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55 YEARS

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Mayor's message: Come celebrate Gaspee Days

April 09, 2008 - Rhode Island

While Paul Revere's ride and the Battles of Lexington and Concord may stand out in our country's early bid for autonomy, the first link in the chain of events that led directly to the Declaration of Independence actually began on June 9, 1772, on Warwick's shores.

For over 40 years, people from around the region have gathered annually for a two-month series of events to celebrate "America's First Blow for Freedom," - when 8 longboats traveled down the Narragansett River under cover of darkness to burn the British schooner, the HMS Gaspee, which lay grounded off Namquid Point in Warwick.

Over the years, the hardworking Gaspee Days committee, which organizes and raises funds for the events, has received the George Washington Honor Medal from the Freedoms Foundation, and the first Certificate of Merit from the Rhode Island Bicentennial Commission. It has also been listed by Discover America as one of the top twenty tourist attractions in the United States.

The celebration centers around scenic, coastal Pawtuxet Village - the oldest village in New England -and will officially begin this year with a proclamation ceremony in the State House Rotunda in Providence at 3:30 p.m. May 1. A proclamation ceremony will take place on Sunday, May 18 at noon at the gazebo in Pawtuxet Park, followed by an amble through the village. This popular event features local school children portraying Colonial citizens and includes tours of some local historical homes and a walk through the village.

Memorial Day is, for many, also synonymous with the annual Arts and Crafts festival, which will be held from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily on May 24, 25 and 26. Approximately 50,000 people a day walk along Narragansett Parkway to examine and purchase the offerings of 150-200 craft exhibitors. Nearby in Pawtuxet Park, there is a food court, as well as free family music, entertainment and pony rides for children, all of which are ongoing during festival hours each day.

On June 8 the Children's Colonial Costume Contest will be held at 12:45 p.m. at the Aspray Boathouse in Pawtuxet Park.

The festivities culminate June 13 through 15. This weekend-long celebration includes a colonial encampment Friday night through Sunday morning; a "fireworks extravaganza," sponsored by the City, at dusk that Friday; an ecumenical service, 5K-road race, colonial muster and the annual parade on Saturday; and on Sunday, military maneuvers and uniform fashion show, burning of the HMS Gaspee and Sunday in the Park.

Whether you're a long-time attendee of our Gaspee Days events, or a first time visitor, the festivities promise something for everyone to enjoy. We hope to see you in Pawtuxet!

For more information about any of these events, call or visit the Warwick Department of Tourism, Culture and Development at (401) 738-2000, ext. 6404 or www.visitwarwickri.com

Scott Avedisian is the mayor of Warwick.

