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Restoring the Paul Revere House in the Name of Americanization

BY JOANNA HESSION

In Massachusetts where so much interest has focused on preserving historic structures and monuments, it may seem strange that the Paul Revere House was not always regarded as holding great historical significance. One reason for this is the progressively greater value placed on historic preservation over the past century and a half, and Boston's xenophobia towards immigration in the nineteenth century. The motivation to restore the Paul Revere House in the early twentieth century resulted from the push in the late nineteenth century for Americans to define their civic identity by preserving Yankee tradition and providing a patriotic example for immigrants.

Paul Revere sold his home on 19 North Square in 1800 and from 1813 to approximately 1867 the home served as a sailors' boarding house. The use of the house for boarding overlaps with the growing influx of immigrants into Boston as a whole and the North End in particular. At this moment it seemed few were concerned with preserving homes for their architectural significance. An article "Structure Booked for Demolition" that appeared on December 11, 1893 in the *Boston Daily Globe* shows this lack of concern. The article argued that since a particular home at 55-57 Prince Street in the North End, built in 1727, was known to be inhabited by John Adams and Nathaniel Loring, and was owned at one time by the sisters of John Thoreau, Jr., Henry David Thoreau's father, it would be a mistake to demolish it. The article stated that the owner David Flynn believed the structure was "unsafe and dangerous" and "This will result in demolition of the structure and the erection of a more modern edifice next year." Although this home was deemed unsafe, enough money might

have been raised in order to restore it and make it structurally sound, if public sentiment demanded its preservation.

The nineteenth century was an unsettling time for Yankee



This 1929 photograph of William Sumner Appleton shows him standing on the steps of the Harrison Gray Otis House, headquarters of Historic New England (formerly SPNEA). An early advocate for restoring and preserving New England's historic structures, Appleton was closely involved with the restoration of the Paul Revere House between 1902 and 1908. Courtesy of Historic New England.

A May 2014 graduate of Emmanuel College with a B.A. in History, **Joanna Hession** served as research intern and then historic interpreter at the Paul Revere House in the spring and summer of 2014. For the past year and a half, Joanna has been working as an administrative assistant for Vinfen, a non-profit organization serving clients with mental disabilities. This article has been adapted from Joanna's internship research paper.

From the Executive Director...

What an interesting and exciting time this is! Whether it is plans for Massachusetts 400, Revolution 250, and Boston 2030; the centennial of the National Park Service; the roll out of Boston's first comprehensive cultural plan; or a new marketing effort along the Freedom Trail; there is great energy around all of these high visibility endeavors.

One need only recall the immense impact of the Bicentennial to understand the opportunities at hand, in particular around efforts to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the founding of Plymouth and any number of Massachusetts cities and towns, including Boston, and the 250th of the events that culminated in our American Revolution. All have strong potential for positive impact on the cultural community, but only if funding and leadership can be identified. Investing now will leverage results that will pay dividends for years to come.

We find ourselves needing to attend to our own transformative projects – our education and visitor center and a major redesign of our web site – while also actively participating in efforts that will also impact our operations for years to come. Whether it is making the time to attend meetings with our colleagues from around the city and across the Commonwealth, attending to the details of paint colors and construction schedules, or serving our growing attendance, I can honestly say that we have never been busier. Whatever the future brings, there is no doubt in my mind that the city's key historic sites must and will play a prominent role in advancing the economic and cultural vibrancy of Boston.



Nina Zannieri

Americans – the descendants of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European settlers in North America, and especially New England – who feared that their heritage was quickly slipping away due to the changing demographics caused by immigration, as well as the social changes caused by industrialization and modernization. Although historic preservation may not have been a major interest of all Yankee Americans during the nineteenth century, making sure immigrants successfully assimilated into American society was an important issue. A December 27, 1899 article in the *Boston Daily Globe* reflected the wide spread xenophobia and distrust of immigrants shared amongst Bostonians. The article mentions recent immigrants from Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Montenegro and describes them as “warlike and lazy” and states: “the problem of absorbing these vast hordes of heterogeneous people is still before us. We cannot object so long as the new comers are sane, orderly, and industrious, but it is clear enough that we are to have here at home a great work in ‘benevolent assimilation.’ ” This is an early indication that Yankee Bostonians wanted to make sure that immigrants completely assimilated to American life and culture.

