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CAPTAIN BENJAMIN BEALE

by Larry Lowenthal

The Beale House is known to many residents of Quincy as the handsome home adjoining the Adams Old House in the Adams National Historic Park. The Beale House has been included within the Historic Park primarily as a contributing feature to the landscape around the Adams property. However, an examination of the life of Benjamin Beale, its builder, yields a picture of a prosperous man of business, very active in the early public life of the town of Quincy.

Biography

Captain Benjamin Beale (1741-1825) was the fourth generation of Benjamin Beales to live in Massachusetts. Born in Old Braintree (the term now used to denote the original town that comprised present Braintree, Quincy, Randolph, and Holbrook), Beale left home in 1758 to make his way in the world. He reportedly commanded a merchant ship by the age of 18, and he settled in Liverpool, England, as an employee of Thomas Smythe and Company. In 1767 he married Anne Copland, or Copeland, of Liverpool. The first of their ten children was born in 1768.

By 1772 Captain Beale was successful enough to commission his brother Joseph, still living in Massachusetts, to purchase for him several tracts of property, including acreage at Squantum, which was then part of Dorchester. The purchase of this American property suggests that in 1772 Beale was planning to return to the colonies, but was then delayed by the American Revolution. By 1780, Beale had become a partner in Thomas Smythe and Company; when he removed to America in 1784, he was a wealthy man.

In 1783, Beale, along with Thomas Smythe and John Johnson, chartered the ship "Thomson" with a cargo for Boston. This ship was followed in May, 1784 by the brig "Juno" bearing Captain Beale, his wife, five sons, and an infant daughter to this country. According to Fred B. Rice, in his 1915 "Genealogy of Captain Benjamin Beale," among the possessions Beale brought with him were three Copley portraits--of himself, his wife, and a child. There is, however, no record of the Beales having sat for Copley in Jules David Proun's book *John Singleton Copley* (1966). Apparently, Beale brought with him a large amount of furniture and silverware. His griffin's head crest adorned much of the silver and plate.

Between 1784 and 1792 the Beales lived on their farm in Squantum, where Benjamin had built a fine house on Sumner Hill. A tax assessor's report for 1784 shows that this was already a superb agricultural property at the time Benjamin Beale began to occupy it. The assessment lists one dwelling house, four barns, 12 acres of tillage, 90 acres English mowing, 3 ½ acres fresh meadow, 26 acres salt marsh, 67 ¾ acres pasturage, only two acres of unimprovable land, and no wood land. This is a distribution that could have been found only along the coast. The number of barns and the great capacity of pasturage gave Beale the potential to be a commercial seller of livestock, hay, or both; and his seaside location and connections in the shipping world enhanced this capability. With ample reason, Benjamin Beale was described in a note accompanying the 1784 Dorchester valuation as "the chief proprietor on

Squantum." Gentry status conveyed civic obligations, and in 1786 Beale was elected one of the Dorchester selectmen, although he had been back in the country less than two years.

Captain Beale traveled frequently around Boston. He made no less than six trips to Boston in the month of October 1788, and at least as many to both Braintree and "Little Cambridge." The Beales carried on a busy social life, enjoying the company of the leading citizens of Braintree. The Quincys, Cranches, Blacks, Apthorps, and Waleses were frequent guests at Squantum. This social activity continued without interruption at the imposing house Beale constructed just west of the John Adams property on the main road from Boston to Plymouth (now Adams Street).

Beale's purchase of this property, the former Joseph Crosby farm, had been effected through Beale's brother Nathaniel, probably before Benjamin Beale arrived in this country. By the end of 1792, while still residing in Squantum, Beale had erected what John Adams described in his diary as "the largest and handsomest house ever built in this neighborhood." Adams's appraisal was in accord with the findings of the official assessors, who in 1798 gave the Beale property the highest valuation in Quincy, even though it did not occupy a large tract of land. At \$3,000 it well exceeded the next highest (\$2,300), and there were no others valued above \$2,000.

