

RESEARCHING FOR THE BOSTON TEA PARTY DESCENDANTS PROGRAM

The organizers of the daring incident that came to be known as the Boston Tea Party most certainly did not compile a list of participants. Due to the treasonous nature of their actions on the night of December 16, 1773, those involved stayed silent to protect each other from British retaliation. This initial silence, while warranted, can make identifying these men 250 years later a difficult task.

Descendants Program

The Boston Tea Party Descendants Program, a partnership between American Ancestors and the Boston Tea Party Ships & Museum, seeks to connect Tea Party descendants to their rebellious ancestors. Our first step in setting up this program was to establish, as best we could, exactly who took part in the destruction of the tea. While no definitive list of Tea Party participants exists, we have used several reliable sources to create a register of accepted participants.

The first published list of these men appeared in *Traits of the Tea Party,* an 1835 volume by Benjamin Bussey Thatcher that contained the recollections of participant George R. T. Hewes (1742–1840). The book named fifty-eight men who took action that night. Historian Francis S. Drake's *Tea Leaves: Being a Collection of Letters and Documents Relating to the Shipment of Tea to the American Colonies in the Year 1773 by the East India Tea Company*, published in 1884, listed 113 men who were involved—fifty-eight from *Traits of the Tea Party*, plus other men whose participation was documented in family stories and printed accounts. Since Drake's *Tea Leaves* was drawn from research and accounts dating from the first half of the nineteenth century, we are accepting these identifications as accurate, unless proven otherwise.

We are also accepting men named in Benjamin L. Carp's 2010 work, *Defiance of the Patriots: The Boston Tea Party and the Making of America*. Carp compiled his list of ninety-nine men from accounts written prior to 1853—eighty years after the Tea Party—while excluding some whose presence he considered to be dubious.

The Descendants program offers three tiers of membership. Lineage members must descend from men named in Drake or Carp's books, or from documented members of the following organizations: the Loyal Nine, Boston Sons of Liberty, North End Caucus, St. Andrew's Lodge (pre-Tea Party), or from ship guard volunteers or signers of the November 1773 petition to



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town selectmen. Although we can't be certain how many of these men participated in the Boston Tea Party, we do know they were ardent supporters of the patriot cause and involved with instigating the rebellion in Boston prior to December 16, 1773. For those reasons, we count them as lineage members. Finally, if applicants can produce or cite pre-1853 documents that indicate ancestor participation, we can review the material and potentially add accepted participants to our list.

Two other Descendants program options exist. The Eyewitness to History category accepts applicants who have a documented lineage to Boston residents in 1773, or post-1853 family lore or evidence that recalls ancestors witnessing or participating in Tea Party events. The Co-Conspirators category is open to anyone, regardless of lineage, who would like access to the program's member events and benefits.

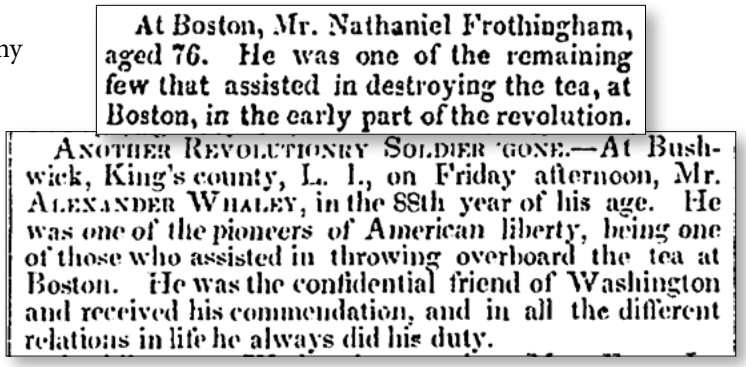
Participants

A few notable historical figures, including Paul Revere, took part in the Tea Party. Paul Revere's son-in-law Amos Lincoln, who married Revere's daughter Deborah, then his daughter Elizabeth, is a well-documented participant. Both men had many children—sixteen for Revere and seventeen for Lincoln—but not all of the participants left descendants. Adam Colson, who is credited with shouting "Boston Harbor, a teapot tonight!" before the tea was dumped overboard, married three times but left no progeny.

As part of our review, we've moved some men from a preliminary list of participants to the Eyewitness category. Amasa Davis is a good example. Although his brother Robert was named in *Tea Leaves*, Amasa wasn't. Amasa Davis was active in the Revolution and may have joined his brother in destroying the tea, but without documented evidence of his presence that night he counts only as an eyewitness.

Benjamin Tucker's name appears on an 1870 monument in Worcester, Massachusetts, that honors men who took part in the Tea Party.[1] The reason for Tucker's inclusion is not clear, other than perhaps family lore.[2] While we don't have enough information to disprove him as a participant, we also don't have enough evidence to claim that he was involved. Due to the family lore aspect, we consider him an eyewitness.

The published obituaries of a few men, including Nathaniel Frothingham and Alexander Whaley, mentioned their roles in the Boston Tea Party.[3] Pension records have also been a useful source for identifying participants. In his pension application, George


At Boston, Mr. Nathaniel Frothingham, aged 76. He was one of the remaining few that assisted in destroying the tea, at Boston, in the early part of the revolution.

