



## Episode 9, 2012: Powder Horn

Bob Burns: My name is Bob Burns. I'm from uh Southern California. My dad was in Bemidji Minnesota when he was a young boy. He was sticking his bare feet in the mud and he felt something down there. It was an old powder horn. There's the name of a Captain Richard Cobb dated seventeen hundred and sixty two. Maybe a fort or a trading post, a lot of wildlife. When I was a young boy and I'd look at the horn, I'd wonder who this Richard Cobb was. After almost 100 years in my family, I'd like to know the story behind the powder horn.

Gwen Wright: Bob, so nice to meet you.

Bob Burns: Same here.

Gwen Wright: So your dad found this powder horn when he was a boy, right?

Bob Burns: Yes, a little over 95 years ago.

Gwen Wright: And how old were you when he first showed it to you?

Bob Burns: Oh, I was probably eight or ten years old. I always wondered about it.

Gwen Wright: Powder horns held gunpowder for a soldier's musket. As a child it certainly fired his imagination.

Bob Burns: I had never seen anything like that before.

Gwen Wright: Bob shows me the different markings, including a strange tower-like structure.

Bob Burns: ...it may be an old fort, it may be an old trading post

Gwen Wright: What about the date, 1762?

Bob Burns: I always wondered about it...I sorta skimmed through the history book on the French & Indian war.

Gwen Wright: The war was a fight between Great Britain and France for control of the North American colony. But the American provincial troops and local militias who fought alongside the British got a close look at King George's army and its tactics just 20 years before Lexington and Concorde.

Bob Burns: Captain Cobb might've been part of that.

Gwen Wright: It may tell us about a crucial time in American history.

Bob Burns: For a little, small item, I believe it's trying to tell us quite a bit. Who was this Richard Cobb?

Gwen Wright: It may indeed be that Captain Cobb served in the French and Indian War.

Gwen Wright: His Anglicized name suggests he was a British soldier, or one of the provincial troops fighting for King George's army. I can't recognize right off the bat if this is a

particular city. The animals that are here, a deer and a fish and a rabbit, are probably familiar animals in almost any part of the British colonies

Gwen Wright: But something's a little odd. If the horn had been submerged underground, could it really be in such good condition? Well, I don't know much about powder horns. But, I know someone who does.

Wes Cowan: Hey Gwen

Gwen Wright: Hey Wes

Wes Cowan: Hey how are ya!

Gwen Wright: I just got a story about a powder horn, and I want some advice.

Wes Cowan: Well here's the thing you know about powder horns. A lot of them have been faked.

Gwen Wright: Uh-huh.

Gwen Wright: He says authentic horns run a variety of styles.

Wes Cowan: Some of them are very simple. The really elaborate ones are much rarer and much more collectible.

Gwen Wright: Interesting

Wes Cowan: If it's a really good French & Indian war powder horn, it could be worth five figures.

Gwen Wright: Uh-huh.

Gwen Wright: Wes Recommended I have someone take a close look at it. So, I'm heading to Fort Ticonderoga, a former French defensive position known as Fort Carillon at the southern end of Lake Camplain in what is now New York State. The fort was a gateway to French territories in North America. It was assaulted by a large force of British and American provincial troops in 1758. Chris Fox is the museum's curator.

Gwen Wright: Chris, I'm trying to solve some mysteries about this particular horn. Take a look at this.

Chris Fox: This is a nicely engraved powder horn. It's fairly simple.

Gwen Wright: Why would animal horn have been used for powder horns?

Chris Fox: It was a very versatile material, and – and a lot of things were made out of horn in the period. Just like plastic today, horn in the 18th century, horn could be heated and formed into different shapes.

Gwen Wright: Can we be sure that this was made in 1762?

Chris Fox: Why don't we go inside? We'll take a look at some of the additional powder horns in the museum's collection for comparative, and I think we'll be able to answer that.

Gwen Wright: Okay.

Chris Fox: An average, very simple horn, which just simply has the owner's name engraved on it, one or two animal figures, and some very basic decoration.

Gwen Wright: Oh, I see.

Chris Fox: Then on the other end of the spectrum, we have this great powder horn, belonged to a soldier named John Miller.

Gwen Wright: This one is magnificent.

Chris Fox: Floral decoration, nice sloop

Gwen Wright: Now my colleague Wes Cowen told me that there has been a big market the last 40 years for fake powder horns. Why would that be?

Chris Fox: Powder horns have really come to be pretty well accepted as a really unique form of American folk art and for that reason, they've become very desirable.

Gwen Wright: The family story is that this powder horn was found buried in the ground – it doesn't make sense to me.

