

# Rhode Island in the American Revolution



An Exhibition from the  
Library and Museum Collections of  
The Society of the Cincinnati

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**T**HIS catalogue has been produced in conjunction with the exhibit, *Rhode Island in the American Revolution*, on display from October 17, 2000, to April 14, 2001, at Anderson House, Headquarters, Library and Museum of the Society of the Cincinnati, 2118 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, D. C. 20008. It is the fourth in a series of exhibitions focusing on the contributions to the American Revolution made by the original 13 states and the French alliance.

Generous support for this exhibit was provided by the Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.

Also available:

*Massachusetts in the American Revolution: "Let It Begin Here"* (1997)  
*New York in the American Revolution* (1998)  
*New Jersey in the American Revolution* (1999)

Text by Ellen McCallister Clark, Sandra L. Powers, and E. K. Hong.

Front cover illustration: "Commodore Hopkins. Commander in Chief of the American Fleet." Published as the Act Directs 22 Aug<sup>t</sup>. 1776 by Thos. Hart. Hand-colored mezzotint after C. Corbutt (pseud. for Richard Purcell). Collection of Frank Mauran. See page 7.

Back cover: 1821 Rhode Island Eagle, originally owned by William Bradford, Jr. (1819-1851), hereditary member of the Rhode Island Society. Private collection. See page 36.

**T**he flame of liberty, which was first kindled in New-England, enlightened the continent; and to their early exertions, the other colonies, in great measure, owe their liberty and independence.

— Hannah Adams. *A Summary History of New-England ...Comprehending a General Sketch of the American War.*  
Dedham, MA: Printed for the Author,  
by H. Mann and J. H. Adams, 1799, page 239.

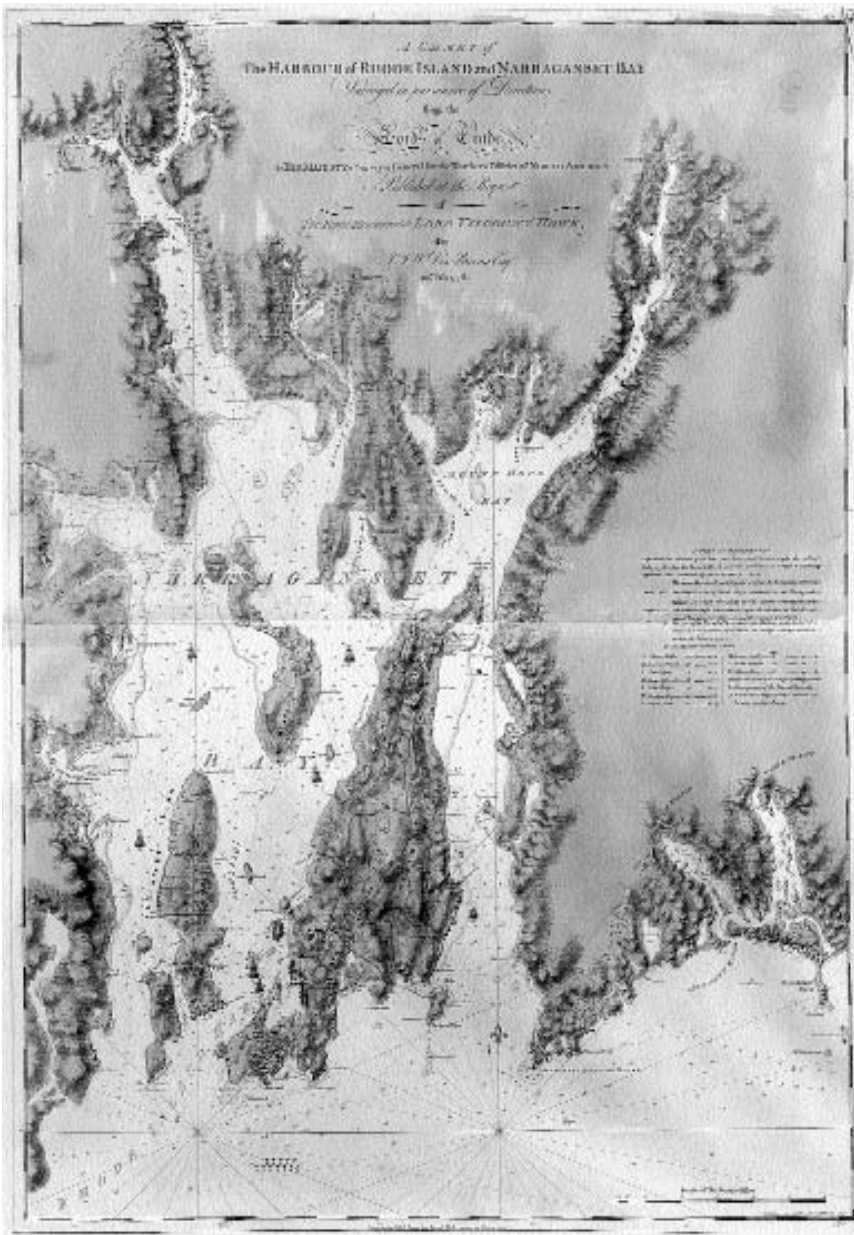


## INTRODUCTION

Rhode Island played a major role in the struggle for American independence. The fiercely autonomous colony was the scene of some of the earliest and most violent protests against British authority. After the war began, Rhode Island's strategic coastal location made it a desirable target for the British, who captured the city of Newport in December 1776 and occupied the main island for nearly three years. In August 1778, the Americans and the French joined forces in an unsuccessful attempt to retake Rhode Island, marking the first allied operation of the war. After the British finally evacuated in 1779, Newport became the base of operations for the French army under the command of the Comte de Rochambeau as it prepared for the final campaign of the war.

In May 1775, the Rhode Island General Assembly established an army to aid in the defense of Boston. The following month, the three regiments of the Rhode Island brigade were adopted into the newly established Continental Army. The Rhode Island regiments underwent several reorganizations during the war, until finally in 1781 they were consolidated into a single battalion. Of all the state lines, Rhode Island recruited the largest proportion of African Americans into its ranks, establishing in 1778 a separate Continental regiment composed of slaves and free blacks. Rhode Islanders served with distinction in nearly every major military campaign, from the siege of Boston to the decisive victory at Yorktown. The Rhode Island officer to rise to greatest prominence was Nathanael Greene, who, though raised a Quaker, became one of the Continental Army's most brilliant strategists and the commander who turned the tide of the southern campaign.

In May 1783, as the army was preparing to disband, a group of Continental officers formed the Society of the Cincinnati for the purposes of preserving the rights and liberties for which they had fought and maintaining the bonds of friendship that had developed during the long years of war. On June 24, officers of



Des Barres. "A Chart of the Harbour of Rhode Island and Narraganset Bay...." (1781). See page 16.

the Rhode Island line encamped at Schuylerville, New York, organized the Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, the fourth of the constituent state societies to form under the Society's Institution.

