

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Salem Maritime National Historic Site
Salem, Massachusetts



A CUSTOM HOUSE SKETCH

By John Frayler, Historian



∞ Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions ∞
Historical musings from Salem Maritime NHS
Vol. II no. 2a March 2000

Recently two new objects were purchased for the museum collection, postcards illustrating the "1805" former Custom House and an early view of the present Custom House built in 1819.

According to a cursory analysis of the fragmentary documentation available which mentions, or alludes to, a location for the customhouse function in Salem, the 1819 structure on Derby Street appears to be the thirteenth, and last, in the series. This is subject to update as more documentation surfaces.

The earliest mentioned is the "Port House" in 1636 at South River, now the site of Riley Plaza. During the Revolutionary War and until 1789, the location was at Ward's Corner, now the intersection of Essex and North streets. From 1805 to 1807 and again from 1813 to 1819, the so called "1805" Custom House was operating at the corner of Central and Essex streets (see illustration.) From 1819 through May, 1936, the business of Customs was conducted at the Derby Street location until turned over by the Treasury Department to the National Park Service as part of Salem Maritime National Historic Site.

The present structure was completed by September 1819. Customs officers John Saunders and Perley Putnam prepared the design. As originally

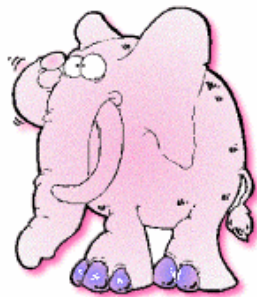
built, there was no cupola, and the eagle, carved by Joseph True, was added in 1826 at a cost of \$50. The first major renovation was in 1853-1854, when the second floor rooms were completed, central heating added, and the cupola replaced a flat deck on the rooftop. Further repairs and renovations were made in 1873, 1886 (the Collector's Public Office was provided with the built in counters and the building needed major repairs), 1901 (the building was painted "colonial yellow"), 1904 (the electrical service was installed), in 1922 (the "colonial yellow" paint was sandblasted off). From 1937 onward, the National Park Service made some additional lesser modifications that remain to the present.

The question of reinstalling the cupola flagstaff is now under consideration. ¹One of the changes made upon transfer of ownership was the removal of the flagstaff atop the cupola by 1939. With its reinstallation, and a few other minor changes, the interpretive focus of the Custom House exterior may more accurately reflect its final appearance as an active Customs installation between 1922 and 1936.

And last, but not least, the Deputy Collector's office has been selected for a permanent exhibit on the Customs Service. The text will give a succinct history of the Customs function, and introduce some

¹ As of March 2000.

of the men who worked in the building. It will also showcase some of the rarely seen tools used by Customs officers in the performance of their duties, including a set of early 19th century gauges in their original storage rack and an 1851 "standard yard."



Merchant Town Press ● 2000

EXPERIENCE YOUR AMERICA™