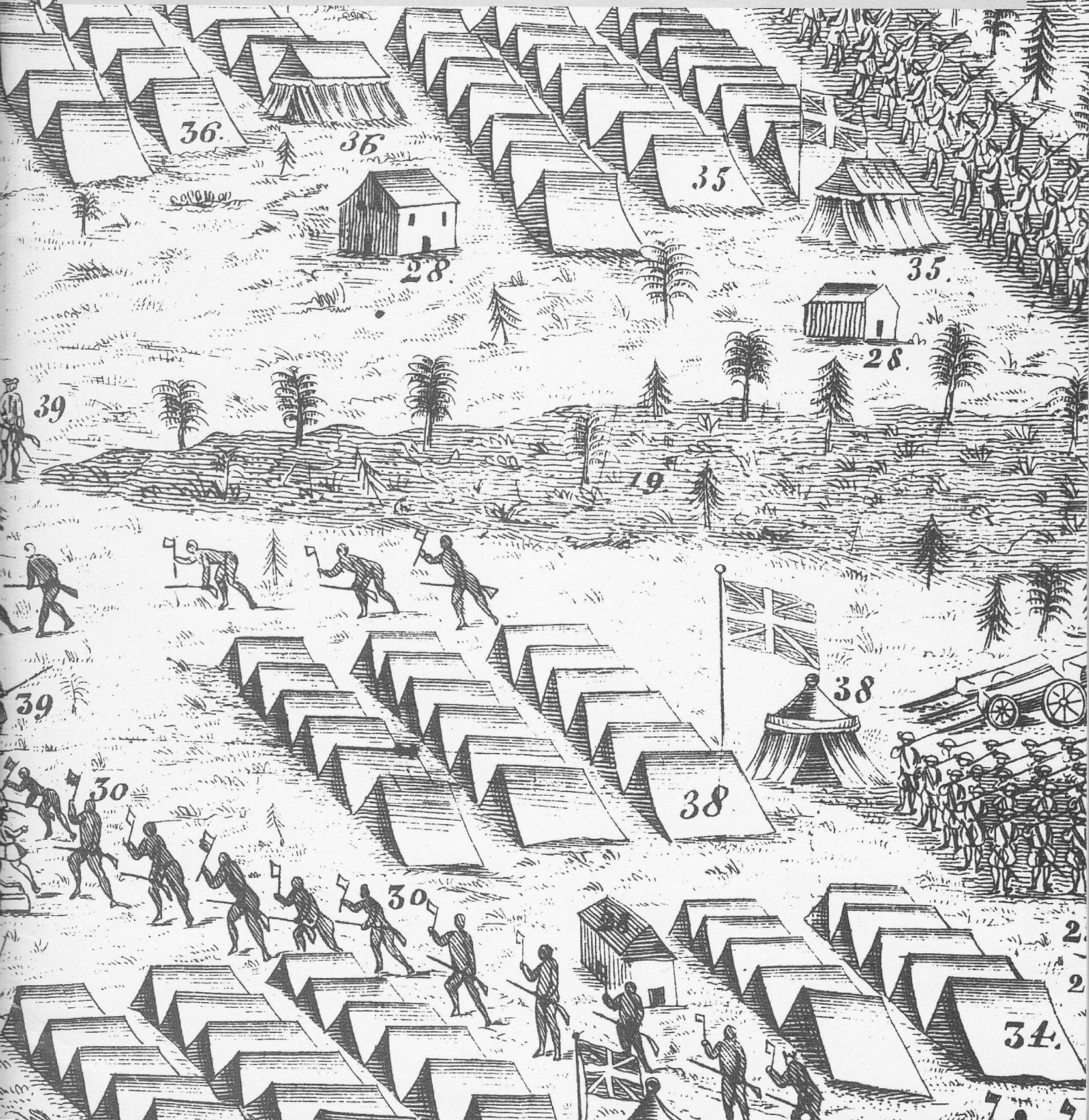




# Rhode Island History

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# Rhode Island History

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## An Eighteenth-Century Rhode Island Adventurer

RICHARD C. COLE

With roots deep in Rhode Island soil, Edward Cole (circa 1723-1793) used Rhode Island during its tumultuous transition from colony to state both as a locale for money-making and political expression and as a base for exploring opportunities in the West. Cole wore many hats during his long career, but in the thumbnail sketches by Lorenzo Sabine and Gregory Palmer he is remembered primarily as a Loyalist.<sup>1</sup> Of his many roles, however—businessman, soldier, Indian trader, Indian commissary, land speculator, Nova Scotian cattle rancher—Loyalist was but one. Although Cole was a person of modest station and influence, he was also an adventurer with a nose for controversy, and crises in his own life were linked to major public issues. Furthermore, he was both a man of action and a chronicler.

Edward Cole's was one of the oldest families in Rhode Island. One of his paternal great-grandmothers was the redoubtable Anne Marbury Hutchinson (1591-1643), who settled in Rhode Island in 1638 after being banned from Boston for her religious stance. She and most of her large family were murdered by Indians in 1643, but her daughter Susanna survived the massacre to marry John Cole in 1651, and her son Edward likewise survived to become the great-grandfather of Thomas Hutchinson (1711-80), the last royal governor of the Massachusetts colony. John Cole's father, Samuel Cole, had come with Governor Winthrop to Boston in 1630 and established the first inn in New England. Among the numerous children of John and Susanna Hutchinson Cole was Elisha Cole (died 1729), who married Elizabeth Dexter (1684-1756) in 1713.<sup>2</sup> Elisha Cole owned 275 acres in North Kingstown, Rhode Island, and operated gristmills and sawmills there. Edward Cole, one of his sons, inherited his father's property and businesses as joint heir with his brother John (1715-77), who was to serve Rhode Island with distinction as a legislator and a judge.<sup>3</sup>

During his early adult years Edward Cole eschewed an obvious course as a businessman to pursue a military career. He may have served in the British army before entering the provincial forces. In 1744 he was a first lieutenant of the First Company of North Kingstown; the following year he was a captain at the capture of Louisbourg, Nova Scotia, from the French, in which battle three of his men were killed.<sup>4</sup> He continued as a company commander in 1746-47, but he then appears to have suspended his military service until 1754, when he was promoted to lieutenant colonel in the Rhode Island Regiment, formed to confront the French threat at Crown Point, New York. The stage was now set for Cole's emergence the following year as a principal in the controversy about the victory of New England troops over French forces at Lake George, New York, on 8 September 1755.

Richard Cole is a professor of English at Davidson College in Davidson, North Carolina.





Historians have recognized the significance of the victory at Lake George—a victory shortly following the French and Indian defeat of British forces in July—but there was controversy about it from the beginning. Milton Hamilton, whose two articles offer the best study of the battle,<sup>5</sup> is convincing in his argument that the victory was achieved primarily by General William Johnson rather than by General Phineas Lyman, despite the claims of Lyman himself and his Connecticut partisans at the time, and more recently of Lyman's biographer Delphine L. H. Clark.<sup>6</sup> But Hamilton does little with the part that Lieutenant Colonel Edward Cole played in the battle itself, or with his role in the later controversy over leadership and the contribution of the several New England contingents.

Cole commanded the Rhode Island Regiment in the battle by accident. On 20 August 1755 General William Johnson wrote to Governor Stephen Hopkins of Rhode Island that he was granting Colonel Christopher Harris's request to return home because the regiment's second in command, Lieutenant Colonel Cole, was "a very active and capable officer."<sup>7</sup> During the ensuing 8 September battle, Johnson ordered Cole and his Rhode Islanders to cover the retreat of the Massachusetts Regiment after its commander, Colonel Ephraim Williams, had been killed, together with many of his men, early that morning. According to contemporary historian Thomas Mante, who later served with the British army in America, Johnson's "well-timed order" to Colonel Cole and Cole's effective response rescued the Massachusetts troops "from destruction."<sup>8</sup> Johnson included Cole's action in his report of 9 September 1755 to the four New England governors, a report that was widely reprinted in periodicals and broadsides in America and England, and even, according to Hamilton, in Portugal.<sup>9</sup>

But General Lyman's self-serving version in the *Connecticut Gazette* of 20 September and the *New York Gazette* of 6 October 1755 mentioned Johnson but once and Cole and his Rhode Islanders not at all. Cole's outraged rejoinder was printed as a separate pamphlet by James Parker and William Weyman, the *New York Gazette's* publishers, and on 17 November it was reprinted in the *New York Mercury*.<sup>10</sup> Attributing the report in the *New York Gazette* not to General Lyman but to "one of his mean ignorant Camp-Flatterers," Cole felt called upon to vindicate himself and his regiment "from the Ignominy of doing Nothing." He had not intended to respond, he said, but complaints from other Rhode Islanders obliged him to make a public reply. Reviewing the role of his regiment in covering the retreat of Massachusetts troops after the death of their commander, he declared that in the second phase of the battle, when the French under Baron de Dieskau had attacked the line manned by Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island forces, the Rhode Islanders—though fewer in number than the other defenders—had repelled the attack at least as effectively as their fellow New Englanders, and they had sustained twice as many casualties as the Connecticut troops did. According to reports by officers that Cole identified by name, a certain commander—clearly General Lyman—was observed "behind a Tree, lying on his belly, with his Face to the Ground." That same nameless commander asked him to lead Connecticut troops "to the Defence of the Camp," said Cole, "and, according to his own Phrase, *Keep them to it*, while he remained behind a Log-House." Cole insisted that the victory was "solely due to General JOHNSON."

A response from Milford, Connecticut, dated 21 November and published in the 29 November *Connecticut Gazette*, saw "Cole's scurrilous letter" as "tending to beget Ill-Will, and breeding a Disunion in the several Governments in

America.” Cole’s pamphlet was “publicly whipt, according to Moses’s LAW, Forty Stripes save one, by the common Whipper, and then burnt.” On the other hand, Richard Shuckburgh, a correspondent of Johnson’s, declared that he found “Caution Modesty and sense” in Cole’s pamphlet and regretted that General Lyman had earned “such Severe Remarks on his behaviour.”<sup>11</sup> After the *Connecticut Gazette* again took up the cudgels against “that wrathful Gentleman, Mr. Cole,” on 13 December, a more temperate response appeared in that paper on 3 January 1756, censuring both Cole and his assailants. Instead of publishing insinuations, said the writer, Cole should have made his charges before a court-martial in the interest of “national Justice, not for the sake of private Resentment for an Offence given probably thro’ meer [*sic*] inadvertency.” On the other hand, Cole’s detractors were equally culpable in their partisanship and had created “Discord and Dissention” in New England. In 1757 the controversy resurfaced in “A Review of the Military Operations in North America,” supposedly by Governor William Livingston of New Jersey, who defended General Lyman vigorously while attacking Lyman’s critics, including “one Cole, a fellow of no reputation.”<sup>12</sup>



This was Edward Cole’s first involvement in a public dispute. Between the end of one conflict with France in 1748 and the outbreak of another in 1754, Cole seems to have quietly devoted himself to Rhode Island affairs. He and his brother John became freemen in North Kingstown in 1747.<sup>13</sup> Edward was probably established in his family’s businesses by 1750 when he and John signed a petition to King George II concerning bills of credit.<sup>14</sup> The next year Edward joined Dr. Thomas Moffat and Gilbert Stuart, the father of the famous painter of the same name, in growing tobacco and building a snuff mill at Petaquanset Pond in North Kingstown.<sup>15</sup> An intimate of the Cole family and an influence on “young Ned Cole,” Dr. Moffat would become a vociferous Loyalist and spend the Revolution in England. The Stuarts would also leave Rhode Island with the advent of the Revolution, the father relocating to Nova Scotia, a favorite refuge of Loyalists, and the son pursuing his artistic career in London.