The original members of the Rhode Island Society and their successors continued to meet until 1835, when declining membership forced a suspension of activities. Reorganized in 1877, the Rhode Island Society has taken an active part in carrying forth the Society's mission at both the state and General Society levels.

Drawing from the collections of the Society of the Cincinnati Library and Museum, as well as from holdings of the Rhode Island Society and two private collections, this exhibit examines the major events that took place in Rhode Island during the Revolutionary period. It also commemorates the contributions and sacrifices of the brave Rhode Islanders, who pledged their lives and fortunes to the cause of liberty.

## CASE 1: PREAMBLE—THE FLAME OF LIBERTY

During the decade following the French and Indian War, Rhode Island was in the vanguard of the resistance to British imperial policies. The succession of parliamentary acts imposed to replenish Great Britain's war-depleted treasury was especially threatening to the colony whose economy depended primarily on international trade. In addition, Rhode Islanders were accustomed to a large degree of independence and self-government granted under their colonial charter of 1663. Shortly after the passage of the Sugar (or Revenue) Act of 1764, Rhode Island Governor Stephen Hopkins published *The Rights of the Colonies Examined*, opening a public debate with his argument that impediments to the molasses trade would be as harmful to Great Britain as they would be to Rhode Island. News of the Stamp Act the following year provoked rioting in Newport, while in Providence the town meeting voted to recommend a convention of delegates from all the colonies to address a common course of action.

Offshore, tensions between British patrols and colonial vessels erupted into violence in several notable incidents during the late 1760s and early 1770s. In 1774, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed resolutions for the procurement of arms and military stores and for the training of the militia. The following year, the town of Providence erected a string of fortifications to protect its citizens. Finally, on May 4, 1776, a full two months before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Rhode Island became the first of the 13 colonies to renounce officially its allegiance to King George III.

John Rogers (1808-1888). "Destruction of the Schooner *Gaspe* in the Waters of Rhode Island 1772." (after J. McNevin). New York: Virtue, Emmins & Co., 1856.

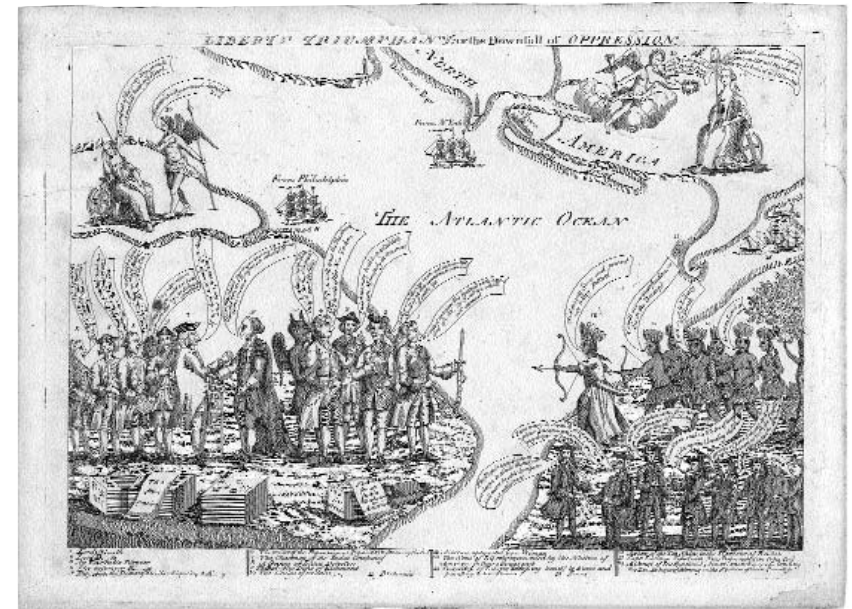
**S**moldering resentment over British interference in the shipping trade ignited on June 9, 1772, when the armed British revenue schooner H.M.S. *Gaspee* ran aground on Namquit Point in Narragansett Bay while chasing a colonial packet. Word quickly reached Providence, where several leading merchants and sea captains organized a party to row south and attack the stranded ship. In the ensuing confrontation, the *Gaspee*'s commander, Lieutenant William Dudingston, was wounded, and he and his crew were evacuated before the colonists set the ship on fire. Although both the royal governor and the British Crown offered substantial rewards for the names of the perpetrators of this "act of high treason," the subsequent Commission of Inquiry was unable to find sufficient evidence to bring anyone to trial.

"Liberty Triumphant, or The Downfall of Oppression." [London, 1774].

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

**T**his pro-American print (p. 5) refers to the events of the night of December 16, 1773, when patriots disguised as Indians dumped 342 chests of tea into Boston harbor. Here America, represented as an Indian princess, leads the Sons of Liberty, much to the chagrin of the Tory merchants depicted below. Across the Atlantic the King is shown in the grip of the Devil, while Lords North and Bute confer with a director of the East India Company. A dejected Britannia contrasts with a proud Goddess of Liberty who says, "Behold the Ardour of my Sons, and let not their brave Actions be buried in oblivion."

News of the Boston Tea Party had an immediate impact in neighboring Rhode Island. Within weeks, a town meeting in Providence voted to ban all shipments of tea into its harbor. In Middletown citizens resolved "that we will have nothing to do with the East India Company's irksome tea." By spring, the townspeople of Providence and elsewhere were calling for a continental congress to unite the colonies in their mutual concerns.



Great Britain. Parliament. *An Act To Restrain the Trade and Commerce of the Provinces of Massachusetts Bay and New Hampshire, and Colonies of Connecticut, and Rhode Island, and Providence Plantations, in North America, to Great Britain, Ireland, and the British Islands in the West Indies....* London: Printed by Charles Eyre and William Strahan, 1775.

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

**A**s protests in the colonies escalated, Parliament responded with increasingly punitive legislation. This act, passed in November 1774, states that "during the Continuance of the Combinations and Disorders, which at this Time prevail within the Provinces of Massachusetts Bay and New Hampshire, and the Colonies of Connecticut and Rhode Island to the Obstruction of the Commerce of...His Majesty's Dominions...it is highly unfit that the Inhabitants of the said Provinces and Colonies should enjoy the same Privileges of Trade, and the same Benefits and Advantages to which His Majesty's faithful and obedient Subjects are intitled." This act bans the import and export of virtually all "goods, wares and merchandises" in



and out of the New England colonies, except for those commodities required by “His Majesty’s Ships of War,...or for His Majesty’s Forces, Forts and Garrisons.”



General Assembly of the English Colony of Rhode-Island, and Providence Plantations. Commission of Henry Sherburne as major of a regiment to be raised in the counties of Newport and Bristol, 12 May 1775. Partially printed document bearing the paper seal of the colony and signed by Henry Ward, secretary.

