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In Search of Excitement: Understanding Boston's Civil War "Draft Riot"

BY IAN J. JESSE

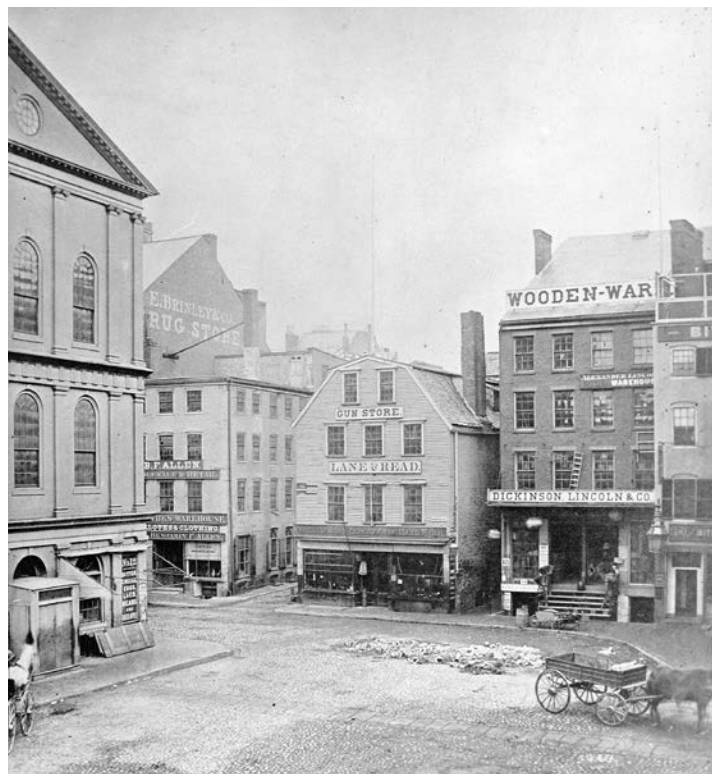
Editor's Note: the following article consists of excerpts from a longer essay with the same title published in the NeoAmericanist, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Fall/Winter 2011–2012). The excerpts here, which are reprinted with permission, comprise about one-third of Mr. Jesse's original article. Although the incident is well known, reconstructing exactly what happened is difficult due to biases in the surviving accounts and the tendency of previous writers to neglect evidence provided by the participants themselves.

On July 14, 1863 Major Stephen Cabot of the First Battalion of Massachusetts Volunteer Heavy Artillery received a request from Governor John Andrew for troops to enter the city of Boston for the purpose of suppressing a riot. Major Cabot was ordered to the city after a mob attacked a conscription officer in the North End of the city. The crowd had gathered in front of a police station and Cabot was told that, "the mob [was] beating police, and that there was every appearance of serious trouble during the coming night." City authorities believed the crowd was uncontrollable and so Cabot and 166 other men left for Boston shortly after the request was made. The Governor directed Cabot to take instruction from Mayor Frederic Lincoln who ordered a detachment of men to the armory on the corner of Union and Marshall Streets. Cabot took the rest of his command to the Cooper Street armory.

When the Major entered the North End he was followed by a crowd that made no serious attack against him. Once Cabot and his men were inside of the armory, he had the doors and shutters closed in hopes that mob would leave if they could not see the soldiers. He believed that the mob in the street would soon launch a much larger assault.

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Around 7:30 p.m. Cabot received news that the mob was abusing another soldier just down the street; he ordered a group of twenty men to rescue him. In the process of the rescue the mob attacked the soldiers and hurled stones at them. Cabot sent out more men in hopes that a greater military presence would prevent the need for firing at the swarm of people. Cabot says however, that during "the



This 1863 photograph of Faneuil Hall Square was taken just after the June 14 Boston "Draft Riot" (note the pile of rubble in front of William Read and Son gun store). This store was broken into by a mob seeking weapons to defend themselves against soldiers and police following a violent confrontation at the Cooper Street Armory. The store is identified as both "Lane and Read" and "Read and Son" in this image but the 1863 Boston Street Directory refers to the firm as "William Read and Son." Courtesy, Boston Athenaeum

From the Executive Director...

