Revere House Radio

Episode 17

Paul Revere and Penobscot

Welcome in to another edition of Revere House Radio, I am your host Robert Shimp. As we are coming to you with this episode on July 28, 2020, we are excited to announce that we are officially open to the public at the Paul Revere House! We reopened last week, and while our numbers are limited, we are excited to offer more formal experiences for you to visit our site, with tours that are more timed than self-guided. This means more one on one time with our great interpreters on site! We would like to thank all of our supporters, listeners, and those who have made donations in this process- we greatly, greatly, appreciate it and are really excited to continue to bring you new content here, on the Revere Express blog, and now in-person on site at the Paul Revere House.

In today's episode of Revere House Radio, we tackle the question of Paul Revere's court-martial. The story is one that visitors to the Paul Revere House usually have 2 reactions to. First, they are surprised in a negative sense that an American icon like Paul Revere would have the words court-martial even remotely associated with his name. Second, more questions abound when interpreters let them know that it was actually Paul Revere himself who pushed for a court-martial, in order to clear his name from what he perceived to be wrongful accusations that tainted his reputation surrounding the Penobscot Expedition of 1779.

While the story is a long and complicated one, I think it is important to note the circumstances around the Penobscot Episode to begin with. While court-martial generally has negative connotations for us, of course- a member of the military being placed on trial for wrongdoing- in this case for Paul Revere, he was the one that wanted the court-martial. In other words, I mean that Revere was just looking to receive his day in court in front of a military tribunal, in the same way that a civilian would push for their name to be cleared of wrongdoing in an appeals court.

As a prelude to Paul Revere's role in the Penobscot expedition, it is important to know the context of his military career in the American Revolution which led up to that moment. We of course know Paul Revere today for his exploits on his Midnight Ride of 1775, which occurred on what is often referred to as the first day of the American Revolution, at least in a military sense. Revere then got in on the ground floor for the war, then, but his participation that day did not lead into any immediate positions.

Revere thought his service to the cause, both in the Midnight Ride and in his previous year and a half of riding for the Sons of Liberty in Boston up and down the Atlantic Coast put him in a deserving position for immediate military leadership. Revere held out for a position in the

continental army for over a year, while biding his time with his family in Watertown and aiding the cause in several ways through his diverse skill sets. By 1776, long after the Battle of Bunker Hill and the British evacuation from Boston on March 17, Revere finally joined the Massachusetts state train of artillery, securing a commission as a major and soon thereafter was bumped up to lieutenant colonel.

Revere had experience militarily previously on a short-lived campaign with Richard Gridley's artillery train during an expedition to upstate New York in the 7 Years war. Revere saw no action then, and became familiar with the less glamourous aspects of a sometimes tedious and mundane service period. In fact, that would be the case for most of Revere's military career leading up to Penobscot. From 1776-1779, Revere was primarily stationed in Boston, and sporadically held command at Castle William in the Boston Harbor Islands. In this role, Revere oversaw militia operations in a period in which the war really had already moved south from Boston.

During this stretch, Revere had two bites at potentially important campaigns, both of which centered on dislodging the British from the strategically important location in Newport, Rhode Island. The expeditions were attempted in both 1777 and 1778, but each one really came to nothing. Revere saw no action in either campaign, and by 1779 was eager to prove himself on the field of battle and in a position of command.

The proving ground for Revere would come in Maine, but unfortunately for him, the ill-fated Penobscot expedition of 1779 was a comedy of errors with deadly consequences for the Americans. The American forces were comprised of a loose command structure with many competing interests from different military components. This was a mission pushed by Massachusetts, not the continental army, and the lack of overarching control and command became clear from the start.

In July of 1779, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress hastily assembled an expeditionary force to dislodge the British from Castine, Maine, who were looking to form a stronghold in the northern Atlantic with an eye towards a potential Loyalist settlement. Massachusetts had only 3 ships to its name at that point, so it was clear the vast majority of the vessels would need to come from other sources. Many private vessels were drawn into participation, sailing under the authority of the Massachusetts government. As such, privateers could reap the fruits of any plunder from the expedition, and were primarily self-interested contractors when the questions of ultimate loyalty and authority came into play.

