

The Story Behind *One April in Boston*

The story behind *One April in Boston* is a fascinating tale in itself. Most of the artifacts shown in this book were discovered only recently. As research for the project progressed, I felt like I was putting together the pieces of a giant puzzle; one that had been disassembled and the pieces scattered many years ago. As my work continued, I sensed that I was doing it for a special reason, but I wasn't quite sure what that reason was.

The desire to learn more about my ancestors began when I was 10. I would spend hours at the kitchen table my father built, paging through the family record section of a Bible that had been passed down in our family for five generations. The Bible was printed in 1812 and once belonged to my direct ancestor Joseph B. Edwards of Boston. An entry listed his birth date as December 29, 1799, and several other entries listed the names and birth dates of his four siblings.

The Bible contained two other notable items. The first was an entry marking the death of a Benjamin Edwards on June 9, 1808, age 43 years, and the second was a yellowed newspaper clipping about Philip Edwards, a relative and soldier who was killed in World War I. I felt that the Benjamin Edwards listed

One April in Boston

above, born in 1765, was Joseph's father. I was told that Philip Edwards was my grandfather's cousin.

I read that newspaper clipping about Philip each time I opened the Bible. The article, from July of 1921, covered his funeral, "one of the most impressive military funerals ever held in Naugatuck." He had been killed in France in July of 1918, and it took three years to get his body returned to the United States. The article noted that "he lived and died gallantly." It went on to say "The eulogy was made more stirring when a letter, the last written by Pvt. Edwards to his parents on the eve of going over the top in one of the greatest battles in the world's history, was read." It demonstrated that "the dead soldier was brave to the core."

I would read Philip's last letter over and over again. I wanted to learn more about him. I wanted to learn more about the people in those old Bible entries, too. That's where this project all began ... a 10-year-old boy sitting at the kitchen table, telling himself, "someday I'm going to find out more about these people, someday I'm going to tell their story." I didn't have a lot to work with, but I did have that mission.

My father's Aunt Elizabeth had done some research into the family history well before I was born. She claimed there was a relation to a Captain Benjamin Edwards of Boston and a connection to the Revere family. Aunt Elizabeth discovered the marker of Captain Edwards at Copp's Hill Burying Ground around 1925.

I entered the scene in October of 1961. Three years later, my family took me to Boston to visit the marker of my namesake and snapped a black and white photo of the event. I remember that day, the sun shining in my face, my father holding my hand next to a strange looking rock, and that overwhelming

The Story Behind *One April in Boston*

feeling of “what am I doing here?” As my interest in the family history grew, I had that black and white photo, the family Bible, and the stories that my father’s Aunt Elizabeth had told me as a child. After she died, all of her written research was lost.

My big break came in 1994 at an Edwards family reunion. Ruth Edwards, a relative who shared my interest in genealogy, gave me a copy of an old newsletter called *The Edwards Journal*. The issue included extensive information from Jeannie Edwards Cook, a woman in Cody, Wyoming, who claimed to have a Bible from 1708 belonging to her ancestor, Captain Benjamin Edwards of Boston! The article listed all the family entries from the Bible and gave other information. That information included a reference to the Captain’s granddaughter, Sally Edwards, and noted that she had married Paul Revere Jr. It also listed her siblings, including a brother named Benjamin.

I sent Jeannie a letter, and we began to correspond. Research she possessed noted the baptism date of Sally’s brother, Benjamin, as April 14, 1765. Other entries in our family Bibles served to confirm the relationship. I learned that this Benjamin Edwards was my direct ancestor. As an adult, he worked as a cooper in Boston. Ben and his sister Sally were the children of Captain Edwards’ son, Dolling. Jeannie was related to the Captain’s firstborn son, Benjamin 2nd. This is where the story really started to get interesting.

Jeannie began telling me stories passed down in her family about the Sons of Liberty and how family members were involved in this organization. Research conducted later at the Massachusetts Historical Society confirmed that one of Captain Edwards’ sons, Alexander, was indeed a member. She spoke about the family tomb at Copp’s Hill and stories of how it had been scarred by British musket balls. I told her that I

One April in Boston

was familiar with the Edwards marker over the tomb, and she was quite surprised when I was able to describe its exact location. I promised to send her a copy of the photo of my father and me next to the marker.