### Chinese export porcelain teapot from the tea service of Henry Sherburne.

Gifts of Mr. Paul William Cook, Rhode Island Society, 1959

On April 22, 1775, three days after the battles of Lexington and Concord, the Rhode Island General Assembly voted to raise an “army of observation” of 1,500 men. When the governor-elect, Joseph Wanton, refused to sign the commissions, the Assembly empowered the colony’s secretary, Henry Ward, to do so. As Ward has noted on this commission, the assembly also appointed a Committee of Safety made up of representatives of each county to oversee the new force.

As a major in Colonel Thomas Church’s regiment, Henry Sherburne (1748-1824) participated in the defense of Boston and later accompanied General Richard Montgomery during the ill-fated expedition to Quebec in December 1775. In 1777, Sherburne was promoted to colonel and given command of one of the 16 “Additional Regiments” established by Congress. Retiring from service in 1781, he served as commissioner to settle the wartime accounts between Rhode Island and the United States. He was a member of the Rhode Island Society of the Cincinnati and served as its first elected secretary.

“Commodore Hopkins. Commander in Chief of the American Fleet.” Published as the Act directs 22 Aug. 1776 by Thos. Hart. Hand-colored mezzotint after C. Corbitt (pseud. for Richard Purcell).

Collection of Frank Mauran [cover illustration]

Before the Revolution, Esek Hopkins (1718-1802) was a successful sea captain who commanded a privateer during the French and Indian War. He retired to his farm in North Providence in 1772, but returned to public service at the outbreak of the Revolution. On October 4, 1775, Hopkins was put in charge of Rhode Island’s militia forces, with the rank of brigadier general. Two and a half months later, Congress confirmed his appointment as commander-in-chief of the newly established Continental Navy. In January 1776, he left Providence for Philadelphia to take command of a fleet of eight small ships. After an initial successful venture in which he captured British ammunition in the West Indies, Hopkins came under fire for his failure to meet the expectations of Congress. Although he had the support of John Adams, Hopkins was censured and then dismissed from command in January 1778. His devotion to the patriot cause remained firm, and he retained the admiration of his fellow Rhode Islanders, many of whom felt he had been treated unfairly. He served as deputy of the state’s General Assembly from 1777 to 1786, and in 1784, he was named to the committee charged with settling the state’s accounts with the Rhode Island Brigade.

## CASE 2: THE BRITISH OCCUPATION OF RHODE ISLAND

Following the British army's successful occupation of New York City in the fall of 1776, Commander-in-Chief Sir William Howe turned his attention to Rhode Island. With over 400 miles of coastline, Rhode Island was especially vulnerable to naval attack, while its harbor at Newport would make an excellent anchorage for the British fleet. Rhode Island was also key to maintaining the blockade of imported supplies to New England. While General Cornwallis pursued Washington's army across New Jersey, Howe appointed Sir Henry Clinton to lead the Rhode Island expedition, which left from New York on December 5, 1776. Two days later the fleet of 83 ships and transports carrying some 6,000 British and Hessian soldiers sailed into Narragansett Bay. The following day, 7,000 men under the command of General Richard Prescott landed at Weaver's Cove on Aquidneck Island (also called Rhode Island). By the time the British arrived, about half the population of the island had fled. With virtually no opposition, the British captured Newport and drove the militia over to the mainland. Four days later they also took possession of Conanicut, the next largest island in the bay.

The British held Rhode Island for nearly three years, during which time the occupying forces underwent a series of command changes. After General Clinton departed in January 1777, the command of the Rhode Island garrison went successively to Lord Hugh Percy, General Richard Prescott, and Sir Robert Pigot. In August 1778, Pigot successfully defended Newport during the Battle of Rhode Island. When he returned to England the following month, General Prescott resumed command. Finally on October 25, 1779, with the focus of the war now in the South, the British troops that remained on Rhode Island set fire to their barracks, boarded ships and sailed back to New York.

Joseph F.W. Des Barres (1722-1824). "A Plan of the Town of Newport in the Province of Rhode Island." London: Published by J.F.W. Des Barres, 1776.

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

A prosperous commercial center and colonial capital, Newport had a population of 5,000 at the beginning of the war. This map details the city's numerous wharves, public buildings and layout of streets in the year Clinton's army arrived. Assessing the British occupation, General William Heath of Massachusetts later wrote: "Rhode Island was a great acquisition for the British, for quarters, forage and a safe harbour, but lessened their ability for more important operations in the field."

A. Birrell (fl. 1770-1820). "Admiral Parker." Published in John Andrews, *History of the War with America, France, Spain, and Holland: Commencing in 1775 and Ending in 1783*. London: J. Fielding, 1785-6.

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

Having distinguished himself at Charleston and Long Island, Sir Peter Parker (1721-1811) was chosen to command the squadron that escorted General Clinton's troops to Rhode Island. On December 7, 1776, his large fleet entered Narragansett Bay and dropped anchor about four miles off Newport. Parker remained in Rhode Island until November 1777, when he left to take command of the British forces in Jamaica.





Sir Henry Clinton's copy of Charles Stedman (1753-1812), *The History of the Origin, Progress, and Termination of the American War*. London: Printed for the author, 1794. Volume 1 extensively annotated by Clinton.

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

Clinton initially had opposed Howe's plan to capture Rhode Island in the winter of 1776, arguing that his troops would be more effective moving against Washington's forces on the Delaware. In this history of the war, Charles Stedman, a British officer who had served under both commanders, observed that "possibly, had [Clinton's] counsel been adopted, the blow might have been irrecoverable to the Americans: But it is said that Lord [Richard] Howe insisted on the possession of Rhode Island for the fleet." In response to this statement, Clinton has written in the margin of the page: "The Fleet had given their most Zealous, hearty assistance to the army; & in return were intitled to Every attention if no other safe anchorage during the Winter could be found Every thing ought to be sacrificed to their security."

Joseph Spencer (1714-1789), Providence, A.L.S. to Colonel John Waterman, April 23, 1777.

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

Major General Joseph Spencer of Connecticut was given command of the American forces in Rhode Island, establishing his headquarters in Providence in December 1776, just as the British were taking Newport. With Benedict Arnold as his second in command, his main responsibility was to defend the rest of the state from British attack. In this letter to Colonel Waterman of Warwick, Spencer writes: "The return must be sent here this week and I want to know as soon as possible how the troops came in this time: as the Season of the year is Very Suitable for Military Exercize I hope you will do your utmost to promote Military skill amongst the troops at your post, and prepare them as much for battle as possible while we have the opportunity." The following September, Spencer was forced to cancel an ambitious amphibious operation against Newport

when the plan was compromised by British intelligence and bad weather. Although exonerated by a court of inquiry held at his request, Spencer resigned his Rhode Island command in January 1778.

"Capture of Prescott." Frontispiece in Catherine Read Williams (1790-1872), *Biography of Revolutionary Heroes: Containing the Life of Brigadier Gen. William Barton, and also, of Captain Stephen Olney*. Providence: Published by the author, 1839.

