Revolution in Boston?
Eight Propositions for Public History on the Freedom Trail

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The author reassesses the public presentation of history on Boston’s Freedom Trail, founded in the 1950s, in light of the reinterpretation of the American Revolution which has brought into focus the multi-sided struggle for liberty and equality within America. In eight propositions, he questions whether the many sites of the trail with a minimum of coordination, do justice to the “popular” side of the Revolution. Boston is at risk in dealing with race and gender, he suggests, of fragmenting the Revolution. In avoiding the “dark” side, it can fall into an exclusively celebratory history. To present a more coherent history, the author points to the need for greater collaborative efforts by the sites which make up the trail.

ALFRED F. YOUNG’S The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) takes up the private and public memory of the Revolution in Boston. His essays on mechanics, women, and popular culture in Revolutionary era Boston will be reprinted in Liberty Tree: Reimagining the American Revolution (New York: New York University Press, forthcoming). Co-curator of the exhibit We the People at the Chicago Historical Society (1987–), and an advocate of curatorial freedom, he received the Organization of American Historians Distinguished Service Award in 2000. He is Senior Research Fellow at the Newberry Library, Chicago, and Emeritus Professor of History at Northern Illinois University.

An early version of this paper was delivered at the conference, “Changing Meanings of Freedom: The 225th Anniversary of the American Revolution,” held at Suffolk University School of Law, Boston, June 2–3, 2000, sponsored by the National Park Service, Boston 2000’s Boston Freedom Awards Program, The History Channel, and the Organization of American Historians. My thanks to the many keepers of the past in Boston who provided information or responded to the various drafts of the paper and to the editors of The Public Historian, two anonymous reviewers, and Michael Zuckerman for comments.
Given the re-interpretation of the American Revolution produced by a generation of scholars, a reassessment of the public presentation of history on Boston’s venerable Freedom Trail, formed in the 1950s, is long overdue. Indeed, in 1995 a team of outside consultants commissioned by the Boston National Historical Park (BNHP), after a searching review of all facets of its operation, concluded that “the Freedom Trail as an entity has not kept pace with the richer and more inclusive stories unveiled at many of the Sites.” It warned that the trail needed “to tell this more complex story [of the Revolution] or risk losing relevance.” The 1995 report, with a 1996 follow-up by a set of task forces which laid out an agenda for “reinvigorating” and “revitalizing” the trail, gathers dust, and in 2000, at a conference sponsored by the National Park Service (NPS) on the occasion of the 225th anniversary of the Revolution attended by a wide range of historians associated with the new history of the Revolution and a host of Boston’s keepers of the past, not a soul mentioned the report.¹

The Freedom Trail, it needs to be said at the outset, is not a single entity under a central administration like Colonial Williamsburg or Sturbridge Village. It is in fact merely a name, adopted in 1951 to link what are now sixteen sites spread over a two-and-a-half-mile route (marked in red on the streets and sidewalks) that winds from downtown Boston in the heart of the business district, through the North End, across the Charles River to Charlestown, sites of the United States Navy Yard, the naval vessel USS Constitution, and the Battle of Bunker Hill monument (see map). Each site is managed either by a private association or a government agency, chief among which is BNHP, created in 1974, a unit of the NPS. About half of the sites have interpretive programs; the Park Service operates two small visitor centers and provides park rangers as guides for the minority of tourists who choose to go on guided tours. There is “minimal coordination” of the sites, to use the diplomatic language of the 1995 report: a Council of Sites in existence at the time is no more; the Freedom Trail Commission, a city agency, deals, in effect, with traffic on the trail and admitting new sites; and the Freedom Trail Foundation functions primarily as a marketing agency.²

This is not to imply that there is inactivity on the Freedom Trail—quite the opposite. Between 1992 and 1997, large-scale restorations were completed at the three major public buildings on the trail: Faneuil Hall, the Old State House, and, most recently, Old South Meeting House—all thanks to massive federal funding. There are new exhibits in old spaces: Voices of Protest in Old South (which includes a segment on the Tea Party) and a


² For an institutional survey of the history of the trail, see Matt Greif, “Freedom Trail Commission Report for the National Historical Park” (Boston, 1995), unpublished ms. The trail deserves a full-scale study in the context of Boston confronting the American Revolution.
display on the early African-American community at the restored Abiel Smith school (on the Black Heritage Trail). The Bostonian Society mounted an adventurous temporary exhibit on the Boston Massacre. Revisions of other exhibits are in progress: at the USS Constitution museum, depicting life at sea; at the Bunker Hill Battle monument; and at the
Boston Tea Party museum (recently the victim of a fire). Proposals have been put forth (and languish) for developing the site at the Liberty Tree.  

A new trail guidebook published by NPS includes a lucid essay distilling the scholarly history of the Revolution in Boston by the historian Barbara Clark Smith, as well as a guide to the sites by Susan Wilson. NPS initiatives have produced both an eye-opening research project on people of color at the battle of Bunker Hill and the Lexington-Concord battle road and an artists-in-residence program at Freedom Trail sites in conjunction with the Institute of Contemporary Art. Meanwhile, the privately managed sites with active programs—Old South, The Bostonian Society, and the Paul Revere Memorial Association—conduct ongoing programs aimed both at general audiences and school children. There are annual reenactments of the Massacre and the Tea Party.

Since the late 1990s, there has been an unprecedented ferment in public history for Boston as a whole. New “trails” have been laid out. The Black Heritage Trail (initiated in 1968) has been joined by a Boston Women’s Heritage Trail; a Literary Trail of Greater Boston; a maritime trail, “Boston by Sea,” a boat tour dramatizing the historic sites of Boston’s harbor; and “Innovation Odyssey,” a trail highlighting Boston inventions—the latter three under the aegis of the Boston History Collaborative (BHC), formed in 1996. There are guidebooks to help visitors find their way on these new trails, which, in effect, exist only on a map and in a guidebook. The BHC, under creative leadership, has been able to tap the energies of academic historians and writers, while mobilizing business and civic support. An
ethnic museum has opened, and new ones are in the offing. It may be a sign of the times that it is hard to keep abreast of all that is going on in public history in Boston.

