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Events That Did Not Happen

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:00

[Mary Yacovone speaking in the background] The Massachusetts Historical Society's collection staff make great discoveries all the time. One morning, Mary Yacovone, the Historical Society's Curator of Rare Books and Visual Materials, told us that she had discovered something that was especially fascinating, while cataloging medals and coins. We brought the recorder along and asked her to tell us about this particular item.

Mary Yacovone 00:26

I have a campaign token for the 1844 election, which Henry Clay ran against James Polk and James Birney of the Liberty Party. Eighteen forty-four Henry Clay was a southern politician.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:40

And running on the Whig ticket.

Mary Yacovone 00:42

Running on the Whig ticket. He had anti-slavery views, but he was a slave owner. Southern people disliked him, northern people disliked him, Southern people liked him. Northern people liked him. So, he was in a good position in 1844. They thought he would win the election.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:56

He's the great compromiser!

Mary Yacovone 00:57

The great compromiser. The reason I was interested in this token is because the back of the coin shows a man on horseback in a mill and gives Henry Clay's nickname which was "Mill-boy of the Slashes," the slashes being the neighborhood where he grew up, apparently.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:14

Rough part of town.

Mary Yacovone 01:15

Rough part of town. But in 1844, the abolitionists for whom Henry Clay was not anti-slavery enough, used the phrase, "The Mill-boy of the Slashes" in a very different way, in a print that was published and shows a man looking remarkably like Henry Clay whipping an enslaved woman who's naked from the waist up. But then as I looked at it a little further, the front of the token is a bust of Clay to the left, and it says, "Henry Clay elected President A.D. 1844," and around the back is "Inaugurated March 4th, 1845." He never was elected president nor inaugurated in 1844/1845.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:57

No, [James] Polk won that election.

Mary Yacovone 01:58

Polk won the election. It was the third time that Henry had run for president unsuccessfully.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:04

Perennial candidate.

Mary Yacovone 02:05

Perennial candidate and because he was sort of liked and disliked in equal measure, the presence of the third-party candidate Liberty Party man, James Birney, it's thought drew enough votes away to make Polk the eventual winner. But whoever minted this token was apparently very optimistic about Henry's chances. Even gave the date of his inauguration, which never happened. It's roughly the size of a quarter, a little bigger, same weight as a quarter.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:35

A modern quarter.

Mary Yacovone 02:35

Modern quarter Yep, it's holed at the top so that the owner could put it on a chain and wear his support for Henry Clay during the course of their campaign or whatever, but this one's in pretty good shape. It doesn't look like it was worn all that much for obvious reasons.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:52

I...yes, I suppose, because someone could come up and say, "But he wasn't elected or inaugurated." Okay!

Mary Yacovone 03:02

But we're very fortunate that someone saved it, and it ended up here.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:05

Events that are commemorated in coin, in medals or in a statue of events that never happened. Why do people do this do you suppose?

Mary Yacovone 03:15

I think in this case, it's sheer Henry Clay boosterism. The fact that I couldn't really find another one of these that exists testifies to the fact that most of them were probably melted down after this didn't happen.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:27

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Cassie Cloutier 03:35

This is Cassie Cloutier, and this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve, and communicate the building blocks of history. Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the

society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 04:05

On this episode, we remind you to not believe everything you see on monuments, medals and coins. We take a look at events that never happened and are yet commemorated in some fashion. We find the monument to one such event on Boston's Commonwealth Avenue Mall. We also take a look at a set of medals struck to mark a great naval victory. The problem, it never happened. Peter Drummey, Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian and Anne Bentley, Curator of Art and Artifacts, Emerita at the MHS help us make sense of these curious items from a fictional past. But we are outside here. We are at the corner of Charles Gate East and Commonwealth Avenue. And it's a drizzly day and what are we looking at Peter?

Peter Drummey 04:58

We're looking at a statue of Leif Erikson inscribed with runes on the side it'll identify what it says. But essentially, Leif Erikson is looking over and to the west, along towards the Charles River. That's all blocked off today. So, we can't see any evidence of that. And it's the statue is it moved at least a few 100 yards from its original place along the Commonwealth Avenue Mall just west of Massachusetts Avenue. But it's quite wonderful. It's a bronze statue about, I think eight feet high on a plinth made of stone about the same height. And it has a wonderful the beak of a Viking dragon ship faces us under the feet of Leif and Leif is wearing the kind of costume that probably is possible for what people thought Vikings looked like in the 19th century and the statue is by Anne Whitney. Let's go around the side and see if it has the....

