

## The “Unknown” Tea Ship By Duncan Oliver

In December of 2023, we’ll start celebrating the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the American Revolution. One of the early events leading to the actual Revolution was the Boston Tea Party on December 16, 1773. And, once again Yarmouth played a part in this event!

In June, an event took place at Yarmouth’s Ancient Cemetery to honor and identify a Boston Tea Party participant. The Coordinator of Revolution 250 of Massachusetts, the director of the Boston Tea Party Museum, and a reenactor representing Yarmouth sea captain Joseph Bassett, identified his grave with a plaque identifying him as a participant.

In early August, they identified another participant from old Yarmouth. East Precinct (now Dennis) Captain Edmund Sears of Quivet Neck was recognized with a plaque at his family cemetery off Airline Road in Brewster. Another Quivet Neck resident, Reuben Hall, was an officer on board of one of the tea vessels arriving in Boston. There is nothing recorded as to what he saw or did during the tea party.

Sometimes history gets slanted because facts are not known. Most don’t know that the tea vessels coming to Boston were not owned by the British East India Company. They were American vessels looking for return cargo. Seven ships left England loaded with tea for the colonies – 4 to Boston, 1 to NY, 1 to Charleston, 1 to Philadelphia.

Regarding the ones that came to Boston, only three ever made it to Boston. The ship Dartmouth arrived November 28<sup>th</sup>. It was owned by the Rotch’s of Nantucket, a fully rigged ship to carry cargo, mostly for whaling industry. On December 2<sup>nd</sup> the ship Eleanor arrived. It was owned by Boston selectman John Rowe. The brig Beaver arrived December 15<sup>th</sup>. Beaver was built in 1772 as a whaling vessel on the North River in Scituate. It was owned by Rotch’s of Nantucket– Had a draft of nine feet, the maximum that could clear the bar in Nantucket Harbor. These three vessels carried 92,000 pounds of tea, all destroyed December 16<sup>th</sup> when it was dumped into Boston Harbor by “Mohawk Indians.” The “Indians” broke a single lock; other than that there was no damage to the three ships- only their cargo. That lock was repaired the next day.

Regarding the other tea ships, the one that landed in Charleston was allowed to land and the tea unloaded to a damp storage area where it was allowed to rot. In Philadelphia, the Polly, loaded with 698 chests of tea, was turned around and sent back to England. The vessel destined for New York, the Nancy, diverted to Antigua after a storm. It didn’t arrive in New York until April 1774 with its 698 chests of tea and it was sent back to England.

There was a tea ship that wrecked before it arrived. The brigantine William is almost unknown in comparison to the above ones which reached Boston. The William was owned by Richard Clarke and sons and ran aground two miles SE of Race Point on Cape Cod during a storm on December 10 and 11. It carried 300 street lamps and 58 chests of tea. Four were damaged. One chest was loaded into a barrel, Three were too damaged to save – each contained 350 pounds of black Bohea tea.

A friend of Richard Clarke's son Jonathan was John Greenough, a justice of the peace from Wellfleet. He was asked by the Clarkes to take charge of unloading the William. Some accounts say Jonathan supervised everything, but he was in Boston when the wreck occurred and by the time he arrived on the Cape, the tea was in Provincetown. The unloaded tea was sent to Provincetown, and in a quick-thinking move, Greenough used the tea in the damaged chests to pay the workers. (As an aside, John was later involved in the 1778 HMS Somerset wreck. John was appointed by the Governor's Council to oversee the unloading of the wrecked HMS Somerset.)

They stored the tea in Provincetown until the Salem fishing schooner Eunice agreed to take it to Castle Island, off of Boston. Nothing happened to it when at P-Town.

Samuel Adams of Boston was disgusted. He said the "Marshpee tribe of Indians" (Cape patriots) was sick at the knees. Had he known they would be, "Indians" would have marched in snowshoes to destroy the Cape tea themselves."

One of the two chests still under Greenough's control was purchased in January by Stephen Atwood of Provincetown. Some "Incendiaries," as they were called, took Atwood's remaining tea after they discovered it in his house and burned it in public.

The tea that remained caused problems. The brother of John Greenough – David, told his brother to have nothing to do with the problems in Eastham regarding the tea. John's father also disagreed with what John did. In Eastham, the Town meeting of January 21, 1774 – voted to sell tea as it was untaxed and would not be supporting the tax on tea. A second meeting a month later voted against it, but that meeting included residents who weren't qualified to vote. In late March there was another meeting, with qualified voters only, and they voted that February's vote was wrong. Wellfleet also allowed the sale of the untaxed tea from the wreck of the William.

Those opposed to the tea tax realized that best way to stop the tax was prevent tea from landing. But what of untaxed tea that was smuggled in? It seems that that some felt not drinking tea was the best solution. For many years, tea had been criticized as wrecking

havoc on digestion, made those who drank it sluggish, and blamed it for bad teeth and weak nerves. Others said it sharpened memories and was a form of aphrodisiac. The 18<sup>th</sup> century was filled with pros and cons. Substitutes like Labrador tea, strawberry leaves, or even sassafras were recommended by some. In the early 1600s, sassafras had been collected on Cape and Island lands by explorers and sent back to England.

While the untaxed tea debate raged, on November 1, 1774 the Yarmouth town meeting voted no tea to be consumed in Yarmouth.

The story of vessels helping Britain coming ashore on Cape Cod doesn't stop with the William. During the war, British transport brig Wilkes in 1777 came aground on Nauset Beach. Only one wreck is well known - the HMS Somerset coming aground in November 1778. What happened to the 480 aboard that vessel is almost unknown, at least their journey along Cape Cod on their way to Boston from November 2 to 10, Who guarded them, where they stayed, how they were fed - that's another story.







