

Revere House Radio

Season 1 Episode 21

Where was Paul Revere Jr. During the Siege of Boston?

Welcome to Revere House Radio, I'm your host, Adrienne Turnbull-Reilly. It's October, and here in Boston we're starting to transition into a little cooler weather. The bounty of summer fruits and veggies is starting to wane, and going outside may require you to bring a jacket. I love autumn, but I also have easy access to the food, clothing, and heat that I like to keep me comfortable. This season in 1775 probably had a stronger sense of foreboding for those living on the Shawmut Peninsula. That's because by autumn of 1775, the peninsula that made up the landmass of Boston proper had been under a siege since April of that year. To avoid the hardships of the siege, Paul, Rachel, and the kids had fled Watertown, Massachusetts. All except, maybe, one family member. Today's episode will be taking a closer look at life in Boston between April 1775 and March 1776 for Paul Revere Jr. But before we turn to Paul, let me set the scene for you.

When Paul Revere did his now famous ride from Boston to Lexington, he did not, that we know of, return to Boston. Instead we think he stayed out of the town and organized a place for him and his family to ride out what he knew to be a dicey time in Boston. He wrote letters to his wife Rachel, the earliest we know of dating to late April, 1775, coordinating their meet up and asking her for certain supplies he wanted her to bring from home. After the battle of Lexington and Concord, the militia surrounding the town of Boston could relatively easily trap the King's troops on the Peninsula, threatening it from Dorchester, Cambridge, and, until June of 1775, Charlestown. This meant that the troops had limited mobility and limited supplies coming and going out of Boston, save for the eastern side of the town that opened onto the harbor. This also meant that any civilians in Boston when it went under siege also had very limited access to supplies that they needed, such as food, firewood, and other household necessities. This was a scary time indeed for Boston residents.

There were exceptions though. In the very early days and weeks of the siege many Boston residents requested "passes" from the British government to gain permission to leave the town. There was also an influx of Loyalists streaming into Boston from outlying communities who felt being under the watch of General Gage and his men was safer than being in more rural areas. While the requirements for passes changed rapidly and I'm sure frustrated Boston residents, when Rachel got out of town, the requirement was that people could leave if they surrendered their firearms, and according to some written records, their "merchandise," or household goods. We know that Rachel and the children, as well as perhaps some of Paul's siblings and mother, left Boston to join Paul in Watertown, living with a Mr. and Mrs. Cook, but there is one intriguing mystery that remains to this day. What of Paul Revere Jr.? There has been speculation for decades about whether in fact Paul Jr. stayed behind in Boston. Given the evidence that exists, most people agree that he probably did. For argument's sake, we're going to assume that

he was in Boston for the duration of the siege, and talk about what we think his life might have looked like.

We know that in his late April letter to Rachel, Paul communicates his plans for the family, and also adds a postscript speaking directly to his oldest son. In it he instructs him to be most helpful to his mother and stay at home. The implication is that perhaps he wanted Paul Jr., then 15 years old, to watch the house at 19 North square as well as the silver shop and its holdings. Of course there was fear of looting should properties be left unattended. Those fears bore out as the siege wore on and supplies in Boston, particularly fuel for fires, dwindled. Poor Paul Jr. had had a tough few years. He lost his birth mother two years prior in 1773, started apprenticing under his father with the hopes of becoming a master silversmith only to have the war upend all of these plans indefinitely. Then, he is asked to guard a house and shop against armed military men all by himself? I imagine he was quite nervous. Rachel too, we think, though all we have is a tantalizing line in a letter she wrote to her husband dating to May 2nd, that reads “Why have you altered your mind in regard to pauls coming with us?” We can only presume that Rachel’s maternal instincts toward Paul Jr. meant that she wasn’t a huge fan of this idea. Ever the pragmatist, the letter quickly moves on to other topics and that’s all we hear about Paul Jr.

Paul Jr’s life for the eleven months that the siege lasted was probably a mixture of scary, hungry, boring, and maybe exciting. As a teenage boy, for example, Paul was in a stage that vacillated between childhood and adulthood. He might have enjoyed new freedoms available to him that did not exist under his father’s strict watch. On the other hand, as a young man, he would not have been very experienced in acquiring and cooking his own food, mending clothes beyond the basics, and he would have been a suspicious character in town from General Gage’s perspective. He would have had to make some tough choices about what to do for money, who to spend time with, and how to acquire supplies. Basic questions nag, like where did he live? Did he stay in his home on North square or move into one of his uncle’s houses, for example? What did he eat? Fresh fruits and vegetables were scarce, though there may have been some long storing foods from the previous year in the root cellar, including perhaps some salted and preserved meats. Did he receive letters and cash from his family in Watertown? Did he have friends to spend time with? We know that a man named Isaac Clemmens is mentioned in Revere’s letter saying to Rachel “Lett Isaac Clemmens if he *has* a mind to take care of the shop and maintain himself there. He may, or do as he has a mind.” There’s a chance that Paul Jr. and Isaac Clemmens lived or worked together. Did he have firewood to keep warm? Supplies were trickling into Boston, particularly starting in October of 1775 when British ships started arriving from England. But these products, if Paul could even get his hands on them at all, were sold at much inflated prices that he may not have been able to afford.

Clearly, we don’t know much about Paul Jr.’s life during the eleven months of the siege. We can speculate based on the written records we have, but this is one of the wonderful things about studying history - there’s always more to uncover! What we do know is that the siege lifted in March of 1776 and many residents returned to Boston, including the Reveres. Paul Jr. would go on to serve in the military from 1776-1780, work in his father’s shop as a silversmith, marry at age 22, having 12 children with his wife Sally Edwards, and die in 1813 at the age of 53.

That's the story of Paul Revere Jr. and the siege of Boston. If you're interested in the other Revere children or want to learn more about the siege of Boston - our Revere Express post published on September 19th is all about the kids in the family, and the Massachusetts Historical Society did a great online project all about the siege, you can find that on their website, which I'll include in the show notes. Keep up with all of our activities on our website paulreverehouse.org and on Twitter. If you want to receive a once per month digest of our activities, feel free to sign up for our mailing list on our website, which I'll also link to in the show notes. As always, thanks for listening.