

“A Box Worth Keeping”

The Story of the Robinson Tea Chest

On the night of December 16, 1773, the Sons of Liberty took great care to ensure that the tea flung overboard was thoroughly submerged in the icy waters of Boston Harbor. However, evidence of the Boston Tea Party remained. As participant George Robert Twelves Hewes recalled, “The next morning, after we had cleared the ships of the tea, it was discovered that very considerable quantities of it were floating upon the surface of the water; and . . . a number of small boats were manned by sailors and citizens, who rowed them into those parts of the harbor wherever the tea was visible, and by beating it with oars and paddles so thoroughly drenched it as to render its entire destruction inevitable.”¹

Likewise, the *Massachusetts Gazette and Boston Weekly News-Letter* of December 23, 1773, reported that “when the tide rose it floated the broken chests and the tea insomuch that the surface of the water was filled therewith a considerable way from the south part of the town to Dorchester Neck, and lodged on the shores.”²



The Robinson Tea Chest.

The tide had picked up detritus from Griffin’s Wharf and pulled it southeasterly, depositing remnants of broken chests and loose-leaf tea along Dorchester Flats, a large, slick, muddy bank exposed during low tides. There, 15-year-old John Robinson discovered a mostly intact wooden tea chest on the mud and decided it was “a box worth keeping.”

According to family lore, Robinson brought the tea chest home, where it was kept out of sight for the duration of the conflict with Great Britain. When the Revolutionary War ended and Robinson returned from his military service, the chest was brought out and displayed in the house.

Today, the Robinson Tea Chest is thought to be the only known surviving tea chest from the Boston Tea Party. Made of ½" thick poplar or spruce and constructed with hand-forged nails, this simple tea chest measures 13½"x 11⅞"x 11¼". Although a small, hinged section remains attached at the lip of the chest’s opening, the rest of the cover is missing—likely the result of rough activity on the deck of the *Dartmouth*, *Eleanor*, or *Beaver*. The hinged section contains nails and screws, which suggests a 19th-century repair. In addition, the sides of the chest were adorned in the early to mid-19th century with painted floral decorations, perhaps in an attempt to depict tea blossoms. Carved into its underside is the chest’s most unique feature, a Twelve Man’s Morris game board, also referred to as “mills.”

As part of the authentication process, the Robinson Tea Chest was appraised by Durkin Valuation Consultants of Boston and forensically tested by the McCrone Group in Illinois. The comprehensive evaluation concluded that the chest’s construction is consistent with materials and techniques of the 18th century. The chest showed evidence of both sea water and the storage of



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tea. The family provenance—letters, photographs, newspaper clippings, and legal documents—has also been authenticated. The chest's long journey through a line of family members is itself a fascinating story.



Following John Robinson's death in about 1819, the chest moved with his widow, Nancy (____) (Robinson) Holden, who had remarried and settled in Gouverneur, New York. In 1843, "Grandma" Holden presented it as a gift. Her son, John Robinson, Jr. and his wife, Patience, had been nursed through a lengthy illness by Patience's sister and brother-in-law, Zilpha "Lurana" and Solomon Shaffstall. As Solomon had an abiding interest in history and had often discussed the chest with Grandma Holden, she gave it to him and his wife as a token of her thanks.

In 1872, Solomon Shaffstall entrusted the tea chest to his orphaned granddaughter, Mary Lurana Cade, when she was about 8 years old. Years later, Cade recalled receiving the chest from her grandfather, remembering it contained "colonial poke bonnets" that she loved to "wear when playing dress-up." The chest also housed a collection of her dolls. Cade kept the chest on a low closed shelf, and one day discovered that her favorite cat had claimed it as a cozy, protected place to have her kittens.

In the century after the Boston Tea Party, the Robinson Tea Chest traveled from Massachusetts to New York, Wisconsin, and the Dakota Territory. In 1885, the chest accompanied Mary Cade when she moved to Knoxville, Tennessee. In 1896, Cade married Isaiah Llewelyn Ford. The next August, Mary (Cade) Ford, wrote down her grandfather's account of the chest's origins, which he signed. This account was the first surviving written history of the Robinson Tea Chest.

The Robinson Tea Chest was publicly displayed for the first time during the Appalachian Exposition, held in Knoxville from September 12 to October 12, 1910. The first of its kind in that region, the fair aimed to demonstrate progress in southern industry and commerce, and an exposition hall featured many popular exhibits.

