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THE DERBY-PRINCE-ROPES HOUSE

BY

EDWIN W. SMALL

AND

THOMAS G. MANNING

THE DERBY-PRINCE-ROPES HOUSE

Report  
October, 1937

UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
Custom House, Derby Street  
Salem, Massachusetts

October 28, 1937

The Director  
National Park Service  
Washington, D. C.

Dear Sir:

A report dealing with historical facts relating to the Derby-Prince-Ropes house is herewith submitted for your inspection.

This report is the first of at least three supplementary reports which may be expected in addition to the historical report on Derby Wharf submitted under date of September 30, 1937.

Sincerely yours,

(Sgd) Edwin W. Small

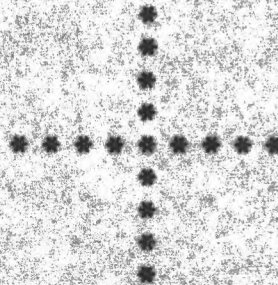
Edwin W. Small  
Acting Superintendent

cc Washington  
Richmond  
Mr. Cox



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DERBY-PRINCE-ROPES  
HOUSE

Prepared by  
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October, 1937.



### THE DERBY-PRINCE-ROPES HOUSE

The land upon which the red brick dwelling known as the Derby House stands was purchased by Richard Derby, founder of the great family mercantile business, in December, 1760. A description of the boundaries of the property acquired at that time is contained in the deed:

|                            |                        |
|----------------------------|------------------------|
| Timothy Mansfield of Salem | Book 109, leaf 78      |
| to                         | Executed Dec. 11, 1760 |
| Richard Derby of Salem     | Recorded Dec. 27, 1760 |

.... in consideration of £ 51.... a piece of land in the East Parish, so called, in said Salem, bounded Easterly on land of Warwick Palfray 226 feet and a half, Southerly on a way 79 feet and a half, Westerly on land of Josiah Ades in part & partly on land of Sarah Bean & partly on my other land formerly of Estate of my late father Paul Mansfield deceased & there measures in the whole 218 feet & Northerly on lands of William Webster & Nath. Silsbee 79 feet and a half, together with the Flatts on the front or fourth end of said premises & of the same width viz. from the fourth side of said way down to the low water mark....(1)

The house itself appears to have been built during the year, 1761, or at least the greater part of it. A receipt found in the Derby Family Papers, dated at Salem, January 6, 1762 indicates that one Daniel Spoffard received of Richard Derby two pounds, thirteen shillings for the roof of a house 43 feet long and 27 feet wide, and was expecting six pounds, thirteen shillings more to be paid when the job was done. (2) By 1764 the house had been standing long enough to be referred to as a landmark for when Sarah Bean, mentioned in the deed above as an owner of property on the west, conveyed her land in that year to John Masury she had it described as bounded on the east by "Derby's Brick House." (3)



The exact identity of the early occupants of the house has always been a matter of doubt. It is fairly certain that Richard Derby himself never lived there. In 1735 Richard purchased a lot on the corner of Herbert and Derby Streets<sup>(4)</sup> and on it probably soon after erected the commodious gambrel-roofed wooden house which still survives. He was doubtless living in this house when he passed away November 9, 1783, in his seventy-second year.<sup>(5)</sup> Richard Derby never paid taxes on the brick house. From 1754 to 1782 he was taxed on only one "homestead" or "house".<sup>(6)</sup>

The view has been advanced, first by Felt and later by Phillips, that the brick house was built by Richard Derby for his son, Elias Hasket Derby.<sup>(7)</sup> This is the most reasonable of contentions and is in harmony with the evidence discovered. While the house might have been built for either father or son the fact remains that Richard Derby already had a house of his own in 1761. That year, however, Elias Hasket married Elizabeth Crowninshield. The young couple, like most of their contemporaries in the same situation, very likely felt the need of a house of their own and were obliged through the paternal concern and generosity of Richard Derby. In 1763 Elias Hasket Derby paid his first taxes on real property in Salem when he was charged 12 pounds for "1 homestead (N.W. Corner unfinished)". Thus he was taxed continually for a house under the caption "house viz 7/8 parts" until 1782.<sup>(8)</sup> No record exists for the next year, but by 1784 Elias Hasket was paying taxes on a "Mansion House"—doubtless the house on Washington Street acquired from Sarah Orne Pickman, widow of Clark G. Pickman, in 1783.<sup>(9)</sup>



