Unknown Speaker
Music.

Tegan
Welcome back to Revere House Radio. I'm Tegan Kehoe, and this episode is a dive into a recent Revere House Gazette article. The Gazette is a quarterly print newsletter, which is a benefit of Revere House membership, and these episodes are intended to give non-members a taste of what's in the article, as well as to give some background and context for those who have read the article. Today, I'm joined by Mehitabel Glenhaber, who is a program assistant at the Paul Revere House. They wrote the feature article in our summer 2024 Gazette, "Snapshots of a Celebrity Visit: Christine Jorgensen at the Paul Revere House, 1954." Welcome to the show.

Mehitabel
Thanks. Happy to be here.

Tegan
So before we get into the article, can you tell the listeners a bit about yourself? How long have you been at the Paul Revere House, and what was the path that led you to working here?

Mehitabel
For sure, so right now, I work as one of the two program assistants at the Paul Revere House. I've been working here for about two years, the first one as an interpreter, and then the second one as a program assistant. So my background is actually not really in the 18th century or the American Revolution at all. It's mostly in media history and history of science and technology. That was what I actually studied in my undergrad and grad education. But when I was doing that, I got really interested in public history. My mother actually is a histor y teacher in the Boston area. So I grew up with a lot of walking around the Freedom Trail and her sharing the oral traditions of those stories with me, and it was something that I really wanted to do, was to share Boston's history with visitors to the city, and in general, do history in a more publicly accessible way. So that was pretty much what brought me here.

Tegan
Great. Christine Jorgensen was a photojournalist, filmmaker, actress, singer and WWII veteran who lived from 1926 to 1989. She was the first nationally famous American transgender woman, and in 1952 she was forcibly outed by journalists who reported on a gender affirming surgery that she received in Denmark. She was the first US citizen to undergo the surgery. Methitabel, can you tell us a little about Jorgensen's visit to Boston?

Mehitabel
Absolutely. So the events that I discuss in my article mostly took place in 1954. And Christine Jorgensen became very famous in 1952 after the event that Tegan mentioned, where she went to Denmark to receive gender affirming care and then was forcibly outed, and she returned to

the United States (where she was from) in 1953, where she was this sort of major celebrity, mostly about her gender transition.

Mehitabel
And in 1954, Christine was still pretty famous, and was trying to figure out, I think, what to do with that fame, or what to do with her life now that she had kind of unexpectedly been thrust into the public eye in this way, and her manager suggested to her that she do a sort of nightclub variety show act. So she had been touring in the United States doing this basically kind of comedy and song and dance act with a pretty famous comedian at the time named Miles Bell. The act was written by Miles' wife Nan Bell, and in 1954 she had already toured this act in a couple cities. She had performed in Los Angeles and New York, and the act was now taking a national tour to Washington, DC, to Boston and a number of other cities. And in some of those cities, Jorgensen had faced pushback. In the 1950s a lot of American cities had laws against "female impersonators" performing in public on the books, and some of those laws were enforced against her. And when she came to Boston -- she actually referred to this event as one of the foremost scandals of her career.

Tegan
Wow.

Mehitabel
The city of Boston basically moved to block her performance. She was banned from performing in Boston on grounds that she was considered a "female impersonator," which was illegal in Boston at the time, and she actually took Boston City government to court about this. So she sued for her right to perform, and that was not settled by the date that she was supposed to perform. So unfortunately, she never was able to perform in Boston, but she was staying in Boston for about a week around the time that her act was supposed to be scheduled, and she did tour around Boston at that time, and we do have several photographs of her just visiting various sites in Boston while that court case was going on.

Tegan
So in the article, you reference a Gazette article from a few years back by Amanda Tuttle, which describes Boston's theater controversy in Paul Revere's lifetime. Massachusetts had long had bans on various types of theater performance and other types of entertainment, in part because of the Puritan religious tradition here, and after the revolution, some leaders felt that British society was overly extravagant, and that reaffirming such bans was a way to deter Americans from emulating the British, emulating their interest in nobility and aristocracy and so on. But others felt that the opportunity to choose their own leisure activities was a natural right. And Paul Revere was part of a committee that wrote and signed a resolution against the theater ban in the 1790s. And that article notes that Revere worked hard to be accepted as a peer of the men who were above his social rank in terms of class background and education. And signing this document is one piece of evidence that he at least somewhat succeeded. Other signers were wealthier and more politically connected than he was. They included men like John Quincy Adams and Harrison Gray Otis. So what did theater censorship look like in 1950s Boston?