I want to take a moment to remember an esteemed member of the Boston history community who passed away this summer, Joan Hull. Many of you likely remember her as the Executive Director of the Bostonian Society. Joan was a determined advocate for history, preservation, and collaboration. She was well known for being tough, direct, and one who did not suffer fools. Yet, Joan had many friends and colleagues in Massachusetts, and in New Jersey where she began her career, who admired her vision and her tenacity. Perhaps it is most notable that many of her friends were people who had worked for her and been mentored by her: testimony to her wisdom and kind heart. I remember a conversation with Joan not so long ago. She said, "I am so glad you finally got your

building, all your hard work is paying off." It meant a great deal to me to have her stamp of approval on our plans for an education and visitor center and her vote of confidence. As we get ready to open later this year, I am sorry she will miss the opening as she loved a good party.

So now we toll the virtual Revere bell to honor the memory of our friend and colleague Joan, who led the fight for an appreciation of the value of history and historic sites. She will long be remembered fondly for her life's work and her enduring contributions to the history field in Boston, the Commonwealth, and the country.



Nina Zannieri

excitement a few shots were fired over the heads of the mob..." and that "during this rescue the mob [was] very furious, and some of [his] men were severely hurt by stones..." The mob believed that the shots fired over their heads were blanks and so they became "more bold and aggressive." Cabot noted that once the doors were shut a full out attack had begun. Cabot felt that he had to fire to keep the mob back. He fired from inside the armory and noted that after, "nothing was to be seen of the mob, except those who had paid the penalty for lawlessness." Cabot felt that he and his men were in great danger and that he had no other options.*

Scholars usually label the events Major Cabot described as Boston's "Civil War Draft Riot." The disturbance occurred immediately following a much larger and more destructive riot that started in New York City. The Draft Riot in New York has gained much more fame and attention than Boston's and historians have struggled to untangle their analysis of the events in the two cities, relying too heavily on voices like Cabot's, who felt under assault. This essay investigates a wider range of sources from those who witnessed and participated in the melee to argue that rather than a smaller, less violent version of the New York riot, the events in Boston on July 14 should be seen differently. The event in Boston should not be seen as a political protest but a group of rowdy people in search of excitement.

A general sketch of the day's events begins with David Howe, a conscription officer, whose job it was to give notice to the men whose names had been drawn in the draft. It was reported that Howe had stopped to talk with a woman [reportedly on Prince Street, in Boston's North End] about the conscription who then hit him. Residents from the neighborhood entered the streets to witness the commotion. These people soon joined the woman in assaulting the officer. Police were informed of the altercation and Officer Wilkins left Station One to retrieve Howe. Wilkins succeeded in getting Howe away from the crowd but while the officer

was escorting the conscription officer back to his residence the crowd once again assaulted him. He was badly beaten this time but was still able to escape the crowd. After Howe evaded the crowd for a second time more police officers were ordered into the North End. On the way to the station house several officers were assaulted "by bricks and other missiles" but other than these minor acts there were no other acts of violence reported at this time. City officials then called upon Captain E. J. Jones from the Eleventh Battery to guard the Cooper Street armory in case further trouble should occur. It was at this point Major Stephen Cabot received his orders to enter the city. After the mob fled the scene of the armory they attacked gun stores in the area of Dock Square and Faneuil Hall. Men plundered these stores and were able to escape with a collection of weapons. According to the *Boston Courier* "Not less than one hundred guns, nearly as many pistols, and three or four dozen bowie-knives, valued at some three thousand dollars," were taken from the store of Thomas P. Barnes. The mob was stopped when they attempted to break into the store of William Reed and Son and several men were arrested. At this point more police officers from around the city as well as the Light Dragoons were ordered into the area. The reinforcements successfully cleared the streets and those in the crowd returned to their homes.