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

The Americans' most successful raid against the occupying forces occurred on the night of July 9-10, 1777, when a small force led by Lieutenant Colonel William Barton (1748-1831) surprised and captured General Richard Prescott, the commander of the garrison. The coup was especially humiliating because Prescott had been caught at an unsecured house where he was spending the night with a female companion. Captain Frederick Mackensie of the Royal Welch Fusiliers wrote of the event: "It is certainly a most extraordinary circumstance, that a General Commanding a body of 4000 men, encamped on an Island surrounded by a Squadron of Ships of War, should be carried off from his quarters in the night by a small party of the Enemy from without, & without a Shot being fired."

As was Barton's hope, Prescott was exchanged for American General Charles Lee who had been taken prisoner at Basking Ridge, New Jersey, in December 1776. Prescott returned to Newport in time to command a brigade during the Battle of Rhode Island. For his valor, Barton received a sword from Congress.

Daniel Chodowiecki (1726-1801). "Landung einer Französischen Hülf-Armee in America, zu Rhode Island. Am 11<sup>ten</sup> Julius 1780." [Berlin, 1784].

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

This plate from a contemporary German almanac depicts the landing of General Rochambeau's expeditionary force of 5,500 men at Newport on July 11, 1780, nine months after the British left the island. The French troops inhabited the city for almost a year before setting off on their march to Yorktown, in

what would be the decisive phase of American-French alliance.



### CASE 3: THE ARRIVAL OF THE FRENCH FLEET

Pierre Ozanne (1737-1813). "L'Escadre du Roy, après une Station d'Onze Jours au dehors de la Barre de Sandy-hook, Va Mouiller le 29 Julliet devant Rhode-Island dans les Dessein d'Effectuer, de Concert avec les Forces des Américains, une Attaque contre cette Isle, et de s'Emparer de New-port." Ink and wash drawing, no. IV in a series, *Campagne du Vice-Amiral C<sup>te</sup> d'Estaing en Amérique*.

Collection of Frank Mauran [see illustration, pp. 18-19]

On February 6, 1778, France signed a Treaty of Alliance with the United States, pledging its aid in the war effort. In April, Admiral d'Estaing left Toulon for America with a fleet of twelve ships and four frigates. After a prolonged crossing, the French fleet arrived in the Chesapeake on July 5 and sailed up to Sandy Hook off New York to offer assistance to General Washington. When passage into the New York harbor proved impossible, Washington directed d'Estaing to go to Rhode Island, where he would join forces with General John Sullivan's land troops in an attempt to dislodge the British garrison.

This drawing by the French expedition's official artist depicts d'Estaing's fleet in the waters off Newport soon after their arrival on July 29, 1778. In the distance, smoke billows from the points where the British burned a powder magazine and sank some of their own ships to prevent their capture and to block access to the island. As Ozanne notes in his caption, a delay in the Americans' preparations for the allied attack allowed British reinforcements under the command of Admiral Richard Howe time to arrive from New York and blockade the French squadron.

## CASE 4: THE RHODE ISLAND CAMPAIGN, AUGUST 1778

The arrival of the French fleet offered the Americans an opportunity to make a major effort to retake Rhode Island. As d'Estaing sailed toward Newport, General Washington authorized General John Sullivan, now in command of the American forces at Providence, to call for the assistance of 5,000 troops from the New England militias. Washington also sent Continental reinforcements from New York: the brigades of Colonel James Mitchell Varnum of Rhode Island and Colonel John Glover of Massachusetts, as well as his trusted officers Nathanael Greene, Lafayette, and John Laurens.

The American land forces were finally assembled at the end of the first week of August. On August 8, d'Estaing's ships moved into the Middle Passage of the Narragansett. The following day Sullivan's forces crossed from Tiverton to the northeast end of the island and captured the British forts at Butt's Hill and Quaker Hill. But just as the carefully planned siege began, Admiral Howe's fleet from New York appeared in the bay, thwarting a full-scale allied assault on the island. D'Estaing turned to do battle with the British fleet, which was only two-thirds his strength, but was out-maneuvered by Howe who had the more advantageous position. The naval action was ended by a hurricane that struck the area on August 11, damaging ships of both lines and forcing Howe to return to New York.

Admiral d'Estaing, who had clashed with Sullivan over military protocol, ordered his fleet to Boston for needed repairs on August 22. Sullivan had pressed ahead with the land operation, but without naval support, he finally had to abandon the siege. On August 29, the British went on the offensive, attacking the Americans at Quaker Hill on the north end of the island. The fierce battle that ensued ended inconclusively. The following night, under the cover of darkness, Sullivan withdrew to the mainland.

[P. Frieselhem.] "Charles Henri, Comte d'Estaing." Color aquatint. [Paris, n.d.].

Collection of the Society of Cincinnati in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations

A favorite of Queen Marie Antoinette, Charles Henri Théodat, comte d'Estaing (1729-1794) was chosen to lead the first French expedition to the United States under the alliance. Following the allies' failed attempt to take back Rhode Island, d'Estaing took part in campaigns in the West Indies and Savannah before returning to France in 1780. He became the first president of the Société des Cincinnati de France.





Joseph F. W. Des Barres (1722-1824). "A Chart of the Harbour of Rhode Island and Narraganset Bay Surveyed in Pursuance of Directions from the Lords of the Trade to His Majesty's Surveyor General for the Northern District of North America...20 July 1776." [Published November 1, 1781.]

Collection of Frank Mauran [see illustration opposite p. 1]

This map, produced for Des Barres' *The Atlantic Neptune*, includes "Notes and references explaining the situation of the British ships and forces after the 29th of July 1778, when the French Fleet under the command of Count d'Estaing appeared and anchored off the Harbour." The position of individual ships of the British line that were burnt and sunk to prevent their capture and to block access to the island is indicated, as is the location of the final battle at the north end of the island.

James Watson. "Richard Lord Howe." Mezzotint after Gainsborough. London: James Bretherton, 1778.

Collection of Frank Mauran

Richard Howe (1726-1799), the brother of General William Howe, commanded the British Navy in North America during 1776-1778. Bitterly critical of the British ministry's management of the American war, both Howe brothers resigned from their commands in 1778. Despite his resignation and a subsequent parliamentary inquiry, Admiral Howe remained a hero in his country. Referring to Howe's military acumen during the Newport campaign, Admiral Horatio Nelson later called him "our great Master in naval tactics and bravery."



Detail

"Jno. Sullivan." Albany: Knapp, Peck & Thompson, n.d.

Gift of William Stephen Thomas, New York Society, 1982

Major General John Sullivan (1740-1795) of New Hampshire took command of the American forces in Providence in March 1778, replacing General Joseph Spencer. Although Sullivan was criticized for his role in the failure of the first allied operation, he and his troops received an official commendation from Congress "for their fortitude and bravery displayed in the action of August 29th, in which they repulsed the British forces and maintained the field."

James Mitchell Varnum (1848-1907). *A Sketch of the Life and Public Services of James Mitchell Varnum of Rhode Island....* Boston: David Clapp & Son, printers, 1906. Frontispiece portrait: Major General James Mitchell Varnum.

