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PAUL REVERE'S SIGNAL

*THE TRUE STORY OF THE SIGNAL LANTERNS
IN CHRIST CHURCH, BOSTON*

BY

THE REV. JOHN LEE WATSON, D.D.

WITH REMARKS ON LAYING DR. WATSON'S COMMUNICATION BEFORE THE
MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, NOV. 9, 1876

BY CHARLES DEANE



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PAUL REVERE'S SIGNAL:

THE TRUE STORY OF THE SIGNAL LANTERNS IN
CHRIST CHURCH, BOSTON.

At a stated monthly meeting of the Massachusetts Historical Society, in Boston, on the 9th of November, 1876, Mr. CHARLES DEANE, the Recording Secretary, laid before the members the following communication, —

Paul Revere's Signal.

Mr. DEANE said that some of the members of the Society would remember an interesting communication which appeared some months ago (July 20) in the "Boston Daily Advertiser," entitled "Paul Revere's Signal: The true story of the signal lanterns in Christ Church, Boston." It was written by the Reverend John Lee Watson, D.D., formerly of Trinity Church in this city, and now residing in Orange, New Jersey; and took the ground that the person who hung out or displayed the lanterns on Christ Church steeple, on the night of the 18th of April, 1775, was not Robert Newman, the sexton of the church, but John Pulling, a friend of Paul Revere. Dr. Watson's statement seemed to be conclusive, and to be fully concurred in by our historical

friends. Mr. Deane said that Dr. Watson had sent to him a slip from the "Advertiser" containing his article, with some corrections and additions; and he now communicated it to the Society, believing that it would find an appropriate place in our Proceedings.

PAUL REVERE'S SIGNAL: THE TRUE STORY OF THE "SIGNAL LANTERNS" IN CHRIST CHURCH, BOSTON.

To the Editors of the Boston Daily Advertiser: —

It will be remembered by many persons in Boston, that, last year, in the Centennial celebration of the events of the night of April 18, 1775, it was stated by my friend, the esteemed Rector of Christ Church, Boston, that the signal lanterns which directed the movements of Paul Revere on that night were "hung out on the steeple of the Old North Church" by one Robert Newman, who, it was said, was then the sexton of that church. Knowing that this statement could not be correct, and having my attention called to the matter by a kinswoman of mine, who furnished me with additional reasons for believing that the honor of aiding Paul Revere on that "night much to be remembered" belonged rightfully to a member of our own family, I addressed a letter to the reverend Rector, asking for the authority on which he had made such a statement. In his very kind reply to my inquiry, he told me that he "had received his information from Mr. S. H. Newman, son of the sexton, Robert Newman"; and that his story was supported by the remembrances of, 1st, an elderly woman, "Mrs. Sally Chittenden, now ninety years of age, who is the grand-daughter of John Newman, brother of Robert"; 2d, "of Joshua B. Fowle, living at Lexington, who knew Paul Revere, who often came with the other patriots of his time to his father's house. It was the common talk among them that Robert Newman put up the lanterns." 3d, "William Green, who lives at the North End, is the grandson of Captain Thomas Barnard. His sister, eighty-four years old, remembers Robert Newman." "All these say it was the universally received opinion that Robert Newman displayed the signal lights."

This is all, and I have no occasion to make any remark upon their evidence.

The reverend Rector also writes that "the sexton was arrested, but nothing was proved against him. After giving the signal, he made his way out of a back window of the church into his house, and was found in bed." And he adds: "Our records — that is, the records of Christ Church — fail us in the Revolutionary period, and say nothing about the signal lanterns."

Now, I have a story to tell, which, I think, will give a different aspect to this matter; and I claim "the honor of raising the signal lanterns" for Captain John Pulling, of whom I will relate all that may be necessary to substantiate his claim.

