This podcast transcript was created for accessibility purposes using an automated transcription service. It has been reviewed for general accuracy but may contain minor discrepancies. It should not be considered a definitive record of the conversation. If you have any questions, please contact us at podcast@masshist.org.

A Letter from Paul Revere

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:02

Let's talk about what you've pulled out of the collection for us.

Peter Drummey 00:07

This is a letter written by Paul Revere. The paper is entirely rag content cotton and linen rags pounded to pieces to make paper. The ink is acidic, so it's permanently etched into the paper, and it's been written right to the edge of the page. He has very rough and ready handwriting. And then, if I hold it up to the light, you can see where there are holes or breaks in it. They've been reinforced by pasting very thin sheets of Japanese tissue. When this letter was received by Jeremy Belknap, this paper would have been bright white in color with jet black ink. That's one thing that's hard for us to put ourselves back into that time. It would be foreign to our modern eyes because we're so used to seeing documents faded by time and brown with age.

Katy Morris 00:59

[Intro music fades in] This is Katy Morris.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:05

This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Katy Morris 01:07

And this is The Object of History, a podcast by the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:13

Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve and communicate the building blocks of history.

Katy Morris 01:20

Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:27
We take you behind the scenes of the MHS to explore the incredible stories held in our collections.

Katy Morris 01:33
In this episode, we're looking at a letter written by Paul Revere, the revolutionary patriot famous for his midnight ride to warn the colonial militia of a British attack at the Battles of Lexington and Concord.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:45
We shall learn about how Revere came to write down his account of that famous night at the request of the Reverend Jeremy Belknap, an ambitious man and principal founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Katy Morris 01:58
To understand the story, we'll speak with Peter Drummey.

Peter Drummey 02:01
I'm the Stephen T. Riley Librarian of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Katy Morris 02:06
And Anne Bentley.

Anne Bentley 02:07
I am the Curator of the Art and Artifacts in our collection.

Katy Morris 02:12

Together, we'll take a close look at the letter itself, as well as a portrait of Belknap to understand these intertwined stories.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:19
We shall explore how this letter was lost for decades before its rediscovery, and how it ultimately became a precious artifact in the MHS collections.

Katy Morris 02:29
Revere's story might have been all but forgotten, had it not been for the MHS and its visionary founders, especially Belknap.

Peter Drummey 02:37
Yes, we tend to tell the story, and there's some justice in this concentrating on a single person, and that's the Reverend Jeremy Belknap, minister, who was born in 1744, a Bostonian.

Anne Bentley 02:52
Well as an only son, he was almost predestined for the ministry as far as his parents were concerned. From day one, he knew he was going to be a minister, and that was quite at war with his drive for history.

Peter Drummey 03:06
Belknap goes to college. Only a tiny number of people attended college. Is in the class of 1762 at Harvard, and then, like many people who went on to become ministers, sort of finds his way, so serves as a schoolteacher and serves as an apprentice minister and as an assistant. In the late 1760s takes the pulpit of a church in Dover, New Hampshire. His career in Dover was not entirely happy.

Anne Bentley 03:38

Even his best friends couldn't accuse him of being a very exciting preacher. He did not exactly set Dover, New Hampshire on fire, and in fact, after 20 very acrimonious years, he finally escaped.

Peter Drummey 03:51

He goes back to Boston during the American Revolution to observe what's going on here. He becomes active in the learned societies of his own day. He's a member of the American Philosophical Society and then in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. So, he's active in those institutions, but at his heart, his coming back to Boston allows him the opportunity to re-enter this larger world of learning in a more active way, and he's able to act upon a long standing interest, and that is to develop in America, something that would be the equivalent of the Society of Antiquaries in London.

Anne Bentley 04:36

Having seen the destruction of so many libraries, Harvard's first library was destroyed in an accidental fire. The incredible library that Thomas Hutchinson collected to create his history of Massachusetts and New England was destroyed by the tax mob riots. The British destroyed what was left of Thomas Prince's great library in Old South Meeting House. Fires after earthquakes, he'd seen a lot of destruction, so he had come to the idea that that America needed a central repository, a safe place.

