



DERBY HOUSE, SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS. ENTRY AND STAIRCASE

Courtesy of the Salem Maritime National Historic Site.

The Derby House

Part of Salem Maritime National Historic Site
Derby Street, Salem, Massachusetts

By EDWIN W. SMALL

THE Derby House, one of many buildings constructed or altered in Salem and vicinity for members of a renowned family of seafarers and merchant princes during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, is the oldest brick dwelling to survive in Salem.

Few brick structures were built in pre-Revolutionary Salem. Probably the first brick house known was one reputed to have been done about 1707 by George Cabot, a mason of Boston, for Benjamin Marston at the corner of Essex and Crombie Streets. According to Felt, the noted annalist of Salem, Marston's wife, thought a brick house was "damp and injurious to health" and got her husband to pull it down, thereby creating a strong local prejudice against brick dwellings.¹ At any rate, there appears to be no knowledge of brick houses in Salem between the venture of Benjamin Marston and the structure Felt says "was built about 1761 for Elias H. Derby by order of his father, Richard Derby."²

Elias Hasket Derby, 1739-1799, the first American to die a millionaire, was the second son of Captain Richard Derby, 1712-1783, who at the time of the Seven Years' War, 1756-1763, was well on his way toward becoming a prominent colonial merchant. In 1735, the year of his marriage to Mary Hodges, Richard Derby had purchased a lot on the northeast corner of what is now Herbert and Derby Streets and soon after erected a commodious gambrel-roofed structure,

later and more commonly known as the Miles Ward House.³ This building, which still stands with clapboards currently painted a bright yellow, was the home of Richard Derby until he passed away in his seventy-second year, November 9, 1783. Consequently, it is a misnomer to apply, as often done in recent years, the full title of "Richard Derby House" to the brick dwelling now preserved as part of Salem Maritime National Historic Site.⁴

The lot on which the brick house was built was purchased by Richard Derby in December, 1760.⁵ The next year Elias Hasket was joined to Elizabeth Crowninshield, a sister of George Crowninshield, who was already married to Mary Derby, an elder sister of the millionaire-to-be. The greater part of the brick house was erected in 1761, but the meager records concerning expenses that can be definitely identified as construction costs do not begin to appear until the following year. A receipt dated at Salem, January 6, 1762, indicates that Daniel Spoffard had received from Richard Derby two pounds and thirteen shillings, and was expecting six pounds and thirteen shillings more for work on the roof of a house 43 feet long and 27 feet wide—measurements that correspond with the present brick house.⁶ Another receipt, providing the best of evidence from the accounts kept by Richard Derby, shows that on May 28, 1762, one John Jones was paid "the sum of three pounds fore Shillings in full for 24 Days Labour on Hasket's

House.”⁷ Joseph McIntire, 1716-1776, the father of Samuel McIntire, 1757-1811, was then a housewright of excellent standing in Salem. In 1758 he was one of the builders of the Jonathan Mansfield House on Norman Street, one of the fine structures of pre-Revolutionary Salem.⁸ From time to time also as “Joseph Mackentire” he billed Richard Derby for work that is distressingly lacking in descriptive details and about which we would like to know more. It may well have been, for instance, that “the sum of forty shillings cash on account” paid to McIntire by Richard Derby on May 22, 1762, had something to do with the son’s dwelling.

By 1764 “Derby’s Brick House” was enough of a landmark to be named in the conveyance of adjoining property.⁹ It did not enjoy for long, however, the distinction of being the only brick dwelling in Salem. In 1762 Dr. John Prince married Martha, a younger daughter of Richard Derby, and it was only a short time before the latter ordered a “New House” in Essex Street, later known as the Lawrence House, for his daughter and son-in-law.