John Pulling, Jr., son of John and Martha Pulling, was born in Boston, February 18, 1737, and was brought up in Christ Church, where

his father was a warden in 1752-53, and a vestryman several years subsequently. He received his education in the town schools of that day, and before the period of the Revolution was established as a merchant, in extensive business. He married, first, Annis Lee, daughter of Colonel John Lee of Manchester, Mass., a well-known patriot of that day, and by that marriage was connected with Jeremiah Lee of Marblehead, "who," says a journal of those times, "was one of the most eminent merchants on the Continent; a member of the Committee of Safety, and a resolute asserter and defender of the liberties of his country." Mr. Pulling was also the brother-in-law of John Glover, and Joshua and Azor Orne of Marblehead, of William Raymond Lee and Marston Watson, all officers of the Revolutionary army. I find also in the "Records of the Boston Committee of Correspondence, Inspection, and Safety," recently published for the first time,* that he and Paul Revere are mentioned together as "Captain John Pulling and Major Paul Revere," and as chosen members of that committee; and from the titles given them it may of course be inferred that they both held commissions in the Continental service. It is also recorded, that "at a meeting of the freeholders and other inhabitants of the town of Boston, in public town meeting assembled, at the Old Brick Meeting-house," &c., it was "voted that Captain John Pulling, Major Paul Revere," and others, "be appointed a sub-committee to collect the names of all persons who have in any way acted against or opposed the rights and liberties of this country," &c. They were both also the associates of Hancock, Warren, Adams, and other leading patriots; and most noteworthy is it that Paul Revere and John Pulling, intimate friends from boyhood, *always acted together*. These particulars are sufficient indications of the character and standing of John Pulling, and the estimation in which he was held by the "men of the Revolution."

His first wife, Annis Lee, died August 11, 1771, leaving a son and a daughter; and in January, 1773, he married Mrs. Sarah (Thaxter) McBean, the widow of Major Duncan McBean, by which marriage he acquired a large property in the West Indies.

The following is Paul Revere's narrative of the events of the night of the 18th of April, 1775: "On Tuesday evening, it was observed that a number of soldiers were marching toward Boston Common. About ten o'clock, Dr. Warren sent, in great haste, for me, and begged that I would immediately set off for Lexington, where were Hancock and Adams, and acquaint them of the movements, and that it was thought they were the objects. On the Sunday before, I agreed with a Colonel Conant, and some other gentlemen," — in Charlestown, — "that, if the British went out by *water*, we should show *two* lanterns in the North Church steeple, and if by *land*, *one*, as a signal; for we were apprehensive it would be difficult to cross over Charles River. I left Dr. Warren, called upon a friend and desired him to make the signal. I then went home, † took my boots and surtout, went to the

* New England Historical and Genealogical Register, vol. xxx. p. 382.

† He lived at that time in "North Square."

north part of the town, where I had kept a boat. Two friends rowed me across Charles River, a little to the eastward where the 'Somerset' lay. It was then young flood; the ship was winding, and the moon was rising. They landed me on the Charlestown side. When I got into town, I met Colonel Conant and several others. They said they had seen our signals."*

Here, then, we trace the course of the movements on that eventful night. At ten o'clock, Paul Revere was sent for by Dr. Warren, who informed him of the intended march of the British to Lexington and Concord, and begged him to proceed immediately to Lexington and acquaint Hancock and Adams of the movement. He left Dr. Warren's residence in Hanover Street,† and then *called upon a friend*, — his most intimate friend, John Pulling, — and *desired him to make the signals*. This, of course, was the most critical and hazardous part of the whole enterprise. It was full of difficulty and danger, and required of any one who should undertake it the union of discretion and judgment, with a degree of courage and firmness which could contemplate certain death as the only alternative of success. The soldiers were in the streets, at no great distance from the church; and not only was there the risk of the light being observed in that quarter, but also, as Pulling said, "he was afraid that some old woman would see the light and scream fire."

No one who knows any thing of Paul Revere will for a moment suppose, that, having been intrusted with an important duty, he would have committed this most perilous part of it to any one but a *friend* in whose prudence or courage he could confide for life or death. Such a man was John Pulling: he had been, from boyhood, his most intimate friend: he had shared with him in the hopes and fears and deep anxieties of Warren and Hancock and Adams, and been acquainted with their most secret plans for alarming the people about the intentions of General Gage. He, then, it was who was "called upon" by his friend Paul Revere, and "desired to make the signals" which had been agreed upon between them.