It is believed that these events were in response to the new Conscription Act. In March of 1863 the Union passed the federal Conscription Act; enrollment was low and the act sought to raise troops for the army. Union numbers on the field were decreasing due to desertion and shortly, those who volunteered for three years of service in 1861 would be relieved. The Conscription Act called for all unmarried men between twenty and thirty five to report for military service. According to the law men could be exempt if they hired a substitute or were able to pay a three-hundred dollar fee. The conscription did not apply to African Americans as they were not considered citizens of the United States. It is easy to see how the Conscription Act would upset the poor; it seemed that the burden of the war was now falling onto their shoulders... .

*Surprisingly, the number of those killed in the Boston "Draft Riot" is not known, although it was certainly far less than the 120 killed in the nearly simultaneous New York Draft Riot.

During this same time a riot occurred in the streets of New York City. The riot began in New York on July 13 when a group of firemen, no longer exempt from military service under the new conscription law, burst into the Ninth District's office, smashed the selection wheel and set the building on fire. As the day progressed men began to leave their places of occupation and had just about stopped business in the city. Mobs soon gathered in front of buildings with strong political symbolism such as General George B. McClellan's house. Others threatened Horace Greeley, editor of the *Tribune*, Republican Party champion and abolitionist. Employees of the Iron Works said that their main aim was to impede the draft in the city but their cause was soon mixed with acts of thievery and the destruction of lines of communication. As the day progressed the protesters began to grow in number and destroyed government property. By the middle of the afternoon the rioters attacked police officers and looted the homes of the wealthy. By three in the afternoon the mob had even attacked an African American boy. Early Monday evening the mob returned to the office of the *Tribune* and they stormed, looted and burned the building. It was reported that some of the rioters carried signs that read, "No Draft" and "Independent." Later in the evening some of the rioters burned an orphan asylum and others moved to tenements and attacked black men and boys.

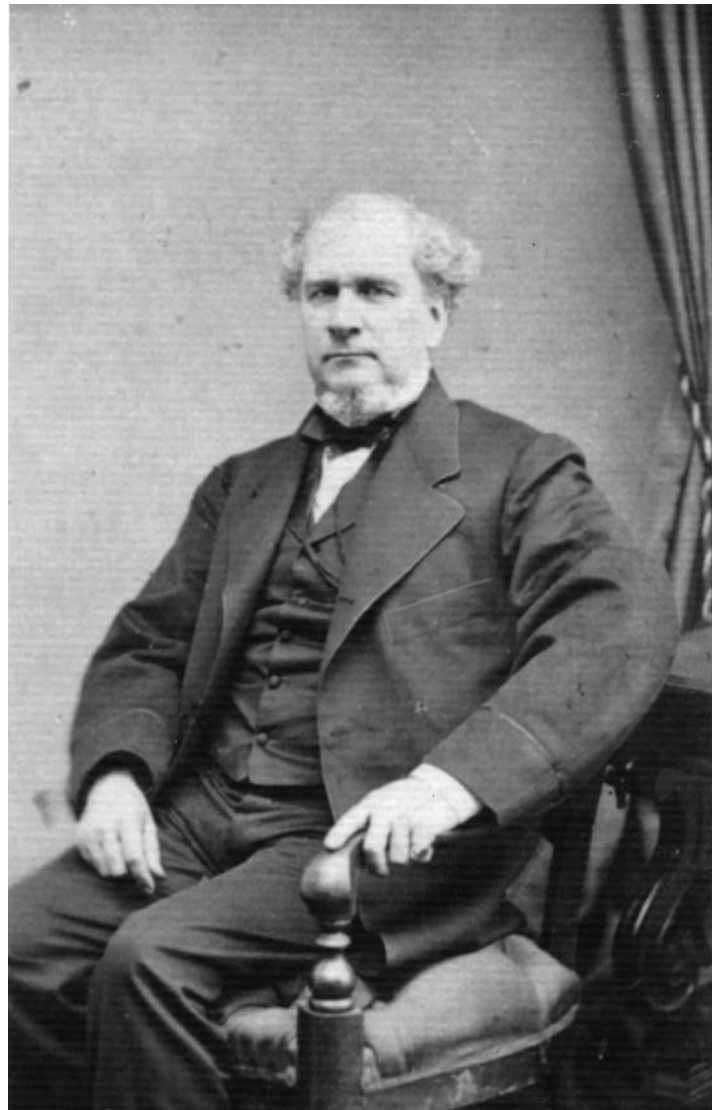
Some of the Irish longshoremen used the riot as an attempt to bring the "white-only" policy of their employment to the entire community. These men instigated the first race-based attacks of the riot not too far from the piers. On Tuesday, the day after the riot began, William Williams, an African American sailor, was beaten by a white longshoreman. After the initial beating other members from the neighborhood approached the sailor to beat his body or stab his chest. On the following Wednesday night, "Dock laborers" had beaten and almost drowned Charles Jackson who is described as a "black work-ingman." A young black shoemaker was given chase and captured by several white men. The shoemaker was beaten, stoned, and then hung. The rioters then burned the house in which he attempted to hide. The riot in New York took on extreme tones of racial violence and African Americans were not safe in the city.