Entries in the Derby Account Books indicate the “New House” was not only of brick but also slated. An entry on September 7, 1763, allows “£121:19:10” paid for bricks and “£6:4:0” for carting them. On October 16, 1763, we find the entry “To pd for Slating ye House £36 Tyle 27/37:7:0.” Another brick dwelling, subsequently called the Thomas Mason House, was erected at the expense of Elias Hasket Derby in 1772 and recorded in his account book. This brick house was also slated.¹⁰

The slate used on these Derby houses of 1763 and 1772 was brought either from Wales or could have been procured

from domestic sources of supply. Slate was taken from Slate Island, “the quarry of the Puritan fathers” near the Hingham shore in the lower part of Boston Bay, as early as 1650 and soon after from Hangman’s Island, about a mile from the mouth of Black Creek in the present Quincy.¹¹ A most important early source of domestic slate, however, for the roofs of these pre-Revolutionary houses built by the Derbys could have been a pit opened in the northeastern part of the Town of Lancaster, Massachusetts, about 1752 or 1753. The black Lancaster slate was hauled to Boston, some forty miles distant, in oxcarts and from there was shipped up and down the coast as well as being used to cover the roofs of Boston buildings.¹² Evidence of slate having been put on the brick houses built by the Derbys in 1763 and 1772 establishes an excellent precedent for its use on the brick house erected in 1761-1762. In consequence, used black slates of a type that could have come in the first place either from Wales or Massachusetts quarries have been employed in a recent re-roofing of the house.

Measures consciously to preserve and restore the Derby House were initiated by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities and have been continued by the National Park Service. The Society acquired the property in 1927 and a decade later donated it to the United States to comprise a portion of Salem Maritime National Historic Site. Generally speaking, the house is typical of a gambrel-roofed Georgian home usually associated with a date somewhat earlier than 1761-1762. Of modest scale and simple wall surfaces, it is of good quality and fine proportions. Inside, it has the arrangement of its archetype as adapted to New England, the Thomas

Hancock House, erected on Beacon Hill in Boston, 1737-1740, and shamelessly demolished in 1863—a rectangular mass of four rooms to a floor, a straight central hall containing stairs and a secondary stair back to the front. Earlier, larger and more lavish gambrel-roofed houses illustrating the style are to be found in the Hunter House, restored by the Preservation Society of Newport County at Newport, Rhode Island, the Webb House at Wethersfield, Connecticut, and the superb McPhaedris-Warner House at Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The Miles Ward House or “old mansion house of Richard Derby,” already mentioned, offers substantially the same form on the exterior, but inside the presence of a central hall with stairs to divide the house is barred by a central chimney.

The Derby House should in no way be confused with the magnificent Derby Mansion, erected for Elias Hasket Derby between 1795 and 1799 in what is now Derby Square near the center of the Salem business district. The latter, executed from drawings and sketches both by Charles Bulfinch, 1763-1844, the famous Boston architect, and by Samuel McIntire, the local designer of plans, was torn down in 1816.¹³

Elias Hasket Derby and his wife lived in the brick house until 1777 or 1778 and all of their seven children were born before they left there. An autobiography of George Nichols, a prominent shipmaster and merchant, who was later a resident of McIntire's Peirce-Nichols House, erected on Federal Street in 1782, states that he was born in the Derby House on July 4, 1778.¹⁴ Following the Nichols family, Henry Prince, a shipmaster for the Derbys and eventually a merchant himself, was the next known occupant of the house. Prince and his family appear

to have been residing there as early as 1784.¹⁵ In 1796, the same year in which he sailed the Derby's *Astrea II* on the first voyage of any American vessel to the Philippines, Prince finally bought the house from Elias Hasket Derby.¹⁶ A daughter of Henry Prince married Henry Ropes and the house remained in the Ropes family until 1873.¹⁷ It was in precarious circumstances thereafter until rescued from oblivion by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.

