

Putting a stamp on history

1765 Stamp Act protest is re-enacted in Newport

By Sean Flynn

Staff writer

NEWPORT — The re-enactment of Newport's 1765 Stamp Act protest and daily life in the pre-Revolutionary War era drew hundreds of people during the four hours of the event held downtown on Saturday.

"It's a brand-new event and we were trying out things as we went along," said Jim Hollister of Littleton, Mass., who portrayed Newport merchant William Ellery, a leading opponent of the Stamp Act.

"We had good crowds all afternoon and people engaged us in informed conversations," he said. "We're very satisfied."

Elizabeth Sulock, manager of public outreach and living history for the Newport Historical Society, directed the event and received prolonged applause from the crowd gathered in front of the Colony House for the final act.

"Everyone seemed to have a good time," she said. "It was a great turnout and a great way to shine light on colonial Newport."

Sulock is an experienced re-enactor of colonial life, and invited re-enactors she has met at other events over the years to participate Saturday.

Many of the spectators were families with young children vacationing in the area, including Marlon and Marisol Martinez of Westfield, N.J., and their daughters, Sofia, 12, and Alyssa, 9.

"We caught the tail end of the portrayals, when the rioters stormed the house on Broadway and looted it," said Marlon Martinez. "It was great."

"I learned about the Stamp Act last year in school, but I forgot about a lot of it," Sofia said. "This reminded me of what I learned."

During the 1765 protests, Martin Howard was a stamp distributor and stamp tax collector for the British crown in Newport. He was hung in effigy in Washington Square, then and again on Saturday as part of the re-enactment. His home, now known as the Wanton-Lyman-Hazard House, was vandalized and he fled Newport after the riot, all of which was acted out Saturday.

Howard was portrayed by Zach Woods of Lincoln, Mass., and he, Hollister as Ellery, and Matthew Mees of Braintree, Mass., portraying Newport silversmith Samuel Vernon, held a

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12, of New Jersey, on watching the Stamp Act re-enactment in Newport with her family



Spectators, above, watch as a mob of patriots loot and ransack the residence of Loyalist Martin Howard during a re-enactment of the Stamp Act protest on Saturday in Newport. At right, Zach Woods of Lincoln, Mass., left, plays the role of loyalist stamp tax collector Martin Howard arguing with patriots in front of the Colony House on Saturday in Newport.

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spirited debate on the justice and injustices of the Stamp Act in Eisenhower Park earlier in the afternoon. They know their history, and their rhetoric and acting ability entertained a large crowd.

Among the listeners were Catherine and Mark Courtney of Bristol and their children, Isabelle, 8, and Bridget, 6.

"It's been so much fun," said Catherine Courtney. "We enjoyed the debate and liked watching all the protestors throw apples at the effigy."

"I liked the tea party most of all," Isabelle said.

"I liked the dresses the ladies wore at the tea party," Bridget said.

The girls were referring to a group of women dressed in colonial garb having a tea party on Washington Square and discussing the day's events.

One of the women, dressed in a silk purple gown, was Elizabeth Mees portraying Mrs. Samuel Vernon. She brought "Rolling Hoops" and "Cat-and-Mouse," two popular games from colonial times.

In the first game, children hold a stick and use it to roll a large hoop as straight as possible to the finish line, while in the second game, two competitors stand on small tree stumps and hold a rope with handles between them.

The children of Nicolas and Karyn Tillet of Barrington — Alice, 8, and Margo, 5 — enjoyed the games.

"It was a lot of fun for them," Nicolas Tillet said. "Cat-and-Mouse is a strategic tug-of-war game, with each trying pull the other off the stump."

The girls also spent a lot of time rolling the hoops, quickly mastering the skill.

"It was a common childhood game in colonial times," Elizabeth Mees said. "It was John Adams' favorite game as a child."

Many adults listening to re-enactors talk about colonial life gathered around Gary Gregory, who operates a reproduced colonial printing shop, Edes & Gill, on Boston's Freedom Trail near the Old North Church. He portrayed Samuel Hall, a son of James and Ann Franklin, and a publisher of Newport Mercury in the pre-Revolutionary War years.

He demonstrated typesetting with individual lead letters and showed how difficult it was to make engravings on copper plate to print illustrations.

"I had to be here," Gregory said. "As far as I know, no one has re-enacted the Stamp Act protests."

He printed a short paragraph, re-created from a flier printed in 1765, calling for the resignation of a distributor of the stamps, which were to be used to collect taxes on a wide variety of printed items, including newspapers, brochures, wills and playing cards.

"That paragraph changes the world," he said. "Once you start these protests, there is no going back. It is the beginning of the American Revolution."

The colonists considered the stamps a violation of their rights as Englishmen not to be taxed without their consent, which in their opinion only the colonial legislatures could grant. The protests stopped the collection of the taxes and helped spark the events leading to the American Revolution that began in 1775.

Among Gregory's listeners were Joseph and Kathy Gallichio of North Kingstown.

"He was extremely engaging and knowledgeable," Joseph Gallichio said. "He wove his knowledge of printing and its mechanics into the history of the Stamp Act. He brought it all together and tied it into the message of the day."

"There was never a paper printed with the required stamp," Kathy Gallichio said. "The collectors were all forced to leave their positions before the tax collections could be enforced and they weren't replaced."

After the re-enactments, visitors were invited into the Colony House to enjoy beer, cheese and hors d'oeuvres with an admission price to help cover some of the costs of the free public re-enactments.

The staff of the Newport Historical Society will review the success of the day and consider building upon it for the 250th anniversary of the Stamp Act protests next year, said Ruth Taylor, the society's executive director.

"They are doing a great job," Taylor said as she watched the re-enactors from the steps of the Colony House. "It's all so amusing as well as informative."

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A crowd gathers to listen in as Jim Hollister of Littleton, Mass., portraying William Ellery, gestures to an effigy of Martin Howard, center, played by Zach Woods of Lincoln, Mass., during a re-enactment of the 1765 Stamp Act Protest on Saturday in Washington Square in Newport.

Dave Hansen | Staff photographer

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