

Preface

In August 1778 the newly formed United States and France conducted their first joint military operation of the American Revolution. Referred to as the Rhode Island Campaign, its leaders, Major General John Sullivan¹ of the Continental Army and Admiral Jean-Baptiste-Charles-Henri-Hector, comte d'Estaing² of the French Navy, were instructed by General George Washington to descend upon Newport, in an effort to reclaim this strategic port. The fight that ensued is known today as the Battle of Rhode Island. Ultimately a loss, the battle is largely overlooked in most history books, in part due to its outcome. However, it is a significant moment, as it marks the beginning of French military involvement. It also underscores the turning point of the war, reached by the decisive American victory at Saratoga a year earlier. With such momentum behind the patriot cause and a newly formed alliance, the war could actually have been won in Newport had the outcome been different. Instead, the Campaign put a severe strain on the new alliance as each side blamed the other for the loss. America would have to wait two more years before another French force under Lieutenant General Jean-Baptiste-Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau³ would come to their aid and ultimately lead them to victory at Yorktown.

¹ An attorney from New Hampshire, Sullivan joined the Continental Army as an officer in 1775 and took part in the Siege of Boston the following March. After being promoted to major general, he was captured during the Battle of Long Island in 1776 but was exchanged in time to lead Washington's right column at the Battle of Trenton. After commanding the Rhode Island campaign at the age of thirty-eight, he found success on the battlefield defeating the Iroquois Indians in western New York, but ultimately resigned before the war's end due to illness. He went on to become a delegate to the Continental Congress, presided over his state's ratification of the Constitution and later in life became governor of New Hampshire.

² A nobleman with many years in the French military, first in the army, then in the navy, d'Estaing was commander of the Toulon fleet ordered by King Louis XVI to aid the American colonies in 1778. Years later, he was guillotined in Paris during the Reign of Terror.

³ A French nobleman and the general in command of French forces in the later years of the American Revolution. Rochambeau was stationed at Newport from July 1780-1781. He led the French Army to aid Washington in the defeat of British forces under Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown, VA, virtually ending the war. During the French Revolution he was nearly guillotined but ultimately evaded execution and was later pensioned by Napoleon. (For more on Rochambeau's roll in Newport and the war see Chapter 4.)

The Americans had started angling for French aid shortly after the Revolution began, aware that they would need foreign help if they were going to have a chance of defeating the British. In the fall of 1775 the Continental Congress sent Benjamin Franklin and three other American diplomats to Canada in an effort to enlist support from their French neighbors to the north. When the Canadians rejected the American overtures, Franklin was then sent to France in December 1776.⁴ Franklin wanted to draw the French into another conflict with the British, who had decisively defeated them in the French and Indian War⁵ in the previous decade. The French were charmed by Franklin and sympathized with his cause, but they needed to be persuaded that the Americans had a chance to win before they would commit resources to the effort. Franklin would have to bide his time until the Americans proved themselves on the battlefield.

Meanwhile, the British, having been forced out of Boston in March 1776, wanted to maintain a foothold in New England and so they set their sights on Newport. A bustling, cosmopolitan trading center, Newport at this time ranked with Boston, Philadelphia, New York City and Charleston as one of the colonies' leading cities. Its deep harbor was especially attractive for the British fleet. Even the largest British ships would be able to enter the harbor without fear of running aground. Additionally, Newport's location at the southern end of an

⁴ Stacy Schiff, *A Great Improvisation: Franklin, France and the Birth of America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005), 1-35.

⁵ The American theater of the multi-continent conflict known as the Seven Years War.

island - Aquidneck Island⁶ - at the mouth of Narragansett Bay⁷, would make it all the easier to defend.