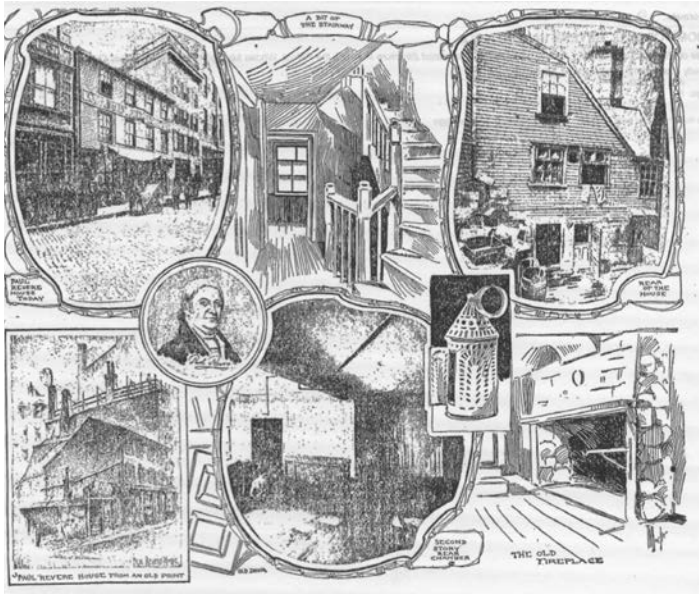
Organizations such as The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) made it their priority to inspire patriotism and confront the threat of unchecked immigration. The DAR expressed interest in the promotion of patriotism by placing a bronze plaque on the outside of the Revere House. The plaque simply stated “HERE LIVED PAUL REVERE. 1770-1800. PLACED by the PAUL REVERE CHAPTER DAUGHTERS of the AMERICAN REVOLUTION. 1895.” The house was being used as an immigrant tenement and vegetable and fruit business at the time but even in its current condition the DAR thought that it would be a great reminder of the colonial era. The DAR, like their fellow Yankee Americans and preservationists, believed that identifying places like the Paul Revere House would help promote patriotic values amongst the new

citizens. The plaque would serve as a physical reminder to immigrants of the events that took place in the North End before they arrived.

Nineteenth-century antiquarians also expressed dissatisfaction with the overtaking of the North End by immigrants. Some antiquarians believed that immigrants were a factor in the destruction of historical homes, and as a result were destroying the fabric of the “original” Puritan settlers. A popular antiquarian of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Samuel Adams Drake, in his 1893 work *Our Colonial Homes*, did not shy away from voicing his attitude towards the new residents of the neighborhood:

“Pah! The atmosphere is actually thick with the vile odors of garlic and onions – of macaroni and lazzaroni. The dirty tenements swarm with greasy voluble Italians . . . One can scarce hear the sound of his own English mother-tongue from one end of the square to the other; and finally (can we believe the evidence of our own eyes?), here is good Father Taylor's old brick Bethel turned into a Catholic chapel! [Sacred Heart Church, across North Square from the Paul Revere House] . . . Shade of Cotton Mather! Has it come to this, that a mass-house should stand within the very pale of the thrice consecrated old Puritan sanctuary?”

William Sumner Appleton, an influential historic preservationist, likely shared the same view towards immigrants as Drake. Appleton served as Secretary of the Paul Revere Memorial Association when it was first organized in 1905 and he was involved with the restoration of the house in 1907–1908. Other members of the PRMA, who also played an active role, including Pauline Revere Thayer and John Phillips Reynolds, Jr., likely felt the same way as Appleton and Drake, although they have left less of a paper trail. Historian and preservationist James



This composite illustration appeared in the Boston Daily Globe on April 19, 1902. It consists of a series of photographs and drawings documenting the condition of the Paul Revere House just prior to restoration. Of particular interest is the drawing at the top center showing a portion of the nineteenth-century staircase from the second to the third floor (see detail below).

