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# Revolutionary War and an Amsterdam Privy: The Remarkable Background of a Rhode Island Ship Token

Ranjith M. Jayasena

*In 2008 the City of Amsterdam Office for Monuments & Archaeology (BMA) excavated a remarkable find from a late 18th-century privy in Amsterdam's city centre that can be directly linked to the American Revolutionary War, a 1779 Rhode Island Ship Token. Approximately twenty five examples of this token are known worldwide, but none of them come from an archaeological context. From this Amsterdam find one can examine these tokens from an entirely new aspect, namely the socio-economic context of the owner as well as the period in which the token was used. The Rhode Island Ship Token was a British propaganda piece ridiculing the weakness of the Americans in 1778 and distributed in the Netherlands to create negative views of the American revolutionaries to discourage the Dutch from intervening in the Anglo-American conflict. Whether the artifact from the privy expressed its owner's political preferences or was simply a curiosity will remain unknown. What we do know is that with the outbreak of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War in 1780, the tokens had become worthless and that this particular piece ended in a cesspit after a final use as a clothing ornament, a counter for card games, or possibly even as a child's toy.*

*En 2008, lors de la fouille de latrines datant de la fin du XVIIIe siècle au centre-ville d'Amsterdam, les archéologues du Département des monuments et de l'archéologie de la ville d'Amsterdam ont découvert un artefact témoignant directement de la guerre de l'Indépendance américaine, soit un jeton naval (ship token) du Rhode Island de 1779. Environ 25 de ces jetons sont connus à travers le monde, mais aucun d'entre eux ne proviennent d'un contexte archéologique. Cette découverte à Amsterdam permet d'explorer ces objets sous un angle nouveau, soit par l'étude du contexte socio-économique du propriétaire, et par l'identification de la période à laquelle le jeton était utilisé. Ces jetons étaient des objets de propagande britannique, servant à ridiculiser la faiblesse des Américains en 1778. Ils étaient distribués aux Pays-Bas pour créer une vision négative des révolutionnaires américains, afin de décourager les Hollandais d'intervenir dans le conflit anglo-américain. Il est impossible de déterminer si cet artefact représente les préférences politiques de son propriétaire ou bien s'il s'agit simplement d'un objet de curiosité. Ce que nous savons par contre, c'est qu'avec le début de la quatrième guerre anglo-hollandaise en 1780, ces jetons étaient devenus inutiles et la pièce découverte au fond des latrines aurait pu être jetée après avoir été utilisée comme parure de vêtement, comme compteur pour jeux de cartes, ou possiblement comme un jouet pour enfant.*

*Archeologisch onderzoek van een laat-18de-eeuwse beerput in de Amsterdamse binnenstad door het gemeentelijke Bureau Monumenten & Archeologie (BMA) leverde in 2008 een bijzondere vondst op die in direct verband kan worden gebracht met de Amerikaanse Onafhankelijkheidsoorlog: een Rhode Island Ship Token uit 1779. Wereldwijd zijn ongeveer 25 exemplaren bekend van deze penning, maar de Amsterdamse vondst is de eerste uit een archeologische context. Dit maakte het voor het eerst mogelijk om de penning te bestuderen vanuit de sociale context van de gebruikers van de beerput en de periode waarin de penning is gebruikt. De Rhode Island Ship Token was een Engelse propagandapenning die de zwakte van de Amerikaanse vrijheidsstrijders moest tonen om hiermee Nederlandse inmenging in het Engels-Amerikaanse conflict te ontmoedigen. In hoeverre de penning de politieke voorkeur van de eigenaar weerspiegelde, is niet te achterhalen. Wel weten we dat de penningen met het uitbreken van de Vierde Engelse Oorlog in 1780 hun functie hadden verloren en dat het opgegraven exemplaar nog enige tijd is gebruikt als kledingaccessoire, een speelpenning, misschien zelfs als speelgoed voordat het rond 1800 in de beerput belandde.*

## Introduction

In the summer of 2008, the City of Amsterdam Office for Monuments & Archaeology (BMA) conducted an excavation in the Oudezijds Armsteeg, an alley in the city's center (Jayasena 2009: 35–43; Gawronski

and Jayasena 2011) (FIG. 1). An 18th-century privy yielded a remarkable find (catalogue number ARM-137-1), a 1779 Rhode Island Ship Token (FIG. 2). Approximately 25 examples exist, but this coin is the first recovered from an archaeological context.