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:08

These look like dolphins or something on the side.

Peter Drummey 06:11

Yeah, they're definitely I think the decorations have a Scandinavian tone to them. He's both in plaque and in three dimensions above it, I think, looking west, to the future site of the golden city of Norumbega, of Viking native community here along the Charles River that is, I suspect largely the product of Eben Horsford, who paid for the statue. His imaginative reinterpretation of the evidence of Viking presence in North America.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:50

We're coming around the back here and looks like there's something we can actually read on the back. "Leif the Discover, Son of Erik who sailed from Iceland, and landed on this continent, A.D. 1000."

Peter Drummey 07:06

Yes and I think that there's his name is in modern interpretation of runes on the underneath his feet on the far side of the statue. But this is essentially the argument Horsford was making presented here.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:23

A tourist just came by and snapped a picture while we were talking about this side panel here. I suppose that people do not expect to run into this statue as they're just wandering the streets of Boston.

Peter Drummey 07:36

Yes, just as Leif discovered the Charles River and lived along the banks of it, people discovered this. So, a common repeating question that comes to the Historical Society is, 'Why is the statue here?' I think it's both a tourist question. There's also a rapid change over in a population of Boston with young people moving to Boston and going to school here. So often those questions are coming. I live along Commonwealth Avenue or live nearby or go to Boston University just up the street from us and why is this statue here. And the explanation is usually longer than people have a patience for,

but briefly, it's a personal enthusiasm and the wherewithal to make this happen. And also, in some respects, go against the clearly stated reservations of not just the Massachusetts Historical Society, but essentially the historical establishment here in Boston.

Cassie Cloutier 08:41

Back at the Historical Society, we asked Peter to tell us more about the background of this statue.

Peter Drummey 08:47

William Everett is speaking in 1880 to the Historical Society. He's not making an address, it's like a news note that he gets up and says, there's talk about erecting a statue to Leif Erikson, and there actually have been talked for quite a long time about having a Leif Erikson statue. This is a complicated backstory. But in the 1830s, the Icelandic sagas, stories of life of Vikings coming out of Scandinavia and spreading over many lands coming to Iceland. And then the sagas telling that story. And then there are sagas that continue that story as people move on to Greenland and then there are within the Icelandic Greenland Sagas, there are so called Vinland Sagas about coming to North America. And a Danish historian Carl Christian Rafn had made a translation of the Icelandic Sagas into Danish and into Latin, and Rafn was one of the very early corresponding member of the Massachusetts Historical Society. So even before the publication of these books about the antiquities of America, that is the Vinland Sagas of the Vikings, he already was a recognized figure. So, there was this instigation and then the sagas as they were translated into other languages more accessible here. There was this romantic attachment to them that's truly remarkable. And one of them was the idea that people could read to them and in their descriptions of coastline and landscape, they could recognize places.

Peter Drummey 10:41

Now, some of this is maybe mistranslation, or maybe misinterpretation of words. And the most important perhaps is Vinland. Vinland, I think understood as be where grapes grow. And if you think about that, in terms of the 19th century, people are probably thinking, 'Well, that sounds just about here.' That is Vinland begins here. They're building a lot on this. But they start thinking

they're seeing some physical evidence on the landscape. And this is the longest introduction to Eben Horsford, who either independently of this, or just thinking he should carry this forward. From about that time, to the end of his life, he devoted an enormous amount of energy to developing and supporting this. And even though there's this reservations of putting up a statue, October 29th, 1877 statue unveiled with not just here in the Back Bay of Boston, the statue itself, on essentially an extension of the Commonwealth Avenue Mall, the statue erected but the actual ceremony that went along with the unveiling took place in Faneuil Hall. And it's my understanding that people marched across the city essentially, to take part. So, we're talking about a very big deal. So when the statue was unveiled Horsford who devotes the rest of his life to the story and sort of enhancing it the story of Leif Erikson, not just coming here and stepping on shore, or looking down the Charles River as this statue sort of implies, but having a life here, a home in Cambridge. He goes further and further down this road. Horsford discovered and elaborated about his life here seems to be based on very limited evidence. In 1917, they moved it onto the Charles Gate. I think when it was moved, it was this big, wonderful tall statue on top of a tall base, overlooking this sort of a plaza, essentially. Well between then, and now, they built an overpass. I think people describe it as Leif Erikson shielding his eyes looking under the overpass towards Kenmore Square and everything built up and tall.