Yet before Elias Hasket Derby bought the Pickman house he had probably left the brick dwelling on Derby Street. Martha Nichols of Salem edited in 1902 an autobiography of her father, George Nichols, a Salem shipmaster and merchant. According to the story Nichols gave his daughter about the time of the Civil War, he was born in the brick house in 1778.<sup>(10)</sup> The very same year Elias Hasket Derby paid a bill that is worthy of notice:

June 15, 1778. Of Mr. Elias Hasket Derby  
Fifty pounds being in full for a years  
rent due the 21st April last for the Man-  
sion House of Gov. Wm. Browne.

(11)

(Committee)

James Jeffry

(Treasurer)

William Browne, a Loyalist, left Salem in 1774 and consequently his property was appropriated by the patriots. Elias Hasket Derby apparently took over his "Mansion House" some-time later and was paying rent for it the year George Nichols first saw light in Derby's former residence.

George Nichols states that his father, Icabod Nichols, and his family moved to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 1779. The brick house must, therefore, have shortly received new occupants. Henry Prince is the next person who is known to have lived there. His period of residence, though covering at least twenty years, has been generally overlooked and deserves a word of comment as does the man himself and his association with Salem's maritime trade. Prince was a



Shipmaster who sailed in Derby's thriving fleet. In 1795 he was captain of the brig Henry which had been built on the east side of Derby Wharf in 1791, and from 1796 to 1799 he had the ship Astrea, constructed originally for privateering during the last year of the Revolution and after peace sent out in search of new markets on the other side of the globe. The Astrea with Prince as master was sent to Manila in 1796 by Elias Hasket Derby and the next year brought home a large and valuable cargo of sugar, pepper and indigo. As a result of this voyage, to the Astrea and Captain Prince belongs the credit of opening American trade with the Philippines, a fact of some historical interest and significance. To the voyages made by Prince in the Henry and Astrea is added the interest of his association with Nathaniel Bowditch, mathematical genius and author of "The Practical Navigator". Sailing as clerk for Captain Prince on the Henry in 1795 Bowditch established his first real contact with the sea, and as supercargo on the next three voyages in the Astrea had the opportunity to test his theories of practical navigation and make singular observations on life in the East. (12)

Prince seems to have been residing in the Derby house as early as 1784 and it remained his mainland home throughout his best years of service on the Derby ships. An item found among



the Derby Papers and probably belonging to Elias Hasket Derby is an "account of the Stuff Expended upon Mr. Prince's House & Fence, April 20, 1784". The "Stuff" included "boards", spike nails, "gilt posts", hinges, shingles, and "board nails".<sup>(13)</sup>

The year after, 1785, Elias Hasket Derby received the lot and residence where Captain Prince was then apparently living as a part of his share in the estate of his father, Richard Derby.<sup>(14)</sup>

On March 22, 1796 Elias Hasket conveyed the lot and buildings to Henry Prince for £ 1,875,<sup>(15)</sup> five days before Prince took command of the Agassiz and started the initial voyage of an American vessel to the Philippines.

In the light of this transaction a clause in the will of Elias Hasket Derby, signed and sealed September 4, 1799, bequeathing "my brick dwelling house" valued at \$3,340 to son Ezekiel Hersey Derby<sup>(16)</sup> would seem to offer a difficulty. In none of the inventories of the real and personal estate of Elias Hasket Derby, however, is the brick house included, and in an inventory of 1805 Ezekiel Hersey Derby is charged with the "Wharf & Flatts in front of Capt. Prince's House".<sup>(17)</sup> Furthermore, the 1796 deed of Derby to Prince was not recorded until January 1, 1801, more than a year after the property had been willed to Ezekiel Hersey Derby.