Mehitabel
So part of what's really interesting to me about theater censorship in 1950s Boston is that some of it was official on the level of the city or state government, but a lot of it was really being done by citizen organizations. So really, there's a pretty clear throughline from even Paul Revere's time through the 1950s of Boston being a kind of puritanical society that often had, you know, laws or social prohibitions against various sorts of salacious activities. And throughout the 1800s throughout the 1900s Boston had a reputation for very serious censorship. I mean, if you've heard the phrase "banned in Boston?"

Tegan
Right.

Mehitabel
We got very famous for banning a lot of books, right, like Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass. And a lot of that in the late 1800s was really, you know, movements of often upper class white women during the Progressive Era, sort of pushing, on a citizen level, for banning culture that they thought would lead to low moral character or the degradation of society in Boston. So in the 1950s some of the censorship that Christine Jorgensen faced was on the level of the city government, like Boston had a law on the books that banned "female impersonators" from appearing in public, and that was a City of Boston law that was passed in 1948. Some of it, though, was really more like citizen protests. So things more similar to, you know, people pushing for libraries to ban books on gay and transgender topics nowadays, for instance. And some of it is kind of in the middle ground. So in the 1950s one of the main ways that theater and performance was censored in Boston was that Boston's licensing board used its role giving nightclubs licenses to censor what nightclubs were hosting as acts. So this is the body in the City of Boston that's responsible for approving liquor licenses and approving licenses for venues to have large numbers of people attend performances there. But the head of the board at the time, whose name was Mary Driscoll, would often really use the power of the board to say, "This club has been putting on acts that I don't approve of the social character of, so I'm going to threaten to revoke their license unless they don't perform this act." And that was actually what happened in the case of the Latin Quarter nightclub. So Christine Jorgensen was supposed to perform at the Latin Quarter nightclub, and one of the things that nightclub got hit with was the city's licensing board saying, "If you allow Christine Jorgensen to perform, then we are going to revoke your entertainment license."

Tegan
Got it. So it's, it's really working at multiple levels in terms of the censorship.

Mehitabel
For sure.

Tegan

So we'll link to the photos in the show notes, but the photos are kind of a big part of the article. Could you also describe them for us and what stands out about them to you?

Mehitabel
Absolutely. So I know this is sort of the wrong medium for this, but we have, from when Christine Jorgensen visited Boston, four photos that I used in the article of her visiting as a tourist. So three of them are of her at various places on the Freedom Trail, and one is of her standing outside of an information booth near South Station. So we do know that when Christine Jorgensen was in Boston, she visited the Paul Revere House, and at least two photos were taken there. And there's also a photo of her posing by a placard that's by the Old North Church. And there's two photos of the Revere House. One of them is her standing outside of the Revere House, sort of posing as she's entering the door. She's wearing a very elaborate fur coat. One of them is of her sitting in the kitchen of the Revere House, and she's actually rocking the baby cradle, which is a real, authentic baby cradle from the 1700s that we still have on display.

Tegan
Yeah, it actually it makes me a little bit uncomfortable, because we don't normally have people touch these artifacts, and I don't know the context there, although I'm obviously not blaming her. This has... happened a long time ago, and I don't know the circumstances, but that's something that I have a slight visceral reaction to seeing that photo.

Mehitabel
I am very curious if that was a special exception that was made for her because she was famous and they wanted to get that photo, or how standard it was for visitors to just walk in and touch the artifacts in the 50s.

Tegan
Right, right. I'm curious too.

Mehitabel
I do find that photo really interesting, though, because almost all of the objects in that picture are still things that we have on display in the kitchen, but in a different arrangement.

Tegan
Yeah. So because her visit to Boston became a high profile censorship case, and also because we believe that these photos we have of her might have been press photos, I imagine that your media studies background helped inform how you approach this story. Can you tell us more about that, and have you studied similar episodes in history before?

