

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Salem Maritime National Historic Site
Salem, Massachusetts



A PACHYDERM'S TALE
Or, Where Did the Elephant Go?

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∞ Pickled Fish and Salted Provisions ∞
Historical musings from Salem Maritime NHS
Vol. I, no. 5 March 1999

For the last two hundred years, it has been a well established fact that Captain Jacob Crowninshield landed the first elephant brought to the United States at Derby Wharf in Salem upon the arrival of the ship *America*.

There is only one small problem with the story. It is only partially true.

Captain Crowninshield did purchase an elephant in India for \$450 as a venture opportunity and brought her back to the United States. Unfortunately for generations of Salemites, the elephant actually arrived at New York in April, 1796. While being exhibited there, a Mr. Owen offered to buy her for \$10,000. Captain Crowninshield's venture was quite a success.

Between the time the elephant reached New York and finally arrived in Salem, sixteen months had passed. During that time, she (Reverend William Bentley commented on the gender) toured throughout the eastern seaboard. By August, 1796, Baltimore and Charleston were on the itinerary. By November 7, 1796, in Philadelphia, curiosity seekers could visit her for twenty five cents at an exhibition which lasted throughout the winter.

According to the July 26, 1797 edition of the Boston Centinel, the elephant (she does not seem to have ever been given a name) had just recently arrived

from Philadelphia and could be seen at Mr. Valentine's at Market Square, for half a dollar. Could this be the origin of the rhyme:" I asked my mother for fifty cents to see the elephant jump the fence; it jumped so high it reached the sky and didn't come down 'till the Fourth of July?" It would not be totally unreasonable to think so.

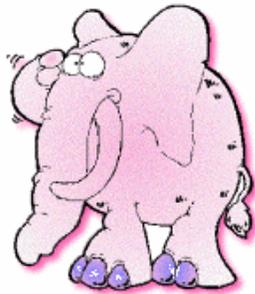
Apparently the elephant could not live up to the expectations of being airborne for a year. After a few days on exhibit in Boston, the less than hoped for visitation brought the price back down to twenty five cents. The public found this more attractive and the exhibition continued for nearly a month.

A broadside dated August 29, 1797, titled THE ELEPHANT announced her arrival in Salem. The next day Reverend Bentley "Went to the Market House to see the Elephant." The twenty five cent admission must have been acceptable to Salem's residents. Dr. Bentley remarked that the crowd prevented him from getting as close as he would have liked. He also noted a few interesting things about the size and habits of elephant number one. She is described as being six feet four inches high, of large volume (not surprising for an animal that has a fondness for malt liquor and all the friends that money can buy), was independent of the wishes of her keeper, her skin was black and shiny and otherwise looked like an elephant.

No reference has been located indicating arrival by ship at Salem. Traditionally, elephants walked from town to town while touring if the distances were not too great.

In an article by R.J. Brown: THE ELEPHANT COMES TO AMERICA, the author states that the elephant continued to tour throughout New England, the Carolinas and Pennsylvania, with the last recorded exhibition in York, Pennsylvania, in 1818.

By 1815, the celebrity of being an elephant was wearing thin. However, in that year Old Bet, the second elephant to emigrate to America for employment arrived. With visions of a career with Hackaliah Bailey (of circus fame), Bet booked passage from London with Hackaliah's brother, Captain Bailey, for a mere \$20. Unfortunately, Old Bet had a short and tragic life. She was shot while touring Maine in 1816.



Merchant Town Press • 1999

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