As soon as he received his notice, he left his house,‡ and, watching his time, went over to the sexton's in the same street, and asked for the keys of the church, which, as he was a vestryman, the sexton could not refuse to give him. He then went into the church, locking himself in; and, climbing to the upper window of the steeple, he there waited for a favorable moment, and then hung out the signal of two lanterns, as had been agreed upon, by which those on the other side would "know that the British were going by water." In the mean time, Paul Revere had been "rowed by his friends a little to the eastward of where the 'Somerset' lay," to avoid detection by those on board; and, landing on the opposite shore, "had joined Colonel Conant

* Paul Revere's Narrative, Massachusetts Historical Society, vol. v., 1st Series.

† On the site of the present American House.

‡ In Salem Street.

and others" in Charlestown, who told him "they had seen the signals." Finding, also, that they had provided him with a horse, "he springs to the saddle," and starts at once on that "midnight ride" which the words of the poet have made famous.

. . . "And through the gloom and the light,
The fate of a nation was riding that night."

When it was discovered by the British authorities that the signals had been made from Christ Church, "a search was immediately set afoot for the rebel who made them." The sexton of the church was suspected and arrested. He protested his innocence; and, when questioned, declared that "the keys of the church were demanded of him at a late hour of the night by Mr. Pulling, who, being a vestryman, he thought had a right to them; and, after he had given them up, he had gone to bed again, and that was all he knew about it." This answer was sufficient to procure his release, and turn the search towards Mr. Pulling.

In the mean time, a Mrs. Malcolm, a Scotch woman, and wife of a near neighbor of Mr. Pulling, — who was under obligations to him for some service he had rendered him, — came to him with a message from her husband, "that he had better leave the town as soon as possible, with his family." And this he did, disguised as a laborer, on board of a small craft loaded with beer for the man-of-war lying in the harbor. In some way, one of the sailors belonging to the craft had known Mr. Pulling, and to him he confided his wish to escape from Boston with his family. The sailor said, "if the skipper of the craft should be on board, he would not allow of any delay; but if the mate, who was a good-natured fellow, should have the command, he would be willing to put him ashore on his return." This proved to be the case, and Mr. Pulling and his family were landed at Nantasket. How long he remained there is not known, — probably not long; but his wife and family continued to live there for some time, suffering from want of all the necessaries of life; for they had carried nothing with them, — every thing had been left behind. And when Mr. Pulling returned to Boston, — after the siege was raised, — he found his dwelling-house and stores and abundant means all so injured or destroyed, that at the end of the war all his property was gone. He died soon after, and the family at once removed to Hingham, Massachusetts.

Such is the true story of the "signal-lanterns," derived principally from the letters of my kinswoman, the grand-daughter of John Pulling, whose very clear and accurate accounts of the matter form the main source of the foregoing narrative. She also writes: "The story of the lanterns I heard from my earliest childhood from my mother and from my step-grandmother, and I never supposed there could be a doubt of its truth. I *know* that he held the lanterns on that night, but how can I prove it after all these years? If this sexton, Newman, — I never heard his name before, — was the person, and was arrested, as the Rector of the church says he was, is it very likely he could escape, and remain

in Boston? And are sextons, as a class, so intelligent and so reliable as to have been chosen for and intrusted with such an important affair? My grandfather was the *intimate friend* of Paul Revere; and because I knew this I inquired of Mr. Longfellow, a few years since, if he could tell the name of "the friend" in the poem. The answer he gave the person who made the inquiry for me was, 'that he found the incident mentioned in a magazine, and that it gave him the idea of the poem.' Is it probable that this *friend* was the sexton?"

I can add my own testimony to my kinswoman's statement, that I distinctly remember hearing my mother and my aunt, both of them sisters of Mrs. Annis Pulling, relating the same story in our family, and saying that they considered his "showing the signals on that night, at the peril of his life, as one of the most daring deeds of the Revolution;" and they were accustomed to speak of it, with justifiable pride, as characteristic of their brother-in-law, John Pulling.

Thus, then, we have the evidence of family tradition that John Pulling was the *friend* whom Paul Revere "called upon and desired to make the signals." And, if the probabilities in the case are considered, I think they will fully sustain the family traditions. To bring them all forward would be only to repeat the questions which have been so well put by my kinswoman, in the extracts which I have given from her letters. But, as I wish to submit the case to the impartial judgment of any one who can discriminate between truth and error, I ask again, Is it probable that Paul Revere would be likely to commit that part of his enterprise, on which every thing else depended, to any one but a tried and trusty friend, on whose prudence and vigilance, as well as fidelity and courage, he knew he could rely? And is it within the bounds of probability that the sexton of the church — perhaps no better and no worse than sextons usually were at that time — could have been such a friend of Paul Revere, and also an associate of Warren, Hancock, and Adams, acquainted with all their secrets and sharing in all their counsels?