The Lake George campaign of 1755 opened up new career options for Edward Cole. He had won favor with William Johnson, now a baronet and the British government’s superintendent of Indian affairs north of the Ohio River, as well as one of the largest landowners in America. This new relationship, together with Cole’s contacts with British-aligned Indians in the 1755 campaign and, undoubtedly, a spirit of adventure and a desire for large profits, led Cole to become an Indian trader for the next ten years, until Johnson appointed him Indian commissary for the Illinois territory. In 1759 Cole met with Johnson on several occasions to discuss trade with the Indians, and he sometimes served as Johnson’s courier. In a letter of 3 May 1760 to Colonel Frederick Haldimand concerning Cole’s trade with the Indians in the Niagara area, Johnson declared that Cole “is a Gentleman for whom I have a particular regard, [and] I shall take as a favour done me, any kindness You may shew him.”<sup>16</sup> By the end of the year, at the request of his deputy George Croghan, Johnson was paying Cole nearly £587 for goods delivered to Indians in the Detroit area.<sup>17</sup>

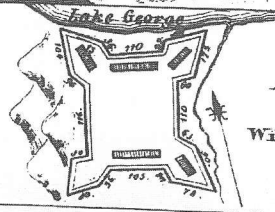
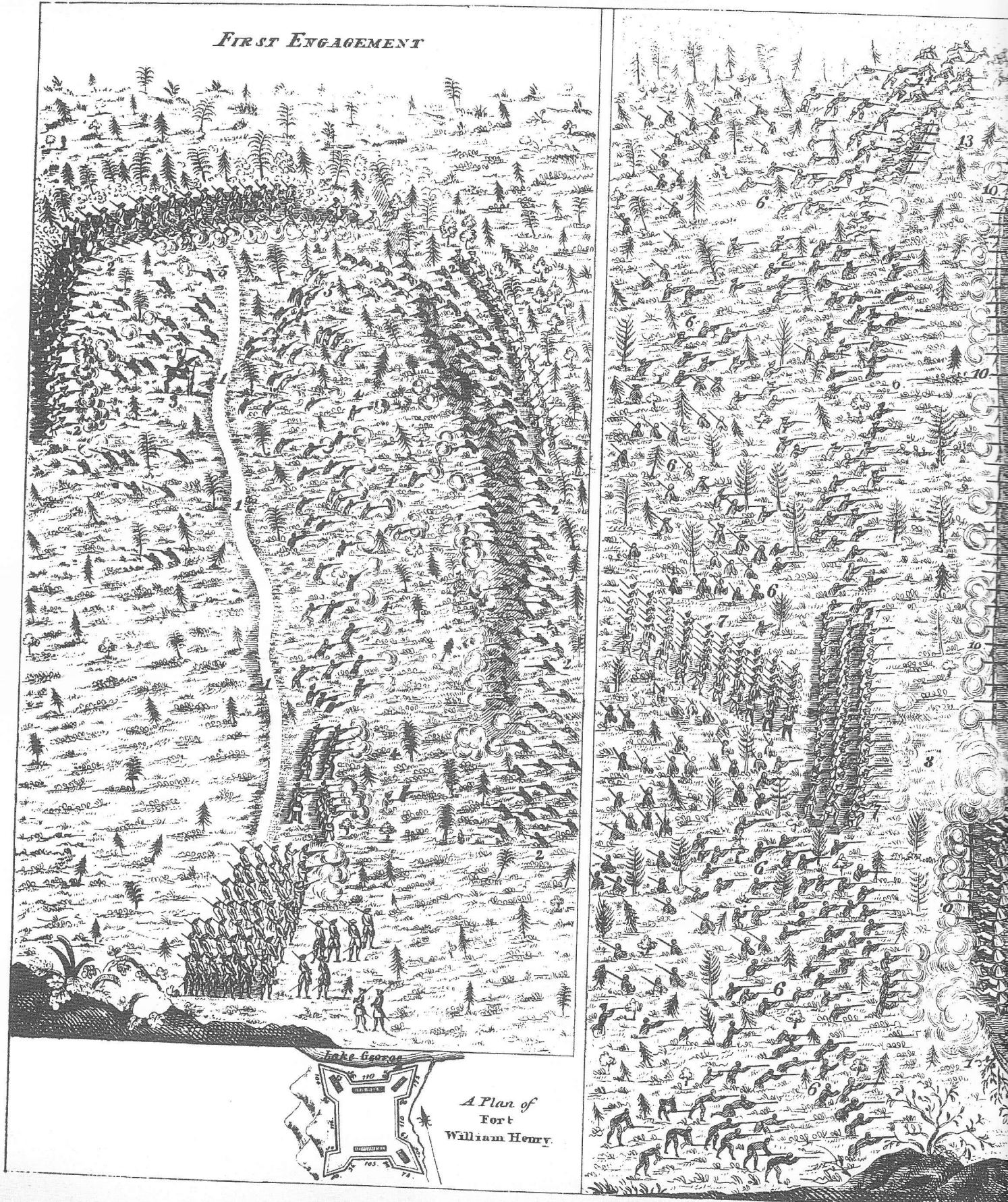
This was also the year of Cole’s second personal crisis with public ramifications, which came about after he had joined Major Robert Rogers’s trading

*Overleaf*

*The first and second engagements between the English and French forces at Lake George in 1755. Engraving in M. Pouchot, Memoir upon the Late War in North America between the French and English, 1755-1760 (Roxbury, Mass., 1866). RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8295).*

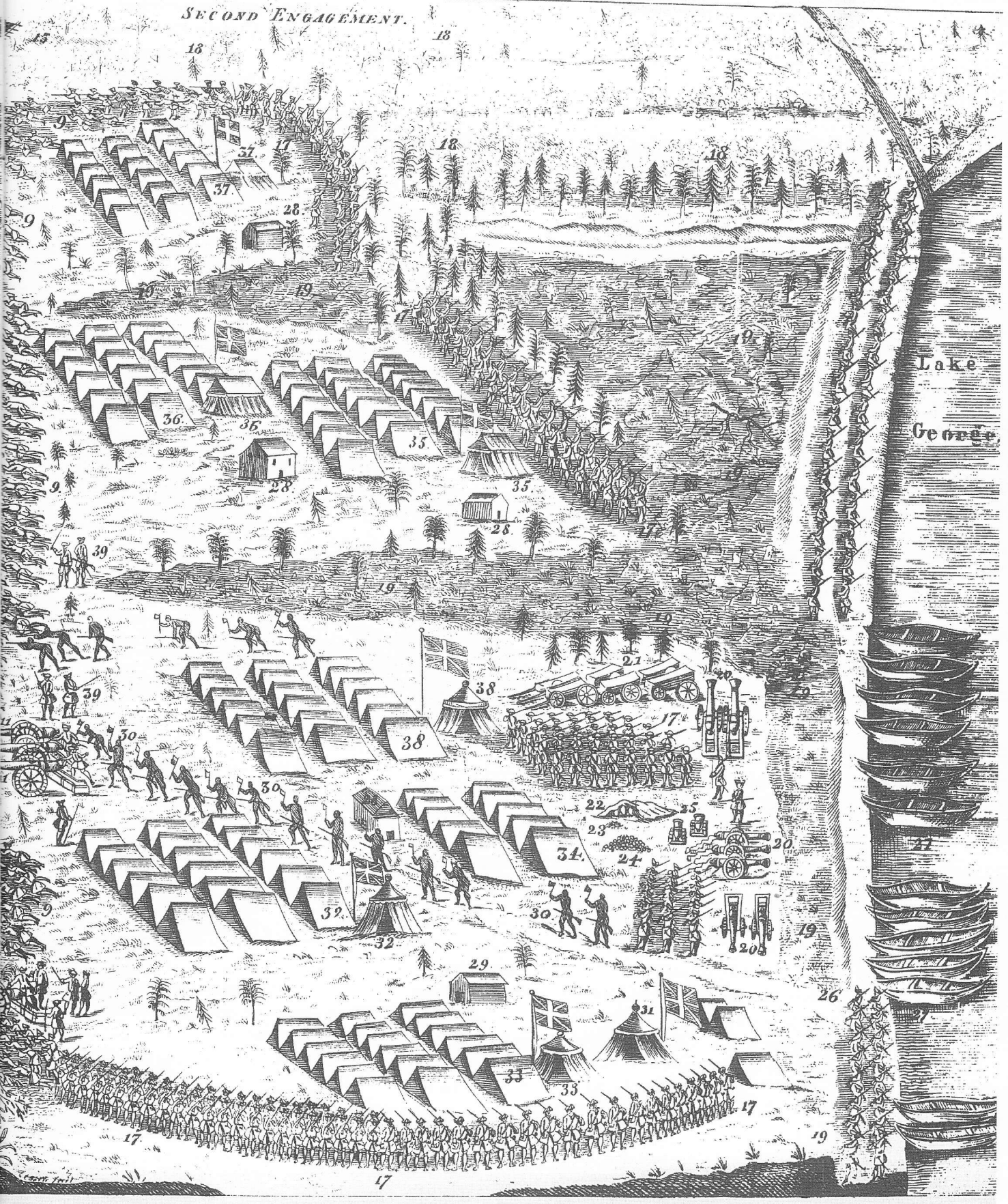


*FIRST ENGAGEMENT*



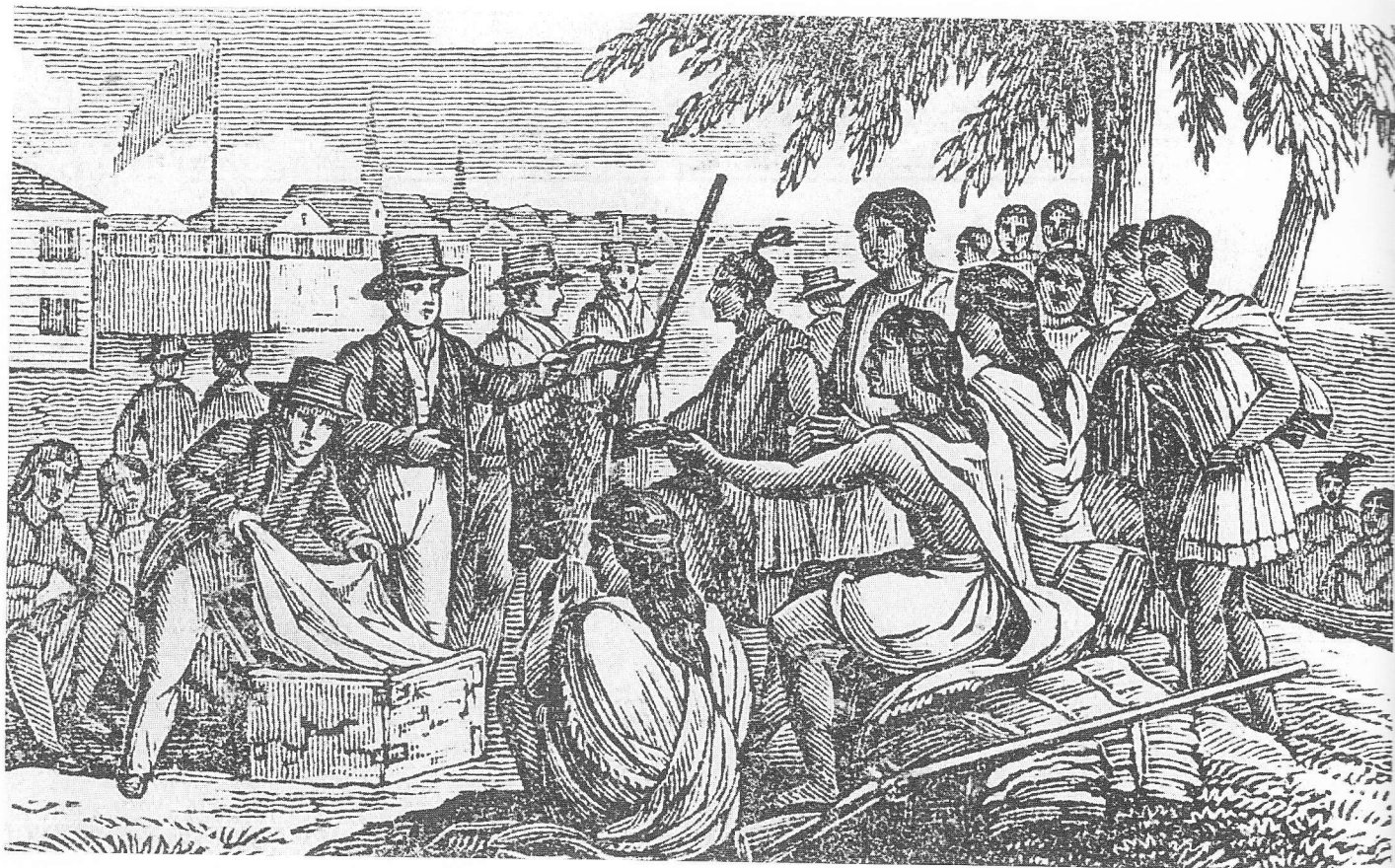
*A Plan of  
Fort  
William Henry.*

SECOND ENGAGEMENT.





firm as “virtual manager of the business.”<sup>18</sup> Rogers, of Rogers’s Rangers fame, had served with Cole at Lake George in 1755 and was rapidly becoming an international figure with many admirers and detractors. After the French surrender at Montreal in September 1760, Sir Jeffery Amherst, commanding all British troops in America, sent Major Rogers and his Rangers to occupy Detroit and



*The French and English carried on an extensive trade with the Indians during Edward Cole's years in the West. Engraving in Samuel Griswold Goodrich, A System of School Geography (New York, 1837). RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8285).*

other French forts in the West. Rogers's firm, managed by Cole, supplied equipment for the expedition and goods to trade with the Indians; and with the occupation of Detroit, Cole moved the firm's headquarters from Niagara to Detroit.<sup>19</sup> During the next year, for reasons that remain unclear, Rogers sued Cole for £2,500. Negotiations went on for two years until a final settlement was reached in March 1763 at Cole's home in Newport, Rhode Island. The firm was dissolved, and each of the four partners got about £976.<sup>20</sup> Rogers had meanwhile formed a new trading firm, but that also failed.

