



Episode 909, Story 1 – 1775 Almanac

Elyse: This case opens an aging bundle of papers and turns the pages to the chaotic and controversial first days of the American Revolution. 1775. The American colonies are engaged in a David and Goliath struggle with the world's most powerful military force. The oppression of British rule had boiled over two years earlier in the Boston Tea Party and the state of Massachusetts is now at the heart of the violent struggle to give birth to a new nation. But not everybody supports the patriots. A powerful minority backs King George, and is fighting to keep America a colony.

Shep Williams from Dennis, Massachusetts has an almanac with scribblings that might be a window into the first fumbling days of the United States.

Shep Williams: I don't know who owned this but he may have lived right in the middle of the Revolutionary War.

Shep: Hi, Elyse. Come on in.

Elyse: Thanks.

Shep: Here it is.

Elyse: Okay.

Shep: An almanac from 1775.

Elyse: Ok, Nathaniel Ames.



Shep: It's been in my mother's side of the family for a number of years passed down. And there are some interesting annotations in the margins. Someone had apparently been using it as a diary. For instance in April on the 19th of 1775 it says there was a battle fought. Which we assume is the battle of Lexington and Concord. Further on it notes that Charlestown burns by the regulars.

Elyse: That lines up with the Battle of Bunker Hill. It's potentially an extraordinary document, a mix of personal detail and a record of the violent birth of the nation.

Elyse: What about all of these names? Have you ever researched them?

Shep: No, I never did.

Elyse: Okay, one cryptic notation has always held Shep's particular fascination. On April 25th, the author notes, "Son Jos. sailed for England." The date is just six days after Lexington and Concord.

Elyse: And what exactly do you want me to find out?

Shep: Who owned the almanac and the significance of his notes?

Elyse: I'm gonna take it with me and I'll see what I can find out.

Shep: Very good.

Elyse: Okay, let's take a look. On the cover it says, "An astronomical diary almanac for the year of our Lord, 1775. And it's by Nathaniel Ames. An almanac was like a calendar. It told you holidays, it told you about the sun rising, the



moon setting, the tides. The typeface and paper seem to be 18th century. It's in really good condition. I'm kind of surprised because you would expect someone to be holding it a lot. But there is wear to it. The information is pretty standard for an almanac. But honestly it's the inscriptions that are so fascinating. There's nothing to identify the owner, but the entry that caught Shep's attention could be a lead: "Son Jos sailed for England with Captain Brown."

The author mentions their son again. It says here, "wrote my son Joseph -- Kay or Tay -- via Barnstable. I don't know what Kay or Tay is -- it could be a last name, it could be a middle name, it could be a nickname. But it's definitely something to go on. Joseph Tay or Kay I'm not getting anything. There's lots of notations about when people died. Josiah Brown. Reverend M. Bowman. Joshua Vose. Most of these individuals lived in Massachusetts, several from the town of Milton, less than 10 miles from Boston. The almanac's owner is obviously taking great interest in what's going on in 1775. There are entries on battles, deaths and generals. Was our author also in the military? My strongest lead may be the writer's son Joseph who departs for England just six days after the beginning of the Revolution? Are you escaping the war? Are you part of the war? Who would be able to do that?

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Joseph J. Ellis of Mount Holyoke College is one of America's foremost scholars in Revolutionary War-era New England.

Joseph J. Ellis: Hi, Elyse. Welcome to Mount Holyoke.

Elyse: Thank you. Have you ever seen an almanac like this before?



Joseph: Sure. This is an Ames almanac, Nathaniel Ames. It's probably the most popular almanac in mid-18th Century New England.

Elyse: It was the first almanac printed in the North American colonies and sold over 60,000 copies. Do you have any idea who would have owned an almanac like this?

Joseph: Almost surely the owner of this is a man. The literacy rate among men is twice as high as women and the men are the farmers who are trying to make decisions about crops and stuff.

Elyse: Joe says the Revolutionary generation – the patriots who would soon fight for liberty – was for the most part, made up of farmers.

Joseph: This man is living through one of the most difficult, controversial, passionate, dangerous moments in American history.

Elyse: He can't tell us who our almanac belonged to, and doesn't recognize the son's surname. But he suggests the annotations put the author at the birthplace of the American Revolution: the deeply divided state of Massachusetts.

Joseph: In laymen's terms the American Revolution begins in Massachusetts in 1775.

Elyse: A lot of the people that are from Milton, Massachusetts. Does that mean anything to you?