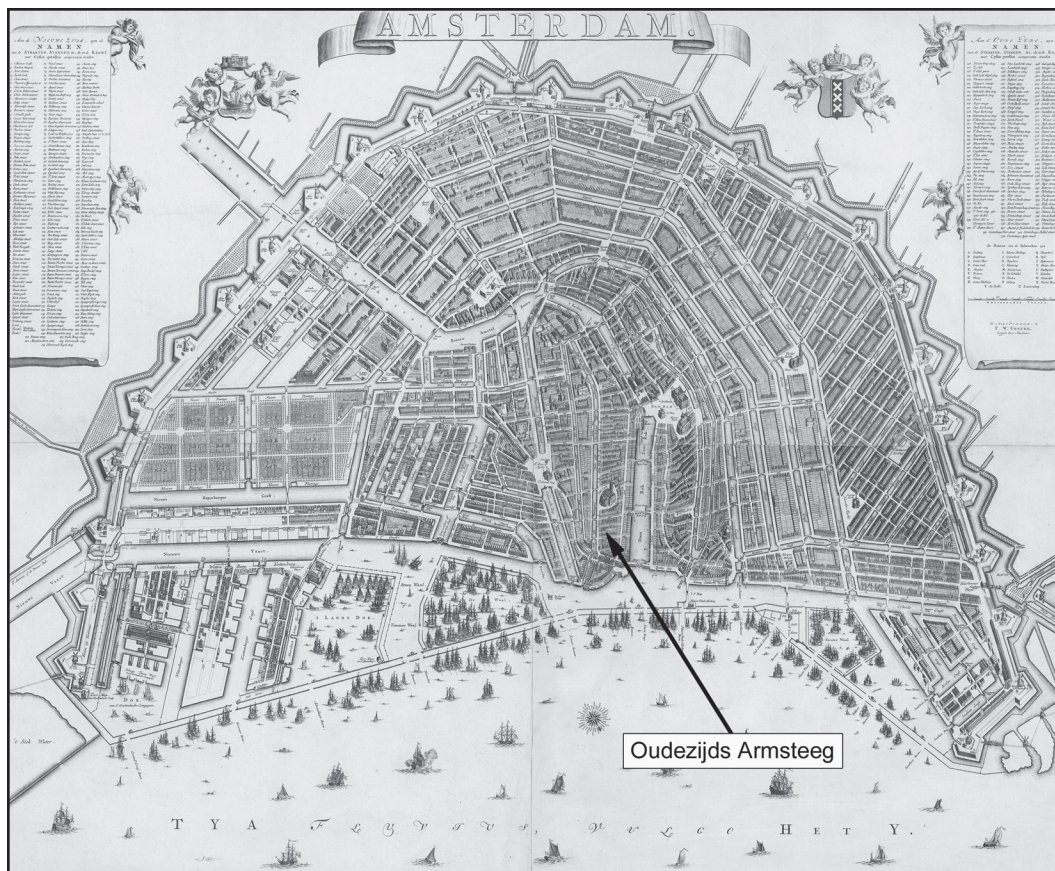


Figure 1. Map of Amsterdam with the location of the Oudezijds Armsteeg. Gerrit de Broen, fifth edition 1774-1782 (Image courtesy of Stadsarchief Amsterdam).



Figure 2. Rhode Island Ship Token from the Amsterdam privy (Photo by H. Strak, Bureau Monumenten & Archeologie).





Figure 3. The Rhode Island ship token amidst a selection of artifacts from the Oudezijds Armsteeg privy (Photo by W. Krook, Bureau Monumenten & Archeologie).

The token has a diameter of 3.2 cm and a weight of 8 grams (FIG. 2). It was tested at the *Koninklijke Nederlandse Munt* (Royal Netherlands Mint) in Utrecht and found to be an alloy of tin and lead—pewter.

The token's obverse depicts a bell-shaped island with three ships at the left, four rows of soldiers departing rowboats at the right. The Dutch legend reads: "D'vlugtende AMERICAANen van ROHDE YLAND Augt 1778," translating to "the Americans fleeing from Rhode Island August 1778." The reverse shows a British warship with the legend: "DE ADMIRAALS FLAG VAN ADMIRAAL HOWE 1779," translating to "the flagship of Admiral Howe 1779."

The edges of the token are worn, indicating that it circulated for some time before being deposited in the privy. The piece was modified by four holes drilled through from the obverse, probably so that it could be stitched to a piece of clothing. The obverse, with the 'fleeing Americans', showed most evidence of wear, indicating that this was the exposed side during the secondary use as an ornament.

