

The Shadow of History and U.S. Customs

By Steven W. Hooper

To quote former U.S. Customs officer and author Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Time flies over us, leaving a shadow behind”. This quote came to mind recently after returning from a vacation to New England where I visited many sites related to the Revolutionary War and U.S. Customs history. As I checked into my Boston hotel, I was quickly reminded that time has flown over U.S. Customs and as each year goes by, the shadow gets a little longer.

The neoclassical U.S. Customhouse in Boston, where I stayed, was built in 1849. A distinctive tower was added to the building in 1915. This landmark structure remained the tallest structure in Boston and New England for the next fifty years. The Customhouse was declared “surplus property” when U.S. Customs moved into the Thomas P. O’Neil, Jr. Federal Building in 1986. The Customhouse building was then sold to the City of Boston and sat vacant for 14 years until it was converted into an 84-room timeshare resort by the Marriot Vacation Club in 1997.

CBP has placed a few exhibits throughout this building highlighting the history of USCS and INS. The resort is located steps away from all the Boston historical sites including the Boston Tea Party and the Boston Massacre sites. A short walk will take you to the *USS Constitution* (“Old Ironsides”) which was built with U.S. Customs revenue and launched in 1797. The *Constitution* was one of six ships built to reestablish the U.S. Navy which had not been maintained after the Revolutionary War. In the meantime, U.S. Customs revenue cutters provided our nation with our only armed maritime defense.

Next, it was on to Concord to visit the Minute Man National Historical Park. Here you can view the site of the opening battle of the Revolution and see where “the shot heard round the world” was fired on April 19, 1775. This is also the site of the famous Daniel Chester French Minute Man Statue. French is the sculptor that designed the four continents’ sculptures for the Alexander Hamilton Customhouse in New York and the statue of President Abraham Lincoln at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C.

Interestingly, I found out that Nathaniel Hawthorne once owned and lived with his family at the Wayside House that is in the park and can be visited by guests. Hawthorne is buried with other family members at the nearby Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in Concord.

Burlington, Vermont was the next stop on my itinerary. This city is the largest in the state and has been the headquarters of U.S. Customs operations since 1791. The city is located on Lake Champlain and only 45 miles south of the Canadian border. Many U.S. Customs officers from our generation will find it hard to believe that Vermont was once the most dangerous place for an officer to serve. The first three U.S. Customs officers to be killed in the line of duty were all slain in the state of Vermont.

When Congress passed the Embargo Act of 1807 and President Thomas Jefferson signed it into law, the stage was set for trouble. This Act prohibited any trade with Canada or Great Britain. Vermont merchants and farmers had long been doing business with Canada and without a place to sell their goods, they faced poverty. As has often been the case in our history, U.S. Customs was asked to enforce an unpopular law with inadequate resources.

At the nearby Ethan Allen Homestead Museum, there is a plaque memorializing the place where the first two U.S. Customs officers were slain in 1808. The incident has come to be known as the “Black Snake Affair”. Coincidentally, Allen’s widow Frances would later marry Jabez Penniman, the Collector of Customs in charge of the “Black Snake” operation. The 1906 U.S. Customhouse in Burlington has been sold and is now the site of the Chittenden County Superior Courthouse.

The 1858 Bass Harbor Head Lighthouse near Bar Harbor, Maine was our next stop. The lighthouse is a popular photo stop in Acadia National Park and a reminder that the early lighthouses and navigation lights on the New England coastline were built and supervised by the local customs collector. The U.S. Coast Guard continues to operate this now automated lighthouse.

Next stop was Portland, Maine to visit the U.S. Customhouse in downtown which was built from 1867-1872. This building is a testament to the importance of the port in the 1800s. By 1866 U.S. Customs was collecting \$900,000 annually making Portland one of the most significant ports in the nation. CBP relocated to another building in 2012, but other federal agencies continue to reside in the customhouse.

Continuing down the coast to Kennebunkport, Maine, we stopped to get a glimpse of the George H.W. Bush compound located on Walker Point. You might remember that Bush once led the Operation Florida drug enforcement task force during the 1980s and was involved in the development of the U.S. Customs famous Blue Thunder drug interdiction watercraft.

Our last stop was in Newburyport, Massachusetts to visit the former U.S. Customhouse which was built in 1834 and is now a maritime museum. This customhouse was closed in 1914 when shippers abandoned the port for the nearby port of Boston. Newburyport is said to be the birthplace of the U.S. Coast Guard because the first Revenue Cutter built for U.S. Customs (the *Massachusetts*) was built and launched in Newburyport in 1791. Today the museum features an exhibit on Coast Guard history.

As we returned to Boston for our flight back to Austin, I reflected on the fact that almost 20 years have passed since U.S. Customs was abolished. Time has flown over our accomplishments and left our legacy in the shadows. Our contributions to our nation were great and should always be part of the fabric of the America story. If the history of U.S. Customs is to survive, we must help CBP and ICE to carry our legacy forward into the future. We have completed our mission; CBP and ICE must take it from here.