Lindgren makes a persuasive argument in his 1991 *New England Quarterly* article “A Constant Incentive to Patriotic Citizenship,” in which he points out that Appleton grew up on Beacon Hill and attended elite schools, including Harvard College. Lindgren argues that one cannot look past this upbringing because it shows Appleton’s deep immersion in Yankee traditions. He was taught by professors such as Charles Eliot Norton, who stressed the importance of art and society and its connection to ancestry. Norton expressed to Appleton directly that historic homes represented “one of the strongest forces in the never ending contest against the degrading influences of the spirit of materialism” which in many Yankee minds was associated with modernization, industrialization, and immigration. Since Yankee professors such as Norton served as important early influences on Appleton it is no surprise that when he became involved in the effort to restore the Paul Revere House, a major purpose of the restored building would be to inspire patriotism and reverence for America’s colonial past.

By 1895, the DAR and similarly-minded antiquarians had escalated their efforts to restore the Paul Revere House. Their elite education and knowledge of the significance of homes like the Revere House enabled them to envision restoration as a way to educate immigrants and instill a sense of patriotism. A short article “Paul Revere’s House Today” published in the *Boston Daily Globe* on September 10, 1896, reports: “Many of the [North End] children learn at school in what a heroic quarter it is that they live in and the Americanism thus engendered shows itself in striking ways.” Neighborhood children gave tours of the house to visitors who stopped by to purchase a cigar, and a “Paul Revere Social Club met in a room now devoted to the manufacture of cigars.” An article from the same newspaper

six years later mentions the important effects the restoration of the Revere House will have upon young children because it will allow America’s history to be permanently a part of their memories. Massachusetts progressives began to realize that although they could not stop immigration they could use historic homes to instill American traditions and history into immigrants’ minds, ideals, and their everyday lives.

As Boston developed a more complex class system in the twentieth century Yankees continued moving further away from the North End and even out into the suburbs. This change allowed immigrants and the children of immigrants to forge stronger bonds within their communities and to gain strength and influence in numbers, a change exhibited in the shift in political power in Boston. Although Yankees and Brahmins still controlled a majority of public offices in Massachusetts, the Boston Irish rose to power during this era. The election of John F. Fitzgerald as mayor in 1906 coincided with the time in which the Paul Revere House was restored. To many Yankees the election of Fitzgerald was a wakeup call signaling the growth of immigrant political influence. One of Fitzgerald’s primary focuses after being elected mayor was to expand housing and infrastructure in Boston which meant the possible destruction of historical homes. As Fitzgerald announced during his reign as mayor “old Boston sits as the tomb of its ancestors and fingers the withered leaves of laurel they won in bygone days. Old Boston is cold and proud, wrapped in the mantle of Puritanism, not progressive enough.” A child of Irish



Detail of the composite illustration showing a portion of the nineteenth-century staircase in the Paul Revere House between the second and third floors. This is one of the few images in existence documenting the interior of the house prior to restoration

immigrants, Fitzgerald was far from the elite class of Appleton and Drake. For Irish-Americans such as Fitzgerald, the historic homes of Boston represented nothing more than the oppression of Yankee Americans over immigrants. Although preservationists such as Appleton were not happy about the changing politics of Boston they also realized that, according to Lindgren, “historic preservation must not only be kept from the hands of those politicians but also serve as a means to unite Yankee and newcomer alike.” With politics in Boston changing significantly and immigrant groups like the Irish rising to power, the responsibility of restoring the Revere home became more vital to antiquarians.

