



Joseph Warren by John Singleton Copley, circa 1765. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Reproduced with the express permission of Dr. Carolyn M. Matthews, M.D., Trustee.

Dr. Joseph Warren *Reflection, Research & Remembrance*

Not often does such a pivotal figure in American history as Dr. Joseph Warren (1741–1775) fall into historical obscurity. Although numerous reasons can account for this neglect, Warren’s mostly forgotten status is in many ways simply inexplicable.

Compared to other founding fathers and revolutionaries, Warren left little written material. Few documents survive in his hand, so writing a complete biography is difficult. Most of the icons of the Revolutionary era who lived into their golden years left vast collections of papers and letters. These circumstances partially explain why only a handful of Warren biographies have been published since his death nearly 250 years ago.

Dr. Warren’s relatives, including his nephew, Dr. John Collins Warren, claimed that Joseph Warren had destroyed many of his own papers and

letters because his resistance activities against the Crown and his covert role at the helm of a vast patriot spy network were treasonous. Many of Warren’s other papers were lost, and two separate nineteenth-century house fires destroyed what little remained. A prior Warren biographer declared that “any biographer of Warren is confronted with . . . difficulty at getting at his personal life. . . . A personal, belletristic biography of Warren cannot be written.”¹ Given this lack of available sources, other works have reimagined portions of Warren’s life in fiction.

Why, then, even attempt a new biography of Joseph Warren?

I first became interested in Warren more than twenty years ago, after reading an 1835 book about him by his niece.² Learning that he had been involved in so many of Boston’s key pre-Revolutionary events made me realize that Warren was among the most vehement and dedicated patriot agitators. My curiosity turned to fascination and I started to read all the available published material about him. Nonetheless, I was left with many unanswered questions. Fortunately, with no deadlines or pressure to publish, I had the luxury of time to pursue new research. I would need to cast a wide research net across several hundred years, throughout the American colonies and across the Atlantic.

My first goal was to learn about Joseph Warren’s world. I had a broad range of questions, from the mundane



Christian Di Spigna, a writer based in New York City and Williamsburg, Virginia, is the author of *Founding Martyr: The Life and Death of Dr. Joseph Warren, the American Revolution’s Lost Hero* (2018). Di Spigna is a regular speaker and volunteer at Colonial Williamsburg.

to the philosophical. I wondered about the typical diet, popular music, entertainment, taverns, and how people bathed, dressed, and traveled in the colonial era. I was curious about social and cultural traditions, slavery, diseases, medicine, prostitution, and class structure. I wanted to know which businesses thrived in Boston, the extent of the city's resources, and the role of its port. How important was religion and education? How had the history of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the local topography influenced the town? Did the colonial political structure mirror that of Parliament? What about laws, local ordinances, and crime and punishment? How important were family connections? Of course, I was also deeply curious about Warren's elusive personal life.

I knew I needed new sources. But where to start? By the early twentieth century the literature had begun to claim that Warren no longer had living descendants. With help from the New England Historic Genealogical Society, I found evidence to the contrary. Then I learned that the trustee of the Warren painting in Boston's Museum of Fine Arts was Dr. Carolyn Matthews, Warren's fifth great-granddaughter. I was soon in contact with the Warren family historian, George C. Wildrick. This connection with descendants allowed me to deconstruct Warren's life in an unprecedented way. In the following years, phone calls and visits led me to documents, artifacts, and pieces of material culture previously unknown to the public.

These family heirlooms offered new insights into Warren's personal life. Comparing an original Warren family tree owned by descendants with baptismal records at Boston's Brattle Street Church, I discovered that Warren and his wife Elizabeth (Hooton) lost a child in infancy. The family collection

included a silver porringer handle that John Adams gave to Joseph Warren for the baptism of one of Warren's children, underscoring the fact that the two men were much closer than previously realized.

By studying the Warren's family history and eighteenth-century Boston, I understood more about Warren's views and relationships. Warren's maternal grandfather, Dr. Samuel Stevens, was financially ruined in the Land Bank controversy of the late 1730s and 1740s. Warren was close to his grandfather and witnessed Stevens's two decades of financial hardships. A similar fate befell the father of Samuel Adams. Both Adams and Warren came to resent the Crown's early meddling, which contributed to the financial downturns experienced by their families. A rediscovered document shows that Joseph Warren gave Samuel Adams a significant amount of money to help keep Adams out of debt.