Meanwhile, there is a prospect of new public spaces for history as a result of the land that will be reclaimed by the city’s “Big Dig” operation, placing a major highway underground. There may be open land equal in size to fifty percent of the city’s current parkland. This has rekindled a demand for a much-needed expanded visitor orientation center, and for some has raised the possibility of a major new museum with perhaps 150,000 to 200,000 square feet, which might be devoted to the 300-year history of Boston as a whole. To an outsider, this ferment in Boston about telling many histories suggests an atmosphere of creative possibilities in confronting old problems within the Freedom Trail. 8

Boston, I have discovered only recently, has not always been as committed to preserving and presenting its history. Some years ago, when I was combing the attics and archives of the Chicago Historical Society for artifacts for an exhibit on the American Revolution, I stumbled across an unpublished letter John Adams wrote in 1809 lamenting “the extraordinary and unaccountable Inattention in our countrymen to the History of their own country.” Only twenty-five years after the Revolution, the former president was convinced that “our own original Historians are very much neglected” and that Samuel Adams and John Hancock were “almost buried in oblivion.” He was prescient. Samuel Adams’s wood-frame house disappeared in the 1820s, and the city did not get around to honoring him with a statue until 1873. In 1863, the city allowed John Hancock’s magnificent stone mansion on Beacon Street to be torn down. Paul Revere’s house in the North End was not rescued until 1906, despite the fame Longfellow’s poem brought him.

This indifference extended to Boston’s leading public buildings. In 1876, Old South Meeting House was auctioned off and was literally about to be sold for scrap when a last-ditch effort saved it. And the city was so indifferent to the Old State House that it was prepared to tear it down to improve the flow of traffic—Chicago even made an offer to move it there. These were the leading men and places of the Revolution proper. In 1888, when, after a campaign of many decades, a monument finally went up on the Common to Crispus Attucks and the other victims of the Boston Massacre, it was over


the opposition of leaders of the Massachusetts Historical Society, who condemned them as a “riotous mob,” the “aggressors,” and “vulgar ruffians.”

This was part of a very old process of selective remembering and willful forgetting of the history of the Revolution in Boston. Over the past two hundred years, there has been an ongoing contest to appropriate the public memory of the American Revolution. We often assume that what is iconic today has always been so, forgetting the historian Eric Hobsbawm’s provocative concept, “the invention of tradition.” The destruction of the tea in 1773, for example, was virtually lost in the sixty years after the Revolution as the elites who established their cultural domination chose to erase the radical or “popular” side of the Revolution: the “mob” actions, the farmers’ rebellions, the quest for equality. When the event was recovered in the 1830s, it returned as “The Boston Tea Party,” a name that reduced an act of civil disobedience to a comic, frivolous, and safe event. Today, the more keepers of the past are aware that Bostonians in the past made choices as to what to remember and what to erase, the more they have a critical perspective on making their own choices.10

My reflections on the state of history on the Freedom Trail are made from the perspective of someone who has taken part in the emergence of the new history of the Revolution, has been in and out of the city over the last thirty years doing research on Boston, and who in recent years has had the pleasure of working with several institutions on the trail. In effect, I am an attentive outsider who has been only an occasional insider. I can still remember my first visit to a poorly marked Freedom Trail in the early 1960s when I got lost and a gentleman in a bowler hat who saw my confusion guided me to the Revere House in the North End. I offer these reflections in a series of propositions, a term suggesting they are tentative and therefore easier to take issue with.11


11. Full disclosure: I was a consultant for the National Park Service for Boston and the American Revolution (Handbook No. 146), and for the exhibit on Hewes in the Old South Meeting House, Voices of Protest; I was a consultant for the Bostonian Society on their exhibit on the Boston Massacre; I worked with the Boston History Collaborative on the segment on Hewes for Boston by Sea; I gave a program for several summers in the National Park Service “People and Places” Institute for elementary school teachers and have given lectures at Old South Meeting House and the Bostonian Society.
Proposition 1. The new analytical framework for the history of the American Revolution has brought into sharp focus a two-way conflict: the struggle for liberty from Great Britain and the multi-sided struggle for liberty within America.

In the “old” history, patriotic colonists faced only one way: towards Great Britain and their Tory allies within America. In the new narratives, Americans more commonly face two ways: confronting Great Britain but also confronting each other. This new history has clarified the character of the Revolution for the country as a whole in three important ways. It has broadened the cast of characters who participated in the shaping of well-known events, making for a more complex version of resistance in the decade from 1765 to 1775. Because its emphasis is on ordinary people who were often at odds with their betters, on “the people out of doors” (as opposed to people in places of power), it has, secondly, “restored rebellion to the history of the Revolution,” as historian Linda Kerber puts it. And in its outcome, thirdly, although this more inclusive Revolution is in many ways more democratic and more radical, it is also more dark. Thus the new history helps us in striking a balance between achievements and the failure to achieve the ideals of the Revolution. The Revolution fits into a long-range vision of Americans enlarging and redefining freedom as an ongoing process.  

The picture that emerges from this scholarship is of a Revolution that lasted longer than the one associated only with its making from 1765 to 1775 (with which a majority of sites on the Trail are associated), or with the war from 1775 to 1783, and which played out in the shaping of the new nation into the early nineteenth century. It is a Revolution in which the promise of the Declaration of Independence, “all men are created equal” was partly fulfilled for the majority of white men, artisans, and yeoman farmers, but remained unfulfilled for women, and in which promises were never made either to African Americans or Native Americans. Although the new history presents a fractured vision of a many-sided, incomplete Revolution, in some ways it is easier to make sense of, more consistent with our understanding of the history that followed.

When the Freedom Trail “was first set up,” as the 1995 consultants report phrased it, “the nation of 1950 emerging from World War II sought

consensus and saw the American Revolution through its heroes and great events.” The managers of individual sites on the trail just picked their way through whatever traditional scholarship was in the air. Although the creation of BNHP in 1974 and the Bicentennial celebrations kindled some rethinking, it was not until the massive restoration projects of the major buildings were underway that serious attention was given to a more comprehensive interpretation.\(^\text{13}\)

The new narratives can no longer be contained within a traditional framework, as was attempted, for example, in the Old State House exhibit called *From Colony to Commonwealth*, still the only exhibit in the city attempting an overall narrative of the Revolution. Based on a rich array of treasures of the Bostonian Society, it is organized around five “Leading Persons,” John Hancock, James Otis, John Adams, and Samuel Adams, the best known patriot leaders, who confront Thomas Hutchinson, symbol of royal authority. The exhibit was already old hat when it was curated by NPS in collaboration with the Bostonian Society in the late 1980s, insensitive to the newer history even though such artifacts on display as the lantern and bunting that hung on the Liberty Tree would have permitted “popular” voices to be dramatized.