Historians have paid more attention to the events in New York than those in Boston. The riot in New York lasted several days while the one that occurred in Boston was short lived, lasting only several hours. The riot in New York City was also a much larger event involving class and race-based attacks. The only thing the two events had in common was timing. The riot in New York broke out on July 13, 1863 and the one in Boston on July 14. Some historians have attempted to make sense of the riot in Boston, but their depictions do not seem to tell the entire story. . . .

There is no evidence to support the claim that the riot in Boston was directed towards the disenfranchisement of African Americans in the North or in support of the Confederacy. There is also no evidence which would suggest the riot in Boston had any objective at all. . . . The *Post* reported that while the mob was burglarizing gun stores in the area of

Dock Square and Faneuil Hall they were stopped by Officer Dunn. It continues to say that, "in the melee a man named James Campbell, the ringleader, was shot in the head and one arm. He was arrested and taken to Station Two, where his wounds were attended." To put a leader with a name and a face to the riot makes it appear more organized than it really was.

James Campbell was one of at least twelve men to be arrested for his part in the riot on July 14. Five men had been accused of the willful murder of William Currier, who was found dead inside the Cooper Street armory shortly after the order was given to fire. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts wished to have these men convicted under Chapter 166 of the Massachusetts General Statutes, "which stated that any member of a mob of thirty or more persons would be held liable for willful murder if their riotous behavior caused the death of a citizen." James Campbell was the first of the men arrested to go to trial. The prosecution had to prove that he did take part in the riot and that the death of William Currier was caused by the actions of the mob in front of the armory. The court ruled that Currier's death could have possibly been a result of



Frederick Walker Lincoln (1817-1898), a descendant of Paul Revere, was mayor of Boston during the Boston "Draft Riot." Courtesy, Boston Public Library, Print Dept.

the shots fired from within the armory and therefore they could not find the defendant guilty. Campbell was however arrested right after this ruling on riot related charges. He was granted bail and was believed to have fled the city. John McGrath however, a second defendant, was found guilty of riot and assault but without a weapon. It was ruled that he serve ten years hard labor. . . .

In the reports regarding the Boston riot in the *New York Times* no connection was made to events in New York City. One of the only occurrences where the New York and Boston events were mentioned together was in a republication of an article from the *Courier*. The *Courier* reported that “but for the promptness of the measures to suppress it, would have probably proved as disastrous as that in New-York.” An earlier article, a report from Boston on the night of the riot, printed on July 16 in the *New York Times*, stated that, “quite a disturbance, but hardly amounting to a riot, occurred in the north part of the city this afternoon.” The New York paper had larger events to report in their own city. Compared to New York, the events in Boston were incredibly miniscule. . . .