Mehitabel
Absolutely. So when I did more media history a lot of what I studied was the history of American moral panics over media. Right, so basically, times in American history that a lot of Americans have gotten concerned that there is some kind of media which is degenerate or going to be a corrupting influence on "the youths." And a lot of this was really kind of going on at the same

time that Christine Jorgensen was performing in Boston. So another major research project I actually have done is on another event that was going on in 1954 almost simultaneous with this, which was the federal hearings about banning comics in the United States. So in the 1950s there was actually a huge moral panic about comic books, where a lot of parents and concerned citizens became concerned that comics were very sexualized and very violent and weren't intended for children, and were very worried that these were contributing to juvenile delinquency, and actually moved for the federal government to ban comics.

Tegan
Just, comics altogether?

Mehitabel
Yes, just all comics marketed at children, which was understood to be all comics, because what kind of adult reads comics?

Tegan
Right. I'm sure the answer to that is plenty, but.

Mehitabel
Yes, and we absolutely know that nowadays.

Tegan
Right.

Mehitabel
And this actually resulted in the comics industry agreeing on its own self-censorship measures. So we ended up with the Comics Code, which was sort of the comic book equivalent of the Hays Code, which was like the film industry's self censorship guidelines. And these were super-strict guidelines. They said that comics couldn't depict vampires or werewolves, or a cop looking bad, or divorce for most of the '50s through '70s. What I think is really interesting about Christine Jorgensen's story is, I think throughout a lot of the history of American moral panics, you often see this concern, right? That seeing the wrong thing in the media, or watching the wrong kind of theater, or reading the wrong kind of books is going to make people into delinquents and bad people. And a lot of those moral panics really involve conflating media showing people gay or transgender characters, or seeing gay or transgender people on stage, with degeneracy and delinquency and crime. When Boston city government was looking at whether Christine Jorgensen would be allowed to perform, a complaint that some citizens brought was that her show was going to cause juvenile delinquency by showing the youth of Boston gender nonconforming people. And that's absolutely something that we saw in the 1950s in comic censorship too, that one of the main complaints that was brought against comics was that comics sometimes showed gender nonconforming or homosexual characters. One of the biggest anti-comics advocates, who's a psychologist named Frederick Wertham, wrote a whole book about all the ways that comics were bad for your kids' mental health, and one thing

that he said was that kids who read comics and see female superheroes, and they if they see strong women like Wonder Woman, it's going to turn your daughters into lesbians.

Tegan
Huh. I'm thinking about how some of the same rhetoric is used today when trying to ban media, and I feel like I don't associate the phrase juvenile delinquency with today's discourse -- I kind of, I associate that with the '90s or earlier -- but then you mentioned mental health, and I definitely hear that, in you know people... people saying that seeing people living their lives could somehow influence kids' mental health for the worse.

Mehitabel
Right. And I definitely think there is that, or I definitely think there was that "think of the children" angle in the attempts to ban Christine Jorgensen. One thing that the licensing board said is they were worried about this show contributing to underage drinking... which I find very difficult to understand the link to.

Tegan
Right, right! Yeah, no, that's, that's fascinating. Thank you for for sharing that, the comics perspective, I'm also thinking about the fact that this is kind of Red Scare era, and just moral panics abound.

Mehitabel
Definitely. And I would say also, you know, complaints that Christine Jorgensen is un-American were very common also in attacks against her in the '50s. For instance, one of the people who was really moving for her to be banned in Boston actually said, you know, it's un-American that she went to Denmark to get this surgery, that we wouldn't allow that sort of thing in the United States.

Tegan
Huh.

Mehitabel
But there were people saying, when she was performing in Boston, that they thought that US citizens going abroad to receive gender confirming care should be illegal because this was foreign influences on American culture.

Tegan
Interesting. I don't know if this is, this is too much of a stretch, but I'm kind of reminded of ... in the years after the American Revolution, this idea of "republican motherhood" emerged in which performing your gender role correctly (by the standards of the day) was considered to be patriotic for women in particular. And that meant being aware of and involved in civics, but only so far as it helped you to raise good, civically involved men. And that that -- that idea of gender norms being related to your relationship to your country has been around at least since Paul Revere's lifetime.

Mehitabel
Right. I would definitely say that in Christine Jorgensen story, she was under a lot of pressure to perform her gender in a way that was patriotic. The news article that actually announced Christine Jorgensen's gender transition was titled, "Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty." And that idea of a "blonde beauty," right? If we're thinking during WWII, this is a very patriotic idea of what an American woman looks like. You know, they are blonde, they are blue eyed, they are supporting our troops.

Tegan
Right.