Purchase, 1979

Brigadier General James Mitchell Varnum (1748-1789) commanded one of the brigades that was sent to support Sullivan during the Rhode Island campaign. Positioned in Lafayette's division, the troops under Varnum's command included the regiments of fellow Rhode Islanders Israel Angell and Henry Sherburne. After its valiant efforts during the Battle of Rhode Island, Varnum's brigade was posted to Bristol and Warren as part of the defense of the mainland.

It was Varnum who first advocated to Washington the enlistment of slaves and free blacks in the Rhode Island line. As a result, the Rhode Island General Assembly established a separate Black Regiment under the command of Colonel Christopher Greene in February 1778. The new regiment experienced its first major action during the Rhode Island campaign and performed with notable ability and courage during the final battle.

Varnum resigned from the Continental Army in March 1779 and returned to his home in East Greenwich, Rhode Island. The following month he accepted an appointment as Major General in the Rhode Island militia, a position he held until 1788. A founding member of the Rhode Island Society, Varnum is shown here wearing the Society's Eagle.

Pierre Ozanne's ink and wash drawing of the French fleet off Newport, July 1778. See page 13.

Nicholas Van Cortlandt (d. 1782), Head Quarters Providence, A.L.S. to Oliver Prescott, July 29, 1778.

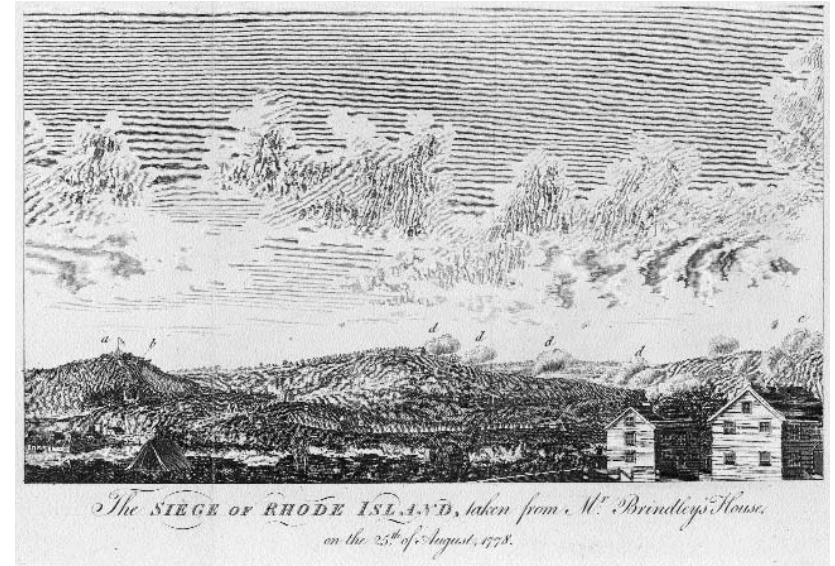
The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

Under orders from Washington to enlist the aid of the New England militias in the attack on Rhode Island, Sullivan's aide-de-camp sends the summons to Brigadier General Prescott of Massachusetts: "General Sullivan desires me to inform you that the French Fleet have arriv'd to aid and assist him in the intended Expedition against Rhode Island — wishes you to come on with your Brigade without delay, and requests you to pay the greatest attention to the providing Surgeons, possessed with every thing necessary for their Departments."

Caleb Gibbs (ca. 1750-1818). Bound Manuscript Orderly Book, August 8-28, 1778.

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

Major Caleb Gibbs served as an aide to General Greene during the Rhode Island campaign. This orderly book begins on August 8, just as the several corps were assembling at Tiverton under General Sullivan's command. The following day, Gibbs notes that the "French troops are to be known on their Passage by the word 'Flight'...[and] (on their landing) by the word alliance." On August 11, he records General Sullivan's exhortation to the troops: "The Commander-in-Chief of the Army in Rhode Island having issued orders for the Army to move on towards Newport tomorrow [expresses] thanks to the brave officers, Volunteers and Soldiers, who have with so much alacrity repaired to this place to give their assistance in Extirpating the British Tyrants from this Country...." The book provides a day-by-day account of military orders, officers of the day, exploration parties, troop movements and other details of the siege, but ends abruptly on August 28, the day before the major confrontation at Quaker Hill.



"The Siege of Rhode Island Taken from Mr. Brindley's House on the 25th of August, 1778." Published in *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, February 1779.

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

This scene of the siege was published in England a few months after the American retreat. Although the Rhode Island campaign failed, the performance of Sullivan's forces under increasingly difficult circumstances had impressed the enemy. Wrote the Reverend James Murray in his *Impartial History of the Present War in America* (1782): "The Americans, who had in the beginning of the war, been the sport of Great Britain and the object of ridicule of her officers and soldiers, were now become the most respectable antagonists, and in some instances, superior to her best troops."



## CASE 5: NATHANAEL GREENE—THE QUAKER GENERAL

**A**t root, the Quakers were a liberty-loving people, and many members of the sect were early supporters of the patriots' cause. But when the revolutionary fervor became too fiery for them, most reverted to the teachings of the Society of Friends' founder, George Fox (1624-1691), who advised, "Whatever bustlings or troubles or tumults or outrages should rise in the world, keep out of them, but...seek the peace and good of all men."

Nathanael Greene (1742-1786), however, was among those who chose the unsanctioned alternative, and at a June 1774 East Greenwich Meeting—the secular jurisdiction to which the Greene family belonged—both he and his cousin were expelled for having attended a military rally in nearby Plainfield, Connecticut.

Shortly thereafter, Greene joined the Kentish Guards as a private. Because he lacked the required musket for drill and because the transport of weapons had been forbidden by the British, Greene smuggled his requisite firearm to Rhode Island from Boston. In July 1774, he married Catharine Littlefield, a non-Quaker, thus severing irrevocably his official connection with the faith of his birth.

Within a year, Greene was promoted to Brigadier General of the Rhode Island Army of Observation, bypassing James M. Varnum, then Colonel of the Kentish Guards. In April 1775, Greene was named to the Rhode Island Committee of Safety, and two months later the Continental Congress appointed him one of eight brigadier generals in the newly formed American army.

In February 1778, Greene agreed to replace Thomas Mifflin, whose tenure as quartermaster general had been marked by inefficiencies. Greene accepted the post reluctantly, preferring to remain in the field; nevertheless, his organizational skills produced immediately apparent improvements. Chief among those

was a more efficient transportation system stemming from a system of strategically placed field depots. But two years later, in 1780, Congress initiated a reorganization of the Quartermaster General department, a plan that Greene believed would undermine his effectiveness, and he promptly resigned.

Greene weathered the ensuing Congressional storm that threatened to end his military career, and, in October 1780, Washington appointed him to command the flagging forces in the south. Greene's successful rally during the campaign in the Carolinas led to the denouement at Yorktown and also established his military reputation as one of the most skilled figures of the war.