ANOTHER REVOLUTIONARY SOLDIER GONE.—At Bushwick, King's county, L. I., on Friday afternoon, Mr. ALEXANDER WHALEY, in the 88th year of his age. He was one of the pioneers of American liberty, being one of those who assisted in throwing overboard the tea at Boston. He was the confidential friend of Washington and received his commendation, and in all the different relations in life he always did his duty.

Opposite page: John Andrew, *The Boston Tea Party.--Destruction of the Tea in Boston Harbor, December 16, 1773,* from *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion*, July 16, 1856. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Melville Chapin. Yale University Art Gallery. *Above:* Obituaries for participants Nathaniel Frothingham and Alexander Whaley. See note 3 below for further details.

Pillsbury wrote that he "aided in the destruction of the tea destroyed in 1773."[4]

We have also disproved at least one participant mentioned in Drake's *Tea Leaves*. Jeremiah Williams, a blacksmith, had died by December 1762[5]—nine years before the Tea Party occurred. As his brother, Colonel Joseph Williams, was a member of the Sons of Liberty, Joseph could have been mistakenly remembered as Jeremiah.

Our list of Tea Party participants remains a work in progress and is subject to change based on new evidence. We know that this list can never be considered complete, given that the contributions of many men were likely not recorded and recognized. We may never know the names of all the men who braved the cold and risked persecution to take a stand for the patriot cause, but their legacy lives on. ◆

NOTES

1. The monument, an obelisk, is near the grave of Tea Party participant Peter Slater. Capt. Peter Slater, FindAGrave memorial #67124230, Hope Cemetery, Worcester, Massachusetts.
2. Caleb A. Wall, *The Historic Boston Tea Party of December 16, 1773* (Worcester, Mass.: Press of F. S. Blanchard, 1896), 21, 68; and Ephraim Tucker, *Genealogy of the Tucker Family* (Worcester, Mass.: Press of F. S. Blanchard, 1895), 73.
3. "Died," *The National Advocate* (New York, N.Y.), February 11, 1825, GenealogyBank.com, citing issue 3477, p. 2; and "Died," *New York Commercial Advertiser* (New York, N.Y.), February 16, 1833, GenealogyBank.com, citing p. 3.
4. George Pillsbury, W.15211, in *U.S., Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files, 1800–1900*, Ancestry.com.
5. *Massachusetts: Vital Records, 1620–1850*, Roxbury 1:380, AmericanAncestors.org; and *Suffolk County, MA: Probate File Papers*, probate #13128:1–15, AmericanAncestors.org.

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Find your Tea Party ancestor or relative in our database!

Our new *Boston Tea Party Participant Biographies* database project contains vital record data, information on children, plus additional biographical details, for individuals associated with or confirmed to have participated in the Boston Tea Party on December 16, 1773. Source citations are included. The database should be completed by the 250th anniversary.

The project biographies have been created in collaboration with the Boston Tea Party Ships & Museum, as part of their commemorative programming for the 250th anniversary of the Boston Tea Party in December 2023.

Search the database at AmericanAncestors.org/tea-party-biographies.

The Boston Tea Party occurred at Griffin's Wharf, shown on this detail of Thomas Hyde Page's *A plan of the town of Boston with the intrenchments ... in 1775* (1777). Library of Congress, loc.gov/item/gm71000621.

Boston Tea Party Facts

The Boston Tea Party was organized and carried out by the Sons of Liberty, a group of patriots dedicated to defending their rights and protesting and undermining British rule. Men from all walks of life belonged to the Sons of Liberty. Prominent Boston members included John Adams, Samuel Adams, John Hancock, James Otis, Paul Revere, and Dr. Joseph Warren.

While many participants lived in the Boston area, some came from as far away as Worcester, in central Massachusetts, and Maine. Most participants were of English descent, but men of Irish, Scottish, French, Portuguese, and African ancestry also took part. Most documented participants were under 40, including 16 teenagers; only nine were over 40.

Thomas Melvill, grandfather of *Moby Dick* author Herman Melville, participated in the Tea Party.

The invoice value of the tea in 1773 was £9,659.6.4, or roughly $1.5 million (or £1.3 million) today.

The tea aboard the three East India ships in Boston Harbor came from China, not India. The East India Company shipped Chinese tea from the port of Canton to their London docks and warehouses. From there, the tea was sent to American coastal cities. British tea plantations in India and Ceylon would not be developed until well into the nineteenth century.

The destruction of the tea began around 6 or 6:30 p.m., and lasted about 3 to 3 ½ hours. Over 1,000 people watched from the shore.

Only one man—Francis Akeley— was imprisoned for his participation in the Tea Party.

The tea rebellion in Boston was not originally called a "tea party." The term was first used in the 1820s. An early example is seen in the 1829 *Providence Patriot*, in the death notice of 97-year-old Nicholas Campbell. He was acknowledged to be "one of the ever-memorable Boston Tea Party, who committed one of the first acts of resistance to British oppression."

—Compiled by Boston Tea Party Ships and Museum staff

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