Saving Paul Revere’s home was one of Appleton’s first campaigns as a preservationist. By 1904 the Revere house stood as the only remaining seventeenth-century wooden house in downtown Boston. Drake even blamed Boston’s elite for the present state of the home claiming it was viewed as a “poor relation upon whom the rich man now turns his back.” (*Our Colonial Homes*, 18). Following a legitimate threat of demolition, Paul Revere descendant John Phillips Reynolds, Jr. purchased the home. A group of elite citizens, Revere descendants, antiquarians, and members of patriotic groups such as the DAR joined forces formed the Paul Revere Memorial Association (PRMA) by 1905. The PRMA focused on raising enough money to buy the home from Reynolds, restore it, and transform it into a patriotic example of civic virtue and pride.

The PRMA flooded the Boston newspapers with long letters explaining to the public the importance of using this home to create a sense of civic identity. However, rather than just promoting the restoration of the Paul Revere House as an effort to convey Yankee traditions, there also emerged a new idea, asking immigrants for support in the restoration effort. In other words rather than confining their restoration efforts to elite Yankees, the PRMA decided to appeal to everyone, including immigrants, in order to raise the funds needed for restoration. On June 21, 1905 the *Boston Evening Transcript* published a letter by Appleton explaining the purpose of the PRMA and the reason funding was needed. He began by stating that the Revere house served as a rare chance to preserve a home with an important architectural history as well as significance as an historical landmark. He pointed out the carelessness of a generation that allowed homes such as John Hancock’s to be demolished in 1863. Without sufficient funding the fear was that the Revere House might be demolished as well. Appleton concluded his letter by emphasizing, “Every reader of the Transcript can afford to send \$1 or more, and be the amount large or small, I appeal to everyone to send something.” Yet the case was not easily made. While it would be possible to capture some attention from immigrant children through school, many of their parents saw such efforts as patronizing. Immigrant parents felt as though Yankee preservationists were waging war on their own cultures.

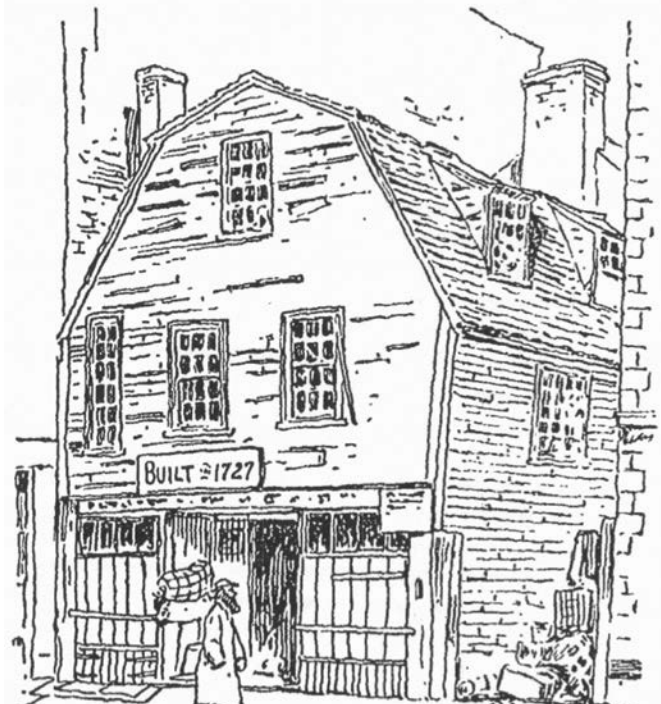
Hoping to broaden the message and expand their fundraising appeal, Curtis Guild Jr., the President of PRMA, decided to refer to the immigrant experience in his own letter published in the *Boston Daily Globe* on January 11, 1908. Guild compared the experience Paul Revere had as a child of an immigrant to

the immigrant children that inhabited the North End during the twentieth century. He points out that the Reveres began as an immigrant family and that Paul Revere assumed important responsibilities at a young age, much as immigrant children do: “The preservation of this monument is therefore well worthwhile, not merely as a reminder to new citizens of the services due from them and from their children to the commonwealth, but also as a reminder to the commonwealth of the services rendered by new citizens and by their children.” This letter provides an example of a significant shift from the efforts Yankee traditionalists and preservationists had previously made in the late nineteenth century in their efforts to save historic homes. Promoting the house as an educational tool for all Bostonians rather than just a tool for Americanizing immigrants, encouraged donations from people from all across the country. By this time it was almost a decade into the twentieth century and more traditionalists were realizing that the immigrant movement had changed Boston’s demographic and cultural landscape forever.