After the war, with his finances in disarray, Greene returned to Rhode Island only to sell his property there. He moved with his family first to South Carolina and then settled in Georgia, taking up residence on a confiscated Loyalist estate near Savannah. It was there he died at the young age of 44—ironically of sunstroke, the scourge that had killed so many of his opposing officers during the Southern Campaign.

**William Law (1686-1761). *An Extract from A Treatise on the Spirit of Prayer...with Some Thoughts on War*. Philadelphia: Printed by Joseph Crukshank..., 1780.**

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

**G**reene's Quaker family encouraged the reading of religious tracts, especially those written by Friends. The sect's beliefs led members to refuse to be drafted or to pay war taxes, thus rendering them susceptible, often unfairly, to charges of Toryism.

The Greenes would have approved Nathanael's reading of this tract by William Law, edited in this edition by the Philadelphia Quaker Anthony Benezet (1713 -1784).

Julius Caesar. C. *Julius Caesar's Commentaries of His Wars in Gaul*. London: Printed for J. and P. Knapton..., 1750.

Frederick II, King of Prussia (1712-1786). *Military Instructions, Written by the King of Prussia for the Generals of His Army....* London: Printed for T. Becket and P.A. De Hondt..., 1762.

Maurice, Comte de Saxe (1696-1750). *Reveries or Memoirs upon the Art of War*. London: Printed for J. Nourse..., 1757.

Henri de La Tour d'Auvergne, Vicomte de Turenne (1611-1675). *Military Memoirs and Maxims of Marshal Turenne....* London: Printed for J. and P. Knapton, 1740.

All four titles from the Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

An avid reader from his youth, Nathanael Greene is known to have studied not only his family-approved Quaker writings, but also a number of military works, some of them no doubt recommended by the Boston bookseller Henry Knox. Among the military books owned or read by Greene were Frederick the Great's instructions to his officers, Marshal Turenne's memoirs, Caesar's commentaries, and the military memoirs of de Saxe. Shown here are editions that may have been known to Greene.

Juste Clevillet (1729-1790). "Nataniel Greene Major General in the American Armies: A Patriot, a Hero and a Friend." Paris: Chez l'Auteur..., 1786.

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

Issued the year of Greene's death, this engraving depicts the General appropriately flanked by a philosopher and a warrior. That the French chose to celebrate his achievements in such a way suggests the esteem in which he was held on both sides of the Atlantic. In America, his compatriot Henry Lee wrote of him in 1812 in terms of "benignity and justice," accolades that would have pleased both Greene and his Quaker relatives.



United States. Continental Congress. "Estimate of the Wages & Subsistence (paid in Feb<sup>y</sup>. 1780) of All the Persons Employed in the Q.M. General's Department, Taken from the General Return for Feb<sup>y</sup>. 1780."

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

One of 29 documents that estimate the costs of running various aspects of the Quartermaster General's department during 1780, this account was probably prepared in response to the Congressional request mentioned in Greene's letter to Nehemiah Hubbard, at right. Monthly totals equaled "in dollars 327,073 5/6"; the annual total, \$3,924,886.

Nathanael Greene (1742-1786) A.L.S. to Nehemiah Hubbard, [Teaneck, N.J., 28 August 1780].

The Robert Charles Fergusson Collection

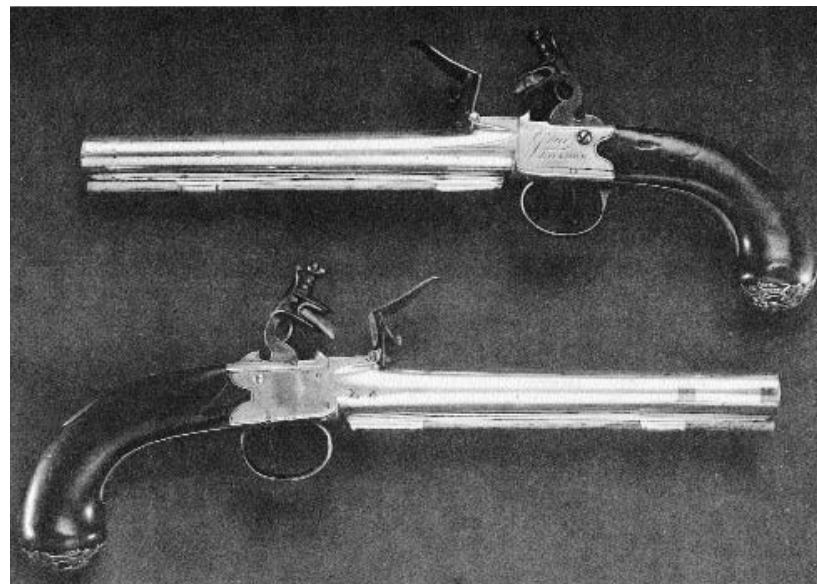
At the direction of Congress, Greene ordered his deputies and assistants to submit returns that detailed "all things appertaining to the Department" and to render those returns to the new quartermaster general, Timothy Pickering.

Greene's concern for his reputation is clear in his postscript: "As few people are acquainted with the true cause of my leaving the QM Generals Department," and "lest the tongue of malevolence should make free with my character," he encloses a letter from George Washington [not present] to "stifle any unjust or ungenerous insinuations...."

Pair of silver-mounted brass box-lock pistols.

Gift of John F. Joline III, a descendant of Nathaniel Pendleton, 1976

The provenance of these pistols (see p. 27) suggests that they belonged originally to Nathanael Greene and were given by him to Nathaniel Pendleton, his aide-de-camp. Made by the firm of William and Joseph Grice, the silver butt-plates bear the hall-marks of the city of Birmingham, England, and the date-mark for 1782-3. The monogram "NG" engraved on the escutcheon of each pistol lends credence to the question of ownership.



Cook, [Thomas? (1744?-1818)]. "Francis Lord Rawdon." London: Engraved for the *Westminster Magazine*; Published by J. Walker..., 1781.

Lord Rawdon, whose actions against Greene in the Camden campaign were estimable, found himself left in command of the several scattered British posts, where he met Greene again at Hobkirk's Hill and at Ninety-Six.

Roderick Mackenzie. *Strictures on Lt. Col. Tarleton's History "Of the Campaigns of 1780 and 1781 in the Southern Provinces of North America"*.... London: Printed for the author..., 1787.

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

Greene's triumph over Tarleton at Cowpens and elsewhere in the Carolinas must be balanced against his not-so-successful battles against his nemesis, Banastre Tarleton. Mackenzie, one of the officers wounded during the action at Cowpens, dedicates his work to Rawdon, whose reputation he sought to defend against the charges of fellow officer Tarleton. The frontispiece portrait of Tarleton shown here may not have been part of the original publication.



## CASE 6: THE RHODE ISLAND REGIMENT AT YORKTOWN

“...the Rhode Island regiment...is the most neatly dressed, the best under arms, and the most precise in its maneuvers.”