Essential restoration work was performed by the Society at the house during 1928. Inside, post-Revolutionary War mantels, which had been installed over the panelling at the fireplaces, were removed and the appropriate bolection mouldings revived. Doorways between the corner rooms in both the east and west halves of the first floor had been enlarged and were reduced to their original size. Many other small jobs of a carpentry nature were done, including the elimination of holes in the fireplace panelings where stovepipes had gone. The twelve over twelve windowlights (as shown in one window in an early photograph of the house) had been succeeded by larger-paned sash and had to be put back. Outside window blinds of a late date were removed along with all traces of wallpaper inside, leaving the walls in the bare plaster. The Society also experimented with revival of the original paint colors of the interior woodwork. Such drawings as were necessary were prepared for the Society by Alfred F. Shurrocks and the work as a whole was done under the direction of George Francis Dow, the well-known antiquarian and historian of early New England. The plans included the erection in front of the house of a picket fence and gate with

ball-capped finials on the posts that were apparently copied from the "Colleges at Cambridge."¹⁸ The fence and gate and exterior wood trim of the house were

green of brownish hue, with some use of mahogany red around the mouldings of fireplaces, at window seats and along baseboards and chair rails. Upstairs, each



DERBY HOUSE, SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS. FIREPLACE IN THE EAST FRONT ROOM, BEFORE RESTORATION

Courtesy of the Essex Institute.

painted a light green that has been retained.

Work on the house was resumed by the National Park Service in 1938. A searching study of the layers of paint on the interior woodwork was undertaken by Stuart M. Barnette, now in the Department of Architecture at Cornell University. The original colors were revealed and restored, and are verified by samples of the originals and each succeeding color in every room. The prevailing color of the central hall and rooms on the first floor was found to be an olive

corner bedroom is of a different color—pastel blue, stone gray, dark green and a pastel or grass green. Artificial graining, probably to simulate mahogany or cedar, was found on the main panel of a dado in the southeast parlor and the sample has been saved. Repainting of the woodwork according to this sample, however, was not acceptable, as a prior application of the prevailing olive green is evident in the room.

A kitchen ell of brick laid up in common bond and covered with a rather broadly pitched roof is an addition half

a century or more later than the main part of the house. The mantels and woodwork in the northwest and northeast

ever, was found in the old plaster of the rear hall side walls and the stairs together with the original stairway into the cellar,



DERBY HOUSE, SALEM, MASSACHUSETTS. FIREPLACE IN THE EAST FRONT ROOM, AFTER RESTORATION

Courtesy of the Salem Maritime National Historic Site.

corner rooms of the first floor presumably date from about the same time. The original kitchen may have been one of these rooms prior to addition of the ell in the post-Derby period of occupancy. The position of the original door leading from the rear hall out-of-doors on the first floor of the main house is in evidence, and the doorway was presumably plastered up when the kitchen ell was added. Stairs, back to the front, had been removed from the rear hall and replaced by stairs in the ell. The outline of the original steps, how-

ever, were restored in 1939.

The flooring in the southeast and southwest corner rooms of the first story is the original, but elsewhere the random width boards of pine had been replaced by later flooring and had to be restored.

The painted side walls in the northeast room of the first story are the outcome of finding an application of green paint on the plastered wall surfaces, a condition that was not in evidence in any other room except the kitchen ell. It is, therefore, assumed that the green side walls

in this room correspond in period to the kitchen ell as well as to the woodwork and mantel in the room itself.

A sample of wallpaper was uncovered under several layers of paint in the northwest chamber of the second floor, which has been identified as a China tea-box pattern. The paper, presumably, was not put on much before the decade of 1790-1800 when great quantities of tea began to arrive from Canton at Derby Wharf, on the waterside of Derby Street and opposite the Derby House. The paper has been reproduced in a smaller pattern and applied to the side walls of the room.

Virtually all of the original brass hardware of the house was missing. The hardware now in place was reproduced and installed in 1940.

On the exterior of the Derby House, less restoration was necessary and less has been performed by the National Park Service. The central oval dormer on the front, however, had been replaced by one to match the pediment-style dormers on either side and had to be revived to its original form (following the evidence of early photographs). Two cellar windows in the granite foundation had been closed up on the front and were reopened, and an outside cellarway on the east side of the house was also uncovered and the granite steps reset. Fortunately the rear ell helped to preserve intact under the pitch of its roof an excellent sample of the original finish of the exterior brickwork.