Peter Drummey 13:09

Anne Whitney, the sculptor of this statue of Leif Erikson, she's an extremely interesting person in her own right. There was this time that she's walking around in where this the idea of a woman being a sculptor would cause pushback. And then a woman sculpting a heroic man seemed to cause some unease if not scandal, just the idea that but she had a tremendous amount of resistance to overcome to have a career and I think she's probably best known here for this Leif Erikson statue, but also a statue here at Boston. And there are multiple copies, now most statues from that time period of Samuel Adams, a wonderful statue, I think of Samuel Adams. I'm not sure many people would be convinced that Leif Erikson is a triumph of a sculpture or his position and his pose and the runic naming on the front of it in the Viking ship.... I mean, there's a lot going on there that she doesn't have to bear all the responsibility for, but it's this idea that almost like how could someone

give a woman the commission to make such a statue? Again, I don't want to read too much into it. But I think Horsford's willingness to sort of support and being enthusiastic about woman in a whole range of roles and education and role and culture that's all going on there too, maybe is a behind the scenes part of the story.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 14:58

Anne tell us at out these wonderful objects that we have, and we have many of them, correct?

Anne Bentley 15:04

Oh yes, we have over a hundred.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 15:07

Of the Vernon medals?

Anne Bentley 15:08

Of Vernon medals. It's a series that date from the 1730s, '40s. And I have to go into a little bit of background first to make sense of them. So, after the Peace of Utrecht, 1713, that ended the War of the Spanish Succession. Spain had to allow the British ships in for trade in Caribbean, which is mostly Spanish, except for Jamaica, which is British, and the Netherlands had their port. So, the various Western nations had their little islands, but most of the mainland was claimed by Spain. And of course, this was the source of their great silver treasure, and the Peace of Utrecht allowed for these Western nations, especially England to import enslaved Africans to the Spanish colonies. And I gather that each ship could also trade one vessel of cargo unrelated to the slave trade. And of course, between 1713 and 1729, all these British ships and foreign nationals took advantage of Spain's spread-out defenses to engage in a lot of smuggling. And the buccaneers and the smugglers were such a problem for Spain that Spain created what they called the costa guarda, which was their naval coast guard, and the naval coast guard's job was to challenge all of these ships and board them looking for contraband and as you probably can imagine, this caused a heck of a lot of friction. And not every guard was going by the book. British merchant and other merchants, European

merchants were losing ships. They were losing men. They were losing cargo. This continued all of this commotion in the Caribbean until in 1731 one Robert Jenkins, who was a master of the ship, *Rebecca* out of Glasgow, had an encounter with the coast guard ship *Isabel* in which he lost a portion of his ear.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:19

What do you mean by lose a portion of his ear? Was it a boating accident?

Anne Bentley 17:24

No, it was an overzealous guard who managed to cut it off with his sword. Jenkins must have scooped it up and pickled it in rum because in 1739...

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:38

Do we have the ear in our collection?

Anne Bentley 17:39

No!

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:40

Oh, okay.

Anne Bentley 17:41

In 1739, eight years later, matters had come before Parliament because the English merchants were just so outraged. They were just losing so much in everything. Jenkins shows up in parliament with his ear in its little glass vial and that set off the whole nation. Got to punish Spain for these depredations on our property, on our people. A backbencher by the name of Edward Vernon, Member of Parliament had been a very successful naval officer in his first part of his career, and in his retirement from the Navy, he was elected to Parliament. So, he gets up and says, 'Well, you

know, I know it's difficult, but I think I can take Portobelo down in Panama, I think I can take it with six men of war only,' and everybody goes 'Well, that sounds like a great idea.'

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 18:29

Who is Vernon and what is the world he's growing up in and why is there all this conflict that's happening?

