

The Obelisk, 1766

QUITE the scarcest of Revere's large engravings is his "View of the Obelisk," as it is known by only one copy. When Samuel G. Drake published his *History and Antiquities of Boston* in 1856, the only copy of the print which he could find was owned by John F. Eliot (page 722). It descended to his nieces, Misses Emily B. and Mary L. Eliot of Roxbury, and later of Cambridge. Upon Mary Eliot's death in 1927, the print was bequeathed to the American Antiquarian Society. No other copy of the original print can be traced today.

The story of the erection of the Obelisk and the celebration for the repeal of the Stamp Act is told in full in the newspapers of the day. The Act was repealed March 18, 1766, but not until May 16 did the news reach Boston. The *Boston Gazette* of May 19, 1766, announced that the news of the repeal had been officially received and that the evening of that day would be given to public rejoicing. It also stated that there would "be exhibited on the Common, an Obelisk — A Description of which is engraved by Mr. Paul Revere; and is now selling by Edes & Gill."

The *Massachusetts Gazette. And Boston News-Letter*, in an "Extraordinary" issue of May 22, 1766, graphically records the program of entertainment, quite different in its fullness from the average account of a local event in an eighteenth-century newspaper. Bells were rung, cannon discharged, colors displayed on ships and many of the houses, and bonfires built. The newspaper states: "In the Evening the whole Town was beautifully illuminated: — On the Common the Sons of Liberty erected a magnificent Pyramid, illuminated with 280 Lamps: The four upper Stories of which were ornamented with the Figures of their Majesties, and fourteen of the worthy Patriots who have distinguished themselves by their Love of Liberty. The following Lines were on the four Sides of the next Apartment, which referred to the Emblematical Figures on the lower Story, the whole supported by a large Base of the Doric Order." The lines are completely quoted, and

then the account continues: "On the Top of the Pyramid was fix'd a round Box of Fireworks horizontally. . . . At Dusk the Scene opened by the Discharge of twelve Rockets from each Stage; after which the Figures on the Pyramid were uncovered, making a beautiful Appearance. . . . At Eleven o'clock the Signal being given by a Discharge of 21 Rockets, the horizontal Wheel on the Top of the Pyramid or Obelisk was play'd off, ending in the Discharge of sixteen Dozen of Serpents in the Air, which concluded the Shew. . . . The Pyramid, which was designed to be placed under the Tree of Liberty, as a standing Monument of this glorious Aera, by accident took Fire about One o'clock, and was consumed." The newspaper further records that a copper-plate print of the Obelisk had been published.

The print is entitled "A View of the Obelisk erected under Liberty-Tree in Boston on the Rejoicings for the Repeal of the — Stamp-Act 1766." Underneath is a long dedication to "every Lover of Liberty," and the plate is signed "Paul Revere Sculp." It shows all the portraits, poetry, and allegorical views on each of the four sides of the Obelisk. Since these elaborate details are shown in the reproduction, they are not repeated here. (See Plate no. 6.)

The names of the sixteen English "worthy patriots" who befriended the colonies are indicated only by initials at the top of the print, as will be noted in the reproduction. On the original print someone has penned, or pencilled, in contemporary or early hand, the full names, omitting only one — "Lord D — I." Later writers, such as Lucius M. Sargent in his *Dealings with the Dead*, 1856, page 145; S. G. Drake in his *History of Boston*, 1856, page 725; and E. H. Goss in his *Life of Paul Revere*, 1891, Volume 1, page 40, give fourteen of the names, as follows: Duke of York, Marquis of Rockingham, Queen Charlotte, King George III, General Conway, Colonel Barré, William Pitt, Lord Dartmouth, Alderman Beckford, Charles Townshend, Lord George Sackville, Mr. Dennis De Berdt, John Wilkes, and Lord Camden. The name which is at the top of the second pyramid is "L — d T — I" in the original print (changed with a pen to "T — n"), but in the copper-plate it is "L — d D — II." This might refer to William Dowdeswell, a member of the House of Commons and an influential friend of the colonies, except for the fact that he was not a Lord. There was no

Lord bearing a name such as either of the two unidentified. Except possibly for the King and Queen none of the portraits bear the slightest similarity to the original persons.