—Baron Ludwig von Closen, Yorktown, July 9, 1781

**O**n October 2, 1780, Congress consolidated the First and Second Rhode Island Regiments into one unit under the command of Colonel Christopher Greene. After Greene was killed in action at Croton River, New York, in May 1781, Lieutenant Colonel Jeremiah Olney succeeded him as commanding officer of the Rhode Island Regiment. Known as Olney's Battalion, it was one of the first to head south to Yorktown, where the Rhode Islanders would serve with distinction in the decisive campaign of the war. The regiment was brigaded with New Jersey troops under Colonel Elias Dayton as part of General Benjamin Lincoln's division. A light infantry company under the command of Captain Stephen Olney was detached from the main Rhode Island Regiment and assigned to Lafayette's division.

On the night of October 14-15, 1781, Stephen Olney was one of a special force of 400 men who launched the first attack on the British redoubts at Yorktown. Captain Olney was wounded as he led the charge over Redoubt No. 10, which was captured in ten minutes. Captain Olney recovered from his wounds to remain in service until May 1782.

Peter F. Copeland. Watercolor sketch representing Private Cato Varnum of Captain Stephen Olney's Light Infantry Company, Rhode Island Regiment, 1781. Based on research by Marko Zlatich. Study for a miniature figure created by Patrick O'Neill.

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

**T**his figure represents Private Cato Varnum, an African American whose name appears on the rolls of Captain Stephen Olney's Light Infantry Company. Although nothing is known of his origins, records show that Cato Varnum enlisted in Captain Ebenezer Flagg's Company of the First Rhode Island Regiment in March 1778; two years later he is listed with the Infantry with whom he remained until the end of the war.

Private Varnum's uniform and equipment are based on a contemporary drawing of a black Rhode Island soldier at Yorktown by Captain Jean-Baptiste-Antoine de Verger and other documentation. Distinctive to the Rhode Island Regiment is the black leather tear-drop cap bearing the Rhode Island anchor emblem; Captain Olney's

soldiers added red-tipped black feathers that were a gift of their division commander, Lafayette. In addition, Varnum is shown wearing the standard linen frock, waistcoat and overalls of the Rhode Island Regiment and carrying a 1767 Charleville musket and bayonet.



*The North-American Calendar, and Rhode-Island Register, for the Year of Our Lord 1782: Being the Second after Bissextile or Leap Year, and the Sixth of American Independence.* Providence: Printed by Bennett Wheeler, [1781].

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

**P**ublished the year of the Yorktown campaign, this almanac lists the officers of the newly reorganized Rhode Island Regiment under Lieutenant Colonel Jeremiah Olney and the general staff of the Rhode Island Militia under Brigadier General James Mitchell Varnum. Also published in this volume is the full text of the Articles of Confederation, which were ratified by Congress on March 1, 1781.

**“Plan of the Investment of York & Gloucester by the Allied Armies: in Sept<sup>r</sup> & Oct<sup>r</sup> 1781.”** Hand-colored map from David Ramsay’s *History of the Revolution of South Carolina*. Trenton: Isaac Collins, 1785.

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

**B**ased on a survey made by Major Sebastian Bauman of the New York line immediately after the surrender, this map shows American and French troop positions at Yorktown. The Rhode Island Regiment is identified next to the New Jersey line, not far from the field “where the British laid down their arms” on October 19, 1781.

**United States. Continental Congress. Commission of William Pratt, Gentleman, as a Lieutenant in the Rhode Island Regiment, May 14, 1781. Signed by Thomas McKean, President of Congress, September 18, 1781. Embossed seal of the Board of War and Ordnance of the United States of America.**

Gift of Lester Amos Pratt, Rhode Island Society, 1960

**W**illiam Pratt (1759-1845) joined the army at age 17 as a sergeant in the Second Rhode Island Regiment in February 1777. He was promoted to ensign in May 1779, and was retained in the consolidated Rhode Island Regiment with the rank of lieutenant the following year. He went with Olney’s Battalion to Yorktown and remained with the regiment until

the end of the war. He became a founding member of the Rhode Island Society.

**Teakwood snuffbox belonging to Major John Singer Dexter, Rhode Island Regiment. Silver plate on top: J. S. Dexter.**

Gift of Mrs. James H. Bailey, 1959

**A** native of Cumberland, Rhode Island, John Singer Dexter (1754-1844) entered service as a lieutenant in the First Rhode Island Regiment in May 1775. He was retained in Olney’s Battalion and promoted to the rank of major on May 14, 1781. Following the Yorktown victory, he remained with the Rhode Island Regiment until it disbanded in December 1783. Major Dexter was a founding member of the Rhode Island Society, in which he held several offices, including that of vice president, 1812-1814, and president, 1814-1818.

**Replica of one of two regimental flags presented by the officers of the Rhode Island line to the Rhode Island General Assembly on February 28, 1784.**

Private collection

**S**hortly after the close of the war, officers of the Rhode Island line, now private citizens, marched to the State House in Providence to present two regimental flags to the General Assembly. In his letter of transmittal, Jeremiah Olney wrote on behalf of the officers: “If their conduct in the field; if their wounds and the blood of their companions, who have nobly fallen by their side, have entitled them to any share in the laurels of their countrymen, they are fully rewarded, in surrendering to your honors...the standards of their corps...” Governor William Greene and Speaker William Bradford accepted the flags on behalf of the Assembly and promised to preserve them to “commemorate the achievements of so brave a corps.” At the same session, the Assembly voted to “inquire into, adjust and settle” its accounts with the war veterans.

The original of this flag, still in the custody of the state, is possibly the standard that was ordered by the General Assembly in May 1782 “for the use of the state’s Continental regiment.”

## CASE 7: SOCIETY OF THE CINCINNATI IN THE STATE OF RHODE ISLAND AND PROVIDENCE PLANTATIONS

The Society of the Cincinnati's 1783 Institution directed that the General Society would be divided into constituent state societies "for the sake of frequent communications."

Following Massachusetts, New York and New Jersey, Rhode Island was the fourth state society to respond to this call. On June 24, 1783, officers of the First Rhode Island Regiment held a preliminary meeting at Saratoga Barracks in Schuylerville, New York, to form the Rhode Island Society. The following December 17, officers of the Rhode Island Continental line formally gathered at the State House in Providence and elected the state society officers: Major General Nathanael Greene, president; Brigadier General James Mitchell Varnum, vice president; Colonel Henry Sherburne, secretary; Lieutenant Colonel Jeremiah Olney, treasurer; and Major John Singer Dexter, assistant treasurer. According to the minutes of their meeting, the next order of business was to invite Rhode Island Governor William Greene, Deputy Governor Jabez Bowen, State Secretary Henry Ward, and State Speaker William Bradford to become honorary members. The Rhode Island Society remained active until its meeting on July 4, 1835, at which Colonel Captain Samuel Snow and Captain Daniel Singer Dexter were the only remaining original members present.

