

Salem in 1800:

A Sample of the Range of Meanings

Applied to One Place at One Time

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Summer Institute 2004, IDS763

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How did people interpret Salem, Massachusetts, as it existed in the year 1800? Taking the themes of *Salem: Place, Myth and Memory*, and narrowing the subject even further to examine not only one particular place but also one particular time, it may be possible to gain insight into a broad range of perceptions. In seeking a “snapshot” of the year 1800 in the New England coastal town of Salem, this paper will take an interdisciplinary approach to sample the range of attitudes and meanings reflected in some of the surviving records.

Largely because Salem was an important center in the early days of the American Republic, the city at that time has been fairly well documented, both by contemporaries and more recently. Two hundred years later, it is possible to compile a collection of documents, which includes journals, newspapers, maps, artwork, literature, statistics, architecture, furniture, and other clues to the story of how a wide range of people perceived the city during the year 1800. Beyond the primary sources of the selected year, there exists more recent documentation indicating the views of later people who tried to interpret for themselves how Salem “really was” in an earlier day.

Why focus on 1800 and not some other year? Different years in the same era would be equally interesting – in 1799, the East India Marine Society is founded, changing how Salem is viewed; in 1802, Bowditch publishes *The Practical Navigator* and again enhances the meaning of Salem to the world! The choice of one year over another is arbitrary, as during that time any period chosen would yield more information than could fully be interpreted, even if the more routine or long-term aspects of life in Salem are left aside.

What sort of place was Salem in 1800? With 10,000 residents, including an African-American population of 200¹, it was the sixth-largest city in the new country. The Essex County population of 61,000² made it one of the most urbanized counties in the United States.³ By 1800,

much of the local population had shifted away from traditional farming as Salem became a major shipping and commercial center.⁴

As is well-documented elsewhere, the maritime trade brought considerable prosperity and renown to the city of Salem, and in 1800 this industry was at the start of its short-lived peak. Because Salem merchants had such success in developing a niche market in international trade and transshipping, Salem was an exceptionally cosmopolitan and wealthy city. Over the years, as most residents of Salem heard firsthand about foreign ports and embraced the high-risk, high-reward commercial ventures, they came to understand that Salem had a particular meaning to outsiders. Imagine the difficulty that an inland Massachusetts farmer who had never been more than a few miles from home, or a fisherman barely getting by on \$200 in a year,⁵ would have comprehending such regular occurrences as the following:

*...William Gray's heavily armed ship Pallas. She reached Canton in December, 1799, and arrived in Salem via St. Helena in July, 1800. She brought a colossal cargo including 400,000 pounds of tea, a vast quantity of sugar, and \$50,000 worth of merchandise. Her duties were \$66,927. Apparently she had no excitement at all.*⁶

That the writer specifically notes the lack of “excitement” on a trading ship highlights the fact that crews often faced considerable hazards during their time at sea. Not every ship returned safely with cargo, and not all of the Salem men who went to sea in the year 1800 returned to their families and friends. During the era when Salem was so extensively involved in international trade, the majority of deaths of Salem men between the ages of 16 and 30 took place overseas.⁷ Because the lives of so many people in Salem revolved around the sea, the community as a whole cared passionately about the safe return or other news of each vessel. For wives and children of the crew, the safe arrival, or not, of a particular ship could dramatically transform their lives.

Looking only at the year 1800 and only at Salem vessels, the following news arrived for those at home:

1800, Jan. 7. The schooner Polly, from Hamburgh, had stranded on Long Island.

May 1. The ship William and Henry, Capt. Thomas Beckford, with a valuable cargo for Amsterdam, founders soon after striking an iceberg on Grand Bank...

June 20. News that Capt. James Snow, of the schooner Experiment, was attacked by a French privateer, a battle ensued, and the latter struck to Capt. Snow, who carried her into Cape Nichola Mole.

While the French continue their utmost efforts to distress our commerce as avowed foes, the English had lately recommenced their ravages upon it, by a new construction of what was enemy's property, though still professing peace with us.

July 18. Information that Capt. Lindsey, of the ship Fanny, bound to Martinico, had an engagement with a French privateer, and forced her to bear away.

Sept. 16. Reported that the ship Elizabeth was lost the 23rd of April, coming down the Ganges. Oct. 10. That the schooner John was wantonly sunk at sea, June 30, by a French frigate. Dec. 2. That the ship Mount Vernon, Capt. Jonathan Neal, bound to Lagaira, was lost, Oct. 2, on a reef of the island of Little Davis...

