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Salem Maritime National Historic Site
Salem, Massachusetts



"Find them if you can...
Take them if you can!"

A Short Biographical Sketch of Richard Derby

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∞ Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions ∞
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By this time, you may have noticed the new painting of the Richard Derby house in the Derby House ell, done by Racket Shreve of Salem. The painting depicts the birthplace and early home of Elias Hasket Derby, located on the corner of Herbert and Derby Streets.

Like his son Elias, Richard was a successful merchant, but who does not often get his due as a mover and shaker in mercantile Salem. He helped mold Salem into a great trading port by furthering trade in the West Indies, and obviously did a great job teaching Elias the finer points of domestic and world trade.

Captain Richard Derby was born on September 9, 1712, to Richard and Martha Hasket Derby. He married Mary Hodges in 1735. Following her death in 1770, Richard remarried, this time to Sarah Langley Hersey of Hingham, Massachusetts in October 1771.

The early years of Richard's life are clouded by time. His father died when he was only three years old, which must have been difficult for the entire family. Letters and documents written by Richard suggest that his education was oriented towards the practical aspects of life rather than formal education.

When he was twenty-four years old, Richard became owner and master of the sloop *Ranger* for a voyage to Cadiz, Spain. *Ranger* sailed with a crew of

seven and contained a cargo of fish. Evidently, young Richard had been going to sea for some time, possibly in the employ of Timothy Orne, and had done well for himself to become both captain and ship owner at such a young age.

Richard's career as a successful West Indies trader began in 1739, when he sold the *Ranger* and her cargo and reinvested the proceeds in a new vessel, the sloop *Neptune*. The *Neptune's* first voyage showed a net profit of 2178 pounds.

During the years prior to 1750, Richard continued his activities in partnership with Orne. By then he had accumulated enough capital to go into business for himself. Soon after, he left life at sea to remain at home and direct his enterprises with sons Richard, Jr. and Elias Hasket.

The family business prospered, and, by 1760, he began to give Elias Hasket increasing responsibility in the operation of the business, which by this time included a fleet of thirteen vessels. Ten years later, Richard retired, leaving the Derby firm in the capable hands of Elias Hasket.

A Whig by persuasion, he still harbored resentments from incidents during the Seven Year's War, when two of his vessels were seized by British privateers and condemned as prizes. Richard soon became an ardent supporter of the patriot cause. He is

reputed to have confronted Lt. Col. Alexander Leslie, who, with a contingent of troops, had been dispatched by Royal Governor Thomas Gage to locate and confiscate eight cannon in the possession of the Salem Whigs. Captain Derby is purported to have replied to the demands by proclaiming "Find them if you can! Take them if you can! They will never be surrendered."

Captain Richard Derby, Sr., died on November 9, 1783, leaving an estate in excess of 20,800 pounds. He is buried in the Charter Street Burying Ground in Salem.

So, as you begin your next Derby House tour, you may want to point out the large yellow house across the street from that other great Salem landmark, the Bunghole package store, and say, "it all began..."



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