And this brings me to another point, which appears to me to be conclusive on the subject. In Paul Revere's Narrative,* he gives an account of about thirty persons, mechanics and others, "who had agreed to watch the movements of British soldiers and tories." These patriots met at the Green Dragon tavern in Union Street. "We were so careful," he says, "that our meetings should be kept secret, that *every time we met every person swore upon the Bible* that they would not discover any of our transactions but to Messrs. Hancock, Adams, Drs. Warren, Church, and one or two more"; that is, to the committees chosen by themselves, to which both Paul Revere and John Pulling belonged.

And I ask, Is there a man living in Boston, who, with all the knowledge we have of the truly noble character of Paul Revere, can believe that he violated his solemn oath to Almighty God by intrusting to the sexton of the church that secret, which he had "sworn upon the

* As quoted in Frothingham's Life of Warren, p. 441.

Bible" he would discover to no one except to the committees, "Warren, Hancock, Adams, and one or two more"? I think not; and I maintain that this point alone, if duly considered, will be sufficient to set at rest the question about the "signal lanterns," and that tardy justice, delayed for a hundred years, shall at length be rendered to the name and services of a man every way worthy to stand on the page of our early history, as he had stood through life, side by side with his friend Paul Revere.

In the statements which have now been made, I trust that the Rector of Christ Church will recognize no want of that respect and regard which, he must know, I have always entertained for him; for, although it was only by the sanction of his name and position that the sexton story could obtain any notoriety, yet I am sensible that no fault can be imputed to him on this account, as it was not possible for him to be acquainted with the facts which have now for the first time been made public. And I indulge the hope that, when he has read this communication, he will be ready to acknowledge that the honor of "hanging out the signals in Christ Church," for the guidance of "Major Paul Revere," on the night of the 18th of April, A.D. 1775, belongs rightfully and exclusively to his friend "Captain John Pulling," merchant of Boston.

JOHN LEE WATSON.

ORANGE, NEW JERSEY, July, A.D. 1876.

MR. DEANE continued: Since the publication of that article, Dr. Watson had heard that some gentlemen here, who fully concurred in his opinion as to the agency of Robert Newman in displaying the lanterns, had some doubts as to the church itself from which the lights were shown; that is to say, whether they were shown from the steeple of Christ Church, or from that of the Old North Meeting-house, inasmuch as Paul Revere, writing in 1798, and Richard Devens, writing without date, but evidently some years after the occurrence of these events, both say "North Church." Feeling confident that Christ Church was the place at which the signals were made, and being desirous that those having any doubts respecting it should see the grounds of his opinion, Dr. Watson has written me a letter on the subject, which I now lay before the Society. (See page 173.)

Dr. Watson seems to me to be equally happy in establishing his last proposition; and in confirmation of his position that Christ Church was known at that period and called "the North Church," certainly some time before Paul Revere wrote his interesting account of the incident, I will read some extracts from an unpublished correspondence between a warden of Christ Church in Cambridge and Dr. Walter, Rector in 1792 of Christ Church in Boston; also one from the wardens

of Christ Church in Boston to a warden of Christ Church in Cambridge:—

I. *Jonathan Simpson to Rev. Dr. Walter*, 26 October, 1790: "Dr. Winship and the two Wardens of the North Church in Boston have just left me."

II. *Rev. Dr. Walter to Jonathan Simpson*. Shelburne, N.S., 5 November, 1790: "At the same time the Proprietors of the North Church were in a strange dilemma."

III. *Jonathan Simpson to Dr. Walter*, 2 March, 1791: "I am excessively mortified to hear that you have desir'd the Wardens of the North Church to procure you a house in their neighbourhood." "Nor had I any idea when I partially consented to an union with the North Church." "All the world (except the North Church people) consider you as engaged to us, nor must you blame us if we cannot consent to your residing with the North people." "I am sorry that the North Church take an undue advantage of our generosity in admitting them to an union with us. If you give up your residence among us, it is my opinion that our Church will not be connected with the North Church." "I see now I went too far in saying that we were willing to be connected with the North Church at all."