The relationship between Rogers and Cole has received at least one fictional treatment, that in Kenneth Roberts's 1937 best-seller *Northwest Passage*, of which Rogers is the central character. Cole is described by one of the novel's other characters as “a tall feller with jaws like a chipmunk carrying acorns. . . . Great friend of Johnson's.”<sup>21</sup> At another point Rogers recounts a conversation with Cole after the latter's appointment as Indian commissary for the Illinois territory by Sir William Johnson:

I asked Cole how he expected to make out with the Indians if he couldn't make presents to `em. Hell, I never expected an honest answer from him; but he admitted right away it couldn't be done. No use talking to Johnson about it, though, he said: nothing to do but give `em presents when the time comes, and hope to God Johnson'll see the light in the meantime.<sup>22</sup>

Although widely commended for his historical accuracy, Kenneth Roberts was probably offering more fiction than history in presenting Cole and Rogers as agreeing on generous gifts to the Indians. As commissary for the Illinois territory from 1766 to 1769, Cole would be regarded by his superiors as too liberal with such gifts. One might surmise that Cole's generosity was in fact the bone of contention between Cole and Rogers in 1760, and that Rogers was suing Cole for restitution of money too lavishly spent on the Indians.

Cole's second personal crisis was not associated with a public crisis of the magnitude of the Lake George controversy of 1755, but in identifying the key issue of gifts to Indians, it did anticipate a later crisis, one that culminated with the British withdrawal from Indian affairs, largely on the basis of cost, in 1768-69. Although there were several reports during the years of the Rogers partnership that Cole commanded a regiment under Wolfe at the capture of Quebec in 1759 and under Lord Albemarle at the capture of Havana in 1762,<sup>23</sup> Rhode Island colonial assembly minutes, with their full coverage of military affairs, list no military appointments for Edward Cole after 1755.

Cole seems to have maintained his business and civic interests in Newport while he was trading with Indians in the West. The family gristmills and sawmills apparently continued operating, as did the snuff mill, despite Gilbert Stuart's withdrawal from the partnership in 1761. Cole was a freeman of Newport in 1757, in which year he was paid by the General Assembly for supplying uniforms for soldiers,<sup>24</sup> a business venture anticipating his supplying equipment for the Rogers expedition in 1760. During these years Cole was active in the Church of England congregation in Newport; Ezra Stiles, a leading cleric in New England and future president of Yale University, recorded in his diary in January 1760 Cole's gift of twenty pounds to the Anglican congregation.<sup>25</sup> This congregation would include many Loyalists—including Edward Cole—during the Revolution.

In 1763 Cole's partnership with Rogers gave way to a more fruitful one with Henry Van Schaack, who had also served with Cole at Lake George in 1755. The two men set up several trading posts in the West. One example of their success was the £900 they received in April 1765 for 1,324 raccoon skins bought from Indians at the partners' Niagara post. Van Schaack's nephew reported that his uncle considered Cole "an intelligent and enterprising gentleman of an ancient and reputable family."<sup>26</sup>



Cole's differences with the colorful Major Rogers anticipated his third involvement in a major public controversy. In 1766, with the grudging permission of the British Board of Trade and General Thomas Gage, commander of all British troops in America, Sir William Johnson appointed commissaries at the five principal forts in the Northern Department to represent the imperial government in political transactions with the Indians and to supervise all trade with them.<sup>27</sup> Johnson recommended Cole to General Gage on 15 March 1766: "I think a certain Mr. Cole will make a good Commissary at the Illinois. . . he is a Man of Education, and Good sense, understands some of the Indian Languages, and Speaks French well, and I believe he will support a proper respectable Character there from his Acquaintance with both French and Indians."<sup>28</sup> Based at Fort Chartres near the junction of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers, Cole was



appointed Indian commissary for the vast Illinois territory on 17 April 1766, and he quickly became involved in controversy again. His name occurs often in Johnson's huge correspondence, appearing in a variety of connections of which this discussion can offer only a sampling.

Cole's three-year tour of duty at Fort Chartres began inauspiciously as the French tried to prevent his taking his post, and shortly thereafter there was a false report that he had been killed.<sup>29</sup> Once established in his position, Cole aroused the ire of his superiors by billing them for large sums that he had promised to traders—often Baynton, Wharton, and Morgan of Philadelphia—for goods supplied to the Indians. In one instance Cole billed Johnson over £15,000 for goods supplied by the Philadelphia firm from July through September 1766.<sup>30</sup> A bill for £5,000 for Cole's expenses from September 1766 to March 1767 drew an objection from General Gage, who was under pressure from the Board of Trade to keep expenses down. On 25 October 1767 Cole complained that Johnson had rejected the former bill not because it was inaccurate but because it was large, and he took issue too with Johnson's charge that he had failed to review his accounts with Colonel Reed, the commandant at Fort Chartres. Cole believed that he had some latitude in making decisions, and that it was important for the civil authority not to be subordinate to the military.<sup>31</sup>

Cole also feared that French traders might gain favor with the Indians by outspending him. On 25 October 1767 Cole informed his immediate superior George Croghan, one of Johnson's deputies, of a bill for over £7,000 owed Baynton, Wharton, and Morgan for goods for Indians, and in justification of such high expenditures he noted—not for the first time—that the Spanish and French would spare no expense “to ingratiate themselves in the favour of Savages.” Cole also repeated his belief that more trading posts were needed to reduce the heavy expenses at Fort Chartres. In a letter to Croghan on 19 December 1767, he continued to advocate such measures as duties on French goods to help pay for the upkeep of Fort Chartres and make French products less attractive to the Indians. With chagrin, on 1 March 1768 Croghan reported to Johnson Cole's bill of £11,000 owed to Baynton, Wharton, and Morgan for goods for the Indians. In April 1768 such huge bills led General Gage to characterize Cole's expenses as “monstrous.” Johnson agreed that these expenses were too high, and Cole's assertion that he could not reduce costs made Johnson willing to recall his protégé. On 23 May 1768, however, he assured the Philadelphia trading firm that Cole's accounting practices had improved and that its large bills would be paid, but he informed the firm that comparable bills in the future would not be paid. In September 1768 a detailed list of goods worth over £1,600 that the firm had supplied to specified Indian tribes was approved by Cole and Colonel Reed, with the statement that the “expenses were absolutely necessary to be made for the Benefit of His Majesty's Service.”<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, Cole had been requesting leave to return to Rhode Island for rest and business; if he could not obtain such leave, he said, he would be obliged to resign his position.<sup>33</sup> The matter was ultimately decided by the Board of Trade in London, which, unlike Cole's superiors in America, believed that peace with the Indians did in fact require massive expenditures. Regarding the cost as prohibitive, on 7 March 1768 the board ruled that control of Indian trade and Indian affairs in general should be turned over to the individual colonies.<sup>34</sup> General Gage put the Board of Trade ruling into operation on 24 March 1769, when he instructed Colonel Reed to send Cole back to Rhode Island: “All the

Commissaries in general are ordered from the several Posts, and indeed I believe the Service will not be the worse for their absence. You will know that the management of the Trade is now left to the Provinces.”<sup>35</sup>

In April 1769 Cole sailed down the Mississippi from Fort Chartres to New Orleans, where he boarded a ship on his eastward journey to Newport. He probably stopped off in Philadelphia with George Morgan, his traveling companion and business associate, and he stopped again in New York to visit Sir William Johnson. Writing to Morgan from New York on 25 November 1769, Cole recounted his reunion with his “good Friend and Patron,” who, he said, “has approved of my Conduct while I was at the Illinois, and has prevailed on me to Remove in this Spring to his Land, has purchased three Improvements for me within a Mile a half of his House.”<sup>36</sup> There appears to be no evidence, however, that Cole ever moved to Johnson’s vast estate. Anticipating his role in yet another public controversy, in the same letter Cole also spoke of “the Land on the Ohio” and claimed that “New England people are all Land Mad.” He himself would join the land speculations of the Indiana Company for fifteen years, a period that would coincide with his greatest personal crisis, and the greatest public crisis in eighteenth-century America, the Revolution.



The period from 1770 to 1775 seems to have been a prosperous and relatively tranquil one for Cole, who devoted himself to business and domestic life in Newport. The main source of his prosperity was his partnership in a tanyard with one of Newport’s wealthiest men, George Rome, who was also, like Cole’s former partner and mentor Thomas Moffat, one of the town’s most outspoken Loyalists. In the Newport tax list of 1772, George Rome’s tax was the third highest, nearly seventeen pounds. Before the Revolution, Newport flourished in large part because of the slave trade, and among his many business ventures Rome owned slave ships. Slaveholding was common in Newport; in 1774 there were 1,084 slaves in a population of 9,209. Rome himself was recorded that year as the owner of thirteen slaves, second only to John Mawdsley, who owned twenty.<sup>37</sup>

Cole was listed as a tanner and paid about ten pounds in taxes in 1772, ranking twelfth among Newport’s taxpayers.<sup>38</sup> In that year he joined other prominent citizens of the town in requesting a lottery from the General Assembly to finance the paving of Pelham Street.<sup>39</sup> According to the 1774 census, his household consisted of himself, his wife, three young sons, and six slaves.<sup>40</sup> In 1775 his income had declined somewhat, as had Rome’s; Cole was taxed about six pounds and Rome about fourteen pounds that year.<sup>41</sup> During this time Cole was probably still running the Cole family mills and his snuff mill while continuing his business ties in the Illinois territory. In addition, with George Morgan and a Captain Moore, he was a partner in a local distillery; after Moore’s death in 1770, Morgan and Cole (who was Moore’s administrator) quarreled over four copper stills, which Morgan got possession of through litigation.<sup>42</sup>

This peaceful interim between crises in Edward Cole’s life came to an end with the opening of the Revolution at Lexington and Concord in April 1775. Although Edward’s brother John was a prominent republican legislator and jurist in Rhode Island, most of Edward Cole’s associates over the years took the Loyalist side; these included Dr. Thomas Moffat, Major Robert Rogers, George



Rome, Henry Van Schaack, and the members of Sir William Johnson's family (Johnson himself died in 1774). Although Edward Cole did not join seventy-four other leading citizens of Rhode Island in signing a statement of allegiance to the king in 1775,<sup>43</sup> his Loyalist stance was well known. In a journal entry of 26 August 1775, Ezra Stiles called Cole and Newport sheriff Walter Challone—both of whom had been seized at Portsmouth as Tories—"insulting and atrocious Offenders" and rejoiced that they had been brought to "humble Confession, Renunciation of Toryism and Promises" before they were released. Cole was apprehended again and brought before Brigadier General Esek Hopkins at the Newport courthouse in October 1775, but once again he was released. In Stiles's long list of "Principal and Active Tories," rated on a scale of one through four, Cole was included as one of the few Tories to receive a four.<sup>44</sup>

The "Renunciation of Toryism" to which Stiles alluded appeared in Cole's October 1775 petition to the Rhode Island General Assembly for a pass to travel to Carlisle, Pennsylvania, for "Business of great Importance to himself." Cole feared that his fellow citizens had misunderstood his political views and might prevent him from leaving the colony, he declared, but actually he had neither said nor done "any thing to the Prejudice of America." He opposed "the mandatory Edicts of the British Parliament to enslave the inhabitants of this Country, and compel them by Force to submit to vassalage," and he agreed that the colonies should use military force to oppose British power.<sup>45</sup> Cole did not identify his business in Carlisle, which concerned land claims of the Indiana Company. His petition was granted, and his recantation was published in the *Providence Gazette*.

At the same time the General Assembly ordered property of a number of loyalists seized, including that of two of Cole's former partners, Thomas Moffat and George Rome, and Massachusetts governor Thomas Hutchinson, Cole's cousin. Cole himself—who had renounced his Loyalist beliefs only in order to be allowed to meet with his associates in the Indiana Company—was not spared for long. In June 1776 he refused the General Assembly's order to turn over accounts of the tanyard he had owned with George Rome, and he was jailed. The "Tan-Yard, Vats, Leather, Stock of Hides, and everything else in the Tan-Yard" were confiscated.<sup>46</sup> Like many families in Rhode Island, the Cole family was divided over the political issue. Shortly before Edward Cole was confined his brother John, who had been chief justice of the state Supreme Court and speaker of the General Assembly, was named an admiralty court judge.