Records indicate that Captain Beale was influential in the incorporation of Quincy in 1792 and that he was active in the town's religious, political, and social life. Adams family letters and diaries reveal many points of contact with the Beales. In 1787, Beale was appointed a Suffolk County Justice of the Peace by Governor John Hancock. In 1792 he became a member of the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Agriculture, and in 1797 a member of the Boston Marine Society. In 1800 he was a founder of the Neponset Bridge Company, and in 1823, two years before his death, a member of the Bunker Hill Monument Association. Beale died on January 29, 1825 at the age of 84 and left a considerable estate.

Business Activities

Only scattered glimpses remain of Beale's career at sea. A watercolor drawing of the ship "Betty" shows B. Beale as co-owner.

Beale's fortunes fluctuated dramatically once he settled in America, partly as a consequence of the upheavals in foreign relations and international trade that affected the new nation. Since the firms with which he was associated were importers of French wines and brandies, their prosperity varied with the troubles in France.

Captain Beale apparently went into business with his friend Peter Wainwright in Boston soon after his arrival, but this partnership lasted only a year. The Wainwrights kept Benjamin Beale, Jr. in Boston to prepare for Harvard and were close personal and business associates of the Beales for many years. Peter Wainwright and his brother Henry were also involved in the concerns in Liverpool. Beale's financial situation improved when he went into business with his son-in-law and nephew, Thomas B. Wales. This firm, called Wales & Beale and later known as T.B. Wales & Company, became a large and prosperous concern, engaged in foreign trade.

Reflecting the inherent risks of maritime enterprise, Beale invested in a number of unfortunate ventures. He capitalized the ships "Cynthia," "Raccoon," "Two Brothers," and "Rover," all lost off the coast of Africa. He also engaged in unsuccessful land speculation with his son Benjamin, Jr. in New York State. Beale also suffered devastating personal loss as five of his sons died in distant lands or at sea in the pursuit of his business activities, or in naval service: Peter, lost at sea in 1793; Joseph, lieutenant of the U.S. brig "Pickering," lost at sea in 1800; Robert, died in Surinam in 1803; Richard, captain of the brig "Traveller," lost at sea in 1807; and Thomas Smythe, died at Wilmington, North Carolina, 1815.

Beale also invested close to home, notably in the Neponset Bridge Company. While undoubtedly a valid business decision, this investment also represented a civic obligation.

Participation in Early Town Government

Town records indicate that Benjamin Beale was prominent in Quincy government during the early years of the town. In 1792 at Quincy's first

town meeting, Beale was chosen along with two others to serve on the first Board of Selectmen. In September of that year, he permitted his Squantum house to be used for inoculation for smallpox. In 1793 he was chosen both Selectman and Assessor. He served on numerous committees in the 1790s. In 1795 he was chosen representative to the General Court.

In 1808 Benjamin Beale performed a conspicuous and enduring civic deed by joining with "a few public-spirited citizens" to purchase the rights of pasturage in the Hancock Cemetery. This action protected the hallowed site from gradual destruction and facilitated its emergence as a shrine. As late as 1817, at the age of 76 Beale was still active in town affairs, sitting on the committees to settle with the town treasurer and to report on the poorhouse. The record establishes that Beale was not only active in town management over an extended period but tended to occupy the most responsible positions, particularly those involving fiscal matters. He was chosen repeatedly to represent the town before outside bodies, notably the General Court in Boston.

The period of Beale's active participation in Quincy town and church management has been regarded as a bucolic time. Writing in 1827, a local historian, George Whitney, observed that "For the past thirty years, this [religious] society has been more united perhaps than any other in our country." Later, Charles Francis Adams, Jr. called the period 1803 to 1854 "the golden age of town government" in Quincy.

Neponset Bridge Company

In the first decade of Quincy's existence, a group of its leading citizens formed the Neponset Bridge Company. The company was organized as early as 1800, since on January 21 of that year it petitioned the legislature for the right to construct a toll bridge over the Neponset River between their town and Dorchester. Benjamin Beale was among the initial proprietors, along with Moses Black, John Davis, John Phillips, and Josiah Quincy. The fact that Beale's name was listed first in the petition suggests that he was a leader of the movement. Beale was still a proprietor at least as late as 1818.