Peter Drummey 05:10

This is what they set out to do, right at the start. And it's a complete history of this country. It's not the history of here or Massachusetts or the American Revolution, and then they go on to cover a range of topics for which they want to collect and publish. That's staggering in terms of its ambition.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 05:35

And so, who would make the decisions as to what would be accepted into the collections? Is this something that Belknap would have done himself?

Peter Drummey 05:44

Right, by telling the story in this way, I'm already, I suspect giving him too much of the credit for this because this is five members, and then they add five more members, so there are 10 members at all. Almost all are college graduates, which in 1790 is remarkable. Ministers James Freeman, the First Minister of an openly Unitarian Church here in Boston. James Sullivan, the Attorney General of Massachusetts, is the first president. William Tudor, a lawyer here in Boston, a person who studied law with John Adams, Thomas Walcott, who's this zealous book collector, a physician and the librarian of Harvard College, an interesting group of people.

Anne Bentley 06:37

Belknap was the germ of the idea, and he was the engine that got this thing going, and he was the one that just kept pushing and pushing and pushing. So that's why we credit him with being our principal founder. He collected omnivorously, because he intended us to be the Smithsonian of the age. He wanted a repository of Americana that would encompass not only the written word and the published word, but would also encompass the geographical, geological, human manufacturers in arts and sciences, everything to do with American history. Belknap could not say no. Whatever it was, weird, wonderful, important, we took it in. When you collect what comes in with the collections are the family's history, and that encompasses objects, artifacts and the artwork, the portraits of the people whose papers we have on our shelves upstairs.

Katy Morris 07:38

Right. I think a lot of people might assume we only collect paper manuscripts, but we both know that that's not the case.

Katy Morris 07:52

Well, I think then that brings us to the main thing we want to talk to you about today, which is the portrait of our most prominent founder.

Anne Bentley 08:01

Yes. We have two portraits of Belknap by [Henry] Sargent. One is quite small, it's a sketch, and the other one is the more finished piece and and actually, I prefer the smaller one, because it's just the head and shoulders. It's more immediate, it's fresher. It's it's quicker, it's not so studied. It's definitely a painting that shows a very, very pudgy gentleman there. There's not a bone in his face, just an absolutely gorgeous double chin.

Katy Morris 08:38

Yeah, but I think you're right. The sketch, he looks more satisfied.

Anne Bentley 08:43

He's much more relaxed and I think, much closer to what Jeremy Belknap probably looks like among friends. The larger, the official portrait shows him from the waist up, seated. He's, he's holding a pen in his right hand, and he's he's got a book open, so apparently, he's just in the process of writing, and behind him are four leather bound books. One is his American biography. So that was what led to the questions because the American biography was published after his death. Was this painted after his death, and Reverend [George] Ellis said that it was understanding that this was in progress when he died. So that would make that would make this smaller version, the sketch for the final version.

Katy Morris 09:32

So when, when I started working here, a co-worker of mine, of ours, I should say someone told me that it was taken from death. That's the sort of....

Anne Bentley 09:43

Taken from death.

Katy Morris 09:44
Like, like painted postmortem. That's kind of the the gossip around the MHS is that it was painted from death. And I've always sort of thought, what, what does that mean? How do you take a painting from death? I guess that's why he looks kind of pasty. I don't, I don't know what this means. So, it's really interesting to have this, this more complete story that. So, he had started the painting, and it's just so happened that he died, and then he was able to finish it because of the sketch.

