the subject of a University of Rhode Island Bicentennial project. In the early 1970s URI Oceanography graduate student Al Davis and his team excavated portions of the Cerberus and Orpheus. They removed many small artifacts and a number of cannons, and exposed some ship structure. (Winslow 1973:8-12)

Davis is now unsure how many cannons were removed, and his extant notes are not helpful in this matter, but it appears that two cannons were sent to England for conservation, one of which was displayed at the Greenwich Maritime Museum's Bicentennial exhibit. (Providence Journal [PJ] 1976) Another cannon may have been sent to France, (Butterfield 1976) and one may still be found on a loading dock at the University.

Davis reported that the project recovered only five per cent of the small artifacts from the Orpheus. (Davis et al. 1976:8) At least some of these were returned to the State Historic

Preservation Office, but the current location and condition of other items have not yet been determined. Although the Bicentennial project was well meaning, and a professional analysis and interpretation of small artifacts was published, (Turnbaugh et al. 1979) the lack of long term management of the artifacts is an embarrassment.

Professional, "hard hat" divers have long taken artifacts and other debris from the waters around Newport, including pieces of the Revolutionary War fleet. With the development of SCUBA as a popular sport, pressure mounted to find the ships and collect souvenirs, sometimes for sale on the antiquities market. (Viera 1987; Newport Daily News 1996) Despite the fact that two of the frigates were placed on the National Register, and despite the laws for shipwreck preservation, publications continue to encourage artifact retrieval. (Snyder and Snyder 1993; 1995)

It is certain that the transports around Newport Harbour have been pilfered. In 1988 the Providence Journal announced the discovery of the remains of one of the transports, by then merely a ballast pile with associated artifacts. (Olinnyk 1989) The artifacts soon disappeared from the site, although a box of unconserved glass and ceramics was returned recently to the Rhode Island State Historic Preservation Office. Unfortunately there is no documentation for this material and some of the artifacts described as being on the site in 1988 were not included in those returned to the state in 1995.

Rhode Island: 1996

Shipwreck encyclopedias such as Berman (1973) list many of the

vessels lost in Rhode Island waters. The Luther charts of shipwrecks in Narragansett Bay(1971) and Block Island(1975), indicate to the diving public where some of the vessels are to be found.

State waters also offer spectacular geology and marine life, including underwater caves, arches, and walls and tropical fish swept north by the Gulf Stream. Despite sometimes poor visibility, Rhode Island deserves the nickname "Ocean State", and has earned its reputation as the major dive destination for all of southern New England.

With so many shipwrecks already known to divers, and with accessible artifacts feeding the collecting frenzy, in 1992 State Archaeologist Paul Robinson suggested the creation of a program using volunteer sport divers to study and protect the state's submerged cultural resources. The Rhode Island Marine Archaeology Project (RIMAP), modeled on Bateaux Below of New York, took as its first tasks to determine the number and nature of Rhode Island shipwrecks and the pressure on them from the diving community.(Abbass 1996)

With the support of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, Rhode Island Sea Grant, the Navy Legacy program, Salve Regina University, and private donors, RIMAP has created a database of state shipwrecks and has investigated a number of sites in and around Newport, elsewhere in Rhode Island, and in neighboring Connecticut. Most importantly, RIMAP has worked with the state Historical Preservation Commission to educate the public about Rhode Island's maritime history and the importance

of protecting historic shipwrecks.

Over the past five years RIMAP has also trained more than one hundred volunteers in basic underwater archaeological techniques, field note preparation, and resource protection philosophy. More than fifty RIMAP volunteers have participated in the field work, and some return year after year. With these specially trained divers, we have determined the fate of the vessels lost in 1778.

Little is yet known about the American fleet in the north end of the Bay, but RIMAP has identified the general location and has conducted visual surveys of the adjacent shore. The greater effort has been reserved for the British ships. The transports are especially at risk of vandalism.

In 1993 and 1994 RIMAP conducted side scan surveys of the area west of Newport. The side scan data indicate a number of targets, three of which may be transports. One is the ballast pile found by others in 1988; a second pile contains two cannons; and a third pile has not yet been identified as part of this fleet. Although the small artifacts on the surface of the piles have long since disappeared, there may still be items beneath the silt.

Despite predictably poor visibility, RIMAP has videotaped, photographed, and made simple site maps of two of these piles. As our work continues we will try to identify the remaining side scan targets.

RIMAP has conducted no field searches in the East Passage, but we have investigated the locations of the frigates. The remains of the Orpheus are again nearly covered with silt; the proximity

to a Naval installation may provide some security from vandalism. The Lark and the Cerberus have been tentatively located but not yet dived. The Juno, southernmost of the frigates, supposedly is in Coddington Cove, site of a Navy base. Today this cove is a superfund cleanup site and the Navy has shared environmental data, including side scan and core samples that deserve further investigation. (Science Applications International Corporation and University of Rhode Island 1996)

It is clear that the Rhode Island Revolutionary War fleet has suffered from both natural degradation of organic material and from aggressive human intervention throughout the years. An undisturbed site has yet to be found. Nevertheless, RIMAP plans to continue its efforts to locate and document all of these sites.

