Benoni Simmons 1755-1835 Raid on the Gaspee

Gaspee virtual Archives Benoni Simmons
(1755-1835) by Chuck Simmons and
Dr. John Concannon

The Gaspee Days Committee at www.gaspee.COM is a civic-minded nonprofit organization that operates many community events in and around Pawtuxet Village, including the famous Gaspee Days Parade each June. These events are all designed to commemorate the 1772 burning of the hated British revenue schooner, HMS Gaspee, by Rhode Island patriots as America's 'First Blow for Freedom l

TM

 Our historical research center, the Gaspee Virtual Archives at www.gaspee.ORG , has presented these research notes as an attempt to gather further information on one who has been suspected of being associated with the the burning of the Gaspee.  Please e-mail your comments or further questions to webmaster@gaspee.org.Evidence to support Benoni Simmons' participation in the raid on the Gaspee

In April 2011 we received a delightfully surprising e-mail from Chuck Simmons of Idaho, who had extensively researched his family genealogy. Simmons' research made our task much easier.

Ladies/Gentlemen:

To your list of participants in the burning of the HMS Gaspee it would appear you can add the name of Benoni Simmons.

From Nancy Simmons' (the widow of Benoni) application for a widow's pension [Rev. War Pension File W.13,899-Benoni Simmons] < available online at <http://www.Footnote.com>>:

Benoni l s widow, Nancy Simmons stated that:

Her said husband, the said Benoni, while a youth, was first an apprentice to the ship building business in the town of Providence in this state, and there resided until sometime in the year 1774. In this year I believe the Enemy's armed vessel 'Gaspee' was burnt in Providence River, by a body of men in disguise, from Providence and some neighboring towns And I have heard my Sd husband often state that he was one of them that went with the party from Providence And that he, on that occasion, took his neck handkerchief to bind around the leg of a man who was slightly wounded -- I have many times heard him claim 'The burning of the Gaspee' as being the first Act of the Colonies in opposition to Arbitrary power wherein blood was shed at the opening of the war. Soon after this event he went to reside in Glastonbury, Connecticut ...

Note that Federal pension applications were serious matters, and all information contained in them had to be sworn to in front of two or more. witnesses. Even Justices of the Peace were required to have their signatures authenticated by City Clerks. The inclusion of the narrative of Benoni Simmons' participation in the attack on the Gaspee in 1772 is truly a gem, for it could not be used to calculate service time for pension purposes. Rather, it was most likely included as a statement of pride. In 1826 four other surviving members of that attack were feted at parades during the 50th anniversary celebrations of American Independence. This led other surviving Gaspee burners to include notice of their own participation in the attack, in documents such as Revolutionary War service pension applications.

Benoni Simmons was of 17 years old at the time of the attack in 1772 making him one of the youngest known Gaspee raiders, but his youthful age was common to many of the 17-21 year olds that went along on the attack. The fact stated here that men in the attack dressed themselves as Indians in disguise lends new credence to that concept which has been often disputed, for several Gaspee raiders claimed that they were not disguised. While the captain of the Gaspee, Lt. Dudingston was seriously wounded in the arm and groin, he was attended to by others, including student doctor John Mawney. Several other people were said to have been slightly wounded in the attack and perhaps such a man was the one attended to by Simmons.

notes:

At the present time we know little about the upbringing of Benoni Simmons. He grew up in, what was then, the bucolic community of Little Compton, RI, known to have been a center for agricultural plantations, often with the help of slaves. While situated on the ocean coast, the community was not known for maritime pursuits.

In either event, young Benoni was sent off by the age of 17 to become apprenticed into the ship-building trade. We do know that several such shipyards flourished in those times, including one operated in Providence's Fox Point neighborhood by the prominent merchant Brown family, of which John Brown was the chief instigator for the attack on the Gaspee in 1772. Elkanah Watson was also known to have been an apprentice to John Brown, though not known to be specifically trained in ship-building. It might be surmised from the rather large contingent of teenagers that were involved in the attack on the Gaspee, that many of these young men may have been involved because they had been likewise apprenticed under the Brown family businesses. Why Benoni

Simmons subsequently moved to Glastonbury is subject to conjecture, but it is known that that area had developed a considerable shipbuilding trade along the Connecticut River during the 18th Century. It can be surmised that Benoni Simmons left Providence upon the completion of his apprenticeship to continue his trade there.