In December 1776 the British forces under Lieutenant General Henry Clinton⁸ landed in Newport in full force: seventy-two ships—including fifteen warships—anchored in and around Newport and 4,000 British troops and 3,100 Hessians occupied the island.⁹ Newport's residents made no effort to resist the invasion and many of the town's Loyalists heartily welcomed the British officers on their arrival. However, as much as half of Newport's population had fled the island, reducing their numbers to 5,300 by the time the British arrived.¹⁰ Among those who took flight was the Reverend Ezra Stiles, a Congregational pastor, director of the Redwood Library and outspoken patriot.¹¹

Having taken Newport and nearby Jamestown without firing a shot, the top British officers ensconced themselves in the town's finest homes and waited for orders from their commanders. In the summer of 1777, the British began an ambitious campaign to cut off Boston—the epicenter of the Revolution—from the rest of the colonies. General John

⁶ Comprised of the towns of Portsmouth (to the north), Middletown (in the center) and Newport (to the south) it is the largest island in Narragansett Bay in the State of Rhode Island. Originally called "Aquidneck" by the Narragansett tribe, it was later renamed "Rhode Island" by early English settlers. Both the State of Rhode Island and the Battle of Rhode Island are named for this geographic feature. Today it is widely referred to as Aquidneck Island, although its official name remains Rhode Island. Throughout this report it is called Aquidneck Island to avoid confusion with the state.

⁷ A large bay in the state of Rhode Island, fed by the Providence, Taunton, and Sakonnet Rivers. Its islands include, Rhode (Aquidneck), Conanicut, and Prudence Islands.

⁸ British army officer whose forces first captured Newport in 1776. In 1778 Clinton became commander in chief of British forces in America. Although his second in command, Lord Cornwallis, was responsible for the loss at Yorktown, it was Clinton and not Cornwallis who received much of the blame upon returning to England, after the war.

⁹ See Christian M. McBurney, *The Rhode Island Campaign: The First French and American Operation in the Revolutionary War* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2011), 2-3; Rockwell Stensrud, *Newport: A Lively Experiment, 1639-1969* (Newport, RI: Redwood Library, 2006), 196-197.

¹⁰ McBurney, 9.

¹¹ *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles*, ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901); 1:661-662.

Burgoyne¹² would bring his forces south from Canada to Albany, New York, where he would connect with General William Howe¹³ who would travel north from New York City. These two armies would be met by a smaller force led by Colonel Barry St. Leger who would come from the western region of New York. The plan was bungled from the start: Howe chose to take his troops to Philadelphia and St. Leger was pinned down in western New York. By October, Burgoyne, outmaneuvered by the American troops, surrendered his 5,900 British and Hessian troops at Saratoga.¹⁴

At Saratoga, the Americans had scored a major victory. When the news of the American success reached Franklin in Paris, he wasted no time in pressing his argument that the war could be won if the Americans had the assistance of France's powerful army and navy. By February 1778, King Louis XVI¹⁵ agreed to ally with the Americans and promised them that aid would be forthcoming.¹⁶ Leading the French expedition would be the comte d'Estaing, a forty-eight year old admiral who had begun his career in the army but had switched to the navy in the 1760s. D'Estaing set off from France in April with sixteen ships and 4,000 troops and traveled at an agonizingly slow pace through the Mediterranean and then across the Atlantic.¹⁷

¹² British general largely remembered for the outcome of the Battle of Saratoga.

¹³ Commander and chief of British forces in America from 1776 to his retirement in 1778.

¹⁴ Richard M. Ketchum, *Saratoga: The Turning Point of America's Revolutionary War* (New York: Henry Holt, 1997), 428-440.

¹⁵ King of France in the late 18th century who supplied military aid to the American colonies during the Revolutionary War. He was the last in the Bourbon line of monarchs before the French Revolution and was ultimately guillotined in 1792.

¹⁶ Ketchum, 440-448; Schiff, 110-134.

¹⁷ John Hattendorf, *Newport, the French Navy and American Independence* (Newport, RI: Redwood Press, 2005), 3-8.