Dec. 19. A letter from Capt. Samuel Endicott, at Havana, states that, on Nov. 7, he fell in with the wreck of the schooner Minerva, of Wiscasset, and took off Michael Quin, the mate, all the rest of her men having been swept away in a hurricane.

23. News that Capt. Elisha Farrington was cast away, near Savannah, and drowned. The rest of the crew swam ashore.⁸

Salem culture and the built environment in 1800 reflected the great wealth that was arriving into the port by sea and largely into the pockets of the elite traders who carried insurance and diversified their risk among many ships. In July of 1800, Salem merchants and ship owners

incorporated the Salem Marine Insurance Company, the first stock company for insurance.⁹ While the most successful merchants lived like royalty – the house finished for Elias Hasket Derby at the turn of the century cost \$80,000 – less visible is the economic impact of the sea trades upon most residents of Salem, who represented the working class.

For the majority of families living in Salem, their individual fortunes depended upon the safe return of one particular ship – the one with their husband or father aboard. Only a relatively few officers were on board any sailing vessel leaving Salem Harbor, yet it is primarily their written records that exist, and there are far fewer records left behind by the poorer (and often illiterate) sailors. As a typical example of crew composition, in January 1800 when the ship *Essex* sailed from Salem for Batavia, her population of 250 included 133 seamen, 50 marines, and 30 boys,¹⁰ which implies that only 37 men on board held positions of authority. For many residents of the city, news of a shipwreck or death on board meant that they had lost their main means of support. Thus, the image that people had of Salem in 1800 included not only vast wealth and opportunity, but also a significant proportion of orphans and widows, many of whom kept small cent shops, taverns (as illustrated below)¹¹ or other small commercial establishments in order to survive.

Salem Maritime National Historic Site corner shop image

With the focus on international trade by ship, many members of the Salem community went away from the city for months or years at a time. From journals of their thoughts and experiences, we can learn a little about what Salem represented to them as the new century began. Their perspectives enhance our understanding of what “Salem” meant abroad in 1800, both to those who knew Salem and America as home and to those who would never see those places first-hand.

Sailors and traders would interpret their experiences in foreign ports based upon what they considered “normal” as defined by life in their hometowns. By analyzing their glimpses of another culture through the lens of their images of home, these men of Salem recorded what each meant to them. For example, William Cleveland, Captain’s Clerk on *Massachusetts* in 1800, contrasted Japanese culture with his own in this way:

Thursday, Sept. 11th. There are many public licensed brothels in the city of Nangassacky. This by all accounts is not uncommon in most large Towns, but when we consider one sex of the human species held of so little consequence that even a parent will publicly sell his own child for the trifling sum of two or three dollars to one of these houses for twenty years, to be exposed to disease and infamy, we cannot but pity the misfortunes of the Japan females and think with affection of our own Country and of the fond sisters of America who are so necessary to our happiness.¹²

To help those left behind in Salem understand the foreign ports and cultures experienced by Salem traders and crewmembers, those abroad collected and brought home great quantities of trade goods and souvenirs from their ports of call. The households of Salem traders and sailors held, as a matter of course, items which represented the larger world in which they circulated. These items, including clothing, furniture, artwork and food, were part of the meaning of Salem

for other Americans, whose own world was much smaller in 1800. A list of ship arrivals from foreign ports gives an impression of the near-global scope of Salem trade:

In 1800, the foreign entries were: from Cape Francois 8, Curacao 3, Port au Paix 2, Hamburg 3, Martinico 13, Havana 41, Cadiz 4, Surinam 3, Trinidad 5, St. Thomas 2, La Guayra 3, Bilboa 7, Corunna 2, Gibraltar 3, Lisbon 4, Alicant 3, St. Christopher's 3, St. Lucia 3, Port Republican 4, Barcelona 2, Leghorn 4, Naples 2, St. Petersburg 3, Copenhagen 3, and one each from Honduras, Jamaica, Tobago, Turk's Island, Isle of May, Demerara, Cumana, Calcutta, Port Dauphin, L'Archahaye, Nova Scotia, St. Bartholomew's, Port Liberty, Russia, Canton, Liverpool, Parimaribo, St. Ubes, Bombay, Cayenne, Madras, Amsterdam, London, Sumatra, Halifax, Genoa, Malaga, Nassau and Batavia.¹³

Thus, Salem in 1800 had a meaning that reached far beyond the city limits, and incorporated important elements and flavors of many world ports into the meaning of the locality.