Revere and his men, which would be in the artillery, became a cog in the largest naval excursion for the Americans during the Revolutionary war. The command structure was loose, with General Solomon Lovell in command of the ground forces, and Peleg Wadsworth as a second to him. Dudley Saltonstall commanded the naval forces, and Paul Revere was in charge of the artillery. In an intriguing bit of historical connection, Wadsworth- who would clash heads with Revere both during and after Penobscot, actually was a grandfather to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who would of course immortalize Revere with his 1860 poem.

Upon arrival in Maine, the American forces of around twelve hundred men quickly lost the plot. The attack was long delayed, the command structure broke down over time, and ultimately the

Americans became trapped when 7 British warships arrived in Penobscot bay to close off any American escape by the sea. By the end of the expedition, over 450 Americans had been killed, wounded, or captured. Massachusetts lost its entire naval fleet in one expedition. During the chaotic weeks of the siege and failed battles, Paul Revere had not necessarily covered himself in glory. He had repeatedly asked for clarification and confirmation of orders and exactly who was in charge of the command structure, and was slow to act when called upon as it became clear he did not believe the mission could succeed. When events really began to go sideways for the Americans, Revere- with concern for both his personal safety and property and for the lives of his men, set his command on an arduous retreat back to Boston. Revere, with a few other officers, secured a faster boat home, a move that certainly raised eyebrows when he did arrive back in his hometown. Revere's actions seem cautious and self-interested, but both should be in context of a disastrous mission all around for the Americans.

Upon his return home, accusations began to swirl. On September 6 1779, Captain Thomas Carnes put formal charges against Revere, amongst other things accusing him of disobedience on orders from Lovell, Neglect of duty, and Cowardice during the mission. Revere was placed under house arrest and his command of Castle Island was stripped until the charges could be sorted out.

Paul Revere was not a man to take a slight or slander lightly. He had defended his name and honor in business practices many times before the Revolution, and would continue to do so on multiple occasions after the war, when his character was called into question or the quality of his work was called dubious. It should come as no surprise then that he fought the charges against him at Penobscot vehemently and over a long period of time. Initial hearings and proceedings began in September 1779 and continued through the next month at Faneuil Hall, as the event took on the air of an airing of grievances between local commanders and men with personal animosities for each other. At the end of the hearings, Revere was just one part of a larger investigation into Penobscot. Revere was not listed in the final report, as most of the blame fell on Saltonstall. For Revere, this was not good enough, though he wanted full exoneration, not just a tacit understanding he had not erred through not being called out explicitly.

Revere's personal battle stretched out over the next 3 years and took no fewer than 9 requests to clear his name, aiming to secure an official court martial through the Massachusetts legislature and board of war. Again, it is noteworthy that Revere was actually the one pushing for a court-martial to clear his name. Not satisfied with halfway measures, Revere lobbied time and again for his side of the story to be heard and for his name to be fully cleared. It was both a matter of principle and of business for Revere- he would need his reputation fully intact in restarting his career as a silversmith as the war drew to a conclusive American victory.

In the end, in 1782 Revere was ultimately cleared of wrongdoing, a vindication of his arguments, as the court-marital ruled that he should "be acquitted with equal honor as the other officers in the same expedition". While Revere would have preferred stronger wording in his exoneration, he realized, after years of attempts, he should be happy with what he got. The outcome allowed Revere peace of mind and an improved social standing, and he was able to restart his business career in Boston. While Penobscot certainly proved to be a set back, it was a hurdle he was able to overcome in the following decades. Penobscot did make clear that Revere would have no

further military career in the early Republic, though. He would never receive military glory or hold a prominent position that he believed would have been a just reward for his service early in the American Revolution for the sons of liberty.

Revere's business revivals would have a major impact on the United States military, of course. His work at his Iron Foundry and Copper rolling mill greatly assisted the formation of the United States navy with ships like the U.S.S. constitution- so even if Revere did not personally hold a major title, his work directly benefited the United States military in profound ways.

So that will do it for this episode of Revere House Radio- there is of course much more to this story, so do reach out and let us know what you think here or if you have any questions around Penobscot or Revere's career. In the meantime, stay in touch on social media and email, and continue to watch our space and we progress through our reopening process. If you are considering supporting our work through a donation, you can find a link to do so directly on our website at paulreverehouse.org. Thank you so much for your continued support! Until next time, stay safe, and thanks for listening!