

Revere House Radio

Episode 25

Restoration and the Early Days of the Paul Revere House

Welcome to Revere House Radio, I'm your host, Adrienne Turnbull-Reilly. My last couple of episodes have highlighted the two additional buildings we have on our site - Lathrop Place and the Pierce Hichborn House. All three of our buildings have had rich and dynamic lives, with some similarities and many differences. For example, the construction of each one falls within three distinct centuries - 17th, 18th, and 19th, so they all have unique architectural biographies. However, all three were used at some point as boarding houses, and both the Revere House and the Hichborn House were used commercially as well. Even before its restoration in 1907, the Revere House was recognized for its significance both as the home of the famous patriot and as one of the oldest standing homes remaining in Boston. Because of that, and given the fact that while the Revere House was first operating as a museum while our two other buildings were still private residences, I wanted to explore a little bit of how this early historic house museum fit into the neighborhood. Who were some key players in its initial preservation? Who was it primarily serving? How did the restoration of the house fit into larger social movements? So today, we're going to zoom out a little and hear about the Revere House, its restoration, and the North End in the early 1900s.

As you can probably guess, the attitude toward the people living in the North End in the early 20th century was not great. In the 18th century, the North End was home to many people of differing socio-economic standings, with large mansions such as Thomas Hutchinson's on Garden Court St, to the more modest middle class homes such as Paul Revere's. As we get farther into the 19th century, many of Boston's wealthy residents started vacating the neighborhood and settling in other parts of Boston. By the late 1800s, when the Back Bay was nearing completion, that neighborhood became highly desirable for the Boston elite. This left space for new immigrants to settle in the North End, and so the area started getting a reputation as being the "foreign quarter." For example, listen to how North Square was described in a 1903 guidebook, written by Edwin Bacon.

This squalid triangular enclosure was the central point of the North End in its 'elegant' days, when it was adorned with trees and dignified by neighboring mansions. It is now the heart of the Italian colony. At its outlet upon North St is the one landmark here of historic value. This is the little low house of wood,

hedged in by ambitious modern structures, marked as the home of Paul Revere.

Concurrent with these demographic changes was extreme unrest and tension in the United States. The onset of the American Civil War had reverberations throughout the country of course, and left a legacy we're still reckoning with today. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, a well known poet and translator, penned his poem titled "Paul Revere's Ride" right at the beginning of the conflict. Published first in the *Atlantic Monthly* in December of 1860, the poem retells, albeit with many inaccuracies, the adventures of Revere in April of 1775. Why am I talking about the poem? Because by many accounts, Longfellow's poem is what launched Revere into the American mythos, where he still holds a place today. Given this, the latter half of the 19th century is when Revere, his legacy, and his house, started gaining more recognition from people across the country, and drew many out of town visitors and locals alike to visit the North End. At this time, the building was not being treated in any special way, and included both businesses and a boarding house. This continued into the 1890s, when the Daughters of the American Revolution, who I will refer to from here on out as the DAR, decided that the house needed some recognition for the role it played in the nation's founding. In 1895 - April 18th to be exact - the Paul Revere chapter of the DAR installed a commemorative plaque on the outside of the house to draw clear lines between the house and its famous occupant from the 1700s. The following Sunday, April 20th, 1895, a ceremony was held at the Old North Church to publicly dedicate and celebrate the installation of the plaque and commemorate the neighborhood's significance in the larger battle for independence.

As Revere's fame increased and the population of the North End continued to change, there was a growing movement in Boston and many cities to establish patriotic, enriching, and educational institutions. Much of the energy behind this came from wealthy Progressives, who saw it as their duty to use their money, influence, connections, and patriotic fervor to help new arrivals learn about the country's past, while at the same time educating them in useful trades, the English language, and how to be engaged citizens. One of the Revere House's biggest champions at the time was also a descendant, named Pauline Revere Thayer. Revere Thayer was Paul's great-granddaughter, and a woman who solidified her place in the Boston elite when she married Nathaniel Thayer. Pauline's connection to the house was not only hereditary, she was also heavily involved in efforts to benefit immigrants through the state government, which I can only assume informed her preservation efforts. She served as the head of Immigration and Americanization in the Massachusetts Department of Education from 1921-1931. She served in many charitable endeavours throughout her life, and hoped the preservation and restoration of the Revere house as "a constant incentive to patriotic citizenship and the study of our national history." Along with her cousin John Reynolds Jr., Pauline spent the early 1900s raising funds to pay back the purchase price of the house - 12,000 dollars - and fund the restoration - for a total of 30,000 dollars.

The time was ripe for this fundraising. There was increasing urgency to preserve old homes and other material culture that fed into a movement called the Colonial Revival. This intellectual movement was rooted in late 19th century industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. There was a sense of urgency about teaching new arrivals about the morals and origins of the United States, which was largely accomplished by the establishment of museums, architectural styles, decorative arts, and educational outlets such as the Saturday Evenings Girls.

As part of efforts by wealthy Bostonian Helen Storrow, with help from Edith Guerrier and Edith Brown, the Saturday Evening Girls was an educational club founded in the North End to expose first and second generation immigrants to the literature, arts, and history of the United States. In addition to a safe environment to learn and socialize, the founders of the Saturday Evening Girls also wanted to equip their students with useful and profitable skills they could use in their adult lives. The most notable outgrowth of this mission is the Paul Revere Pottery. Paul Revere Pottery produced decorative pieces that were both in keeping with the Arts and Crafts style of the time, while also harkening back to a “simpler” time in the Colonial Era when hardworking craftspeople - such as Paul Revere - made their living honestly. The name was no convenience of proximity to the North End, it was intentionally chosen to draw a clear line between the products being produced on Hull St in the North End, and the bygone era of early Boston, which most of the Pottery’s target audience would think fondly of. Some of the Pottery’s students went on to become well known artists and craftspeople, like Sarah Galner, whose work you will still find in museums today. In fact, we have some small pieces of Paul Revere Pottery in our own collections.

I bring up Paul Revere Pottery because it is an example of the types of Progressive Era activities that dovetail perfectly with the restoration of the Revere House. Many thought that teaching practical skills like creating pottery would give people good jobs to thrive in their new country. They also thought that teaching America’s history would by extension instill a devotion to the way of life they thought best. We don’t actually know who the first early visitors to the museum were when it opened in 1908, though I think it’s safe to assume a mixture of locals and tourists alike. If you could time travel back to our opening day, the cost to enter was 25 cents, which is about 7 dollars today.

Organizations like the Saturday Evening Girls did benefit a lot of people, but of course, there were many people who did not attend clubs like this one. People who worked hard and didn’t pay much attention to the history of the neighborhood where they happened to settle when they arrived in the United States. Life was hard for many new immigrants and the efforts of a wealthy few did not reach everyone. The Revere House today is still wide open to whomever wants to visit, to learn about our country’s past, but what may surprise those living in the North End at the turn of the 20th century is that now they are themselves part of our interpretation.

We hope that you enjoyed this episode of Revere House Radio, which was generously funded by a grant from the Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati. See the show notes for this episode to find links to early images of the Revere House, the DAR plaque, work by the Paul Revere Pottery and a blog post about Pauline Revere Thayer if you want to learn more about her. Stay tuned for some more holiday themed content coming up in the next few weeks. And as always, thanks for listening.