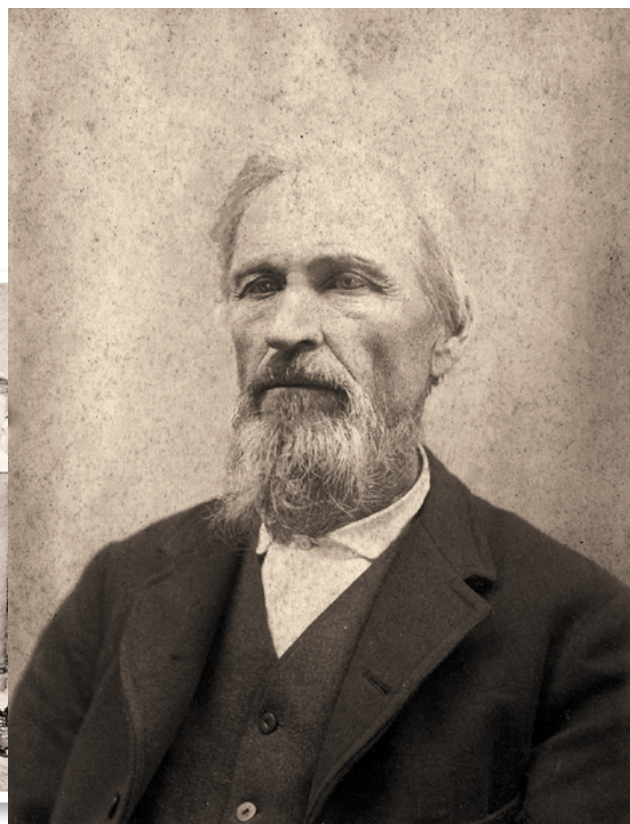


Former President Theodore Roosevelt visited and perhaps even gazed upon the tea chest.

Not long afterwards the Ford family moved to Corpus Christi, Texas, and then San Antonio, bringing the chest with them. The Robinson Tea Chest's history was documented again, by Isaiah and Mary Ford in 1913 and by 84-year-old Mary (Cade) Ford in 1949. When Mary (Cade) Ford died in 1950, her daughter Helen (Ford) Waring inherited the chest.

The chest's next public appearance was prompted by a hurricane. On August 31, 1954, Hurricane Carol took down the steeple of Boston's Old North Church. The steeple was made famous by Boston Tea Party participant Paul Revere on the night of April 19, 1775. Having a deep connection to Boston's history through her family's stewardship of the tea chest, Helen (Ford) Waring felt compelled to contribute to the steeple's replacement. She rallied fellow members of her local Daughters of the American Revolution chapter and opened her San Antonio home so visitors could view the Robinson Tea Chest and its documentation in exchange for small donations towards the new steeple.

Waring said, "It is fitting that a donation to help restore the Old North Church steeple be made in the home where the only chest from the Boston Tea Party rests." She noted that "just as the church steeple helped



Left: A young Mary Lurana Cade. Right: Solomon Shaffstall.



Isaiah and Mary (Cade) Ford and family in Knoxville, Tennessee, circa 1906. Isaiah is holding the chest.



Betty (Ford) Goodman and her children admiring the chest in Texas in 1961.

point the way for Paul Revere's ride warning about the approaching Redcoat Soldiers, the tea chest stands for one of the first American revolts against British oppression." Old North's steeple was replaced the following year, with reinforced steel.

In 1974, an unexpected call came from the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. In preparation for a multi-year celebration of America's Bicentennial, the Smithsonian was launching a new exhibit that would celebrate the nation's first 200 years. Five days before the opening, staff had learned of a tea chest somewhere in Texas that had been salvaged from the Boston Tea Party. They located it in Laredo, at the home of William Ford, the last surviving Ford sibling. On June 9, 1974, National Portrait Gallery registrar John Freshour flew from Washington to San Antonio, and then drove to Laredo. "The Robinson Half Chest," as it was then known, was shipped in a box labeled "Tutti Frutti Twinkles"—the name of a popular cereal—and given security protection for the journey back to Washington the following day.

When the National Portrait Gallery's exhibit, *In the Minds and Hearts of the People—Prologue to the American Revolution, 1760–1774*, opened on June 14, the tea chest was displayed in a gallery titled, "A Tempest Over Tea." The chest assumed its place among other Revolutionary-era relics, portraits, letters, and documents. The Robinson Tea Chest had been elevated from the status of a family keepsake to a national treasure.

When the exhibit ended, the Robinson Tea Chest returned to Texas, to new caretakers. William Ford had died, so his daughter, Betty (Ford) Goodman, her husband, Andre, and their five children inherited it. The chest was safeguarded in a bank vault in Laredo. Eventually, though, Andre Goodman decided to bring the chest home, to be celebrated and enjoyed as their own special piece of American history.

In 2005, the Robinson Tea Chest returned to Boston for the first time in more than 200 years and was welcomed into the collections of Historic Tours of America, with the intention of being placed on permanent display. When this treasure left her family, Betty Goodman expressed her wish that the tea chest be shared, viewed, and appreciated by the people of the world.

On June 13, 2012, the Robinson Tea Chest was draped with the red and white striped flag of the Sons of Liberty and traveled from a dedication ceremony at Old South Meeting House (where public meetings on the tea tax were held prior to the Boston Tea Party), to the newly rebuilt Boston Tea Party Ships & Museum. There it was placed in a permanent display case and is now featured as the institution's central artifact. Coming full circle, the tea chest has returned to the place where, 250 years ago, it was thrown into Boston Harbor and acquired its historical significance.

The Robinson Tea Chest remains a tangible embodiment of an important act of defiance in the face of tyranny and a key milestone on the road to American independence. In addition, the very existence of the Robinson Tea Chest is a testament to the power of oral traditions, cherished heirlooms, and family history. ♦

NOTES

- ¹ [James Hawkes], *A Retrospect of the Boston Tea-Party with a Memoir of George R. T. Hewes* (New-York, 1834), 41.
- ² Francis S. Drake, *Tea Leaves; Being a Collection of Letters and Documents Relating to the Shipment of Tea to the American Colonies in the Year 1773* (Boston: A. O. Crane, 1884), lxxviii.