



Nellie M. Gorbea
Secretary of State

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King George III's instructions to the Gaspee Commissioners, 1772

This document accompanied the King's official commission to the five New Englanders who were charged with investigating the Gaspee attack. In Article 3, the king instructs the commissioners to send the offenders to England to be tried for their crimes. It was this threat, that Rhode Islanders would be forced to give up their right to be tried on their native (Rhode Island) soil, that had the most lasting effect. Word spread throughout the colonies and eventually led to the meeting of the First Continental Congress.

GEORGE R.

[L.S.]

Instructions to our trusty and well beloved Joseph Wanton, Daniel Horsmanden, Frederick Smythe, Peter Oliver and Robert Auchmuty, Esquires, our Commissioners for enquiring into the circumstances relative to the attacking, plundering and burning our armed schooner, called the Gaspee schooner, within our Colony of Rhode Island in America, on the tenth day of June last, and into the causes thereof, and of the violences and insults offered upon that occasion to our officers employed in our service: Given at our Court at St. James, the fourth day of September, 1772, in the twelfth year of our reign.

Article 1st. With these our instructions you will receive our commission under our great seal of Great Britain constituting and appointing you our commissioners for enquiring into and making report to us of all the circumstances relative to the attacking, plundering and burning the Gaspee schooner on the tenth of June last in the Narragansett river, within our Colony of Rhode Island, and to the assembling, arming, and leading on the persons who made the said attack, and to the concerting and preparing the same; together with all such other powers and authorities as are judged necessary for that purpose: You are therefore to take upon you the execution of the trust reposed in you, and so soon as three or more of you shall have been assembled at Newport, within our said Colony of Rhode Island, you are to cause our said commission to be read and published in such manner and form, and with such solemnity as are due to the authority from which it proceeds, and the important occasion which it is issued, using your own discretions as to all such other times and places of your meetings, according to what shall appear to you, or the major part of you, to be most fit and proper.

This transcript is intended to capture the substance of the document.

For details of capitalization, punctuation, spelling and spacing, we recommend consulting the original document.

Art. 2d. You are to use your utmost care and diligence pursuant to the authorities and directions contained in our said commission, in making a very full and particular inquiry into all the circumstances relative to the attacking, plundering, and burning our armed schooner the Gaspee, on the tenth of June last in the Narragansett river, within our said Colony of Rhode Island, and to the assembling, arming, and leading on the persons who made the said attack, as also into the causes and occasions thereof, and into all the steps that have been taken by the civil magistrates in their respective stations, for the discovery and punishment of the perpetrators of those heinous offences, and to those ends you are to summon before you, all such persons as you shall think may be able to give any information touching the said objects of inquiry, and likewise to order all informations, depositions and examinations, which may have been taken and made in writing, touching those matters or authentic copies thereof, to be laid before you, and to make a report to us, by one of our principal Secretaries of State, of all your proceedings and of what shall appear to you respecting the conduct of the magistrates and people of Rhode Island on that occasion.

Art. 3d. And, whereas, the civil magistrates and officers within our said Colony of Rhode Island are entrusted with the power and authority to arrest and commit to custody such of the persons concerned in the plundering and destroying the Gaspee schooner, and in the inhuman treatment of our officer who commanded her, against whom any information shall be taken in order to the said offenders being sent to England to be tried for that offence; it is therefore our will and pleasure that you do, from time to time, communicate to the said civil officers and magistrates, such informations as you shall be able to collect touching the persons concerned in that daring attack upon our authority and commission, to the end that they may be accordingly arrested and delivered to the custody of the commander-in-chief of our ships and vessels in North America, pursuant to such directions as we have thought fit to give for that purpose.

Art. 4th. And whereas it is of importance with regard to the mode of proceeding against the said offenders that they should be exactly informed of the place where the offence was committed, it will therefore be your duty to take care in all your proceedings upon this enquiry, as well as in your reports thereof to us, by one of our principal Secretaries of State, to ascertain with the greatest precision whether the offence was committed and done within the body of the Colony, and if so, within what County or district thereof, if not so, in what other place the said offence was committed and done.

Art. 5th. And whereas there may be reason to apprehend, from the outrages which have been committed within our said colony of Rhode Island, by numbers of lawless persons, that insults may be offered to you; it is therefore our will and pleasure that if any disturbance shall arise with a view to obstruct you in the execution of your duty, and any violence should in consequence thereof be offered to you, you do in such case, give immediate notice thereof to the commander-in-chief of our forces in North America, and require of him to send such a military force into the Colony as you shall judge necessary for your protection, and for the aiding the civil magistrates in suppressing any tumults or riots and preserving the public peace.

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Lastly. It is our will and pleasure that you do take an account by way of Journal of all your acts and proceedings in the execution of the powers and directions given to you, and that the reports which you are to make us, by one of our principal Secretaries of State, of those proceedings, be in writing and signed by any three or more of you.

G. R.

This primary source comes from the Rhode Island State Archives, C#0554 - Gaspee Papers 1772 – 1773.