The foreign products entering Salem in 1800 were so numerous that even a very narrow topic offers many artistic images. As look at a very specific example - Chinese artists' images of Western trading areas in Canton in 1800, all brought to Salem in ships - yields a Chinese porcelain punchbowl showing the foreign enclave in Canton,¹⁴ a view of Canton showing Western warehouses,¹⁵ and a view of the Foreign Factories in Canton.¹⁶

Porcelain bowl image

Image of warehouses

View of Foreign Factories

Of course, this lens of home worked in the other direction too. Just as travelers from Salem sought to represent their overseas experiences to those at home, they also tried to describe their home to the people abroad who would never see it firsthand. In addition to the trade goods,

ship furnishings, and clothing that people in foreign ports could observe, Salemites brought images of Salem and America with them on their long trips away from home. From a ship's log, we can read how Americans represented their country to foreigners during a voyage from Salem:

Tuesday, July 22nd [1800]. It is astonishing what a low opinion the Japanders have of America. Some of them inquired today whether America was as large as Nangassacky and on being shown a Map of the World were astonished at the extent of America and the diminutive appearance of the Dutch dominions. The Dutch being the only foreigners, except the Chinese, that are permitted to trade here, have it in their power to prejudice the Japanders against any foreign nation of whom they may be jealous.¹⁷

This observation demonstrates the power of images, especially maps, to affect the meaning that outside observers give to a particular place. Another map, allegedly made in China around 1800 but never located, is said to have labeled most of the settled United States as “Salem”¹⁸, indicating the strength of the Salem trading presence in Chinese ports at the time.

On a smaller scale, a map of Salem produced locally in 1800 (reproduced below)¹⁹ depicts a town nearly surrounded by water, with dozens of wharves jutting into Salem Harbor. This map, although clearly intended to give meaning to the town geography for a person traveling by land, also indicates the importance of waterfront commercial activity to people in Salem in 1800.

Map of Salem, 1800

Other maps that were developed during this time showed a shift in thinking about the role of specific areas in the new United States. Because Salem did not stand alone but was also connected to New England in the minds of many Americans, this new thinking would have affected how Salem was perceived in other regions of the United States. Conforti writes of “the father of American geography”, Jedidiah Morse (1761-1826), who

*assumed the task of revising New England’s colonial identity to address the new circumstances of geographic and political union. His numerous and widely read texts advanced a geocultural interpretation of New England’s distinctiveness that endeavored to reconcile regionalism and an incipient nationalism. Morse was the first writer to conceive of New England as a cultural region.*²⁰

Just as maps reflect the perspective of the mapmaker, buildings reflect the message that the owner is trying to send to the public. When Salem was starting to reach its zenith of wealth around 1800, residents constructed many fancy buildings to show the world their new prosperity and social importance. Both private residences, of which dozens were constructed in 1800 alone, and public buildings became symbols of the sophisticated taste of the residents who were benefiting most from maritime commerce. Examples of this fine classic architecture are plentiful and have been well documented over the last two hundred years. However, they represent only the most elegant and worldly structures, sources of pride for Salem.

Relatively few architectural historians have chosen to spotlight the type of housing where most Salem residents, those of more modest means, lived. In this way, Salem is typical of other local areas, where the most sophisticated and elegant structures are preserved and publicized, and the less-substantial dwellings, representing the housing of typical residents, are given only passing interest and are, for the most part, forgotten or destroyed over time.

The architectural themes and artistry of Salem deserve study on their own, and because many have done so, they will not be analyzed in the scope of this paper, much to the dismay of

the writer. However, for modern students of Salem who have the luxury of applying hindsight to local decisions made in 1800, one municipal regulation regarding architecture stands out, particularly when accompanied by the 1845 opinion of local historian Joseph Felt:

*Municipal Regulations: 1800. A question came before the town for having houses and stores built with brick, as a preservative of fires. It was decided in the negative. Time will show, though we earnestly wish that the demonstration by flame may never come, whether this decision should not have been entirely the reverse.*²¹

This is one of many possible examples demonstrating that Salem, as it functioned in 1800, has many different meanings for people who look back into history and try to understand how local residents viewed their community at the time.

