

Revere House Radio

Episode 24

Pierce-Hichborn House

Welcome to Revere House Radio, I'm your host, Adrienne Turnbull-Reilly. Episode 23 of this podcast was all about our visitor center located at 5 and 6 Lathrop Place. In that episode, I wanted to shed some light on the rich history of the buildings many of our staff work in regularly, and when we're open normally, house public space as well. In a similar vein, I wanted to also give some attention to the other building on our site, commonly known as the Pierce-Hichborn House. The architectural history of the Pierce-Hichborn House is intensely complicated, and I don't want to simply list off dates and statistics, but rather weave a story of the neighborhood and the human activities in the house. However, I would be remiss if I didn't outline major changes and eras in the house's life, because they do help set the scene for how the Paul Revere Memorial Association ultimately became the caretaker of this Boston treasure. So. Let's dive in.

The original brick structure that abuts the sidewalk on North St was built between 1711 and 1715. However, as early as 1701 there is evidence of wooden shop buildings there. These become important when discussing the Pierce part of the Pierce-Hichborn house because Mary Peirse left these wooden buildings to her son Moses in 1710. Moses Peirse made and fitted glass windows as his job, called a glazier. This makes a lot of sense if you visit the building, as the side facing the little bricked courtyard is decked out lavishly with many large windows. We think Peirse used this property at least partially as his shop, so perhaps he was also using his house as a showroom? The original brick structure is a wonderful example of early Georgian architecture, which prides itself on symmetry, restraint, and balance.

Pierce sold the house in 1747 to a man named William Shippard. We know very little of Shippard, but think that he was perhaps a mariner. He died in 1785 in Medford, Massachusetts. In 1781, he sold the house to a certain Nathaniel Hichborn, the other half of the Pierce-Hichborn name.

Nathaniel was a boatbuilder, and many of the early Hichborns were involved in seafaring endeavours, to the point of owning a small wharf on Boston's coast. Nathaniel died in 1796 at the age of 61, leaving his property to his wife Elizabeth and sons Samuel, a sailmaker, and Benjamin, a housewright. This is close to when, in 1800, the family added a rectangular shaped

portion to the back of the building, called an ell. The ell significantly increased the square footage of the home, and also included a state of the art kitchen upgrade. After Elizabeth's death the two sons shared joint ownership, and then after brother Benjamin's death, Samuel took full ownership of the property in 1815. You may notice the overlap in dates of Revere's ownership of his home (1770-1800) and the Hichborn's ownership. The two families were related through Paul's mother Deborah, sister to Thomas Hichborn, Nathaniel's father. This makes Nathaniel and Paul cousins, and neighbors from 1781 to 1796. Nathaniel and Elizabeth's son Samuel, the sailmaker, lived in the house until 1844, at which point he moved in with his son Charles who lived in the South End of Boston. There is speculation that Charles moved Samuel out because of the changing dynamics in the neighborhood, which many old Bostonians viewed as declining. By this point in time the North End had made the shift from old Colonial mansions to boarding and tenement houses. Both the Revere House and Lathrop Place were serving as boarding houses at this time.

While Sameul wasn't living in the house after 1844, the building remained in the Hichborn family. We don't know a whole lot about who lived there after Samuel, but there are some interesting snippets from the mid-19th century that I don't want to overlook. From 1850-51 we see a George Pearce, different Pearce than Moses' family, listed as a hairdresser. From 1861-1862 James Giannetto, hairdresser, lived and worked in the Hichborn House. From 1865-1868, Antonio Giannetto operated a barbershop out of the building. Noticing a trend? Antonio also operated a barbershop at 21 North Square, aka the Revere House, from 1863-1864. He moved out of the Hichborn house in 1869 and resumed his barbershop at a different north square address. These names and dates are significant, because they indicate some of the very earliest Italian immigration into the North End. The fact that James was able to successfully set up a business as early as 1861 indicates that there were enough Italians to keep his business profitable. We also see the lines of access that one or a handful of people can provide for a whole community. In this case, James was probably the father or the brother of Antonio, setting him up for his own commercial success. It was not uncommon for people to seek out and settle near family for both comfort, and economic opportunities.

