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Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions

Historical Musings from Salem Maritime NHS



A Tangled Web

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Above: The Salem Custom House after the renovations of 1853-1854. The men standing on the front steps are most likely Customs officials.

The Spoils System

The description of life at the Salem Custom House presented in Nathaniel Hawthorne's introductory chapter to *The Scarlet Letter*, published in 1850 following his removal from office, gives a hint of the daily routine at Salem. It also reflects hiring practices within the Customs Service (and the government generally) prior to the advent of civil service reform. Although the Customs Administrative Act of 1799 provided an operational framework for the agency, problems were recognized as early as 1817, but serious efforts were not made by Congress to resolve them. This set the stage for an atmosphere of official corruption that would last for more than sixty years. President Andrew Jackson's aggressive implementation of rewarding his political supporters and punishing political opponents, the Spoils System, as it came to be known, was felt to be a "democratic" means of bringing new people whose views were in accord with party policy into the system. With some exceptions, officials were systematically appointed and turned out of office with changes of administration. The practice proved to be a double-edged sword. Sometimes it did allow a chance for a man of above-average ability to make a worthwhile contribution to the common good of the country, but it also threw the gates wide open to bribery and political extortion by office seekers and special interests. It also discouraged an efficient institutional memory resulting from all too frequent short tenures of office. Relief for a seriously flawed system came in the form of the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of January 16, 1883. Because the Act intended to eliminate abuses of the public trust and make the operation of the government more efficient, the issues experienced by Hawthorne during his tenure as Surveyor of the Port of Salem (1846-1849) were finally addressed on a systematic basis.

Hawthorne's situation was not at all unusual for the time. He obtained office through friendships and political connections, and he lost his job through political retribution. The story of his forced change of occupations has been addressed by Hawthorne scholars ever since, and even Hawthorne acknowledged that it provided the motivation finally leading to his recognition as a successful author rather than "as good a Surveyor as needs be."

At the outset of the establishment of the Federal Government in 1789, President George Washington's appointments to governmental positions were influenced by his personal experience regarding the competency and character of the appointees. Ability and reliability were recognized as crucial to the success of the new nation. Alexander Hamilton, talented and trusted, was appointed the first Secretary of the Treasury and tasked with the administration of the Customs Service, the primary source of revenue for the United States Treasury until surpassed in 1864 by internal revenue sources.¹ The Secretary of the Treasury directly administered and coordinated the activities of the Customs Service until 1849, when the office of Commissioner of Customs was created.²

A Family Affair

Various considerations factored into federal hiring practices, but from the very earliest days at Salem's Custom House, government employment was a family affair. Salem's former Commonwealth of Massachusetts Naval Officer, Major Joseph Hiller (1748-1814), appointed by Governor John Hancock in 1783, continued his career as a Customs officer under the new Federal government with his appointment in 1789 to the post of Collector of the District of Salem and Beverly. Although the positions of Collector, Surveyor, and Naval Officer (auditor) were presidential appointments, collectors were authorized to recommend suitable persons for lesser posts within their jurisdiction pending confirmation by the Secretary of the Treasury. Collector Hiller brought his long-lived nephew, Charles Cleveland (1772-1872) aboard as Deputy Collector. Both men left office in 1802, when President Jefferson replaced Major Hiller as Collector with Colonel William Raymond Lee (1745-1824). A prominent Marblehead businessman, Colonel Lee had served in John Glover's 14th Continental Regiment during the American Revolution and played a significant role in successfully navigating General Washington's army across the Delaware River to Trenton in December 1776.

One of Collector Hiller's clerks, Dudley L. Pickman (1779-1846), was the son of Salem's Naval Officer, William Pickman (1748-1815). Clerk Pickman left the Customs Service in 1799 to go to sea as a ship's Supercargo (owner's business agent) and later became a successful merchant.

Sometimes the same family names appeared on the books for many years. For example, Stephen Webb was one of Salem's first federally appointed inspectors in 1789. John Webb joined the staff in 1798. Captain William Webb (1765-1848), Inspector, who died January 3, 1848, at age 75, had the distinction of being one of the inspectors alluded to in *The Scarlet Letter* whose "official breath" was abbreviated by Hawthorne in 1846.³

Nathaniel Hawthorne's Coworkers

Hawthorne's less than flattering image of "the old Inspector" was satirically based on Captain William Lee (1770-1851), son and business affiliate of Collector William Raymond Lee. Inspector Lee is first noted on the Custom House payroll as of October 1812. Hawthorne's reference to "The old Inspector-who, by the way, I regret to say, was overthrown and killed by a horse, some time ago..." is not absolutely founded on fact. When *The Scarlet Letter* went to press, Inspector Lee still had almost a year to live; he did not quite measure up to Hawthorne's expectation of him living forever. Still working at age 80, he died February 2, 1851.

Another inspector, even older than William Lee, was Captain Henry Prince (1764-1846). He is better known for his association with the renowned navigator Nathaniel Bowditch, and sailing for Elias Hasket Derby, and is credited with

opening Salem's trade relations with the Philippines. As with so many fortunes based on trade, one of Captain Prince's risky ventures as a shipping merchant finally ruined his business in 1827. He lived down the street from the Custom House in the former home of Mr. Derby. All the Customs men knew him both by reputation and as a neighbor. Somehow it does not come as a great surprise to find him on the Custom House rolls in 1830. It is, however, an interesting coincidence that in 1828 his nephew married Mary Miller, the daughter of Salem's latest Collector, General James Miller (1776-1851), hero of the battle of Lundy's Lane during the War of 1812 and later Governor of the Arkansas Territory. General Miller was appointed in 1825 following the death of Collector Lee in October 1824. Captain Prince's name is to be found frequently mentioned in the Surveyor's inspection duty log until his last assignment, beginning October 20, 1845. Prince suffered with a "lung complaint" and, like Captain Webb, ended his career due to incompetence (implying age and health issues). He died on October 1, 1846, at age 82.

