A Craftsman's Stories: Interview with R.P. Hale

Tegan 00:17
Welcome back to Revere House Radio. I'm your host, Tegan Kehoe. In 2026 the Paul Revere House is participating in a nationwide celebration of craft, so several episodes of this season will focus on different types of craft in Revere's time and beyond. As you may have noticed, we're kicking off a new season of the show with some new theme music, and that snippet of harpsichord music you just heard was performed by a friend of the Paul Revere House, RP Hale. Today's guest is RP himself and, as I'm sure we'll get into, he actually built the harpsichord he's playing. He's kind of an 18th-century polymath! So we'll be talking about a couple different crafts, a couple different sciences and arts. Welcome to the show, RP!

R.P. 00:55
Thank you!

Tegan 00:56
So to start us off, can you tell the story of your relationship with the Paul Revere House? How did you first get involved here? And what types of work have you done with the museum?

R.P. 01:05
Well, I was first referred to by a pair of musicians who had associated with Revere House, but they couldn't do it anymore, so they gave them...they gave you my name, and the rest is history, as it were.

Tegan 01:20
Yeah.

R.P. 01:20
And I...I came in first as a musician. I brought a harpsi- I brought a small harpsichord and a dulcimer with me. Later, a clavichord joined up. All instruments of my own construction. It built out from that, because I think it was Nina...It was either Nina or Emily who said, "Well, if you built these, you obviously do other things"-

Tegan 01:41
(Laughs) Mhmm.

R.P. 01:42
- and I said "Well, yeah, you got to mind your physics and math for one thing. Then everything I do on there comes from my own shop. So the marbled paper, the calligraphy, whatever." So they started asking me, "well, could you think about doing a printing workshop?" And for which they commissioned, a big block of the Revere House that I...that I...a wood engraving that I executed. It's only printed at Revere House. I don't print it at home. And then 18th century calligraphy, using quill pens and turning that into a public participation demo -- which always has me holding my breath for two hours, but there you have it. I'm using all original materials. And what that means is that the ink stains like hell, and if

you get it on fabric, it ain't coming out. And so I'm tellling...you know, I advise people to be very, very careful with it, and I do have to watch them carefully. And-

R.P. 02:39
-also handle the pens gently. If you have to force it, you're doing it wrong anyway. Then came paper marbling. And then came another one on executing the big window illuminations for Revere House, and how that was done. Period technique, but on modern material, because the originals were done on paper.

Tegan 02:39
Yeah.

Tegan 03:02
Well, that's all very cool. And how long have you been involved with the Paul Revere House?

R.P. 03:07
Quite a while. I know it goes back to the 90s, so you know, maybe 30 years, isn't that?

Tegan 03:12
Yeah.

R.P. 03:12
30 years wouldn't be out of line. And then it just, uh...they kept asking me back, and now you won't let me go, so...

Tegan 03:21
Yeah, absolutely. So let's start kind of where you started in terms of the Paul Revere House. Can you tell us more about the 18th-century musical instruments you play and your relationship to them?

R.P. 03:33
Yeah, I started out by bringing my big eight foot harpsichord. And you know, it only weighs 83 pounds, but it takes three of us to carry it, because there's no balance point. It takes a while to set up, and then you got to put it back in the vehicle and take it back home. And then I realized, Wait! I've got this virginal I built to take the stress off of that. And so I bring a smaller, a smaller box harpsichord. Looks like a box, but it doesn't sound like one. It has a very loud tone for its size, and so that's called a virginal. They were very common. I mean, they were the oldest form of harpsichord. They were the first kind of harpsichord. They were also among the last, because they were easy to build, easy to maintain. Mine weighs but 22 pounds. They're very portable. And if you do things right, you're going to get an astounding amount of volume out of those. The second instrument was a hammer dulcimer. I was asked to build one for a museum in England who had a 1744, original. I said, "No, it's all wrong." They said, "No, you got to build what you see," whether they sent an x ray and a drawing. I said, "Well, I'm not going to promise anything. How do I know it's not going to implode when I put strings on it?" Well, it didn't. And then I played it, and it was...oh my God. So I jumped all my 20th-century plans. I said, "Took someone who died in 1750 to show me how to do it right." And this is how I make them now, and that's

it. So I build iterations of that original, which is a four octave. I built a five octave. You know, my main interest is period, but the first category under that is accompaniment. And the more low notes I have, the happier I am. So, uh-

Tegan 05:11
I see.

R.P. 05:12
And well, accompanists get all the work, and there aren't, there aren't many of us, so we're always busy. I mean, I could be as busy as I as I wanted to be. And in fact, if I'm ever allowed to retire from my teaching job -- which I'm told ain't going to happen yet -- I could go right back into accompaniment and work 50-hour weeks. So...plus, I'm also a church musician, play for a big Episcopal congregation. So there's a lot of music Sunday mornings and sometimes on harpsichord, a lot of times on dulcimer. So...then the last instrument I bring that's always with the other two is a clavichord, which was the first hammer string keyboard instrument dating back, oh, around 12th century or so. Mine is a derivation of one built in 1600 in the Swedish Royal Collection in Stockholm. And I use that to show, you know, this is what it sounds like. This is what it does. And Swedish modern is really four centuries old, because it's, you know, very simple. It's got sleek lines. It looks very modern, but it isn't. And that's, that's the instruments I bring to Revere House. And the heaviest one is the clavicord at 25 pounds, then the virginal at 22 and that big dulcimer at 13.

Tegan 06:31
Yeah.

R.P. 06:32
So they're they're bulky, but they're easy to care...they're easy to move around.

Tegan 06:37
And for listeners who aren't very familiar with these instruments, could you give, kind of the...not the "for dummies" version, but maybe the "for dummies" version, and kind of relate it to something like a piano? What...what should they be picturing?