Mehitabel
And I think that in a lot of her public appearances, Christine Jorgensen was really under a lot of pressure to look very domestic, to look like she would be a good wife and mother. The press really liked when she was dating a man, because that was proof, you know, that she was being a good wife, that she was going to be the kind of housewife that American society wanted. I wonder if that was at play when she posed for a photo in the Revere House kitchen, because in that photo, she is kind of taking on the role of Rachel Revere, right? It is the most sort of overtly domestic room in the house.

Tegan
Yeah.

Mehitabel
And she posed rocking the baby cradle, so maybe that was an image she chose for herself, or maybe that was an image that someone who was helping her pose chose, but it's definitely positioning her as an American mother and making that connection to mothers in the Revolutionary period.

Tegan
Yeah, definitely. And can we back up a little bit, and can you tell me how you found out about Jorgensen's visit to the Paul Revere House and these photos, and what got you interested in writing about it?

Mehitabel
For sure. So I owe this story actually to Robert, who you podcast listeners know as our previous podcast host. Robert found those photos a while ago when he was working as Research Director here, and he actually mentioned them to Rachel, who was the program assistant before me, and also to me, because he really thought somebody should write about them. And when I saw the photos, I really wanted to take on that article. And they're interesting to me, because I think one thing that's so cool about the Paul Revere House is it has been standing for almost 350 years. So the number of different eras of history that we get to touch on in this site is enormous, right? We talk a lot about the history of the house during the revolution, and a little bit

about the history of the house back when it was, you know, part of the Puritan settlement of Boston. But I think it's really cool to think about this whole history it has as a tourist site. Throughout the 1950s visitors to Boston were coming and seeing this museum, and I wanted to talk about a little bit of that history. And I think it's also cool to remember this house has ties to so many people, right of different genders and sexual orientations and gender presentations. And it's really neat to get to tell some of those histories that are related to our site.

Tegan
Yeah, definitely. And I'd like to talk about some of the sources that you cite in the article. I'm sure there was information in them that you didn't get to include in the article just because of length and scope. So the first is Jorgensen's autobiography, which came out in 1967. Could you tell us more about that book, and if there are any stories from it that you wished you had been able to include?

Mehitabel
Absolutely. I highly recommend reading Christine Jorgensen's biography to anyone who has the time to. She is a really smart and funny writer.

Tegan
Nice.

Mehitabel
And I think that her story is interesting because Christine Jorgensen never really intended to become famous or become the voice of transgender women for America. When she went to Denmark to receive a gender confirming surgery, she wanted to keep that on the down low, and just have that be her personal life. And because she was outed without her consent and ended up becoming very famous, that was something that she had to deal with, and a social role that she had to take on. And her thoughts about being famous and how that affected her life are really interesting. But it is definitely something that she was engaging with really deliberately. So she writes a lot in the autobiography about how difficult that was for her. And I think reading the autobiography, you really get this sense that when she became famous, she was in the hospital, recovering from a fairly intensive surgery, having just come out to her parents, and dealing with some major changes in her life. And I think it really helps you understand just how much that must have been to deal with, also to have journalists coming to her hospital room and asking really invasive questions.

Tegan
Yeah! Yeah, that's interesting. I'm thinking about the fact that prior to that, her career had been as a filmmaker and photojournalist and so, or -- am I getting the chronology right, that that was before?

Mehitabel
Yeah.

Tegan
So she's also kind of switching. She was already working in media, but she's switching sides, and now she's the subject.

Mehitabel
Right. And it's interesting too, seeing how Christine Jorgensen talks about how what she became famous for is really not what she wanted to be famous for. She has a really interesting story, actually, about in 1952, right when she became very famous, basically for existing as a transgender woman, and she was hoping that she could use the fact that she had a lot of name recognition to get a screening for a travel film that she had made. Because when she was in Denmark waiting to receive the surgery, she had also been taking all of this footage and putting together this documentary.

Tegan
Nice.

Mehitabel
And there was one screening of the film that happened in Denmark. And then when she came back to the United States, she was really interested in screening the film, because that was how she wanted to be seen, right? Was for the work that she did, and not just for this aspect of her identity. And her manager actually told her, after the first time they screened the film, that audiences would find that boring, because they just wanted to look at her and be interested in the fact that she was transgender and were not really interested in seeing her work. And that was something that was very frustrating to her.

Tegan
Yeah. I mean, it's frustrating to me just hearing about it.

