

# "In the Belfry Arch Of the North Church Tower"

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 00:05

It is a balmy summer day, and the MHS podcast team is on a special trip to what was one of the highest points in the town of Boston during the 18th century.

**Nikki Stewart** 00:15

So, anything that you want to leave, you can leave here. [Sounds of footsteps and climbing stairs]

**Cassie Cloutier** 00:27

We are heading up to the steeple at Old North Church.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 00:31

[Intro music fades in] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

**Cassie Cloutier** 00:47

This is Cassie Cloutier.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 00:49

And this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve and communicate the building blocks of history. Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections.

**Cassie Cloutier** 01:16

In this episode of The Object of History, we begin our exploration of the greater Boston area and institutions that are connected to the MHS through shared collections. As you heard in the introduction, we are visiting the Old North Church located in the North End of Boston. Nikki

Stewart, Executive Director of Old North Illuminated, takes us on a tour of the church's famous steeple and tells us about the history of the building. We then sit down with Peter Drummey, Chief Historian at the MHS, to learn more about the historical significance of the church and how this institution is connected to the American Revolution. Later, Patrick Gabridge, the Producing Artistic Director of Plays in Place, shares what it was like to produce a play at this historic site. But first, let us return to our visit to the top of the steeple at the Old North Church. Executive Director of Old North Illuminated Nikki Stewart discusses the significance of the building and bell ringing chamber as we climbed the eight stories to the top.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 02:24

So, I understand this used to be someone's apartment?

**Nikki Stewart** 02:27

Yes, so this was housing for the Rector in the early, mid-19th century.

**Cassie Cloutier** 02:39

Now we're entering the top floor.

**Nikki Stewart** 02:45

So, it's to the top top is about eight stories total. It is going to be warm up there. If you are afraid of heights, it's risky business. So, you all know your minds' best.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 03:03

This is as far up as I've been.

**Cassie Cloutier** 03:09

Now we're heading up another steep staircase, a very narrow hall.

**Nikki Stewart** 03:15

So, on your left you see the ropes for the bells. We're kind of in the space between the bell ringing chamber and between the bells. Now, as we go around the corner here, there is no rail on your left.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 03:29

Okay.

**Cassie Cloutier** 03:31

And how many are there?

**Nikki Stewart** 03:32

There are eight and they are change ringing bells. Which are, you know, kind of, kind of unique in North America. So, we believe these are the oldest set of change ringing bells in North America.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 03:44

And what are change ringing bells?

**Nikki Stewart** 03:46

So usually when people think of church bells, you think of, you know, really simple melodies, you like, Ode to Joy, right, but on the church bells, so change ringing bells are rung in a different manner, and they aren't played through melody, they're played through pattern. And so, it's really a combination of music and mathematics to ring a change ringing bell, and when you move to another pattern, the caller will call out that change. And my understanding is that's why we call it change ringing. So, when they ring a full peel that can be, you know, well over two hours. And so, they're not memorizing two hours worth of music. They memorize the patterns. And so, it's kind of like square dancing in that regard, you just listen to the caller. But what's, then, really interesting about that is they're they're pretty standard. And so, if someone, somebody is visiting Boston from England, for example, they know how to ring. They know the patterns. They can jump right in and

ring here. And so, if Paul Revere, you know, came back to life like Encino Man, he would be able to ring today, it's the same patterns.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 04:57

A universal language.

**Cassie Cloutier** 05:00

To learn more about how this church fits into both local and national history, we sat down with Chief Historian Peter Drummey.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 05:08

Let's start with the Old North Church. What can you tell us about it?

**Peter Drummey** 05:13

The Old North Church, its name, is one of the most interesting historical things about it, because the North Church that people referred to at the time of the American Revolution, I think most Bostonians would be thinking of Boston's Second Church, the Congregational Church in the North End of Boston, and refer to it in that way as both the North Church and the Old North Church, and they weren't describing it as being particularly old, although it was one of the oldest congregations in Boston. They were trying to make it clear they weren't talking about the new North Church. But I think many people would have referred to the Old North Church that it's now part of its name, but Christ Church in Boston, the second Anglican Church in Boston, King's Chapel, is first. And then early 18th century there's the Christ Church, which is built in the North End.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 06:19

So, wait, there are two North Churches?