If, today, you were choosing five individuals who might epitomize today’s two-way vision of the Revolution, who might the candidates be? Let me, for purposes of illustration, nominate five Massachusetts residents who confronted the leading persons on the patriot side while they also confronted the British, who would be appropriate for a museum located in a building that was the center of governmental decisions.

Abigail Adams, facing her husband, John, in the Continental Congress, asking him “to remember the ladies” in “the new code of laws” he was writing. “Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands,” she wrote. John’s putdown would be part of their dialogue. “As to your extraordinary code of laws I cannot but laugh.”\(^\text{14}\)

Ebenezer McIntosh was a shoemaker who led the united South End and North End gangs at Boston’s annual Pope’s Day festivity in demonstrations against the Stamp Act. He escorted Stamp Act Commissioner designate Andrew Oliver—Thomas Hutchinson’s associate—to a forced resignation at the Liberty Tree. Known as “the Captain General of the Liberty Tree,” he was feared by John Adams as a “Massaniello,” symbol of proletarian revolt in Europe, and shunted aside by Samuel Adams as a leader of mob actions.\(^\text{15}\)

Prince Hall, an African-American leather dresser of Boston who crafted drumheads for the patriot armies and organized the first African Masonic Lodge. A free man manumitted by his master, he confronted the Massachusetts legislature in the Old State House with petitions: before the war, to free the slaves; after the war, to end the trade in slaves, admit black children to the town’s public schools, and then to support those free blacks who might choose to return to Africa.\textsuperscript{16}

Elder Isaac Backus, foremost leader of New England’s Baptists, who traveled from his home in Middleborough to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia and embarrassed delegates John and Samuel Adams with a plea for religious liberty from the Massachusetts Congregationalist Church establishment. He advocated nonpayment of ecclesiastical taxes or civil disobedience to win “soul liberty.”\textsuperscript{17}

Daniel Shays, a leader of the farmers of western Massachusetts who rose from private to captain in the Continental Army and fought at Bunker Hill, Saratoga, and Stoney Point. In 1774–75 farmers closed the courts in western Massachusetts. After the war, Shays joined his fellow debt-ridden farmers in closing down the courts again to prevent them from foreclosing farms and imprisoning debtors. Shays confronted Samuel Adams, the rebel against Britain who denied a right to rebel against a republic.\textsuperscript{18}

This new history does not imply that we displace “leading persons” with “ordinary persons”; rather, it is an invitation to see leaders as many-sided. If we turn, for example, to John Adams, who at last is coming into the fame that eluded him in his lifetime, we realize how much energy this revolutionary conservative poured into containing the many radicalisms of the Revolution. Adams consistently faced two ways. As a lawyer defending the British soldiers in the Boston Massacre trial, he blamed the event on “the motley mob of saucy boys, negroes and molottoes, Irish teagues and outlandish jack tarrs.” In reply to his wife’s plea to “remember the ladies,” Adams lamented


that “we have been told that our struggle has loosened the bands of government everywhere . . . that Indians slighted their guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their masters.” In response to Thomas Paine’s irreverent, democratic *Common Sense*, Adams wrote a pamphlet advising constitution-makers how “to preserve respect for persons in authority.” Later, as president, he administered the Alien and Sedition Laws under which his Jeffersonian opponents were jailed for criticizing the president. In other words, history at the top can look different when viewed from the bottom up.19

**Proposition 2. Buildings do not “speak for themselves” or the events that took place within them. There is a question whether the Freedom Trail does justice to the “popular” side of the Revolution.**

While other early American restorations at outdoor museums permit the recovery of the social history of everyday life, Boston, like Philadelphia, has intact the sites of the major public events of the Revolution. The State House was the seat of colonial government, composed of the royal Governor, his appointed Council, and the General Court, an assembly elected by the towns, and then from 1775 to 1798, it was the seat of the independent state government. Faneuil Hall was the place where the town meeting met and voters of small property expressed the democratic will. Old South Meeting House, the largest church in Boston, was the scene of the major protests of “the whole body of the people” at which the bars of property were let down and every Tom, Dick and Harry turned out. Legislators contested the crown inside the State House and citizens contested British soldiers in the square outside where the Massacre took place. The Tea Party was launched from an overflow meeting at Old South; the Declaration of Independence was read from the State House balcony.

The events that took place within are not “self evident.” There are, of course, inherent difficulties in presenting a narrative of the Revolution in the heart of a bustling city whose steel and glass buildings overshadow the eighteenth-century sites. Granted, tourists can follow (after a fashion) the red line from site to site, but there is no narrative logic to the trail; the sites can not be arranged in a sequence of Revolutionary events. In fact, the sites of some major events of the people “out of doors” are not even on the Trail. Visitors need more help than they get in linking sites to events. Although 250,000 or so tourists a year take “trolley” tours or the very popular “duck” tours with History Lite, only about 25,000 take the thousand or so tours conducted annually by NPS rangers.20


20. For statistics on attendance at Boston sites, see Sean Hennessey, NPS Information Officer [Sean_Hennessey@nps.gov]. For three fiscal years, 1996–99, NPS conducted about
The institutions in charge of the buildings struggle valiantly with interpreting to visitors the history that took place within. In some ways the unintended consequences of faithful restorations pull against the history. (The Revere House, restored early in the 1900s to its seventeenth-century state, is successfully interpreted today as the house Paul Revere lived in at the time of the Revolution). From its appearance within, you would not know that the Old State House once housed legislative chambers. In Old South Meeting House, the beauty of the restoration inspires reverence and a hushed silence appropriate to a sacred place. Faneuil Hall has been restored to its state as the building the architect Charles Bulfinch later enlarged, and an incongruous, giant painting of the famous Webster-Hayne debate at the front pulls us towards the abolitionist history of the nineteenth century. NPS guides thus have a burden of pulling visitors back to the era of the Revolution. No building tells its own story, and no one (park rangers aside) assumes the burden of drawing connections between events that took place in one building and events in another.

