Episode 906 Story 2 – Kittery Telescope

Elyse Luray: Our next case asks who was the owner of this spyglass, and what can it reveal about America’s naval past. October 13, 1775. Seven months after the outbreak of the Revolutionary War, the Second Continental Congress establishes a navy to pursue the fight for independence. Outnumbered by the vast British fleet, the colonies’ thirteen frigates will have to rely on tactics, technology and tools. But did the real test of colonial America’s nautical strength actually occur thirty years earlier? Now, Kittery Point, Maine native Greg Rivers thinks he has an instrument that may have played a role in one of America’s earliest military conflicts.

Greg Rivers: I’ve always wondered what’s been seen through this telescope.

Elyse: I’m heading to Kittery Point, Maine to meet Greg.

Greg: Here’s the telescope.

Elyse: Okay. Where’d you get it?

Greg: I got it from my great aunt. I purchased her house back in 1973. And as part of purchasing the house they were selling all of her worldly goods, so I got to go around the house and look and see what was there, and I found this telescope.
Elyse: Greg says his aunt had no information about the telescope, but his family’s been in Kittery Point for over 350 years, and many of his ancestors were sailors. Who do you think the original owner is?

Greg: Well I’m sort of hoping that the original owner is William Bray.

Elyse: Who’s William Bray?

Greg: My great-great-great-great grandfather who was the boatswain on the USS Raleigh which was the first frigate to be built by the Continental Congress during the Revolutionary War.

Elyse: But Greg says the owner could have been other navy men on his family tree including a Revolutionary War seaman named Andrew Phillips, and an even earlier ancestor, Sir William Pepperrell. What exactly do you want me to find out?

Greg: If in fact it was used during the Revolutionary War, and who in fact used it.

Elyse: I want to give the telescope a test run, so Greg’s pointed me to a favorite spot. You have to feel this thing to believe it. It’s unbelievably light. It feels like a whiffleball bat. I’m used to seeing telescopes that are heavy. There’s a lot of brass on them. They’re very complicated. This is just a simple piece of wood.

Elyse: There’s a brass piece at each end holding a lens. And on this end there’s some type of grip. The glass is pretty clear, but it’s hard to keep steady. I don’t know, Revolutionary War? That would make this over 230 years old and I would expect it to be in worse shape. I’m narrowing my search down to Kittery Point,
Maine, 1775, the beginning of the American Revolutionary War. Top hit, here’s William Bray. “Enlisted as a boatswain at 15 dollars per month on board the Continental frigate, “Raleigh” at Kittery. And probably remained on her until her capture on September 28, 1778.” Let’s see what happened.

After a century of increasingly oppressive British colonial rule, the stirrings of American independence exploded into full revolt in 1775. That year, the Second Continental Congress created the Continental Navy, and within a year, launched 13 frigates. This is the birth of the American Navy. And Greg’s ancestor was right in the middle of it. In 1778, the frigate, Raleigh, was en route from Boston to Virginia when she engaged with two British warships. A running battle ensued. Outgunned, the captain grounded the ship and ordered it burned, but the crew was too late. The British captured Raleigh for the Royal Navy. Bray must have seen some pretty dramatic sights if he used this spyglass on the Raleigh. But I still have two other names to run down. Here’s Andrew Phillips. He’s listed as a Revolutionary War soldier. But the name is so common. Pepperrell was the other name he gave me. Let’s see what I get. Okay, here we go. He was one of the wealthiest colonists, and commanded a military expedition to Nova Scotia in 1745. Here’s his portrait. He’s holding something. It could be a scroll but it might be a telescope. If it is our telescope, it’s missing the brass ends. But Pepperrell died in 1759. That’s 16 years before the Revolutionary War began. William Bray might be our man.

I think I need to learn a little bit more about what type of telescope we have here. I’m heading to the Maine Maritime Museum to meet Dr. Marvin Bolt. An expert in antique optics, he’s astonished at what has been sitting in Greg’s house.
Marvin Bolt: This is absolutely fantastic. I’ve been looking at telescopes for about 15 years. There’s only one other one I know that’s like this.

Elyse: Marvin says our telescope is called a three-foot glass.

Marvin: The wood tells me that it’s a naval telescope. Anything that’s made out of metal would rust, and that wouldn’t last on board ships.

Elyse: And how does it work?

Marvin: So at the very end here we have sailor’s braid work that would be used as a grip to hold this on board ship. You would hold it and then I, being the captain and the boss, would hold the other end of the telescope and look for whatever it is I’m looking for.

Elyse: How do you date a piece like this?

