

About Jeremiah Lee

Though virtually unknown today, and essentially an enigma, save for his exceptional residence, Colonel Jeremiah Lee would have been a prominent figure in his day. A leading ship owner and merchant in New England's mid-1700s Atlantic trade in dried salt fish, which by 1765 had made Marblehead one of the ten largest towns in England's North American Colonies, Colonel Lee was among the most affluent businessmen in America just prior to the American Revolution.

Too soon however, Lee would lose his life and his family's well-being to the cause of independence. A militia Colonel and Patriot leader locally and regionally in the perilous regional politics that led to war, Lee committed significant financial assets to supply the growing rebellion, and acted covertly as well. Those efforts would cost him his life, due to his presence near Lexington with the secret committees led by John Hancock & Sam Adams in April 1775, as the British Regulars marched toward Lexington and to what became the first battle in a conflict that ended a full decade after Boston's incendiary Tea Party in December 1773. (After that, Marblehead & Salem became the official ports of entry for Massachusetts). Many in Marblehead were involved in dramatic episodes in 1775 & 76 ~ at home, at war, and at sea.

Marblehead residents suffered greatly from the war ~ among them, the extended Lee family. Their eldest son, a Harvard graduate, was a captain in the regiment his father had commanded and died in his mid-thirties soon after the war ended, leaving four children and a wife as a widow – a position in which several hundred Marblehead women found themselves by the 1780s. A nephew was taken prisoner, while another served as a Colonel through most of the war and became a friend of General Washington. The Lees' youngest daughter died in childbirth after her betrothed died at sea, their middle daughter married and disappeared with her husband and four children into the rapidly growing middle class, and the eldest daughter adopted both her youngest brother (Jeremiah) and her orphaned niece, while raising her own eight children (of 11 born) to adulthood, in genteel poverty. Her wealthy young husband, Nathaniel Tracy of Newburyport, died in 1796. Tracy, who was also the executor of Col. Lee's estate, had outfitted his trading vessels as privateers to attack British shipping, and lost nearly everything. All of his business records, and those of his father-in-law, Colonel Lee, are gone; perhaps a house fire in 1782, soon after the end of hostilities, is an explanation. The Lees' eldest son had inherited the family's first principle home, a block away from their later grand mansion, and all three girls married Newburyport men and lived their family lives there as well. Jeremiah's widow appears to have lived with her eldest daughter's family until the older woman's death in 1791 at age 61 – sixteen sad and difficult years after that of her husband Colonel Lee.

A fourth generation American, Jeremiah Lee descended from a Lee family in Cheshire, England. A great-grand-father had come to Cape Ann in 1650, possibly by way of Virginia. (Since the more famous Virginia Lee family had roots in the neighboring English county of Shropshire, the families could have been related farther back in time). Clearly an entrepreneur, Lee came to the thriving seaport of Marblehead at age 21, with his newly widowed father. Both married into a prominent and esteemed Marblehead family, and Jeremiah built what became of the largest commercial shipping operations of his day, with full ownership of 21 vessels at the time of his untimely death at age 52. A London newspaper implicated him in the events of April 1775, and intriguing bits of evidence prove the nature and international scope of Colonel Lee's public and covert activities on behalf of American independence.

For images of Colonel Lee, see the book, or the website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, CT, or the Marblehead Museum & Historical Society