IV. *James Sherman and Charles Williams, Church Wardens*. Boston, 21 March, 1791: "We this day received yours of 5 March instant, directed to the Wardens of the North Church, Boston."

V. *Dr. Walter to Jonathan Simpson*. Shelburne, N.S., 5 April, 1791: "The two Churches of Cambridge and Boston North being united under me with an assistant." "I have only some fears in my own mind respecting the gentlemen of the North."

But it has been said that, although Christ Church may have been popularly called "the North Church" after the old North Meeting-house was taken down, yet it was never so called while the latter was standing.

This is a mistake, as I will now proceed to show.

The Rev. Mather Byles, Jr., while pastor of the First Church in New London, became an Episcopalian, and received in 1768 a call to Christ Church, in Boston, whose rector, Dr. Cutler, had died three years before. His acceptance created considerable dissatisfaction in the New London parish, and resulted in a conference between the pastor and people, an account of which was published that year, in a pamphlet of considerable interest.*

* A Debate between the Rev'd Mr. Byles, the Pastor of the First Church, in *New London*, and the brethren of that Church, held at the meeting-house, previous to his leaving said Society, containing the substance or heads of the Discourse which then passed. As also a specimen of one of the many volumes which Mr. *Byles* is supposed to have been convinced by, &c. By A. Z., Esq. See 34th chap. of *Ezekiel*. To which are added some remarks. *New London*: Printed in the year 1768. Sold at *Draper's* printing-office, *Boston*.

On the reverse of its title-page, the writer says, "As the Public are so very desirous of knowing the Reasons of Mr. Byles's leaving the Church of Christ, in New London, where he was so happily settled to all Appearance, in so unexpected a departure for Boston, without Time or Inclination of seeing or bidding any of his best Friends farewell; will let them know it is in Consequence of an Invitation of the Wardens, Vestry, &c., of the Episcopal *North Church*, Boston: which he has thought fit to accept," &c. Then follows the account of the Conference, near the beginning of which the minister says, "I will now communicate to you a letter I received from the wardens and vestry of the *north church*, in Boston, dated 8th of March," &c. (p. 3). "And since that have received a line from brother Walter, wherein he advises me: 'This day, at a meeting of the wardens and vestry of the *north church*, in Boston, they have come to the determination of sending for you to Boston,'" &c. (p. 4).

Mr. Byles's acceptance of the call to Christ Church made it necessary that he should go to England, to receive ordination; and he accordingly went, bearing a letter to the Secretary of the Society for Propagation of the Gospel, &c., dated "Providence, 5th May, 1768," of which the following is an extract: "Rev. Sir, — The bearer hereof is Mr. Byles, a New England gentleman, was bred a Dissenter; his Father the Doctor still a Pastor in Boston. . . He is now going to England for Episcopal Ordination, under I doubt not a full and clear Conviction of its superiority. He has accepted an Invitation from the *North Church* in Boston where the late Dr. Cutler was their long and faithful Pastor." . . .*

J. GRAVES.

Mr. Byles continued to be the Rector of this church till 1775, when the troubles of the Revolutionary war intervening, and his parishioners being divided in political sentiment, the church was closed. (Dr. Burroughs's Hist. Address, p. 24.)

Paul Revere, writing to Dr. Belknap, on the Lexington and Concord affair, in 1798, says that he had agreed with Colonel Conant and some others of Charlestown, the Sunday evening before (*i.e.*, two days before the 18th of April), "that if the British went out by water we would show two lanterns in the North Church steeple, and if by land one, as a signal, for we were apprehensive it would be difficult to cross the Charles River or get over Boston Neck." In saying "North Church," Revere would be likely to use a name which his readers, at

* Perry's Hist. Coll. relating to the Am. Col. Church, III. 336.

the time he wrote, understood; and we have just seen, in the correspondence above cited, in 1790 and 1791, that by "the North Church" Christ Church was intended. We have also seen that by that name Christ Church was known just previous to the time the affair of the lanterns took place. If Revere had meant to describe or refer to the "Old North Meeting-house," which had stood in North Square, and had been destroyed by the British during the siege, whatever name that old structure once bore, would he not have said so?

