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North Kingstown in the Revolution

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North Kingstown in the Revolution.

No colony in proportion to its size played a more prominent part in the American Revolution than Rhode Island. Though the smallest, it was by no means insignificant in its spirit of patriotism.

Near the southern limit of Rhode Island lies North Kingstown, whose sons were among the first to go to the front in 1775. The town is now a manufacturing and agricultural district: it has no cities, the nearest approach to one being Wickford, a quaint old village of about eight hundred inhabitants. The settlement of this place was begun before 1640, when Richard Smythe built the old "Block House." Lodowick Updike, who owned a large tract of land, married Smythe's daughter, and what is now the village of Wickford was then called Updike's Newtown in honor of the Updike family. This name was retained for a long time, but finally it was changed to Wickford. It is not known whether the name is a contraction of Lodowick's ford, from the ford at the north of the village, or whether Wickford was so called from the old town in England. The latter theory, however, is considered the more probable.

In 1774, at the thought of war in the near future, the whole town was aroused with patriotic feeling; and when the President called for volunteers, there was a generous response. A number of the houses in which the soldiers enlisted are still in good condition. It is claimed that men were mustered at both of the old hotels on Main Street, and that General Washington stayed at the Narragansett House. There is a tradition that Washington when passing through Wickford dined at the Smythe-Updike House, or Cocumscussuc, as it is sometimes called. This is the oldest residence in Wickford, having been built before 1640. During the early Indian Wars it was used for a fort, and served its purpose well. Other noted men besides Washington, among whom were some of the French officers, were entertained there during the Revolution. Another old structure which was built before the Revolution, is the Robinson House, near Bonnet Point. From here "Unfortunate Hannah Robinson" eloped with a French tutor, and in one of the chambers may be seen the little cupboard where she was accustomed to conceal her lover whenever she heard her father approaching. It is said that La Fayette and his officers stayed there for some time, and evidence of their sojourn still remains in the officers' names cut on the panes of glass with their diamond rings.

Before war actually broke out, North Kingstown gave aid to the citizens of Boston in the form of cattle and money. In February, 1775, North Kingstown made a call for one hundred and forty guns, which were sent at once, and in March the town was apportioned its ammunition.

Soon after the war began, the General Assembly had one of South Kingstown's field pieces assigned to North Kingstown. This gun won great honors by saving Wickford from destruction in 1777, and again by helping in the capture of a British ship which grounded on Point Judith. The British fleet, thinking that Wickford was without defenders, sent out a company to burn the village. Just as they were entering Wickford Harbor, the old field piece fired on them, killing one and causing a decided change in the minds of the enemy. If that cannon had not given such timely aid, there might have been nothing but ruins today, to show where the village of Wickford once stood. South Kingstown was very grateful for the assistance which the gun rendered, for without it the British would probably have done much damage, and finally escaped. The Tories spiked it, but that did not long delay the sturdy defenders of the town; they drilled it out and drew it to Point Judith, where they at once began action against the English ship which was grounded.

there. The vessel soon surrendered, and was taken to Providence. It proved to be the twenty eight gun frigate, Syren, carrying a crew of one hundred and twenty eight officers and men.

In 1777 General Washington ordered all the Rhode Island troops to the Jerseys, leaving the coast in an almost defenceless condition. This, of course, was very dangerous, as the coast when undefended, is so easy of access to the enemy. A number of men from Wickford raised a company for the protection of the town, and petitioned the General Assembly to grant them a charter; whereupon it was voted that "The petitioners, with such others as shall enlist with them, not exceeding sixty four men, exclusive of commissioned officers, be incorporated into a separate and distinct military company by the name of the "Newtown Rangers; to be commanded by one captain, two lieutenants, and one ensign." In 1778 the legislature passed an act which allowed slaves to enlist, and a company of negroes with white officers was soon raised in the town.

The depredations of the British caused much trouble in North Kingstown. Farms were devastated, and cattle stolen, and sometimes even the inhabitants were seized, and their dwellings destroyed. Two men whom they carried off were taken to Newport, and there contracted the small-pox, of which one of them died; but the other,

having previously vaccinated himself, recovered. At another time two families living just north of Wickford were turned out of doors in the middle of the night, by the English soldiers. One of the houses was burned, but the other, since it belonged to a Tory, was saved. The men were marched to the water, put into a boat and taken to Newport, where they were imprisoned. The intercession of a woman secured the speedy release of one; the other was forced to remain in prison until the British troops left Rhode Island.

Among the men from North Kingst^xon who took part in the war, two of the most notable were George Babcock and Samuel Phillips. Babcock's name is the first on the petition of the Newtown Rangers for a charter. He was one of the most successful commanders in the American Navy, having taken many British ships with his small vessel manned by one hundred and thirty men. Samuel Phillips was at one time lieutenant of Babcock's ship; at another he commanded one of the five vessels which so successfully captured Prescott. In his Journal Captain Phillips says, "I have ever strove hard and suffered much to help gain the independence of my country, and am ready to step forth again and oppose any power that shall endeavor to injure my country and her rights." This is genuine American patriotism, the kind that is felt all over our land today. It has been said that

"Nowhere beat more patriotic hearts than in America."

It may be that no great deeds were done in North Kingstown during the Revolutionary War; but the patriotic spirit of brave men was shown by their prompt and united action: and if the citizens of today respond as nobly and spiritedly as did those heroes of '76, we have nothing to fear from the struggle in which the nation is now engaged. At best war and bloodshed are a terrible calamity, and we will trust that soon the warring nations shall be at peace, and the oppressed and the oppressor shall recognize each other as brothers.

Mildred Trayne Harvey.