In 1838 Benoni Simmons' widow, Nancy, applied for a Federal pension as granted to the surviving widows of men that had served honorably in the Continental Army or Navy. It is from this document, paraphrased below, and several other sources that we cull the following record of Benoni Simmons! remarkable service to the American cause in the Revolution::

Left: The Battle of Valcour Island by Ernie Haas. (Lake Champlain Maritime Museum Collection) This painting depicts the bottle during which Benoni Simmons lost his left arm.

At the Lexington Alarm he went from Glastonbury to Roxbury in April 1775 where he enlisted for nine months as a Private under Captain Wyllys, Col. Spencer's Connecticut Regiment, and participated in the Battle of Bunker Hill in June 1775 1 . After wintering in Roxbury in January, 1776, he re-enlisted for one year as a Sergeant under Capt. Ebenezer Stevens in Colonel Knox's Massachusetts Regiment. "...soon after the Enemy left Boston, he was ordered to Canada. They proceeded by way of

Lake Champlain into Canada as far as Troix Riviers [Three Rivers]-- they then returned back to Montreal, thence to Isle aux Noix [Island of Walnuts], thence to Ticonderoga." There he "entered on board of the Galley Trumbull, Capt. Seth Warner, as master gunner at the rate of ($13) per month -- and in an engagement with the enemy on said Lake on the 11 October 1776 he had the misfortune to lose his arm by a shot from the Enemy".

After recovering from his wound at the "General Hospital at Fort George", it appears he went to Springfield where he "was in the laboratory for a short time "5 He then spent a brief period in the Corps of Invalids in Philadelphia. Even though he was awarded a pension awarded 17August1777 for his injuries, he is next found aboard an unnamed vessel or galley in the Delaware River "at the time of the Battle at Red Bank" where he was "in full view of the contending parties" 

From 27Nov1777 through 270ct1778 he served as a sergeant in Capt. Bryant's Company of Col. Mason's Regiment, and then served in Capt. Benjamin Frothingham l s Company of Col. John Cranes

Artillery Regiment.at Springfield, during 18Nov1778; where he had signed up for a 3 years enlistment. He was reported discharged Sept. 30, 1778 -

In March 1779 he enlisted as a Sergeant in an artillery company of Captain Howe, Col. Elliot's Rhode Island Regiment of Artillery stationed in the Little Compton area, from which unit he was discharged in March 1780. The land war was over with the American victory at Yorktown in October 1781, but further fighting still occurred at sea. Simmons apparently still itched for action against the British, and transferred over to the Navy on 31December1781. He served on board USS Alliance under Capt. Barry and "... went to France, and carried home .... the Marquis de Layfayette" and purchased from a servant of the Marquis a coat which had been the Marquis' Benoni Simmonds was discharged from the active Navy rolls on

17March1786, having served 11 years in the active military, and became a resident of Rhode Island. He is still found on the Roll of United States Navy pensioners belonging to Massachusetts through 31December1787.10

1.

Personal e-mail from Donna Webber, Archivist for Simmons College, 19 April 2011.

2.

Before Simmons joined this regiment, these were the troops that had previously transported captured British artillery pieces from Fort Ticonderoga on sleds through horrible winter conditions all the way to the Heights of Dorchester overlooking the then British occupied City of Boston, thus prompting the enemy to hastily withdraw from the City via their ships in March 1776.

3.

This expeditionary force into Canada was not one that had been assigned to Col. Knox's Regiment but rather to that of Capt. Ebenezer Stevens, transferred under the overall command of General Benedict Arnold..

A galley is a rowed warship typically used as a cannon platform or as a fire-starting catapult base. For an account of the horrible conditions encountered by American soldiers at Isle au Noix see:

The American Northern TheaterArmy in 1776: The Ruin and Reconstruction of the Continental Force by Douglas R. Cubbison, 2010, p120. The entire Chapter Six which applies is fortuitously presented on-line as a free preview.

4.

Simmons lost his entire left arm up to the shoulder-possibly due to direct combat, or possibly due to surgical amputation to treat or prevent gangrene from developing in the wound

5.

It might be postulated that the reference to the "laboratory" at Springfield to mean Springfield Armory which was established in 1777. This would certainly seem a fitting place to assign an invalid with extensive gunnery experience.

6.

The Battle of Red Bank occurred on October 27, 1777 at Fort Mercer, just south of Philadelphia.

7.

of the Revolutionary War, 14:228

8.

thus after September 1780.

9.