I now wish to call attention of members to Price's large map of Boston, dated 1743, on which all the churches of Boston are delineated. "Christ Church" is shown to have a very tall steeple, rising from a high tower; while the "Old North Meeting," as the inscription reads at the bottom of the map, has only a low tower or belfry, terminating abruptly in a point. Devens says the signal "was a lanthorn hung out in the *upper window* of the tower of N. Ch. towards Charlestown." Now the Old North Meeting-house had no "upper window" answering to this description. It had simply one window (if it may be so called), — an opening at the place where a bell may have hung. Christ Church, on the contrary, had both an upper and a lower window in its tower, above which its spire rose. The language of Devens, and also of Revere, — the only authorities hitherto relied on, — if carefully considered, clearly sustain the view advocated by Dr. Watson. Moreover, the position of Christ Church, elevated, just opposite Charlestown, was a fit place from which such signals could be seen. Not so, it is believed, with the Old North Meeting-house, as well from its location, surrounded by buildings, as from its having no tower or steeple or spire, properly so called.

A writer of bad verses (happily unpublished), residing in the vicinity of Boston, under date of "March 15, 1795," *three years* before Paul Revere wrote his letter to Dr. Belknap, and *fifty-four* years before Richard Devens's memorandum was published by Mr. Frothingham, thus commences his poem, entitled "Story of the Battle of Concord and Lexington, and Revere's Ride, twenty years ago": — *

"He spared neither horse, nor whip, nor spur,
As he galloped through mud and mire;
He thought of naught but liberty,
And the lanterns that hung from the spire."

* These verses were written on some half-dozen leaves of an old folio account-book, dated as above, and signed "Eb. Stiles." The detached leaves were presented to the Cabinet of this Society last year.

If not a uniform rule, certainly the general custom seems to have been, as Dr. Watson shows, to denominate the places of worship of Dissenters as "meeting-houses." On Price's editions of Bonner's map of Boston, 1743 and 1769, copies of each of which are in my own possession, we have the following marginal references to the body of the map: "The Old Meeting, Old North M., Old South M., Anabaptist M., King's Chapel, Brattle St. M., Quakers' M., New North M., New South M., French M., New No. Brick M., Christ Church, Irish Meeting-house, Hollis Street Meeting, Trinity Church, Lynds Street Meeting." (Many of these places of worship on Bonner's original map, 1722, were designated as "churches"; but that name was afterwards carefully erased, except where it was applied to Episcopal churches.)

Religious bodies known as "churches," a name dear to our fathers, were connected with every Dissenting, or what we now call Orthodox, religious society; comprehending a select body of the "saints," the visible Church. To this body the minister sustained peculiarly close relations. The whole society, in fact, existed for the Church, and was guided and governed by the Church which gave its name, so to speak, to the whole worshipping assembly. To speak, therefore, of Dr. Lathrop's Church was to speak of his worshipping assembly, not his meeting-house, or place of worship. The "Old North Church," as a religious body, worshipped in the "Old North Meeting-house." The location of these Boston "churches" may be seen in Fleet's Register, and other statistical books of the time.

Misapprehensions and errors arise by not paying sufficient attention to the meaning of words and terms as they are found recorded in old books. When the records of the "Old North Church" are spoken of, or when it is said that the "Old North Church" had owned a piece of land or other property, it should be known that the religious association, either the church or the society, is intended, and not the meeting-house, which could not properly be said to keep records or to hold property. Dr. Watson's letter to me here follows:—

ORANGE, NEW JERSEY, October 21st, A.D. 1876.

MY DEAR SIR,— Since the publication of my letter to the editors of the "Boston Daily Advertiser," I have received a great many letters from persons interested in the matter, all of which, with scarcely an exception, express the belief of the writers that "John Pulling was the man who showed the lights for Paul Revere on the night of the 18th of April, 1775"; and none of them intimate any doubts of Christ Church being the place where they were shown.

I have learned, however, from a friend that one or two gentlemen, especially conversant with the history of those times, "have the impression that it was "from the 'Old North Meeting-house,' not from 'Christ Church,' that the signals were put out." Having great deference for the opinions of those gentlemen, and being desirous of removing their doubts, I trust to your kindness to excuse the liberty I take in addressing you, as one interested in the subject, and asking you to do me the favor of bringing to the notice of those gentlemen, as you may have opportunity, the following reasons for my belief that the "steeple of Christ Church" was the place where the lights were shown by John Pulling.