In their programming, the major institutions on the trail assume responsibility for missions that extend beyond the Revolution: Old South as a landmark for traditions of freedom of expression in Boston; the Bostonian Society as a museum covering the sweep of the city’s history. Although the Bostonian Society plays host to an annual reenactment of the massacre, everyday passers-by have only a brass plaque outside which does little justice to the event, difficult to explain at best. (People know there is something wrong with Paul Revere’s version of the event in his engraving but are not sure what.) Old South sponsors an annual reenactment of the debate over the tea tax, from which patriots sally forth for the tea ship. Capturing such moments for the casual visitor, however, is daunting.

Meanwhile, the two sites in Boston that epitomize the Revolution “out of doors” are orphans: the Liberty Tree and the Boston Tea Party. The site of the Tea Party (1773) is not on the Freedom Trail, presumably because it is managed by a profit-making entity that charges tourists to visit a reenactment of the tea action on a replica of the Beaver tea ship, and throw a cask of tea overboard. (The official map does no more than locate the site.) The site of the Liberty Tree, a public center of Sons of Liberty activity in the Stamp Act protests (1765–66) and thereafter a common symbol of Revolutionary ideals, is unmarked on most maps. At the site, about five blocks from the downtown sites, there is one plaque on what was later called the Liberty Tree building and another in the pavement across the street. Presumably it

1000 tours each year with from 24,000 to 27,000 participants; for 2000–01, a year in which tourism plummeted after September 11, there were 676 tours with 15,260 participants.

is not on the official trail because it is in a neighborhood long known as “the combat zone” which tourists might balk at. A porn store next door to the site celebrates freedom of expression with a bas-relief replica of the Liberty Tree.

If Boston ever develops the site, how will it interpret the place where effigies of detested British officials were hung and the shoemaker McIntosh became “Captain General” of the Liberty Tree? One park ranger told me he flinched at the prospect of hanging effigies which could be read as championing violence. In truth, historians have contributed a great deal to setting the “mob” into perspective; the crowds of Revolutionary-era Boston actually were remarkable for their relative restraint and for targeting property and symbols of authority, as opposed to persons. These are among the unmet challenges on the Freedom Trail.

**Proposition 3. The issue is no longer whether to include ordinary people in public presentations of history, but how to include them. We are past the point where all we want to say is “they too were there.”**

The multi-volume *American National Biography* (1999), with an array of 17,450 entries which includes little-known and unsung Americans never admitted to the august *Dictionary of American Biography* (1928–36), registers a sea change in the attitudes of professional historical opinion to ordinary people in history. This change is also registered in college and high school text books, biographies, museum exhibits, television documentaries, and the National Standards for History.

I may run a risk of drawing too much from my own experiences, but for the Revolution the response among Boston’s keepers of the past to my scholarship about George Robert Twelves Hewes is a case in point.

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22. On August 14, 1996 and 1997 (Liberty Tree Day), the historian David Hackett Fischer spoke at a commemorative ceremony on the Boston Common sponsored by Mass ReLeaf, a division of the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management; see Young, *Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, 247.


was a shoemaker, a poor man in one of Boston’s lower trades, a nobody who for a moment became a somebody in the Revolution. Born in Boston in 1742 to a tanner, he became an active participant in some of the best-known events in the making of the Revolution in Boston, including the Massacre and the Tea Party. Never a success in his trade, during the war he left Boston, raised a large family in Wrentham, Massachusetts, and after the War of 1812 went west to join several children in central New York. He was “discovered” in 1834 when he was in his nineties and thought to be one of the last survivors of the Tea Party and became the subject of an “as-told-to” memoir. When he returned to Boston in 1835, he became the hero for the day on the Fourth of July, the subject of a portrait and of a second memoir. He died in 1840.

We know of him only because he lived so long and had an excellent memory, and because he surfaced in the 1830s at a moment when the Tea Party was being rediscovered. My findings about Hewes did not fit the conventional views of the mob. He was not a member of any organization and was not particularly shaped by “propaganda” (indeed, he was not much of a reader). He was not one of the violence-prone rabble portrayed by Hutchinson or John Adams (he was opposed, for example, to a tarring and feathering he unwittingly instigated). His memory gives a clue as to what the Revolution meant to him.

When my article about Hewes appeared in the William and Mary Quarterly in 1981, it was dramatized by the American Social History Project in a slide show that became a video for classroom use, but no one on the Freedom Trail rushed to find a place for Hewes. In the late 1990s, after readers of the Quarterly voted it as one of the ten most influential articles to appear in that journal in the half century gone by, several things happened. Boston’s venerable Beacon Press invited me to publish the article on Hewes and his private memory as a book and add an essay on the public memory of the Revolution. The Bostonian Society restored the painting and returned it to a place of prominence in the Old State House; CNN televised the unveiling amidst his descendants, and Bryan Lamb interviewed me on “Book Notes.” The Park Service included a profile and picture of Hewes in its new handbook on the Revolution, and Old South Meeting House commissioned a sculpted mannequin of Hewes (who had been christened there) for the Tea Party segment of its new exhibit. The History Collaborative then dramatized him in a cameo for its harbor tour. For keepers of the past in Boston, Hewes seems to fill a need for an ordinary person on whom they could hang a side of the story they recognize has long been neglected.