**Peter Drummey** 06:23

Yes, well, there are actually more, because there's an Old North Church and a New North Church, congregational churches, and then there's Christ Church. Almost everyone would be referring to the congregational churches, as we would say, as meeting houses. So, the Old North Meeting House, we still keep that phrase when we're talking about the Old South Meeting House, but almost all would be called meeting houses. So, it would be the Old North Meeting House to distinguish it from the New North Meeting House and other meeting houses in Boston. Then Christ Church comes in as an Anglican Church, and then with the connection to the signals from the steeple, from the tower of the church, it becomes fixed in people's minds as The Old North Church. [Paul] Revere who gives us an account of this. All he refers to is he doesn't name who assisted him by putting lanterns in the tower of the North Church as he describes it. He doesn't further distinguish it. It's hard to be absolutely certain that he's referring to the Christ Church, the Anglican Church, as being the North Church, but because the Old North Meeting House was torn down during the Siege of Boston, used both practically and symbolically for firewood by the British garrison that by the time Revere was writing his account of his ride for the Historical Society, he said the signals were made from the North Church. And I think people assumed that he meant the Christ Church, and I think the preponderance of evidence probably that it is, but it's not like it's absolutely certain, although I suspect that many people associated with Christ Church, which has Old North Church right in its name now, would differ with me on that. The people who press the claims for the Old North Meeting House that happened in the 19th century, and it tends to recur as many questions, historical questions, where there's a claim of priority or the importance of a physical place. It wax and wanes. It never quite goes away. But I think logically, the Christ Church, which towers over Boston, is the highest built point in Boston. Now, the Old North Meeting House, the Congregational Church had a tower and a steeple, but I believe that Christ Church was maybe 100 feet higher.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 09:20

I suppose not all listeners might be familiar with the events we are describing. This moment in the historical spotlight for the Old North.

**Peter Drummey** 09:31

In April of 1775 it's, as Revere recollects it clear that the military forces, the British military forces in Boston are organizing for an expedition, and all the things that they're doing, assembling the elite troops of the garrison in Boston and assembling boats. They're doing lots of things towards doing something. There's a feeling that they're relatively careless about keeping secret the details of what they're doing. But in any case, Revere rides out to Lexington and to get the lay of the ground there and warn Samuel Adams and John Hancock, who are in Lexington, and then comes back, and when he comes back to Boston, he makes this plan of when there's an alarm to be sounded, if, in fact, it means him being rowed out of Boston across the Charles River and the Charles River Lagoon to the other side of the harbor, to Charlestown or elsewhere, to then ride to the countryside. There's some question whether he'll be able to do that. There's a substantial British fleet anchored in Boston Harbor, and they, in fact, move a ship, a famous warship, the Somerset move its location to sort of block communication or protect their expedition in the harbor. So Revere gets the idea that if he's not able actually to get out of Boston, and William Dawes, the other famous rider from this if one or the other, or both of them are not able to deliver this message in person by riding out of Boston or being rode to where they can ride from that by signaling from the church tower of Old North Church or Meeting House, that signal can be recognized on the other side of the harbor in Charlestown, a relatively short distance across the Charles River from Boston, that a signal, a straightforward signal, will if the troops are leaving Boston marching by way of the narrow neck of land, Boston, at the time of the revolution, is almost an island. But if they're leaving by this fortified neck of land that connects Boston with the mainland, that will be a signal that they'll show one lantern. And if they are being rowed across this tidal lagoon and river or across to be landed in Cambridge or in Charlestown, they'll show two lanterns. And in the letter that Revere writes, which then published by the Historical Society, it's edited to say, there's a carrot, and above the line it says, 'as a signal', like in case you did wasn't clear, maybe it wasn't clear what Revere who would be by 1798 very familiar with the story, but it has a signal system, not for himself, but if he can't deliver this message in person, other riders can take that news to the countryside. Meanwhile, Paul Revere is being rode across to the Charlestown where then he takes horse and rides out northwest to

