

Revere House Radio

Season 2 Episode 1

The Life and Symbolism of Christopher Seider

This episode contains a description of the death of a child. .

On this day in 1770, there was turbulence in the North End of Boston. Ebenezer Richardson, a customs officer in the employ of the King, had just fired his gun out of his front window into an angry crowd. The result? Two boys wounded, one who won't make it through the night, and an escalation of the anti-government sentiments that were already at a steady simmer in the colony. Today, an episode devoted to that young boy who was, by some accounts, the first victim of the American Revolution. I'm your host Adrienne Turnbull-Reilly, and you're listening to Revere House Radio.

Christopher Seider, sometimes spelled Snider with an "n," was born in 1758. He lived in the North End with his parents and siblings, and presumably had a pretty normal childhood. Much of his early life was overshadowed by growing tensions in the colonies, and by the time young Christopher reached double digits, there were active and open antagonisms between the King and his subjects in Boston. One of these was the non-importation movement many Boston merchants agreed to, or reneged on. Theophilus Lillie, a North End shopkeeper, was one of those who refused to go along with the boycott of British imported goods. Lillie had been in open conflict with his peers via newspaper debates. But on February 22nd, 1770, the conflict jumped off the paper into the streets. Someone had placed a sign outside of Lillie's shop that simply read "IMPORTER." Some people - most accounts say young boys and teenagers - gathered in front of his shop and were drawing increased attention to it, to the point that a fellow loyalist named Ebenezer Richardson tried to remove the sign and disperse the crowd.

Having none of it, the crowd apparently turned their attentions to Richardson himself, and started harassing him with taunts, throwing small rocks and clumps of dirt at him. Richardson, not surprisingly, made his way quickly back to his house to take shelter. Now Richardson had to decide what to do. He had a volatile group of people in front of his home, he had a wife and daughters inside with him, and he had his pride to rescue. So, his choice? Shoot blanks out his front window to try to scare the people away. Apparently, that wasn't very effective because as the story goes, he shot again, but this time he wasn't shooting just gunpowder, he had ammunition in his weapon. The unfortunate Christopher Seider was the recipient of Richardson's

anger, and the boy was shot in the chest. He was rushed away, and laid suffering for several hours before succumbing to his wounds about 9pm on Feb 22nd.

I'll return to the repercussions of Seider's death in a moment, but I'm going to take a quick detour to round out Richardson's fate. Richardson was tried for murder starting on April 20th, 1770. It seems like no one was really contesting the facts of the case, but rather whether Richardson's response was justified as self defence. One additional man who was present in the house, George Wilmot, also went on trial. Wilmot was pretty quickly acquitted by the jury since he didn't fire a weapon, but Richardson's fate was up for debate. The prosecutors in the case were Samuel Quincy and Robert Treat Paine. The defense attorney was Josiah Quincy Jr. You may recognize Quincy's name in relation to another hotly contested trial, that of the Boston Massacre. Josiah Quincy Jr. also served as the defense attorney in that case, for which he suffered much public abuse. But back to Richardson. The jury began deliberation around 11:00 PM, and came back with a verdict in the wee hours of the morning April 21st. The verdict? Guilty. After the verdict comes the sentencing, right? Well, not so fast. The original sentencing date was set for May 29, 1770, then moved back twice until finally on Sept 6th, the judges, attorneys and jurors got back together so that the defense could mount an argument about why there should be another trial. After much deliberation, it seemed that the verdict would stand. This is when Thomas Hutchinson, royally appointed Lieutenant Governor of the colony, wrote to the King asking for a pardon for Richardson. The short version is, Richardson finally received his pardon in early May, 1771. But wait! There's more, the pardon that Hutchinson received from England was vague to the point that he was unsure whether local authorities would accept it. He wrote again, asking for a more specific pardon. Finally, in early March, 1772, he got clarity on the matter and felt confident that Richardson would be released from jail. Never ruling out that a mob wouldn't enact vigilante justice on Richardson though, Hutchinson rushed Richardson through the formal proceedings on March 10th when most other citizens were occupied in their town meeting. Richardson crossed over the Charles River and out of Boston, a free but despised man. He ended up in Philadelphia for a little while and then left for England in 1774, where his paper trail evaporates.

Back to Boston in February 1770, though. Young Christopher's death sparked off intense public mourning and fierce outcries against Richardson specifically, and England more generally. Local newspapers such as the Boston Gazette and the Boston Newsletter ran dramatic retellings of his funeral procession that took place on February 26, 1770. Interestingly, the Boston Gazette and the Boston Evening Post both ran their accounts of the funeral procession on a day that would go down in history for another reason - March 5th, 1770 - the day of the Boston Massacre. The procession started near the Liberty Tree, and was led by some hundreds of school boys. Was Paul Revere Jr. one of them? We don't know, but he was close to Seider's age, so highly likely.

Behind the school boys were the family and close friends near Seider's coffin, which was carried on the shoulders of pallbearers. Behind, vast numbers of Boston inhabitants. The numbers fluctuate between accounts, but are generally in the 1 to 2,000 people range. Just for a little context, if the population was roughly 15,000 at this time, and 2,000 people did join in the procession, that's a whopping 13% of the population of Boston. The same percentage today would be just under 90,000 people.

One year later, in an anniversary display commemorating the Boston Massacre, Paul Revere included a whole panel devoted to Seider. He is rather gruesomely portrayed holding his wounds as he departs his earthly body, and the caption at the bottom says "Seider's pale Ghost freshbleeding stands, And Vengeance for his Death demands." Seider was used to pull on the heartstrings of Boston locals, many of whom may have interacted with him. No doubt when Revere was creating the panel, his own young son came to mind. I think it's significant that during Revere's illuminations, Richardson's fate had not yet been decided. Sure, he had been convicted just over a year ago, but his sentencing and pardon were far in the future. Revere may have been reminding the public that the much-hated Richardson could still be pardoned, and invoking the injustice of Seider's death would keep the outrage and mourning for the boy alive. By helping to stir up the popular memory and anger regarding the boy's death, Revere was contributing to the spark that would soon burst into the full flames of revolution.

That's the brief story of the too-short life and death of Christopher Seider, Ebenezer Richardson, and how Revere utilized a publicly felt tragedy to promote a political agenda. I relied heavily on two particular sources in my research for this episode, and I want to give them a shout out because they may be of interest to our listeners. I will link to both in our show notes.

Massachusetts Historical Society Adams Papers contain detailed records of Richardson's trial, and I could not have made sense of any of it without them. And secondly, J.L. Bell's blog Boston1775 has multiple posts regarding Seider, Richardson, and Revere's illuminated display. I strongly encourage anyone interested in Boston history to check it out. We are using all of our content in the next few weeks to frame the context for the Boston Massacre and its aftermath, including Revere's illuminations in 1771. Please follow our social media channels and website for more Revere House Radio episodes, blog posts, and a fabulous virtual event you can attend on March 5th, the 250th anniversary of the illuminations. This has been Revere House Radio, thanks for listening.

Sources:

http://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=318&pid=2 <http://boston1775.blogspot.com/2020/04/the-trial-of-ebenezer-richardson.html> <http://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/LJA02d086>

