

Revere House Radio

Episode 16

Paul Revere and Boston's North End

Welcome in to another episode of Revere House Radio, I am your host Robert Shimp. As we move closer to reopening the Paul Revere House after months of covid-related closures, we thought it would be useful to prime to pump so to speak for upcoming visitors. We have recently covered an introductory history of the Paul Revere House on Revere House Radio- when it was built, the various individuals who called it home over the centuries, the varied business that ran out of the house, and the process through which it became a historic house museum. If you are interested in an exterior tour of the house or of North Square where the house resides, check out the Revere Express blog on our website for a pair of articles that will provide you with that content. In continuing this general theme, this week, we are going to expand on that topic a bit, and discuss Paul Revere's life-long connection to Boston's North End.

Boston's North End is one of, it not the, most recognizable neighborhood in the City today. It still primarily comes across as Boston's Italian neighborhood, following massive waves of Italian immigration into the area in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and then generations of Italians and Italian Americans continuing to call it home through the modern day. It is a staple of any visitor's trip to Boston, and the neighborhood buzz is definitely picking up again with restaurants and some shops reopening. It is a relatively small and manageable area in a modern city that has held at bay high rise buildings and mass market chain brands.

Despite its modest size today, it is much larger than it used to be. The physical space of the neighborhood has changed a good deal since Paul Revere roamed its streets. Thanks especially to land reclamation projects in the 19th century, the North End has grown greatly since the 18th century, and has much less of a maritime feel in its interior than it would have during the American Revolution. You are never far from the water in today's North End, but you would have felt the breeze and smells of the wharves at the Revere House itself during the Revere's time there.

Though Paul Revere could rightly be considered a lifelong resident of Boston's North End, his most prominent connection to the neighborhood still stands today at 19 North Square as the Paul Revere House. The house is of course still the oldest house still standing in downtown Boston today, and Revere owned it for 30 years, from 1770 to 1800, though we think the family actually held a different residence in the North end for periods of the 1780s.

While the house stands out as quite different from its neighboring buildings today, North Square- the large square immediately across from the Revere house- would have been dominated by Old

North Meeting House, the church previously headed by the Mather Family during the Revere family's first years there as residents. The church stood at the top of North Square, and was a fixture from the 17th century through the American Revolution. During the early years of the Revolution itself, the fiery preacher John Lathrop preached to pro-patriot crowds, and it is perhaps not surprising then, that in one of their last actions in Boston, the British soldiers stationed in town pulled the church down for firewood in February of 1776. The Revere's returned to the scene of wreckage later that year, and the church's absence was noteworthy to the family.

Paul Revere did not have to go far for his worship, though, as the New Brick Church stood in Boston's north End on Hanover Street. From the first official contemporary record of his life, we know that Paul Revere was baptized at that meeting house on January 1, 1735. Revere attended the congregationalist church through his life in Boston and was an active member of parish life. Especially in his later years, Revere was instrumental to church offices and even made the first bell for his church when one was needed in 1792, though he had no prior experience in doing so. It never stopped him before and it certainly didn't stop him that time either.

For more worldly concerns, the wharves of Boston's North End played central roles in Revere's life and formative years. The wharves were Boston's hub of activity and outlets to the greater world, and Paul Revere was usually not more than a stone's throw from them. His mother Deborah's Hichborn relations owned a prominent wharf in the town, and Revere's early years were spent primarily in a house at the end of Clark's Wharf, close to the intersection of North and Fleet streets.

While he likely worked in the North End for his entire silversmith career, Revere's primary shop was at the corner of what is now Lewis and North Street. The intersection of the two streets is still there today, though the feel of the location is markedly different than in Revere's time. His business was strategically located at the end of Clark's wharf, where could conduct business with all sorts of people coming off of ships and working on the docks. He could advertise his finer wares for ship captains and owners, perhaps an elaborate tea service or a bespoke gift. Conversely, Revere could also make simple buttons, utensils, or small gifts for itinerant sailors looking for a quick fix or perhaps an item to impress a would-be-beau.

In terms of his political business, Revere of course left from Boston's North End on his famous Midnight Ride of April 18, 1775. He is most connected to the Old North Church in the North End through Longfellow's poem, which has Revere waiting across the Charles for two lanterns to be hung. In reality, Revere set into motion the events through which 2 lanterns were hung from Old North's steeple- Revere was well familiar with the Church and its steeple's prominence since he lived only a few blocks away from it, and the Church is of course another staple along Boston's Freedom Trail today.

Revere found his greatest business successes later in life after the American Revolution, and the first major project he took on came right in the North End. Revere's iron foundry ran from his home neighborhood on Foster Street, near the corner of Commercial street. It was from this location that Revere began and then honed his bell making skills, producing bells that scattered the landscape in Boston, New England, and eventually ran through different parts of the country.

He also used his foundry to produce mortars and ship fittings, which became instrumental to ships like the USS Constitution with the United States' navy coming into existence in the 1790s.

Even when Paul Revere sold his home at 19 North Square in 1800, he decided not to quit the only neighborhood he had called home. Yes, Revere is most known for his late life exploits in Canton, at the first copper rolling mill in the United States, but he also maintained a residence on Charter Street in the North End. The elegant brick house had a Georgian style to it, and was undoubtedly a significant step up from the then 120 year old wooden post and beam house at 19 North Square. Revere kept residence there after Rachel's death in 1813 and fittingly, passed away in his North End home on May 18, 1818, closing the circle of his life which began in the North End some 83 years prior. There is of course much more to the connections, people and places alike, that Revere maintained to his neighborhood. As we continue to get closer to re-opening the Revere House, if you are able to visit the North End this summer or in the future, try out some of these sites around the neighborhood and re-trace Revere's haunts. You can also learn about the vast array of other stories that link to Revere's time and certainly beyond!

In the meantime, we will keep you posted on all of our channels- our website and social media in particular, with updates on our next steps. We are excited to welcome back visitors soon, and will continue to produce content for Revere House Radio and the Revere Express on our website. Do keep in touch with any questions you may have on this, or our reopening- we love to hear from you! Please subscribe to the podcast on iTunes or Spotify, and let your friends know about this content! That will do it for this edition of Revere House Radio- until next time, stay safe, and thanks for listening.