As far as I am informed, the only objections to this statement, of any importance, are, first, that Richard Devens, a well-known patriot of that day, in a letter without date, but written probably in 1775 or 6, speaks of "the lights being shown from N. C'h.," — by which it is supposed he meant "North Church"; and, second, that Paul Revere, in his Narrative, written in the year 1798, twenty-three years after the event, makes use of the same term, the "North Church"; and it is claimed that, in both these instances, the words "North Church" mean "North Meeting-house."

In reply to these objections, I beg leave to state the well-known fact that the Puritan forefathers of Massachusetts, and the ministers and writers of their generation generally, were very scrupulous about applying the word "Church" to their "places of worship," and used it, principally, to designate the "communion of the society to which they belonged," as distinguished from the "non-communicating parts of the congregation"; both together forming "the Church and Congregation worshipping in the North or South Meeting-house." And so tenacious were they of this phraseology, that, if a few solitary instances are found to the contrary, they ought to be considered as the exceptions, which prove the general rule. Most persons are so well acquainted with this familiar fact, that I cannot but think it unnecessary to say any thing more about it, except to notice some instances which occur in the few books within my reach. In "The Siege of Boston" and "The Life of Joseph Warren," by Mr. Frothingham, it will be found, in almost every instance, that where the buildings are spoken of, and the words of the original writers are preserved, it is "Meeting-house" which is used; though often changed, or explained by the historian, to mean "Church." I may also refer to Dr. Belknap's writings, and particularly to the account of his visit to the camp in Cambridge, Oct. 22, 1776, where he speaks of "preaching in the Meeting-house"; and to the Diary of Dr. Sewall, the minister of the "Old South Meeting-house," as he always called it; and to Judge Sewall's Journal; and to Snow's History of Boston; and to Greenwood's "History of King's Chapel"; and to various articles in the Massachusetts Historical Collections; the "Journal of Deacon Newell"; "The Diary of Ezekiel Price"; and indeed, generally, to the journals and newspapers of those days. In a word, if one had courage and patience enough to examine the venerable and dusty piles of religious pamphlets, which

have accumulated in the closets and upper rooms of many of our large libraries, and to select from them the "dedication sermons," and other writings of the "pious and pains-full" preachers of those times, he would find, probably, more than a thousand instances of the use of the word "Meeting-house" to designate the places of worship of their own or kindred denominations, and scarcely one of the word "Church" being applied to any other than those of the Episcopal, or Church of England congregations. And, if he wanted additional proof of this, he might find it, perhaps, in that humble elevation in Roxbury, which they called "Meeting-house Hill," because they had built a place of worship there; which name, I believe, still remains, a perpetual memorial of the peculiar phraseology of our forefathers, in their religious nomenclature. From these and other considerations, and from the testimony of elderly persons to the same effect, I think I am justified in believing that the writers of those times, and people in general, when they spoke of the congregational places of worship, called them "Meeting-houses"; and that if Devens and Revere had meant the "North Meeting-house" as the place where the lights were shown, they would have so written it.

In the next place, I wish to call attention to the fact, that the custom of calling "Christ Church" the "North Church" began in pre-Revolutionary times, and prevailed very generally in the times of Devens and Revere. This custom arose from Christ Church being the most northerly church in Boston, and having a very lofty steeple, — at that time 191 feet in height, and after the gale in 1804 reduced to its present height, 175 feet, — which formed the most conspicuous landmark for vessels entering the harbor, and thence being well known, especially among the merchants and seafaring men, and generally among the inhabitants of the North End, as the "North Church." I have an impression, also, that it was so designated in the printed directions to pilots and masters of vessels entering the harbor. The Rev. Dr. Greenwood, in his "History of King's Chapel," — when giving an account of the "increase of Episcopacy in Massachusetts, in the year 1723," says: "And thus Dr. Cutler" — who had been a Congregationalist, and President of Yale College — "became the first Rector of the North, or Christ Church." I have a letter from a lady whose mother was a member of Christ Church in those times, who says "that, when young, she seldom heard it called by any other name than the North Church; and that she was twelve years old before she ever heard a Meeting-house called a Church, and then it was by a person from the South, and not a New-Englander." I have also lately been informed that the descendants of John Pulling's second wife say of her, "that she always called Christ Church the North Church," and whenever she told her story of the lanterns, which she was fond of repeating, said "that it was from the steeple of that church that they were shown." And this custom continued to a very late period, and, possibly, even now continues. And, in this connection, I may be permitted to add the testimony of my own experience, — now, of three-quarters of a century, — for, though brought up in Trinity Church, I had friends