The formation of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, (now known as Historic New England), in 1910 marked a shift in the preservation movement because it focused less on homes with patriotic heritage, but instead

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STRUCTURE BOOKED FOR DEMOLITION.



This drawing of the so-called “Thoreau House” at 55-57 Prince Street in Boston’s North End appeared in the December 11, 1893 issue of the Boston Daily Globe, accompanying an article advocating its preservation. The writer describes the interior of the house in some detail, including large pine beams, massive brick chimney, and unique multi-layer ceiling between the first and second floors. In spite of the fact that the house was once owned by the sisters of John Thoreau, Jr., the father of Henry David Thoreau, and was once lived in by John Adams, it was eventually demolished.



Summer Events

AT THE
PAUL REVERE
HOUSE

Paul Revere's Boston events on summer Saturdays feature period craft demonstrations, historical talks from experienced staff, live music as Paul Revere heard it, and more in the museum's courtyard, weather permitting. Included with admission to the museum: adults \$3.50, seniors and college students \$3.00, children 5-17 \$1. Members and North End residents admitted free at all times. In summer, the Revere House is open daily, 9:30-5:15.

19 NORTH SQUARE
BOSTON MA 02113
WWW.PAULREVEREHOUSE.ORG
617-523-2338

JUNE

4 Royal Irish Artillery, 1:00-3:00. Fred Lawson, founder of the reenacting troop, brings sample artillery tools copied exactly from period originals. The Royal Irish Artillery fought against Paul Revere at the Siege of Castine in Penobscot Bay.

11 Fife and Drum Concert by the Boston Alarm Company, 1:00, 1:45, & 2:30. Treat yourself to a sprightly concert of fife and drum music! Dressed in civilian clothing reproduced from period originals, alarm company members play marches and beat out cadences used to warn citizens of impending attack.

18 A Loyalist Perspective on the Revolution, 1:00, 1:45, & 2:30. Hear a first-hand account of the abuses loyalists suffered at the hands of emboldened "patriots." Michael Lepage takes on the role of Chief Justice Peter Oliver, brother of Andrew Oliver, a stamp collector.

25 Hammered Dulcimer Music, 1:00-3:00. Award-winning musician Dave Neiman plays jigs, reels, and Baroque and Renaissance tunes that Paul Revere and his family may have enjoyed.

SPECIAL EVENTS IN HONOR OF BOSTON'S HARBORFEST

Thursday, June 30th Hammered Dulcimer Music, 1:00-3:00. Award-winning musician Dave Neiman plays jigs, reels, and Baroque and Renaissance tunes that Paul Revere and his family may have enjoyed.

Friday, July 1st A Visit with Paul Revere, 1:00-3:00. David Connor brings Boston's favorite patriot vividly to life. Ask him about the details of his midnight ride, inquire about his 16 children, or engage him in conversation about his activities as a member of the Sons of Liberty.

JULY

2 Patriot Fife and Drum, 1:00, 1:45, & 2:30. Enjoy a lively concert of music that accompanied colonists as they marched, danced, wooed their beloveds, and waged war. David Vose and Sue Walko provide fascinating insight into each selection they perform.

9 Glass Harmonica Concert, 1:00-3:00. Vera Meyer plays early American melodies on the intriguing instrument that Ben Franklin invented. The ethereal, haunting tones Meyer creates will mesmerize all who listen!

