

Revere House Radio

Season 1 Episode 26

Revere Holidays

Welcome in to another episode of Revere House Radio, I'm your host Robert Shimp. The holiday season is always a popular one around the Revere House. With less daylight in the afternoons, North Square looking festive, holiday displays in the house, and I have to say- pretty great imitation candles going in the various rooms, it's easy to feel transported back into the Revere period of ownership in the house for some cold December days in the 1790s. Despite the nostalgic feel and festive touch, visitors are often somewhat surprised to learn, and very interested to discover the ways in which the Reveres' holiday observances differed- sometimes greatly- from many of the traditions that we celebrate today. They definitely would have been huddled up around the fireplace in the cold months with friends and family, just not necessarily for the celebratory reasons we might think. As I am recording this, we just received at least a foot of snow in Boston- so on December days like this it is a reminder that winter weather could hit at any time in the 1790s as well!

When visitors come through the house in December, they anticipate that the holiday displays in the Revere House are for Christmas, but that is not the case. In fact, it's almost certain that the Reveres themselves did nothing major for Christmas. The Reveres were Congregationalists, and their New Brick Church was very much an outgrowth of the Puritan faith tradition in Massachusetts Bay Colony. By the 1790s, the remnants of Puritanism that had dominated Massachusetts and Boston since their foundings had softened in severity, but certainly still influenced daily life and traditions over a calendar year. What that meant for celebrations was that without biblical evidence, holidays could not and should be fashioned from traditions and lore. For the Puritans, no major celebrations or festivities should be held, especially in December. As such, it is true that Christmas celebrations were actually illegal for stages of the 17th in the colony. Even after the hardened opposition to Christmas was legally removed, it of course took a long time for the celebration of the holiday in Massachusetts to become something that we would recognize today.

By the time the Reveres moved into the house at 19 North Square in 1770, the hard edge against Christmas was shifting in and around Boston. By the time that we set the best chamber in the house too- somewhere around 1790- It is possible the Reveres may have 'kept' Christmas- we have no evidence to suggest they did- but they would not have been an anomaly if they did so. Such keeping, for Congregationalists, might have included an attendance at an Anglican service in Boston, or perhaps a very low-key dinner or gathering. Decorations would have been out of the question still, but in form things were beginning to change.

Instead of Christmas, it's far more likely that the Reveres would have been gathering around days of Thanksgiving and the new year when the calendar turned. Days of thanks and reflection of course had a long tradition in Massachusetts and were far more to the speed of Puritan sensibilities than major festivities. Such gatherings spanned back to the 1620s, but were not necessarily calendar dependent. While we know Thanksgiving as the last Thursday in November now, that set pattern for the holiday was not instituted nationally until the Lincoln administration during the Civil War.

As such, days of thanksgiving could come at any time of the year in the 17th and 18th centuries, and be instituted at different levels, ultimately even coming at national levels during the early republic. For instance, a colony-wide day of Thanksgiving could be called for a major event or success, like a victory in a war for the colony or for England in one of its many conflicts with France. A community day of Thanksgiving might come in the form of a successful harvest or a bountiful economy for the year. Even family units may have celebrated their own personal days of thanksgiving with a feast and small celebration for more intimate events like the recovery of a sick child.

All of these types of thanksgivings would have applied for the Reveres- you could imagine the work that would go into an all-day cooking affair for Sarah or Rachel and the children, serving up dishes not just for the immediate family but for any visitors that would be coming over. Their menus would have actually not been too foreign to us, as poultry of some kind- perhaps a turkey, goose, or chickens would have likely been the staple dish for such celebrations. Additionally, there likely would have been at least two more cooked in pies, sometimes joint ones of beef, pork, or mutton. Often, those types of meats weren't processed from animals until after the festivities, though, as Thanksgivings were time consuming!

Vegetables and breads would have accompanied the meat course. Preserves would have been in the mix, but PIES were the other essential ingredient to a traditional thanksgiving dinner. Pumpkin and apple pies were most numerous, but they also made mince, squash, plum, and cranberry pies and tarts. Marlborough Pies were a very common featured dessert in New England – that's an apple pie with a lemon custard filling.

Beyond days of thanksgiving, the other holiday that we look forward to every year that the Reveres would have shared was New Years eve. Unlike major bashes or ball drops, the Reveres would have observed the turning of the calendar in small gatherings amongst some family and friends. On this occasion, it was actually fairly common to exchange gifts. They would not have been doing so on December 25, but December 31 might have seen some small presents in the form of rings, fruits, or books given to those dear to each other. We do know that Paul Revere was an avid reader, or at least fancied himself to be, so you can definitely imagine him both giving and receiving books in the best chamber at the Revere House.

If you have been to the Revere House in the past, you might remember some of the displays we have out this time of year to set the scene for these celebrations. There is no Christmas tree or garlands in the house, nor any bright illuminations that are typical in the modern day. Instead,

there are some modest displays that convey what the season might have looked like for the Reveres. In the best chamber, which was a joint sleeping chamber and small entertaining space, they likely had some madeira in small wine glasses, that we have on a table, to sip on. You would definitely note the pineapple display in the back of the room, which was a sign of affluence that the Reveres may have shown off. Pineapples were even rented out in Boston over the colonial period, so you would have needed to be careful to not have your guests dig into one!

In terms of things that they could have made in the household, we have tarts, marzipan, and small containers that would have contained syllabubs on the tables. While the numbers would have been low by necessity given the best chamber's space, family members could have come over for small celebrations- perhaps some of Paul's siblings, or even Nathaniel Hichborn in the nearby Hichborn House where our offices now reside. So while things would have been different and on a different scale, there would have been some familiar aspects of the holiday season that still carry over to the modern day.

That will do it for this week's episode- stay tuned for more content over the winter on Revere House Radio and on our express blog. Members should be receiving the long-anticipated Winter Gazette soon, if they have not already. It is the second part to the initial article written by Ruaidhri Crofton in the spring, and explores Robert Howard, slavery in the house at 19 North Square, and the question of slavery in general in Boston over the 17th century.

For the month of December, we would like to thank the Massachusetts Society of the Cincinnati, whose funding makes programs like Revere house Radio possible. As a heads up, we will be closed to the public through at least the start of 2021, stay tuned for more details on the reopening. But also stay in touch with us over social media and we will look forward to hopefully seeing more of you in person in the New Year! Do let us know if your food traditions at the holidays are anything like the Reveres!

Until next time, stay safe, and thanks for listening.