The fortunes of Edward Cole and other Newport Loyalists radically altered when British troops occupied the town in December 1776. George Rome and Thomas Moffat had already fled to England, but Cole, still in Newport, got his tanyard back. Commissioned a lieutenant colonel by Sir William Howe, commanding general of all British forces in America, Cole was given a warrant to raise troops, and he advertised for recruits in the *Newport Gazette* (which replaced the republican *Newport Mercury* during the British occupation) throughout the month of March 1777. Men who enlisted in Colonel Cole's Regiment of Loyal Rhode-Islanders for two years were promised an enlistment bonus of five dollars. Another recruitment drive, this one by Lieutenant Colonel George Wightman for his Regiment of Loyal New Englanders, was announced in the same newspaper. Ezra Stiles noted on 20 March 1777 that "not a man" had enlisted in either regiment.<sup>47</sup> How many men Cole raised is unknown, but the regiment was in existence throughout 1777, with one of its companies com-

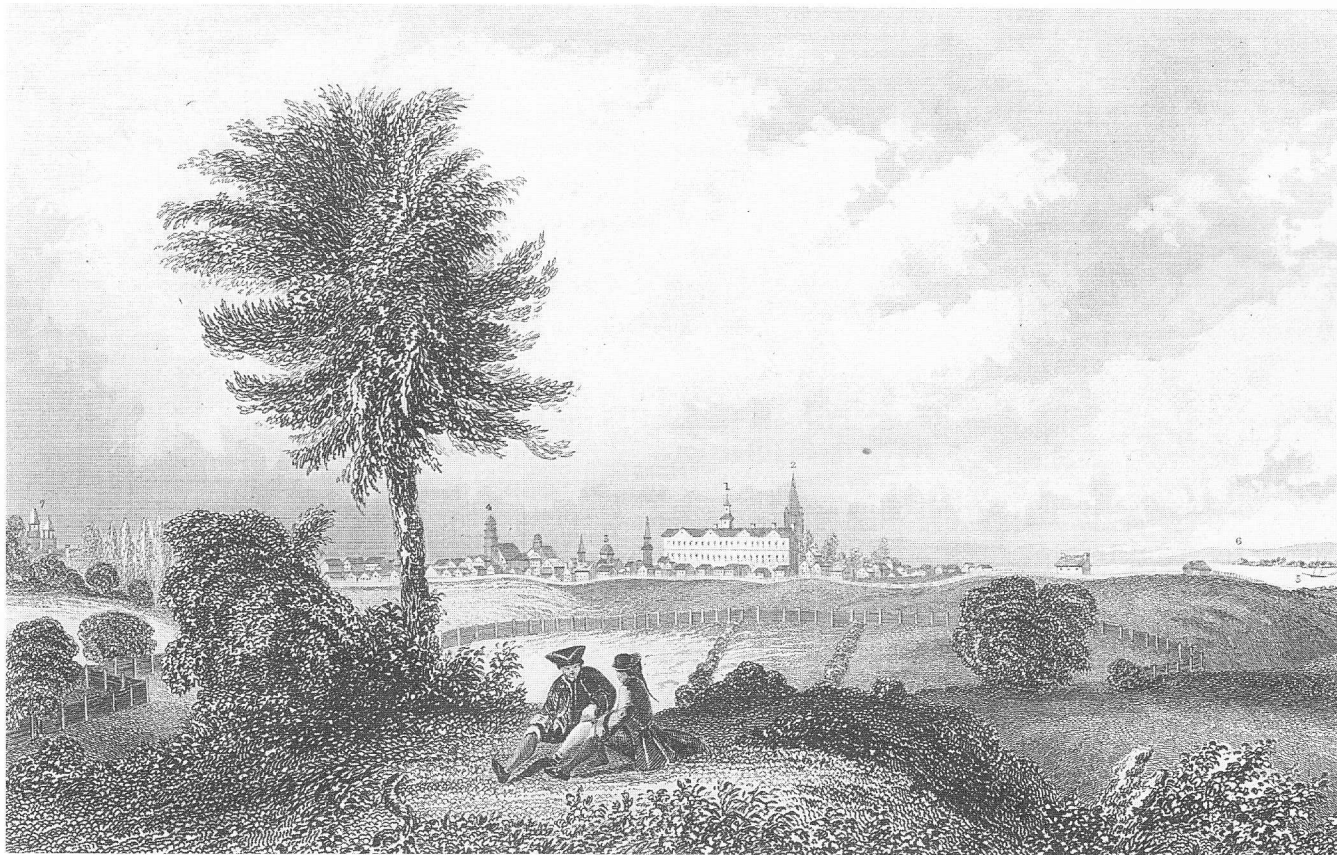
manded by Captain Seth Williams, a Harvard College graduate.<sup>48</sup> On 28 January 1778 Major Pelham Winslow, in Newport, reported Cole's failure as a recruiter to Colonel Edward Winslow at British army headquarters in Philadelphia:

The bearer hereof, Colonel Cole, has lately had his warrant withdrawn from him; not from any fault, but from his not being able to raise many men. This event has greatly distressed him, and entirely thrown him out of all business. He is confident, should there be an opening into New England, he can complete his corps in the spring. His business to Philadelphia is to solicit a renewal of his warrant.<sup>49</sup>

Cole failed in his mission in Philadelphia, but Sir William Howe allowed him to retain his rank of lieutenant colonel with half-pay of 7s. 6d. per diem, benefits that Cole continued to enjoy at least through October 1783.<sup>50</sup> His fellow recruiter in Newport, Lieutenant Colonel George Wightman, managed to enlist 16 officers and 112 men; 175 men served in his Regiment of Loyal New Englanders at one time or another during the war.<sup>51</sup> Wightman's success probably stemmed from the offer he announced during August and September 1779 in the *Newport Gazette*: handsome bounties would be paid both to enlistees and to recruiters, and substantial acreage after the war was guaranteed by General Sir Henry Clinton himself, Howe's successor as British commander in chief in America, to all who served in Wightman's regiment.

When American forces reoccupied Newport in November 1779, Cole and Wightman, like many other Newport Loyalists, withdrew to New York City, the site of British army headquarters. That month the sheriff of Newport found the houses of a number of Loyalists, including Edward Cole's, unoccupied.<sup>52</sup> Whatever Cole may have done in New York went unreported in the city's newspapers, but at the end of the war he told the Claims Commission set up by the

"Southeast View of the City of New York."  
Engraving, 1768, in Pouchot, *Memoir upon the Late War*. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8286).





British government to indemnify Loyalists that he had not borne arms for Britain.<sup>53</sup> In 1780 George Rome came to New York from England to serve on the board of directors of the Associated Loyalists. Appointed by Sir Henry Clinton and operating under the presidency of Benjamin Franklin's son, Governor William Franklin of New Jersey, the board was to supervise the organization of Loyalist military forces and the provision of relief for refugees.<sup>54</sup> The board does not seem to have renewed Cole's warrant to raise a regiment, but it was probably responsible for his being given military housing first on Long Island and then, until the final departure of British troops in November 1783, at 41 Roosevelt Street in New York City.<sup>55</sup>

Cole was apparently well known and respected in New York military circles. In 1783 at least 110 seconded officers of Loyalist forces—officers not then on active duty—made him their spokesman in a petition to Sir Guy Carleton, Clinton's successor as commanding general. Writing from New York as a colonel on 3 April 1783, Cole stated that the seconded officers had “left valuable Estates and lucrative Professions” to serve their king and no longer had the “means of maintaining themselves and families without the Support of Government,” and he asked Carleton to award the officers “Grants and permanent Subsistence, according to their rank, equal to what the Officers now serving with their Battalions are to have on the reduction of their corps.” Carleton forwarded the request to the secretary of war in London with his favorable recommendation. Cole's name was included in a list of 110 seconded officers that Carleton sent to the prime minister, Lord North, on 29 November 1783.<sup>56</sup> This was the final month of the British occupation of New York City, and Cole and his family were among the 32,224 Loyalists that Carleton reported as having left for Nova Scotia.<sup>57</sup>

It is not known when Cole arrived there, but in August 1784 George DeBlois, a Loyalist merchant formerly of Newport, in a letter to his uncle Stephen DeBlois in Newport, reported from Halifax that Cole was then living in that Nova Scotian town.<sup>58</sup> For his services as a Loyalist colonel, in July 1785 Cole received one thousand acres in Parrsboro Township, King's County, Nova Scotia, from John Parr, the province's royal governor.<sup>59</sup> Cole was one of only 105 Loyalists of sufficient status in Nova Scotia to be awarded that much land.<sup>60</sup> Thirty-three other Loyalists were given land in Parrsboro in 1785, including Thomas Moore and Captain Samuel Wilson, who received four hundred acres and seven hundred acres respectively. These two men would help to appraise Cole's estate in 1793.<sup>61</sup> As colonel of the Regiment of Loyal Rhode Islanders, in 1788 Cole was one of 55 Loyalists from Newport to sign an address thanking the king for land they had received in Nova Scotia.<sup>62</sup> Cole filed a number of claims in Parrsboro (renamed Saint John in 1785) and Windsor seeking compensation for losses he had suffered in the war, but these brought him only £435 from the British government.<sup>63</sup> The value of his confiscated properties in Rhode Island was exceeded by claims against these properties in 1784.<sup>64</sup>



It was during the final years of his life that the fifth and last public controversy in which Edward Cole was a participant moved toward its culmination. This was the controversy that surrounded the Indiana Company—of which Cole was a member—and its claims to western lands. Formed in 1765, the Indiana Company sought compensation for losses suffered by its twenty-three members, all Indian traders, during attacks on western settlements by Chief Pontiac and his



PONTIAC.

Chief Pontiac. Engraving in Samuel Griswold Goodrich, *The Lives of Celebrated American Indians* (Boston, 1843). RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 8287).

coalition of Indian tribes in 1763. Included in the original group of members were Samuel Wharton, John Baynton, George Morgan, Thomas Smallman, and Richard Winston, with all of whom Cole had dealt, first as an Indian trader himself and then as Indian commissary for the Illinois territory. George Croghan, Cole's immediate superior in the Illinois territory, was a secret member of the company. Although not a member himself, Sir William Johnson had worked diligently through his position and his many contacts to secure compensation for the traders. In November 1768 Johnson had called a conference at Fort Stanwix, New York, bringing together the traders, colonial officials, and Indian chieftains. The losses of the traders were set at about £86,000 in provincial currency, and in compensation the Indians agreed to grant the traders about 3.5 million acres of land, primarily in western Virginia.<sup>65</sup>

Because the Board of Trade in London was hesitant about approving the huge grant, the Indiana Company was enlarged in 1769 to include influential British and colonial leaders like Benjamin Franklin. With the resulting Grand Ohio Company incorporating the Indiana Company, the latter's objectives became secondary: the Grand Ohio Company was interested in land speculation, while the Indiana Company was interested in confirming its 1768 land grant from the Indians. It was not until the new company's failure to set up its proposed colony of Vandalia in the western lands, and the coming of the American Revolution, that the Indiana Company withdrew to pursue its own aims.<sup>66</sup>

At a meeting in September 1775 the members of the Indiana Company decided to sell their claimed land at fifty dollars per hundred acres. Another meeting was called for November 1775 at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, and this was the occasion of Cole's public recantation of his Loyalist principles before the Rhode Island General Assembly. It is not certain when Cole joined the Indiana Company, but he was included in a 20 January 1776 list of proprietors as the owner of 1,208 shares, worth £1,208 in Pennsylvania currency.<sup>67</sup> Cole had bought his shares from one of the company's original members, Richard Winston, with whom he had worked in the Illinois territory from 1766 to 1769.<sup>68</sup> During November and December 1775 and January 1776 Cole took an active part in the deliberations of the company.<sup>69</sup>

Dogged by controversy from the beginning, the Indiana Company was challenged in 1776 by the Commonwealth of Virginia, which in 1779 claimed the western lands as its own. The company's petition to the Continental Congress to intervene in the dispute was unsuccessful, and its appeal to Virginia to reconsider its action met a similar fate. In 1792 the company sought to have the Virginia action countermanded by the new United States Supreme Court. As an active Loyalist in British-controlled Newport and New York City, and then as an exile in Nova Scotia, Cole presumably was not involved in these attempts by the Indiana Company to assert its claims. Nevertheless he remained a company member, adding 430 shares to his holdings after 1781 as the principal creditor of fellow member Dennis Croghan.<sup>70</sup> A list of proprietors sent by the company to Congress in October 1781, however, contained the succinct notation that Cole was now with "the Enemy."<sup>71</sup>

By the time the Indiana Company appealed to the Supreme Court, Edward Cole was near death. Among other bequests to his wife in his will of 18 October 1792, he included "whatever Sum or Sums of Money may be Allowed due payable, or coming to me or whatever proportion of Land may be assigned or



Set off for me in the United States in Lieu of my Claim Share or Shares and assignee of Dennis Croghan in the Indiana Purchase the Issue of which is now depending in the Court of Chancery of the United States of America." But Elizabeth Brown Cole never collected anything from this source: in 1798 the Supreme Court finally ruled that it had no jurisdiction in the dispute between the Indiana Company and the Commonwealth of Virginia.<sup>72</sup>

Edward Cole's years in Nova Scotia, from 1784 to 1793, appear to have been free of controversy. Cole apparently took possession of his thousand acres in Parrsboro shortly after the award in July 1785. A year later he was raising cattle in sufficient numbers to warrant recording his brand with the township, "Crop in the right Ear and an half-penny under the left."<sup>73</sup> How long he operated his cattle ranch is not certain, but by the time he drew up his will in October



*Nova Scotia was a favorite refuge of Loyalists during the American Revolution. Engraving of a Nova Scotian seaport scene in Goodrich, System of School Geography. RIHS Collection (RH: X3 8288).*

1792 he had moved across the Bay of Fundy to Windsor in Hants County, Nova Scotia, near the town of Newport, where many Loyalist exiles from Newport, Rhode Island, were residing.