R.P. 06:50
Well, a harpsichord, the strings are plucked. And unfortunately, because of very bad instruments built from the 1930s to the 1960s they have a...those things have a very tinny sound, very unpleasant, because they were built like pianos. And harpsichords are almost a diametric opposite of of a modern piano. And so when I finished mine in 1978 and played it -- gave it, um, the first concert in Tucson -- people were coming up to me: "I never knew a harpsichord could sound like that!" I said, "Well, neither did I, till I did this one!" And then people would ask, "Well, where did you get that?" I said, I didn't get it nowhere. I made it!"

Tegan 07:30
And how did you get into instrument making?

R.P. 07:32
Well, wanting a harpsichord, but never being able to afford one. See, I grew up in a barrio in South Tucson in Arizona, and you don't ask for gifts that cost as much as your house did. That's bad form. And knowing I would never going to be able to afford one, two choices are steal one, which will get you 20 years, or build one, which...I spent about maybe $3000 1976 dollars on this one to get a $22,000 instrument. And, er, and it took a year and a half to build it, because you spend most of your time waiting for glue joints to dry. So you shape something, glue it, clamp it, walk away, unclamp it a day later, but don't touch it. Let everything settle. And then you get to do something else, and you get to do that around and around and around. And slowly your case comes together. Meanwhile, to amuse yourself, you build the keyboard-

Tegan 08:30
(Laughs)

R.P. 08:31
-and get the action ready whilst you're waiting for the case to dry. Because if you...if you start doing things with uncured glue joints, you're asking for trouble. Any woodworker will tell you that. So most of that year and a half was waiting.

Tegan 08:45
Yeah. It sounds almost like gardening, rare plants that are very fussy. There's little moments of very precise work, and then waiting for it to do its thing.

R.P. 08:54
Right, right. And then toward the end is a flurry of work. The case is done, it's painted, it's stabilized. You put the strings in it, and now you get to put the action to it then. My three-ranker with 186 strings, 61 notes, that was another week and a half. But now: "Oh my God, a thing! It works! It's sounding, it's making noise! What do I...What do I do? Shall I faint or what??" Because this is, this is what you've been working toward.

Tegan 09:24
Yeah. That must be an amazing moment.

R.P. 09:26
It still is! I've built 46 of various sizes and kinds, and making them sound is always the magic moment, or the magic period. And then regulating the tone so that it sounds even, and then making sure it's consistent, you know, no sticking notes or anything like that. Because-

Tegan 09:46
Right.

R.P. 09:46
-if you're going to charge what you're going to charge for one of these things, you better, you better make sure it works.

Tegan 09:52
Yeah. And can you tell us a little bit about what this would have been like in 18th-century Boston? Were there instrument makers in the city at the time, or was everything imported?

R.P. 10:02
Well, clavichords and dulcimers were pretty common. Harpsichords, they technically had to be imported because of the guild rules, and... you can get any harpsichord you want, but it had to go through England, and it had to come to the colonies in a British bottom, ie. a British ship, you know, and a merchant ship. So that would up the price considerably. And so there was a kind of a big underground in virginals and small square forte pianos and things like that. You know, there aren't too many of them, but there were enough of them to kind of discomfort the king, the king's tax agents, and-

Tegan 10:45
Hmm.

R.P. 10:45
Because, how do you know they weren't cutting down the king's mast trees to make these things?

Tegan 10:50
Right.

R.P. 10:50
And you know, and you know they were so...but you couldn't prove it. (Laughs)

Tegan 10:55
Right, right.

R.P. 10:56
You know, you plane, you plane off the broad arrow. Nobody knows anything, right?

Tegan 11:00
Right, right, right, the mark that marks those trees for the king. And where would someone like Revere have heard these instruments? Were these being played in churches or popular venues?

R.P. 11:11
Yes, and popular venues. I mean, you had to entertain yourself back then. And so dancing was...I mean, people think of Boston as a Puritan town. But by Revere's time, the Puritans had somewhat mellowed out, but the Anglicans had taken over with, you know, with the royal governor and all, ie Old North Church and all that. And if one thing Anglicans and their Episcopal descendants love, it's music. And dancing. And partying. You know, going to a dance was a big social event. You weren't considered properly educated if you couldn't play an instrument, and if you couldn't conduct yourself on the dance floor. And a lot of those period dances, I mean, they will put a real strain on your calves, like...I mean, I would have to prep for doing a public demo on a minuet, which is a slow, three beat dance by doing

some serious cycling, because your heels are off the floor. You're making all that movement basically on the balls of your feet, your toes. And you discover, you rediscover muscles you forgot you had when they announce themselves nastily.

Tegan 12:18
Right. I imagine they're talking to you for days afterwards.

R.P. 12:21
Yes. And the same goes for 18th century contra dancing.

Tegan 12:25
Hmm.

R.P. 12:25
A lot of dance steps, lot of motion, lot of moving. It becomes more of a gymnastic...it can be a gymnastic exercise. And on top of that, you were in the period dress-

Tegan 12:36
Right

R.P. 12:37
- which, for women, can be awfully heavy.

Tegan 12:40
Yeah, absolutely.

R.P. 12:41
Oh, to get back to the instruments, the clavichord and the dulcimer have sort of related tones. Many people confuse the dulcimer for a harpsichord. But the dulcimer is a struck instrument, a percussion instrument, and it is the predecessor -- it and the clavichord and the harpsichord combined -- are the predecessor to the modern piano. And the clavichord has a very soft tone to it. The strings are hit, but it's more akin to the hammer-on technique of a guitar, which is where the guitars got it from, the clavichord.

Tegan 13:05
Hmm!

R.P. 13:12
And a lot of those were built on this side of the water. I mean, they were the...about the easiest of the keyboard instruments to build.