Joseph: Ah! Milton is the main town in Suffolk County. It's a place where there are wealthy merchants with reasonably nice houses. Many of whom end up being Loyalists. Whose primary allegiance remains with the British Crown and British Parliament. But it's also surrounded by a population in Suffolk County that's among the most radical Whigs or patriots in America.

Elyse: Joe explains how in 1774, as punishment for the Boston Tea Party rebellion, the British parliament retaliated with what were known as the intolerable acts, closing the Boston port and stripping Massachusetts of its right to self government.

Joseph: The issues being raised in Massachusetts in 1774 are all the issues that are going to bring about the American Revolution.

Elyse: In response, delegates from Boston and town leaders from Suffolk County drafted what were known as the Suffolk Resolves, a sort of precursor to the Declaration of Independence.

Joseph: The Suffolk Resolves essentially said we don't recognize the legitimacy of the British government's decisions.

Elyse: The resolves branded the acts as "the attempts of a wicked administration to enslave America" and urged colonists to "acquaint themselves with the art of war as soon as possible."

Joseph: And if you said anything hostile about the Suffolk Resolves or something positive about the British army you were called out. Your name was printed in



the paper, people were told not to talk to you. So there's a real split, a real Civil War going on here between patriots -- and Loyalists.

Elyse: It says here, son Jos sailed to England with Captain Brown and its 6 days after the battle of Lexington and Concord. Who would go to England in 1775?

Joseph: Well one reason could be that he's a merchant and he needs to go back to help settle business. Another is that there's this is violent time and it's a small pox epidemic going on and you simply are sending your child out of harm's way. But the fact that this man sends his son back to England suggests to me that it's highly possible that this man is a Loyalist.

Elyse: Joe puts me in touch with Maya Jasanoff of Harvard University, an expert on Loyalists during the Revolution. She asks to meet at the Boston Atheneum Library, with its outstanding collection of Loyalist reference material.

Okay there's one inscription that I particularly wanted to talk to you about. If you look closely, it says here, "April 25, son Joseph sailed for England with Captain Brown." Now that's six days after Lexington and Concord.

Maya Jasanoff: You know, it makes sense to me that somebody who was very uncomfortable in this environment because of maybe their political views might be thinking about leaving.

Elyse: She suggests that the date of the almanac and departure for England are early in the Revolution and might be clues.



Maya: So a year later in 1776, the British actually lost control of Boston to the patriots and they decided to evacuate. And when they left they took with them about 1200 civilians from Boston. And those people went as refugees and they went for free on British ships.

Elyse: Maya says those who stayed in Boston under British protection faced persecution.

Maya: Massachusetts actually passed a law in 1778 against Loyalists where the state took away their property and also banished them because they were now traitors against the state.

Elyse: A large population of Loyalists fled to Canada.

Maya: So this guy was leaving even before it seemed really necessary to go.

Elyse: So what does that say about him?

Maya: That suggests that he was probably reasonably well off. That he's paying for his own passage. That he feels that there are reasons that he should get going even before it becomes really important for so many others in a situation of open war.

Elyse: But Maya's not familiar with Joseph Kay, or Tay, as a known supporter of the British crown.



Maya: But, if he was a Loyalist, there is one place we could try to find him. There's a great biographical work called Sabine's American Loyalists. And it's a list of a lot of Loyalists and we could maybe check and see if he's there.

Elyse: Originally published in 1847, Lorenzo Sabine's "Biographical Sketches of Loyalists of the American Revolution" is a 1,200 page reference compendium, sketching the lives of everyone from Royal Governor Thomas Hutchinson to the lowliest street sweep. C-a-s -- Cayford.

Maya: Cayford could be an abbreviation.

Elyse: Yeah, but it says Richard. So that can't be it.

Maya: No.

Elyse: Is there a Joseph?

Maya: Nothing like that here, let's check the letter T.

Elyse: Okay. Let's go to the T's.

Maya: Ah. Now here's something interesting. This is Taylor –

Elyse: Joseph. Okay. A Boston merchant. Graduated Harvard in 1765. That's our time period. Went to England. That's great. Was a member of the Loyalist Club in London in 1776. Prescribed and banished in 1778. The listing shows that he was eventually allowed to return to Boston and died there in 1816.



Maya: You know the parents aren't given here but we do know that Joseph Taylor graduated from Harvard in 1765. And in fact there's a book that describes all of the people who graduated from Harvard. It's called Sibley's Harvard Graduates.

Elyse: And would that maybe tell us who the parents are?

Maya: Let's check there. Here we go. Here is Joseph Taylor.

Elyse: It says that he sailed to England on April 24, 1775. That's one day before what our almanac says.

