

Patriots & Poisons – Historical Notes

Patriots & Poisons is a work of fiction, but I tried to make the descriptions of life in late 18th century Philadelphia and the politics of the times as realistic as possible. Most of the main characters in this book are real people and the fictional ones are, I hope, at least plausibly realistic. The City Tavern and other places did exist, and the political and other major public events for the most part actually happened (though I have taken some liberties with the precise timing.)

Elizabeth Powel was a real person. Though her maid Lydia and her relationship with Jacob Martin are fictional, the details of her life and house are generally accurate. David Maxey's interesting biography of her, [A Portrait of Elizabeth Willing Powel](#), is available from Amazon and can also be read free online at JSTOR. <https://www.jstor.org>

Jacob Martin is a fictional character, but he is closely modeled after a real Senator from South Carolina, Jacob Read. Many of the details of his life are the same, including his having a doctor brother William who studied in Philadelphia and the near-burning of his house after he supported the Jay Treaty. The real Jacob Read was married, however, and views on politics, women, and slavery may not have been as moderate or progressive as those of Jacob Martin. More information is available about him at the South Carolina Historical Society and a brief bio is online at the Congressional website.

<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=r000092>

James Mathers really was Irish and the Senate Doorman. Somewhat sketchy details of his life are in the files of the Historian's Office of the U.S. Senate, from which it appears that he was actually married. Samuel Otis was also the clerk of the Senate at the time. I have imagined their interaction and Otis' rather snooty attitudes, though it is consistent I think with what is known about their lives and personalities.

Rachel McAllister is a fictional character, but someone like her could well have existed. It was common in the 18th century for a widow to take over her husband's business or trade and the status of women, legally and otherwise, was far superior to that of single or married women. Her employer, Thomas Dobson, is a real printer who did have a shop

called the “Old Stone House” and did print the first American version of the encyclopedia. The other characters in the shop are fictional.

Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Abigail Adams, Senator William Bingham and his wife, Thomas Pickering, and the other members of government, are all real personages, as are Bishop White, Benjamin Rush, the other doctors, Benjamin Bache, and William Cobbett. I have invented of course their precise thoughts, words, and deeds, but in doing so I have tried to stay as close to their true characters as possible. Much of what John and Abigail Adams have to say, for example, is based on the historical record, including the gist of his letters to her and their views Jefferson and Hamilton.

The names and histories of less prominent people are rarely preserved, but a number of references provide tantalizing glimpses of their lives and backgrounds. Among the characters in *Patriots & Poisons*, Joe Cartier at City Tavern and John Scott the tailor are inspired by real people.

The City Tavern still exists, <https://www.citytavern.com/>. The property is owned by the Department of Interior, but the colorful and famous Chef Staib is in charge of the kitchen. Samuel Richardet, who leased it from Elizabeth Powel, was in 1797 the proprietor and caterer. The description of Washington’s farewell dinner is based on the historical record. The other taverns I’ve mentioned all really existed at the time, though I’ve invented the staff and interior details.

The physical layout of Philadelphia at the time is drawn from first-person descriptions and other primary sources. You can still visit Bishop White’s house, Benjamin Rush’s house, the site of the President’s House, and Congress Hall, though Rickett’s Circus, the Chestnut Street Theater, and Oeller’s Hotel are no longer standing. If you’re interested in theater history, Jack Wolcott has extensive information about the Chestnut Street Theater (and theater history generally) on his website. <http://www.videoccasions-nw.com/history/cst/cstnuopn.htm>

If you’re curious about other details of the book, feel free to contact me via info@shrewsburypress.com.