Peter Drummey 18:36

Edward Vernon is born in 1684, politically well-connected family in England. He has a traditional gentleman's educational background but leaves school and joins the navy in 1700s. So, he's a teenager and with a fair amount of patronage, I expecting, clearly a talented naval officer. But he is a lieutenant within a couple of years. And he's the captain of his own ship after four or five years. But then, through the first decades of the 18th century, he has a long, distinguished technical training as a naval officer, during a series of wars, which are fought essentially start being fought over most of the world. So, he serves in the Mediterranean and in the Baltic, and in home waters around the British Isles, and then is sent to the West Indies. And we're talking about the larger West Indies, not just the islands of the West Indies, with perhaps Cuba as a focal point, but the Spanish possessions along the coast of South and Central America as well. So, we're talking about a theater of war that extends from Jamaica and beyond to the Gulf of Panama and south to the coast of what's today Colombia and into the Gulf of Mexico. A big cockpit of war. So, this is a war fought in the West Indies, but a larger West Indies than we think of today.

Peter Drummey 20:12

Vernon starts having experience there in the 1720s and then this these are wars that are fought on the European mainland or fought between the countries of Europe and changing alliances. But, in the West Indies, through much of this time fought between the Spanish and the English. They're ongoing for decades, and they're given a series of names often fought also in the North American colonies and in Canada, where those sometimes have a name, different from the name of the same war taking place in Europe. But essentially, there is a hiatus during the 1730s in the fighting between

England and Spain. And by that time, Vernon is a senior naval officer, an Admiral, but he's also a person with strong political connections. So, in the events that happen over the next few years, there'll be a mixture of objective military operations naval and combined army and naval operations. But there also are politics underway. You can be commanding officer and a Member of Parliament at the same time, with all that that might imply, especially if you're on home service or your ships, not in commission, you can serve in Parliament and act on behalf of your political party, and then take up a military or naval command somewhere else in the world. So going back and forth. So, this is both partisan politics layered on top of military operations.

Anne Bentley 21:55

That July 1739, Edward Vernon is created admiral of the blue, and he set out to punish Spain with nine vessels, and he had 550 guns, and 3,700 sailors. And once he was there in Jamaica, he was to rendezvous with a guy by the name of [Thomas] Wentworth his corresponding officer in military who would come with his full squadron of British troops, supplemented by Gooch's American Regiment. That was 3,600 colonial American soldiers who were going to meet up with them and they were all going to together take all these major Spanish ports that were important for trade and most important for loading the silver on their routes back to Europe. So, they get there. They left July 1739, December 2nd, 1739, Vernon and his six ships actually succeeded in capturing Portobelo in Panama. When he sent word back that Portobelo had fallen and he wiped out the town that set off a frenzy of national pride and, and commemorative anything, you name it. Today, we're concerned with the commemorative medals for this venture and England had a tremendous coterie of toy makers, who make toys out of metal and cast toys, and so they also cast tokens and little medallions and things. So, these guys all set up their shop and multiple shops made 1,000s upon 1,000s of these medals commemorating Admiral Vernon. He took Portobelo with six ships only. That's what most of them say. Some of them say with six men of war only. So, well and good. Next, they set their sights on Cartagena and didn't go so well. Wentworth and Vernon butted heads. Vernon was the more experienced and he had no use for the military. So Wentworth was given short shrift, and so the communication was just not what it needed to be in order to be successful. They failed in capturing Cartagena yet, Vernon had been so confident that he sent word to London

that they had taken Cartagena and word in London arrived five or six days after they had already given up.

Anne Bentley 24:24

So, we have lots of these, 'Took Cartagena with six ships only,' that sort of thing. So, it's all these incredible medals that commemorate victories that didn't happen and then they were going to try to take a Santiago [de Cuba] and Caracas and they failed, partly because of the logistics of having a long supply line. It's one thing to fight in Europe where your supply line is really short when you need new things, but a naval engagement requires so much technical stuff and the only place they could get it was really from Europe. The only thing they probably could get from their northern colonies would be masts for the ships, but everything else had to come from England. And it's just not a tenable project. It's just too difficult, too complicated when you're facing foreign ports. Spain had all of this stuff in her ports. But of course, he had to get to these ports in order to take command of the equipment, which he couldn't do without supplies that he needed. So, it was a catch-22 for him. But at any rate, they wintered in Jamaica, but they were not equipped for the summers. And so, they decided to take to Havana, Cuba in the summer. And they're all there in their woolen uniforms in a tropical summer, and they were dropping like flies from yellow fever and dysentery. They had set their sights on Havana, but that proved to be too difficult. They wound up setting anchor in Guantanamo Bay, which is the worst of the worst. The Spanish didn't go anywhere near Guantanamo Bay because of the heat, the humidity and the insects and the diseases. And so, they tried very hard and failed because out of the 3,600 American troops in the forces, only 1,300 survived, among them, George Washington's brother, who when he returned to Virginia named his plantation after Edward Vernon.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 26:29

