

Revere House Radio

Season 1 Episode 9

Paul Revere and the Boston Tea Party

Welcome in to another episode of Revere House Radio, I am your host Robert Shimp. In today's episode, we will take a look at another one of our most frequently asked questions regarding Paul Revere's connection to the key events in Boston during the American Revolution. In our last episode, we tackled Paul Revere's connection to the Boston Massacre. While it is unlikely Revere was physically present at the Massacre, his post-facto contributions were incredibly significant to the Massacre's legacy and to the cause of the American Revolution. Today we will discuss Revere's role in and connections to the other major event in Boston leading to war: the Boston Tea Party.

The Boston Tea Party occurred on December 16, 1773. For a brief refresher on the event, Boston's revolutionary leaders had imposed a local boycott on British tea being distributed into its port due to the Tea Act of 1773. In effect, the Tea Act gave the East India Company a monopoly on tea sales in Boston, which would help the cash-strapped organization. With the exclusive rights, the Company's sales would include the small, but symbolically large, tax on the purchased tea, a still standing remnant of the highly unpopular 1767 Townsend Duties. The act aimed to cut down on smuggled tea into the colonies via Boston, and force the Bostonians to effectively consent to the idea that a tax, any tax, without direct physical representation in London was permissible. To the rebellious Bostonians, the tax represented something much larger than having the choice to enjoy a cup of tea.

In November into December of 1773, the crisis had tensions in Boston back at a fever pitch following a slight lull after the Boston Massacre and the British troops' removal from Boston. The *Dartmouth*, a whaling ship full of East India tea on its return to America from England, was set to be offloaded in Boston harbor at Griffin's Wharf no later than December 17. Unlike other port towns along the Atlantic in similar situations, Governor Thomas Hutchinson refused to simply diffuse the situation by allowing the *Dartmouth* return to England, meaning December 16 at midnight would be a defining moment one way or another. Either the tea offloaded with the tea tax in effect, or some other dramatic measure would prevent it from happening.

In short, with a clock ticking, the Sons of Liberty went into motion on December 16, and took drastic measures into their own hands. They boarded three vessels, as the ships the *Elanor* and the *Beaver* sat in the harbor as well, and destroyed what would be maybe upwards to two million dollars' worth of tea in today's money by breaking open and throwing some 342 tea chests into the harbor. The Tea Party would join the Massacre as the two most iconic events in Boston

leading up to Revere's famous midnight ride, and set into motion the series of punitive measures coming from London that incensed American leaders to a true breaking point.

In comparing Paul Revere's potential connection to the Boston Massacre versus the Tea Party, it is far more likely that Revere was active at the Tea Party and events on December 16, 1773 for several reasons. Primarily, I believe Revere's Tea Party presence is far more likely, in some capacity, given the numbers of people involved, the known connections between planning and cross-referencing Revere's actions and networks, and post-facto references to Revere's involvement.

At the most basic level, the demographics were different between Massacre crowd and the Boston Tea Party, as the Tea Party drew not just from Boston's lower and itinerant classes but into the middling ranks where Revere sat, perhaps even into some of Boston's upper tiers. Well over 100 men, likely many more, were involved in the actual destruction of the tea.

The night's activities actually began with a meeting of Revere's St. Andrew's masonic lodge at the Green Dragon Tavern, though Revere is not listed among the very small roll call that evening. His absence at that meeting does not indicate he was out of area, as the reduced numbers seem to actually indicate most St. Andrew's masons were otherwise involved in something else that evening.

As events matriculated towards Old South Meeting House, there became a clear carry-over amongst participants between Revere's various social organizations and haunts, such as the North End Caucus, the Green Dragon Tavern, and a few of his masonic associates. Unlike the spontaneity of the Boston Massacre, the Tea Party was an orchestrated affair. The crisis had been thoroughly debated amongst Boston leaders - It was carefully thought out, planned, and with Old South Meeting House as a backdrop, executed event with a precise goal in mind. The Sons of Liberty had time to think through the event for weeks, so once Samuel Adams told the massive crowd gathered at Old South there was nothing more they could do, it became clear he did not mean it at all.

While many familial references and lists came out after the fact, given the seditious nature inherent to destroying the crown's property, there was clearly no roster of participants in the moment. While Adams and Dr. Joseph Warren were clearly pulling the strings from a leadership level, it is unlikely they were physically on the ground at the docks. Such a task would have been left to men of Revere's ilk, who held more direct leadership roles amongst the town's manual and itinerant laborers.

Disguises were worn by the colonists, with Mohawk Native American attire donned to prevent obvious detection in the December night. Revere and his friends' names were not posted then, or immediately after, given what would have been tantamount to bragging about a serious crime on social media today. We will likely never know with full certainty that Paul Revere was one of the actors tossing tea into Boston Harbor that evening, but crossover connections on that night would

again suggest a high likelihood. Further, there are post-facto references to his inclusion in the events, which to me add a great support material in the pro-presence camp.

Specifically, in the late 19th century, a ballad connected Revere and Warren to the Tea Party and its leadership.

The song, which was officially published in 1870 by Charles Moore, included the lines:
...Then rally boys, and hasten on /To meet our Chiefs at the Green Dragon. /Our Warren's there,
and bold Revere/With hands to do and words to cheer/ For Liberty and Laws! /Our country's
"Braves" and firm defenders, /Shall ne'er be left by true North-Enders, /Fighting Freedom's
cause! /Then rally boys, and hasten on/To meet our Chiefs at the Green Dragon.

Moore claimed it was an old rallying song that was never put to pen and paper, but that it dated to around 1830, which would still be over 50 years after the Revolution. The actual printing of the ballad came out after Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, so it's a bit tricky to take that at face value. If the song was indeed one that was passed around early in the century, it would definitely indicate or at least highly suggest Revere's participation since the timing meant it would not have simply been an act of capitalizing on a name made famous in 1860 by Longfellow, giving it some measure of legitimacy.

Like the Boston Massacre, Revere never recorded to history that he was at the Tea Party, even years after the fact once independence had been long secured. For almost all participants, their code of silence held firm and was more important than spilling the beans some 50-60 years after the fact.

With all things considered, I would chalk it up as at least as very probable that Revere attended and participated in the Tea Party on December 16, in some capacity, maybe physically destroying the tea, or maybe just being present, perhaps giving some instructions from nearby. As we have discussed in previous Revere House Radio episodes, Revere continued his work for the Sons of Liberty the next morning when he made his first long courier ride down to New York. Revere made great time on his trip and helped the Boston revolutionaries keep a leg up on the British in terms of communication spread.

While these two episodes represent Revere's connections to 2 very famous events, his longevity of course connected him to many more important moments both in the build to the Revolution and in the United States' early years. Do keep in touch with us on social media, Twitter and Facebook, or email if you are curious about his role in other major events, and we will continue to highlight some of the more interesting and curious facets of his long professional and public life. Until next time, stay safe, and thanks for listening.