A new fence and gate, similar in design to the one erected by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities in 1928, was constructed in front of the house in 1939, but with a high base

of granite instead of wood. The removal at that time of undesirable buildings of more recent origin that had obstructed and endangered the house increased the frontage to be fenced and it was found to be most practical to put up an entirely new fence rather than to make extensive appendages and repairs to one that had been in place only a decade.

The reroofing of the Derby House with black slates is the most recent work that has been performed, and a statement on use of slate has already been made.

The house was partly furnished by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities. Through the coöperation of the Society some of the furnishings, especially items associated with the Derby family, have been retained in the house as loans. Additional loans from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, from family descendants and others have been procured largely through the untiring interest and enterprise of Mrs. Francis B. Crowninshield, whose husband was a descendant of Captain Richard Derby. Mrs. Crowninshield, furthermore, has been more than generous with gifts from her own collection and elsewhere in order to fill specific needs of the house. She also has been instrumental in getting family descendants and others to make specific donations. The Essex Institute and Peabody Museum of Salem have assisted from time to time by loaning items particularly appropriate for the place. The third quarter of the eighteenth century is the ideal period it has been desired to attain in the furnishing of the house, with a few significant items dating a bit earlier and a very few somewhat later.

NOTES

¹ Joseph B. Felt, *Annals of Salem* (1845), I, 414-415.

² *Ibid.*, I, 415.

³ Essex County, Southern District, Registry of Deeds, Book 74, p. 143. By indenture, January 11, 1785, between the heirs of Richard Derby, his "Mansion House" became the property of Elias Hasket Derby. (*Ibid.*, Book 140, p. 30.) Even after the property passed out of the hands of the family it was still referred to as the "old mansion house of Richard Derby." (See *Diary of William Bentley, D. D., 1784-1819* [1905-1914], II, 203, October 24, 1796.)

⁴ The source of the misnomer may be in the assumption in Robert E. Peabody, *Merchant Venturers of Old Salem* (1912), pp. 21-22, and the subsequent article on Richard Derby in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, V (1930), 252-253, to the effect that Richard Derby lived in the brick house with his family.

⁵ Essex County, Southern District, Registry of Deeds, Book 109, p. 78.

⁶ *Derby MSS*, Vol. IV.

⁷ *Richard Derby, Receipt Books, 1754-1769* (3 vols.).

⁸ Fiske Kimball, *Mr. Samuel McIntire, Carver, The Architect of Salem* (1940), p. 5.

⁹ Essex County, Southern District, Registry of Deeds, Book 115, p. 51.

¹⁰ "Notes on Derby Houses from the Derby Ledgers," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, LXIX (1933), 90-95.

¹¹ Edward R. Snow, *The Romance of Boston Bay* (1944), pp. 146-147, 163.

¹² Peter Whitney, *The History of Worcester County* (1793), p. 53. Rev. Abijah P. Marvin, *History of the Town of Lancaster, Massachusetts, 1643-1879* (1879), pp. 32-33. George P. Merrill, *Stones for Building and Decoration* (1891), pp. 8-9, 301-302.

¹³ Fiske Kimball, "The Elias Hasket Derby Mansion in Salem," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, LX (1924), 273-292.

¹⁴ Martha Nichols (ed.), *A Salem Shipmaster and Merchant, The Autobiography of George Nichols* (1921), p. 1.

¹⁵ *Derby Family Papers*, Vol. XXX. Listed among bills, 1780-1789, is one dated April 20, 1784, as an "account of the Stuff Expended upon Mr. Prince's House & Fence."

¹⁶ Essex County, Southern District, Registry of Deeds, Book 167, p. 137.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Book 883, p. 129.

¹⁸ From notation on blueprint of drawing showing design of fence and gate.