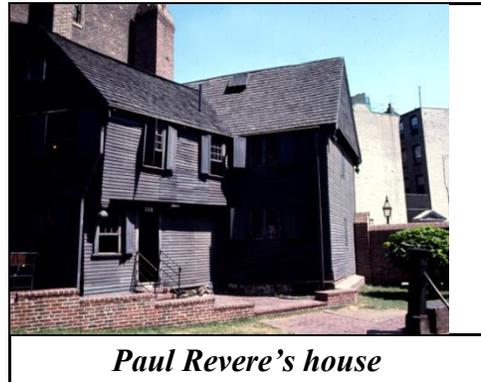


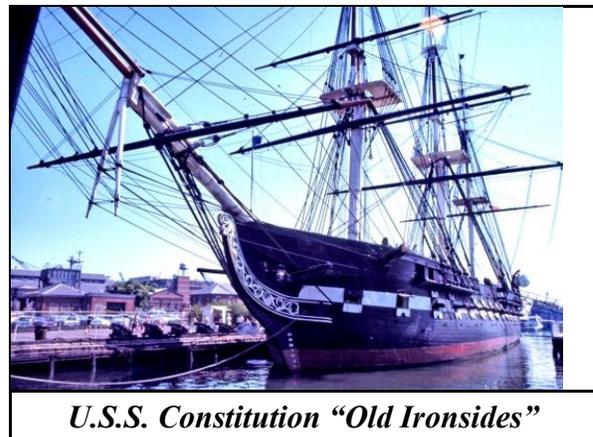
# **New England—Birthplace of American Freedom**

by Rob Ransone

Now is the best time for road trips through scenic woods to enjoy the brilliant colors as nature briefly dons her fall wardrobe in preparation for her long winter's nap. New England in the fall is renowned for its spectacular fall colors, and in the fall of 1968 we drove through New England to enjoy them. The advertising is not exaggerated. The colors were, indeed, glorious: but the greatest thrill of New England is its history. And now, with probably the strangest election year in history looming before us, is a good time to reflect on the rough road that finally created our great country. We visited Boston, Lexington, and Concorde. From our grade school history lessons we had all read Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's wonderful poem:



Listen my children and you shall hear,  
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,  
On the eighteenth of April, in  
Seventy-five;  
Hardly a man is now alive  
Who remembers that famous day and  
year.



We visited the Paul Revere house, which is the oldest house in Boston. A tiny, wood frame house painted a dark greenish gray that was probably milk paint

or stain appropriate to the period, it was two stories with an attic. The second floor overhung the first floor. There were several small, diamond-shaped leaded glass windows. But the most fascinating thing that struck us about the house was that it was 100 years old when Paul Revere bought it! We saw the Old North Church in which the two lantern lights in the belfry arch signaled that the British were going by sea. Paul Revere, waiting across the river, mounted his horse and galloped through the countryside into history.

We saw Faneuil Hall, the old market building, first built in 1742, that sits at the site of the old town dock. Town meetings, held here between 1764 and 1774 provided the meeting place for clandestine revolutionary war planning.

We even saw Mother Goose's grave in the old Granary Burial Ground in downtown Boston. Elizabeth Goose, believed to be the legendary author of so many charming children's rhymes, died in 1757. Many of the old



*The Bridge at Concord, Massachusetts*



*The Witches House, Salem, Massachusetts*

gravestones had the skull and crossbones engraved in the stones, signifying that here lie only the mortal remains of the departed souls. We visited *USS Constitution*, called "Old Ironsides" because cannonballs could not penetrate her tough, 21-inch thick live oak sides. One of the first of the original six

frigates that made up the US Navy, she is a 44-gun frigate built at the Edmond Hartt Shipyard,

Boston, Massachusetts in 1797. The ship served in the undeclared naval war with France (1798-1800), was the Flagship in the Mediterranean squadron in the Tripolitan War (1801-05). In the War of 1812 *Constitution* won battles with the British frigates *Guerriere* and *Java*. She made her last combat tour in 1814-15. The ship was scheduled to be scrapped in 1830, but Oliver Wendell Holmes's poem *Old Ironsides* inspired a public movement to save it, including thousands of school children's pennies.

Ay, tear her tattered ensign down!  
Long has it waved on high,  
And many an eye has danced to see  
That banner in the sky;  
Beneath it rung the battle shout,  
And burst the cannon's roar;  
The meteor of the ocean air  
Shall sweep the clouds no more.

Restored in 1925, *Constitution* is now the oldest commissioned vessel in the US Navy, presently serving as a museum ship at the Charleston Navy Yard in Boston, Massachusetts.

We visited Concord, Massachusetts, home of Henry David Thoreau, Louisa May Alcott, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and home of Walden Pond and the American Revolution. Massachusetts natives with Boston accents often pronounce Concord "kahn-kid."