Lexington, and that's the story that's come down to us. Some of this gets sort of confused as that Revere has already gone across the harbor and is looking back for the signal. Well, actually, he communicated that information to the people who made the signal, but then, at the same time, went physically across the harbor. So, if other riders had been cut off or hadn't gone out, he would be prepared to do it.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 13:36

So militarily, you would want the highest point that your signal?

**Peter Drummey** 13:41

Yes, in fact, it's more than just your signaling going across to Charlestown, but in fact, Copp's Hill lies substantially between, so you have to get to high place to signal from, and we have in our collection a wonderful document that doesn't prove this, but I think adds to the weight of the argument for Christ's Church being the North Church, the Old North Church, and that is when he's a teenager in about 1750 Paul Revere and friends get together.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 14:17

Sounds like a TV show.

**Peter Drummey** 14:18

Yes, that's right, but these are teenagers, so it's like..

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 14:21

Even better!

**Peter Drummey** 14:22

A rock band. But Paul Revere would be about 15 in 1750. Another person whom we know who worked with Paul Revere in printing enterprises, Josiah Flagg, would be even younger. He would be a younger teenager at that time. So, these teenagers sort of petitioned the administration of what

they refer to as Mr. Cutler's Church, which is they're referring to Timothy Cutler, the Boston, born Anglican minister of Christ Church to ring the bells in the tower of Christ Church. Christ Church had the only bell set that is a set of bells, rather than a single bell in its tower, so it could provide more elaborate change ringing and or more elaborate music played essentially with the bell set that it had the first time there was a set of bells to ring in Boston. So, you'd have to have a group of people ringing bells, rather than the church sexton or a single person ringing. From his teenage years, he had the familiarity with the tower in this church and had through that both the church and the meeting house, I probably should use that terminology to distinguish them. Both would be near to where he lived in North End. He would be familiar with them and the understanding, because, again, he doesn't give any account of the friend who assisted him by carrying the signal lanterns to the church tower, but it seems he had this familiarity with it, and also, they were looking for a high place to make the signal from.

**Cassie Cloutier** 16:22

Nikki told us about the history of the building and its congregants.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 16:29

Well, we'll get to sort of the present-day Old North tell us a little bit about the institution, the church itself.

**Nikki Stewart** 16:36

Old North Church was built in 1723, which makes it currently the oldest still standing church building in the city, and it's originally known as Christ Church in the city of Boston. And there's really interesting history with Old North from the beginning. It's interesting. It's a historic site that is now 300 and a half years old, but most known for, you know what's literally one moment in history, just one minute when those lantern signals are hanging. So Old North is founded as an Anglican congregation, Church of England church in a congregational city. And so, there's always this sense of being a little different, being a little unique. I think what's also interesting about the church's history is that in the 18th century, it was a very racially diverse church community which



were very intentional about always giving the context that that doesn't mean that this was a place of equality. It was very much a place of segregation and white supremacy, but still notable for being such a racially diverse congregation.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 17:46

And you've done some research, you've actually sponsored historians to delve into the archives and look into that history, that part of the church's history.

**Nikki Stewart** 17:55

We hosted Dr. Jaimie Crumley, who's now at the University of Utah, for a research fellowship from June of 2020 into June of 2023, and as you say, her purview was to comb through the church's archives and try to find the traces of that black and indigenous community that had a home here at Old North, which is challenging on many levels. I will say the church, in some ways, kept excellent records, and we still have them, so that, in and of itself, is incredible, but really, those records are about people who were considered to be very important, or financial transactions, which gives you a lot of information, but not necessarily about the folks that we were researching.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 18:42

Well for folks who have never been to the Old North can you give us a little bit of the lay of the land, from the bottom most to the top.