Anne Bentley 10:12
Yeah, you can see, when you look at the two together, the sketchiness of the smaller one. It truly is a sketch. It's it's much more direct. It has more life in it than than the official solemn portrait with the pursed lips. He was Belknap. The last 11 years of his life was an enormously contented man because he was where he wanted to be. He was fulfilled, religiously. He was fulfilled historically. He was involved in this wonderful idea and creation of this library. So, it's, it's lovely to think I prefer the smaller, unfinished one because this is a man who looks content. He's he's bent on great things. He's accomplished great things. His idea of an historical society has weathered the first eight years of his existence and seems to be in good hands. He died very young. I believe it was 54. That is, that is a pity, but what he accomplished in his short time and that here we are 200 some years later...

Katy Morris 11:26
Talking about him.

Anne Bentley 11:27
Talking about it.

Katy Morris 11:28

Yeah, absolutely.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 11:33
Now that we know something about the key figure in this enterprise, let's talk about the letter.

Peter Drummey 11:38
In 1798, at the request of Jeremy Belknap, Revere has written out a detailed account of what we think of now as his famous ride. But actually, until he wrote this letter to the Massachusetts Historical Society, I think the events of the beginning of the Revolution and his role in them were perhaps not very well known. We don't have that a copy of that letter sent to Revere. But Revere begins his letter, "Sir, having a little leisure, I wish to fulfill my promise of giving you some facts and anecdotes prior to the Battle of Lexington, which I do not recall to have seen in any history of the American Revolution." So clearly, that's what he's been asked, and that's what he's replying to.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:31
My understanding is that Revere requested anonymity.

Peter Drummey 12:34
Yes, he did. Well actually, what he says, and this is at the end of his letter, he says, he writes, "If you print this, do not use my name." I think it's, I think what it is that's not necessarily being anonymous in the, I think in the sense we might attach to it, but not looking for personal credit. One of the things that's really interesting about this letter that I should point out is it's edited right on it. It's marked up. Some people have seen Revere adding more information to it, or corrections or changes. I think it's very clear that Jeremy Belknap edited it to make it more clear to publish it. So that line about not using his name has been crossed off. Another where his name appears, and he signs it where his name appears, another line has been added that says, "A son of liberty from 1775." A sort of pseudonym which often people would be using when they publish things. Belknap very clearly crosses those things out and simply writes, "Colonel Revere's letter." Editor and author are figuring out what this should say. And you see it have a lot of crossing out and changes going on

there right at the end point. It's not the founding document in terms of the immense collection we've assembled, but I think emblematically, it demonstrates what we as an institution set out to do. It actually is in some respects a model for how the Massachusetts Historical Society acted. That is, Belknap is key to the story as an instigator, but he's very dependent on people sending him information and accumulating information.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 14:29
There's a great line, of course, where the line about the wolf on the prowl.

Peter Drummey 14:33
Yes, that's right. You don't stay home like a sedentary oyster, go back, go out, searching like the wolf for the prey, that is this idea that that collecting is an active thing to do.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 14:46
Do you have a favorite part of this letter?

Peter Drummey 14:49
I think the part that I read you, I think the introduction to it is wonderful. I mean, there are very few times that you get what the point of something is in someone's own words right at the beginning, and the fact that that is known to us and published today but was not published at the beginning as this intimate, personal part. I would say that my favorite part of this letter is where Revere the man comes through because here's someone who's very talented, clearly, but someone who has essentially what we would think of today as a grammar school education. He's he was an apprentice to his father, who was a silversmith. Lived his life as a craftsman, his early life as a craftsman. Nevertheless, there his voice comes through this letter. He gits, "G-I-T" "gits a horse." You hear the manner of someone speaking in his letter because he's often spelling words phonetically, which I think are so we know how he heard words in his own day said. He is also writing an account that's very familiar to him, so he glosses over or Belknap coming along edited has to add words in because to Revere they're transparently obvious when he talks about the signal

system in the North Church, what the purpose of it is, but added to it is above the line is the phrase as a signal. So, it'll be clear, careful, precise editor as that were.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 16:29
Well, surely editing primary manuscripts on the primary manuscripts is not something we do today, but...

