

Revere House Radio

Episode 22

The Revere/ Rivoire Connection

Welcome in to another episode of Revere House Radio, I'm your host Robert Shimp. While the name 'Revere' has been a staple of American history since Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem was published just before the Civil War, many visitors are surprised to learn that the Revere last name is actually an altered one- one that was made to sound more akin to that of an English colonial. In fact, the name originally had nothing to do with England, it was a French surname, Rivoire. What that means for the Paul Revere that we know is that his paternal lineage was French, not English, and he was actually a first generation American on his Rivoire side.

Paul's father, whose silver you can find around American museums under the listing of Paul Revere, Sr.- was actually named Apollos Rivoire at birth and through his first years in America. Apollos was born in France near Bordeaux in late 1702, and left in 1715 to stay for a time with his uncle Simon on the Channel Island of Guernsey. From there, the young Apollos arrived in America at the age of 13, and was somehow able to secure- we don't know whether it was predetermined or one that he came into upon arrival to America- an apprenticeship with John Coney, one of the preeminent silversmiths- or goldsmiths, if you would prefer the more formal and correct term- in Boston.

We do not know what drove Apollos, or perhaps more likely, his family, to send him to America. Contextually, there was likely a religious component to the move, as the Rivoires were Huguenots, or French Protestants. Following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 by Louis the 14th, French Protestants were no longer secured in their personal rights and liberties as they had been for the previous century. Over the subsequent decades, the opportunities for young French Protestants grew increasingly slim, so it would make sense that Apollos's parents may have looked to the new world in America as a place in which a young Protestant- albeit, one who spoke French, might be able to secure a better life amongst the Massachusetts late Puritan society.

Though it was very likely a difficult transition to life in Boston, it seems Apollos made the most of his experience as a teenage immigrant. There would not have been many Frenchmen and French women living in Boston at the time- especially as Boston was still a small town at that stage. He would have needed to learn English quickly, as French would have been his native tongue and most likely the only language that he knew. That said, there were prominent Huguenot families in Boston, and several whose names are still recognizable today- such as Bow-done and Faneuil.

Apollos's apprenticeship with John Coney worked out well for him- though Coney ultimately died relatively young and before Apollos was able to fully complete his contracted labor and learning, he was able to draw on Coney's shop and clientele in building up his own practice. He became a skilled silversmith in his own right, and his reputation was certainly enhanced by his training with and connections to Coney.

He also must have cracked into Boston society in a meaningful way, in a short amount of time, as he married Deborah Hichborn from the well-established Hichborn family by 1729. The Hichborn connection would provide Apollos, but more specifically Paul, important connections and financial benefits that would be a boon to their respective careers, as the Hichborns were by that point, well established across varying professions, with some working as mariners, artisans, and businessmen in Boston.

According to the Paul we know, his father ultimately changed his name to Paul Revere, as he recollected, "merely so that the bumpkins could pronounce it easier." Paul's comment conveys an amount of disdain for provincial colonists of English descent who likely scoffed at a young Frenchman trying to make his way in their midst. Though they shared a general Protestant religion- at least to them Apollos was not a French Catholic- he clearly must have been treated as an outsider with a funny name and likely a very strong accent at least at first.

Nevertheless, Paul Sr. became an important member of Boston's society, and the more famous Paul continued on with his father's anglicized name. With the new name, Paul Revere interacted more with his Hichborn relations directly, and benefitted from them financially to keep his business running, and ultimately embraced their general culture far more than any lingering French Rivoire customs.

All the while, the Paul Revere that we know remained curious about his father's background. Apollos died on July 22, 1754 when Paul was 19, so he certainly had a chance to know his father, and likely knew him quite well as he spent 6 years as his apprentice. Still, questions must have remained, and there was clearly a strong pull for Paul to maintain the Rivoire connection and learn more about his ancestry.

Starting in 1775, Paul began a correspondence with two Rivoire cousins that would, at sporadic intervals, span the next few decades and would provide future generations with some of the most personal letters and papers that we have from Paul Revere.

Paul would correspond most with his cousin John- who lived on the Isle of Guernsey and tended to make and take pro-British position that rankled Revere. John then put Paul in touch with his second cousin Matthias- who lived in San Foye la Grande in France. Fortunately for us, we can glean several things from the rich letters between these relatives. First, it is immediately clear that Paul Revere did not read or write in French. His cousin Matthias asked him to write in French if possible, as there was only one person near him who knew English to translate what Paul Revere would write to him.

Beyond the linguistic information, the letters offer us real insights into Paul Revere's self-perceptions and political stances. The incomplete correspondence provides some of the most

intimate glimpses we get of his feelings about his family and its size. In getting the correspondence with John off the ground in 1781, Revere talked about learning the silversmith trade from his father, his military service, and some of his businesses, which included trade to Holland. In summation of his place in life, he said he was “in middling circumstances and very well off for a tradesman.” He detailed that he had a wife, 8 living children, and one living brother and two living sisters. In continuing on the thread Revere, later noted in 1786 that “I have begun to think, shall have no more children. I have had fifteen children and six grandchildren.” Though 15 often sounds like a lot to us, it is clear Paul desired more children, and in fact, would get his wish when the 16th and last Revere child- the third and only surviving son named John, was born in 1787.

We also know that Revere definitely would have been a person to talk politics at family gatherings- Revere felt free to delve into deep discussion about his feelings about the American Revolution and the reasons behind it. In fact, he and his cousin John really had it out on the issue. Revere wrote to John towards the end of the American Revolution, and spewed vitriol towards the British- Revere argued that it was “the birth right of *every* Englishman not to be taxed without the consent of himself, or Representative” and that King George III and his ministers “did not want colonies of free men, they wanted colonies of Slaves.” He said the name of an Englishman was “odious” to Americans, and that Americans would now, at the end of the Revolution, be free forever of British oppression.

Despite potential political differences, it is clear that Revere held an affinity for his cousins after getting to know them a bit more through correspondence. He desired to maintain the Revere/Rivoire connection, as he made a generous offer to John in 1782, saying “My dear Cousin I must once more invite you to come to America. Should there be a peace, which I hope is not far distant, you may enjoy all the liberty here, which the human mind so earnestly craves after. I am not rich but I am in good circumstances, & if you will come here you shall not want; while I have a shilling, you shall have part.”

Paul Revere himself never crossed the Atlantic to do a deeper dive into his paternal lineage, nor does it seem either of his cousins made their way to the United States. Revere’s curiosity about his French heritage has carried on through the family and for generations of historians. In the 1880s, his grandson General Joseph Warren Revere traveled to France on a fact finding mission- while his work proved inconclusive, he identified a coat of arms similar to that which Paul Revere himself used, and compiled information on the De Rivoires in Dauphiny. There is of course much more information on the concrete connections to the Rivoires in France- the correspondence is rich, but incomplete, as some of the exchanges have been lost or remain one sided. We hope to do more work with this story of immigration and transatlantic politics in the future, though I hope this serves as a good primer for anyone interested in the immigrant history for the Revere family!

That will do it for this week’s episode- we love to maintain the links to the Revere family and this area in France where we can, so do let us know if you have any additional thoughts or insights into the Revere’s French connections! In closing, we would like to thank the continued support from the Society of the Cincinnati, which helps make this programming possible. As we continue our programming, please follow us on all of our social media platforms to keep up to

date on all PRH happenings, and as a reminder, the Revere House itself is open to the public if you would like to come visit in person- we are open 10-4 Wednesdays through Sundays, but do check out our website or give us a call to confirm any changes to the schedule before visiting, especially if you are listening to this episode some time after it airs! As always, we greatly appreciate your continued support- until next time, stay safe, and thanks for listening!