Cole died by 7 May 1793, when his will was submitted to probate. His joint executors were Elizabeth Cole and the Reverend Thomas Shrive, a Loyalist who had been Cole's neighbor in New York City and who had been given 587 acres in Parrsboro in 1790.<sup>74</sup> Another Loyalist, Windsor merchant Joseph Mumford, who had witnessed the will in 1792, was named Mrs. Cole's attorney in 1794; Mumford, a native Rhode Islander who had been banned from returning to the state by the General Assembly in 1780, had received 500 acres

in Parrisboro in 1787.<sup>75</sup> The act of attorney was notarized in Newport, Rhode Island, by John Grelea and witnessed by a father and son, both named George Gibbs; Grelea and the elder Gibbs had been included on Ezra Stiles's 1776 list of "Principal and Active Tories,"<sup>76</sup> but both came to terms with the new republican government and appear in the Rhode Island Session Laws of 1792-1794 in positions of responsibility. Elizabeth Cole's return to Rhode Island to collect funds in 1794 was probably in vain; the General Assembly was still using Cole's forfeited properties to pay off his creditors as late as October 1793 and June 1795.<sup>77</sup>



Edward Cole's five personal crises were associated with large public issues, but the personal and the public were connected in different ways. Outraged in 1755 by what he regarded as an affront to his Rhode Island troops, Cole helped to initiate a public controversy about leadership in the Lake George campaign. Cole's second crisis, over relations with the controversial Major Robert Rogers, and his third crisis, involving relations with Indians in the Illinois territory, were linked. Cole and Rogers differed over the conduct of trade with the Indians, as did Cole and his superiors about the complex interrelationships between Indians, traders, and British officials. Cole was not a principal figure in these public disputes, as Major Rogers, General Gage, Sir William Johnson, and leading merchants like Samuel Wharton and George Morgan were, but he did recognize that heavy expenditures were required to appease the Indians. Agreeing with Cole's position rather than that of his betters, the Board of Trade in London decided that the price of such appeasement was prohibitive, and it removed the British government from Indian affairs.

The American Revolution posed the greatest crisis of all for Cole, who chose the less popular option and ultimately the losing side. Whereas most of those inclining to the Loyalist cause eventually adapted to the majority view, especially as it became obvious that the Revolution would be successful, Cole maintained his Loyalist commitment to the end, at substantial sacrifice to himself. The Indiana Company's land claim was different from the other major controversies in which Cole was involved, in that it was a grandiose money-making scheme that failed; but it, too, was of historical importance, for it led to spirited debate in statehouses, Congress, and the Supreme Court over the disposition of western lands, a debate that continued for another century after Cole's death.

In these crises, spanning a period of nearly forty years, Edward Cole was both participant and memorialist. He thus left us not only the record of an active and varied life but something else as well—a significant commentary, by a man of modest station but adventuresome bent and strong views, on several of the major issues in late eighteenth-century America.



## Notes

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To  
Mr. Aaron Lopez  
Merchant in  
Newport

March 27. 1770  
From John Reynolds  
at Greenwich

To  
Mr. Aaron Lopez  
Merchant in  
Newport



## “Let Me Chat a Little”: Letter Writing in Rhode Island before the Revolution

KONSTANTIN DIERKS

**I**n the late summer of 1755 Benjamin Franklin was a busy man. Though retired from his Philadelphia printing business, he was engrossed more than ever in a “perpetual Hurry of publick Affairs” as he wrangled over war preparations with his fellow Pennsylvania legislators. By 11 September, Franklin was eager to escape his hectic schedule, and he did so by writing a whimsical letter to a young woman in Rhode Island. “Begone, Business, for an Hour, at least, & let me chat a little” was how Franklin began his letter to Catharine Ray. Ray was an unmarried young woman, the same age as Franklin’s son, who had innocently charmed Franklin when they had journeyed together from Boston to Rhode Island the previous winter. By dint of fate the two became lifelong friends, and although they would see each other only five times altogether, they would exchange letters filled with “small News” and “domestic Occurrences” every few months or so. The pretense was that their letters bridged the great distances separating Rhode Island, where Ray lived with her family, and Philadelphia or London or Paris, where Franklin relished the life of a cosmopolitan gentleman. These amiable letters were not so much letters, the two friends reassured each other, as they were “chats” that brought them face-to-face.<sup>1</sup>

The current consensus among historians is that such exchanges of letters were a rarity before the American Revolution. Ordinary Americans were too poorly educated, too busy with hard work, too immersed in family life, and too involved in local affairs to be exchanging letters with anyone in the wider world. Only a handful of urban elite white men enjoyed the privilege of a proper education, the luxury of leisure time and disposable income, and the advantage of cosmopolitan connections, and only they could indulge in writing letters. Most other Americans, historians have argued, were quite content to lead circumscribed lives because they could simply visit neighbors and nearby friends whenever they wanted to socialize or do business. The historical record seems to confirm these assumptions, since the letters most assiduously gathered into archival collections have been those of the government officials, merchants, and ministers who made up the elite. Yet the bias of such collections does not necessarily mean that less prominent people did not write and exchange letters before the American Revolution.<sup>2</sup>

Rhode Island archives contain a cache of rare records that allow a more systematic investigation into the cultural practice of letter writing at that time. Records survive for the Newport post office spanning the years between 1748 and 1775. Of particular interest are seven daybooks in which the postmaster listed, by name, the recipient of every letter sent to the Newport post office for more than two decades.<sup>3</sup> The daybooks reveal that the volume of mail increased substantially before the Revolution, and that the number of people receiving mail increased at an astonishing rate. By the eve of the Revolution the Newport

*A 1770 letter addressed to one of Newport's most prominent merchants. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 8290).*

Konstantin Dierks is a graduate student in early American history at Brown University. For their helpful comments, he would like to thank Lucy G. Barber, Richard D. Brown, Donna DeFabio Curtin, William J. Gilmore, Richard R. John, Naomi R. Lamoreaux, Emily O'Brien, Gordon S. Wood, Michael Zuckerman, and the 1994-95 cohort at the Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies. Maureen A. Taylor and Richard Stattler at the Rhode Island Historical Society and Bertram Lippincott III at the Newport Historical Society provided indispensable archival assistance, and the John Nicholas Brown Center for the Study of American Civilization provided office space for the writing.

post office was being patronized by more middling and poorer people, more women, and more rural residents than ever before.



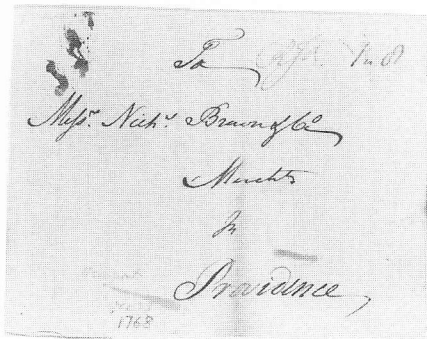
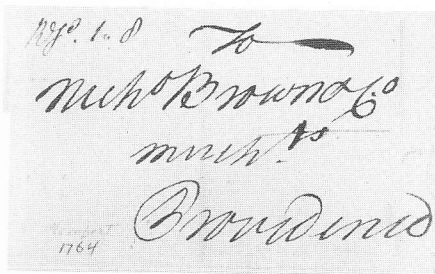
The Newport post office was the first in Rhode Island, and one of the first in what is now the United States. The American postal system (which today encompasses over twenty-eight thousand post offices, including more than fifty in Rhode Island)<sup>4</sup> can trace its ancestry back over three centuries. It was in 1692 that the British government decided to sponsor a postal system in what was then a remote corner of its burgeoning global empire—the North American colonies. The colonial postal system was the brainchild of an entrepreneur, Thomas Neale, and Neale was expected to carry out the project without an iota of government support. Prospects for his success appeared dim, since Neale had never been to the colonies, he had no experience in the English postal system, and he was distracted by other speculative ventures (such as recovering sunken treasure). The best decision he made was to persuade the newly appointed governor of East and West Jersey, Andrew Hamilton, to oversee the undertaking. The persistent Hamilton badgered several colonial legislatures into allocating money for the postal system, and he used those funds to install post offices in major seaports between Massachusetts and Virginia. By 1710 there were fourteen post offices in the North American colonies, including one in Newport.<sup>5</sup>

Little is known about either the Newport post office or the colonial postal system between 1710 and 1753. This is so, in part, because the fledgling system was a victim of chronic neglect. In 1710 the entire imperial postal system—in England, Scotland, the West Indies, and North America—was consolidated under the authority of the postmaster general in London. Once the British government had taken over the system, the colonial legislatures gladly spent their money elsewhere. Rather than filling this void, though, the British government assigned charge of the colonial postal system to a deputy, whose meager salary would be the only funds devoted to the system. In this era powerful London politicians doled out patronage jobs throughout the British Empire to family and friends, but since the office of deputy postmaster general for North America was not terribly lucrative, it was filled by neither the best nor the brightest administrators. One such official shirked his duties and dissipated himself “sotting about with the Dregs of the People,” a critical grumbled in 1740.<sup>6</sup> Without proper leadership by the deputy postmaster general in the colonies, without clear direction from imperial authorities in London, and without any subsidy from the colonial legislatures, the postal system was fortunate to have stagnated when it might have crumbled altogether.

The vagaries of patronage nearly destroyed the colonial postal system, but in the 1750s it was patronage that helped to save it. In 1753 the system entered a period of remarkable growth when Benjamin Franklin began his long tenure as deputy postmaster general for North America. Unlike his predecessors, Franklin had had many years of experience as a postmaster, and he had some concrete sense of how the postal system might be improved. Though he was no grand visionary, his reform instincts and practical tinkering were a breath of fresh air after decades of neglect. His most important asset was that he was not only a beneficiary of someone else’s patronage; he himself was also a dispenser of patronage. Ever striving to expand his sphere of influence beyond his adopted

hometown of Philadelphia, Franklin spun a vast web of patronage up and down the eastern seaboard, granting postmasterships to eager business partners like Peter Timothy in Charleston, South Carolina, to struggling kinfolk like his own nephew Benjamin Mecom in New Haven, Connecticut, and to grateful friends like Joshua Babcock in Westerly, Rhode Island. In the two decades following Franklin's appointment as deputy postmaster general, the number of post offices in the North American colonies quadrupled.<sup>7</sup>

Slowly but surely the postal system shed its aura of fragility and assumed one of permanence. By 1766 the overworked comptroller in New York City was pleading for a salary increase, since "there are many more small Offices to look after . . . than there were a few years ago."<sup>8</sup> Rhode Island shared in this widespread expansion as new post offices were established in Bristol, East Greenwich, Providence, Tower Hill (South Kingstown), Warren, and Westerly. These offices formed two postal routes through Rhode Island, one on either side of Narragansett Bay, linking the colony to Boston to the northeast and New York City to the southwest.



Letters were folded in such a way that they could be sealed and addressed without envelopes. These letters to the Providence firm of Nicholas Brown and Company were from Issac Hart (top) and Thomas Robinson (bottom), both of Newport. RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 8291).

The process of conveying mail from sender to recipient was much different in the eighteenth century from what it is today. To send a letter then, the writer folded it in such a way that the outside was blank and could be addressed and sealed with wax; envelopes were not used, and postage stamps would not appear until the next century. Addresses contained the recipient's name, town, and colony, but not a street name, and zip codes, of course, were far in the future. Once the letter was sealed, it had to be brought to the local post office, since street-corner mailboxes were also a future invention; yet with so few post offices in existence, the local post office might be miles away. From there the letter was forwarded by horseback to the post office nearest to its destination, which likewise could be miles away from where the recipient lived. And there the letter sat until the recipient somehow learned of its existence and picked it up, since there was no home delivery. Trusting that a letter would reach its intended recipient was, in the eighteenth century, something of a leap of faith.

Since uncertainty plagued every step of this process, many people chose to entrust their letters only to someone they knew personally. "Gave my . . . letters to Mr. Cole to carry to Boston," South Kingstown minister James MacSparran noted in his journal in 1745. "He promised to come to my House for more; as he does not go away till Wednesday."<sup>9</sup> Such informal conveyance of mail was not recorded in any post office daybook, so historians have no way of comparing the volume of mail sent this way to that carried by the colonial postal system. Still, the preambles to innumerable letters surviving in the archives suggest that informal conveyance was a deeply ingrained habit in the eighteenth century, when most people were accustomed to having personal knowledge of everyone they dealt with in their day-to-day affairs. Using the postal system, on the other hand, meant entrusting one's letter to strangers—postmasters and postriders—who could not offer any personal assurances. In addition, use of the postal system cost money. Postage was not cheap, and since it was paid by the recipient (rather than the writer) of a letter, it amounted to an imposition on those receiving mail. When MacSparran received three letters one day in 1751, for example, he was acutely aware of the steep cost, noting in his journal that



the letter conveyed by the postal system cost "30s postage." To pay for a service that was customarily free understandably registered as a bit of a shock.<sup>10</sup>

Though more certain and less expensive than the postal system, informal conveyance of mail had drawbacks of its own. A sender had to find someone traveling to the desired destination who would promise to deliver the letter. Typically, letter writing was prompted less by fresh news to relate than by an opportunity to have a letter delivered, news or no news. "I embrace this opportunity by Mr Leonard Duson to write you," Nathanael Greene informed a correspondent in 1773, "not because I have anything to write" but because Duson was going on a trip and could carry a letter.<sup>11</sup> If a person had particular cause to write a letter, he or she would have to wait patiently for an opportunity to send it, no matter how frustrating that wait might be. Yet waiting was not the only problem caused by informal conveyance of mail; another problem was the haste required when an opportunity to send a letter suddenly presented itself.

"Charles hurries me," Nathanael Greene scribbled frantically on another occasion. "Blame him for bad writeing and a bad Letter, for I knew not of his going till a few minutes ago."<sup>12</sup> Relying on informal conveyance meant aligning one's letter-writing needs with the haphazard rhythms of eighteenth-century travel. Sometimes the timing was right; often it wasn't.