The legislature on March 11, 1802 granted authorization to construct the bridge. In the following year the company obtained an amendment which permitted crossing the river at a more favorable point, thereby allowing a saving of 25% in toll rates. Prior to the construction of this toll bridge, the route to Boston from Quincy and Braintree was circuitous and involved going over Milton Hill. This was the "old coast road" laid out in the 1640s. According to documents and plans presented by the company, the new route which opened October 28, 1803, saved over a mile and a half compared to the "upper Dorchester and Roxbury road" and more than two miles compared to the lower road.

Although the act of incorporation allowed the toll bridge a 70-year term of existence before the property had to be "delivered up in good repair," the toll system ended in 1863, about ten years before deadline. (The bridge itself survived until 1877.) This enterprise provided a steady return for some of Quincy's prominent residents.

Although Quincy contained a number of small businesses characteristic of rural communities, and although the nascent granite industry, the town's mainstay in the nineteenth century, was gaining in importance, Benjamin Beale's business activities were conducted in Boston and beyond. For this reason, his involvement in the Neponset Bridge Company takes on added importance. While it proved to be a sound and profitable investment, it was an obligation of members of his class to support public improvements to benefit the community.

The value of this enterprise to the public is demonstrated by the fact that in 1803 the town granted its right and title in part of an old road leading to Squantum to the bridge company so that it could complete the connection to the bridge. The bridge company's charter allowed it to "lay out and make a road from the meeting-house in Quincy . . . leading to said bridge . . ." However, the 1803 town act gave the company the right to take over an existing road "between Mr. Black's and the stone post at the corner leading to Squantum."

While the bridge proprietors may have begun by acquiring a public right-of-way, the connection they built was largely new roadway, and that built to greatly improved standards. With justification,

local historian William Pattee in 1878 described the old byway leading from the Quincy meeting house to the Milton-Squantum road as "a zig-zag sort of way." It made several right turns on its rambling course, and at one point the new road actually crossed it.

In common with the better-built turnpikes of the age, the new road--today's Hancock Street--represented a revolutionary approach to highway construction. Charles Francis Adams, Jr. observes that, "The way in which it was laid out and built--disregarding the lay of the land, crossing the marshes, cutting through hills, and filling the bog holes--was in strong contrast with the method pursued a century and a half before." He did not hesitate to assert it "dimly foreshadowed the coming railroad era."

By participating in this venture, Beale and his associates performed a service of lasting importance to Quincy. Prior to completion of the bridge Quincy had no regular stagecoach service; soon after, the artery created by the Neponset company became "a favored stage-coach route." Col. James Thayer began to run a baggage-wagon, in which he also carried passengers, from Quincy to Boston. This was succeeded in 1823 by a regular stage passenger coach with the honorable name "John Hancock." Charles Francis Adams, Jr. termed this "an epochal event" even though the stage at first only made four trips a week.

The road to the Neponset bridge, even if only a portion of it was entirely new, formed a spine which to some extent channeled the subsequent growth of the town. As early as 1818 a Neponset Bridge Hotel was in existence. The 1830 town map of Quincy shows at least eight houses and a school located directly along the road. An 1857

map shows the process continuing, with the beginning of a street grid and a cluster of houses in North Quincy adjacent to the bridge and along Hancock Street. Although by then the Old Colony Rail Road had also been completed, it is reasonable to conclude that the Neponset bridge and its connection facilitated urban growth, notably in North Quincy. And in the twentieth century, Hancock Street, relatively wide and straight and still leading to the only crossing of the Neponset, emerged as the main commercial artery of the neighborhoods lying between the city center and the river crossing.

This article is adapted from a paper on Benjamin Beale by Larry Lowenthal, National Park Service historian, written for the Park Service. The full paper is available in the Quincy Historical Society library. A second article adapted from this paper, discussing Benjamin Beale's role in the formation of the town of Quincy will appear as a separate article in an upcoming issue.

Erratum: our preceding issue, on Benjamin Tompson, should be numbered issue #39.

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