**Nikki Stewart** 18:50

So Old North Church is, first of all, you know, situated on a half-acre campus here in the North End, with some other quite historic buildings around it. But when you walk into the church from, you know, the front doors on Salem Street, it really can be a breathtaking experience. And you know, one of the things that I remember from the pandemic was once people were able to travel again, seeing people come into the space for the first time and just have that really, like awestruck, very emotional reaction, which that point in time was so many factors coming together, right? Being thankful to travel, being thankful to be alive and to be in a space that you've always wanted to visit.

It was really incredible. But on the first floor, Old North has box pews, which, if people aren't from New England, is definitely a little more striking. A lot of folks grew up with slip pews or bench pews, so the box pews are really like little cubicles across the floor of the sanctuary. There are 66 of them in total today, and they were functional. First of all, families purchased a pew and then paid an annual tax, if you will. So, they were a revenue generator for the church, and then they also helped trap heat from bodies and foot warmers in the winter. So, we're lucky to still have those today. And then moving up on the north and south sides of the church, there are two long we call them galleries, but they're balconies, and there is bench seating up there. At that level, we also have the church's organ, which dates to, I believe, the 1750s. We believe it to be the first American made, if you will, organ before American made was really a thing. And so, the gallery is a really interesting space because you are closest to some of the most precious artifacts in the church, the organ, those wooden cherubs that flank the organ. But it's also the space where on the north side, the black and indigenous congregants worshiped, and it was considered really undesirable seating.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 21:03

Did you say there was a crypt?

**Nikki Stewart** 21:05

I didn't say there is a crypt, but there is a crypt also beneath the sanctuary. We have a crypt that dates to 1732. It has 37 tombs, and we believe there were over 1100 burials beneath the church.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 21:21

So, this was a vibrant community. This is a center for the community of life in Boston in the Revolutionary era.

**Nikki Stewart** 21:30

So, the church itself is built in 1723, but the steeple comes a little bit later. There was just a little bit more fundraising to do to construct the steeple.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 21:41

This is why probably most people know of the church, right?

**Nikki Stewart** 21:45

Yes.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 21:46

So, let's talk a little bit about that moment in history.

**Nikki Stewart** 21:50

When people come to Old North, I think a lot of folks are surprised that old North wasn't a patriot church, right? But it's Church of England, church, so it's inherently people who are loyal to the crown, and particularly the clergy and the leadership of the church at that time, Reverend Dr. Timothy Cutler. So, we like to say that the population here at Old North was split into thirds, a third patriot, a third loyalist, and a third who, just like didn't want to talk about politics at the Thanksgiving table, right? They're just trying to get by. So right there, I think is something that people can relate to today. So Old North is most known for the lantern signal on the night of Paul Revere's ride, which was April 18, 1775 and it's an event that is later really put into popular consciousness through [Henry W.] Longfellow's poem, which he wrote on the brink of the Civil War. And I think it's important to note that Longfellow's poem was never intended to be a historical record or a factual account. It is art for political purpose. Was meant to inspire people to come together as one to defeat a common foe, as their forefathers had done. So, we know that the lantern signal was held again late on the night of April 18, 1775. There's very little else to be truly certain of, which is, you know, the the pickle of the historian, right? Like, how close do you get to certainty before you get to fact? But I think, as an institution here at Old North and as a community of historians, we believe that the lantern signals were held by the church, Sexton Robert Newman, and a vestryman or a lay leader in the church named Captain John Pulling Jr and we know that it was just for a minute in time, right? It's a secret signal. It is an act of treason. So, it's not something that you're going to leave up there all night. You just want the right person to see it, and then you

want to bring it back down, which I think is another misconception that a lot of folks have about the lantern signal.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 24:08

Well, you mentioned Longfellow and Longfellow's poem, and Longfellow was a member of the Massachusetts Historical Society. We believe that he looked at our copy of Paul Revere's description of his ride written down for the Historical Society in the 1790s. So that's in our collection. What's also in our collection are papers from the Old North Church. And last I checked, there were 52 boxes, 75 volumes, six oversized boxes and 12 cartons. That's a lot of history.