The issue then became how Hewes should be portrayed. From my foray into public memory, I realized that when Hewes first appeared on the scene, the Revolution was a subject of political contention. In the 1830s, when Hewes reappeared, it was an unusually turbulent time in Boston when radicals were invoking the heritage of the Revolution. A journeymen trade union movement paraded through the streets and heard the fiery oratory of the labor leader, Seth Luther, claiming that “the mechanics of Boston” threw the tea in Boston harbor. William Lloyd Garrison opened his campaign for an uncompromising abolition of slavery by citing the Declaration of Independence, for which a white-collar mob came close to lynching him. Meanwhile, with Andrew Jackson elected to a second term as president in part with the votes of workers, Boston’s merchants and mill owners formed the Whig political party, its name an effort to appropriate the patriot tradition of the Revolution. Whigs were learning to parade as the party of the common man. In 1834, Abbott Lawrence, Boston’s Whig congressman, had squired Davey Crockett, the Whig frontiersman, around his own textile mill in Lowell. In the presidential election of 1840, Whigs would masquerade in a “log cabin and hard cider” campaign.\(^{27}\)

In 1835, Hewes was taken over by such conservatives, not by the labor movement. On the Fourth of July he was celebrated not for what he did in the Revolution, but as one of the last survivors of the tea action “on the verge of eternity.” The portrait, entitled “The Centenarian,” depicted him not as a shoemaker or the poor man that he was, but in his Sunday-best clothes leaning on his cane. Hung in the fashionable gallery of the Boston Athenaeum, it was reassuring to the genteel: he was a kindly old codger nearly one hundred years old. In the second biography, the Whig author treated Hewes, a member of defiant mobs, as one of “the humble classes,” a prankish boy and a jolly old man. In sum, Hewes’s sponsors tamed him, sanitizing him and the audacious popular movement he had been part of.

In Boston’s second discovery of Hewes in the late 1990s, the question of how to depict Hewes came up in a very literal way. How should he be sculpted for the mannequin in Old South’s new exhibit? In the portrait he was in his nineties. A series of decisions had to be made: at what age should he be depicted? What should he be doing? Should he be a shoemaker at his bench? No, we agreed we should portray the man who in his thirties became an active citizen in the Revolution. If in action, at what event, because he was in so many: at the massacre where a man shot by a soldier dropped wounded into his arms? On a tea ship where he insisted he worked alongside John Hancock breaking open chests and throwing them overboard? In the streets, we decide, as if on the verge of some unnamed action. In what

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27. For the previous paragraphs, Young, *Shoemaker and the Tea Party*, chaps. 6–8; for the Whig elite, see especially Harlow Sheidley, *Sectional Nationalism: Massachusetts Conservative Leaders and the Transformation of America, 1815–1836* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998).
clothing? Obviously, not his Sunday best, but in his work clothes, as if he were coming from his shop. But doing what? He was an angry man, riled up, but not violent. What should he look like? Can we morph the man in the portrait back sixty years? He was about 5 foot 2—heroes are supposed to be tall and commanding.

And so, there he is at the back of the church, a very short man in his mid-thirties, a leather apron tied around his waist (so much a symbol of mechanics that they were often called “leather aprons”), a cobbler’s hammer (molded from an authentic original) tucked in his belt. He is poised to take off to some unnamed action, a determined look on his face. Have we done justice to him as a “man in the street?” Perhaps. Have we caught what the Revolution meant to him? I think not, and I am not sure how an exhibit could have done that.

**Proposition 4. We need to avoid the danger of add-on history. If we add representative characters who make for a more inclusive history, we have to ask: Does their presence change the narrative?**

Glance through the elementary and high school history text books for the Revolution, and some are now replete with images of Phillis Wheatley, Abigail Adams, and Paul Revere—no more than token add-ons to the conventional story. This is feel-good history which comforts democratic sensibilities for inclusion, but does it enhance our understanding of the era? 

Was Hewes important? Did he change the course of the Revolution? No, not as an individual; but arguably, he and others like him, acting together, made a difference. If the actions in the streets and meeting places of Boston were important, then Hewes shares in that importance. Indeed, he was one of the people “out of doors” that leaders like the two Adamses had to learn to accommodate to build a political system that would last.

Secondly, he was important for what the Revolution meant to him. In the memories he retained for over half a century, Hewes insisted that he remembered John Hancock alongside him on the tea ship. His memory was otherwise extraordinary, but it was unlikely that Hancock was present. (The leaders conspicuously remained behind in Old South.) But in this memory lay the meaning of the Revolution to him. Hewes remembered Samuel Adams and John Hancock as his “associates.” In wealth and status, he could hardly have been less equal to Hancock, perhaps the wealthiest merchant in Boston, but in his memory he brought him down to his own level. He was no social leveler, but he thought himself the equal of Hancock as a citizen. What he was remembering was a moment of equality.

Others in Boston demonstrated a variant mechanic consciousness. Paul Revere, Boston’s best-known artisan of the middling sort, has been swallowed by the Longfellow legend of the midnight rider that obscures his own sense of commonality with others of his class. As the Revolution unfolded in Boston, Revere identified himself as a mechanic. A silversmith, his first contribution to the cause was as an engraver of popular images for the Sons of Liberty, the “Boston Massacre” only the most famous among them. He was also a manager of public displays and a leader trusted by his fellow Northenders. He allowed himself to be painted by John Singleton Copley in his shirt as a craftsman at his bench, a piece of silver he crafted in his hand, a tool on the bench, an unusual expression of artisan pride. In the 1790s, in his own account of his famous ride, he wrote: “I was one of a group of about 30 assigned to watch the British troops in Boston,” paused, went back to put a caret mark after “about 30” and inserted “chiefly mechanics.” In 1795, he was elected the first president of the Boston Mechanics Society. He became a successful owner of a brass foundry and rolling mill. But when he died in 1818, a Boston newspaper spoke of him as “a prosperous North End mechanic. He was a born leader of the people; and his influence was pervading, especially among the mechanics and workingmen of Boston, with whom his popularity was immense.” As David Hackett Fischer points out, “In his own mind, he was an artisan, a businessman and a gentleman altogether.” As a tradesman, however, he was never quite accepted by the new gentry on Beacon Street.29

In creating a vocabulary for public history from the evidence that survives, we have to learn ways of allowing one person to speak for many, which requires envisioning a person both for his or her achievements as an individual and as representative of a group.

Proposition 5. It is difficult to convey the theme of the quest of ordinary people for equality in a society of social inequality when so little survives in Boston from the material world of eighteenth-century private life.

Visit Colonial Williamsburg and its environs and there is no escaping that you are in a stratified society of well-to-do plantation owners at the top, slaves at the bottom, and middling craftsmen and women in their shops. Visit Sturbridge Village, whose buildings have been assembled from the New England countryside, and you know you are in a community of middling yeoman farmers and artisans, women and men. But what is the Boston of the Revolutionary era to today’s visitor?

