

S#248 Christopher Sheldon **By S#5720x23 Irving Sheldon 1979**

*Given as a talk at the Sheldon Reunion at
Larchwood Inn, Wakefield, RI in 1979.*

*Updated and printed in SFA Quarterly p. 260
1992 by Irving Sheldon and E. Mark Sheldon.
Given to Rose Newton 1988 by Irving*



Ship of S# 2350 Capt. Pardon Sheldon
*8 John, 20 Nicholas, 60 Joseph, 248 Christopher,
745 Remington, 2350 Pardon.*

Sheldon Street, off Benefit Street, in Providence's east Side, was laid out when the estate of S248 Christopher Sheldon was divided in 1802. This land and more to the northwest down to the Providence River which had been acquired by S-60 Deacon Joseph Sheldon in 1720 and 1744 was turned over to his son Christopher, in 1770. Perhaps also, you have seen the little monument to Pardon Tillinghast nearby. Pardon, the deacon's grandfather, had been a captain in Cromwell's army and, following emigration became a leader in establishing the Providence settlement.

Christopher Sheldon and George Washington were born two days apart in 1732 ; and they also happened to die in the same year of 1799. I do not know about the early years of Christopher, but his father was Town Treasurer for many years and, according to Chase, Providence houses, 1779, had built a sizeable house near the still-standing warehouse on South Main Street. His mother, the former Mary Greene, died when he was only twelve. His father remarried and Christopher became a part of a large family. He married his cousin, Rosanna Arnold, before he was 21, and they had two sons and three daughters before she died in 1765.

The earliest reference I have found naming Christopher in Rhode Island records occurs in June 1757 , when he was twenty-five years of age and master of the snow "Dolphin". It is a bill for carrying a French captain to Antigua. A

Rhode Island privateer had captured this gentleman, and this was a step in returning the captain to French territory. For his services, Christopher billed the Colony.

Fortunately, a number of orders, invoices, letters, etc. between 1767 to 1771, during which time he was master of the brig, "George", sailing in the molasses trade between Providence and Paramaribo, Surinam, for Nicholas Brown and Company, have survived. The beginning of the first letter I have of Christopher's is interesting from a sailing standpoint:

"Paramaribo, December 13th, 1767"

Gentlemen: After my respects to you, these may serve to inform you of my safe arrival here on the 28th November after 37 days passage (to a bad market). Brought all my horses in, but some of them in bad order. Met with loss of eight sheep only.

That one very hard gale of wind which began with me on the 29th of October in Latitude 34 0 Longitude 62 (650 miles or so northwest of Bermuda) from the SSW to the WNW but the height of the gale was from WSW to WbyS which continued to blow hard for about sixty hours in which time scudding made several days difference in the length of my voyage by falling to windward further than I had expected. I think we had very great luck in saving our stock through such a gale; I've not had so hard a one for several voyages past, and must give the "George" the praise of being the best vessel for scudding that ever I sailed in. She proved much the same for tightness in the gale as at other times, making about the same water as she did when left home, but now makes very little I judge then occasioned by some open pace in her upper works." etc.

Getting to Paramaribo was only the very beginning of what was expected of a ship master in those days, in additionally, he was the owner's representative and the "business of the voyage" was the essence of the entire operation. Lacking swift communications, the owners specified in their orders to the masters where and how they should attempt to sell the varied cargoes they carried and what to do about the cargo for the voyage home. In this case we don't have the invoice for the cargo out, but it must have been similar to the one of 1769 which included bricks, salt, axes, beef, pork, bread, flour tobacco, rice, rum, boards and spermaceti candles.

Often a captain would find that the best way to

sell his cargo was to rent a building ashore and operate it as a store. The new cargo was another big job. The Browns on the occasion tried to control the purchase price of the molasses at six stivers per gallon delivered alongside the “George”. Unfortunately, a ship arrived from New York and blew the scheme apart by offering more. The captain had to make a deal with a plantation for the molasses, have various sizes of barrels made by his cooper and delivered to the plantation, arrange for barging the full barrels out to the ship, and see that they were towed properly.

Presumably, the cargo brought out sold for more than the cost of the molasses, so the captain had to get his difference into good bills of exchange on Amsterdam and get them back to the Browns as quickly as possible since they would be used for financing further ventures. It is understandable why vessels like the “George” only made about one round voyage a year.

When the entire business was practically complete and the “George” had Block Island in sight, then there was the little matter of trying to smuggle the molasses in past British warships such as the “Rose” or the “Gaspee” which had been sent to enforce a tariff. Rhode Island enthusiasm for that idea of the Crown was nonexistent.

We are indebted to our cousin, Carlotta Wettach of Tulsa, for further information on Christopher’s life as a young sea-captain. The conflict which we refer to as the French & Indian War gave Rhode Island seafarers a real chance to make some money, not only by smuggling, but also by capturing enemy shipping with private armed vessels, or “privateers,” as they were called. Unfortunately, the risks were evidenced by the fact that two of Christopher’s vessels were captured. Issues of the *Providence Gazette* and *Country Journal* of January 14, and 21st 1764 carried an essay on the trade of the northern colonies and included in the list is the losses from “Rosanna” the ship named for his wife as well as the aforementioned snow the “Dolphin”.