### Archaeological Context

The token was excavated from a brick-lined privy dating from 1750–1800, at the rear of a

house on Oudezijds Armsteeg. In Amsterdam, privies were often used as garbage pits, and this deposit contained a minimum number of 73 objects: predominantly ceramics, glass, metal, and wood (Gawronski & Jayasena 2011: 39–43) (FIG. 3).

The ceramics were primarily tablewares (60%), followed by cooking utensils (10%), sanitary objects (3%) and miscellaneous (27%). The tableware group contains plates, dishes, cups, and saucers, manufactured in red earthenware; Chinese and European porcelain; blue-and-white tin-glazed earthenware (Dutch faience); and English industrial wares. This group can be subdivided into plates and dishes for food consumption, primarily faience, versus English industrial ceramics and Chinese porcelain cups and saucers used for tea and coffee consumption.

High percentages of Chinese porcelain (25%) and faience (19%) are characteristic of Amsterdam privy groups from the second half of the 18th century. After about 1760, English creamwares, redwares, pearlwares, and industrial stonewares gradually replace porcelain and faience. In this group, English industrial wares constitute 23% of the assemblage. One of

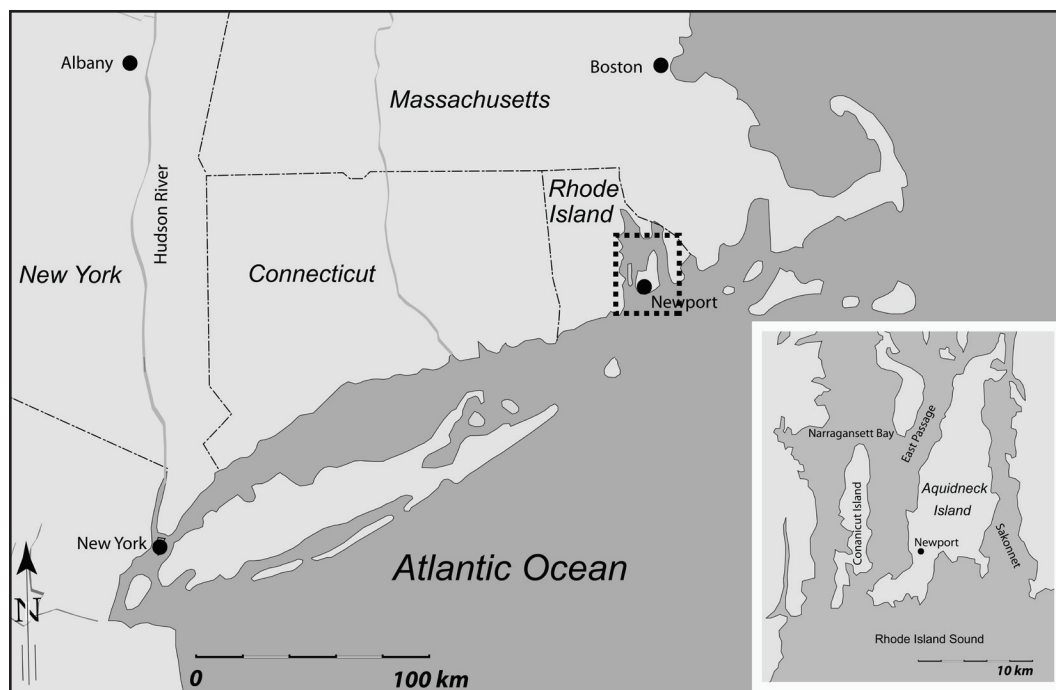


Figure 4. Rhode Island within the United States of America (Image by the author, Bureau Monumenten & Archeologie).

the diagnostic finds is an English pearlware saucer with blue slip and a band of black and white checkering inside the rim, dating from ca. 1785–1800.

Cooking utensils consist of two cooking pots; a whiteware example and a slip-decorated red earthenware vessel that is probably of North German origin. The privy also contained a redware and a whiteware chamber pot. The miscellaneous group consists of a red earthenware money box and a variety of tin-glazed ointment jars.

The assemblage includes a glass pharmaceutical bottle, although most of the glass provides material evidence of alcohol consumption: wine bottles, drinking glasses, and beakers. The privy's users included smokers, who deposited the remains of a minimum number of 96 clay tobacco pipes. All appear to be products of Gouda and date to the second half of the 18th century.

The assemblage also contains a number of miniature objects in ceramic, wood, and metal, which appear to have been toys. These consist of a small Westerwald stoneware cooking pot, a faience strainer, a pewter jug and plate, a faience cow, a white ball clay sheep, a wooden doll, a small octagonal mirror attached to a

cloth, and a copper jetton of the type used as tokens in card games, bearing the bust of the Austrian Emperor Leopold II (1790–1792).