Mehitabel
Yeah.

Tegan
I think that that's something that a lot of public figures face today, if they're a part of any marginalized identity, being seen as at best, you know, "photojournalist who is trans," rather than just "trans woman," but don't get to be seen as photojournalist or filmmaker or any of that. That's a couple generations later, still something that people are definitely still struggling with.

Mehitabel
Absolutely. One thing that was really remarkable to me was also just seeing how much support that Christine Jorgensen got as a trans woman in the 1950s. Because obviously, she faced a huge amount of discrimination for just existing as a person with her identity at the time that she did, but all throughout the autobiography, when she's talking about facing censorship, when she's talking about being harassed, when she's talking about the press saying very unkind things about her, she's also talking about finding allies. So for instance, when she performed in

Las Vegas, there was, the newspaper ran an article saying that the other chorus girls who performed in Vegas didn't want to share a dressing room with her. Right? This kind of bathroom panic stuff people often talk about? And all of the other female performers at that same venue actually wrote a letter where they said, "None of us said that! We all feel fine sharing a dressing room with Christine."

Tegan
Huh. Yeah.

Mehitabel
And there were, you know, even when she was being banned, always venues that were willing to host her as a performer. When she was banned from performing in Boston, there were a couple clubs in Lowell actually, that stepped up and said, "We would love to have your show." And then, I guess the sort of counterpoint to that also is, throughout her autobiography, it is really obvious that even though she is the most publicly famous trans woman in her time, she is really not the only trans woman in her time, that she writes about constantly receiving letters from other people who say, "seeing you out there in public is really inspiring to me, and it's inspired me to also perform a feminine gender presentation in public, or it's inspired me to come out." She also talks about psychologists coming to her and saying, "I have patients who are cross dressers. Can you help me understand their psychology?" And something that's very interesting is, I think it makes it obvious that because she was so famous and because she was a pretty attractive white woman, she was not facing a lot of the sorts of discrimination that other transgender women were facing at her time. She talks about, at some point, being informed that there were a couple other trans women who were arrested for cross dressing in New York City, and said that Christine Jorgensen was a major inspiration to them.

Tegan
Interesting.

Mehitabel
So I think it's sort of a reminder that even while the American press is in some ways celebrating Christine Jorgensen as a "miracle of modern science" there are other trans women who are being totally oppressed in America.

Tegan
Yeah, I think that what you mentioned about people writing to her, saying that she inspired them to come out, or that she inspired them to, you know, be more public about their presentation, is a reminder that trans women didn't start existing in the 1950s, and that many, many of these stories are completely lost to history because there was no one to inspire someone to come out, or because coming out wasn't safe, and so there's just a lot that we don't know about the history of trans people in Boston, the history of trans people on our site. I mean, she was very unlikely to be the first trans person to ever set foot in the Paul Revere House, but she is the first one we know about.

Mehitabel
Oh, absolutely. And I think it's also an interesting reminder that while Christine Jorgensen is very famous for being the first American citizen to receive the particular gender confirming surgery she did, that there were lots of other trans women who didn't have access to the same medical care. That really affected how they were treated. That in the 1950s and -- I think nowadays, in many ways -- American society was much more willing to accept a trans woman who received all of the surgeries that she was expected to than trans women who didn't have access to the same medical care.

Tegan
Yeah, that makes sense. And even the headline that you referenced, "...Becomes Blonde Beauty," this idea that she had a physical transformation, I think, was very important to the narrative. Is there anything else, either about the newspaper accounts that you read or anything else about your research process for this article that stood out for you?

Mehitabel
Totally, I had a lot of fun reading all of the old Boston Globe articles about this, and also other local newspapers, like Lowell newspapers. I think it's a good way to remember that historical events always happen simultaneously, to read newspapers. Because Christine Jorgensen story is not the front page story on almost any of even the Boston newspaper articles I was reading about her. So you remember, yeah, this is going on during the Red Scare, during the Comics Code hearings, during lots of other municipal drama in the city of Boston. And I think it helps give it a time and place.

Tegan
Yeah, that makes sense. And in the article, you mentioned that the Freedom Trail, as a Freedom Trail, had recently been created, even though many of the sites predated it by quite a bit.

