

Revolutionary Reminiscence of Throwing the Tea Overboard in Boston Harbor

[Discovered through research on Joshua Wyeth by Christopher Smith, a Cincinnati/Hamilton County Public Library Historian and redacted from the original publication by Michael B. Gunn, CCSAR Revolutionary War Sites and Graves Committee Chairman]

The Western Review, published at Cincinnati, Ohio and edited by the Rev. Timothy Flint, gives the following interesting account of this extraordinary incident, obtained from one of the survivors of the party who performed the exploit, now residing at Cincinnati in 1827: --

These reflections occurred to us, in consequence of meeting, the other day, with a person, and probably the only surviving one, who took part in throwing the tea overboard from the British ship in Boston harbor, undoubtedly one of the measures which precipitated the Revolution. His name is **Joshua Wyeth, of Cambridge**, whom every Harvard scholar, of the times of the venerable Willard and Tappan, so well remembers. He lives in this city, is turned of seventy-five years, appears to be in robust health, and uncommonly cheerful, although, it is believed, his circumstances are straightened. His simple narrative gave us vivid impressions of the feelings that actuated his fellow townsmen, on the occasion of the tea into Boston harbor. News of the most interesting character transpired every day. Never was a period so full of rumors and reports, which had yet acquired the horrible and bloody interest to unfit them for the tea table. The patriots saw, that the fair could not resist the seasoning of the fragrant beverage, with the discussion of these themes of universal interest, and it was determined, that they should not be led into such irresistible temptation, that it should be removed by throwing the tea overboard. It was proposed that young men, not much known in town, and not liable to be easily recognized, should lead in the business. Our narrator believes, that most of the persons selected for the occasion were apprentices and journeymen; not a few of them, as was the case with himself, living with tory masters. He had but a few hours warning of what was intended to be done. The part which he took in the business, is related as follows, and nearly in his own words:

I labored as a journeyman blacksmith, with Western & Gridley, blacksmiths by trade, and Baptists by profession. Western, at the time, was neutral, but afterwards became a tory. Our numbers were between twenty-eight and thirty. Of my associates, I only remember the names of Frothingham, Mead, Martin, and Grant. We were met together one evening talking over the tyranny of the British government, such were as the heavy duties, shutting up the port of Boston, the murdering of Mr. Gray's family, sending people to England for trial, and sundry other acts of oppression. Our indignation was increased by having heard of the arrival of the tea ships at this time. We agreed that if the tea was landed, the people could not stand the temptation, and would certainly buy it. We came to a sudden determination, to make sure work of it, by throwing it all overboard. We first talked of firing the ships, but we feared the fire would communicate to the town. We then proposed sinking them, but we dropped this project, through fear that we should alarm the town, before we could get through with it. We had observed, that very few persons remained on board the three ships, and we finally concluded, that we could take possession of them, and discharge the tea into the harbor, without danger or opposition. The greatest objection to our plan was, that it would take a great length of time to carry it through, and render us more liable to detection. We agreed, one and all, that we would go on, at the

risk of our lives. We proceeded to contrive the mode of accomplishing our business. One of the ships laid at Hancock's wharf, and the others a few paces out in the stream, with their warps made fast to the same wharf. A brigade of British soldiers was encamped on the common, less than a mile from the wharf. We agreed, in order, as much as we might, to prevent ourselves from being discovered, to wear ragged clothes, and disfigure ourselves as much as possible. We concluded to meet at an old building at the head of the wharf, and to fall in one after another, as if by accident, so as not to excite suspicion. After having pledged our honor, that we would not reveal our secret, we separated.

At the appointed time, we met according to agreement. We were dressed to resemble Indians, as much as possible. We had smeared our faces with grease, and soot and lampblack. We should not have known each other, except by our voices, and we surely resembled devils from the bottomless pit, rather than men. We placed one sentry at the head of the wharf, one in the middle, and one on the bow of the ship, as we took possession. We then proceeded rapidly to business. We boarded the ship which was moored by the wharf, and the leader of our company in a very stern and resolute manner, ordered the captain and crew to open the hatchways, and hand us the hoisting tackle and ropes. The captain asked us what we intended to do? The leader told him, that we were going to unload the ships of the tea, and ordered him and the crew below, assuring him, if they obeyed, no harm was intended them. They instantly obeyed, without murmurs or threats. Some of our number jumped into the hold, and passed the chests to the tackle. As they were hoisted on deck, others knocked them open with axes, and others raised them to the railing, and discharged their contents overboard. All that were not needed for dislodging the tea from this ship, went on board the others, and warped them to the wharf, where the same ceremonies were repeated, as at the first ship.

While we were unloading, the people collected in great numbers about the wharf, to see what was going on. They crowded about us, so as to be much in our way. We paid no attention to them, nor did they say anything to us. They evidently wished us success; for none of them gave any information against us.—Our sentries were not armed, and could not stop any who insisted on passing. If we had been able it would have been good policy; for, in that case, they might have complained of us to the civil authorities. I believed, our object in stationing the sentries, was to communicate information, in case we were likely to be detected by the civil or military power. They were particularly charged to give us notice, in case any known tory came down to the wharf. But our main dependence was on the general good will of the people.

We stirred briskly in the business, from the moment we left our dressing room. We were merry in an under tone, at the idea of making so large a cup of tea for the fishes, but we were as still, as the nature of the case would admit.—No more words were used, than what were absolutely necessary. Our most intimate acquaintances, among the spectators, had not the least knowledge of us. I never labored harder in my life; and we were so expeditious, that although it was late in the evening, when we began, we had discharged the whole three car loads before morning dawn.

I may be supposed, that there was much talk about this business next morning.