

Revere House Radio

Season 2 Episode 2

illuminating 1771

Welcome in to another episode of Revere House Radio, I am your host Robert Shimp. Today's episode comes as part of our programming this month which commemorates the 250th anniversary of Paul Revere's illuminations from his house on March 5, 1771. The Illuminations depicted scenes of the Boston Massacre and early Revolutionary propaganda, efforts that were meant to keep the spirit of the Revolution alive a year removed from the Massacre itself. Before we delve into the episode, I would like to offer a major thank you to everyone who participated in putting the program together, but especially to all of the support we have received from members, viewers, fans, all of you. It means a lot to us to have been able to bring the program to all of you, especially in this year of fits and starts, and thank you all so much for your generous donations to support our continued programming. If you did miss the program by chance, you still have an opportunity to see it and the illuminations! You can register via our shop website at paulreverehouse.org and receive the link to the program.

In considering the Illuminations and their context, by all accounts of them, though such contemporary descriptions are limited, Revere's graphic illuminations were haunting scenes that highlighted the solemnity and severity of the Massacre, as it was noted that thousands of Bostonians strode by the Paul Revere House to take witness of them. As we have heard from our programming from Prof. Nancy Siegel, such displays would not have been uncommon in the period, but would have nonetheless been memorable for their content and would have stood out on a dark March evening. R.P. Hale's recent modern recreations of Christopher Seider's Death, the Bloody Massacre, and a personified America with her foot on a British grenadier's head were enough to conjure images of how dramatic and solemn the occasion would have been for Bostonians.

Why was it the case that Revere felt he needed to make the illuminations in the first place though? What was happening at that moment that we now mark as an interlude period between the Boston Massacre in early 1770 and the Boston Tea Party in late 1773? Let's delve a bit into what we know about Paul Revere and his family at that brief snapshot in time.

Globally, 1771 was a year that witnessed quarantines being put in place in Russia for a Bubonic Plague outbreak, Captain James Cook's HMS Endeavor returning to England after a 3 year voyage, and fighting as a precursor to the Revolution break out in North Carolina between the Regulators and local colonial officials over the tax structure in that colony.

1771 found Boston in a lurch following the Massacre's aftermath and the subsequent trials. The Revere's had been in their house for a little over a year, and it would have been quite the eventful year with Christopher Seider's death, the Massacre, Revere's print and conflict with Henry Pelham over ownership for the image, most known image, we should say, of the massacre itself,

and of course the subsequent trials, which we'll get into. Personally, Paul and Sarah welcomed their seventh, and fifth surviving, child into the world, in between the massacre and the illuminations, the child was Elizabeth, who was born on December 5, 1770, joining the clan that already included Deborah, Sarah, Frances, and Mary.

For the major events in Boston, as Adrienne noted in the last episode, the sentencing for Ebenezer Richardson, the customs informant who shot and killed young Christopher Seider only a few weeks before the Boston Massacre, was still dragging out slowly in the courts. The Massacre trials for the immediate participants, which are often cast as a moment of heroic justice of laws not getting in the way of public opinion, thus took center stage. Though the trials for Captain Preston and his men did not kick off until October and November respectively, the justice served to them progressed a little more quickly. John Adams famously defended the British regulars in the trial, though he was of course growing, but not yet fully fledged, in his revolutionary sentiments. While far from the ardent patriot that he would be in 1776, Adams nonetheless took the case with reservations but wanted to prove that the rule of law still held in Boston and that the soldiers involved would have their day in court with a fair trial. In the prosecution were Robert Treat Paine and Samuel Quincy, and Josiah Quincy, Jr. (Samuel Quincy's brother), Sampson Salter Blowers, and Robert Auchmuty joined Adams in the defense. After a lengthy build up to the trials that gripped the town, Captain Preston drew an acquittal on October 20th, and at the end of November, 6 of the soldiers were totally acquitted on charges, while 2 were branded on the hand with an M for manslaughter after invoking the benefit of clergy to avoid any potential inaction of a capital punishment.

