

Revere House Radio

Episode 27

Happy Birthday Paul Revere!

If I asked you when Paul Revere's birthday is, what would you say? Depending on who you ask, you may get different answers. Until about two years ago, very few people were aware of when Revere's birthday actually was. Well, now we know for sure, and today I'm doing a short little happy birthday episode for our namesake. I'm Adrienne Turnbull-Reilly, and you're listening to Revere House Radio.

It was spring of 2019 when we received a very special object into our collections. A descendant of Joseph Warren Revere, Paul's second born son, donated a Revere family bible to us that had the birth, marriage, and death dates for many of the Reveres, including Paul's birthday, written in his own hand! For years his birthday was unknown and often estimated based on his baptismal date in late December, 1734. However, it was confirmed to be Dec 21, 1734, in the Bible.

We were so excited to receive this gift, not only for its tremendous historical value as a primary source document with family significance, but also because we were just curious! It is relatively rare that these types of questions get answered, but sometimes they do, and that's what makes working in history so exciting, you never know when you might find or receive new information.

When we first received the bible, it needed some conservation work just to clean it up and stabilize it for storage. We sent it off to our friends at the Northeast Document Conservation Center, where they worked their magic (which is actually science) to clean and stabilize it before returning it to us.

Now in our care, we're thrilled to be able to confidently tell people when they ask, that Paul was born on December 21, 1734. Since his birthday had previously been estimated based on his baptismal date, which was December 22, 1734, we always suspected he was born in late December. However, there is another reason why you may see his birth date listed variously as 1734 or 35, and that is the "old style" and "new style" calendars that often confuse dates from this period.

In this case, the “old style” calendar is the Julian calendar, put in place under Julius Caesar. The main distinction you’ll notice with this calendar is that the first day of the new year falls in March.

In the 1500s, Pope Gregory XIII authorized a new calendar system, one we call, you guessed it, the Gregorian calendar. The main change was that the first day of the new year was moved back to January 1, and, to compensate for some extra days that had accrued over the last several centuries, 10 days were removed from October.

The big problem with all of this is that because the Gregorian calendar came from the Pope, many protestant countries refused to go along with it at first. So, we have a period of about 170 years during which both calendars were in effect and it was incumbent upon everyone to include both types of dates in their records. So, when reading documents between 1582 and 1752, when England and its colonies finally got on board with the Gregorian calendar, historians have to decipher dates with this in mind. Many people just went ahead and wrote both dates, which is very helpful, but not everyone.

All this being said, since Revere was born in 1734, the first part of his life falls solidly within this “double dating” period, which has led to some confusion surrounding his birth date. You may see his birth date listed as January 1, 1735, which is what his birthday becomes when December twenty first gets converted from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar.

It’s interesting that Revere wrote his birthday according to the Julian calendar, and didn’t change it even later in life. The bible we acquired is a Baskerville bible printed in England between 1769 and 1772, after the official switch over to the Gregorian calendar by England and its colonies. This implies that Revere really saw himself as a December baby, and used this date his whole life. If that is really when Revere would honor his own birth date, then that’s the day we’re going to go with too!

We made an announcement of this new acquisition in our fall 2019 issue of the *Revere House Gazette*. If you want to be the first in the know about exciting happenings at the Revere House, or are interested in longer form articles about a variety of topics, may I suggest becoming a member of the Friends of Paul Revere? Each issue includes fascinating, well researched articles by current and past staff, as well as guest contributors. See the online version of the Gazette on our membership page to decide for yourself, I’ll link to it in the show notes.

All of our online content for this month has been sponsored by the Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati, so big thanks to them for their support. Show your support by continuing to listen and sharing with a friend. This has been Revere House Radio, I’m Adrienne Turnbull-Reilly, and Happy Birthday Paul!