Mehitabel
Absolutely. It's also interesting to get to see all of the personalities in the story and how they were portrayed in the press in Boston. So Mary Driscoll, the head of the Boston licensing board, was a major public figure, like she was very well known as someone who worked at City Hall and wielded her power very politically. And the Boston Globe would report on just a lot of what was going on in her daily life.

Tegan
Huh.

Mehitabel
I think the craziest thing I found about her doing my research is that a couple years later, she was at Fenway Park and got hit in the head by baseball!

Tegan
Oh wow.

Mehitabel
...which there was a newspaper article about.

Tegan
Yeah, I mean, I hope she's okay, but I also find it amusing that she's such a public figure that that's...

Mehitabel
Right.

Tegan
And, you know, I don't know who's running the Boston licensing board at the moment, or even if it's still called that.

Mehitabel
Right, and I think it helps you understand, right, how much political power this entity had, that it was understood even in the newspaper as a person and a government entity to keep an eye on.

Tegan
Yeah, definitely. So you close the article by posing questions about what Jorgensen hoped for when the photos were taken. There's no documentation that we know of that describes who chose the staging of the photos or how Jorgensen felt about them. If you had to venture a guess, what do you think might have been on her mind when she visited the Paul Revere House?

Mehitabel
That's a really interesting question, because part of what I find so cool about the photos is I have no idea. And, you know, I think it's possible that that moment was emotionally resonant for her in all sorts of ways. I think about the framing that she was a veteran. And I know a lot of veterans visit the Paul Revere House and feel a connection to the house of another veteran from the American Revolution. And I wonder if that was an emotion for her. I think it's, you know, very possible that she was thinking about her own struggles to exist in public and to fight for her freedom of speech, and that maybe thinking about America's struggle to become an independent nation, or the way that revolutionaries in Paul Revere's time were fighting for rights of freedom of speech and right to protest, maybe that really hit for her. But I think it's also possible that she was really trying to get her mind off things, right?

Tegan
Right.

Mehitabel
She had come to Boston to perform, to do something very specific that she was banned from doing, and had all of this free time. So I think that she might have been trying to, you know,

recoup some losses with other appearances. She might have just been trying to get a good day's tourism out of it, if everything else about the trip to Boston was a wash.

Tegan
Right. Yeah, definitely. Well, this is a fascinating story. The article could have been twice as long, and you still would have had plenty to say on the topic, because it is such a rich topic. So I also feel like we could continue this conversation for much longer than the length of one episode, but we are going to wrap it here. So thank you so much for being on the show today.

Mehitabel
Thank you very much as well. It's been fun.

Tegan
We just heard from Mehitabel Glenhaber, who is a program assistant at the Paul Revere House. They're the author of our summer 2024 Revere House Gazette article, "Snapshots of a Celebrity Visit: Christine Jorgensen at the Paul Revere House, 1954." Now, listeners, if you'll follow me, we'll step into the Paul Revere House for our next segment, Our Favorite Questions.

Derek
Okay, welcome everybody. Welcome back to our favorite questions segment. Today I am joined by Cal. Tell us a little about yourself.

Cal
Hi everyone. So my name is Cal. I am a historic interpreter here at the Revere House. And when I'm not at the Revere House, I am mostly a historical archeologist. So yeah, not digging up dinosaur bones, I study old garbage, mostly from like the 17th and 18th centuries. I moved to Boston to start my master's degree here, so that's how I ended up working at the Revere House. I have been here for the past eight or so months, and I've been really enjoying my time at the Revere House.

Derek
It's a wonderful time. I think we started at the same time.

Cal
Yes.

Derek
Same graduating class, yes. Okay, so today, we're gonna ask you about a lot of questions that you've heard here at the house, because we get asked a lot of them pretty consistently. And so what is, you know, a question or a favorite question that you're asked pretty regularly.

Cal
So people often ask about the bathrooms, which is a little gross, if you want to put it that way.

Derek
For sure.

Cal
But I particularly study bathrooms. And a lot of my thesis research is actually related to a late 17th, early 18th century privy from a town up near Salem. So whenever people ask me about this, I love to explain the whole idea of a chamber pot and people going outside to a privy. So for, if you're not familiar with it, privies being like, usually an outhouse or some type of structure that's gonna have a stone or sometimes barrel lined, sometimes brick lined hole dug into the ground underneath it. If you've seen the movie Shrek, think of Shrek: that kind of like outhouse at the beginning of it? Similar to that, but a little bit nicer, if you will. And I always think that's so interesting, because I get to explain to kids, be like, yeah, okay, go on a little scavenger hunt to the back room. Go to, like, the back bed chamber, and look for the bathroom, the chamber pot. But I always think it's particularly interesting because when we talk about privies, we get to talk about the archeological data that comes out of them.