Although the print stated that the Obelisk was erected under the Liberty Tree, it actually was first erected on the common, with the intention of removing it later to the Liberty Tree. Evidently the print was engraved before the final arrangements for the celebration were made.

The size of the print, to the border lines, is $9\frac{3}{8}$ inches high, by $13\frac{1}{4}$ inches wide. The original copper-plate of the Obelisk print is still in existence today. When Revere, a few years later, was commissioned to engrave a Masonic certificate, he found that the obelisk copper was the right size and used the reverse for his Masonic print. I believe that this design was made about 1773 and altered in 1796. The original bill for the latter design is in the Gay collection in the Harvard College Library. The bill reads:

Elias Perkins

Boston July 4, 1796.

Bo't of Paul Revere

One Engravd Copper-plate
for Mason Certificates

£6.00

Receivd pay

PAUL REVERE

Ernest Gay showed me this manuscript about thirty years ago, telling me, as I remember it, that it had been acquired from a dealer in Connecticut. Upon his death it went to the Harvard College Library. The copper was bought and paid for by Elias Perkins of New London, Connecticut, who was Senior Warden of Union Lodge of New London (see E. G. Storer's *Records of Freemasonry in Connecticut*, 1859, pages 73, 76). He evidently wanted the plate to serve as a certificate for members of his own Lodge. The subject is treated in my chapter on Revere's Masonic engravings, where the print is reproduced. It is also shown in Goss's *Life of Paul Revere*, Volume 2, page 477, the impression being taken from the original copper. The size of the print is $13\frac{7}{8}$ inches high by 10 inches wide, to the edges of the plate mark.

The next heard of the copper-plate was in 1839, when on January 16, Francis

A. Perkins of Norwich, Connecticut, sent an impression of the Obelisk engraving to the American Antiquarian Society. It has his inscription on the restrike, and his gift is recorded in the Society's Donation Book on January 24, 1839. Francis Perkins was a prominent citizen of Norwich and its Mayor in 1834. Although he lived in a nearby town, he was not related to Elias Perkins who ordered the plate from Revere. The water-mark is "Pro Patria" and apparently of Dutch manufacture. Mr. Dard Hunter informs me that the paper long antedates the year 1839, and probably was made about the year 1800, or even a few years earlier.

The 1839 impression of the Obelisk side of the plate has the same defects shown in recent restrikes — the letters "P R" and "D," reversed, at the left side, the letter "D" in the margin above the left pyramid, a gouge under the tree in the third pyramid, and occasional scratches on the copper.

Francis A. Perkins died in 1863. About 1890 the Revere copper-plate was acquired by Thomas S. Collier of New London. Collier, who was a poet of some distinction, a collector of books, relics and autographs, and Secretary of the New London County Historical Society, died September 21, 1893. The plate went to his widow, Annie C. Collier, and after her death in 1919, it was bought by R. B. Jacobs, an antiques dealer of Hartford. Mr. Jacobs showed me the plate, and although I was intensely interested, it was a purchase which we could not afford. It was sold to Dr. Rosenbach, who advertised it in one of his Catalogues in 1926 at a price of \$5,500. It was purchased by Lessing J. Rosenwald of Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, who in 1943 included it in the collection of prints which he gave to the National Gallery in Washington. Mr. Rosenwald in 1943 engaged Richard E. Bishop of Germantown, Pennsylvania, to pull nineteen proofs from the plate, both sides, which were presented to various interested collectors and institutions. The proofs show all the defects on the plate.

In 1881 two Boston antiquarians, R. D. Child and A. O. Crane, discovered the plate in Connecticut, and issued a facsimile reproduction. This was published, as they state in their circular, in three forms: "one on Bristol board, wide margin, suitable for framing, price 75 cents; one on plate paper, 50 cents; one on strong, thin paper, designed for inserting in Drake's Boston and New England History, 25 cents." Child was Richard D. Child who liked antiquarian matters, and Crane

was Albert O. Crane who conducted an art and bric-a-brac store on Washington Street, was especially interested in Revere, and often helped Mr. Goss in preparing the Revere biography. The publishers, in issuing their facsimile, omitted the defects, although they retained the reversed letters on the left margin. The American Antiquarian Society has examples of all the restrikes.