and acquaintances in Christ Church, with whom I associated,—and in my boyhood I scarcely knew that that church had any other name than the North Church. In later years, in my intimacy with a very dear friend, who was then the Rector of that church, the Rev. Dr. Crosswell, when conversing together about the events of its former days, we were very much in the habit of calling it the Old North Church; and I have now before me letters from the same friend, after he left Boston, in which he speaks of it, in affectionate terms, as “the dear Old North”; and in the “Memoirs” of his life, written by his father, there are letters and pieces of poetry, dated from the “Cloisters of the Old North Church.” I conclude, from these and other circumstances that might be mentioned, that when Richard Devens wrote “N. C’h.,” he meant “North Church” or “Christ Church,” as the place where the signals were shown.

And all this applies to Paul Revere’s account, with still greater force. For, as is well known, the North Meeting-house was destroyed by the British in the year 1776; and afterward, “as the Old North Society had lost their Meeting-house, and the New Brick Society had lost their minister, the two congregations united, and worshipped together,” in the building called the New Brick Meeting-house. But Revere wrote his Narrative in the year 1798; and it is scarcely probable that, in that account, he would have referred his readers to a building which, twenty-three years before, had been “entirely demolished and consumed for fuel”; at least, without some explanation. And therefore I conclude, also, that when Paul Revere wrote “North Church,” he meant “Christ Church,” and called it by the name which was most familiar to himself and his readers.

Although it may be thought that enough has been said to resolve all doubts, yet I may be allowed to observe that all the probabilities in the case seem to be decisive in favor of Christ Church as the place. It appears from the records of that church, as quoted by the Rev. Dr. Eaton, in his historical account, in 1823, that “the Rector, the Rev. Mather Byles, Jr., continued his services till April, 1775, and then went to Portsmouth, N.H.”; and, also, that “from this time the church was closed till August, 1778.” This, of course, would render it easy for Pulling—a vestryman, having authority—to have entire control of the building, and go in and out, and do as he pleased, without interruption. Besides that, the steeple of Christ Church was the very best place for hanging the lanterns, so that the lights could be seen by Conant on the beach in Charlestown, and also be concealed from the British, who were, mainly, in an opposite direction. Now, to compare these circumstances with those of the Meeting-house. As far as can be ascertained from any and every source, it was a low wooden building, with a small open belfry, in North Square, immediately opposite the soldiers’ barracks, where the troops were then mustered, with sentinels at every corner and outlet. I cannot think there is the least probability that Pulling would choose such a place, where he would have found it difficult to enter without being discovered; or, if he succeeded in entering, and showing the lights, where they would

have been immediately seen by the troops, and where they could not possibly be seen by Conant on the beach in Charlestown. It is true that all the streets of the North End were full of danger that night, but it is plain that the North Square was the most dangerous of all; and it seems to me that the North Meeting-house, in the North Square, was the very last place that Paul Revere and John Pulling — who were not deficient in prudence and discretion — would have been likely to choose for their operations on that eventful night.

There is much more of this kind of evidence which might be brought forward; but I will only add, at present, that some weight should be given to the fact that the two traditions, though disagreeing as to the man, yet concur in representing Christ Church as the place; and that it was the sexton of Christ Church who was suspected and arrested, “because the lights were shown from the steeple of that building.”

And now, sir, I cannot but think that these considerations will be sufficient to remove the doubts which may have arisen in the minds of others; and — in the absence of any evidence to the contrary, or in favor of any other place — to incline them to believe that the “steeple of Christ Church” was the place where John Pulling “showed the lights,” at the request of his friend Paul Revere.

But, whatever may be the result, I feel well assured that these views will receive impartial consideration; and am, sir,

Very respectfully,

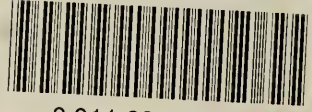
Your obedient servant,

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