**Nikki Stewart** 24:39

That is.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 24:40

Why has the organization deposited them at the MHS and what do you hope scholars will be able to learn from them?

**Nikki Stewart** 24:48

This is where I guess I should take the pause and remind listeners that Old North Church is an active historic site, but it's also an active congregation, and so you know those church records are part of a body of product that is still being added to, because the church is still keeping its records, and so they are the property of the congregation of the church, but were entrusted to MHS, I believe, in the 1990s. I think from a feeling that it's so much bigger than this place or this institution, and, you know, so valuable that we would want them to be in a place like the MHS, where they're useful to people, and where, you know, people like Dr. Crumley or any researcher can come along and tease out what's in them.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 25:40

One of the people whose used these resources is your playwright. Tell us a little about the process of him developing this play. Did you contact him to have him write this or to come to you and send him over to the MHS?

**Nikki Stewart** 25:54

As an institution, we've been big fans of plays in place and you know, we're aware of their previous work, and Patrick's previous plays. And so there had been, you know, this desire for several years to work with Patrick and to do something here at Old North. And last year 2023, was the 300th anniversary of the church, and that felt like the right time to do something big and to think about, you know, well, what story would we tell with a place-based play here at Old North? So, we reached out to him, and Patrick had been wanting to work with us as well. So really this, the stars aligned there, but we told him that we wanted a play that had the perspectives of a loyalist and a patriot, and that would feature the perspective of an enslaved person. I think actually we said either a free or enslaved black person. But that's really, I think, all the instruction that we gave him, and he ran with that and came up with Revolution's Edge.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 27:02

And you are awash in anniversaries. You've had the 300th, the 250th of the Declaration of Independence is coming up. Boston's 400th is coming up. Any thoughts on the importance of such moments?

**Nikki Stewart** 27:16

Well I have to say the 250th of the lantern signal is coming up. I think that we're coming into these anniversaries. I'll say, from our perspective here Old North, you know, we're thinking most now about our 250 just in this coming April, right? A little less than a year away. They're coming at a time of really great divide in our country, culturally, politically. I think back to, you know, Old North in the Revolutionary era of being a community that is united by you know, their faith and their values, but also so divided. And I hope that these anniversaries provide opportunities, even if

they're only band aids in the big scheme of things, but opportunities to come together and to feel more unified as Americans, to start to feel like there is more of a shared a common history, a common identity. And I think I will admit that that's a lofty goal, but I hope that the anniversaries play out in a way that people can be brought together, that it's not more reinforcement of the divide. This episode will air, unfortunately after the run of Revolution's Edge, But I do want to encourage folks to still think about coming to visit us and to check out the resources on our website. We have some really great newer resources on the website. We have virtual reality tours through a partnership with UMass-Boston. And so, for example, through a virtual reality tour, folks will be able to climb the steeple, as you just did in real life. They'll be able to explore the crypt and the galleries. We also have the Illuminating the Unseen web series, which was produced by Dr. Jamie Crumley, and she shares how she utilized some of the sources in the archives to pull out the stories that we now tell. And you know, we have a speaker series archive, classroom curricula. So, there's oldnorth.com there's a lot there.

**Cassie Cloutier** 29:35

Patrick Gabridge, the Producing Artistic Director of Plays in Place, met with us in the gallery of the Old North Church to discuss Revolution's Edge, a play staged at the church itself.

**Cassie Cloutier** 29:48

Can you briefly tell us your background and how you got involved with Old North Church?

**Patrick Gabridge** 29:54

I'm a playwright and theater producer, and I run Plays in Place which is a theater company that partners with historic sites, museums and other cultural institutions to create site specific place. So how we got involved here is that we've been doing work in the Boston area for a few years now, and Catherine, who works here, saw our work and really liked it, and we've been talking for a few years and about how to come in here and then, I think about two years ago, they came to me and said, you know, we think we're ready to make something happen. And we started talking about, here are some ideas that we could explore as a site-specific stage production here in Old North.