Why on earth would he do that?

Anne Bentley 26:30

Because he felt that Edward Vernon was a very, very able commander. He apparently was of the opinion that Wentworth was not worthy of his respect, but Vernon was.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 26:43

So, despite what sounds like only one major victory.

Anne Bentley 26:47

One major victory.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 26:48

The legend of Vernon is that he was this great military commander.

Anne Bentley 26:53

That's right, but he lost Cartagena, Santiago de Cuba, Panama and Caracas.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 26:59

But that's not what the medals say.

Anne Bentley 27:01

No, no, no. We've got one here that says, 'Havana, Edward Vernon, vice admiral of the blue.' and on the back it says he took Havana.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 27:14

And they did not even leave for Havana?

Anne Bentley 27:16

Did not even set foot in Havana. And then you've got this it's kind of embarrassing when you look at it because it's got full length Edward Vernon with his sword in hand, taking the sword of Don

Blas [de Lezo], his Spanish counterpart who preserved Cartagena, who was kneeling at his feet. As I say it was this grand orgy of hubris of national pride in subduing Spain and humiliating Spain. And then on the reverse of all of these, you've got the views of the harbor Portobelo, or at Fort Chagre, depending on what they're showing. And the medals themselves are all brass or bronze alloys. They're just inexpensive little things.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 27:59

Inexpensive. So, they would have been sold as commemorations, as tokens of...

Anne Bentley 28:04

Yes, and they're all about one and a half inches in diameter. And these medals were set into coffee pots, they were set into tankards they were set into dresser drawer handles that have escutcheons with these, just everything you can think of, everything you can think of. Some of the officers under Vernon did get their share of whatever it was that they took. Because we do have a punch strainer that is made from silver captured by Vernon.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 28:04

I was thinking about one of the early episodes that we did about the Lusitania medal, which also has historical inaccuracies in it.

Peter Drummey 28:40

That's really interesting, because they're visible propaganda. Another kind of medals sometimes lie because the Germans strike a medal to celebrate this victory. Then the British propaganda department within the British government realizes what a blunder it has been for anyone to be celebrating the death of women and children in a maritime disaster and make copies of themselves. You know that the only thing worse than the Germans doing this was the British making 1,000s, maybe 10s or hundreds of 1,000s of copies of it to circulate to show how terrible, how bestial the Germans were. And here you have not a victory without significance, but mostly a psychological victory. And this opening campaign of this war, and in the 18th century, and then you have people

celebrating it in a way completely at odds with the objective amount of success, and then just pushing it forward, never going back, you know, doubling down on their investment in this celebration, and the unconquerable hero that they've made out of Vernon, even though he's the person who it didn't even want to avoid land campaigns in the West Indies wanted to do this essentially as an entirely a maritime war. You have things that are so different in time and are addressing popular will at once and also a strategy gone wrong in both instances.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 29:33

And what became of these medals when people realized, well, he was not as successful as he was purported to be?

Anne Bentley 30:29

I don't think that they ever admitted to that because...

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 30:34

Why would the truth get in the way of a good story?

Anne Bentley 30:36

Exactly, exactly. And just the fact that England had humbled Spain with only six ships that went down in history, so no matter what didn't happen there, he did do that.

Cassie Cloutier 30:48

[Outro music fades in] To look at the items discussed in today's episode, visit our show website at www.masshist.org/podcast. The Object of History was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Mary Yacovone, Curator of Rare Books and Visual Materials, Peter Drummey, Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian, Anne Bentley, Curator of Art and Artifacts, Emerita and Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and Chad Crouch. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening.