

Revere House Radio

Season 1 Episode 15

Rachel Revere at Work

Welcome to Revere House Radio, I'm your host, Adrienne Turnbull-Reilly. The COVID19 pandemic has forced many people to re-examine how they perceive work and home. For most people living in colonial Boston, the questions, anxieties, and struggles swirling around how to work from home would not have made a whole lot of sense. For many in the 18th century, their homes were their workplaces, and vice versa. The Revere House was no different. Since its construction, the house has sheltered all types of different labor within its walls.

When speaking about work in the 18th century, we cannot go farther without calling out the most egregious abuse of power to take place in the Revere House, that of enslaving one human by another. Robert Howard, who purchased the home in 1680, exploited the power structures available to him in the 17th century to enslave at least one man, Samuel, and perhaps up to 3 more individuals. Paul Revere and his contemporaries grew up in a world where this horrible practice was common place, and while the Reveres were never slaveholders, it is a regular part of our interpretation in the house with visitors and we are working to learn more about Samuel and the Howard's period of occupancy as best as we are able.

Additionally, though we are talking today about Rachel Revere, I'd like to acknowledge that talking about one woman's work in a colonial port town does not describe the lives of all women in Boston or throughout the colonies. Religion, race, politics, economics, gender norms, health and medicine, and much much more would influence Rachel's experience of the world and make it uniquely hers. For today, I want to focus on the particular subject of the work Rachel would be expected to do in and around her North Square home. There are so many more facets of Rachel's life to explore, and we hope to do so in future episodes.

Rachel was born in 1745, the only child to Richard and Rachel Carlile Walker. After Paul Revere's first wife, Sara Hichborn Revere died in May of 1773, Revere was left bereft with seven children and a bustling silversmith business to run. While his shop was located nearby, it simply wasn't feasible for him to take over being a fully-employed single parent. Enter Rachel Walker. She and Paul knew each other from around town, and in fact they worshipped at the same meeting house. Rachel offered to be a caregiver to the children, particularly concerned with Isanna who was a sickly infant when her mother Sarah passed away.

In October of 1773, Paul and Rachel were married and she entered into the responsibilities of being a wife, mother, and home-maker. One can imagine Rachel feeling overwhelmed by these tasks, as she had never been married before and was an only child. The expectations of women to raise children to be moral and productive members of society, while keeping a clean home, cooking all the meals for the family, and doing sundry other domestic tasks must have felt daunting.

Rachel, of course, would not have been wholly unprepared - she would have learned many of the domestic sciences from her own mother - nor would she be alone. When Rachel married Paul and moved into the house on North Square, his eldest child, Deborah, was 15. Young Deborah Revere would have trained in many household activities under her mother Sarah and grandmother Deborah, and would be a valuable help to Rachel. Additionally, there were other daughters who could help - Sarah, who was 11 in 1773, and Frances, who was 7 in that year. The youngest children, Elizabeth, Mary, and briefly Isanna before she passed away in September, would have required care, and indeed childcare consumed the bulk of most women's time.

Women were expected not only to feed and clothe their children they would also be responsible for their basic education. Boys were given the privilege of a more robust education that extended beyond reading, they often went to what we would consider more formal schooling to learn writing and arithmetic. Girls, like the boys, would be taught to read by their mothers, but writing and other subjects were less emphasized. Families would often place a higher priority on girls learning domestic skills, assuming those skills would serve them better in a future household of their own. It was common, however, for girls to complete embroidered samplers that enabled them to learn valuable hand stitching skills while also including letters and numbers at the same time.

For those of us who have taken some time during this global COVID19 lock-down to learn new skills, such as baking bread or working on some sewing, there is a greater appreciation for the sheer skill involved in mastering the myriad complicated tasks a colonial housewife was expected to know. Her work would focus on cooking, cleaning, laundry, sewing, processing foods for preservation, gardening and tending a few animals even In the Revere's case, we think they kept a cow and some chickens. Each one of these tasks would take an immense amount of time, even with Rachel's relative advantage of being an urban housewife. Women living in rural areas would still be able to trade with neighbors and purchase things when they or their husbands went into town, but by and large they would produce more items from beginning to end. One example we often think of is cloth - caring for the sheep, processing the wool into yarn, making cloth from it, and then sewing the final product. You will not see a spinning wheel in the Revere House or other items typically used to process raw materials. Rachel, living in one of the largest towns in the colonies, had access to both locally made and imported goods to make her life a

little easier. She would still purchase cloth to sew needed items, but she might have outsourced some of that work to people like Revere's brother John, who was a tailor, for example.

That said, women were for the most part the shoppers and therefore the accountants for their homes. Rachel, and Sarah before her, would be expected to stretch every bit of their household income to make it as efficient as possible. Women's economic influence became particularly apparent a few years before Rachel married Paul in the 1760s as what is now known as the "homespun movement" during which colonial women resisted British textile imports by making their own cloth.

Domestic labor, whether unpaid for a woman's own family, or paid work she did for other people, was a major part of the colonial landscape. Interpreting Rachel in the house with visitors is an interesting challenge, but I believe she is a good figure to shed light on a particular class structure in Colonial Boston. Wealthier women certainly had easier access to paid help in the home, or were more likely to enslave women and use them as domestic laborers. Poorer women, in contrast, were more likely to be forced to work for wages to bring in some extra cash, therefore taking them away from their own household duties. Rachel's position as the wife of a "middling" sort - an esteemed artisan, but an artisan nonetheless, meant that she mostly likely did very little, if any, wage work, but she also didn't have any assistance from non-relatives. Rachel would take full responsibility for the health and operation of her home.

While this look at Rachel's domestic labor is by no means comprehensive either for her as an individual or for colonial women in general, I hope that you take away a greater appreciation for the labor that women like Rachel Revere put into their homes, and by extension their communities. When the Revere House reopens, and you are able to safely visit, make sure to spend some extra time reflecting on how much care and work went into maintaining the home on North Square.

That's all for today, stay tuned for more episodes coming up. You can follow us on Twitter and Facebook for all the latest, and make sure to watch our website for updates on our re-opening, which we hope will be coming soon. Thank you for listening to this episode of Revere House Radio,