**Cassie Cloutier** 30:34

Did you have the theme or the time period in mind before you researched or did that come afterward?

**Patrick Gabridge** 30:42

We knew right from the pretty much from the onset, that we wanted to focus it around the 1775 period, like right around the edge of the war. That that made the most sense for this space, and then the day that we're exploring here in this play, where Reverend Mather Byles resigns as pastor, and, you know, has to decide where he's going to go with his family, and this man who's enslaved by him, who he just baptized a week before, Cato, so they have a lot at stake. And then the vestryman John Pulling who's a ship's captain, is involved with the resignation of Byles but also is going to hang one of those signal lanterns that night in the steeple. So, it seemed like an obvious, dramatic moment to explore here, for sure. So that gave us a great starting point to know like, oh, what research we're going to need next.

**Cassie Cloutier** 31:33

So, you've kind of hinted at the theme or the topic of the play, but can you give us a brief introduction to what the play is about?

**Patrick Gabridge** 31:39

So, the play is set on April 18, 1775, on the verge of the war, and so Mather Byles, the Reverend here has resigned, has to figure out what he's going to do with his family. He thinks he's going to take a job in New Hampshire and bring his family with him. John Pulling knows that something is up. Doesn't know exactly what he's going to do at the start of the play. By the end of the play, he thinks he he's going to hang that signal lantern that night. So, there's a lot of interaction. These people know each other very well, even though they're on different political sides. So Pulling is a patriot. Mather Byles is a staunch loyalist. Even though they're on opposite sides. They live in a small town. They live in the same neighborhood. Their families know each other, and all three are

fathers of young children, and they have to understand what does that mean for their families? As war is about to erupt, they know it's dangerous. How are they going to steer them to safety? Examples of other work that we've done and are doing, we're doing a play set in the Senate chamber of the Massachusetts State House about a speech by abolitionist Angelina Grimké that was given in there in 1838. It was the first time an American woman had ever addressed a legislative body. But we get to do it under the dome where she gave this speech 108 years ago, which is pretty exciting. And that's part of a big National Park Service project we're doing called Suffrage in Black and White. That'll be there another spot-on Beacon Hill and in Faneuil Hall, looking at a women's suffrage rally from 1915. We're looking at a piece around the 1895 First National Colored Women's Convention that took place in Boston. And then we're doing plays in Connecticut and Rhode Island. We're consulting with the Texas Historical Commission. They're actually sending someone to see this play on closing night to get some ideas about how to do this kind of thing at their sites.

**Cassie Cloutier** 33:23

So, can you tell us about your research for this play?

**Patrick Gabridge** 33:26

I had never done research on site there before. It was really exciting to go in. It feels like you're entering kind of a special cloister that's dedicated to history. That was kind of a thrill to me as someone who studies history a lot, but yeah, I knew that the search records were held by Mass Historical, so that's where we started. And so, the nice thing about them, Old North already having a relationship with Mass Historical is that they could tell me where to go, what documents I'm looking for, and we're able to figure out pretty quickly, like, what boxes these things are stored in, and have them there. And so, I was really looking at the church records. So, the ledger books that are showing all kinds of things, as well as general recordings of church business. The Church Ledger books told me a lot in terms of when Byles was there. They're keeping track of baptism, births and marriages, which ends up being kind of an important part of the play. And yeah, I'm trying to understand, you know, what is his life like? Like, how is are there a lot of these? Are there just a few of these? And so, I'm, I'm counting, I'm looking, I'm looking at the what's the flow? But it's really