Tegan 13:20

Yeah, that's very cool! And I just wanted to zoom into one piece of these instruments, which is that marbled paper. Can you tell us what you typically tell visitors who come in without any knowledge when you're doing the marbled paper program, and they say "What's going on here?"

R.P. 13:36
Well, they say, "What's going on here? It looks magic." And I say, "Yes, it is." It's the wonders of physical chemistry you're looking at, and I use it. In fact, I'm devising that into a lab for my honors chemistry students. I'd say "It's a very old process. It was discovered, in...." and I give them a rundown on history. It came out of Japan sometime around sixth- or seventh-century Japan, and so it's probably about 1400 years old as an art. It's one of the seven sacred arts over there. It's called Suminagashi. The tools and the technique is very simple, but very, very, very touchy. I mean, there's a lot of technique involved. So you're working with almost nothing, but sometimes and you work so simply, you're going to have a harder time getting results. And what I'm doing is what was devised in Turkey around 11th, 12th Century, where they, were they replaced the Japanese pure water with water with carrageenan or gum in it to thicken it. And, I said, this also makes the bath very dense, and it also sends the surface tension, you know, right off the chart. And I'll remind them, you've seen water bugs, you know, skating across ponds and puddles. We're taking advantage of the same principle, surface tension. And water has a lot, but not enough for Turkish marbling. So they added agar or xanthan or carrageenan, which is seaweed extract. And that thickened the water and really upped the surface tension. Because we're using gouache, which is opaque watercolor, and so that-

Tegan 15:15
- and so that gouache is essentially being floated or rested on the surface of the water-

R.P. 15:20
Yep!

Tegan 15:20
-and then that's what you're manipulating to create the marbled pattern to put onto the paper?

R.P. 15:24
Yep!

Tegan 15:25
Okay.

R.P. 15:25
And yeah, the gouache...I kind of like to know that things will work, so I only use distilled water in making them up and the ground pigments and, um, to which you add a surfactant, such as oxgall, which is a flowing agent. It's used to make watercolors spread. So watercolorists know all about oxgall. And it's also used to make ink spread, so to get ink to flow through a pen evenly, they'll add a little bit of that to it. And we add that to...it's a surfactant, is what it's called, so it takes away all the surface tension. There's none left in the color. So now you got a balancing act. So now you're adding... you got a very dense bath with a ton of surface tension, and now you have a quantity of color that's much less

dense, volume per volume. And so you add the colors, drop it on the surface carefully. And I use a dropper, a dropper or a whisk to spatter it there. The color, the droplets will land on the surface of the bath, and being fully supported by the density and the surface tension, they'll spread out to a degree. You put more oxgall in, the color will spread out more. And furthermore, it'll act like oil and water, even though there is no oil in the process.

Tegan 16:44
Hmm!

R.P. 16:45
The color won't even mix it with itself. Once it's on the surface, you can't make a new color on the surface. You want a new color, you're going to make it up before you put it down. And, uh-

Tegan 16:55
Okay, so that explains to me something that I've kind of wondered when I've seen you do this, which is the colors swirl together, but you don't end up with mud.

R.P. 17:05
They don't- yeah, they cannot mix. And, um-

Tegan 17:08
And so you're able to get these really detailed marble patterns with a lot of swirling-

Tegan 17:12
-and a lot of almost zigzags and things, because they won't mix with each other. That's really cool.

R.P. 17:12
Yup!

R.P. 17:18
Yeah, the colors will come together against each other, but let's say they have strict border policies, and you can't cross a border between one color drop and another. (Laughs) Which is why you can manipulate them, but they still will not mix. And that's one of the most important properties of paper marbling, and it was also one of the most mystifying, and it literally took quantum mechanics to figure it out in the end.

Tegan 17:46
Oh, wow!

R.P. 17:46
In other words, the the resistance force. And they had to go back and deal with...I mean, we've known about density for several 100 years, but we didn't know about atomic force. And furthermore, the thickness of color on that bath is measured on the nano scale. It's that thin!

Tegan 18:06
For many, many years, people are practicing this art, understanding how to make it work, but not fully understanding why it works.

R.P. 18:12
Yeah. And now you don't have to be a physical chemist to be a paper marbler. But on the other hand, that kind of background is a big aid in both safe handling and in being a good troubleshooter if you see something happening. I see something happening, I immediately revert to chemistry mode and and try to figure it out from that end, and I'm usually pretty successful. Not always! As a result, I will pull my biggest screw ups in public. Woh, okay! And I'll tell them, "Okay, this happened and this happened," and I'll rip it up, ball it up and throw it away, and let's do it again.

Tegan 18:52
(Laughs)

R.P. 18:52
This time, this time. I'll try to do it right.

Tegan 18:56
Yeah.

R.P. 18:56
And you know, emphasizing you learn from your mistakes too.

Tegan 19:01
Absolutely.

R.P. 19:01
Or in my case, relearn.

Tegan 19:04
Right.

Tegan 19:05
So same question as I asked about the instruments, what would this have looked like in appearing in Revere and his family's daily life? I think they would have encountered marbled paper, at least in the end papers of books? Anywhere else?

R.P. 19:05
Yeah.

R.P. 19:19
That would be pretty much it. The French had perfected a technique of marbling fabric. And there may have been a few marbleized fabric waistcoats here and there, but I don't think Revere was one of the

owners. You know, ultra formal. I mean this...I mean we're going beyond the Royal Governor here. But you would have most often encountered it in books and papers and as decoration, like in musical instruments or lining boxes and cases or what have you.

Tegan 19:51
And would any of that be made in the colonies? Or is that all imported as well?

R.P. 19:55
No, some of it was imported. And it was imported mostly from Italy and Spain. I mean, England had a small industry doing it, and so did the Flanders Flemish area, the Dutch Belgium area. But to period taste, the papers most in demand were coming from Central Italy, centered around Florence; Spain, centered around between Madrid and Cadiz. And they were prized because of the deep, rich pigments they were able to use. And a lot of it was done here too. I remember that I was doing it at Williamsburg one time, and they discontinued the program. The then director said, "well, we don't have any proof that marbleizing was done in Williamsburg." And I shot right back and you equally don't have proof that it wasn't.

Tegan 20:43
Mmhmm. That kind of question is one that, as you know, we grapple with in public history all the time, is: When do you err on the side of requiring that you have the documentation for something? Or being able to generalize and say, "Well, if it was done here, here, here and here. why would it not be done there?" You know, making those decisions for interpretation is both about the history and about the interpretation.

R.P. 21:09
It is. Yup!

Tegan 21:09
And it's, you know, something I think we don't talk about a lot to the visitors, but it's going on all the time.

R.P. 21:15
Yeah. And I had to weigh that too. But then anywhere you're going to get a group of printers -- and New England was the most educated part of the colonies ever back then, but you had a group of printers in Baltimore -- and where you have printers and book publishers, you were going to have wood engravers, steel engravers, hand-set type, and book binders, and at least one paper marbler. We do know that there were at least two or three at any one time working in Boston because of all the printing going on in that town. And seacoast, I mean, even Portsmouth, New Hampshire had one going. But as New Hampshire, you know, developed, and then about mid 19th-century, Concord, the capital, took over as the printing center, which included marbleized papers. It was also the home of the Concord coach and big wagon building industry. So you had that with with all the fine work that involved. So between the woodworking on one end, and the book publishing, printing and publishing on the other, of course they were going to be marbleizers. Because it was cheaper to make it on site than to have to buy it somewhere.

Tegan 22:28
Yeah.

R.P. 22:28
And you could also...also, if you bought it, you had to take what you got. Whereas you could go, you could go to the marbling end of the print shop and say, "well, we need these colors in this pattern."

Tegan 22:41
So let's talk more about printing. I think writing and printing are two sets of skills that are very understandable to modern visitors. But there's also a lot of difference between today and the 18th Century. Can you tell us a little bit about the process of printing at the time?

R.P. 22:56
Well, printing was all...it was all done by handset type. I mean, you had type cases. And to compose a word, you know, like "constitution," you had to reach for the C and -- a capital C -- and then a lowercase o, and then an n out of its cubby, and then an S, and then a T, and so on so forth, til you finished the word. And because the type is all reversed, you have to keep that in mind so you get around that...in other words, instead of having to read backwards, you lay it, your composing stick, upside down. So now it's reversed, still reversed, but now the word is upside down and reading left to right, and it's actually amazingly legible. I've shown that to you know, guests, and they could read. It kind of amazed them, because when I turned the composing stick over, well, what does it say, now? I have no idea. I said, "you know what? Neither do I, and I just set it." So turn the stick upside down. Now it's...and you, and you typeset from the bottom, from the bottom up. Which means when you pull the type out of the composing stick, you turn it around. So now it's first line, second line, third line. You go from the top to the bottom. Now it's reversed. When you finish setting that block of type, we call it, then you run a proof. This is where you find your typo. So we call them galley proofs. And about half the time, I've screwed up a letter, or tried to make a lowercase n and do a lowercase u, or some dumb thing like that, and have to fix it. Other times I got lucky. So it's a time consuming process. So I'm not going to do big typesetting, hand typesetting, unless I have a decent quantity job for it. So to go along with the handset type, if you wanted an illustrated newspaper, you had to know somebody could do wood or metal engraving. Now, Paul Revere could do engraving, but he did it on silver. And if he wanted something put into a block, a wood block, he would make his drawing and then hand it over to a wood engraver. Yeah, we do have some record of him dealing with metal engravers, but wood engraving had just been discovered. Uses the same tools as steel or brass engraving. And you can do it quicker, something a little quicker. If we use the right kind of wood, like a boxwood block, is worth about 5000 impressions. And-

Tegan 25:27
And okay, so you can use it 5000 times before it wears down?

R.P. 25:31
Yeah. But the printing process itself was still rather crude compared to the fine, you know, the fine detail of handsetting type or wood engraving. I mean, the presses were wood. The iron press wasn't

really around yet. So there...I mean, the Franklin press started out as a wood press. The 19th century, it became an iron press. And then its immediate variant is the Washington hand press, which looks like a Franklin press, only it's, it's iron, cast iron. And so these presses, these period presses, they were big, they were clunky, they were hard to deal with. It took a bit of strength to print with one. I've operated one, and I've been....which always after a day with the wood press, like I kind of want to run screaming back to the Washington press and print with a metal press. Because I have a lot more...lot more control. And the inking technique was still being worked out, too. You see a lot of smudges over inking or under inking, or whatever. Also. Period printing, letter press, 18th and 19th century, you had to moisten the paper too, before laying it over the type. Then you lay your frisket over it, which is your packing, which gives you supposedly even pressure. Then crank it under the big horizontal platen. And then you grab the handle, twisting the devil's tail, and it comes down with a thump. And you push the handle back, the platen lifts. And then you crank out the table under it, and you lift your packing away. And then you finally get to lift your sheet away and see if you did....see what kind of a job you did.

Tegan 27:11
Right, right.

Tegan 27:12
Oh, yeah! Definitely.

R.P. 27:12
And you did that again and again. You ink it, lay the paper, put the packing down, crank it, print it, uncrank it, crank it back out, lift the frisket and the packing, lift your paper, and then hang it over a line to dry. So printing two sides, you didn't do that in a single day, because you had to wait for your first side to dry.

R.P. 27:18
So printing a newspaper was a multi-day job, which is why they only came out weekly.