One of the first violent affairs that presaged the Revolution was the attack on, and the burning of the British ship, the “Gaspee,” grounded on the point now known as Gaspee Point on the Providence River one evening in June of 1772. Our late cousin, Hazard Knowles, has told us in the past of the tradition in his branch of our family that Christopher was in charge of one of the longboats which rowed down from

Providence that night. Regrettably, the commander of the “Gaspee” Lt. Duddingston was shot and badly wounded in the attack. There wasn’t a great deal said about who were involved in the attack on the “Gaspee” in those colonial days because the Crown intended to treat them very harshly. The *Providence Gazette* for June 13th printed a proclamation by Governor Joseph Wanton offering a reward of one hundred pounds sterling “to any person or persons who shall discover the perpetrators of said villainy.” (Author Irving Sheldon states here “Perhaps it’s just as well the Revolution turned out as it did. Otherwise certain people who write historical articles might never have been born.)

In 1774 the Baptist Society in providence petitioned the general Assembly, because it had “purchased a convenient lot to build a meeting house for the public worship of Almighty God, and holding the public commencements and as the purchase of the lot, together with building a proper house, for the purpose aforesaid, will be attended with very great expense,” the petitioners asked that an act be passed for raising the sum of two thousand pounds by lottery. Among a dozen signatures is that of Christopher Sheldon.

Town Meeting in Providence in 1775 was held on August 29th. There was a crisis atmosphere and communities exposed to the British fleet were preparing for defense. A committee reported on how to set up a coast defense battery on Fox Hill, which has long since been leveled, but was in the vicinity of Fox Point. The report was adopted by the meeting and three officers for the battery were elected. Among those elected was Christopher Sheldon “gunner”.

In the spring of 1776, the colony of Rhode island voted independence from the mother country and became the State of Rhode Island. Inasmuch as Great Britain thought this ridiculous and increased its forces to bring the colonies back to their senses, the State had to take measures to defend its position. One of its most important moves came on December 13th when the General Assembly set up a Council of War to coordinate all efforts.

We have to realize that during those years Rhode island had an invading army on its hands. People were doing their utmost to be prepared for any eventuality, and there were all kinds of difficulties in living in so small a State with the enemy able to carry out attacks in many directions with very little warning possible. It

was very different from later in the war when the French had joined in and the British had moved their forces to the South.

During 1777 a Rhode Island privateer brought in a British ship, the "Aurora," and on December 24th, the Council of War appointed Christopher Sheldon to take charge of the Ship and her equipment; to take inventory, and report to the Council. Christmas must have been a bit different that wartime year because we have a copy of the sail inventory taken December 25th by Captain Sheldon at the sail loft of a John Davis. He continued in charge of the ship until August 15, 1778 when she became a prison ship.

We next find Christopher Sheldon a member of the Town Council of Providence. On May 28th, 1781 the council petitioned the General Assembly to help an aged, infirm lady. In that same month the General Assembly appointed him fifth justice of the inferior court of common pleas, and general sessions of the peace, in and for the county of Providence.

The return of peace that year brought a new era to the seafaring men of Rhode Island. No longer could a living be made breaking the smuggling laws of Britain. Traders were frozen out of anything Britain controlled. Imports from the ex- mother country were harder to pay for and the country plunged into the depression of the eighties. Yet in the worst year of this, 1784, Christopher built his warehouse on South Main Street which still stands. [1988] By 1790, the country had recovered and I believe that Christopher must have done all right.

The last item I found is an act of the Town Council of Providence in 1795 making him guardian of his grandson, Joseph Cooke, son of his deceased daughter Rosanna and her late husband.

Christopher Sheldon died in 1799. A register in the State Archives lists his name among those interred in the North Burial Ground at Providence. Other documentary proof is not available since records were not kept from before 1850 showing where people were buried. His son, S3745 Captain Remington Sheldon, and grandson, S#2350 Captain Pardon Sheldon, were buried in the little Green Cemetery, Pawtuxet, in the City of Warwick.

Christopher's business apparently was carried on by his son, S-745 Remington. Until about 20 years ago [this written 1988] there was a very attractive office building which he used next to

the warehouse. This was a National Historic Landmark which was so badly damaged by vandals that it has been torn down.

Two items I researched in this search have given me particular pleasure:

1. The warehouse on South Main Street was rebuilt and restored to become a useful modern building assuring its survival for years to come.
2. Our home looks out on Dutch Island in Narragansett Bay. We often visit the island, now a State Park, and anchor in Dutch Island Harbor as have many members of our family of the five generations I have known. Imagine my feelings when, searching through a file in the John Carter Brown Library many years ago, I found the orders for the voyage referred to in the first part of this paper. On the back of the orders these handwritten words: "Copy of Chris'r Sheldon's orders in Brigg George, Sailed October 21st 1767 from Dutch Island. " Irving C. Sheldon: 8 John, 20 Nicholas, 60 Joseph, 248 Christopher, 745 Remington, 2350 Pardon, S#5720 James Rhoads, S#5720x23 Irving.