During this time of global interaction and accumulating wealth, Salem also blossomed as a cultural center. The international maritime trade permeated deep into the cultural life of Salemites. As discussed, a great deal of artwork and other cultural artifacts arrived by sea from around the world, and even local art frequently held a maritime flavor. The beloved architect and wood carver, Samuel McIntyre, who designed and decorated many lavish homes of local merchant princes at the time, also is believed to have created in 1800 the first American figurehead for ships, shown here:²²

NPS, Maritime Salem book, figurehead

In addition, many Salem merchants adorned their houses or offices with images of their trading vessels, employing artists to create a large collection of artwork which served to connect visually the prosperity and beauty of the Salem ships and show what locally-produced and –owned Salem ships meant to the residents. This helped give visitors or outsiders another perspective on the meaning of Salem and reflected the tight bond that Salemites perceived between trade and culture. For example, in 1800 Salem shipbuilders launched the ship *Margaret*, which has been featured by many artists, one sample of which is included here:²³

Brewington, Marine Paintings & Drawings in Peabody Museum

Music was another cultural aspect of life in Salem that was affected by maritime trade. It was in 1800 that a particularly fine church organ was constructed in London and shipped to a Salem church in a trade vessel owned by Hasket Derby, supplanting the more traditional orchestral instruments.²⁴ To connect themselves to home, sailors often played familiar music when far from their families in Salem:

*Tuesday, Sept 16th [1800]. In the evening we generally amuse ourselves with music on the ship. The people amuse themselves in various ways, in writing, ciphering, navigation, etc., others in fiddling, drumming and dancing on deck. Thus we contrive to pass the time away, often thinking and sighing for Home!*²⁵

The benefits of Salem's transformation into a trading and commercial center also influenced how children learned. Informally, children were able to see first-hand the trading ships and their cargoes, and to gain familiarity with goods produced around the world. They, too, developed skills in the arts, as this ca. 1800 sampler preserved at the Peabody Essex Museum demonstrates.²⁶

Postcard of sampler, from PEM shop

The school system witnessed transitions, as children from poorer families still had to go to work rather than stay in school, and many private schools sprung up to accommodate wealthy families. As a wealthy city and a cultural innovator, Salem supported three public schools, although private school was still the norm for those whose parents could afford it:

1800: 100 students each at East, Center, and West Public Schools [decline from earlier]: This was not, however, because of any lack of interest in education, but of the rapid increase in private schools, where children could get a better education, and as wealth increased parents were able to pay for better facilities.²⁷

As literacy and prosperity increased in 1800, a new newspaper, “*The Impartial Observer*”, was produced in Salem three times per week, and publishers in the city had a market in which to produce several essays, plays, sermons, and books, including Pope’s “*Essay on Man*”.²⁸ These many publications enhanced Salem’s reputation and meaning as a center of learning and culture.

For residents of Salem, their new century began with the cultural process of mourning the passing of President George Washington, who had died in December. Because this was the first death of an American president, Salemites helped define themselves through their methods of commemoration, and in reflecting on the meaning of President Washington to Salem, they gave new meaning to themselves as a community.

*On the 30th [Dec 99], the inhabitants assembled and passed several votes in testimony of their high appreciation for his excellence. One was that the residents here by desired to wear badges of mourning for sixty days, commencing the first day of the year. Another, that an eulogy be delivered the second day.*²⁹

Reverend Bentley, in his diary, noted his experience of mourning George Washington in Boston at this time and expressed his preference for attitudes in his own town of Salem:

*Jan. 8: I prefer the melancholy silence and the mournful countenance of Salem to the rabble rout of Boston which cannot be quiet from point of devotion.*³⁰

The death of George Washington, regarded as the “Father of the Country”, naturally generated great mourning and many public expressions of praise. Salem residents collected and published several of these eulogies and sermons in 1800, recognizing them as part of the record of cultural life of Salem.

