

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Salem Maritime National Historic Site
Salem, Massachusetts



THE MAN TWICE FORGOTTEN
Captain John Derby and the *Quero*

By John Frayler, Historian

∞ Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions ∞
Historical musings from Salem Maritime NHS
Volume II, No. 1 February 2000

One of the more obscure patriots of the American Revolution was Captain John Derby of Salem, Massachusetts. Born in 1741, he was the youngest son of Captain Richard Derby, Sr. The elder Derby was the patriarch of the Derby shipping firm who defied the efforts of Colonel Alexander Leslie to confiscate American cannon during the incident at Salem's North Bridge ("Leslie's Retreat") on February 26, 1775. This act of resistance set the tone for the series of events leading up to Paul Revere's famous ride and the encounters at Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775.

In the evening of April 18, 1775, in an effort to chastise the rebellious Massachusetts inhabitants in the vicinity of Boston, Provincial Governor Thomas Gage ordered Colonel Francis Smith and some eight hundred British soldiers to march to Concord to destroy military stores located there. Unlike the similar event two months previous in Salem where cooler heads prevailed, the campaign to Concord ended in disaster for the British troops, who were forced to retreat to Boston, while suffering substantial casualties at the hands of a quickly growing force of colonial militiamen.

The members of the patriot Provincial Congress immediately recognized the propaganda value of presenting the American views on the conflict to the British public, and the need to do so as quickly as possible. Richard Derby, Jr., a member of the Provincial Congress, offered the use of his fast, 62 ton schooner *Quero* to convey the news to London. He agreed to outfit the vessel, and his younger brother, Captain John Derby, was to command her.

On April 26, Captain Derby was given a letter of instruction to validate his "secret" mission to Benjamin Franklin and Arthur Lee, Agent for the House of Representatives of the Massachusetts Bay. He was to deliver accounts of the battles published in the April 21st and 25th editions of the Essex Gazette, along with copies of sworn affidavits by participants in the encounters representing both sides. These documents were to be immediately communicated to the Lord Mayor, Aldermen and Common Council of London, and the accounts printed and made public throughout every town in England.

Derby left Salem on April 29. His orders called for him to proceed to Ireland and then to London in secrecy. It has not been established beyond all doubt exactly where Derby landed, but he traveled from Southampton to London, arriving on May 28. The Isle of Wight is suggested as the probable location since it is mentioned in his expense account, and the Customs officers at Southampton reported that *Quero* was not there.

Having accomplished his mission, Captain Derby left London on June 1. His dispatches were viewed with skepticism and all of England waited anxiously for the official reports. Finally, on June 9, Governor Gage's dispatches arrived aboard the royal express packet *Sukey*. A vessel of 200 tons, *Sukey* left Boston

four days before *Quero* left Salem. The worst was confirmed; Massachusetts was in open rebellion.

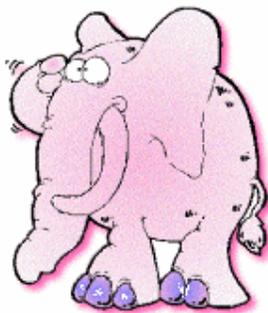
It seems that Derby had made arrangements to rejoin his vessel at Falmouth following an overland journey from London. Again, his accounts document his movements. He paid the required Customs inspection and clearance fees at the port of Falmouth. A rumor circulated that he was on his way to France and Spain to purchase ammunition.

When *Quero* arrived home on July 19, Captain Derby was not aboard. He earlier went ashore at an undisclosed location, leaving William Carlton in command. Derby reported to General Washington at Cambridge the day before *Quero* appeared at Salem.

The expenses submitted for the voyage came to 57 pounds, eight pence. Captain Derby took no pay for his time spent while making the voyage.

Captain John Derby continued to serve his country during the Revolution. He is on record as part owner of the privateers *Rover* and *Oliver Cromwell*, and Master of *Patty* and *Astrea*.

As Captain Derby carried the words of war across the Atlantic in 1775, he carried words of peace in 1783. The news of the Treaty of Paris, announcing the cessation of hostilities between Britain and the United States arrived at Salem on April 4, 1783 aboard Elias Hasket Derby's 20 gun ship *Astrea*, John Derby, Master.



Merchant Town Press ● 2003

EXPERIENCE YOUR AMERICA™