

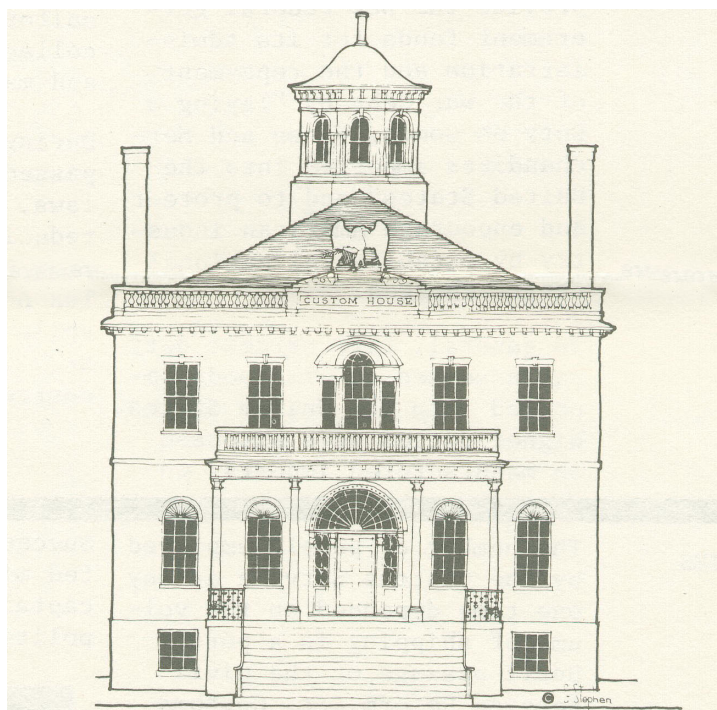
National Park Service  
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Salem Maritime National Historic Site  
Salem, Massachusetts



## OLD "STEP OVER TO LYNN"

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∞ Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions ∞  
Historical musings from Salem Maritime NHS  
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Maritime history is commonly thought of as romantic or exciting adventure stories about clipper ships or swashbuckling pirates. This suffices for most people...until they stumble into Salem Maritime NHS and find their perspective radically altered. In a physical environment so different from its historical context, the human aspect of past activities must be highlighted. The reality of this situation ordinarily gravitates toward the well known, or nefarious, personages who lived long ago.

In order to bring old Salem to life, the stories of lesser known personalities also need to be told, some of which have long since faded into the mists of time. When I came upon the references to a gentleman who personified the activities of the Salem Custom House for nearly a half century, I was totally captivated. Here was a man well read in the classics, commerce and the Bible. He appreciated the therapeutic value of physical exercise, including walking and swimming. Thanks to his exceptional gift for remembering obscure details, we are fortunate in having an unusual insight into the operation of the port of Salem prior

to Nathaniel Hawthorne's scathing expose' of the political climate at the Custom House during the late 1840's.

This gentleman, known to his descendants as "Old Step over to Lynn," is William Wait Oliver (1778-1869), who worked for the Customs Service at Salem for 46 years and 10 days. In 1858, at age 80, Mr. Oliver recorded some details of his early life. The dates recounted match exactly the historical record.

"At the age of 12 years (1791) I went to live with Major Joseph Hiller, Collector of Customs at Salem, April 1, 1793, at 14, he took me into the Custom House. August 13, 1802, Colonel William R. Lee was appointed Collector of Salem, and in February, 1803, he made me Deputy Collector. I continued with him till he died, October 24, 1824 and I settled his business to the end of December, 1824, when General James Miller was appointed Collector, and I continued deputy till April 10, 1839. I was in the office for 46 years and 10 days." He had served in the capacities of office boy, clerk, and finally, Deputy Collector of the Port of Salem and Beverly.

According to Mr. Oliver's journal, he had misgivings about his future and felt great resentment when Colonel Lee replaced Major Hiller as Collector on Friday, August 13, 1802. Major Hiller had taken young William under his wing and was rewarded with strong loyalty. Mr. Oliver thought that the methods used by Colonel Lee to obtain his appointment were scandalous, and to make things even worse, Lee was from Marblehead. Nonetheless, Oliver resolved to continue doing his job to the best of his ability despite his indignation.



*Left: Major Joseph Hiller (1747-1814), Collector of Customs in Salem 1789-1802.*

Beyond any personal differences that may have existed between them, Colonel Lee was well satisfied with William Oliver's competence. Just seven months later, Oliver took the oath of office for Deputy Collector on the morning

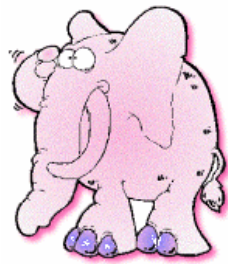
of Monday, February 28, 1803. He appeared for work at the Custom House faithfully (at six successive locations) to fulfill his official duties over the next thirty-six years.

Mr. Oliver's signature is found on all manner of Customs documents, including the contract for the construction of the 1819 Custom House, now part of Salem Maritime NHS. In his own words, we find the definition of his responsibilities as he saw them: "I had the care of all the money received and paid for more than 36 years." He recounts an incident in which he was required to transport specie to Boston: "I took the bags from the bank in Salem to the bank in Boston, and in no instance took my hand from the bag till I delivered it in Boston." This was in 1808. The trip to Boston by stage coach was less than comfortable in the best of circumstances. Imagine Mr. Oliver bouncing around in the coach trying not to drop his bag of gold. Ten years after his retirement, he was approached to determine his availability for reappointment. He respectfully declined the offer.

You are probably still wondering why he is remembered by his family more than a century after his death as "Old step over to Lynn." His journal indicates that he enjoyed taking long walks. That is clearly illustrated by the following incident. The record is somewhat fuzzy on the occasion, but something had happened in Lynn, apparently a fire which delayed the arrival of the train (sometime after 1839) from Boston. Reportedly, someone asked him where the fire was and he replied: "I am told that it is in Lynn; guess I will step over and see."

My favorite reference from Mr. Oliver's slate of obscure recollections is the following. As a youth, Mr. Oliver was present when President George Washington visited Salem on October 29, 1789. He recalled the ever practical general giving his most profound words of advice to the excited, cheering crowd: "Put on your hats, my men, you will get cold."

So goes the story of "Old step over to Lynn."



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