News of the French entry into the war alarmed the British in Rhode Island. In May one of the British officers in Newport, Lieutenant Frederick Mackenzie,¹⁸ noted in his diary that “great rejoicings have been made of late all over the Country, on account of their Alliance with France...I am of opinion that they really will attempt something soon, for as the spirits of the people are now high...numbers of them will be found willing to engage for a short time in an enterprize of that nature.”¹⁹

To thwart any potential attack on Aquidneck Island, the British engaged in harsh pre-emptive strikes against nearby towns. General Robert Pigot,²⁰ who assumed command of Newport in July 1777, ordered attacks on Bristol and Warren to destroy any boats and weapons that the patriots might use in an invasion. In their raids, the British carried out what the historian Christian McBurney calls a “campaign of burning and plunder,” taking dozens of prisoners, torching a church in Bristol and numerous homes and storerooms in both towns.²¹ A few days later, the British entered Fall River and burned a sawmill which had been producing planks for the Patriots’ ships.

At long last, d’Estaing arrived off Sandy Hook,²² New Jersey in early July (Figure P.1). He contemplated an attack on the British fleet guarding New York City but eventually decided that the water might not be deep enough for some of his larger ships. Figuring that d’Estaing

¹⁸ British officer in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, who kept a detailed diary during the American Revolution, recording his time stationed in Boston, Newport and New York. His diary provides enormous insight and is widely quoted and cited throughout this report.

¹⁹ *Diary of Frederick Mackenzie (DFM)* 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), 1: 275-276.

²⁰ Officer in command of the British land forces stationed at Newport, RI during the city’s occupation and the Battle of Rhode Island.

²¹ McBurney, 58.

²² A barrier spit in northern New Jersey, protruding into and sheltering part of Lower New York Bay. Located just south of New York City, ships headed for this port had to pass by Sandy Point *en route*. The British Navy stationed at New York used the strategic geography and location of Sandy Hook to their advantage to protect both the city and their fleet.

might bypass New York City and sail on to Rhode Island, General Clinton, who was then in command of British forces in New York, moved to bolster Pigot's forces. In early July, he dispatched 1,850 British and Hessian troops to Newport.