Cal
So as I mentioned, they're usually holes in the grounds. Archeologists love to study things like features. So features being kind of permanent parts of like the ground that you can't take with you, so a privy is considered to be a feature, right? And along with throwing out fecal material and things like that -- which I know, that's why it's a little bit gross -- absolutely great sources of data.

Derek
For sure, yeah!

Cal
A lot of it having to do with the fact that they're consistently wet. So kind of like imagining it's a little bit gross here, but because they're consistently wet, they're fantastic at preserving organic materials that don't typically preserve. So for me, a historical archeologist, my specialty is faunal analysis. I study animal bones, specifically bones that come out of kitchen waste. So bones are mostly organic. They don't typically preserve well unless they're in pretty consistently either damp or dry environments. So privies form excellent sources of data for that. So like most of my thesis collection, is about animal bones, but along with kitchen waste because you don't have regular sanitation the way we do today -- no one's coming along and picking up your garbage every Thursday and Monday morning -- you're gonna throw out your kitchen waste into the privy. So broken plates, animal bones that are being cooked or like remnants of meals. This is... gives us an opportunity to really look at, I guess, for lack of better words, like the historic diet, like, what are they eating? What are they serving it on? How old are the animals that they're eating? How, like... what is the health of them? Or is it a really old animal, or is it a really young animal? And the quality and quantity of the food you're eating can often also be an indicator of status, in terms of how much money can you afford to spend on your food, or something like that. And then, along with that, another amazing source of data we get, other organic materials, being parasites.

Derek
Oh wow.

Cal
Which parasites, the worms and bugs themselves, don't survive, but the eggs do. And when they're in really wet environments that are being excreted in fecal material. There are people who specialize in archaeoentomology. So they can do like, they study parasites to be like, "How healthy are the people who are living here?" Or in terms of environmental components, like, archaeoentomologists will often look at "How many beetles are here? How long was this privy open for? How smelly and gross would have been, versus did they just dump everything in at once and then cover it up really quickly?" And then, along with that, people who do paleoethnobotany, people who study seeds or pollen, we often take very specialized soil samples that they can actually process them with acid to look for the pollen in the air. So trees and plants rain pollen. So you get a really good indicator of, like, "What's in bloom? What season can this be, potentially"" things like that.

Derek
Fascinating.

Cal
So, yeah, you can get, like, really hyper-specific data from privies.

Derek
Yeah, it's a way to, like, literally, have a window into what life was truly like back then.

Cal
Exactly, or like seeds. You don't digest seeds for the most part. So if there's tons of raspberry seeds...

Derek
They're still there.

Cal
Yeah, it indicates that there's a lot of raspberries in your diet, or things like that. And that also comes from the fact that my research program does a lot of environmental research, but it gives us so many clues into the health of people, what they're eating, things like that, which I always think is particularly interesting.

Derek
Yeah, I feel like a guest walking in would have ... I think a lot of people wonder, how do you know about any of this stuff? Where do you get any of this information? How do you know what people were eating? How do you know what their diets were like? How do you know all this

stuff? But it takes somebody like you and like the people you work with to really get into the nitty-gritty.

Cal
Yeah, and granted, this is also very specialized information, so sorry for anyone who's listening and has just heard a whole little rant about privies.

Derek
No, I think it's fascinating, yeah.

Cal
It's also really fascinating, because we have the Revere connection with privies. Yeah, he is the first President of the Board of Health, and...

Derek
He was very concerned with probably very smelly privies in particular.

Cal
I'm sure he was, I know it's a little bit more hyper-specific, but I love when people ask about the bathroom, because not only do we have the Revere connection as the President of the Board of Health, but I get to tell them all about these rich sources of archeological data that they should go examine.

Derek
Absolutely. I mean, each one of us has some things specific that we're all interested in, and can give a unique perspective on. You know that's what the interpretation is for.

Cal
Exactly.

Derek
Okay, so what is one of your favorite questions that you've ever been asked by a visitor?

Cal
Ooh, I love when people ask about food. In particular, during the holidays, when we have out all of our citrus fruits. So I study historic diets from the late 17th and early 18th centuries, and citrus fruits would have been such a big display of wealth.

Derek
Right, yeah.

Cal
Particularly, to have an orange on your table meant you had money, but if, say, during the holidays, you have your entire pyramid of oranges out...

Derek
I mean, you're rich.

Cal
Yeah, that means you definitely have money to spare on that.

Derek
Yes.

Cal
To the point where, when we look at historic recipes, they're often telling you, to you... you're not just eating an orange the way we eat an orange today. We can just go to the grocery store. You can buy an orange for $1, you're gonna go home, you're gonna peel it, you throw out the peel, you throw out all this different stuff. Historically, the 17th and 18th centuries, when they have recipes involving citrus, these recipes are telling them to use every single little bit. They're telling them to juice it and to use it in a recipe. They're going to use the flesh that's already been juiced. They're going to use the peels, every little component, because they're going to be so expensive.

Derek
Right.

Cal
I always love to think about that in terms of, like, the labor that goes into the production of food.

Derek
Yeah, definitely.

Cal
Oranges mostly going to be grown in Spain or Portugal, and then have to get shipped to New England before they're starting to get grown in Florida. And later on, people, especially in like the later 1700s, people are growing either pineapples or oranges and greenhouses.

Derek
The... it's so fascinating, because food, again, is such a window into status and also into the greater Atlantic trade system, especially because Robert Howard was a merchant, a shipping merchant himself, the first, you know, person who owned the house. I'm sure food was a big part of his business, or just in general, of Boston itself, and why the city grew, because it was being traded all over the place.

Cal
Yeah, exactly. And food is such a big indicator of socioeconomic status, a lot of that having to do with the fact that our food speaks about us. If you think about the meal that's on your plate when

you go home tonight, that's gonna say a big part about who you are and like your cultural background, and like, who are you in terms of the world that you live in now. So I love when people ask about food.

Speaker 1
All right, so for our last question, what is something or a topic or a question that you wished visitors would ask you more often?

Cal
Oh geez, I love when visitors ask about the 17th century, especially when we're in the hall and we're focusing on the period about Robert Howard and his family. Of course, the Howards being very wealthy Puritans. So they're people who are going to be really attempting to display their wealth through the things that they're surrounding themselves with. There is an excellent source called Purchasing Identity in the Atlantic world, and this particular author, in this whole book looks at material culture and how this would have been used as -- these merchants, as they start to build like their identity as merchant elites. Especially considering that in England, merchants, usually people who are not considered to be the most elite of people, not like the most high end in terms of their status, because they don't have the noble titles or anything like that. So when they arrive in places like Boston, they're really using all of this material culture to represent themselves in t erms of this greater world, all these new different cultures kind of being mixed into play, and they're moving around them.

Cal
So I love when people talk about, like, the 17th century or the Howards, because it allows us to really talk about, like, the nuanced details of when this house is first built. And like, why is the layout of the house like this? You walk into the kitchen, and you're in the 1790s when the Reveres are here, and then you're walking back into the 1680s, you get to see what this house was supposed to look like when it's first built. And of course, "supposed to" being very subjective there.

Derek
Yeah, of course.

Cal
But similar to what the original intentions for what it would look like are, and then especially as you walk from the hall and you go to the second story, those Revere family bedrooms on the second story really highlight how much change goes on.

Derek
How diff... it's drastically different upstairs and downstairs, yeah.

Cal
So much time traveling, if you will.

Derek
Definitely!

Cal
I always think that's a good way to start to wrap your head around it.

Derek
Yeah, I think so. Well, thank you very much, Cal for joining me today.

Cal
Thank you so much for having me, this was lot of fun.

Derek
This was a lot of fun. Well, thanks for tuning in, everybody. We will see you next episode.

Tegan
Thank you for tuning in to Revere House Radio. I'm your host, Tegan Kehoe, and I am the Research and Adult Program Director here at the Paul Revere House. Our production team for this season includes Derek Hunter, Tyler McDonald, Cadee Stefani, Gabe Quealey and Adrienne Turnbull-Reilly. Revere House Radio is a production of the Paul Revere Memorial Association, the nonprofit which operates the Paul Revere House Museum. You can find more information, subscribe to our mailing list or social media, or become a member on our website at www.paulreverehouse.org. Or, come visit us in Boston.