Tegan 27:18
I hadn't thought of that. Yeah, it makes a lot of sense that that physical and constraint would be a big part of it. Can you tell us a little bit more about copper plates in printing? Because that's where Revere ended up translating his training from silver into copper to be able to do some engravings. What's the difference between wood and copper there?

R.P. 27:18
Very little, actually! Copper, that would be more for what we call intaglio engraving. So in other words, in wood engraving, when you engrave a line, you're going to end up with a white line, because you've taken the printing surface away that way.

Tegan 27:18
Right.

R.P. 27:18

Copperplate, your printing surface is not supposed to print at all. So you put a line on it, and then, when, you know, you rub ink on the plate, then you try to rub it all away, clean your plate again, the ink will still stay in the scratches.

Tegan 28:26
So a wooden plate is kind of like a rubber stamp, where the inked parts are what you would think they would be, and copper is the reverse?

R.P. 28:33
Yep. Us. Currency is printed by the intaglio method to this day from stainless steel plates. And they keep a crew of engravers busy year round, because even steel plates wear out after a while. So all the artwork you see on US currency is hand done.

Tegan 28:50
Wow.

R.P. 28:50
Well, I mean, there are ruling machines that will do like the scroll work and so on. But the portraits and the buildings, you know, the structures you see, or whatever, you know, the American Eagle, or what have you, that's hand done.

Tegan 29:03
Yeah, wow! That's really fascinating.

R.P. 29:05
Yeah. And so when you feel a dollar bill, a new one, the ink is raised on the surface, and you can feel it because the ink was squeezed out from that scratch and deposited on paper, but it was still dries in a little, tiny, little, tiny mound. Whereas wood engraving, that's relief printing, you've carved away what you don't want to see, and you're left with what you want to see. And like letter press, the wood block will impress into the paper. You can also feel the depression of the block and other type. And you can also feel some of the lines of the engraving itself, but in reverse. But they use the same tools.

R.P. 29:50
So that's like a very tiny indent in the paper? Huh!

R.P. 29:50
Yeah. But they use the same kind of engraving tools and the same techniques.

Tegan 29:52
Very cool.

R.P. 29:53
Oh, if I can, if I can insert, I am a fifth generation printer and fifth generation wood engraver. Sixth generation calligrapher. Come from a Mexican family with a long, centuries long, tradition in the arts. I

got into it because of interest, not because I'm the first born five times, and expected to. But it was, it was interest on my part. It's proven to be...let's just say it's gotten me where I am now.

Tegan 30:18
That's very cool. I'd like to leave some time to talk about the illuminations that Paul Revere did in 1771, that you did kind of a recreation or an homage or a celebration of in 2021. So a little context for the listeners: This is for the first anniversary of the Boston Massacre. The massacre is a highly, highly politicized event. I mean, that's why we know about it today, is because it was really seen by the Patriots as a really clear example of what the royal government was doing wrong here in Boston and elsewhere. And just a few weeks before, there was a Boston loyalist who had shot into a crowd and killed a child. Both of these events were extremely emotional. By a year later, Patriots are trying to make sure that they're staying in the public consciousness. Dr Joseph Warren gives an anniversary oration, and Paul Revere participates by using this form of political speech called an illumination. And the originals don't survive, but there is a newspaper account of what it looked like, and I'll let you take over the story from there.

R.P. 31:28
Well, I was approached by Nina, the director, and then talked to by several others about this, and I was given quite some time to do it. And I needed it. I needed that time. I mean, there was a...so I did probably six months of research. Within that time, I was learning to mimic or even counterfeit Revere's drawing style. And you know, the conditions given: well, we want to use these again. So they had to be sturdy, they had to be on a tough material that wouldn't give out. So I said, "okay, well, there's only one that will really work, and that's draftsman's mylar."

Tegan 32:06
Okay.

R.P. 32:07
Which is a plastic, you know, a frosted plastic. But it's, it's very stable. It doesn't expand or contract. I mean, it's, it's what they still make blueprints on, and harpsichord plans are still printed on that, because it doesn't change dimension with humidity like paper does.

Tegan 32:25
Hmm, right. And Revere would have been-

R.P. 32:29
And when you're talking about-

Tegan 32:29
Yeah, so he would have been using, he would have been oiled or waxed paper?

R.P. 32:33

Yep, yeah. He would have used the paper and did the, did the work on it, down to and including the color, and then oiling it to make it more transparent. Which also made it much more flammable, and, in fact, a potentially self-igniting, spontaneous combustion. You know, the oily rag story, and...

Tegan 32:58
So I know that he didn't burn his house down in 1771, but just hearing that, I'm getting nervous. Because aren't they back lit with candles or lanterns? So you have-

R.P. 33:07
Yes! And I think he would have been prudent enough to use closed lanterns.

Tegan 33:12
Yes.

R.P. 33:13
You know candle flame...you know, candle flames move around a lot if they're not contained. A square, you know, a square lantern, particularly one with a reflective back, would have been much more efficient, because now you're getting almost twice the light reflected back, and so you get that much more illumination. So you know. The streets were very dark back then too. I mean, one candle in the house could be seen from blocks away. It wasn't the overly lit Boston we have now. I mean, people...if you, if you were walking around at night, you had to carry a, you had to carry a flame and torch in your hand, or you couldn't see where you were going. Unless there was a good moon out. And even then, you had no guarantee. And actually, Revere also designed an obelisk that was, you know, very tall, and I think the Concord Museum has a replica of it. However, they very prudently did not oil their paper. So, so it was a...it was an obelisk, a wooden frame, well, something like eight, nine feet tall. And they intended to light fireworks from the top of it. So they had this thing. They had this obelisk on the green, lit up from inside. And then, okay, let's, let's touch off the fireworks. Well, guess what? Fireworks give off sparks. The obelisk immediately caught fire, and within 15-20 seconds, it was no more. It had flashed out. However, I had previously, because of my work with Revere House, I had ordered a copy of the the big book compendium of his engraving work-

Tegan 34:51
Oh yes, Paul Revere's Engravings by Clarence Brigham from the 60s.