Although the privy was located in the back yard of the house on Oudezijds Armsteeg, the deposit may have been created by more than one household. The privy was accessible via two alleys from both houses on the street, as well as the workshops and dwellings of the inner courtyard.

From a socioeconomic point of view, the refuse in the Oudezijds Armsteeg privy offers useful material data on the occupants of this neighborhood. In the 1742 tax register, *Kohier van de Personeele Quotisatie*, most of the occupants around the exterior of the block, bordered by the Oudezijds Armsteeg, Warmoestraat, and Heintje Hoekssteeg, are listed with an annual income of 600 guilders, the minimum income of the urban lower-middle class (Oldewelt 1945: 4, 8). This did not change during the second half of the 18th century.

The people who lived and worked in the inner courtyard, including employees of a sugar refinery, had incomes below 600 guilders. With this economically diverse mix, the privy's more expensive objects probably reflect

the lives of those living on the side facing the street, whereas the more modest utensils reflect the material culture of those in the inner courtyard.

## Historical Background

The Rhode Island Ship Token commemorates an event on the Rhode Island coast during the American War of Independence (1776–1783) (FIG. 4). A major feature of that coastline is Narragansett Bay, containing the two islands Conanicut and Aquidneck. Aquidneck is the location of Newport, one of the five largest ports in the new United States — a name first used in the 1776 Declaration of Independence.

There has been confusion in the identification of the island on the token. Wyllies Betts (1894) referred to it as Rhode Island. Breen (1988: 125) called it Conanicut Island, an error repeated by Lorenzo (1993: 76) and the author (Jayasena 2009). Gladfelter (2006: 37–38) notes the depiction is Aquidneck, which during the colonial period was called Rhode Island.

In December 1776, at the beginning of the American War of Independence, Conanicut and Aquidneck Islands were captured by British forces. The remainder of Rhode Island remained in US hands and Continental commanders made plans to drive out the British, but lacked the strength.

An opportunity appeared for Major General John Sullivan in July 1778, when a French fleet commanded by Comte d'Estaing arrived at the mouth of Narragansett Bay. Facing a joint Franco-American attack, the British evacuated Conanicut and withdrew into works around Newport. Bolstered by the French, in August 1778 the Americans recaptured the remainder of Aquidneck Island. Before they could take Newport, a Royal Navy fleet appeared. When the French sailed out to fight, the naval forces were surprised and scattered by a storm.

De-masted, d'Estaing's flagship was towed back to Narragansett. The French captains demanded harbor facilities to fix their ships, while the Americans begged the fleet to stay. The campaign was the first co-ordinated action of the allies, and, when the French repaired to Boston, some Americans viewed it as desertion.

Alone, the Continentals did not have the strength to capture Newport. On August 28,

1778, in what is called "the Battle of Rhode Island," British forces attacked the Americans outside the city. The US troops were forced to flee. This retreat is the scene on the token's obverse; the 13 boats almost certainly symbolize the 13 rebelling colonies. The following day, Admiral Howe brought the Royal Navy into Narragansett Bay, as depicted on the reverse of the token. The British continued to occupy Newport until late 1779, the date inscribed on the reverse of the token.

In contrast to most coins and tokens, for which the place of manufacture, date, and mint are known, there is no contemporary documentary evidence on the Rhode Island Ship Token. It was not minted in Rhode Island, as those facilities did not exist in that state until 1786 (Lorenzo 1993: 76–79). The earliest known record of the token is 1853, when Hague-based American diplomat George Folsom sent one to the New York Historical Society.

Folsom obtained the token in the Netherlands from a Dutch lieutenant named Netscher. The latter got it from a soldier who found it at an unrecorded location. Folsom, who had never seen another example, suggested the token was a British propaganda piece meant to bring the Netherlands closer to Britain (Hodder 2002: 16–20). In 1864, 15 more Rhode Island Ship Tokens were shipped to America by John King, who had also obtained them in The Netherlands (Lorenzo 1993: 79). Also in 1864, one was auctioned in the United States (Wyllys Betts 1894: 254–255).

## Three Variants

Rhode Island Ship Tokens are classified in a chronological sequence of three variants. All depict the retreat of the Continental force on the obverse and Howe's flagship on the reverse. The variation is only on the reverse (Wyllys Betts 1894: 255–256; Breen 1988: 125–126). The initial version, known from one example in brass, has the word "*vlugtende*" (fleeing) on the reverse under Howe's ship (Breen 1988: nr. 1138). The second variation, most likely contemporary and known in both brass and pewter, was issued after the word "*vlugtende*" was scratched off. In the third variant, the die was altered to replace "*vlugtende*" with a wreath. The token excavated in Amsterdam is the third variation, recorded in silver, brass, copper, and pewter.