easy to do that when you have the documents in front of you and trying to figure out, what more can they tell me? Like, is Cato showing up anywhere in these documents? What do I know about Byles? What do I know about Pulling as a vestryman? Those are in the church records too, so I can see when he's there, when he disappears after he hangs that signal lantern, he and his family go into hiding for a few years. I was trying to figure out, like, did he ever return? The answer is yes, but not a lot. So clearly, his life had changed. For Byles, yes, the most interesting and moving thing for me was looking at the records of deaths, trying to figure out who he buried, and then discovering where he's buried two of his daughters as infants he buried, and then one of them in the ledger he had underlined their names only for the first daughter that he buried, and it just told that little line of ink told me so much about Mather Byles, how moved he was, what an impact that had on the family. And I think that shows the advantage of actually doing research in person with primary documents because if I had seen a digitized copy of that, I wouldn't have noticed it. It wouldn't have meant anything to me. I mean, it wouldn't have been it wouldn't have shown up. But I think, as a researcher and as a dramatist, when I see something like that, like, oh, that little inch long piece of ink means a lot. And that was that he wrote that the piece of paper that I'm holding in my hands, like he wrote. So that was really powerful, an example of the importance of what Mass Historical does.

**Cassie Cloutier** 36:03

How long did you spend researching for this play?

**Patrick Gabridge** 36:06

Over a span of time you know, probably up to six months. I wasn't like I spent six months at Mass Historical. I was there a few days, and able to find a lot and then using that to trace down various other rabbit holes and digitized records, but that the Mass Historical visits were really key for letting me know information I would never find anywhere else, and again, the flavor of it that was really important.

**Cassie Cloutier** 36:31

So, you've hinted at this, but I'm wondering, what's it like using this space for this production? How does the building play into this?

**Patrick Gabridge** 36:39

I love it. It's a beautiful space, and it has such rich bones. And I think all the work we do inhabits space in its own special way. And we do a lot of historical work, and I think you always can feel kind of the resonance of the space and the history that lives there. It has a real deep quality to it, I think. And you know, there are some restrictions that you just have to deal with in terms of how the site is laid out. So, we can kind of have action happening at the front of the church, and then in the aisle, central aisle, and then sight lines don't permit you to kind of roam all around the church in this particular instance. But the people that we've worked with here have just been amazing, and the audiences have responded very, very well. They love the show. And I think our goal when we build a play like this is to have it change the audience's perception and relationship with the space. So, we want when they are done with this play, they will never see Old North Church again, the same way. They'll have a new relationship, a new understanding of it, in a way that is much more lively and fully inhabited. Our goal, we often say, is to unflatten history a little bit, to really breathe life into it. And I feel like this show especially, we've got a great cast. Alexander Smith is a fantastic director, so our team, our costume designer, Christina Beam, has really given us the elements that we need to make it work.

**Cassie Cloutier** 38:06

Yeah, I'm sure the audience, once they leave, they start having questions about other locations around Boston as well.

**Patrick Gabridge** 38:11

I hope so. Hopefully they'll come see some of our other shows that we we have lined up to do around here. One thing that we do is that we always have a post-show discussion afterwards, and it's kind of interesting because I think when you because I think when you do that in a normal

theater setting, you know a few handful of people stick around, but I would say in this circumstance, a lot of people tend to stay because they have questions they want to have answered, so they have an educator here. And often one or two, or sometimes all three of our cast will stick around. They know the history of their own characters quite well in the play. And so, people want to know. And we find that whenever we do a show, it's nice because it lets them again, continue to deepen the relationship to these people. They spent some time, they want to process it. We always have some people who are surprised that in the north, in Boston and New England, there were people holding slaves, and so they're sometimes they're surprised. They want to know how that's possible, because it challenges their expectations. They always want to know, you know, what happened to all three of these after the war and during the war? And I think they're interested in knowing, from the actors, what's it like to be in the space. And I think they always say, you know, this space feels like an extra character, that it gives them this extra basis. I think that's the thing this kind of work does that's really interesting to me, is that, as opposed to a traditional theater, which has lots of benefits on its own, this place is one that has inherent meaning that it brings with it that is already overlaid upon everything we do. There's a whole patriotic story told here. We are challenging that, and I think the audience appreciates the complexity to think about, oh, this space that features so prominently into the Revolutionary War, and some of the mythology of it is complicated, right? It's not just it wasn't church full of patriots. It wasn't a church full of loyalists. It was complex, and people were held in slavery here. And what does all that mean? And that changes our relationship to the past in a really useful way I think.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 40:14