[Emma Sewell] Adams remembers the melee in, “A Remembrance of the Boston Draft Riot” [1909]. She recalled the riot being initiated by a woman who was upset at a conscription officer and who had shouted out of her window to her husband “to ‘protect himself from the draft.’” Men leaving the gas-house for dinner quickly assembled and chased the officer. After he escaped, the crowd began to beat police officers in the streets. Later, the mob realized they did not have weapons and so they began to attack gun stores. The mob was growing in size and in the evening began to attack the Cooper Street armory where soldiers had been sent to protect its inventory. The mob was finally dispersed when the soldiers fired into the crowd.

Adams recalls a few nights later, seeing, “two men wearing large cape-coats,” and being handed a gun which was quickly hidden in their coats. She says that she, “later learned...there was a meeting of the rioters that night, but it was dispelled by a Catholic priest.” Adams’s recollection of events makes it appear that the mob in Boston was largely comprised of working class men. At this point in the day many of the men would have been at work and unable to join the protest. In various testimonies people cited that the crowd primarily consisted of women and children. Patrick Gould testified that he saw a “crowd composed mostly of women and boys.” Ora May Jr. claimed that he witnessed “a large crowd of children . . . firing bricks.” Geo. W. Talbot had testified that he “saw a crowd of youngsters firing bricks . . . a little girl, 10 or 12 years old, throwing bricks and stones.” . . .

While Adams may have believed this event to be a clear opposition to the draft perpetrated by working class Irish men, not everyone felt similarly. An anonymous author, claiming to be a “North End mechanic” postulated that the events began early on when a conscript officer got into an argument when he told a woman that her husband was going to be drafted. The argument got out of hand and a crowd consisting of mainly women and children gathered around. Police soon arrived and took some members of the crowd



This image from the August 15, 1863 issue of the Illustrated London News, shows rioters and soldiers firing at each other during the New York City Draft Riot two months earlier. Although often compared with the Boston “Draft Riot,” the New York Draft Riot was a much more serious disturbance, with class and racial overtones absent during the Boston incident. Courtesy, New-York Historical Society. Image #43282.

and went to the police station a few streets away. Throughout the day many more officers crowded into the station, which only fed the curiosity of the crowd outside. “The Plain Man” believed that at this point, had the mayor made an appearance and dispersed the crowd the excitement would have ended. He also felt that if these officers had orders they could have successfully broken up the crowd but instead they sat idle. The crowd was interested in what was occurring inside the police station but the officers never acted. The mob had no political motivation and was just waiting for something to happen. “The Plain Man” felt that when the authorities did finally act it was with too much of a heavy hand; he felt innocent women and children, his neighbors, had been unjustly murdered. He believed that the citizens of the North End did nothing wrong. . . .

By reviewing various newspapers and accounts regarding the events of July 14, 1863 in Boston it is clear that this “draft riot” looked nothing like the one in New York. In Boston only one conscription officer was attacked and there were no attacks on African Americans, the wealthy, or Republican symbolism. Historians have been quick to make connections between the two events that do not exist. They have attempted to assess the Boston riot in political terms but politics played only a minor role, if any at all. The Boston “draft riot” was a gathering without purpose or leadership. It took a turn for the worse when Major Stephen Cabot marched his men through the North End and fired upon the crowd through the closed doors of the armory. While the scholarship of this event has been overshadowed by the riot occurring in New York City, it seems understandably so. ❖

For Further Reading. A Plain Man. *The Boston Riot, July 14, 1863. A Plain Statement of Facts*. Boston. 1863; Adams, Emma Sewell. “A Remembrance of the Boston Draft Riot.” *The Magazine of History with Notes and Queries*. X. July-December 1909, 37-40; Cabot, Stephen. *Report of the “Draft Riot” in Boston, July 14th, 1863*. Boston. 1863; Lincoln, Frederic. *Mayor’s Communication Respecting the Control of the Recent Riot. City of Boston*. City Document No. 75. Boston, July 23, 1863.