R.P. 34:55
Yes, and I, and I ended up with the first edition.

Tegan 34:59
Hmm!

R.P. 35:00
And...which meant that the illustrations, you know -- 1930s I think it was? The illustrations were hand-colored. Oh, my God, what have I got? And I only paid this amount for it? Are you kidding? And, well, it's a prize...It's, it's, it has a prize place in my library. And I referred to it a lot. And so I was referring to

that and, and yes, we don't have the original illumination illustrations. But there were a lot of pictures of young boys, Lady Liberty with the cap, brutal British soldiers, and, you know, the tree of liberty and things like that. That book had everything I needed. I was able to do the the ghost of the murdered, murdered, what, 14-15 year-old rising from his body and, and that panel was the least colored. I mean the ghost was blue. I mean the ink-- it was a black ink illustration done in the derived wood engraving style of the times, you know, lots and lots of lines. So the ghost is blue, and the only other touch to color is, of course, the blood flowing. And Revere liked drawing blood that time. You know, yeah, look at the look at the Boston Massacre.

Tegan 36:18
(Laughs)

R.P. 36:18
I mean, good God.

Tegan 36:19
Right.

R.P. 36:19
And, and I had all the brutal British soldiers I could ever want. And so Lady Liberty -- again, from, you know, several of his illustrations -- with her foot on the neck of a British soldier. And so I had references for that. And the third one...you know what? I forgot, what the third one was. What is it? But at any rate...

Tegan 36:44
It's similar to the massacre engraving.

R.P. 36:47
Oh, that's it! That's it! That's the massacre itself!

Tegan 36:50
Yeah.

R.P. 36:50
Now he would not have put a million lines in any of those. So I was able to edit back the number of lines, because when you step back 5-10, feet from it, it looks really, complicated. So...but I did have to put all lines in. And besides, the more ink I put on that surface, the less light was going to get through. So then I started doing a series of sketches in...and then, you know, mimicking his style. And of course, when Paul was through with those, he threw them in the fireplace so the uh...In other words, he burned the evidence.

Tegan 37:22
Mhmm.

R.P. 37:23
Well, for obvious reasons. Because that was a very dangerous thing for him to be doing. It was very provocative.

Tegan 37:30
Yeah, yeah.

R.P. 37:31
And on top of that, thousands of people showed up and saw these things. But I mean, if they were put in the fireplace afterwards, well, they don't have anything to get them on.

Tegan 37:41
Right, right.

R.P. 37:42
And along with that came some of the subsidiary techniques, like the ink chemistry and color chemistry, the fact...I had the sense they're going to be reused and used for schools and things. I had to do them on mylar, but then backed them up with onion skin to, you know, stop the glare, and do a few things. You know, add a few other things.

Tegan 38:05
I'm not familiar with the material. Is onion skin literal onion skin? Or is it something else?

R.P. 38:11
It's a kind of tracing paper, and it's called onion...it's traditionally called onion skin because the the inner part of the outermost layer of an onion is transparent. And so they called it that.

Tegan 38:23
Got it.

R.P. 38:23
Except the onion has a pattern on it, and this stuff doesn't. And then when I was ready, I started. And I was given the sizes. I started laying them out for real on the mylar. So I did the drawings. I did the layout drawings, scanned and sent emails of them to Revere House. So I took the original drawings, which were 11 by 17, and immediately blew them up to the size I needed, and laid them under the mylar and did my initial layout sketch on that, then took them away and then finished out, you know, finished out with a couple copies of the enlarged images from Revere's....from the original engravings, so I could...I would not lose the mimicking track. I made the ink and the colors I'm using actually were marbling colors.

Tegan 38:24
Huh!

R.P. 38:24

You know, watercolor, gouache, I mean opaque watercolor, but diluted to where...but this time diluted with alcohol so that it would stick, those pigments would stick to the surface. Which they did, which they do very well. And they're properly transparent. So I did the inking on all three of them, and then did the coloring, and then they interviewed me for it as part of the video. So, you know, there were...went into--

Tegan 38:24
Yeah.

R.P. 38:35
--just how did you do it? Well, I don't know how I did, it just happened, and, um -- I didn't give them that answer. But yeah, there was, so there was...I had eight months; six months of research and two months of actually drawing, inking, coloring, adjusting. And we pulled it off.

Tegan 40:09
Yeah, yeah.

R.P. 40:10
It was a fun job.

Tegan 40:11
It sounds it. And this was in the winter of 2021, and so I think this was -- this was before I was at the Paul Revere House -- but my understanding is that the recreation of this public event was originally going to be a public event. And then there was a early covid spike, and so the video became the event.

R.P. 40:33
Yup.

Tegan 40:34
And so there's a couple of interviews with historians as well. So that's available on our YouTube channel, and I'll have a link to that in the show notes. So we've covered a lot of ground, but before we close out, I want to ask: is there anything that you wish that more people knew or understood either about the crafts that you do or about the late 18th Century?

R.P. 40:56
Well, the crafts almost explain themselves, and they were a lot more pervasive than people think. I mean, arts education was very, very, very important. And to this day, I tell my chemistry students, particularly my honors kids, I said, "you're going to do as much writing in my class as you ever did for an English class, and you're going to be doing as much art as you ever did in art class," because...plus there's, you know, there's a lot of math and science and all the crafts that I do. And also there's something called safe handling and detoxifying your lab, which is why I'm still here. I banished, yeah, mercury and lead and cadmium and arsenic and stuff like that, and...but you have to know what to replace them with.

Tegan 41:41

Right.