How do you portray the inequality of that day when almost nothing survives of the private city of either George Hewes near the bottom or John Hancock at the top, and only the house of Paul Revere is left to stand for the middling sort? In present-day Boston we have almost no sense of the immense plebeian presence in the colonial era. The North End then teemed with the maritime trades: shipyards, workshops, taverns, and the houses of the men and women who worked there, merchants mixed in higgledy-piggledy among them. The houses of only two artisans remain: Revere and his neighbor and relative, Nathaniel Hitchborn, a boatbuilder. The educators of the Paul Revere Association successfully convey a sense of craft, family, and neighborhood, but the two houses cannot carry the burden of representing the diversity of the old North End.

Amazing as it may seem, there is very little left of the patrician presence in early Boston. Elsewhere, homes of the colonial elite still stand, solidly built and kept up by descendants. But it is as if the Boston elite who also made the Revolution (a minority Tory, a majority Whig patriot) have vanished. The Harrison Gray Otis House and the houses on Beacon Hill were a postwar development, the product of the architect Charles Bulfinch refashioning a neighborhood for newly risen men of wealth who did not want to mix with the hoi polloi in the North End. Thomas Hutchinson’s mansion in the North End, rebuilt after it was gutted by Stamp Act rioters, lasted after he went into exile in England but then was torn down; today you need the help of a park ranger to locate a plaque on the site.

In the nineteenth century, Boston Brahmins were ill at ease with the traditions of their radical forebears. A president of the then elite Massachusetts Historical Society was said to utter a string of profanities when he passed John Hancock’s elegant mansion on Beacon Hill. Men of wealth were uncomfortable with a man who pledged his fortune to the cause of Revolution and chased after political popularity. Small wonder that in the 1860s, no one saved the house after Hancock’s heirs were unable to get either the state or city to take it over. But how much easier would it be today if we had the mansions of Hancock and Hutchinson as a vantage point from which to view the Revolution.


do we have any sign of the sources of merchant wealth: ships, wharves, warehouses, or counting houses. “Boston by Sea,” the new harbor cruise history lesson, is so welcome because it is such a refreshing reminder of the city that was first and foremost a seaport.

Today, to find Boston’s ladies and gentlemen of that era, you have to go out to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts in the Fenway, where you can stare at them in their arrogant aristocratic splendor in Copley’s portraits. Copley, who painted everybody who was anybody, fashioned his sitters as they wished to be portrayed, displaying the wealthy in their silks and velvets. He presented Hancock, however, in his counting house, dressed in a more subdued velvet, fingerling an account book—a merchant of Republican virtue. (He portrayed Samuel Adams as a tribune of the people in a simple, russet-colored wool suit, pointing to the colony’s charter and “instructions” from the town meeting.) Make your way to the museum’s galleries of colonial decorative arts and you can see Revere’s silverware that graced the tables and cabinets of the rich. But how many tourists do that, or if they do, how many draw the connections to the historical actors in the buildings downtown?34

On the Freedom Trail, if you bring the knowledge with you, you can imagine this elite in their positions of influence: in the Old State House as members of the Governor’s Council; or as worshippers in Old South, Old North, or King’s Chapel where they bought the most prestigiously placed pews. NPS exhibit designers are fond of models laying out miniatures of the buildings of Revolutionary-era Boston. (They did one for the museum in the Old State House and refurbished another for Old South Meeting House.) There is something in the toy houses, churches, and wharves neatly laid out on streets that appeals to the child in all of us, especially when we can press buttons to light up famous places. But these spatial relationships cannot measure the social distances between classes or suggest what might have brought together such unequals as a Hancock, a Revere, and a Hewes in a political cause.

What can keepers of the past do to make up for such absences on Boston’s social landscape? A small exhibit in an alcove of the Old State House is a poignant reminder of the Hancock house that was torn down. One little-visited building in the Charlestown Navy Yard provides a glimpse of the maritime trades that made and outfitted ships and a smell of rope and tar. (A long, cavernous nineteenth-century ropewalk is closed.) Should we not be


recreating the world of the working tradesmen of the pre-industrial era? And where are the taverns where events of the Revolution were hatched?\(^{35}\)

If we ponder the limitations of what has survived, we may find ways to compensate for what is missing. Will it to be harder for Boston to come to grips with class than it was for Colonial Williamsburg to confront race?

**Proposition 6.** In dealing with race and gender, Boston is at risk of fragmenting the history of the Revolution, in a sense of resegregating American history.

Boston now has, besides the Freedom Trail, a Black Heritage Trail, a Women’s Heritage Trail, an Irish Heritage Trail, and an ethnic museum. They all belong; each has a theme that sinks in only as you move through a long stretch of remnants of sites. Yet has there been an unintended consequence for the Freedom Trail?

On which trail, for example, do we put Phillis Wheatley, African American, female, poet, patriot in the Revolution? Here is a happy report: she is on all trails: Black, Women’s, and Literary Heritage, and since 2000 she is on the Freedom Trail as a mannequin in the new exhibit at Old South Church (which she attended), a few yards from Hewes. But her very ubiquity creates another problem. In 1770, there were about seven hundred blacks in Boston in a town of about fifteen thousand, with some five thousand in Massachusetts, all but a small number slaves. Wheatley should not bear the burden of representing the many-sided roles of African Americans. The Black Heritage Trail and museum located on the back of Beacon Hill picks up black history a few decades after the Revolution in the physical place where Boston’s first free black community lived. In the Revolutionary era, however, there were blacks scattered through the city who petitioned collectively for their own freedom; blacks who later fought at Bunker Hill; and black Tories, some of whom joined the Loyalist exodus from America to settle in Nova Scotia. In the aftermath of the Revolution, free blacks in Boston had to fight for their most elementary civil rights.\(^{36}\)

Phillis Wheatley cannot contain these multitudes, any more than can Crispus Attucks (the sailor killed by British soldiers in the Boston Massacre at a site marked in the square outside the Old State House, buried in a site marked in the Old Granary burial grounds and depicted on a brass plaque on the base of the statue on the Common memorializing the victims of the massacre). But we are in a trap if the only two blacks Boston valorizes are

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patriot heroes. Has the creation of a Black Heritage Trail allowed the Freedom Trail sites and guides to evade responsibility for telling the many different stories of blacks in the Revolutionary era?