Several state societies experienced decline in the mid-nineteenth century, but a renewal of Society activity started first in Rhode Island in 1877. As a result of a petition presented to the state General Assembly by several members of the Rhode Island Society to secure an act for preserving and utilizing the state society funds, a meeting was called urging the presence of all entitled members. After 42 years of inactivity, the Rhode Island Society was re-instituted with these officers: Nathanael Greene, M.D., eighth president; Simon Henry Greene, vice president; Henry E. Turner, secretary; Asa Bird Gardiner, assistant secretary; and Samuel Chase Blodget, treasurer.

### James Mitchell Varnum, Providence, A.L.S. to General Nathanael Greene, December 17, 1783.

One of a group of manuscripts purchased with the generous assistance of the New York State Society and an anonymous contribution in 1988.

General Varnum writes in his capacity as vice president to inform General Greene of his election by the "unanimous vote of the Society of the Cincinnati for the State of Rhode Island appointing you their President...." Although Greene accepted the office, he soon moved to South Carolina and did not take an active role in Rhode Island Society business. Varnum succeeded Greene as president of the state society in 1786. The full slate of officers elected is listed on the verso of this document in the hand of Daniel Lyman, secretary *pro tempore*.

### Nathanael Greene, Newport, A.L.S. to George Washington, February 16, 1784.

Society of the Cincinnati Archives Collection

On December 28, 1783, George Washington sent a circular letter to the presidents of the state societies announcing that the first annual meeting of the General Society was to take place in Philadelphia in May 1784. Washington was especially concerned that key members, such as Greene, be in attendance, when he hoped to air his concerns about public criticism of the Society's Institution. In this letter of acknowledgement, General Greene reports that the Rhode Island Society has appointed General Varnum, Major Lyman, and himself as its General Society delegates, but "it is not expected more than one will attend the meeting. I intend to be in South Carolina before that time." Despite subsequent pleas from both Washington and Knox, Greene did not attend the Philadelphia meeting.



Certificate of Membership in the Society of the Cincinnati for Lieutenant John Morley Greene, January 1, 1784, signed by George Washington and Henry Knox.

Gift of Benjamin Josiah Linthicum III, Rhode Island Society, 1998

John Morley Greene began his military career as an ensign in the 2nd Battalion of the Rhode Island Continental line in March 1779 and was wounded at the battle in Springfield, New Jersey, in June 1780. After his promotion to lieutenant he was retained in Lieutenant Colonel Jeremiah Olney's Rhode Island Regiment in May 1781. Lieutenant Greene retired from service in December 1783 and joined the Rhode Island Society as an original member.

Designed by Society member Pierre L'Enfant and printed on parchment, the original membership certificates were usually signed by both George Washington and Henry Knox in blank and then sent to the state secretaries, who filled in the names of the recipients. On September 17, 1787, the day the Constitutional Convention adjourned in Philadelphia, Major William Jackson of the Pennsylvania Society, who had served as secretary to the convention, wrote a note requesting Washington's signature on "forty Diplomas intended for the Rhode Island Society of the Cincinnati."



Enos Hitchcock (1744-1803). *A Discourse on the Causes of National Prosperity, Illustrated by Ancient and Modern History, Exemplified in the Late American Revolution. Addressed to the Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Rhode-Island...July 4, 1786. Providence: Printed by Bennett Wheeler, [1786].*

Gift of Francis A. Foster, Georgia Society, 1949

The title page of this sermon, which was delivered at the Rhode Island Society's annual meeting in 1786, bears the signature of member John Parrish, who had served as a surgeon's mate in the First Rhode Island Regiment. The author, Enos Hitchcock, was a chaplain in the Massachusetts line during the Revolution. At the end of the war he became pastor of the First, or Benevolent, Congregational Church of Providence and joined the Rhode Island Society. In this Fourth of July address to his fellow Cincinnati, he evokes the example of Washington:

*You have an excellent model in our great American Cincinnatus, who, at his country's call, exchanged the domestic scenes and rural walks of life for the jargon of war—and, having delivered it from oppression, he nobly retired to usefulness in private life.*

*The Institution of the Society of the Cincinnati: Formed by the Officers of the Army of the United States, for the Laudable Purposes therein Mentioned. Published by Order and for the Use of the Members in the State of Rhode-Island. Boston: Printed by Manning and Loring, 1802. Signature on the title page: Benj<sup>n</sup> Tallmadge. Inscribed on the front flyleaf: Presented by Col<sup>o</sup> W<sup>m</sup> Peck of Rhode Island. May 3<sup>d</sup> 1802.*

The Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson Collection

This pamphlet includes a roster of the 72 original members of the Rhode Island Society, only ten of whom had died by the time of its publication almost two decades after the end of the war. Also listed are the honorary members and those who had been admitted "in the right of their deceased Fathers." Benjamin Tallmadge, whose signature appears on the title page, was an original member of the Connecticut Society.

## The Rhode Island Eagle, 1821.

Private collection

The Society of the Cincinnati's insignia, the Eagle, was designed by Pierre L'Enfant, who arranged to have the first examples manufactured in France in 1784. In 1821 the Rhode Island Society commissioned a new issue of 32 Eagles from an unidentified Philadelphia firm. Two of them were produced in solid gold at a cost of \$20 each and the rest were made of coin silver double-plated in gold, at \$10 each. This is one of the silver gilt Eagles; it was worn by William Bradford, Jr. (1819-1851), hereditary member of the Rhode Island Society. In this example, the center medallion of the obverse side has become detached and lost, and it has been replaced with an oval disk engraved with the owner's monogram. The medallion of the reverse side, shown here, depicts Cincinnatus at his plow, with a sunrise at left and Fame above. A reproduction of the 1821 Eagle, molded from an example in the Rhode Island Historical Society collection, was issued by the Rhode Island Society in 1983.



## Portrait of Daniel Lyman (1756-1830). Oil on canvas, artist unknown.

Collection of the Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations

Major Daniel Lyman served in the Massachusetts line during the Revolution, becoming aide-de-camp to General William Heath in 1777. In 1782, he married Polly Wanton of Newport and settled in that city after the war. He was an active member of the Rhode Island Society, serving as its sixth president from 1818 to 1831. A lawyer and prominent citizen of Newport, Lyman was chief justice of the Rhode Island Supreme Court from 1812 to 1816.

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## THE ROBERT CHARLES LAWRENCE FERGUSSON COLLECTION

Established in 1988, the Fergusson Collection honors the memory of Lieutenant Robert Charles Lawrence Fergusson (1943-1967). A member of the Society of the Cincinnati in the State of Virginia who died of wounds sustained in combat in Vietnam, Lieutenant Fergusson was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the Bronze Star Medal with Oak Leaf Cluster, and the Purple Heart. The growing collection that bears his name includes rare books, broadsides, manuscripts, maps, works of art and artifacts pertaining to the military history of the American Revolution and to the art of war in the eighteenth century.

