

Revere House Radio

Episode 13

Paul Revere's Politics

Welcome in to another episode of Revere House Radio, I am your host Robert Shimp. While Paul Revere may be a household name in American history, he really never rose to the political ranks that made so many of his acquaintances of the age prominent figures in American history. Revere never held a national office, didn't serve in state government, and the roles he held were mostly at a local level. That does not mean Revere didn't strive for major political roles in his life, however. For several reasons, Revere was never able to break into the political elite in the early Republic, but the roles he did hold, and the influence he was able to cast, were intertwined with his business careers and revolutionary activities.

Despite not holding any major offices, Revere was undoubtedly quite active politically. We know what his political leanings were, both in the Revolution and in the early republic, and we do know he was able to leverage his local influence into some important roles. Given his longevity, the politics in Revere's life spanned from the reign of King George II in colonial America, to James Monore's first years as America's fifth President.

Given his participation in the American Revolution- from his Midnight Ride to his anti-British political engravings around the Stamp Act Crisis and the Boston Massacre, to his work on the 1768 liberty bowl and his nods to the prominent and outspoken Whig John Wilkes in England, it is clear that Paul Revere was an ardent supporter of the revolution itself. As has been mentioned previously, Revere's politics and business interests didn't always perfectly align, with his silver work for and business interactions with known Tories. Despite such economic decisions, Revere's unflinching support to the cause from its very early stages, labeled him politically as a Whig, or Patriot, in this stretch of time.

One of Revere's clearest articulations of his political sentiments around the Revolution came during the late stages of the war. In the 1782 letter to his cousin John Rivoire, Revere held to an economic and representative argument for the Revolution itself, saying "it is the birth right of an Englishman not to be taxed without the consent of himself or Representative.. (I mean the British King & ministers)." In short, Revere held firmly to the slogan of 'no taxation without representation'- which doesn't convey the full spectrum of events and the nuances of the period, in this case it's one of those times where the shorthand slogan actually holds through time and does a pretty good job of synthesizing the major events.

Revere put these feelings to work in the buildup to the war, as he participated in numerous groups that were either overtly political, or social and fraternal groups that were certainly vehicles for the politics of the age. Amongst others, Revere was involved in the St. Andrew's

Lodge of Freemasons, the Sons of Liberty, and the smaller off shoots of the Sons of Liberty, the North End Caucus, and the Long Room Club. It was through these groups that Revere rose to prominence as a trusted messenger, a role he, of course, most prominently held on his midnight ride of April 18, 1775.

During the Revolution itself, Revere stayed true to the cause while aiming for military success. He was involved in and held different positions in town government- including terms as fire ward, work on the Committee of Correspondence, Safety, and Inspection, even membership in both official and unofficial groups to find and punish Loyalists. Though his work held local importance, in one of the great counterfactuals of Revere's life, you have to wonder if his avenues for potential political and military success would have been more open had his close friend Dr. Joseph Warren not died at the very start of the conflict during the Battle of Bunker Hill.

When Revere did get into the action militarily, his participation in the ill-fated 1779 Penobscot disaster, a subject we'll explore later, likely ended any potential aspirations for a political career, or at least one in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution. Instead of using the military as a springboard for future politics, like his friend Henry Knox, Revere had to push for a court-martial to clear his name from wrong doing. While he ultimately succeeded in doing so, the stain of Penobscot, fused with his lack of formal education, worked as dual barricades to block Revere out of direct political channels in the early republic.

In rebuilding his career and reputation after the Treaty of Paris officially gave the United States its independence from Britain, Revere's political leanings shifted with early parties forming in the nation. Revere stood out as an ardent Federalist, or supporter of the Constitution's ratification, in the 1780s. As it became clear the Articles of Confederation government, the nation's first governing body, was at best weak and at worst ineffectual, Revere took the lead amongst his socioeconomic group in Boston and led the charge for change. Revere was one of three major leaders, along with baker John Lucas and publisher Benjamin Russell, who wrote resolutions of support for ratification of the Constitution after the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. A group of "Tradesmen and Mechanicks" unanimously adopted the resolutions on January 7, 1788 at the Green Dragon Tavern- the crafted supporting document argued the Constitution was "well calculated to secure the liberties, protect the property, and guard the rights of citizens of America." While contextual evidence in correspondence suggests Revere held personal anti-slavery convictions, there is no documented evidence that he grappled with the question or made any public sentiments known on the issue during the ratification debates.