On whose trail should Abigail Adams go? And Mercy Otis Warren, poet, patriot, historian, and Judith Sargent Murray, the American Mary Wollstonecraft—the three most articulate Massachusetts voices of the era for the recognition of the “equal worth” of women? Thanks to the guide to the Women’s Heritage Trail, we can locate Mrs. Adams’s Boston house on what was once Brattle Square and Mrs. Murray’s on Franklin Place. A statue of Abigail Adams was recently dedicated at the family home in the Adams National Historical Park in suburban Quincy, whose public programs appropriately deal with women of the era. How do we get these women into the narrative of the Freedom Trail?

Such women were “ladies.” How do we recover the ordinary women who were active in the making of the Revolution: Mrs. Seider, whose eleven-year-old son, Christopher, was killed in a boycott demonstration; Anna Green Winslow, a twelve-year-old who wrote in her diary: “As I am (as we say) a daughter of liberty, I chuse to wear as much of our own manufactory as possible”? Or the women who jammed the annual meetings at Old South Meeting House memorializing the young men killed in the massacre? Women’s history also runs a risk of being the story of elites.

The challenge to public historians, in view of the academic specialization that has fragmented social history by groups, is to integrate such histories into the larger narrative—or else to show the ways these histories run on separate tracks with their own timetables.

Proposition 7. If we avoid telling the dark side of the Revolution, we are at risk of falling into an exclusively celebratory history.

When keepers of the past put up a statue, make a shrine of a person’s house, or guide visitors through a site, generally they are celebrating history. But we all know this is not the only way to express historical memory. In 1995, Boston dedicated a New England Holocaust Memorial and in 1998, an Irish Famine Memorial, both at points adjoining the Freedom Trail. Two statues on the State House lawn acknowledge the religious bigotry of


seventeenth-century Massachusetts Puritans by honoring their victims: Anne Hutchinson, the dissenter the colony exiled, and Mary Dyer, the Quaker the colony hanged. We do this to remind ourselves: we commemorate, we memorialize. What does Boston do to remember the dark side of the Revolution? 39

Take slavery. Massachusetts in the eighteenth century was not a slave society built on the labor of slaves as was Virginia, but it was a society with slaves. 40 Boston has no statues honoring slaveholders (none save George Washington) that elsewhere are embarrassing. But in one sense, the statues paying tribute to its own famous abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Phillips, and to Colonel Robert Shaw and the black soldiers who fought in the 54th Massachusetts Regiment in the Civil War, displace the issue of slavery onto the South and hinder the city from acknowledging its own history of slavery. 41

Massachusetts eliminated slavery during the Revolution, not by its Constitution or statute but in good part through the efforts of slaves themselves, who ran away or fought in the army. (In Stockbridge, “Mumbet” brought a legal suit under the Massachusetts Declaration of Rights of 1780, won her freedom, and changed her name to Elizabeth Freeman.) Early in the nineteenth century, as New England became a righteous opponent of the “slavocracy” and southern slavery, the region blotted out the memory of its own history as a society that once held slaves and kept free Negroes as second-class citizens. 42

It did something of the same thing with Indians, burying the memory of Indians who once populated New England, and turning upside down the history of their role in the Revolutionary War. By the end of the colonial era, Indians in the region were decimated by warfare, disease, and assimilation, yet tribal entities existed. In the war, historian Jill Lepore writes, “Mashpees from Cape Cod, Penobscots and Passamquoddi from lower Maine, and Pequots and Mohegans from Connecticut all fought on the colonists’ side” and “also suffered severe losses.” But because many more Native Americans, including the powerful Iroquois confederation, fought on the side of the British, New Englanders created the fiction that all Indians were on the side of the British, which justified further dispossession of Indian lands. In

41. For Boston’s revisiting the “Shaw memorial” monument, see Martin H. Blatt, Thomas J. Brown, and Daniel Yacovone (Eds.), Hope and Glory: Essays on the Legacy of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), essays in Part Two.
42. For Elizabeth Freeman see Kaplan and Nogrady, The Black Presence, 244–48; Susan Sedgwick, “Elizabeth Freeman,” a miniature on ivory (1811), is in the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society; for the erasure, see Joanne Pope Melish, Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and “Race” in New England, 1780–1860 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999).
1788, Massachusetts repealed a 1763 ruling by which the Mashpees had been incorporated as a self-governing district. Thus for Indians in New England, Lepore writes, “the American Revolution signalled not a gain but a loss of liberty.” In present-day Boston, the few surviving symbols of Indians perpetuate a mythology of racial harmony and cooperation: the Massachusetts seal of state, the state flag, the murals in the state house. The artisan Shem Drowne’s gilded bronze weathervane which in colonial days stood aloft a fashionable mansion might be a more fitting symbol. It depicts an Indian archer poised with his bow and arrow, as if in combat.

Will Massachusetts find a way to present this history it has erased? In the aftermath of King Philip’s War (1675–76), the colony imprisoned some nine hundred Wampanoag Indians on Deer Island in Boston harbor, half of whom died in what in effect was the country’s first internment camp. NPS recently commissioned a scholarly report on the episode by Lepore with a view to developing the site. Here is a strong first step, but will a site on a harbor island reachable only over water do justice?

There are always roadblocks to going down this path. The tug of Americans for a Norman Rockwell version of the American past is ever present, the desire to see only “the smiling side of American life,” as Boston’s nineteenth-century realist novelist William Dean Howells put it. These days, a good share of visitors to Boston’s iconic sites come with more sophisticated expectations. Recall the experience of Colonial Williamsburg (CW) which a few years ago boldly took the plunge, dramatizing the African American history it had so long ignored. Restored in an era of segregation by Rockefeller philanthropy, you would hardly know that in colonial days Williamsburg was a town half of whose residents were black, a society based on the labor of slaves. When CW’s education department confronted the issue and came up with a set of public reenactments on the streets—a slave auction and the return of a runaway slave—it faced a chorus of doubters, including blacks who felt more comfortable with a history stressing achievement rather than victimization. But there are no reports of attendance dropping off. In “giving slavery a human face,” as the head of the local NAACP put it, CW made for a more compelling experience. Museums of conscience are now going up all over the world.