We saw the field at Lexington where was fired the “shot heard ‘round the world”—the first shots fired in the American Revolution in a skirmish during the British Army's advance. About 700 British Army regulars under Lieutenant Colonel Francis Smith attacked and the outnumbered militia fell back. We walked across the small, wooden bridge at Concord, crossed the fields, and climbed the hill. From our vantage high upon the hill, looking out across the peaceful fields to the quiet little bridge on that bright, sunshiny fall day, without a cloud in the sky, it was hard to imagine the horrors of the fierce battle fought long ago. Three companies of the king's troops advanced across the narrow bridge towards the rough farmers and merchants waiting for them with their primed muskets from where we were standing. Then the order to “FIRE!” After a pitched battle in the open territory, the British Army broke ranks and fled from the Minutemen. On Turner Street in Salem we saw the Turner-Ingersoll Mansion, built in 1668, which was the inspiration for Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The House of Seven Gables*. We saw the secret passage described in the famous story. And, also in Salem, we saw the notorious Witches House where innocent men and women were accused of witchcraft. Fully restored at the corner of North and Essex streets, it was the home of Judge Jonathan Corwin, one of the magistrates involved in the Salem witch trials. It is the only structure still standing in Salem with direct ties to the Witchcraft Trials of 1692. From June through September of 1692, 19 men and women, all having been convicted of witchcraft, were carted to Gallows Hill, a barren slope near Salem Village, for hanging. Another man of over 80 years was pressed to death under heavy stones for refusing to submit to a trial on witchcraft charges. Hundreds of others faced accusations of witchcraft; dozens languished in jail for months without trials until the hysteria that swept through Puritan Massachusetts subsided. Only an unfortunate combination of an ongoing frontier war, economic conditions, congregational strife, teenage boredom, ignorance, and

personal jealousies can account for the spiraling accusations, trials, and executions that occurred in that dreadful spring and summer.

The Witches House is a scary looking house even today in broad daylight! A full two stories with an attic, three tall gables loom across the front of the house. The second floor overhangs the first floor as though reaching out to snatch the unwary. Tiny, diamond shaped leaded glass windows glower through the ominous dark gray, almost black, exterior. The house exudes a lurking evil even today, and I shivered involuntarily as we timidly entered for our tour. I doubt that any of the docents stayed there after dark—I know I wouldn't!

It's one thing to read of these places and events in school textbooks, and even to see reenactments in the movies or on Public Broadcasting Service specials. But it is something entirely different to stand on the deck of the Navy's oldest warship, built over two centuries ago, and imagine her fierce battles. To almost smell the gun smoke and to hear the shouts of the men, and to almost feel the heavy thud as the enemies' cannon balls hit her heavy oak sides and splash harmlessly into the sea; to stand in Faneuil Hall and imagine the discussions and arguments both for and against revolution. These "conspirators" didn't know what was going to happen, but were willing to risk everything based upon just an unfaltering belief that the present conditions were wrong and should be changed. Their planning was undoubtedly fraught with conflicting feelings of optimism, hope, confidence, uneasiness, and fear. In a revolution there is either total success or death. There is no middle ground. There was little if any history on republic forms of government or presidencies. Their best reference, perhaps, was *The Republic*, a Socratic dialogue written by Plato around 380 BC, concerning the definition of justice and the order and character of the just city-state and the just man. (Incidentally, we do not have a democracy, we have a republic. Nowhere in the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, or the

Pledge of Allegiance can you find the word “democracy.”). It is reported that a woman accosted Benjamin Franklin as he left the Constitutional Convention, and asked him: “Sir, have you given us a Democracy?” to which he replied: “No, madam. We have given you a Republic.”

Our Founding Fathers were making it up as they went along. They had embarked upon a hopeless battle, pitting their meager and untrained militias against the most powerful country in the world. England had the world’s greatest navy. It had defeated the Spanish Armada in 1588, and had enabled England to establish—and defend—colonies around the world: the eastern coast of America, India, Hong Kong, and Australia. Truly, the “sun never set on the British Empire.” In fact, the undertaking would probably have failed without the military support of France, which Benjamin Franklin orchestrated. Some of us refused to remember this during Bush The Second’s invasion of Iraq, when some of our shortsighted people renamed French Fries as Freedom Fries, and criticized France for not supporting our unilateral Middle Eastern war.

So our brave (perhaps foolhardy?) leaders voted to pursue this impossible task. Excerpts from Rudyard Kipling’s wonderful poem of optimism, *If*, perhaps puts it best:

... If you can dream - and not make dreams your master;  
If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;  
If you can meet with triumph and disaster...  
...If you can make one heap of all your winnings  
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,  
And lose, and start again at your beginnings...  
... Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,

And - which is more - you'll be a Man my son!

It was sobering to stand in the Old North Church, where the two lanterns signaled that the British were attacking by sea; and Paul Revere's house and remember that fateful night when he rode forth to change the course of history; to stand in the field where the first shot of the American Revolution was fired that would change our entire history—and, eventually, perhaps the history of the whole world—and imagine what was going through the minds of both the Minutemen and the British Redcoats. How moving to look down from the hilltop towards the old wooden bridge at Concord; to stand in the somber Witches House and feel the unspeakable terrors of these innocent and terrified—but doomed—people.

This was a wonderful experience for us: to feel this history come alive before our very eyes. To see, touch, smell, and feel these actual places where our country began.

Everyone who loves this country, and appreciates the sacrifices made during the last 240 years by all the brave men and women, military and civilian, since, who have defended and ruled it wisely in accordance with our brilliant forefathers' incredible vision and courage, should take this pilgrimage in order to truly feel the unique soul of our wonderful country.

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