

Revere House Radio

Episode 14

The History of the Paul Revere House

Welcome in to another episode of Revere House Radio, I am your host Robert Shimp, coming to you from the Paul Revere House offices. As we move closer to reopening the Revere House after our lengthy closure due to Covid-19, this week we wanted to share a bit of the background and history of the Revere House itself. This episode will serve as a survey history of the house, as any decade, let alone century, really, of the house, deserves its own deep dive. Needless to say, there are rich stories from the origins of the house dating back to 1680- we will aim to cover some of the other residents and periods beyond the Revere's time in the house in future episodes. We hope you will both find this content interesting in itself, but also as a potential primer for a visit to the house in the near future!

The Paul Revere House itself is the oldest home still standing in downtown Boston, as it dates back to 1680. You won't see anything else like it in Boston today, both for its age *and* its exterior, which harkens back to its 17th century history construction in a Tudor-style design. It's not the first residence on the location at 19 North Square in Boston's North End, though. There was a parsonage for what came to be known as Old North meeting house at the location, and the parsonage served as home to the famous Mather family of theologians and historians from the mid 16 hundreds. The structure was destroyed in the great fire of 1676, though, that ravaged the North End, and a new home was constructed and purchased by the prominent Merchant Robert Howard in 1681.

Upon its construction, the house stood as one of the finest ones in the North End, and was assuredly the house of a wealthy family. It stood with 2 full levels, a basement, and a smaller attic space with exceptionally high ceilings throughout. Even today, many visitors are struck by the size of the rooms compared to many other historic homes from the 1600s and 1700s. While there has been some debate on the dates for parts of the house, when they were put in, it seems most likely that the footprint one sees today with the Revere house is very similar if not identical to that of the 1680 construction.

The house was spacious enough for the Howards, a family that consisted of Robert, his wife Elizabeth, daughter Sarah, and at least one enslaved person, Samuel. Records suggest more enslaved persons may have lived in the house as well, perhaps a woman named Katherine who was admitted into the congregation of Old North Meeting House in 1702.

The House was close to a lot of the action in the growing town of Boston. As it did for most of its existence, the house then abutted the market in North Square and remained just over a stone's

throw from the nearby docks. Howard's work as a merchant likely necessitated close proximity to the wharves, and such a location gave the house and North Square in general far more of a maritime feel than we can appreciate today after the various land reclamation projects in the 19th century.

Following Robert Howard's death in 1717, per his recorded will, the property transitioned to his daughter, Sarah Wyborne, who remained in the house with her family until 1741. Following the Wyborne ownership period, the house passed over to Andrew Knox, a mariner, his son Andrew Jr., and then a John Erving who took over ownership of the property following the younger Knox defaulting on his mortgage.

It was at this stage, during the Erving period of ownership, that Paul Revere entered the picture. In 1770, Paul Revere purchased the house that would become famous for his name attached for 213 pounds, 6 shillings, and 8 pence. At the time, the house was still one of the larger homes in the neighborhood, which met the Revere's needs with their ever-growing family. At the time they moved into the house, only weeks before the Boston Massacre, the Revere family consisted of at least Paul, his wife Sarah, their five children, and Paul's mother Deborah.

At 90 years old though, the house definitely needed some work, which is how it could fit into the Revere's solidly middle-class budget. Ever the craftsman and creator, Revere would make improvements to the home, some of which are still seen today. In Revere's thirty years of ownership, he improved the house through adding a working kitchen to the first floor of the home via another fireplace in addition to other cosmetic alterations on both the interior and exterior.

Though the Revere's called the house their primary residence through the early years of the American Revolution, the family (save for Paul Jr.) were able to evacuate the house under Rachel's guidance after the battles of Lexington and Concord. They returned after the British evacuated Boston on March 17, 1776, but the family appears to have lived elsewhere for periods in the 1780s. At different stages, a tailor, George deFrance, and a miniature painter, Joseph Dunkerly, rented the house, in the 80s.

As Revere's business success accumulated over the 1790s, and the family came back into the home, he ultimately decided to sell the house and move his family into larger, more stately quarters. The Reveres relocated to a Georgian style brick house on Charter Street in the North End, while soon thereafter adding a second residence at his country estate in Canton. For the Revere House itself, a quick succession of sales followed until the house was purchased by John Loring in 1803. The Loring family would maintain ownership of the house for the better part of the next half-century, as it was run primarily as a boarding house for sailors. Loring's daughter Lydia took on the house in 1833, and maintained ownership for the following decades.

In 1867, after the Civil War, Catherine Wilkie, originally from Ireland, purchased the Paul Revere House, marking a new ownership period that matched the general demographics of the North End at the time. The neighborhood's population had swelled in the previous decades with immigration from Ireland, in particular, and that would soon be followed by waves of Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe and then finally Italians at the end of the century.

Catherine Wilkie is often jointly listed as an owner with her husband James, who hailed from Scotland. In total, the couple owned the house for 25 years until 1892. The Wilkies continued the house's use as a boarding house, primarily for sailors and new immigrants, but also seem to have run a saloon out of the house's first level at the time. During their period and into the following ownership by Sidney Squires, starting in 1892, the house also functioned as an Italian bank, a fruit and vegetable stand, a cigar rolling operation, and a confectionary manufactory.

It was in its iteration as a fruit and vegetable stand that the Revere House ran into its period of greatest danger. In 1901, one of the last tenants of the house, Pasquale Nazarro, apparently tried to ripen bananas with a kerosene lamp in the basement, would not recommend. The ploy did not work out well, as one of the ancient timber beams caught fire. While the flames were extinguished without much damage, the ordeal made the front page of local papers, perhaps spurred on by a plaque commemorating the house, which was added to the exterior by the Daughters of the American Revolution some six years prior. The papers themselves were not flattering to Nazarro's heritage or the neighborhood's current overcrowded, immigrant status. The house was slated to be torn down, much like many of the other historic properties had been in Boston through the late 19th century.

In 1902, however, Paul Revere's great-grandson John Phillips Reynolds, Jr. purchased the house. While it continued as a residence for its tenants, in particular Maria Santosuosso through 1905, other Revere descendants and interested parties came together to form the Paul Revere Memorial Association with an eye towards restoration. This process began in earnest under the plans of Joseph Chandler in 1907, and on April 18, 1908- of course the anniversary of Paul Revere's midnight ride, the house opened to the public as one of the first historic house museums in the United States. This year marks our 112th year of being open to the public, which we aim to return to soon!

All of this of course, again, is just a brief introduction to the history of the house. There are many well known stories that can be delved into through the lives of the house's occupants, as well as many yet to be uncovered. As we do, we hope you will continue to spread the word about Revere House Radio, which can be downloaded via Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and iHeart Radio, in addition to being found on our website. Please continue to watch our social media and website for updates as we all work hard behind the scenes to provide a safe experience for everyone when we are able to reopen our doors. That will do it for this episode of Revere House radio- as always, stay safe, and thanks for listening!