Peter Drummey 16:36
But completely sensible in his own day, and very and also completely in keeping with this idea that it's not the historical document, that it's the information contained in it. So, this is that's a difference in sensibility. We look at this document both for both its intellectual content, the historical information in it, but also seriously as an artifact. This is a treasured artifact in our collection. It wasn't in 1798.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:07
That's fascinating to me that this original piece, its power is in its ideas.

Peter Drummey 17:13
Exactly. The idea of having something written in Paul Revere's hand became important in a way that it very clearly wasn't in 1798. This was a manuscript that was worked on, written right on it, and then clearly sent to the printer and set in type and printed right from the manuscript itself. No intermediate step. It's remarkable that it survived at all. Most of the manuscripts that people sent off to be set in type and printed back at the time of the Revolution and onward into the 19th century, the original manuscripts don't survive. They were simply the fact that they were set in type and printed that would they had served their purpose. After the Civil War, this came back, and it's only a later editor, Charles Dean, who a) found this manuscript in essentially a pile of miscellaneous papers, and also realized its importance as a manuscript and perhaps even more important, realized that some material in it had been cut out that he could restore the full manuscript. He is the person in the 1880s who put that introductory passage back into this.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 18:36

Let's talk about the afterlife of this story, which is how he becomes a national figure thanks to another member of the Historical Society.

Peter Drummey 18:51

Yeah, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, the poet, makes use of this account, and Paul Revere's Ride, this poem that appears first in the Atlantic Monthly and then published before the outbreak of the Civil War. And he makes use of this, this long-standing story and tradition from New England. And he is writing in a journal published in Boston, but a journal that has a national circulation and broad influence in literature and history. He's writing a poem which is using Revere the alarm rider as emblematic of the necessity to warn the country of the approaching storm. In some respects, it's both wonderfully predictive of what is about to happen, but also sort of again, sounding the alarm that people need to act. They need to be alarmed, so they can act to save the Union, essentially, and that has a dramatic influence on Revere's story. This poem, in its extraordinary popularity and long-standing popularity, really embeds that story in the national consciousness, not simply as a regional or local story. This becomes part of the national story.

Katy Morris 20:36

Can Kid hold the letter?

Peter Drummey 20:38

Oh, of course.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 20:39

I think you should hold it. Okay, I'm gonna move the microphone to you.

Katy Morris 20:47

Well, one, I'm very nervous holding it. It's so old. I didn't expect it to be this sort of booklet shape.

Peter Drummey 20:58

Yeah, it's, it's actually a little unusual for a letter. It's like larger and squarer than most letters from that time will be.

Katy Morris 21:09

And so, you're saying the ink, it's....

Peter Drummey 21:11

It's acidic, so it's etched right into the paper. So, it means that if you wash it with water, it's not going to run. It's, you know, it's permanently affixed to it. I don't know the specific ink on this letter, but it's essentially homemade with the burls of oak trees, those round sort of growths that you see on oak trees being ground up to make this and then darkened. But this acid in it has, which would seem in extreme cases, it actually will burn into a document. So, you'll see a document with holes in it because the ink is sort of too strong.

Katy Morris 21:54

So, I couldn't like smear it while touching it.

Peter Drummey 21:57

Almost impossible.

Katy Morris 21:59

Because I just I asked that because it's, as you said earlier, the ink goes all the way to the edge. So, when I hold I have to touch the ink. There's no, there's no margin around it, like we think of a paper today. I have to touch the actual words where his hands were when he wrote them.

Peter Drummey 22:14

Right and people who were trained in a colonial period where paper would be imported. So, you kind of wrote up to the margin. I think you're just seeing someone who's trained to write up to it.

Katy Morris 22:27
It's also the first thing too, is that I can't read it. My modern eye can't read it.