Soon after his ownership of the property was recorded, Henry Prince was interested enough in his place to secure a larger frontage on his western boundary. A strip some sixteen feet wide and fifty feet deep was purchased from William B. Parker, a tobacconist next door.<sup>(18)</sup> This strip is approximately



the space where the shop acquired as part of the same gift parcel as the brick house itself now stands. About this time Prince probably stopped going to sea and established himself as a merchant. Jefferson's embargo and the depression which ensued in maritime commerce, however, swamped Prince with obligations he was unable to fulfill for on April 9, 1811 the Derby house and land was taken by William Ropes, a merchant from Boston, in satisfaction of a mortgage along with property of one Amos Hovey on Essex Street. <sup>(19)</sup> The house remained in the possession of the Ropes family and was occupied by descendants until 1873. <sup>(20)</sup> By that time the neighborhood of Derby Street had become more industrial than maritime and unsightly tenements were beginning to make their appearance around the picturesque earlier structures like ravens around a decaying carcass. Although the brick house has been generally called the Richard Derby house and with good reason, a fuller presentation of the facts that has here been undertaken shows that the Ropes family and Henry Prince, in particular, are worthy of inclusion in the designation given the house. The Derby-Prince house or the Derby-Prince-Ropes house is not a better name, but has the advantage of being more complete historically.

## APPENDIX

It is convenient to include here two additional documents from the Derby Family Papers which may have some connection with the red brick dwelling on Derby Street:

1. Memorandum of sundry household furniture and clothing and linen given to daughter Elizabeth Crowninshield by her father when she was married.

Worth £ 481.. 7 .. 6 (in old tennar).

Case of mahogany draws £ 75.

A mahogany table 25 to chamber tall  
£ 49.

A bedstead, a looking glass, bed bolster  
& pillows £ 53

A suite of harriton (sic) curtains & tester  
£ 142 .. 14 .. 6.

Brass kettle, sundry ironware L 27 ..0 ..0.

Ref. H. F. P., IX, 4. - 1761

2. John Whittmore presents bill to Ezekiel Derby for ... "2)3 bolsters for your gaiters 0 .. 6 .. 0".

Ref. D. F. P., XXIX, undated item listed among bills  
176-179.



### NOTES

1. For additional evidence that this deed unquestionably refers to the land on which the brick house was built, see Sydney Perley, "Salem in 1700. No. 24" in the Essex Antiquarian, I (1906), 114-130, 124-125. This article provides a valuable background for and understanding of the many conveyances of land which were later made.
2. Derby MSS, IV. The measurements given in this receipt correspond in feet with the measurements taken of the Derby house by the Historic American Buildings Survey in August, 1937. No evidence is available to indicate Richard Derby was building any other house in 1761-1762.
3. Essex County, Southern District, Registry of Deeds, Book 115, 51.
4. Ibid., Book 74, 143.
5. Ibid., Book 143, 30, January 11, 1785. By an indenture between Elias Hasket Derby, John Derby, and John Gardner, husband of Sarah Derby, when the estate of Richard Derby was divided, Elias Hasket received the "Mansion House of said Testator". Even after this building passed out of the hands of the Derbys it was still known as the "old mansion house of Richard Derby". See Bentley II, 203. October 24, 1796.
6. Town of Salem, Records Miscellaneous, chiefly Taxes, 1753-1781. Taxes, 1774-1781.
7. Joseph B. Felt, Annals of Salem, I, 415; James D. Phillips, The Life and Times of Richard Derby, 100.
8. See note 6.
9. This was a three-story brick house built by Benjamin Pickman in 1763 which until 1915 stood on the site of the present Masonic Temple at the corner of Washington and Lynde Streets. See George F. Dow (ed.), Diary and Letters of Benjamin Pickman, 1740-1819, 15-16. Also Essex County, Southern District, Registry of Deeds, Book 140, 150.
10. Martha Nichols (ed.), George Nichols, Salem Shipmaster and Merchant, an Autobiography, 1.
11. D. F. P., XXIX, listed among bills, 1764-1779.
12. Ralph D. Paine, The Ships and Sailors of Old Salem, 271-272; Catalogue of a Special Exhibition of Manuscripts, Books, Portraits and Personal Relics of Nathaniel Bowditch, (Peabody Museum, Salem, Mass. 1937) 24-25.

NOTES

13. D. E. P., XXX, listed among bills, 1780-1789.
14. See Note 5.
15. Essex County, Southern District, Registry of Deeds, Book 167, 137.
16. Essex County Probate Records, Book 367, 93-98.
17. D. E. P., IX, 99; X, 84; XXXIV; Phillips, op. cit., 74.
18. Essex County, Southern District, Registry of Deeds, Book 168, 298.
19. Ibid., Book 194, 14.
20. Ibid., Book 163, 129.