The one clear advantage of the postal system was its regularity; by the end of the 1750s it operated on an established schedule along the main post road stretching from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, to Williamsburg, Virginia. The Newport post office received mail once a week from Boston as well as from New York City. Except in the worst of winter snow or spring thaw, when overland travel by horse was quite arduous, this weekly schedule was reliably maintained for much of the year. In theory, people could write a letter as soon as the occasion arose and then send it with the next scheduled mail. "I have waited more than a week for an opportunity of writing by some private hand," a Boston correspondent wrote to Ezra Stiles in 1761, "but hearing of none think it proper to inform you by the Post."<sup>13</sup> To save money, people tended to use the postal system only as a last resort, when no informal conveyance was available or seemed imminent. "I should have wrote by the post," a Philadelphia merchant admitted to a client in Newport in 1773, "but Capt. Whitman is going so soon and I thought it would save the postage."<sup>14</sup>



For thirty years, beginning in 1745, the Newport post office was located in the home of postmaster Thomas Vernon. Vernon's older brother William and younger brother Samuel ranked among Newport's wealthiest merchants, and although Thomas had also pursued commerce as his first career choice, he did not have the same zeal for business that his brothers did. In 1744 he dissolved a business partnership after five years of lackluster profits and cast about for a new way to earn his livelihood. Within a few months he managed to secure two minor royal offices, one as Newport postmaster and the other as register for the vice-admiralty court. These positions afforded Vernon only middling economic rank, but he boosted his social status by becoming an active member of the Redwood Library and Trinity Church, two leading cultural institutions where he could mix with Newport's most prominent citizens and cultivate his own predilections for the English, the royal, and the refined.<sup>15</sup>



daybooks provide us with valuable information, for by counting the names that Vernon recorded each year, we can determine how the volume of mail changed during the pivotal decades before the American Revolution.

A comparison of the first and last years recorded in the daybooks, 1749 and 1774, shows that the volume of mail delivered to the Newport post office increased substantially. For 1749 Vernon entered 1,191 names in the daybook; for 1774 he entered almost double that number, 2,249 names. During those twenty-five years the annual volume of mail increased by 89 percent, a rate of increase more than twice that of Newport's population growth.<sup>19</sup>

Some people received mail week after week, and their names were entered repeatedly in the daybooks. To determine how many different individuals received mail at the Newport post office, all of the repeated names must be factored out. Removing the repetitions from among the 1,191 names recorded for

1749 leaves only 103 individuals, a small set of people. By 1774 the situation was greatly changed: among the 2,249 names recorded for that year were 790 individuals. In just twenty-five years the number of different people receiving mail had increased by an astonishing 667 percent. Not only was much more mail being delivered to the Newport post office, but many, many more people were receiving that mail.

Not all of these 790 people received mail week after week; some received mail intermittently or only seldom over the course of the year. For purposes of comparison, mail recipients may be divided into three categories: frequent recipients, who received mail twelve or more times a year; intermittent recipients, who received mail between three and eleven times a year; and infrequent recipients, who received mail only once or twice a year. As table 1 shows, between 1749 and 1774 there was a marked shift in the percentage of people falling into these three categories. During that time the percentage of frequent recipients decreased substantially, while the percentage (as well as the number) of infrequent recipients greatly increased. In a parallel shift, shown in table 2, frequent recipients received a far smaller proportion, and infrequent recipients a far greater proportion, of the post office's total volume of mail in 1774 than they did in 1749.

These dramatic changes suggest that letter writing was becoming a more common cultural practice by the eve of the Revolution than it had been earlier. The amount of mail received at the Newport post office nearly doubled between 1749 and 1774, but even more noteworthy was the astonishing increase in the number of people receiving that mail, especially among infrequent recipients. Although these changes might be interpreted

Table 1  
Recipients of Mail at the Newport Post Office  
in 1749 and 1774

	1749		1774	
	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%
Frequent recipients <sup>a</sup>	35	34	34	4
Intermittent recipients <sup>b</sup>	33	32	153	19
Infrequent recipients <sup>c</sup>	35	35	603	77
<b>Total</b>	103	101 <sup>d</sup>	790	100

SOURCES: Newport post office daybook, 1748-1752, Rhode Island Historical Society; Newport post office daybook, 1774-1775, Newport Historical Society.

<sup>a</sup> Received mail 12 or more times a year.

<sup>b</sup> Received mail 3 to 11 times a year.

<sup>c</sup> Received mail 1 or 2 times a year.

<sup>d</sup> Does not add up to 100% because of rounding.

Table 2  
Amount of Mail Received at the Newport Post Office  
in 1749 and 1774

	1749		1774	
	NUMBER OF LETTERS	% OF TOTAL	NUMBER OF LETTERS	% OF TOTAL
Frequent recipients	912	77	747	33
Intermittent recipients	239	20	768	34
Infrequent recipients	40	4	734	33
<b>Total</b>	1,191	101 <sup>a</sup>	2,249	100

SOURCES: Newport post office daybook, 1748-1752, Newport post office daybook, 1774-1775.

<sup>a</sup> Does not add up to 100% because of rounding.



as meaning that people who had once had their mail carried by friends were now using the postal system instead, the prevailing reluctance to accept the uncertain and expensive new way of sending mail points more clearly toward an expansion and diffusion of letter writing rather than a mere substitution of one means of conveyance for another.

Vernon's daybooks do not define the full extent of letter writing in this era. There is no way of knowing how much additional mail was delivered to the Newport area via informal conveyance, unrecorded in the daybooks. Vernon protested to his superiors that fewer than half the letters sent from Boston were ever delivered to the Newport post office; the rest were being distributed by the brazen royal postrider Peter Mumford, who simply pocketed the postage without reporting it to Vernon. The familiar adage in Newport, Vernon reported sulkily, was "Well there must be letters, we'll find them at Mumfords."<sup>20</sup> Mumford in fact kept a private mailbox at his house for his best merchant customers, an arrangement that helps explain why the amount of mail that frequent recipients received at the Newport post office actually declined somewhat over time.<sup>21</sup> Mumford was undoubtedly only one of numerous people who were conveying and delivering letters on a private basis, beyond the purview of the postmaster. All in all, the evidence both inside and outside the Newport post office daybooks suggests that the expansion and diffusion of letter writing in this era was quite substantial. Historians have thus far assumed that such a process started only later, as a *product* of the Revolution, yet in doing so they have given insufficient attention to the period before the Revolution.<sup>22</sup>



Today virtually every adult American receives mail frequently, even if it is mostly unwelcome bills or intrusive junk mail, but this was not the case before the Revolution. In 1749 the men who received mail at the Newport post office represented a mere 5 percent of the city's adult white male population. Almost everyone who received mail—frequent, intermittent, and infrequent recipients alike—ranked among Newport's economic elite, the merchants whose aggressive overseas trading underwrote the city's vibrant economy.<sup>23</sup> By 1774 this pattern had been transformed. The 790 people who received mail that year amounted to the equivalent of 38 percent of Newport's adult white male population, hypothetically reaching below the elite into the ranks of middling taxpayers. In fact, not all of those 790 people enjoyed elite or even middling status, not all were men, not all were white, and not all lived in Newport. Not only were many more people receiving mail at the Newport post office in 1774, but more *kinds* of people were doing so.<sup>24</sup>

The frequent recipients of mail in 1774 fell into three groups. Most were rich merchants ranking in the top 5 percent in wealth, like Aaron Lopez and George Rome. A second, smaller group consisted of successful ship captains ranking among the next 10 percent in wealth, like Stephen Deblois. A third group was composed of royal officials like Charles Dudley, who did not appear on the tax list because they were exempt from local taxes, no matter how rich they were. Altogether, in 1774 the frequent mail recipients made up a sizable slice of Newport's elite white men. To appreciate the leverage of this elite in Newport's community life, we need only calculate the proportion of the city's taxable wealth that they owned: the richest 5 percent of the population owned 63 per-

Table 3  
*Adult White Male Residents of Newport  
 Receiving Mail at the Newport Post Office in  
 1774, by Economic Class*

	Frequent Recipients		Intermittent Recipients		Infrequent Recipients		All Recipients	
	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%	NUMBER	%
Elite <sup>a</sup>	23	82	31	33	25	14	79	26
Upper middling <sup>b</sup>	5	18	41	44	51	28	97	32
Lower middling <sup>c</sup>	0	0	16	17	65	36	81	27
Poor <sup>d</sup>	0	0	5	5	42	23	47	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>99<sup>e</sup></b>	<b>183</b>	<b>101<sup>e</sup></b>	<b>304</b>	<b>100</b>

SOURCES: Newport post office daybook, 1748-1752; Newport tax list, 1775, Newport Historical Society; John R. Bartlett, ed., *Census of the Inhabitants of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations...1774* (Providence, 1858).

<sup>a</sup> Top 5% of population.

<sup>b</sup> Next 10% of population.

<sup>c</sup> Next 33% of population.

<sup>d</sup> Bottom 52% of population.

<sup>e</sup> Does not add up to 100% because of rounding.

cent of the wealth. Newport's upper middling sort (the next 10 percent) owned another 26 percent of the wealth, while the lower middling sort (the next 33 percent) and the poor (the bottom 52 percent) together owned a mere 11 percent of the wealth.<sup>25</sup>

While some intermittent and infrequent recipients were also among Newport's economic elite, many ranked lower in the social scale, as table 3 shows.<sup>26</sup> People who received mail intermittently or infrequently were a diverse group that included an array of merchants, ship captains, lawyers, and doctors at the top of the social scale. However, a sizable percentage of intermittent and infrequent recipients were among those working in Newport's vast service sector, the artisans and others who, directly or indirectly, helped keep the city's precious merchant fleet afloat. Some of these men were comfortable enough to rank in the upper middling bracket, including Josiah Flagg, who ran a popular coffeehouse; Daniel Servat, a sailmaker; William Burroughs, a house carpenter; and John Stevens, Jr., a stonecutter. Others ranked in the lower middling bracket, including Cornelius Dillingham, a blacksmith; Thomas Lueby, who made leather breeches; James Anthony, a hatter; Adam Maxwell, a school-

teacher; and Robert Proud, who repaired watches. Nearly one-fourth of the post office's infrequent recipients ranked among the poorer residents of Newport, owning no taxable property. These men included James Bradley, who ran a tavern; William Hooky, a silversmith; and Frank Skinner, a bookbinder.<sup>27</sup> All in all, many different kinds of men, spanning the social scale from the rich to the laboring poor, were receiving mail at the Newport post office on the eve of the Revolution. The post office was no longer the exclusive domain of the city's economic elite, as it had been in 1749.

One out of every thirteen people, or 8 percent, receiving mail at the Newport post office in 1774 was a woman. In all, sixty women received mail that year, in strong contrast to the three women who received mail in 1749. The number of women receiving mail was likely even greater, since not all letters intended for women were addressed to them. For example, Valentine Wightman, a Newport ship captain who was a frequent mail recipient at the post office, sent letters home regularly whenever he sailed to New York City and Philadelphia. Although he addressed the outside of these letters to himself, the contents were for his wife Molly at home.<sup>28</sup> Women also sometimes added postscripts to letters exchanged by their husbands. At the end of her husband's letter to Aaron Lopez, the wealthiest merchant in Newport, Ann Pollok of South Carolina "intrude[d] a Line of Thanks" and promised to "write a long Letter" to Mrs. Lopez. This long letter would be in reply to three letters that Mrs. Lopez had sent her, Mrs. Pollok remarked.<sup>29</sup> More women were receiving letters than the 1774 post office daybook indicates.