"These Excellent Old Persons"

Hawthorne's image of "these excellent old persons" correctly included many former shipmasters, men fully at home with the conduct of trade and the lading of ships. A perfect example is Captain William Story (1774-1864) of the ship *Friendship* of Salem. Following a long and eventful career as a shipping merchant and master mariner, Captain Story joined the ranks of Customs as a Weigher and Gauger in 1827 at 52 years of age. The fact that his half-brother Joseph was a Supreme Court Justice probably did not hurt his chances for employment. This pattern of second careers seems to have been very common among officers of the revenue. Some of the many other Customs officers who could be addressed as Captain included the names Putnam, Elkins, Preston, Buffington, Adams, Tibbets, West, Noble, Batchelder, Phippen, and Bray.

Among their number was Captain Stephen Burchmore (1782-1850), Inspector and Storekeeper, an ardent Democrat who just happened to be the father of Hawthorne's long time friend, Zachariah Burchmore, Jr. (1809-1884), the senior Custom House Clerk and Chairman of the Democratic Congressional Committee. Captain Burchmore was remembered in a very positive way as "the veteran shipmaster" in the *Scarlet Letter*. Some light is shed on a less serious side of Hawthorne's tenure at the Custom House in a letter dated September 10, 1850 from Captain George W. Mullet (also a Salem Customs Inspector) to George H. Holden. Regarding Captain Burchmore's great skill at storytelling, Mullet states: "I have known the company present to roar with laughter, and not one more convulsed than Mr. Hawthorne."⁴

Two generations of Millers ran the Salem Custom House for thirty-two years. Resigning due to declining health, Collector James Miller was succeeded in office by his son, Deputy Collector Ephraim Flint Miller (1808-1875), in 1849. The younger Miller, a Harvard graduate and lawyer, managed to survive the admin-

istrative shake-up that forced Hawthorne from office, and continued as Collector until 1857. He remained with Customs in other capacities up to the time of his death in 1875. For a number of years, he was the British Consular Agent for the port of Salem.⁵

Politics and Governmental Service

The reforms to public service were a great improvement, but at least at the Collector's level, political affiliation remained a factor for appointment into the early years of the twentieth century. The position of Collector of the District of Salem and Beverly was abolished in 1913. At some point in their lives, the incumbents of these positions often held state or local political office and were highly respected as community leaders. For example, former Collector (1865-1869) Hon. Robert Samuel Rantoul was elected Mayor of Salem in 1890. Captain Charles Henry Odell, Collector (1873-1875), became Mayor of Beverly.

While the Miller dynasty controlled the District of Salem and Beverly for thirty-two years, there were Lees at the Custom House for forty-nine years. Three members of the Webb family held positions as inspectors and measurers between 1789 and 1846. Although many of the Salem Customs men had tenures that can be tracked to administration changes, some managed careers that seemed eternal. The Custom House marker who made it possible for Hawthorne to be remembered "on such queer vehicles of fame" as pepper bags and baskets of annatto, Inspector Devereux Dennis, had been stenciling cargo for forty years.

In all, it appears that service at the Custom House operated as governments always have. There was a blend of efficient and less-than-efficient activity, influenced by civil and military achievement, family connections, fraternal organizations, real or presumed ability, and politics.

Even Salem's longest tenured officer, Deputy Collector William Wait Oliver (1778-1869), finally had enough excitement. After a highly successful career, he left office after forty-six years service in 1839. Following the Hawthorne scandal of 1849, Salem's Whig Ward Committee nominated Oliver as a potential appointee for Deputy Collector.⁶

Already seventy-one years old, he did not rush back to his old desk.

Notes

¹ U.S. Department of Commerce, *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957* (Washington, D.C., 1961), p. 712.

² Carl E. Prince and Mollie Keller, *The U.S. Customs Service: A Bicentennial History* (Washington, D.C., 1989), p. 97.

³ Letter to Robert J. Walker, Secretary of the Treasury, from Nathaniel Hawthorne, Surveyor of the Port of Salem dated May 21, 1845. Hawthorne recommended “Messrs. [Stephen] Burchmore and [Stephen] Harraden” as suitable replacements for “Messrs. [William] Webb and [Henry] Prince, whom I have found it my duty to report as incompetent” [in this case implying age and health issues].

⁴ Rose Hawthorne Lathrop, *Memories of Hawthorne* (Boston, 1897), p.112.

⁵ David Mason Little, “Documentary History of the Salem Custom House,” *Historical Collections of the Essex Institute*, LXVII (July 1931), p. 266.

⁶ Record of Meetings of the Whig Ward Committees and members of the government of the Taylor Club of Salem, July 6, 1849.



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On the front cover:

Capt. Hardy Phippen (1778-1868). Phippen was a successful captain, master of the brig *Nabby* and owner of the schooner *Minerva*, among others. According to official documents, he was 5'9" tall and had blue eyes. After retiring from the sea, he served as a Customs inspector in Salem from 1841 to about 1850. This ambrotype of Capt. Phippen was probably taken in the 1860s, and is a recent acquisition of Salem Maritime National Historic Site.

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