While all of this grooming was going on in the house, it did change ownership. In 1864, Catherine Hart bought the building from Samuel Hichborn's estate for \$6,000. However, we don't think she ever actually lived in the house. Instead, she lived above the saloons she ran, then later in a rental on North Sq, then she finally moved to Charlestown to live with family members Margaret and Daniel Mahoney. Catherine died in 1897, at which point the Mahoneys took over full ownership of the property through their inheritance. Daniel Mahoney retained rights to the property through the early 1900s, taking out a mortgage on the building in 1931 through the Charlestown Trust Company for \$7,000. And here you're going to see a theme resurface. In 1930 a man called Salvator Santoro operated a barbershop here, and later a man named Ancona Francesco worked as a barber from 1936-1939. From these records, we know Mahoney must

have had some money coming in, but clearly not enough, defaulting on his mortgage in 1938, the Charlestown Mortgage Loan Company seized the property for lack of payment.

The records for the years between 1938 and 1940 are spotty at best, but they pick up again revealing some tenant names in 1941, as well as a clear owner. In December 1940, Carlton Richmond bought the Pierce-Hichborn House for \$1600 on public auction. This was in cooperation with Old Boston Inc, an organization formed to help preserve Boston's architectural heritage spearheaded by a locally known preservationist, William Sumner Appleton. Richmond bought the house specifically to save it from potential destruction and to facilitate its restoration. High minded intentions be damned, in October of 1948, the Hichborn House was raided by Boston police for a betting ring scheme in which more than one million lottery slips were seized. This exciting incident didn't do any lasting damage to the house, just an article write-up in the newspaper and a good story to tell years later. Finally, an architectural firm called Strickland and Strickland was contracted, and the house began its restoration in 1949 and finished in 1950. This restoration also included the last major structural addition to the house, the rear-most portion that contains a modern staircase, giving easier access to the levels at the back of the building. At the same time, the Moses Pierce Williams Association formed as the body meant to care for the building.

Beyond the major portions of the house mentioned previously, there were many smaller outbuildings, privies, and even a brick tenement building that was built between 1843 and 1852 that all existed on or adjacent to the Hichborn House property. What I wouldn't give to see a time lapse video of this little corner of Boston.

And this brings us up to the present day. The Paul Revere Memorial Association has owned the Hichborn House since 1970 when the Moses Pierce Williams Association offered its building to them. Since then, we've been using it as a historic house museum, and also as staff office space, collections space, and a staff kitchen. Until we had use of our Visitor Center starting in 2017, we also used the Hichborn House as classroom space for visiting school field trips. Right in keeping with its history, the building continues to host all sorts of activities and people. I tend to think it would get bored without all the hustle and bustle!

I wouldn't have been able to present you with all this history without the extensive research done by others before me. Digging through Boston city archives for census records, property deeds, newspapers articles, and much more is not something I have the time for, but others have done much of the work for me, thank goodness. I understand this episode is dense with descriptions and dates, if you would like to see architectural drawings of the Hichborn House to get a better sense of what I'm describing, see the link to our website in the show notes. We also had the good fortune of hosting the Boston City Archeology Lab in the summer of 2018, when they dug into the Pierce-Hichborn courtyard. Many objects were found, ranging from animal bones, buttons,

shells, pottery, and even some Lego pieces. I encourage you to go on their website to see some videos of them at the dig, as well as some interesting articles on the process. I'll link to that in the show notes as well.

As we round the corner into the holiday season and the end of 2020, I thank you again for listening to Revere House Radio. We will continue to bring you content on the Revere House, its neighborhood, and its people. Thanks for listening to this episode, and we'll be in your feeds again soon with more content!