However, the death of average citizens continued to be viewed as a normal event, even when it came at an early age. In Salem, 157 deaths were recorded in 1800; 51 deaths were of children under the age of two, roughly equal to the number of residents who died over the age of

50.³¹ Overall, life expectancy was 35-40 years.³² Felt, in his exhaustive *Annals of Salem*, lists the causes of deaths in 1800, reflecting the hazards of daily life and the general helplessness to treat a wide range of medical problems. His chart is reproduced here:³³

Felt— chart of causes of death

None of which sound like fun

As the chart shows, in 1800 no one in Salem died of smallpox, but as with many diseases which were not understood, there was considerable fear. This is illustrated by two incidents that year, the first of which stresses that residents did not wish to have the reputation and meaning of Salem associated with illness:

1800. Nov. 18. The selectmen and board of health give notice, that as forestallers residing in the neighborhood, endeavor to prevent the market men from coming to Salem, saying falsely that the town has the small-pox, and thus injure the poor by

*subjecting them to high prices for their meat, etc., they notify that there is no case of small-pox here, and that all proper attempts will be made to keep it so.*³⁴

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*Charitable Concerns: 1800. To the poor of Marblehead, infected with the small pox, \$2,800, besides other private and liberal donations. The first of next year, \$2,800 more were collected for them.*³⁵

Most written records of the period, including tombstones and diaries, noted the positive characteristics of the deceased. Yet there are exceptions. In contrast to the great praise heaped upon George Washington as the year began, the year drew to a close with the death of a man whose passing was considerably less mourned in Salem. The notation of his death by Reverend Bentley in his journal is memorable:

*December 30, 1800: This morning died in Warner Street, Hubartus Mattoon, aet. 78. He was as far from beauty as he could be without deformity, and as brutal in his zeal as he could be without persecution. He was ignorant, noisy, petulant, but happily neither his organs nor his abilities made him intelligible. He was a blacksmith with the same fame as he was religious. There was no polish, no invention and no praise in what he did, more than in what he said. He declined at last into intemperance, dishonesty, and derangement, and died of a cancer which took away all of his face and made him as ghastly to behold as he was terrible to hear. His wife was glad he was dead and even Charity had not a tear, though she comforted him in his sickness and carried him to his grave. The race is extinct and like the Mammoth nothing is left but his bones.*³⁶

This record indicates that this resident of Salem could be perceived in different ways by those who did not know him in person. Reverend Bentley leaves us with one image, while any record of a graveside service, a newspaper mention, or other documentation, might give the life of this man another meaning not seen by Bentley.

In conclusion, because Salem was the host and the motivator of a golden age as the eighteenth century ended and the nineteenth began, the city has generated many myths and

memories, in a variety of forms. By focusing on just one specific moment in the life of the city, a researcher may examine artifacts across many disciplines. Art, literature, commercial records, journals, and other artifacts can all yield clues to the world of images that individuals held of Salem. This allows a range of perceptions, and no doubt many misperceptions, to mingle within one subject. In this way, one can see the varying meanings that the same place, in the same time, can hold for people of different backgrounds. Looking at the city through many eyes leads to a greater understanding about how Salem, Massachusetts was perceived locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally in the year 1800.

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Endnotes

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- ⁴ Bernard Farber, *Guardians of Virtue* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1972), 6.
- ⁵ Vickers, 273.
- ⁶ James Duncan Phillips, *Salem and the Indies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947), 188.
- ⁷ Farber, 181.
- ⁸ Joseph B. Felt, *Annals of Salem*, v.2 (Salem: W. & S.B. Ives, 1845), 311-12.
- ⁹ Phillips, 218-9.
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- ¹⁴ Margaret C. S. Christman, *Adventurous Pursuits: America and the China Trade 1784-1844* (City of Washington: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1984), 19.
- ¹⁵ Christman, 39.
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- ²⁰ Joseph A. Conforti, *Imagining New England* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 82.
- ²¹ Felt, vol 1, 370.
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- ²³ M.V. Brewington, *The Marine Paintings and Drawings in the Peabody Museum* (Salem: The Peabody Museum of Salem, 1981), image 1128.
- ²⁴ Felt, vol.1, p 503.
- ²⁵ Paine, 367.
- ²⁶ Sally Martin Bowen sampler, silk and linen, postcard from Peabody Essex Museum, Salem.
- ²⁷ Phillips, 205.
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²⁹ Felt, v.2, 53.

³⁰ William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1962), 327.

³¹ Felt, v. 2, 439.

³² Farber, 44.

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³⁴ Felt, v.2, 194.

³⁵ Felt, v.2, 405.

³⁶ Paine, 310.