Marvin: Well, let’s take a look at a few other examples from a little bit later and we’ll see how they’re the same and different.

Elyse: Both of the museum’s telescopes date to the late 18th century. Marvin says ours uses much older technology.

Marvin: The biggest problem with a telescope like this is that it’s not very portable. So, eventually, instead of having one long tube that is fixed in length, you have a telescope that actually collapses. The other difference is that the lens here is only one piece of glass whereas these are two pieces of glass.
Elyse: And how do you know that?

Marvin: In our telescope because it only has one piece of glass, we’ll shine the laser light on it you’ll only see the one dot. These two have a lens that’s made out of two pieces of glass. I’ll just shine my laser pointer here so you see a bunch of dots there.

Elyse: Interesting.

Marvin: The technology of having two pieces of glass to make one lens comes around 1750.

Elyse: By the time of the Revolutionary War, he says, our telescope was a technological dinosaur.

Marvin: It’s like using a cell phone from the 1980’s, you could still use it. But why would you use it if you have a little flip phone that you can put in your pocket?

Elyse: How old do you think it is?

Marvin: Based on all the evidence, I’m pretty confident that this telescope dates from between 1740 and 1760.

Elyse: Marvin says Greg’s telescope is an extraordinary discovery.
Marvin: This is one of the oldest naval telescopes in the country and in fact, in the world. So who was supposed to have owned this telescope?

Elyse: The owner thinks that it was an ancestor who fought in the Revolutionary War and he was a boatswain. Marvin says boatswains like William Bray ranked low on the naval hierarchy and, more importantly, payscale.

Marvin: A boatswain probably wouldn’t have any use for something like this. This telescope would have cost about three pounds. To put that in perspective, that’s about a third of a salary of a soldier or a laborer. Eventually the price comes down.

Elyse: But Marvin says during the Revolutionary War period, our telescope was still pricey and not likely to have been used by a boatswain. That rules out both Bray and the second possible family owner, Andrew Phillips. You know the owner of this telescope has another ancestor, William Pepperrell, who was a very wealthy colonist. And he fought in Nova Scotia in the 1740s.

Marvin: He sounds like a great suspect.

Elyse: Did this spyglass see action in the years before the Revolutionary War? Colonial historian, Steve Eames, meets me at Maine’s Fort McClary, a defense works built by Sir William Pepperrell. Steve says that if Greg’s telescope dates between 1740 and 1760, it could have played a part in one of the most significant military engagements of the pre-Revolutionary period.
Steve Eames: Well if it’s that old and it belonged to William Pepperrell, it was probably at the Siege of Louisburg in 1745.

Elyse: He explains how decades before the American Revolution, the struggle for power in Europe between the French and the English had spilled over to their colonial territories. In 1744, the English Crown had its eyes on French Canada and the rich fishing waters of the Outer Banks. Both were protected by the fortress at Louisburg on Cape Breton.

Steve: In 1745, it was determined that Louisburg was actually vulnerable to attack, and William Pepperrell was named as commander of that expedition.

Elyse: Steve explains how the French and the English each turned to their colonial subjects for military support. Over 4,000 New Englanders from four colonies signed on with Pepperrell under the banner of King George.

Steve: They were fishermen and farmers and laborers and so forth. They were not trained as soldiers.

Elyse: On March 24, the colonists’ makeshift fleet of merchant vessels set sail for the dangerous assault on the French superfortress.

Steve: The Island Battery, Grand Battery were perfectly positioned to basically pulverize these ships if they tried to get into the harbor.
Elyse: Pepperrell would attack from land. After hauling their cannon within range, the amateur soldiers began pounding the fortress walls. How would the telescope have come into play?

Steve: A siege involved breaking down the morale of the defenders through artillery fire. And he would have to observe Louisburg through a telescope like that every day to see the damage that his cannons were doing to the fortress.

Elyse: After a prolonged siege, the final assault was prepared.

Steve: The naval squadron was going to sail in, and the colonists were going to attack the fortress, but at that moment the French decided to surrender.

Elyse: So, it was a victory for the colonists?

Steve: This was a tremendous colonial victory.

Elyse: The New Englanders had won the fort for the English crown, but they had done it with native cunning and bravery. It was a victory that would one day haunt the English.

Steve: In their perception they had captured a European style fortress defended by European professional soldiers. And as the American Revolution approached they all remembered this. We did it once before, and we can do it again. It gave them the confidence that they could take on another European army.
Elyse: So there’s a chance that this telescope could have played a role in that battle?

Steve: Absolutely. It would be an every day use.