The aftermath of the trial and its favorable outcome for the soldiers, somewhat surprisingly, did not lead into more violence or create a major negative reaction from Bostonians. Perhaps the sting of the immediate event had been lessened by that stage, something that Revere and the sons of liberty likely noted.

Instead of receiving capital punishments, the soldiers were relocated to New Jersey. The removal of all regulars from Boston proper in 1770 essentially provided the colonists and Sons of Liberty with a victory, though one that had of course come through the blood shed on March 5th outside the custom house. Soldiers would remain in the Boston Harbor Islands and along the colonial seaboard, of course returning in a much fuller force only a few years later as the imperial crisis deepened.

In one sense, it is surprising that tensions remained calm through 1771, 1772, and for almost all of 1773. But in this relative calm, Revere and leaders in Boston knew that they had to keep the spirit of revolution alive, and that complacency was perhaps the biggest battle they would be fighting. It was of course much easier to have a visible enemy and opponent with the soldier's red jackets recognizable in the small spaces of Boston. With their removal, more abstract concepts of representation and taxation from across the ocean were things that might not necessarily be at the forefront of a regular Bostonians' mind on a given day. The boycotts to push back against the Townshend Duties had been successful, and only a small tax on tea remained-obviously that would become an issue in a few years later, but maybe not wasn't immediately pressing for most folks in 1771.

Perhaps Revere felt, especially with the relatively light sentencing, for the British soldiers- at least in the eyes of the Sons of Liberty- that Boston needed another spark to push back against the British. Revere had of course been important in creating the most lasting image of the Massacre through his Printed engraving – The Bloody Massacre- which came out a few weeks after the event. He had seen first-hand the influence and importance of visual art to the political events in Boston, and aimed to replicate its success in a more memorable, one-off, dramatic event using his household as the backdrop.

North Square and the North End at the time would have still been a densely populated area, though nowhere near what it is today, or even in its peak immigration periods in the 19th century. Boston as a whole at the time of the Revolution was somewhere around 15,000 people, and today's North End population alone is around 10,000. That number is only a quarter of the 40,000-individuals living in the North End around the turn into the 20th century. So the Illuminations in 1771 would have both been significant on the night in question, and then likely through word of mouth in the still small town over the subsequent days and weeks.

So what was the aftermath of them, and of the moment? After 1771, the remembrances of the Boston Massacre certainly continued through the next year, and in fact throughout the duration of the American Revolution. Each year an oration of the massacre was given through 1783 and was seemingly an esteemed position, an honor to be held. John Hancock delivered the oration in 1774, and Dr. Joseph Warren did so on two occasions.

We do not know if Revere continued any commemorations on the Massacre's anniversary, or if he continued to do anything along the lines of the illuminations moving forward. He would of course continue using his skills as an engraver, and would do so for the Massachusetts Provincial Congress during the war.

If anything, it seems like a good bet that Revere's performance on March 5, 1771 helped to ingratiate himself to the Sons of Liberty leadership. He had twice over proven himself to be a died in the wool patriot, and ready to support the cause, in so far as there was a cohesive cause to support in 1771. Revere of course would become an increasingly important cog in the Sons' of Liberty's structure in Boston, though actions like his Boston Massacre engraving and the Illuminations never allowed him to crack into the upper echelons of the leadership structure.

That will do it for this week's episode. We have some more exciting programming coming up, as the spring is always a busy year for the Revere House. In addition to the Revere Express and Revere House Radio, our new Revere Gazette publication will be dropping this week or next for members- this quarter's publication is entitled *Outrage at Faneuil Hall: An Enduring Legacy of Freedom and the 1903 Chinatown Raids*, written by Sharon Kong-Perring. It is a great look into a little remembered, but very significant moment, in Boston and Faneuil Hall's History. If you are interested in becoming a member to receive the Gazette and this content, you can find more information on our website or email Adrienne to ask any questions. For now, stay safe, and thanks for listening!