Elyse: The dates don't match perfectly, but Maya is encouraged.

Maya: You know with those dates so close and with the number of ships coming out of Boston Harbor being pretty few at that time, I think this really makes sense. It could be the same person.

Elyse: Let's see what it says. Okay, so he's the son of William and Faith Taylor. So that would be our Dad if he's the right person.

All it says about the father, William Taylor, was that he was a merchant and a member of something called King's Chapel.

Maya: The King's Chapel is the Anglican Chapel here in Boston.

Elyse: Maya thinks she's heard the name William Taylor before.



Maya: There's a guy of that name who was one of the presenters of the Suffolk Resolves.

Elyse: But the Suffolk Resolves was a Revolutionary document denouncing the King.

Maya: You know there were actually a number of families who were divided by the Revolution. It was quite a civil war. One of those families was Benjamin Franklin the founding father whose son, William, was actually a Loyalist and who ended up going to England and spending the rest of his life as a refugee.

Elyse: Does our almanac record both the birth of a nation and the fracturing of Massachusetts family?

Maya sent me to the Library of Congress, where some of the Taylor family correspondence is archived. Julie Miller, a specialist in early American History, helps me locate the correct files.

Elyse: Okay, diary, unidentified journals, Jonathan, Charles. Here's William.

We eventually uncover a small file of letters between father and son.

Julie Miller: There's really not that much about politics. These are essentially family letters.

Elyse: Instead of hostility, Joseph and William share family affection.



Elyse: All right. Let's see. "Son Joseph Taylor, Milton, 1779." He's talking about his life in Boston. "I sincerely wish you happiness in this troublesome world and hereafter in a future state of glory, and I'm your affectionate father, William Taylor." Clearly even if they're on completely different sides of the turmoil that's going on in the war right now, they love each other.

Julie: Yeah, I think it's pretty evident when you read these papers that they were a close family and that they felt this distance between them.

Elyse: Our almanac is potentially an extraordinary record of a nation and a family's history. But do we have the right family? I've brought handwriting expert Herman Darvick to compare the writing in the almanac with the letters.

All right. Grab the almanac. If you open to the third page, you'll see some inscriptions. Okay, here's some letters. Tell me what you think?

Herman Darvick: The handwriting is much smaller in the almanac than the letter and also the almanac is 1775, the letter is 1779, four years later. And handwriting could change a little bit in 4 years. First step is just comparing capital letters. The upper case. And the first word here is the word "battle". The "b" in battle is almost identically shaped to the "b" in Boston. So that's a similarity.

Elyse: Is there anything that's unique to these two that you would say would seal the deal?

Shep is going to be curious to hear what Herman points out next. I'm bringing him to The King's Chapel in Boston, where one William Taylor was a member.



Elyse: Okay. You know where we are?

Shep: I certainly do.

Elyse: What's behind us?

Shep: The King's Chapel.

Elyse: Do you know why I brought you here?

Shep: I haven't the slightest idea.

Elyse: I tell Shep that during the American Revolution, some members of this church were Loyalists. I believe this document has a direct link to the Loyalist movement. This investigation had one good lead - a son named Joseph who sailed to England six days after the battles of Lexington and Concord. I explain how we'd uncovered a father who had signed the Suffolk resolves, and a son who had fled to England as a Loyalist. But did the handwriting in his almanac prove our case?

Herman: What he does is he crosses the lower part of the "g" all the way near the bottom. Which is an oddity. You usually don't see that in letters...

Elyse: So do you think the writing in this almanac was done by William Taylor?

Herman: In my opinion, the author of the letter is also the person who hand wrote the notes in the almanac and that's William Taylor.



Elyse: Okay. We're standing in front of the grave of the gentleman who wrote in your almanac. His name is William Taylor.

Shep: Wow, William Taylor, Esquire, died February, 1789.

Elyse: That's him.

Shep: Amazing, you found his grave. I'm just amazed by the whole thing. I didn't think you had a prayer of finding out who wrote those notes. It was just some yeoman, some farmer. He wanted him to come back from England. And it showed where his heart was. He was interested in his children.

Elyse: It was an amazing investigation and I never expected to have something so rare.

Shep: Its mind blowing you know to think that that's been sitting in tin boxes and safes and whatever in our family for over 200 years. It's just incredible.

Elyse: A genealogy search could not confirm a relationship between Shep's ancestors and William Taylor, but both families lived in Suffolk County in the 18th century. William Taylor remained in the Boston area until his death in 1789. His son Joseph returned to Boston in 1796 and opened a marine insurance company there. Joseph Taylor died in Boston in 1816 at the age of 71.