Alliance transported Lafayette back to France arriving there on January 17, 1782. He is not, however, listed among the prize crew of the Alliance that fought the final battle of the Revolution, that being her engagement with HMS Sybil on March 10, 1783 (5 weeks after the Treaty of Paris was signed) It may be postulated that perhaps instead Simmonds accompanied, Lafayette to his home in France. as part of an honor guard,

10.

Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors, 15:335.

In addition to helping start the Revolution by participating in the attack on the Gaspee in 1772, Benoni Simmons served between 1775 through 1786, encompassing the entire Revolutionary War and beyond, and rose through the ranks of "Sergeant of Artillery" and "Master Gunner". It is obvious that Benoni Simmons exemplifies the very best of patriotic ideals and valor in his continuous service during the American War of Revolution. Serving in the artillery commands of both the Continental Army and Navy he was the prototypical gunnery sergeant, or gunney, of what would later become the US Marine Corps. He was undoubtedly fearless and fearsome at the same time, while exemplifying the very best of patriotic ideals and valor in his continuous service during the American War of Revolution.

With the loss of his left arm he could no longer ply the shipbuilding trade, and cannoneer was not a civilian job option when the standing Continental Army and Navy were dissolved at the end of the Revolution. We presume Benoni Simmons returned to his home town of Little Compton to once again take up farming, and where he pops up periodically in historical records.

He was married to Nancy Bailey in 1784, the year after the treaty ended the Revolutionary War. He is listed in the 1790 Census of Newport County as 1-1-2-0-0, that is, 1 adult male, one male less than 16 years, 2 females, 0 others, and 0 slaves. This perfectly matches the expected count at the time of Benoni, his wife, Nancy, and their two surviving children at the time, Cornelius and Lydia (see genealogy below). He did not have any boarders or slaves. The 1800 Federal census from Little Compton also matches our expectations of Benoni, his wife, and their five surviving children born by that time. Many of the other families that are contiguous in the census are assumed to be closeby neighbors, and as common, we see many familiar surnames of Simmons, Grinells, and Baileys. This attests to a family farming cooperative set-up. By 1820 the Federal Census tells us more specifically that at least 2 of the males in the Benoni Simmons' household were engaged in agriculture, probably Benoni and his son, Valentine. Besides Benoni and Nancy, and their two teenagers Valentine and Comfort assumably living with them, they also had one child less than 10 years old in the household, which may have been a grandchild. In 1819 Benoni Simmons was appointed a town officer of Little Compton, holding the title of Auctioneer. We can attest that he was literate since he signed some of his own documents that were included in his widow's application for a pension. He also became a man of some means, for he was able to commission a painting of his son when John was a young child.

Federal pension application records related to Revolutionary War wounded veterans held in the City of Washington were largely destroyed when the British sacked and burned the town in 1814. While we cannot see the all the details of his pension application, his name does appear on a rare list, from 1813 that survived, of all recipients of Federal pensions at http://www.archive.org/details/pensionletter00unitrich . We know that he filed for and received a State invalid pension on 04 March 1789 whereby he was granted a disability income of $60 per year, which was increased to $96 per year on 24 April 1816.

His wife, Nancyls, application for a widows pension in 1838 gives us more detail in her narrative [Rev War Pension File: W13,899 Benoni Simmons] and is available online at Footnote.com. She had to wait until that time before the US Congress finally got around to extending these benefits to the very few such women who were left. Included in the widow!s pension papers are some items original to Benoni himself, such as a letter from January 1777 written by Ebenezer Stevens, his artillery company commander, attesting to his capability to continue work supporting the Army in a laboratory or other such occupation despite his war related wounds.

The real crime is that when Benoni 's original pension was transferred from Massachusetts to Rhode Island someone at the RI Board of Pensions for Invalid Servicemen screwed up in recording him on the RI rolls and the $6.50 per month pension he had been receiving was reduced to $5.00 per month. An ironic aspect of this sad case is that Benoni Simmons' pension transfer from Massachusetts to Rhode Island was entrusted to Paul Allen, Esq., a Commissioner of Invalid Pensions, and a man who had been along with Simmons on the Gaspee attack back in 1772. Another part of the difficulty was that Benoni Simmons! pay grade, as warranted by a non-commissioned officer (Sergeant, and Master Gunner), was not always well recorded as such in the muster lists of either the army or naval forces in which he served. According to his widow, Nancy, Benoni, 'l... on being informed of the error, demonstrated against it, but being then as he ever since has been poor and infirm was compelled to take the ($5) per month, or suffer for the want thereof ... until the year 1816 when, by the Act of Congress his Pension was increased to ($8) per month .