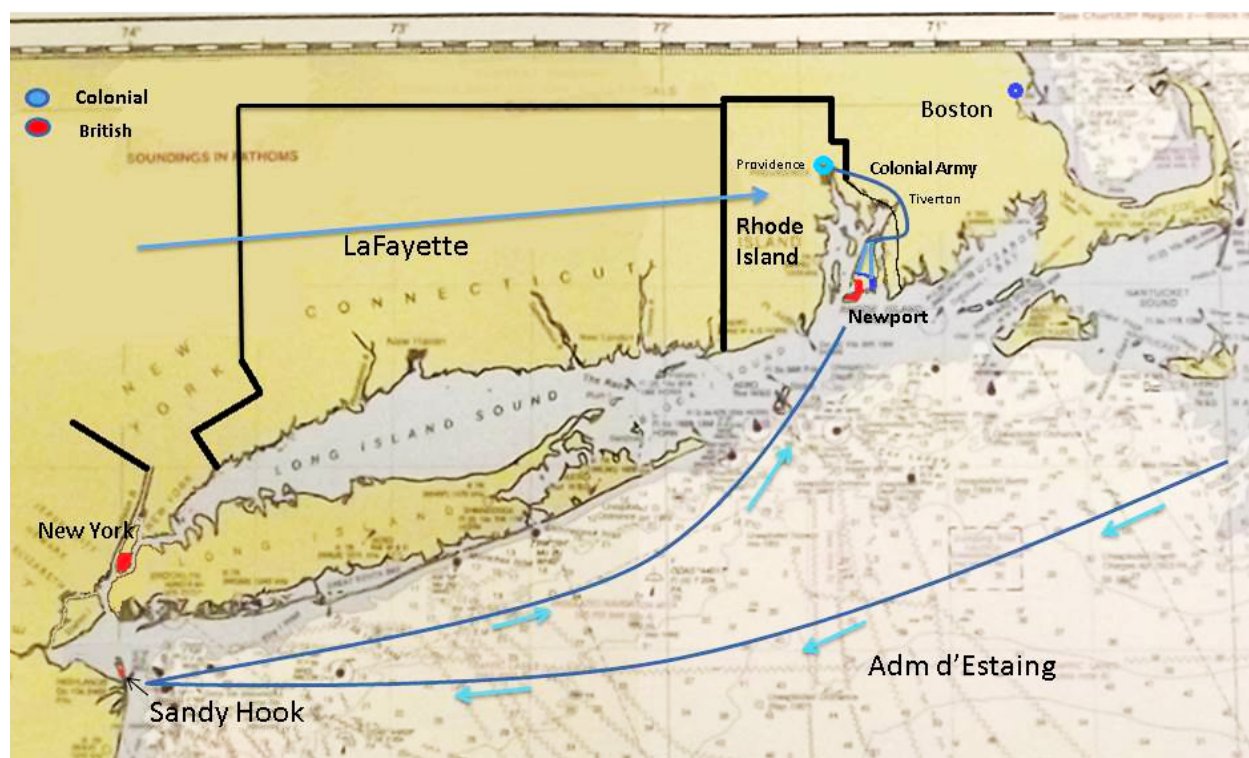


Figure P.1 Overview of French and American troop movements during the summer of 1778 (marked in blue). These include Sullivan's forces moving from Providence to Tiverton and eventually Middletown, Lafayette and the Continental Army troops on their way to join the campaign, and d'Estaing's route from France to Sandy Hook, NJ to Newport, RI. Cities held by the British, such as Newport and New York are marked in red and the Patriot stronghold, Boston, is marked in blue.²³

²³ Narragansett Bay to Nantucket, Maptech Chart Kit, 2nd edition, region 3.1, map 1. Reproduced from NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Department of Commerce) Chart No. 13003 Georges Bank and Nantucket Shoals, 2011.

Washington had the same idea as his British rival: he hoped that d’Estaing would sail into Narragansett Bay and help the Patriots retake Aquidneck Island. Washington sent his trusted aide Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Hamilton to meet the admiral on his flagship, the *Languedoc*. The two men agreed on the wisdom of a Rhode Island campaign and Washington then sent Major General Nathaniel Greene²⁴ and another trusted aide, the Major General Marie-Joseph-Paul-Yves-Roch-Gilbert du Motier, marquis de Lafayette,²⁵ to Rhode Island with two brigades from the Continental Army. Greene and Lafayette would report to General Sullivan who was in charge of a force of 8,000 militiamen in Providence. With these American troops and d’Estaing’s French ships joining forces, Washington was optimistic that they would be able to dislodge the British from Newport and thus provide a crucial follow up to the American triumph at Saratoga.

²⁴ Hailing from Rhode Island, Greene was manager of his family’s iron foundry before the war and became commander of the State army in 1775. After joining the Continental Army, he was quickly promoted to Major General and became one of Washington’s most skilled and trusted officers. He was assigned to help Sullivan retake Newport, in the hope that his local knowledge could be of use. Greene is largely remembered for his strategic mind and for his part in the war’s Southern theater. His actions proved crucial in the lead up to Yorktown, luring and exhausting Lord Cornwallis’ army throughout the South. After the war, he settled in Georgia, where he died in 1786.

²⁵ French aristocrat and army officer who volunteered for the American Continental Army prior to French involvement in the war. Lafayette became a close friend and aide to Washington and participated in numerous engagements throughout the war, most notably helping to blockade Lord Cornwallis in the lead up to the Siege of Yorktown. He was also vital in America’s dealings with France, both during the Rhode Island Campaign and later helping Benjamin Franklin to secure 6,000 French soldiers under the command of Rochambeau. Lafayette went on to be a key figure in the French Revolution of 1789 and in the July Revolution of 1830.