Peter Drummey 22:32
No and part of that, there's two things that are going on, you know, and you could, if you, what happens is, if you, if, if you look at things letter forms, this is both different style of handwriting from today and different letter forms being used. It's also as different one person to another's handwriting as handwriting today. So, you have those both those things going on at the same time. And how should I say this people under a certain age are haven't been trained in cursive handwriting, and they're just less familiar with it. That's not universal, but as a most people through college age today and even now, graduate students, and this is no fault of theirs, but if you've written out letter forms yourself over your lifetime. It's just more familiar to you. I don't overstate that, but this has become more difficult. Now you can get a handbook, and we have them as reference books here, which will show you archaic or you know the sort of abbreviations and letters. It's simply a different sensibility from now.

Katy Morris 22:35
Does it still feel magical to you when you hold it?

Peter Drummey 23:57
Yeah, there's a there's never a time this will go away. We hold these documents in our hands. I think there's kind of a general impression from what people have seen in films or in television that people are going to be wearing gloves. And I'm not saying that there aren't places that do, but our experience is there's danger from dirt and oil on your hand, to be sure, to documents, but it's difficult to turn to pages of documents. So, within the limited number of times, documents like this are handled, it's, I believe, more sensible to handle them with your bare hands.

Katy Morris 23:57

Right, which, to be clear, we were just holding that with our bare hands.

Peter Drummey 24:03

Yes, bare hands. And that's where part of the magic part this is both it goes both ways. The magic is holding something that Paul Revere read, that Jeremy Belknap edited and held in his hands, then was put in a pile and ignored for a century and then kind of discovered, and you can sit at the desk that Charles Dean, the work table that Charles Dean used upstairs in this building, you know, you can kind of almost like recreate that moment in a kind of wonderful way of having being surrounded by all these sort of artifacts and pieces of furniture from the past, but so that's along one line. So, there's that kind of magic part of it, which is very real. The other part in our conservation lab, when I go down there and something is being washed in a sink, as you would wash some sort of light fabric clothing, you know, some delicate piece of clothing you might do that. It looks like a handkerchief put into a, you know, an oversized metal sink, so you can put something large in it, but it's floating in there. And it's just shocking. It's that it's, it's magic, but magic in this sort of, almost like heart stopping way.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 26:05

You feel the magic. Belknap would not have necessarily. So, Jeremy Belknap walks in our front door 225 and years and beyond, when his vision is put into practice. What would he think of the modern society?

Peter Drummey 26:27

I think this idea that we had continued down this road of collecting, energetically collecting. He had been perfect to it that I think he might be puzzled by us, sort of retaining the manuscript of Paul Revere's letter after he had edited it and published it, that the artifact nature of it was important to us, that might be harder for him to see, perhaps. I think he might be, it's I was, it's hard to say, but I think he might be both impressed and pleased where our publications are shelved together to see

where, you know, the publications he oversaw at the sort of start of that have now expanded to be whole ranges of shelves going forward in time that that that might be that we, that we did adhere to that over this long progress, that our website, which would look pretty odd to someone from the 18th century, nevertheless, when explained to him, I sincerely believe, would say, "Oh, this looks like the back pages of the American Apollo." You know, this is we're reaching out to a wide audience through our website today. That I think he might think looks an awful lot like what they set out to do at the time of the founding of the Historical Society. Because it does serve these two purposes. It sort of means this information is communicated, the word that they used in the 18th century, made accessible, I think we would say today, to this much wider world, much, much wider than he could imagine.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 28:14
Thank you so much, Peter.

Peter Drummey 28:15
It's always my pleasure.

Katy Morris 28:18
[Outro music fades in] To view the objects in the episode and to learn more, visit our website at masshist.org/podcast. You can also email us your questions and comments to podcast@Masshist.org. We would love to hear from you. If you enjoyed the show, help us spread the word and share the podcast with your friends. Stay up to date with our latest episodes by subscribing on iTunes, Stitcher, or wherever you listen to your podcasts. The Object of History is produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We want to thank Anne Bentley, our Curator of Art and Artifacts, and Peter Drummey, Chief Historian, and Stephen T. Riley Librarian. Music in this episode is by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and by Chad Crouch. See our show notes for details. Thanks for listening.