Elyse: Any idea how you think I can connect this telescope to Pepperrell?

Steve: Well, the Pepperrell papers are preserved. The problem is a wealthy man like William Pepperrell, to him this was a rather mundane everyday object and he may not have mentioned it in his correspondence.

Elyse: I’m heading to the Portsmouth Athenaeum in New Hampshire, where many of Pepperrell’s papers are archived. Tom Hardiman, Keeper of the Archives, has agreed to help me look through them.

Tom Hardiman: Here’s Sir William Pepperrell.

Elyse: Life size. So do you think he’s holding a telescope in that portrait?

Tom: Well the jury’s out on that. It looks like it’s more like a map or a chart or something like that.

Elyse: Alright, well let me show you our telescope. I’m trying to find out if Pepperrell used this during the Battle of Louisburg.

Tom: It would be so exciting because not many artifacts from the Battle of Louisburg that survive.
Elyse: If this did belong to him, do you think he might have mentioned it anywhere?

Tom: Well we have a lot of Sir William's personal papers.

Elyse: Many of the Pepperrell family wills, inventories, and letters are kept here in the archive.

Tom: Here's one collection.

Elyse: Okay, I'll take those.

Tom: You go through that stuff. I'll go through the manuscripts.

Elyse: First up is Pepperrell’s 40-page will. I'm finding a lot of big property here. I'm not seeing anything small. Tom’s not surprised. He tells me the Pepperrells were among the richest families in America, with an estate stretching the first 30 miles of Maine’s coast.

Elyse: I am not seeing anything here. Are you finding anything?

Tom: No, this is mostly business material.

Elyse: Here’s a copy of his journal. Let's check the Louisburg months. Listen to this. “Tuesday, June 11. Went to Grand Battery and viewed the city and Island Battery with glass.”
Tom: Well that means spyglass. That’s certainly a telescope.

Elyse: But there are no details to match to ours. Most of these papers deal with Pepperrell’s life after Louisburg. Okay, that’s it. That’s all the Pepperrell stuff and I’m not finding anything.

Tom: A lot of the items from the Pepperrell family descended through the Sparhawks. We have a probate inventory for what was left in the house after the last Sparhawk died.

Elyse: Okay, where is that list?

Tom: That’s in the Sparhawk family file.

Elyse: Tom says the Sparhawk family included Pepperrell’s grandson and heir. Knives, forks, leather chairs. Okay. What currency is all of this?

Tom: It must be dollars. It’s 1818.

Elyse: A silver snuff box, $2.50. A pair of gold sleeve buttons, $4.50. Ah, look at this! Greg’s going to want to hear this.

First of all, thank you, because this was an amazing investigation, not only into American history, but really into your family’s history. You wanted to know if your telescope was used in the Revolutionary War, and it wasn’t.
Greg: Oh, well, I was sort of hoping.

Elyse: I explain how William Bray likely could not have afforded such a telescope which would have been mostly obsolete anyway by the time of the American Revolution. That’s when I started digging into your other ancestor, Sir William Pepperrell.

Ah, look at this! A telescope, $1.50. How much was that in 1818?

Tom: That would be about 2 pounds at that point.

Elyse: Marvin Bolt said our telescope would decrease in value, and cost less than three pounds by the 1800s. Do you think that this telescope could be William Pepperrell’s?

Tom: It’s in the house. It’s from the family. It’s a good paper trail. It’s a very good match.

Greg: That’s awesome!

Elyse: We can’t say with certainty that this telescope saw action at Louisburg, but I explain how that battle, and the fighting spirit of Pepperrell’s New Englanders, was early evidence of the prowess of the Americans in confronting a European army. You can say, I have ancestors that fought not only in the American Revolution but the predecessor, and I have something that actually represents that. I tell Greg he owns one of the earliest naval telescopes in America.
Greg: That’s amazing, absolutely amazing. I would never have thought that. It really amazes me that my family was really involved with the very beginning of America, the very beginning of the United States.

Elyse: Do you think you’ll look at the telescope in the same way?

Greg: Now, I’m wondering how many eyes looked through this telescope and what they saw on the other end. Perhaps coming into Louisburg and seeing the fort and seeing the cannons firing. Just, your imagination goes wild.

Elyse: In 1760, the British destroyed Louisburg to prevent further use. Two hundred years later, the Canadian government launched a 23 million dollar restoration project. Archaeologists, historians, engineers and architects spent 20 years rebuilding a quarter of the city stone by stone, guided by colonial French documents. Today, Louisburg remains the largest historical reconstruction site in North America.