RIMAP's philosophy is to incorporate volunteer divers into professionally managed archaeological activities and thus to co-opt individuals responsible for shipwreck vandalism into a shipwreck protection program. The state of Rhode Island has expressed a goal to create underwater preserves at appropriate shipwreck sites. Because our submerged cultural heritage is so accessible to the diving public and because shipwrecks are considered glamorous and interesting, a preserve program may be the way to protect not only the Revolutionary War Fleet, but all of Rhode Island's historic shipwrecks.

REFERENCES

ABBASS, D. F.
1996

Report of the Years 1992-1993: The Rhode Island Marine
Archaeology Project. Privately printed. Newport, RI.

BERMAN, BRUCE D.

1972

Encyclopedia of American Shipwrecks. The Mariners Press. Boston,
MA.

BOND, KATHLEEN, JANE CAROLAN, MICHAEL ROBERTS, LEITH SMITH

1990

A Plan for the Preservation, Protection, and Management of the
Underwater Historic and Archaeological Resources of Newport
Harbor, Rhode Island. Timelines, Groton, MA. Submitted to the
City of Newport, Rhode Island, Planning Department.

BUTTERFIELD, BRUCE

1976

Bombast Over Revolutionary War Cannon Finally Headed for New Home
in France. Providence Journal. 8 July:n.p.

CONLEY, PATRICK

1986

Album of Rhode Island History, 1636-1986. Donning Co. Norfolk,
VA.

COVELL, ELIZABETH

1933

Newport Harbor and Lower Narragansett Bay: Rhode Island During
the American Revolution. Bulletin of the Newport Historical
Society. 86:2-37.

CRANE, ELAINE FORMAN

1992

A Dependent People: Newport, Rhode Island, in the Revolutionary Era. Fordham University Press. NY.

DAVIS, ALBERT P., JR., FOSTER H. MIDDLETOWN, AND BRADLEY M. ALTON
1976

University of Rhode Island Underwater Bicentennial Expedition: A Report on Past Achievements and Future Objectives. Department of Ocean Engineering, Kingston, RI.

DEARDEN, PAUL F.

1980

The Rhode Island Campaign of 1778: Inauspicious Dawn of Alliance. Rhode Island Bicentennial Foundation. Providence, RI.

SAMPSON AND MURDOCK CO.

1921

Map of the City of Newport. Sampson and Murdock Co. Providence, RI.

LINZEE, JOHN WILLIAM

1917

The Linzee Family of Great Britain and the United States of America. Vol. II. Privately Printed. Boston, MA.

LUTHER, BRAD

1971

Marine Disasters of Narragansett Bay. Peter J. Closson. Sandwich, MA.

1975

Marine Disasters of Block Island. Peter J. Closson. Sandwich, MA.

MARSHALL, DOUGLAS AND HOWARD H. PECKHAM

1976

Campaigns of the American Revolution: An Atlas of Manuscript
Maps. University of Michigan. Ann Arbor, MI.

NERENZAHL, KENNETH

1974

Atlas of the American Revolution. Rand McNally, New York.

NEWPORT DAILY NEWS [NDN]

1996

Miscellaneous for Sale. Newport Daily News. 20 Dec.:B-5.

OLIYNYK, SANDRA

1989

Submerged for 2 Centuries the Wrecks of 5 British Ships are
Discovered off Newport. Providence Journal Bulletin, 4 July:A-1,
A-10.

OLSEN, STEPHEN, DONALD D. ROBADUE, JR. AND VIRGINIA LEE

1972

An Interpretive Atlas of Narragansett Bay. University of Rhode
Island. Narragansett, RI.

PROVIDENCE JOURNAL [PJ]

1976

URI Researcher Says British Botched Cannon Restoration.
Providence Journal, 8 July:n.p.

RICHMAN, IRVING BERDINE

1861

Rhode Island: A Study in Separatism. Houghton Mifflin Company.
Boston.

SCIENCE APPLICATIONS INTERNATIONAL CORPORATION AND THE UNIVERSITY
OF RHODE ISLAND

1996

Director Shipyard Marine Ecological Risk Assessment. Report to the Department of the Navy, Northern Division.

SNYDER, MARLENE AND DON SNYDER (EDITORS)

1993

Rhode Island Adventure Diving. Privately printed. Westfield, MA.

1995

Rhode Island Adventure Diving II. Privately printed. Westfield, MA.

STEINBERG, SHEILA AND CATHLEEN MCGUIGAN

1976

Rhode Island: An Historical Guide. Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission. Providence, RI.

TURNBAUGH, WILLIAM A., SARAH PEABODY TURNBAUGH AND ALBERT P. DAVIS, JR.

1979

Life Aboard HMS Orpheus. Archaeology 32(3):43-49.

VIERA, MICHAEL J.

1987

He's A Natural at Marine Museum. Providence Journal, 9 June:n.p.

WINSLOW, RON

1973

They're Raising History From the Bay. Rhode Islander. 17 June:8-12. Providence, RI.

D. F. ABBASS

RHODE ISLAND MARINE ARCHAEOLOGY PROJECT

Box 1492, NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND 02840