16 Amasa Soper's Company, 1:00-3:00. Costumed members of this Revolutionary War reenactment group take on the roles of the farmers, printers, and tailors who volunteered to defend Boston harbor after the siege of the city ended in 1776.

23 Colonial Leather Working, 1:00-3:00. Find out how colonial era leather workers fashioned scabbards, sword belts, and harnesses. Fred Lawson demonstrates and invites visitors to try their hands at punching holes and sewing leather.

30 A Revolution of Her Own! 1:00, 1:45, & 2:30. The captivating story of the first woman to fight in the American Military: in 1782, Deborah bound her chest, tied back her hair, and enlisted in the Continental Army. Experience her arduous upbringing, active combat, and success as the first female professional soldier (in part, due to the assistance of Paul Revere). Deborah's passion takes you back in time! Length: 30 min.

AUGUST

6 To Be Determined 1:00-3:00.

13 The Tailor's Craft, 1:00-3:00. Clothing historian Henry Cooke takes on the role of an early Boston tailor. Watch as he "takes the measure" of visitors, then sits cross-legged, fashioning waistcoats from luxurious fabrics and "slops" from coarse weaves.

20 Colonial Dance Tunes and Love Songs, 1:00-3:00. In the guise of itinerant musicians, Al Petty and Deirdre Sweeney perform popular 18th-century tunes such as "Mr. Isaac's Maggot" and "Jack's Health" on the penny whistle, flute, fife, and other instruments.

27 The Art of Spinning, 1:00-3:00. The art of spinning is best learned by the young, and Zoe Lawson has been practicing the craft of spinning by drop spindle and on a wheel since childhood. She shares her techniques while in 18th century garb, accompanied by her fellow fiber artist and father, Fred Lawson.

PAUL REVERE HOUSE STAFF

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The PAUL REVERE MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION

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Restoring the Paul Revere House *continued from page 4*

on homes with architectural value. Preservationists such as Appleton still primarily appealed for funds to more elite citizens and private associations, but they no longer justified the preservation of historic homes strictly as a means of assimilating immigrants. In addition Appleton wanted to focus on historic homes endangered throughout New England, not just in Boston or the surrounding areas. The attitude towards the meaning of the Paul Revere House is shown in newspapers published after the house was restored and open to the public. In one article "At Paul Revere's House" (*Boston Daily Globe*, January 30, 1910) the author mentions how visitors were feeling more of an urge to visit because of the enthusiasm their children conveyed. A Revere House custodian was interviewed saying, "Parents are awakened to the significance of this place."

The Paul Revere House continues to serve as an educational tool because of the motivation of Yankee traditionalists to preserve one of the only surviving examples of Puritan America in downtown Boston. Immigration felt like a great threat to the Boston traditionalists and they fought against it by preserving homes that represented the patriotic history of America. Without the nostalgic desire to look back to an idealized Puritan past combined with an immediate need to Americanize a flood of new immigrants, the Paul Revere House might easily have been another tragic example of the many historic homes demolished in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. ❖

Please Join the Friends of Paul Revere Today!

Distinguish yourself as an active supporter of America's cultural heritage. Membership fees help preserve both the Revere and Hichborn Houses, and subsidize educational programs for schoolchildren. In appreciation for your support, you will receive the quarterly *Revere House Gazette*, a 10% discount on all purchases from the museum store, unlimited free admission to both the Revere and Hichborn Houses, and much more.

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

NAME: _____

ADDRESS: _____

PHONE: _____

PLEASE CHECK ONE:

- \$20 INDIVIDUAL
- \$35 FAMILY
- \$50-99 SUPPORTING
- \$100-249 PATRON
- \$250-499 PATRIOT
- \$500 SILVER CIRCLE

My additional donation of \$_____ is enclosed to support the museum's educational programs.

I don't care to join at this time but would like to make a contribution of \$_____ to the museum.

Please make check payable to the Paul Revere House and mail to 19 North Square, Boston, MA 02113.