As our conversation continued, Jeannie told me that a painting of Captain Edwards existed. I was stunned. She responded, “Not only is there a painting of him, but also a painting of his father.” As if that wasn’t enough, she mentioned that I could also view his father’s original desk that the family had brought to Boston in the early 1700s. “Where could I see these?” I asked. She gave me the name of a relative in Plymouth, Massachusetts, and I contacted her.

In 1994 and 1995, I had the paintings and desk photographed. I also hired a genealogy researcher, Joan S. Leland, who was connected with the New England Historic Genealogical Society in Boston. Through Joan’s research, I learned that important birth information contained in my family’s 1812 Bible was apparently missing from both the Suffolk County records and the National Archives in Washington, D.C. The Bible was indeed the “missing link” in the puzzle. As the research piled up, it began to fill many boxes in my basement. I wondered how I might share it with others. The desire to share my family’s story combined with the internet connections in my business soon spawned a unique idea.

In 1997, I offered to create a website for the Paul Revere House. I would donate the site and my expertise in exchange for a dedication link off the homepage where I could share my research on the Edwards/Revere connection with others. The Paul Revere House accepted. The site, paulreverehouse.org, has been a great success. In May of 1999, I was honored when the Paul Revere Memorial Association elected me to its

The Story Behind *One April in Boston*

Board of Directors. During this time, the *One April in Boston* book project was born. After reading the *Revere Memorial* and learning of the family's Civil War legacy, I decided to integrate it into my story.

As research for the book continued, I learned more about Philip Edwards. I was told that all the children in his neighborhood loved and admired him. Like a "Pied Piper of Naugatuck," he was followed by children wherever he went. My 93-year-old grandmother, Mildred Edwards, was one of those children, and she remembered Phil. She rode in his wagon as he delivered groceries for the local market.

In 1997, an early photo of Phil and his parents was discovered in an attic by a relative. Previous to that, no photos of him had existed. In early 2000, with the help of a friend (Linda Skarnulis) who scanned through numerous rolls of microfilm at the *Naugatuck Daily News*, I was able to discover the content of two other letters Phil had written from France in 1918. From the newspaper articles, I also learned the names of Phil's sweetheart, Miss Ella Wininger, and his best friend, John Simmons.

As I learned more about the 26th Division, I discovered its strong connection to Boston. The division was formed in Boston in the summer of 1917. In April of 1919, the 26th returned there to a glorious "Welcome Home" parade. Because Phil was killed in France, he never had a chance to return to Boston with the 26th. Through this book, he can finally return to the place his ancestors called home.

Throughout 2000, I sought additional information on the Colonial Edwards family. With the assistance of Michael J. Leclerc, a project manager and reference librarian for the New England Historic Genealogical Society, I was able to discover the exact location of the Edwards home in Boston. By platting

One April in Boston

tracts of land near the Edwards property, Michael helped me determine that the family home stood on Back Street (now Salem Street) near the intersection with Cooper Street. It was two blocks from the home of Robert Newman and three blocks from Christ Church. After the deaths of Alexander and Sarah Edwards, the property was passed on to the children of Jedediah Lincoln and Betsey Edwards Lincoln.

In March 2000, with the assistance of Helen Wilmot of the Naugatuck Historical Society, I met a wonderful woman named Fran Jenkins. Fran, age 70, is the daughter of John Simmons and Ethel Elliott. John Simmons and Philip Edwards served together in the 26th Division. Fran shared her father's World War I diary with me and located a photo of Phil and her dad in uniform. From Fran, I learned the legend of the "star stone" and the content of a very moving letter her father had written to Phil's parents in 1918. Fran also told me that she was Ella Wininger's cousin and that Ella's little sister, Doris, lived in a nearby town.

Fran took me to meet Doris Wininger Harkins, age 90, several days later. Doris was just wonderful to speak with. Her memory took us right back to 1915. She remembered when Phil delivered groceries to their home. She recalled her sister's love of pond lilies and undying love for Phil. For six years, I had searched for the true purpose of this project. I discovered it the day I met with Doris.

Through *One April in Boston*, Philip Edwards and his sweetheart, Ella Wininger, can continue to have a positive impact on the lives of children. Their story of love and the gifts they gave to all who knew them will last forever. In their name, a donation will be made to the Paul Revere House, on an annual basis, to help fund educational programs for children.