44. Jill Lepore, “No Safety for Us: The Internment of Native Americans on the Boston Harbor Islands during King Philip’s War, 1675-1676” (Final Report, National Park Service, 1999); Lepore, “When Deer Island was Turned into Devil’s Island: A Historian’s Account,” *Bostonia* [Boston University] (Summer, 1998), 14–19.

Boston’s keepers of the past may have to confront dark corners of American history in unexpected places. The curator of the USS Constitution museum writes, “We are hoping to give the visitors the look, the feel, smells, and sounds of being aboard ship, as an ordinary seaman.” Are they prepared to show the horrors of the lash that led Cambridge’s Richard Henry Dana to write his since classic *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840)? The Boston Academy of Music produced Gilbert and Sullivan’s *HMS Pinafore* in the Boston Navy Yard. Are they ready for Benjamin Britten’s opera, based on *Billy Budd*, Herman Melville’s searing novel of life at sea?246

Revising the exhibit at the Bunker Hill Monument site in Charlestown presents another sort of challenge. NPS no doubt will find ways to incorporate the new scholarship it commissioned showing African-American soldiers to have been far more numerous at the battle than anyone believed. But can they also navigate the claims of present-day Irish workers, class of Charlestown, which has long celebration Bunker Hill Day as its own? And how do we give meaning to the heroism of those who fell in battle without celebrating the romance of that battle as portrayed in John Trumbull’s painting?247

**Proposition 8. The future of the Freedom Trail requires a greater coordination of responsibility for the Trail as a whole with responsibility for interpreting the sites remaining with each institution.**

The 1995–96 consultants report, the fruit of extensive discussions with the many “stakeholders” (and several historians), pleaded for “a richer, more evocative telling of the story [of the Revolution] which weaves the Sites and Trail together.” The scores of recommendations ranged from the generally accepted need for more restroom facilities, a larger visitor orientation center, and more skillful marketing, to imaginative proposals for reenactments, public art, audio self-guided tours, and more staffed interpretations at sites. Who will take responsibility for change? Asserting that “the current system of minimal coordination is no longer working,” the report pointed to a need for further “collaborative ventures” and “a renewed organizational structure.”48

Perhaps only an outsider can say it, but to be blunt, there is no framework for implementing the report, even though leaders of the major institutions identify the “lack of a unified mission” and “lack of long term and annual planning for collaboration” as their principal challenges. In a conversation with me, one Boston businessman, highly successful in tourism, used the

word “Byzantine” to describe decisionmaking for the Trail. The Freedom Trail Foundation, an umbrella organization of sorts, does not seem constituted to cope with long-range issues. Whatever happened to the Council of Sites, which functioned up to about 1995? Four sites and BNHP are currently represented in the Foundation, but to an outsider, the sites need their own organization to deal with their common problems as well as to give them the voice they deserve in overall decisionmaking. The sites alone have the personnel with historical expertise, the experience in interacting with audiences, and an institutional memory. They need an Articles of Confederation government which would address their common needs with the urgency they demand while retaining their autonomy.49

Boston National Historical Park (BNHP) remains an indispensable player at its own sites and in formal partnerships with other sites on particular projects. Where it is good, it is very good: receptive to the new history and responsive to initiatives. Boston owes its three skilfully restored public buildings to the BNHP. It alone has the financial resources, the capacity for major research projects, and a large skilled staff, including park rangers who manage the visitor’s center and conduct tours. But, if it launches initiatives, it also fails to follow through, the consultants report being a prime example. It is part of a national agency, the NPS, and often creaks under a layered bureaucratic culture with a fear of going out on a limb. (Typically, Park Service exhibit labels have been notorious for a museumspeak filled with straddling and the evasion of the passive voice.) Nationally, the NPS commands a growing respect among historians; locally, it is a token of its achievements that expectations for BNHP remain so high.50

There is no deus ex machina to rescue the Freedom Trail. In light of a lack of coherence in the history conveyed by the Trail as a whole, a modern center to help visitors navigate the city’s riches is long overdue. It has the potential to draw connections among sites and between trails. Keepers of the past of course may get more than they wished for. My fear is the inevitable fast-paced film geared to the short attention span of tourists, common to visitor’s centers, which can end up with the same old stereotyped history. A museum covering three hundred years of Boston history has the potential to deal with the many strands of history now left out; it also runs the risk of squeezing the Revolution into a single gallery with a single vision.51

49. See Minutes of “Partners Meeting,” Boston National Historical Park, 30 May 2001, reporting a poll of senior staff members of the park and directors of the primary partners; for the Foundation, see “The Freedom Trail Foundation: A Thousand Days of Progress, January 1998 through August 2000,” a loose-leaf collection of newspaper clippings assembled by the Foundation.

50. It remains to be seen what BNHP will do with “An Action Agenda for the National Park Service, 225th Anniversary of the American Revolution Commemoration Initiative” (Boston: National Park Service, 2002).

51. See the warning by James Green, “A City of Multiple Memories,” Boston Globe, 9 December 1999; James Green, a Massachusetts historian steeped in the city’s labor history, is the author of Taking History to Heart: The Power of the Past in Building Social Movements (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000).
Given the unparalleled asset of the iconic sites, from the point of view of a historian, the goal of any reforms should be to get visitors to the sites and help provide a framework to understand what took place there—and what did not. This should also lead to expanding interpretation at the sites; this double chore will require all the imagination curators, guides, historians and educators can muster. Decentralization, a weakness for the trail as a whole, is potentially a source of strength.

Each time I returned to Boston over the past few decades, my sense of wonder was rekindled. A few years ago I wrote, “as the city all around booms with one redevelopment after another, the Trail retains its historical integrity, resisting thus far the pressures of tourism to sanitize history. It is not Disneyland.” 32 Was my wish father to my thought? The 1995 report also rejected “the Disney model as undesirable.” If the drumbeat for a reassuring, entertaining version of the American past increases in times of national crisis, so does the interest of Americans in understanding their heritage. Is it possible that a successful alternative lies in the more multi-sided, more exciting version of the American Revolution that a generation of historians has uncovered?