

Revere House Radio

Episode 12

Paul Revere's Copper

Welcome in to another edition of Revere House Radio, I am your host Robert Shimp. In recent episodes, we have covered a few of Paul Revere's various occupations, as he wore many hats in Boston's economy. While he took on many tasks in the town with a population of around fifteen thousand people at the time of the Revolution, he is most known to history- professionally at least- as a silversmith, which we have discussed. Revere's career in silver started well before the American Revolution and stretched into the early Republic following the War's conclusion. It was not, however, the career that he invested the majority of his time and energies to in his final working years. Revere's most ambitious project- and ultimately his most lucrative- came in the form of his Copper rolling Mill in Canton, Massachusetts, the first of its kind in the United States.

Over the course of his life, Paul Revere was not only able to take on many different occupations and jobs, but he had a keen sense of being able to leverage the skill sets from one profession into that of another. For instance, Revere's ability to make thin wires from silver allowed him to bind together dentures, and his silversmith practice generally allowed him to dabble in engravings and mass reproduction of prints.

Revere's skills as a successful businessmen and an understanding of metallurgy ultimately gave him the confidence that he could pull off a copper rolling venture that did not exist in America in the nation's first years. Copper refinement had existed for millennia, but significant improvements on the technology beyond extraction, smelting, and molding had not progressed along the course of time. By Revere's time, Great Britain had advanced into rolling, but held near exclusivity in the practice. A great deal of capital and a large amount of risk with a more than standard dose of self-confidence were needed to pull it off in America.

In 1800, large scale copper rolling only existed in England, and was, like so many similar technological advancements, kept as a tightly held secret of the trade. Thus, copper became a touchstone of sorts in the early Republic, as the United States still had to rely on Great Britain for almost all of its copper needs. It was one of the humbling aspects of the nation building process, and one that American authorities, and an ambitious Patriot like Paul Revere, were eager to counter. Laws from the early 18th century had in fact prevented copper production in the colonies, so the newly formed states were already at a technological disadvantage at the time of the Revolution and into the early republic.

Revere worked with iron for mortars and bell casting and some small-scale copper at his iron foundry in the North End starting in the late 1780s, one of those professional shifts that we've

discussed. The creation of the United States Navy, following the Revolution and during the quasi-war with France, when the nation was being pulled into a global conflict between the old enemies, Great Britain and France, provided Revere with an opportunity to expand upon his operations. Specifically, rolled copper had naval importance in that it could provide sheathing to a ship's hull to limit sea worms boring into the wood, and for a sea mat of barnacles and other grime to accumulate on the bottom of the ship. The copper would make ships more durable, more efficient, and save lots of money in the long run for a young country.

Revere touted his skills, and admission of no experience in smelting copper ore, to the United States government in 1800, after some initial overtures in the previous years. Revere, in fact, travelled to Philadelphia in May 1800 and secured a few initial contracts for work from U.S. Naval Secretary Benjamin Stoddert. Revere succeeded in attempting to roll his first sheet from native ore with his limited materials at hand, and sent it to Stoddert as proof of his capabilities and for a request for a previously promised government loan. Unfortunately for Revere, the timing coincided with the first major political shift in American politics with the election of 1800, or as Revere put it "a dreadful change in politics."

As such, the finances for Revere's venture were touch and go for many years. Even in his ideal political climate under the Adams administration, Revere was taking great financial risks for himself and family, in addition to putting his rebuilt reputation on the line. But after Thomas Jefferson's ascendancy to the Presidency and the sea change away from Federalist politics that it ushered into the country, many of Revere's financial struggles had to do with the politics of the age as well as the machinery and large scale operations needed. Revere's petitions to the United States government provide us with some of clearest examples of his political leanings, as he found the Jeffersonian administration far more difficult to deal with, and in opposition to his personal politics. That said, he made repeated requests to the new administration for payment, and ultimately succeeded. By mid 1802, Revere completed his contract and had successfully rolled around 20 thousand pounds of copper.

The elaborate complex at Canton that Revere was able to construct and put together, drew on water power through wheels propelled the Neponset River. Like so many of his careers, his operation existed as a fusion of his technical expertise, personal innovations, and what he could learn secondhand from other similar, successful ventures.

He ran an operation with variable employees, up to about 12 at a time, and was able to transition the business into the very capable hands of his son, Joseph Warren Revere. Joseph Warren Revere's story is a lengthy and interesting one as well, with industrial espionage in Europe for his father in the first decade of the 19th century followed by a long career and life that spanned beyond the Civil War. We hope to explore more on Joseph Warren Revere in coming episodes and Express posts.

In total, Revere directed the mill in Canton for 11 years, until he retired in 1811. His copper work ultimately allowed him to accomplish two of the most important aspirations of his life. First, the mill finally put Revere at a gentleman's status in great Boston society, at least in his eyes. He proudly provided the copper for the Massachusetts's State House dome, where he had given perhaps his most prominent public address in 1795, and his reflections upon his retirement

harken to idyllic days in the countryside at his Canton Estate. In late life, Revere wrote a lengthy poem that conveyed his feelings on his status at his mill- I will share just a few pertinent excerpts here- not the whole thing! But a few telling bits that really give us insights into Revere's final years.

Not distant far from *Taunton road*
In *Canton Dale* is my abode.
My Cot 'tho small, my mind's at ease,
My Better Half, takes pains to please,
Content sits lolling in her chair,
And all my friends find welcome there
When they git home they never fail,
To praise the charms of *Canton Dale*.

At early morn I take my round,
Invited first by *hammer's* sound;
The *Furnace* next; then *Roleing-Mill*;
'Till Breakfast's call'd, my time doth fill;
Then round the Acres (few) I trot,
To see what's done and what is not.
Give orders what ought to be done.
Then sometimes take my Dog and *Gun*.

Under an aged spreading *Oak*.
At noon I take my favorite *Book*
To shun the heat and feed the Mind,
In elbow chair I sit reclined.

When dinner's call'd, I feel prepar'd
For to refresh from frugal board;
When Table's cleared, and dinner ends
With Chearfull *Glass drink absent* Friends.

Beyond his social status, the mill was a patriotic venture for Revere and it did make significant, real, and immediate impacts upon the United States. The new nation was able to outfit its navy with Revere's products, bolts, spikes, but at the most innovative level, copper sheathing on ship hulls for some of the early ships in the fleet like the USS Constitution. This gave the Americans an advantage against the famed British Navy in the war of 1812, and allowed the U.S. forces some of the only triumphs they had in the early stages of the conflict. Revere was truly an entrepreneurial patriot, and lived to see his nation hold off the British once last time after the Treaty of Ghent closed out the conflict, in some part thanks to the work he had done for its navy.

Now there is much more to explore in the story of Paul Revere's Copper Mill, with the Embargo of 1807, and Revere supplying Robert Fulton with material for some of his first steam ships in America, and its continuation in various forms and iterations through the present day. For now, we will leave those for a more robust discussion down the road. In the meantime, I would encourage you, if you have not done so already, to please visit our website to read our most recent post "A Reflection on Racial Injustice and the Role of Public History." Please watch this

space for continued Revere House updates, please follow and subscribe to Revere House on Spotify and Apple podcasts, and please help us spread the word that we are on those platforms. As always, stay safe, and thanks for listening.