

Revere House Radio

Season 1 Episode 7

Paul Revere's Odd Jobs

Welcome in to another edition of Revere House Radio, I am your host Robert Shimp. While Paul Revere is most known for his midnight ride, of course, and then, if for anything else, as a silversmith, there is a lot more to the man than those two identifiers. In fact, Paul Revere was very much a man about town and an important cog in the town's economic engine, as an artisan, or mechanic, as he would have said, as a public office holder, albeit in a somewhat nontraditional manner, and finally as an entrepreneur. Paul Revere held numerous occupations over the course of his life, and in doing so, he always balanced a mix between making money, selfimprovement, and patriotism.

Revere's first and primary profession was following his father's footsteps as a silversmith, or as they often called themselves, a goldsmith. Notwithstanding a brief stint as a bell ringer at Christ Church (now Old North Church), where Revere signed a pact with a few of his teenaged friends for their schedules and practice, Revere started his apprenticeship with his father at age 13. Appollos Rivoire, Paul's father, who Anglicized his name somewhere in the 1720s, "merely on account that the bumpkins should pronounce it easier," had been in the silversmith profession since 1715 when he arrived in America from France via the isle of Guernsey. The elder Revere had learned from one of the best in America, John Coney, and then passed his skills along to his son during the younger Paul's apprenticeship.

We will cover Revere's silversmith career at more length here and on the Revere Express blog, but suffice it to say he was very skilled at what he did. Revere produced iconic works in his practice, perhaps most notably the famous Liberty Bowl that is often the first object that greets visitors in the Art of the Americas wing in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts. Revere was proficient, industrious, and creative in his silversmith career, which spanned lean and more lucrative years on both sides of the American Revolution.

Revere's silversmith skillset allowed him to dip the toe into other professions that might not seem totally connected at first glance. For at least a few years in the late 1760s, Paul Revere actually practiced dentistry. A couple of advertisements through which he extolled his services still exist today, as he was able to make thin wires to bind teeth together for dentures. He boasted that he could do this "as well as any surgeon-dentist from London"- and while his selfassessment was almost certainly off the mark, to some extent, it does seem that Revere not only made teeth for his friend Dr. Joseph Warren, but performed one of the first cases of forensic science in America when Revere identified Warren from his dental work in efforts to rebury the dead from the battle Bunker Hill after the British evacuated the city some 9 months after the battle.

During the Revolutionary period, Revere acted as an artist and engraver, producing several well known images from the Revolution. Revere borrowed heavily from other artists- definite grounds for copyright infringement today but a far more common practice in his time - and produced propaganda works that were both stirring and evocative. His heavily, ahem, borrowed Boston Massacre print is still one of the most recognized prints of the Revolutionary era. With this skill, Revere was also employed by the Provincial Congress in Massachusetts to the vital role of printing money and notes in the period after his Midnight Ride.

Regarding the ride, as we have discussed in previous episodes here, Revere made many rides for the Provincial Congress in Massachusetts, certainly before his ride and did many more than just the famous one itself. He continued on doing so after April 18, 1775, and put in receipts for these rides, making sure he was compensated for his services to the cause.

With the engravings, money printing, and riding, you would think Revere would not have had time for much else during the period between his ride and the Declaration of Independence by the united Colonies in July, 1776. We know how industrious Revere was, though, so maybe it does not come as a surprise that he was instrumental in the opening of the first gunpowder mill in Massachusetts. Revere was sent by the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, with a letter of introduction from John Dickinson and Robert Morris, to check out an operation run by Oswell Eve in Philadelphia so that Massachusetts might replicate the facility. Eve stonewalled Revere at almost every turn on the visit, but Revere was able to piece together the bits of information he did receive with his what must have been almost photographic memory in terms of what he saw there and helped get his colony running in the gunpowder game. The mill opened in Stoughton in May 1776, thanks to Revere's ingenuity and an assist on acquiring additional planning materials by Samuel Adams.

Both before, but then more frequently after the Revolution, Revere took on elected and honorary positions in Boston. He was Boston's fire ward for a time, in addition to serving as the Suffolk County coroner for six years, investigating some forty-seven cases. Along these lines, he also served two years as the first President for Boston's board of health, starting in 1799. While his election meant more for his position of standing in the community than his actual medical acumen, he did see the town through Yellow Fever scares that were cropping up around the country in the 1790s and put forth the suggestions that shallow privies be emptied along with pools of standing water, and that ships with sick passengers be put into quarantine upon arriving in Boston. These ideas were ones that produced positive effects in the town, even if the townspeople didn't fully know why they were beneficial.

Revere's most successful, or at least profitable, professions came late in life. In 1788, Paul opened an iron foundry in Boston's North End. While he produced some cannons and mortars, Revere became best known for his bells that came from his furnace. He produced the first one for the New Brick Church in Boston's North End, with absolutely no experience in doing so. The church needed a bell, and Revere claimed he could do it. A lack of experience never stopped him in life and it didn't then. While his first bell worked, it was far from perfect- complaints followed that the sound was neither clear or prolonged. That said, Revere was undeterred- he stuck with

the practice and ultimately produced bells that not only spanned the United States, but one bell still exists to this day in Singapore, where his daughter Maria resided for some of her adult years.

Spurred on by his iron foundry, Paul Revere made his riskiest but ultimately most successful business venture at the age of 65, opening the first copper rolling mill in the United States in Canton, Massachusetts. He took on great personal and financial risk in this endeavor, and with some fits and starts on funding from the United States government, ultimately did his nation a great service. Revere was the first in America to be able to roll copper sheets, meaning the United States could rely on a domestic small business for its needs versus imports from Great Britain, which were particularly galling for Americans following the Revolution and in the lead up to the War of 1812. Revere found great success in his venture, and provided the United States Navy with copper lining that gave his country a leg up in Naval Engagements against Britain in the War of 1812.

As the episode comes to a close here, I would just add that these are still only a sampling of the odd jobs that Paul Revere took on in his life. This is not exhaustive but is rather meant to illuminate the variety of his occupations, and the new adventures he tackled not only to provide for his family, but to advance the civic missions of his town and his new nation. There are incredibly rich stories in all of these occupations, and we will continue to delve into them in both the Revere Express Blog and via Revere House Radio. So stay tuned, watch this space, and be sure to follow us and stay in contact on social media and email. We love to hear from you and your suggestions for content moving forward. Until next time, stay safe, and thanks for listening.

Erratum:

Note that silversmiths usually called themselves “goldsmiths” in the 18th century because most silversmiths worked in both silver and gold.

The episode states that Revere used metal wire to “bind teeth together for dentures” – 18th century dentists often used wire to affix dentures to neighboring teeth.

The episode states that Paul Revere was “Boston’s fire ward for a time” – he was at the time actually one of several fire wards.