Given that payment, I wondered about the relationship between these two men. For years, scholars have claimed that Samuel Adams was Warren's mentor, but the men seem to have been on



Joseph Warren's tall case clock, 1772–74, made by Benjamin Willard of Roxbury, Mass. Courtesy of the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and Library, Lexington, Mass., collection of the Grand Lodge of Masons in Massachusetts, GL2004.4498, photograph by David Bohl.



N. Currier, *The house in Roxbury, Mass: (as it now stands, August, 1840.)* in which General Joseph Warren was born in the year 1741, published 1835–56, Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., [loc.gov/item/2002699673/](https://www.loc.gov/item/2002699673/).

a more equal footing than previously realized. In his 1768 medical ledger entry, Warren had misspelled Adams's name as "Adames." I was surprised that Warren referred to Adams as the "Honourable Speaker of the House"—when, in fact, Adams was never the Speaker; he was the clerk. If Adams was an early mentor to Warren, Warren would certainly have known that Adams was not the Speaker. These new clues suggest that the relationship between the two men should be re-evaluated, and that Warren was already entrenched in his radical political philosophies before his association with Samuel Adams.

Additional new information about Warren came from newspapers; I searched papers from every colony, from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century. Reading about items owned by Warren aided in my understanding of his personal life. I discovered that Warren commissioned an ornate mourning ring in memory of his wife Elizabeth, which further highlights Warren's wealth and his close relationship with his wife. I also learned that Elizabeth wore a bracelet made from Joseph Warren's hair, which provided more evidence of the couple's devotion. Warren's eight-day clock on display in the Scottish Rite Masonic Museum and Library in Lexington, Massachusetts,

further demonstrates Warren's elevated social status and taste for luxury, and helps to recreate his home environment.

Warren's residence for most of the 1760s and 1770s has remained a mystery. Fortunately, information I gathered from various primary source documents helped to fill some of those gaps. Court documents show that on April 18, 1775, Warren dispatched Paul Revere and William Dawes from a different house in Boston than previously thought. By 1772 Warren had left the home he had rented from the Green family on Hanover Street and moved into a house owned by Peter Chardon, located at the "Head of Wing's-Lane near the Flesh and Fish Markets."

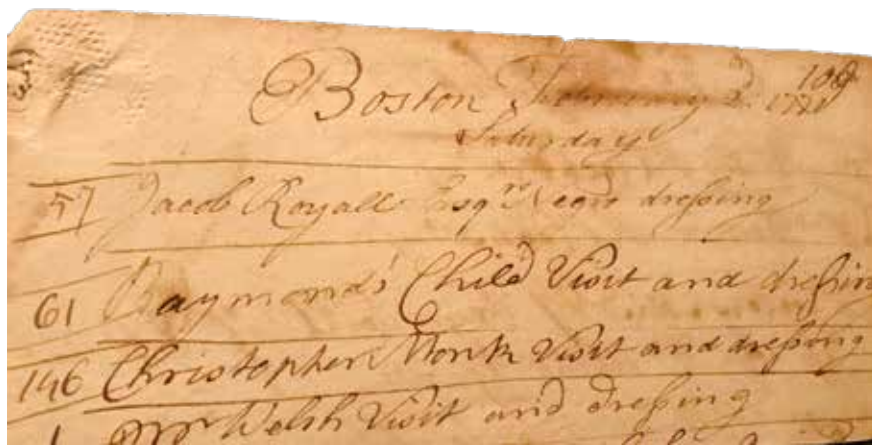
Documents in the Boston Public Library familiarized me with Warren's mansion in West Boston, and described many custom construction upgrades. A number of invoices presented to the administrators of Warren's estate listed specific work and services. From these papers, we know much about the house's interior and exterior, including the quantity of planks purchased, the number of dormers installed, and the paint colors of the rooms—and even a carriage. Warren had his carriage painted vermillion—the most expensive color in the colonies and in high fashion in London at the time. Not only was

Warren living the life of a gentleman, he was also very fashion conscious. From the single word "vermillion" we can extract clues about Warren's personality and social and economic standing.

At the Massachusetts Historical Society, I pored over Dr. Warren's medical ledgers, as well as diaries and letters written by Warren descendants. At the Boston Athenaeum, I analyzed apothecary John Greenleaf's ledgers, which chronicled ten years of Warren's purchases for his medical practice. The New England Historic Genealogical Society provided vital records—baptisms, marriages, and deaths. At the Suffolk County Probate Court I found various wills and lists of personal items Warren owned, including now archaic terms such as "montieth" and "cricket." (A montieth was used to chill glasses, which implied considerable entertaining at home. A cricket was often used as a small foot stool in church, and implying Warren's dutiful attendance at church.)