Figure 5. Satire of the English, who were not only involved in a struggle on the American continent but also in Europe. Contemporary engraving, published in the Fourth Volume of the city history by Jan Wagenaar from 1802 (Image courtesy of Bureau Monumenten & Archeologie).

## Interpretation

The Rhode Island Ship Token raises a number of questions. It was long assumed to be pro-American, commemorating a well-organized Continental retreat from Aquidneck Island (Breen 1988: 125). In this interpretation the ship on the reverse lampooned the British, forced to abandon Rhode Island. In this view, the “vlugtende” under the ship combined with the 1779 date, refers to fleeing British.

It seems more likely that 1779 is the year in which the die was cut. Driving the Continental forces from Aquidneck was a British victory and the flagship is not in flight, its sails are furled. Fully demonstrating the power of the Royal Navy, the sails are marked with three St. George crosses.

The most likely interpretation, advocated by Folsom in 1853, is that the token was a British propaganda piece ridiculing the American cause meant for circulation in the Republic of the Seven United Netherlands (Haffmans 2005: 211–212). Tensions between the Dutch Republic and Great Britain had increased since the start of the American Revolution (FIG. 5).

Officially the Dutch Republic observed a policy of neutrality, however, the Republic also had good relations with France. Dutch merchants, particularly from Amsterdam, found it lucrative to smuggle goods to the US via the island of St. Eustatius. Anglo-Dutch relations were further strained by British warships stopping and searching Dutch

convoys in international waters. The Amsterdam city council pressed the States of Holland to submit an official complaint to the British government and to strengthen the Dutch fleet to enforce free passage (Hell 2005: 352–354). Similar actions were taken by Russia, Sweden, and Denmark in the Pact of Armed Neutrality.

In 1779, it was crucial for England to keep the Dutch Republic out of the Pact of Armed Neutrality. The Battle of Rhode Island offered the British an opportunity to contrast their military might with the Continentals. On the obverse, a fleet of British warships packs files of identical soldiers, while the rebellious Americans escape in rowboats resembling peas. On the reverse, a proud Royal Navy flagship rides at anchor, her colors streaming in the wind. The iconography is aimed at people who understand the difference between a battle fleet and a gaggle of rowboats.

The token from the Amsterdam privy is the only known example from an archaeological context; all others exist in public and private collections. There is no information on the original find spots, which would give insight into the British propaganda campaign. It is assumed that this token did not circulate in the United States (Breen 1988: 126). Breen estimates the total of known tokens at about fifteen (Breen 1988: 125–126). The database of the American Numismatic Society lists 12 ([www.numismatics.org](http://www.numismatics.org)). Another is in the English National Maritime Museum (Haffmans 2005: 212–212) and two more are at the Geldmuseum in Utrecht (pers. comm. C. Voigtmann).

## Origin

The Rhode Island Ship Tokens most likely were made in England but intended for circulation in Dutch-speaking territory. The engraver was apparently unfamiliar with the Dutch language, consequently misspelling the Dutch “vlag” as “flag.” It appears this same engraver cut the word “*vlugtende*” under the British flagship without realizing this implied the flight of the British fleet. Once this mistake was discovered, “*vlugtende*” was scraped off and the die was recut with a wreath.

In 1994, American numismatists M. Hodder and J. Lorenzo theorized that on the basis of the specific metallurgical process used for the brass tokens, these had to be produced in England (Lorenzo 1994a: 8–11). In addition they ascribed all of the alloy types of the Rhode Island Ship Tokens to the Birmingham workshop of Matthew Boulton (Lorenzo 1994b: 89–91). Although not unlikely, this issue needs further study.

## Conclusions

The find of a Rhode Island Ship Token in an Amsterdam privy raises many questions that could only be briefly addressed in this article. It seems certain that the token was a British propaganda piece ridiculing the weakness of the Americans in 1778. It seems likely the tokens were produced in England and distributed in the Netherlands to create negative views of the American revolutionaries. Whether the artifact from the privy expressed its owner’s political preferences or was simply a curiosity will remain unknown.

The token was apparently minted in 1779 to help foster Dutch respect for Great Britain; the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780–1784) broke out in 1780. The archaeological context hints that despite its origin as a propaganda piece, during an estimated 20 years of circulation and before its deposition about 1800, this token may have served as a clothing ornament, as a counter for card games, or possibly even as a child’s toy.

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