As we wrap up this episode, we are returning to the steeple of the Old North Church. In this segment, you will also hear a new voice on the recording. It belongs to our Podcast Producer Sam Hurwitz, who usually remains behind the scenes. Sam joined us for this outing to the Old North. Now here again is Nikki Stewart, Executive Director of Old North Illuminated.

**Nikki Stewart** 40:38

Now this is the first point where, if you're afraid of heights, you might start to get a little queasy, right? So, we're now in the chamber with the bells themselves. They are now right below us. And what's really interesting about this space is if you look at the exterior wall, you can see this seam right here that goes all the way around. That is where the steeple fell in 1954 during Hurricane Carroll. Yeah, so it's a little scar in the church that we can see from here.

**Cassie Cloutier** 41:13

Opening a hatch door above us heading up another small staircase into a dark room.

**Nikki Stewart** 41:30

So that'll give us some light and some air. You're welcome to take a peek out.

**Cassie Cloutier** 41:39

Very nice view.

**Nikki Stewart** 41:41

Now I will say just to be very careful in this space, because the light can blind you and there is a trap door in the floor.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 41:46

Yes, and so the lanterns were hung there?

**Nikki Stewart** 41:51

Tippy top. Still going.

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 41:53

Okay, okay, eight stories.

**Nikki Stewart** 41:55

Yeah, this, this is where you can start to imagine, obviously, like this ladder is newer, right? Like this part of the steeple is reconstructed in 1954 but I think this does give you a real sense of what it could be like to have to come up here, you know, in the dark, in the night, right? Like holding on to something. And that, I think, also helps make the commonsense case for why there were two lantern holders to come up here, holding two of them at the same time in the dark. I don't know. Even superheroes can only do so much. Now, at the top of this ladder, there's a lip, so you just want to be careful not to trip on the way up or the way down.

**Cassie Cloutier** 42:41

Now heading up a staircase that's more like a ladder.

**Nikki Stewart** 42:42

Okay, it's a really small space up here. So, I think I'm going to wait here.

**Cassie Cloutier** 42:44

Now, heading up the last flight of stairs to the eighth floor. Now we are at the top of the steeple after eight flights.

**Sam Hurwitz** 43:14

Yeah, you have a commanding view of the North End downtown, the water. Yeah, you can see everything. You get a 360 view of the city. So where exactly would the famous lantern, I mean, like, right outside the window or, or would it literally be right above us?

**Nikki Stewart** 43:37

So, they would have been held by somebody standing where you're standing and just holding them up for a minute.

**Sam Hurwitz** 43:42

Okay.

**Nikki Stewart** 43:43

So, I believe we can assume the window that faces Charlestown is where they would have stood.

**Sam Hurwitz** 43:50

Oh, wow! Pretty cool!

**Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai** 43:52

[Outro music fades in] If you missed Revolution's Edge in 2023 and 2024, you have one more chance to experience the play this spring. On the night of April 18, 2025, the 250th anniversary of the lantern signals and Revere's most famous ride, Old North Illuminated will host a staged reading of Revolution's Edge. For more information, please visit [oldnorth.com](http://oldnorth.com)

**Cassie Cloutier** 44:36

To look at the items discussed in today's episode. Visit our show website at [www.masshist.org/podcast](http://www.masshist.org/podcast). The Object of History was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. We would like to thank Nikki Stewart, Executive Director of Old North Illuminated, Patrick Gabridge, the Producing Artistic Director of Plays in Place, Peter Drummey, Chief Historian at the MHS and Sam Hurwitz, Podcast Producer at the MHS. Music in this episode is by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and Podington Bear. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening.