

Walking Boston

Walking Tours of Historic Boston

Back Street, Boston April 1775

Learn more about the 19 individuals in the painting and what they are doing on a warm spring afternoon in early April 1775.

- 1) **A cabinet finisher/decorator** wearing an apron and holding a paintbrush outside the Edwards house gate, chatting to **a young lady**. The Alexander Edwards cabinetmaking shop is just out of sight behind the house.
- 2) Across the street is **a British officer** speaking with **a woman**. Rather than placing a generic officer in the painting, Cortney sought the expertise of scholars of the period as well as historical costumer Henry Cooke and elected to depict, as accurately as possible, Lieutenant John Dutton of the 38th Regiment of Foot who was stationed in Boston in 1775. Henry provided a wonderful portrait of Lt. Dutton and Cortney rendered the officer's uniform so it matched exactly with a uniform thoroughly researched by one of the scholars. That individual even owned Lieutenant Dutton's short saber given to him by one of the officer's descendants. Cortney portrayed the contour of Dutton's scabbard and shortened it to match his actual saber.
- 3) **A laborer** with a wheelbarrow in the center of the street is delivering firewood as **a sailor** stops him for directions to the nearest tavern. There's little work for sailors in the closed Port of Boston so it's possible that a dram of whiskey might be found, since rum is hard to find in this closed port.
- 4) **An older man** and **his daughter** enjoy the warm day as **her son** stacks some of the newly delivered firewood. Upstairs, **a young woman** observes the scene below, keeping an eye on the British officer. Perhaps she has a spouse or friend who is a member of the Sons of Liberty?
- 5) **Two gentlemen in dark suits** next to the Edwards house converse in quiet tones... perchance about information of a military value to the patriots?
- 6) **A tavern keeper** crosses the street toward the Edwards cabinetmaking shop to check on his order for a new "cage" for his bar, and of course, to discover the latest rumors in the air.
- 7) Outside the brick-sided house, **a lady** and **her husband** exchange thoughts about the latest news. They could be reading Edes and Gill's *Boston Gazette* for the latest political announcements.
- 8) Further down Back Street, **a fellow in a green suit** talks business with **an African American man**, one of the many freedmen that comprised 10% or more of the African Americans (including enslaved persons) in the town. This enterprising man, one of the community of freedmen who lived in the Copp's Hill neighborhood, herds his two sheep from place to place to crop the new spring grass and weeds in the small green spaces in the town.

- 9) Heading away down the street toward the docks is a freight wagon pulled by a yoke of oxen. Though the Port of Boston was closed by the Crown the previous year, there were still goods to deliver and distribute, supplied by the other American colonies coming to the aid of the city.
- 10) **One man on horseback** pauses to let the freight wagon pass, as **a second man on horseback**, at the bend in the road where Back Street crosses Prince Street, carries on his business... or provides intelligence to the patriots of Boston about British troop movements.
- 11) The masts of a few British supply ships docked at the waterfront a few blocks away can be glimpsed. The Boston Port Act had shut down Boston Harbor in 1774, and only ships carrying certain necessities, such as fuel and supplies for the English military were allowed to dock.