R.P. 41:41
And as far as the period is concerned, it's still romanticized to a nauseating level.

Tegan 41:48
Hmmm.

R.P. 41:49
I mean, right now...I am right now 71. That would have made me...I mean, I've I have out-, I have outlived at least three and probably four generations of 18th Century generations. I mean, Franklin was not the rule. He was the exception, living into his 80s. And-

Tegan 42:07
Revere, too, an exception.

R.P. 42:09
Very much the exception. I mean, if you could make it to 45, you had a very good chance of making it to 90. Trouble was, most people didn't make it that far. I mean, there was no medical knowledge, the way we call it now. No germ theory. Didn't know about viruses, clean handling and proper disposal of waste. I mean, that was just nonexistent. They didn't know. Some of them cared, but they didn't know what to do about it. And it wasn't all silk stockings and silk and moire clothing. Most people couldn't afford that. And -

Tegan 42:43
Right.

R.P. 42:44
You know, you wore something till it...You wore something and you patched it up and you kept it going to you couldn't wear it anymore.

Tegan 42:49
Right.

R.P. 42:50
And you had one Sunday go-to-meeting outfit. And then you had a collection of, for a farmer would have, would have been in a city called, rags that you wore. Who wants to stain your best frock coat by mucking out the barn? Forget it.

Tegan 43:04
Right. Or by writing a letter for that matter, because that'll stain you too.

R.P. 43:08

Yeah, and actually, people are surprised to see me rolling my cuffs up out of the way when I do that. Because I don't want to, I don't want my fine shirt stained. You know, the the frilled cuffs. And if you're, and if you're having a frilled shirt, you've also got the frill and just below the neck. Those are the only three parts you're going to see. And if you got ink stains on your cuffs, well, that doesn't say much for you.

Tegan 43:35
Right.

R.P. 43:36
I mean, it's, it's a visual...okay, you're an ink stained scrivener. But do you have to show that you're one?

Tegan 43:45
Right.

R.P. 43:45
They didn't call them ink stained scriveners for nothing.

Tegan 43:48
Right. Yeah. Well, thank you so much for all of these stories, and that's going to do it for this episode, but thank you so much for being on the show!

R.P. 43:57
Well, you're welcome! Thank you for bringing me in.

Tegan 43:58
Next we have a conversation between a couple of our interpreters here at the museum. I will let them tell you more. So let's virtually step into the Paul Revere House. (Door creak sound effect)

Derek 44:16
Hello everyone, and welcome back to our little segment where we interview some of our interpreters here at the Revere House! Today, I am joined with...

Natalie 44:26
Hello! I'm Natalie.

Derek 44:27
And so what brought you here to the Revere House?

Natalie 44:29
So I started between college and graduate school. I was studying History and Library Science, and I wanted to work in a museum. And it's been amazing, and kind of changed my trajectory to be more invested in talking to visitors, which was never what I kind of went in for.

Derek 44:48
Yeah, yeah. It's definitely a job that, like, puts you through every kind of interaction you could have, and immediately-

Natalie 44:54
Absolutely, yeah.

Derek 44:55
I mean, it's a job about talking to other people, basically.

Natalie 44:58
Absolutely, yeah! So I feel like every time I can, like, make little friends with people-

Derek 45:02
Yes.

Natalie 45:03
-in passing.

Derek 45:04
So it is very fun! You get to make little 10-second friendships.

Natalie 45:07
Exactly, yeah. (Laughs)

Derek 45:08
Yeah. We'd like to focus our next couple interviews for this segment on "what do you personally like to bring into interpretation in the house?" Because we all come at it from a different angle. Like, of course, we all have to cover the same kinds of things. But everyone comes at it from a different angle and brings things from their own, like, personal interests.

Natalie 45:28
Absolutely. Yeah. I would say there are kind of, like two themes that I always kind of circle back to. One is the concept of trade and the international lens.

Derek 45:38
Yeah.

Natalie 45:38
So, I don't think this is a bad model in any means, but the way that I was taught history, and I think many people were taught history, is by place and then time.

Derek 45:47

Yes.

Natalie 45:48
So, you take a class on US history, and you start from probably the 1630s and then go to, like, World War I or II, and then kind of stop.

Derek 45:55
Yeah.

Natalie 45:55
And then you learn European history, or you learn world history, and you kind of use that same model.

Derek 46:00
Yeah.

Natalie 46:01
It really blew my mind when I realized -- and this may sound silly, but -- that these things happen concurrently.

Derek 46:08
Yeah.

Natalie 46:09
And they were not in a vacuum. And I just naturally viewed these things in a vacuum.

Derek 46:15
Yeah, that makes a lot of sense, yeah.

Natalie 46:15
When I learned about the French Revolution, they did talk about how the American Revolution was impactful for that so it wasn't completely in a vacuum. But being here in the museum, one thing I like to remind people is that you have cross cultural discussions. You have trends that are happening in England are impacting the fashion of Boston for better or -- you know, they may hate it, they may love it, but they're reacting to things that are happening in London. They're reacting to things that happen internationally. And one way that I kind of put that in a more grounded sense, is through trade. Because Boston had a huge port, a lot of what we learned about the 1700s -- and for good reason it impacted many people -- was this sense of self sufficiency. You know, you have to have farm animals, you have to make your own butter. That's not really a concern in Boston. Obviously, there is some of that. But you can buy and trade things being in a city. You know, you have this commerce that existed. And that also means imported things, for instance, South American goods. So South America was colonized, just like we were, by parts of Europe. And getting from South America to Europe is actually quite difficult at this time. It's not necessarily safe. And so there was a lot of smuggling that was happening from South America into Boston and North America. And so Boston is in a position to get South

American materials and trade and food and, you know, things that we don't really think about at this time, because we think of it very isolationist.