Reading the will of Warren's father-in-law, Richard Hooton, I discovered that Hooton had owned half of Hooton's Wharf in Boston. This was significant because the wharf was inherited by Warren and his wife, thus connecting Warren to the seafaring community of ship captains, sailors, and dock workers, and offering additional evidence about Warren's involvement in helping to plan the Boston Tea Party.

Extending my research in neighboring towns around Boston—and beyond—proved fruitful. Many libraries and local historical societies held relevant information within their archives. Letters written by Warren's friends, political associates, family, and



Warren's medical ledger entry for Christopher Monk, sixth victim of the Boston Massacre, 1771. From the author's collection.

his fiancée, Mercy Scollay, contributed useful insights. The Mercy Scollay Papers at the Cambridge Historical Society consists of ninety letters written by her. In a previously undiscovered July 1780 letter at the Library of Congress, Mercy thanked Benedict Arnold for sending nearly £3,000 for the care of Warren's four orphaned children—an incredible monetary gift from a man soon to be accused of putting coin above country. In the letter, Scollay provided information on Warren's children and described her belief that some of the founders abandoned Warren's children in their darkest hour.

I did not want to limit my research to libraries, museums, and historical societies. I searched used book stores when I could, and kept informed about relevant auctions. In 2008 I bought a Joseph Warren lot of items that included a lost portion of Warren's missing medical ledger. This ledger includes an entry for treatment that Warren provided to Christopher Monk, the sixth victim of the Boston Massacre. Also noted were services that Warren rendered to the Isaac Royall Jr. family—then the largest slaveholding family in Massachusetts. These discoveries underscored Warren's large medical practice, and an additional connection between Warren and the Boston Massacre.

Uncovering all these new and re-discovered sources posed challenges. Some terms and vocabulary I encountered were so old and obscure they could not be easily deciphered or understood. Warren's medical ledgers

were akin to ancient hieroglyphics, full of Latin abbreviations and archaic terminology. For years I visited Colonial Williamsburg and consulted their experts. At the apothecary shop I learned how to deconstruct the ledgers, and many other Colonial Williamsburg period scholars, including the wig-maker, gunsmith, wheelwright, cobbler, archaeologists, architects, and paint experts, generously shared their knowledge with me.

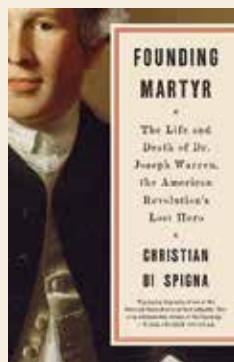
I soon came to view Colonial Williamsburg as my personal time machine, so I moved to Williamsburg with my family and began to volunteer for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. I wanted to learn even more about eighteenth-century life and viscerally experience the past, by smelling wood-burning street fires, tasting colonial recipes, listening to fife and drum marches, riding in a horse and carriage thundering down

a winding road, and much more. I combined these experiences with my travels to Boston to walk in Warren's footsteps.

Having spent over two decades in pursuit of Joseph Warren, I believe that to study the life of a historical figure, one must be immersed not only in source documents but also in material culture, prevailing socio-economics and politics, and virtually all aspects of that particular time and place. Eighteenth-century events must be viewed from an eighteenth-century mindset. Research comes in many forms, and following any and all suggestions is important—even though many leads will inevitably be dead ends. Some ideas, however, will become the gems that illuminate figures from the past and tell a more complete story about their lives and times. ♦

NOTES

- ¹ John H. Cary, *Joseph Warren: Physician, Politician, Patriot* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1961), ix.
- ² Rebecca Warren Brown, *Stories About General Warren in Relation to the Fifth of March Massacre and the Battle of Bunker Hill by a Lady of Boston* (Boston: J. Loring, 1835).



Founding Martyr

"Without Joseph Warren, who combined the passionate eloquence of Thomas Jefferson with the leadership abilities of George Washington, the American Revolution might have never even gotten started. Christian Di Spigna has written a laudable and carefully researched biography of the Founding Father history forgot."

—Nathaniel Philbrick, author of *Valiant Ambition* and *Bunker Hill*

Founding Martyr: The Life and Death of Dr. Joseph Warren, the American Revolution's Lost Hero (Crown, 2018) by Christian Di Spigna is available from Amazon and many other booksellers. Learn more at FoundingMartyr.com.