Fall Events

AT THE
PAUL REVERE
HOUSE

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

Our Fall Paul Revere's Boston events try to bring life in 18th century Boston into focus through living history demonstrations of all kinds. Our September Lecture series approaches the same goal from a different angle, that of the modern archaeologist. The free lectures will be held at the Old South Meeting House on Tuesday nights in September. Our onsite Paul Revere's Boston events on Saturdays are included with admission to the museum: adults \$3.50 seniors and college students \$3.00, children ages 5-17 \$1. Members and North End residents are admitted free at all times. Through October 31 the Revere House is open daily 9:30-5:15. Beginning on November 1, the museum is open daily 9:30-4:15.

PAUL REVERE'S BOSTON

SEPTEMBER

3 Colonial Herbalist, 1:00-3:00.

Learn about the healing benefits of common and uncommon plants from a true expert. Judy Grillo portrays a colonial herbalist demonstrating techniques and wisdom passed on by generations of women who cared for their families with plants grown primarily in their kitchen gardens.



10 Colonial Weaving Demonstration, 1:00-3:00. Talented craftsman Fred Lawson demonstrates the art of creating cloth by hand and simple machines. Practice weaving on the small looms provided.

17 Printing Demonstration, 1:00-3:00. Did you know Paul Revere worked as an engraver? Using similar technology R. P. Hale produces copies of his own wood block image of the Revere House on a hand-cranked press. Prints (available for sale) are only made at the Revere House.



24 Rachel Revere: A Revolutionary Woman, 1:00, 1:45, 2:30. Who held the Revere family together after Paul set off on his Midnight Ride? Joan Gattorna takes on the role of Paul Revere's second wife. Enjoy her dramatic account of a woman's struggle to hold home and family together in a time of war, blockades, and shortages.

OCTOBER

1 Gilding Demonstration, 1:00-3:00. Watch professional gilder Nancy Dick Atkinson apply gossamer thin sheets of gold leaf to wooden ornaments just as craftsmen did in Revere's era.

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

15 Paper Marbling, 1:00-3:00. See how colonial craftsmen created eye-catching marbled papers. Watch as R. P. Hale floats pigments in water, swirls the colors, then transfers the designs to paper. It may look like magic but Hale will explain the very real science behind this fascinating phenomenon.

Please note: No program on October 22 & 29.

FALL LECTURE SERIES

Lowell Lecture Series presented by the Paul Revere Memorial Association at Old South Meeting House

Unearthing Boston: A Bordello, "Home Rule" Pipes, A Shipwreck, and Native American Shell Middens

Decades of archaeological work in and around Boston have revealed a complex history and occasionally surprising and unexpected finds. On Tuesday evenings in September, 2016, the Paul Revere Memorial Association, in cooperation with the Old South Meeting House, will present a series of lectures exploring recent archaeological work in the North End, Downtown Boston, the inner neighborhoods, and on the Boston Harbor Islands.

September 6 from 6:30-7:30 pm. Alexander D. Keim: Boston Inside Out: What Archaeological Excavations at a Brothel and Boarding House Reveal About Life in the 19th-century North End

September 13 from 6:30-7:30 pm. Joseph M. Bagley: Dig Boston: How, When, and Why Archaeology Happens in the Hub

September 20 from 6:30-7:30 pm. Kristen Heitert: Knee Deep in Paul Revere's Privy: Archaeology at the Paul Revere House Lot

September 27 from 6:30-7:30 pm. Martin Dudek: From Hills to Islands: Ancient Adaptations to the Inundation of Boston

All lectures presented at Old South Meeting House, 310 Washington Street, in downtown Boston.

For more information, contact the Paul Revere House at 617-523-2338.

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The PAUL REVERE MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION

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