Derek 47:46
Right, yeah.

Natalie 47:46
Yeah. And I think learning about history that happens concurrently...I always like to share this with our visitors; Sometimes people come in and they're, like, embarrassed that they don't know things.

Derek 47:56
Oh yes, and all the time, yeah.

Natalie 47:57
All the time. And I'm like, "really, I don't expect you to come into a museum already being educated on the subject."

Derek 47:57
Yeah, that's the point! It's not a class, right? There's no test!

Natalie 47:58
(Laughs) Exactly. You're here to learn. There's no test at the end. But I like to share some of my own ignorance with that, was that...I learned about the French and Indian War in American history class. And then in a European history class, I learned about the Seven Years War. And no point in a classroom -- maybe they did, and I missed it -- but I didn't realize those were the same war.

Derek 48:26
(Laughs) Right.

Natalie 48:27
And so I had to put those international connections, like put those two things together, for myself, like, after I had left the education system. So when I'm in the museum teaching, that's kind of what I want to do, is I don't necessarily want to retread the same things that you learned in elementary school or high school. I want you to be able to connect things that you already know to something maybe you don't know-

Derek 48:48
One hundred percent.

Natalie 48:49
-and reframing the way that you view history and reframing the things that you may be familiar with. Especially with a person like Paul Revere, who there's so much myth that isn't quite true.

Derek 48:58

Yes! That's what I think is so fun about our museum in particular, is that people start with this myth idea: this guy that's bigger than what he really was, I guess, in a lot of ways? And then they leave with an appreciation of who the guy really was and, like, his family and the world that he was in.

Natalie 49:14
My other thing that I've been really into, and I'm sure the other staff have picked up on it from our morning meeting discussions, and you know, the way -- News flash! the staff love to talk about history with each other.

Derek 49:24
We certainly do!

Natalie 49:25
- is the ideologies and the religion of Massachusetts. So-

Derek 49:32
I think it's another topic that people come in with a very either limited knowledge base of or a very skewed knowledge base of. I think a lot of people assume everyone believed and thought and acted in really similar ways. But like, the ideological splits at that time were diverse and fascinating in the same way they are today!

Natalie 49:51
And they impacted the way that people reacted to the revolution!

Derek 49:54
Exactly!

Natalie 49:54
So how this comes up a lot is through our programming in the winter. We talk about the history of Christmas.

Derek 50:00
Right!

Natalie 50:01
And I won't go into that too much, because that could be an episode of its own. But a large portion of that is that the Puritans did not celebrate Christmas-

Derek 50:10
No

Natalie 50:10
-and it's such a big deal to Americans today.

Natalie 50:10
Yes, they were very anti-Christmas. And so during the Christmas season, we like to bring that up. And, you know, talk about the evolving feelings about holidays, because it's interesting, and people -- some people in their own lives -- are celebrating Christmas at that time of year. And it really comes down to...because people are like, "What?? The Puritans???" You know.

Derek 50:11
Anti-Christmas. (laughs)

Derek 50:12
It's always a shock, yeah.

Natalie 50:19
It's always a shock. And I think that they're like, "Oh, the Puritans hated everything. So of course, they hate Christmas." And it's like, actually a lot deeper than that.

Derek 50:36
Yeah.

Natalie 50:37
And so it's really interesting for me to really think about the foundations of Boston as a religious city. Like, for instance, I think one big thing that people in Boston value at this time is kind of this sense of, like, modesty, but also just not being materialistic. And so it's interesting how that ties to my other idea that I was talking about with trade. Because you have things coming in from Europe, and it's like, "Ooh, cool, new, flashy, different!" But then also this idea of like, "but you can't be too invested in what's new and flashy." So there's kind of this push and pull in Boston society where they're, like, very interested in whatever's happening in London, but they can't be too interested because as a society, they kind of don't value the new and trendy.

Derek 51:21
Yeah.

Natalie 51:22
Yeah, that's seen as being materialistic. So it's interesting that ideologies can affect trade.

Derek 51:27
One hundred percent, yeah!

Natalie 51:28
And people can come to the revolution differently based on, you know, maybe-

Derek 51:32
Where they come from.

Natalie 51:33
Their religious background. Where they come from, yeah,

Derek 51:38
Yes. Our good friend, George.

Natalie 51:39
(laughs) Our good friend, George. I guess there's a couple Georges of this era. But George Washington has a bit of a culture shock when he comes to Massachusetts. And he kind of has to, like, put that aside, where he's like, you know, "if this is gonna work, then I can't hold the values that Boston has against them necessarily."

Derek 51:39
What their brain is telling them to do.

Natalie 51:39
Yeah. And I think George has a huge -- George Washington, to be clear

Derek 51:56
Yeah, right, because they come from completely different worlds.

Natalie 51:58
Exactly. Yeah.

Derek 51:59
All right. Well, thank you for talking with me about the way that you like to interpret.

Natalie 52:03
My pleasure.

Derek 52:04
So I'm Derek Hunter, with...

Natalie 52:07
This is Natalie.

Derek 52:08
And thank you for listening to Revere House Radio.

Natalie 52:10
Thank you!

Tegan 52:11

Thank you for tuning in to Revere House Radio. I'm your host, Tegan Kehoe, and I am the Research and Adult Program Director here at the Paul Revere House. Our production team for this season includes Derek Hunter, Mehitabel Glenhaber and Adrian Turnbull-Riley. Thank you to RP Hale for the use of his performance on the harpsichord as our theme music. If you're listening online, we encourage you to subscribe in your favorite podcast app so you never miss an episode. Revere House Radio is a production of the Paul Revere Memorial Association, the nonprofit which operates the Paul Revere House Museum. You can find more information, subscribe to our mailing list or social media, or become a member on our website at www.paulreverehouse.org. Or, come visit us in Boston!