Whether he was just satisfied with the $8 pension he was receiving ... or whether his previous experience discussed above (coupled with Nancys statement that his understanding was that he wasn't entitled to a "regular" pension), caused him to not want to risk losing the pension he was already receiving, probably accounts for the fact that he didn't apply for a "regular" pension under the 1818/1820 Pension Acts. In either event, by 1848 and at the advanced age of 82 years, Nancy Simmons was receiving her widows' pension of $120 per year.

Genealogical Notes:

Perhaps because his family extends from the Mayflower, the Internet is absolutely choked with genealogical information that includes Benoni Simmons, and only a brief summary will be included here.

Benoni Simmons descends from Moses Simmons, Ship Fortune, 1621 through his son, John, as follows:

Moses Simmonsl / John Simmons2 / William Simmons3 / Joseph Simmons4 / John Simmons 11 5 / Benoni Simmons6

Note that Benoni Simmons was also a descendant of John & Priscilla (Mullins) Alden and Richard Warren of the Mayflower as follows:

John Aldenl / Elizabeth Alden2 / Mercy Pabodie3 / William Simmons4 / Joseph Simmons5 / John Simmons 11 6 / Benoni Simmons7

William Mullinsl / Priscilla Mullins2 / Elizabeth Alden3 / Mercy Pabodie4/William Simmons5 / Joseph Simmons6 / John Simmons 117 / Benoni Simmons8 Richard Warrenl / Elizabeth Warren2 / Joseph Church3 / Abigail Church4 / Joseph Simmons5 / John Simmons 116 / Benoni Simmons7

Benoni Simmons was born 4 August 1755, the son of John Simmons (29 Jan 1727- ) and Lydia Grinnell (7 Dec 1726 - ) of Little Compton, RI.

He married his wife Nancy Bailey on 19Sep1784 in Little Compton. Nancy was born 14FEB1767 in Little Compton, the daughter of Cornelius and Mary (White) Bailey.

Benoni Simmons died 15 June 1835 in Little Compton, aged 79 years. Nancy Simmons died 20 Oct 1855 at age 88 Benoni

Simmons, his wife, and two of their sons are buried in the first four graves at the west end of the sixth row in the Old Commons Cemetery in Little Compton (LC012). According to NEHGR 115:172 Benoni Simmonst grave is noted to have a marker from the Sons of the American Revolution. Despite this accuracy above, his name is listed in the Rhode Island Historical Cemetery Database Project as "M. Benoni Simmons".

Benoni & Nancy had eight children (all were born in Little Compton) as follows:

Cornelius - b. 19 SEP 1785 - ? ) - m. Margaret Lord& Eliza Bradford Lydia - b. 19 AUG 1787 - supposedly d. 24 JAN 1863 - m. Joseph Austin

Jeremiah - b. 30 NOV 1789 - d. 12 MAR 1790 - died in infancy Mary - b. 1 FEB 1791 - d. 12 MAY 1875 - m. Frederick Almy

George Washington - b. 9 SEP 1793 - d. 9 SEP 1814 - Never Married, died at sea, age 21 John (Ill) - 30 OCT 1796 - d. 29 AUG 1870 - m. Ann Small

Valentine - b. 19 APR 1802 - d. 22 SEP 1885 - m. Mary Ann Lombard & Lydia Bailey Comfort - b. 7 JUL 1803 - d. 14 APR 1878 - m. Lemuel Sisson.

Benoni Simmons' son, John Simmons, moved to Boston as a young man and made a fortune in the ready-made clothing business. He hired immigrant Irish and German girls and prodded them that they would never get ahead unless they were educated. He left money to found Simmons College in Boston, but much of his holdings were destroyed in the Great Fire of Boston in 1872, and founding of the college was delayed until 1899.. Henry S. Rowe, a "Trustee under the will of Mr. Simmons", did a lot of research on the family and published The Ancestry ofJohn Simmons in 1933.

Of other note, Benoni l s son Valentine Simmons, moved to Pennsylvania and became a noted industrialist. He had a son in 1828 he named Benoni Simmons. This younger Benoni was known to have been on the crew of a whaling vessel out of New Bedford, MA, and he was lost at sea at the age of 22.

The Gaspee Days Committee proudly recognizes Benoni Simmons both as a Gaspee raider and as a grievously wounded combat leader and veteran of the Revolution. He is truly an American hero.

SOURCE:http://www.gaspee.org/BenoniSimmons.htm