100 Newport Rhodey <sup>d</sup> Dec. 3 <sup>rd</sup> 1751		Newport Rhodey <sup>d</sup> Dec. 18 <sup>th</sup> 1751 101	
Col. Grant 6 at 1/4 180 20/	64	Mr. Richard 1 do	10
Quincy & Mason 2 at 3/6	7	Mr. Sney 2 at 3/6	7
Ben. Mason 1 do	3	Rob. Robinson 6 <sup>th</sup> 1/2 do	30
Ben. Sney 1 do	3	Wm. Bourne 2 ditto	18
Wm. Redwood 1 do	13	Rob. Jenhens 1 do	3
Rob. Stevens 2 do at 2/6	8	Capt. Harrison 2 do	10
Lat. H. 1 do 1/2 do 1/2	4	Mr. Cooney 1 do	3
Caleb Gardner 1 do	3	Dr. Whipple 3 at 7/2 at 3/6	28
Wm. Thurston 3 do	15	Ben. Wickham 1 do	8
Int. Channing 1 do	3	Dr. Hammond 6 <sup>th</sup> by a	
Rob. Jenhens 1 do	3	Chud. W. B. at 1/2	5.10.6
Mr. Bourne 1 do	3	Sic. P. God. malbon to may	
Ben. Collett 2 do	4	20.0.6	
Capt. Muscoe 1 N.Y.	12		
Bot. Moffatt 1 do	10		
Wm. Vler 1 do	3		
Dr. Wanton 2 do	3		
Capt. Praser 1 do	12		
Dr. Harrison 1 do	3		
Dr. Richardson 1 do	10		
Int. Brown 2 do	5		
James Gould 2 do	6		
Wm. Richards 2 do	7		
Dr. Hammond 1 do	8		
Dr. Cooney 1 do	7		
W. Carpenter 1 do	7		
Ben. Tucker 1 do at 1/4	3		
Cha. Bowler 1 do	16		
Rob. Robinson 2 at 3/4	14		
God. malbon 1 do 1 do	10		
Rob. Crocker 1 do	7		
Ben. Sney 1 do	3		
Mat. Bowler 1 N.Y. 12.16	32		
Dr. Miller 1 do	3		
W. Honyman 1 do	3		
Dec. 13			
Wm. Hart 1 do to Post	8		
Wm. Redwood 1 do to Post	17		
Wm. Redwood 1 do 1 do	17		
Mosey Levy 1 do 2 do	70		
Mr. Channing 1 do 4	10		
Mr. Collett 1 do 4	10		
Mosey Levy 1 do 1 do 1 do 1 do	15		
Capt. Brown 1 do 4	10		
Mr. Husted 1 do 1 do 1 do 1 do	12		
from the 1 do 1 do 1 do 1 do	12		
Dr. Banister 1 do	3		
Dr. Ticoedy 1 do	3		
Dr. Wanton 2 do	7		
Rob. Stevens 2 at 2/6	7		
Wm. Quincy 2 do	20		
Dr. Grant 1 do	3		
Dr. Miller 1 at 2/6	7		
Int. Channing 2 at 2/6 1 do 1/2	14		
Mosey Levy 1 do	3		
Henry Gould 1 do	3		
Geo. Bryant 1 do	6		
Rob. Brenton 2 at 2/6	7		
Mr. Richard 1 do	10		
Mr. Sney 2 at 3/6	7		
Rob. Robinson 6 <sup>th</sup> 1/2 do	30		
Wm. Bourne 2 ditto	18		
Rob. Jenhens 1 do	3		
Capt. Harrison 2 do	10		
Mr. Cooney 1 do	3		
Dr. Whipple 3 at 7/2 at 3/6	28		
Ben. Wickham 1 do	8		
Dr. Hammond 6 <sup>th</sup> by a			
Chud. W. B. at 1/2	5.10.6		
Sic. P. God. malbon to may			
20.0.6			
Dec. 18			
Mr. Quincy 1 do 1 do 1 do 1 do	14		
Rob. Stevens 1 do	3		
Dr. Grant 1 do 1 do 1 do 1 do	11		
Dr. Bird 2 at 2/6	7		
Bot. Moffatt 2 at 2/6	7		
Dr. Brown 1 do Post	7		
Lat. Spang 1 do 1 do 1 do 1 do	13		
Dr. Channing 1 do 1 do 1 do 1 do	21		
Mr. Sney 1 do 1/2 1/4	10		
Quincy & Mason 1 do 4	10		
Dr. Harrison 1 do 4, 16	12		
Dr. Grant 1 do 4	20		
Wm. Richards 1 do 1 do	7		
James Honyman 1 do 1 do	10		
Dr. Johnson 1 do 1 do	10		
Dr. Jacob 2 at 1/4 1 do 2 do	60		
Ben. Collett 1 do 1 do 1 do	17		
Dr. Bird 2 do	13		
W. Vernon 1 do	10		
Dr. Hart 1 do	10		
Dr. Cayaut 1 do	3		
Dr. Grant 2 at 3/6 1 do 8	15		
Bot. Moffatt 2 do	7		
Rob. Stevens 2 at 2/6	7		
Wm. Thurston 1 do	7		
Wm. Quincy 1 do	3		
Mr. Cooney 1 do	5		
Dr. Cooney 1 do	5		
Dr. Nick 1 do 1/2 1/2 1 do 2/6	18		
Dr. Banister 1 do 10 1/2 1 do 3/6	18		
Dr. Brenton 1 do	3		
Rob. Jenhens 1 do	3		
Cha. Bowler 1 do	7		
Mat. Bowler 1 do	7		
Dr. Hammond 1 do 10 1 do 1 do	16		
Mat. Bowler to letters	24		
James Gould to the Post 1 do 1 do	40		
from May 1 1/4 to May 1750 3	40		
God. malbon to ditto 1 do	40		
Mat. Robinson to May 1750	40		
Rob. Robinson to May 1750	40		
Geo. Wanton to May 1750	40		
Dr. Bourne to May 1751 2.12.6	2.12.6		
Charles Bowler to do 1751 2.12.6	2.12.6		
Dr. Bule to do 1751 2.12.6	2.12.6		
Dr. Brenton do 1751 2.12.6	2.12.6		

How many women were writing letters, however, remains unclear. Letters sent to women were not necessarily written by other women. The literacy rate in New England before the Revolution was lower for women than for men. Since writing was popularly associated with business and considered a skill unsuitable for women, girls were taught to read more often than they were taught to write.<sup>30</sup> Catharine Ray Greene, who wrote letters not only to Benjamin Franklin but also to his sister Jane Mecom, represented more an exception than the rule.<sup>31</sup> Yet there is evidence that an increasing number of women could write during these years. Contributing to this trend was an emerging association of letter writing with refinement, at least for women whose families could afford to indulge such refinement. In the 1760s several schoolteachers were teaching writing skills to "young Misses" and "young Ladies" in Newport.<sup>32</sup> For some women, however, the traditional association of writing with business was no impediment, since they themselves were engaged in business. Among the businesswomen receiving mail at the Newport post office in 1774 were Mary Carr, a shopkeeper; Sarah Rogers, another shopkeeper; and Mary Cowley, who ran a dancing school as well as a coffeehouse.<sup>33</sup>

Three of the names in the 1774 post office daybook were those of black men: Cato Coggeshall, Cato Johnson, and Sambo Wanton.<sup>34</sup> Coggeshall and Johnson both appear in the 1790 national census as free blacks living in Providence, and Coggeshall is mentioned as a Providence activist in the records of the Free African Union Society, an organization formed in Newport in 1780.<sup>35</sup> While the three men were undoubtedly unusual in receiving mail at the post office, they were not unique among blacks, free or slave, in their literacy. For example, a 1767 advertisement for a runaway slave in the *Providence Gazette* noted that the slave in question could "read and write"; a 1772 advertisement sought the return of a runaway slave who could read, write, and even "cypher."<sup>36</sup>

Thomas Vernon's 1748-1752 daybook, pages 100 and 101. RIHS Collection (RH X3 8292).

That no black women's names appear in the post office daybooks perhaps reflects the even sharper limitations inflicted on the lives of black women; yet



even here there was at least one exception to the rule. Phillis Wheatley, the Boston slave who published a stunning book of poetry in 1773, exchanged a series of letters with her friend Obour Tanner, a female slave who labored in the home of James Tanner in Newport. All of Obour Tanner's letters to Wheatley have unfortunately disappeared, but several of Wheatley's letters to Tanner have survived. Wheatley rejoiced in the pious tone of her friend's letters and hoped that their correspondence, which lasted at least eight years, would have "the happy effect of improving [their] mutual friendship," despite the fact that the two women rarely saw each other.<sup>37</sup>

More than a quarter of the people who received mail at the Newport post office in 1774 lived not in Newport but in rural communities around the city. Mail was conveyed to Newport that was intended, for example, for Nathanael Greene, an ironmaster in Coventry; for John Turner, a physician in Tiverton; for Nathan Miller, a boatbuilder in Warren; for James Varnum, a lawyer in East Greenwich; for Billings Throop, a trader in Bristol; and for Peleg Peckham, a shopkeeper in South Kingstown.<sup>38</sup> Even Joshua Babcock, the postmaster at Westerly, received mail at the Newport post office. That these letters came to Newport reflected, in part, the lack of post offices in rural areas before the Revolution. The colonial postal system had from its inception been organized along a string of key seaports like Newport; only after the Revolution did the new national government aggressively extend the postal system into the rural hinterland. Some Rhode Island villages like Warren and East Greenwich already boasted a post office in 1774, but letter writers and perhaps even postmasters elsewhere were unaware of this fact. Nevertheless, people were willing to use the postal system without knowing for certain whether their letters would get from Newport to their intended destination. Thomas Vernon periodically notified people via the *Newport Mercury* that there were letters waiting for them at the post office, but only a small proportion of these people were noted as living outside Newport. Many letters destined for rural communities did apparently reach their proper recipients.<sup>39</sup>

Some people listed in the 1774 daybook were visitors to Newport who had their mail forwarded during their sojourn there. Clement Biddle, for example, lived in Philadelphia, but he received mail in Newport because he visited there regularly on business and social trips. Rich folks from Charleston, South Carolina, like Charles Crouch, Isaac DaCosta, Philip Mines, John Murray, and Thomas Shubrick, flocked to Newport for its cooler summer climate and elegant social life, and they too appear in Vernon's daybooks.<sup>40</sup> Some of the people listed in the daybooks remain a mystery, however, either because they had recently arrived in Newport or because they did not stay very long and had already gone elsewhere. In either case, their identities could not be established from contemporary records in Newport or, more broadly, Rhode Island archives, a symptom of how fluid Newport's population had become by the eve of the Revolution. One transient resident was Andrew Balfour, a Scottish immigrant who had established himself as a merchant in Enfield, Connecticut. In 1774 Balfour married Elizabeth Dayton of Newport and lived in the city for a brief spell before seeking his fortune in North Carolina.<sup>41</sup> Balfour received a number of letters in Newport during the time he lived there.



The evidence from the Newport post office daybooks suggests that in the years before the Revolution letter writing not only increased but also became remarkably diffused throughout the population. Contrary to what historians have assumed, urban elite white men were not the only people receiving mail in this era; by 1774, recipients included significant numbers of middling and poorer people, women, and rural residents. Among the white adults living in Newport that year, 17 percent of the men and more than 2 percent of the women received mail.<sup>42</sup> This evidence raises new questions and problems. As always, the essential question is *why*—why did the cultural practice of letter writing expand and diffuse as it did?

In 1749 the post office in Newport stood alone in Rhode Island, part of a fragile postal system that suffered from mismanagement and neglect at every administrative level. Twenty-five years later Rhode Island featured seven post offices, and the number of post offices along the eastern seaboard of North America had quadrupled. This expansion of the postal system meant increased convenience for both senders and recipients of mail and contributed to the growing popularity of letter writing itself. More post offices tended to generate more letters, and letters themselves tended to beget more letters. Writing a letter was not a solitary but a social act, inviting a reply, perhaps an ongoing exchange, and possibly even a correspondence stretching over a lifetime, as in the case of Catharine Ray Greene and Benjamin Franklin.

But these factors do not fully explain the striking growth and diffusion of letter writing during these years. Why were so many more people buying paper and

ink, composing letters, and sending them via an expensive and often unreliable postal system? The daybooks of the Newport post office document a dramatic increase in letter writing, but they do not explain it. For the reasons, we must look at the letters themselves. What were the relationships between senders and recipients? What impulses prompted the letters? What purposes did the letters serve for individuals, for groups, for communities?

The evidence from the Newport daybooks indicates that if historians are to determine the cultural meanings of letter writing, they will have to consider a diverse cross section of the populace rather than a narrow coterie of urban, elite white men. A wide variety of letters will have to be examined before conclusions can be reached about the motivations that prompted people to communicate with the wider world in the decades before the American Revolution.

A Block Island resident promises to settle a financial obligation with the eminent William Ellery of Newport.  
RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 8289).