Historians have long indicated that it was the Revere-led Mechanics in Boston coming out in full force for the constitution that helped sway Samuel Adams and John Hancock to the cause. While such influence is likely overblown, it is true that the Mechanics' vocal support was important insofar that ratification in Massachusetts was a very close run thing. Ultimately, the new Constitution did pass in the state and Massachusetts was a key domino to fall in its ultimate ratification nationally. Major parades of support in Boston followed in Boston, and on February 9, 1788, Revere joined artisan leaders on a sleigh pulled by 4 horses in Boston's ratification parade.

Following ratification, Revere aimed for national positions, making an audacious appeal to become the master of the United States mint, a role that was far beyond his social status at the time, not to mention his practical skills. As historian Rob Martello points out in his work *Midnight Ride: Industrial Dawn, Paul Revere and the Growth of American Enterprise* “When he failed at the national level he turned to state and local endeavors.”

In a way that he had done during the Revolution, Revere served his local community from the 1780s through the early 1800s by holding positions as the county coroner, president of the board of health, and in numerous roles in non-political organizations. Further, he was active on a committee that worked to repeal Boston’s anti-theatre law. This debate raged in 1792, and Revere was joined in the pro-theatre camp by a young John Quincy Adams, just emerging onto the state’s political scene. In 1792, Revere also spoke at a meeting of Mechanics to abolish the town meeting in favor of a town council, but was on the losing side of that matter.

Professionally, Revere’s late life careers at his iron foundry and copper rolling mill were very much intertwined into the politics of the age. As a rule, Revere’s personal politics were in favor during the Washington and Adams administrations from 1789 into early 1801, but were out after Thomas Jeffersonian’s rise to the Presidency in the election of 1800. That said, Revere did his most lucrative and important work during the first years of the 19th century under the Jefferson and Madison administrations.

Revere secured government contracts from the Federalists for cannons from his iron foundry, and made inroads with Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert for the initial loans and contracts for his copper rolling mill. In his interactions with Stoddert in Philadelphia, Revere listed President John Adams and arch-Federalist Harrison Gray Otis as references, amongst others.

Revere’s hiccups came during the first years of the Jefferson administration, and it was an arduous process for him to secure the loan that the Federalist had promised him. He ultimately got the money, and boosted his young nation’s navy in the process, but complained often about the rise of the Democratic-Republicans. While he pushed for personally beneficial embargos on copper, he protested the major embargos, especially the one of 1807, put forth at the end of the Jefferson administration, though he was able to leverage them to personal benefit. Despite some lean times, Revere’s work in copper anticipated the military struggles to come, and in his case, war ultimately proved good for business. In the War of 1812, the United States relied heavily on its navy, and rode it to successes in the conflict thanks to Revere’s important interventions and work.

The sea change in politics during Revere’s life is really incredible to consider, tracking the course of subject to citizen from the 1730s to the 18teens. We will aim to delve into more specifics in future episodes, but for now, let us know if there are specific topics, interests that we have discussed in this or other episodes that you would like to learn a little bit more about. We do have some very exciting content lined up on both Revere House Radio and in the Revere Express blog, which can be found on our website, so stayed tuned! Please also help us spread the word that we are on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, iHeart Radio. Please follow us on those platforms

as we will continue to introduce some new content and we'll release some of the back content from our website as well. Do continue to follow us on social media and our website for updates, and as are working very hard behind the scenes to prepare for our reopening as state regulations permit. Until next time, stay safe, and thanks for listening!