Mr. Ellery Newshoram <sup>th</sup> 25 Feb 1770  
Sir  
I Reciev'd your Letter  
and will soon Comply with y<sup>r</sup> Request Res-  
pecting my ~~settling~~ taking up the Obligation  
you have of Mr. W<sup>m</sup>. Rodmans. Against me—  
I am Extreamly Sorry it is not. Immediately in  
my Power to <sup>do it</sup> take it up, however I will shortly  
I am with Respects Y<sup>r</sup> Hum<sup>l</sup> Serv<sup>t</sup>  
Abel Franklin  
To  
Mr. William Ellery  
In  
Newport

## Notes

1. William Greene Roelker, ed., *Benjamin Franklin and Catharine Ray Greene: Their Correspondence, 1755-1790* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1949), 11-15.
2. Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 13-15; William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 380-83.
3. Five of the daybooks are at the Newport Historical Society and two are at the Rhode Island Historical Society. These daybooks are the equivalent of numbers 2, 4-8, and 10 in a series; daybooks 1, 3, and 9 are missing.
4. United States Postal Service, *National Five-Digit Zip Code and Post Office Directory* (Washington, D.C.: United States Postal Service, 1994), 11-37.
5. The best overview of early American postal history is Wesley Everett Rich's *The History of the United States Post Office to the Year 1829* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924).
6. "The Letters of the Byrd Family," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 37 (1929): 31. This criticism was aimed at Head Lynch, deputy postmaster general for North America from 1739 to 1743.
7. The best account of Franklin's impact on the colonial postal system is Ruth Lapham Butler's *Doctor Franklin: Postmaster General* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1928).
8. James Parker to Benjamin Franklin, 27 Aug. 1766, *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree et al., 30 vols. to date (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959—), 13:394.
9. Diary entry for 4 July 1745, *A Letter Book and Abstract of Out Services Written during the Years 1743-1751 by the Revd. James MacSparan*, ed. Daniel Goodwin (Boston: Merrymount Press, 1899), 32.
10. Diary entry for 18 Nov. 1751, *Letter Book and Abstract*, 67.
11. Nathanael Greene to Samuel Ward Jr., 2 Mar. 1773, *The Papers of General Nathanael Greene*, ed. Richard K. Showman, 7 vols. to date (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976—), 1:56.
12. Nathanael Greene to Samuel Ward Jr., 21 July 1773, *Papers of General Nathanael Greene* 1:59.
13. Charles Chauncey to Ezra Stiles, 7 Feb. 1761, *Extracts from the Itineraries and Other Miscellanies of Ezra Stiles, D.D., LL.D., 1755-1794, with a Selection from His Correspondence*, ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1916), 439-40.
14. William Barron to Christopher Champlin, 10 Dec. 1773, *Commerce of Rhode Island, 1726-1800*, 2 vols. (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1914-1915), 1:470.
15. There is no single biographical source for Thomas Vernon (1718-1784), but his biography can be constructed from the following sources: Vernon Papers (Misc.), vault A, box 79, folder 3 (Thomas Vernon, 1752-1783), Newport Historical Society; *Reminiscences of Thomas Vernon, an American Loyalist*, ed. Thomas Vernon (New York: n.p., 1880), 5-9; *The Diary of Thomas Vernon: A Loyalist Banished from Newport by the Rhode Island General Assembly in 1776*, ed. Sidney S. Rider (Providence: S. S. Rider, 1881); George Champlin Mason, *Annals of Trinity Church, Newport, Rhode Island, 1698-1821* (Newport: George C. Mason, 1890), 102, 104; George Champlin Mason, *Annals of the Redwood Library and Athenaeum, Newport, R.I.* (Newport: Redwood Library, 1891), 44; Dorothy S. Towle and Charles M. Andrews, eds., *Records of the Vice-Admiralty Court of Rhode Island, 1716-1752* (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1936), 90.
16. *Newport Mercury*, 19 Mar. 1764, 30 Sept. 1765, 3 Nov. 1766, and 28 Nov. 1768. See also Susan Braley Franklin, "Division Street: A Memory and a Warning," Newport Historical Society *Bulletin* 104 (1948): 11 and plat following page 40, and Antoinette F. Downing and Vincent J. Scully, Jr., *The Architectural Heritage of Newport. Rhode Island, 1640-1915*, 2nd ed. (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, 1967), 501.
17. Newport post office daybook [no. 2], 1748-1752, Rhode Island Historical Society.
18. Vernon was later detained for his political views, but with the help of his brothers he escaped exile and died in Newport after the war. See *Diary of Thomas Vernon*.
19. Daybook no. 2 (which follows the missing daybook no. 1) records the full calendar year 1749. Daybook no. 10 (which follows the missing daybook no. 9) begins in May 1774, but I have carried my tabulations forward through April 1775 to compile a full year of data. The latter daybook is at the Newport Historical Society. Between 1748 and 1774 Newport's population increased by 41 percent. See Lynne Withey, *Urban Growth in Colonial Rhode Island: Newport and Providence in the Eighteenth Century* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), app. A.
20. Frank H. Norton, ed., *The Hugh Finlay Journal: Colonial Postal History, 1773-1774* (Brooklyn: Frank H. Norton, 1867; reprint, n.p.: U.S. Philatelic Classics Society, 1975), 32.
21. Joseph Rotch to Aaron Lopez, 8 Mar. 1769, *Commerce of Rhode Island* 1:275. This also helps explain why Peter Mumford ranked higher on the 1775 tax list than his boss Thomas Vernon. See Newport tax list, 1775, Newport Historical Society.
22. The Revolution itself was not a cause of this expansion and diffusion, since both the increased volume of mail and the increased number of people receiving mail were already apparent by 1760. See Newport post office daybook [no. 5], 1758-1761, Newport Historical Society. Indeed, in 1770 Thomas Vernon complained that the volume of mail, and along with it his income, had "diminished since the late [French and Indian] warr." Thomas Vernon to J. R. [John Robinson], 27 June 1770, Vernon Papers (Misc.), folder 3 (Thomas Vernon, 1752-1783).
23. The status of these 1749 mail recipients was determined by reference to a 1760 Newport tax list (the closest year available) as well as to lists of Newport freemen. "Economic elite" here refers to those in the top 5 percent of the city's wealth. The best general account of Newport's mercantile economy in this era is Elaine Forman Crane, *A Dependent People: Newport, Rhode Island, in the Revolutionary Era* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1985).
24. Information in John R. Bartlett, ed., *Census of the Inhabitants of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, Taken by Order of the General Assembly, in the Year 1774* (Providence: Knowles, Anthony & Co., 1858) and the 1775 Newport tax list makes it possible to



- locate these 790 mail recipients along a socioeconomic scale. There is also a 1772 tax list for Newport, but it was unavailable when this study was being researched. The *Newport Mercury* of 12 Mar. 1853 printed the names of those included in the 1772 tax list but not in the tax list for 1775. The *Mercury's* listing is useful because Newport's population declined precipitously at this time, from 9,208 in June 1774 to 5,299 in September 1776. See John R. Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England*, 10 vols. (Providence: A. Crawford Greene, 1856-1865), 7:616. The main exodus from Newport occurred when English warships threatened to bombard the town in July 1775. See W. G. Roelker and Clarkson A. Collins III, "The Patrol of Narragansett Bay (1774-1776) by H.M.S. *Rose*, Captain James Wallace," *Rhode Island History* 9 (1950), 11-12.
25. Statistics on wealth were derived from the 1775 tax list and the 1774 census.
  26. Table 3 tabulates only adult white men living in Newport. The poor are those residents (excluding ministers and recent refugees) who were not assessed taxes, as identified by a comparison of the 1774 census with the 1775 tax list. These nontaxpaying mail recipients seem to be laboring rather than indigent poor. I am grateful to Ruth Wallis Herndon for sharing with me her computerized database of Rhode Island's indigent poor.
  27. Occupations were determined primarily through advertisements and other notices in the *Newport Mercury* in the late 1760s and early 1770s.
  28. See letters dated 11 June 1767, 3 Nov. 1767, 23 Sept. 1769, 22 Aug. 1770, and 22 Dec. 1770 in the Vernon Papers (Misc.), vault A, box 79, folder 2 (Wightman Family Papers), Newport Historical Society.
  29. Postscript from Ann Pollok in letter from Cullen Pollok to Aaron Lopez, 16 Jan. 1772, *Commerce of Rhode Island* 1:384-385.
  30. See E. Jennifer Monaghan, "Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England," *American Quarterly* 40 (1988): 18-41.
  31. See Roelker, *Benjamin Franklin and Catharine Ray Greene*.
  32. See *Newport Mercury*, 22 May 1759, 19 Sept. 1763, 26 Dec. 1763; also see entry for 4 Aug. 1770, *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles, D.D., LL.D., President of Yale College*, ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), 1:61. The increase in writing skills among women in the decades before the Revolution is discussed in Gloria L. Main, "An Inquiry into When and Why Women Learned to Write in Colonial New England," *Journal of Social History* 24 (1991): 579-89. On the more general trend toward the refinement of writing skills, see Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 90-96.
  33. See *Newport Mercury*, 23 May 1774, 8 Nov. 1773, 29 Oct. 1772, and 14 June 1773. See also Patricia A. Cleary, "'She Merchants' of Colonial America: Women and Commerce on the Eve of the Revolution" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1989), 144-46, 251-52. Adult women far outnumbered adult men in Newport in 1774, and quite a few women had to join the work force to eke out a livelihood. See Crane, *A Dependent People*, 69-72.
  34. The race of these men is indicated by their forenames, which were distinctively African-American in the eighteenth century.
  35. See Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1790: Rhode Island* (Washington, D.C.: General Printing Office, 1908); William H. Robinson, ed., *The Proceedings of the Free African Union Society and the African Benevolent Society, Newport, Rhode Island, 1780-1824* (Providence: Urban League of Rhode Island, 1976). I am grateful to John Wood Sweet of Princeton University for searching his computerized database of Rhode Island blacks.
  36. *Providence Gazette*, 27 June 1767 and 2 May 1772. I am grateful to Maureen A. Taylor of the Rhode Island Historical Society for making her computerized database of *Providence Gazette* runaway ads available to me.
  37. Letter dated 19 May 1772, in *The Poems of Phillis Wheatley*, ed. Julian D. Mason, Jr., rev. ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 190.
  38. These occupations were determined through advertisements and other notices in the *Newport Mercury*.
  39. See list of letters "remaining in the post office," *Newport Mercury*, 6 Dec. 1773 and 8 Aug. 1774.
  40. See Carl Bridenbaugh, "Charlestownians at Newport, 1767-1775," *South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine* 41 (1940): 47, and "Colonial Newport as a Summer Resort," *Rhode Island Historical Society Collections* 26 (1933): 6.
  41. See *Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles* 1:439, 2:374.
  42. Population figures were derived from Bartlett, *Census*, 239. In 1749, 5 percent of the men and 0.2 percent of the women received mail.

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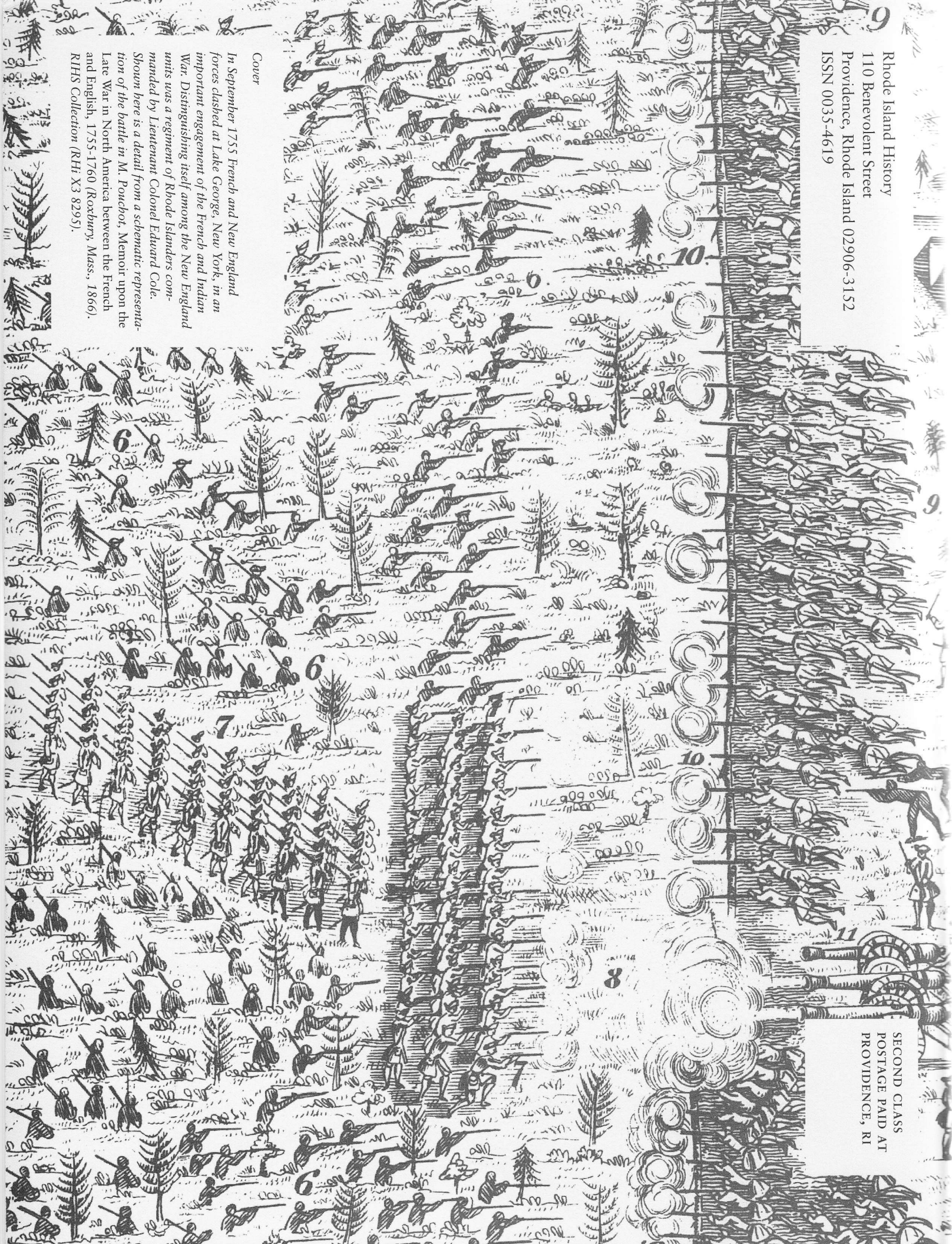
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In September 1755 French and New England forces clashed at Lake George, New York, in an important engagement of the French and Indian War. Distinguishing itself among the New England units was a regiment of Rhode Islanders commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Edward Cole. Shown here is a detail from a schematic representation of the battle in M. Porchot, *Memoir upon the Late War in North America between the French and English, 1755-1760* (Roxbury, Mass., 1866). RIHS Collection (RH: X3 8295).