Chris Fox: It doesn't make sense to me either. Um – horn is a fairly durable material, but in an environment where it's been buried in the ground. It's going to end up looking something like this, if not even worse. This powder horn may have spent somewhere around 125, 150 years in the ground.

Gwen Wright: Something's not right here. Ours has none of this damage or decay. Wes did warn me.

Gwen Wright: So, should we be concerned that ours is fake?

Chris Fox: Well, powder horns are – are tricky beasts to authenticate, sometimes. What I see on horns where they – they are not authentic pieces, is instead of being nice, sweeping lines around curves, they tend to be very stuttery almost and if you look at the – the lines carved into the Cobb horn, they're not necessarily perfect, but they're nice, sweeping lines – lines cut with a confident hand, as opposed to somebody who's been, you know, really paying attention to every single little cut, trying to get it just perfect. The wooden base plug here shows lots of good age. It blends nicely with the edge of the horn, kind of almost polished from the wear. I have no doubt that that is a perfectly legitimate, authentic powder horn. And a nice example.

Gwen Wright: So, how would you recommend I try to identify our Captain Richard Cobb?

Gwen Wright: Chris says the vast majority of these horns turn out to be owned by American soldiers. He suggests we check two volumes that list provincial officers from the French and Indian Wars.

Chris Fox: There is a Richard Cobb...

Gwen Wright: Yes

Chris Fox: ... who is listed, as a second lieutenant serving in 1754. And there's one other source that I found.

Gwen Wright: Ok

Chris Fox: Captain Richard Cobb commanded a company that took part in the attack on Ticonderoga.

Gwen Wright: Ticonderoga had been a miserable defeat for the British and their American allies. Poor leadership contributed to as many as 2000 casualties. I'm curious- had Captain Cobb's war experience shaped his view of the British, only two decades before the start of the American Revolution? I've reached out to David Lambert at the New England Historic Genealogical Society.

David Lambert: Isn't that beautiful?

Gwen Wright: Now, I found a reference to a Richard Cobb in 1754 and 1758, but I'm trying to confirm that it's the same person.

David Lambert: Well I can assure you that it is definitely the same Richard Cobb. There was only one. Richard Cobb was from Taunton, Massachusetts and he was involved very early on in the French and Indian War.

Gwen Wright: So where were the Massachusetts regiments in 1762...?

Gwen Wright: David tells me 1762 was a dead end when looking for Richard Cobb. His name does not appear in any muster rolls for that year. Instead he thinks a different carving reveals a clue to Captain Cobb.

David Lambert: The spire on the left was what caught my eye in the image and I'd like to show you something that I found. It's an engraving by Paul Revere in 1768.

Gwen Wright: All right.

David Lambert: If you look at the shape of the spire, it looks very much like Old North Church. A very crude depiction of the steeple, but one can get a sense of what he was trying to display.

Gwen Wright: Yes, you can see the similarity.

Gwen Wright: David says the cityscape is Boston.

David Lambert: ...and one that's really interesting about this is that the buildings are in the background and not in the foreground, and so this would be Charles River. So the person is actually situated in Cambridge, looking across the river to Boston, which is very rare.

Gwen Wright: By 1762 he says, the French and Indian War was drawing to a close. Many Massachusetts troops were stationed in and around Boston and this may have been Cobb's view.

Gwen Wright: So, the odds are then that Richard Cobb was in Boston in 1762. David thinks the horn may have been a gift, marking Cobb's service.

David Lambert: It's almost like a commemorative piece to remember his time in war.

Gwen Wright: What were you able to find about the rest of his life?

David Lambert: Well, Richard Cobb was living in uh Taunton.

Gwen Wright: Cobb appeared to stay close to his home in Taunton, Massachusetts, raising 8 children.

David Lambert: So we have here, his obituary from the Massachusetts Spy, of November the 19<sup>th</sup> and what it reads: "We hear from Taunton that on Wednesday, the fourth instant, at being the training day, the following melancholy accident happened there: Captain Richard Cobb of that place, having loaded a gun very deeply laid it on the ground and it discharged it as a fuse. The gun split in fragments about eight inches in length that struck him below the knee and that entirely separated his leg, leaving the remainder of the bone and the joint most miserably shattered and he died from the effects of it shortly after."

Gwen Wright: It's a tragic thought that he would've had such a terrible ending, for a man who was a hero in the French and Indian war...

Gwen Wright: And David points to the date of the obituary, November 19, 1772. Three years before the start of the Revolutionary War. On the eve of revolution, Cobb left a widow. They'd had eight children.

Gwen Wright: I still have this nagging question of how this horn ended up in Minnesota.

David Lambert: I did an in-depth search on all of his descendants. They moved up to Vermont and went westward, but through all the research I did into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I found no evidence that they ever made it to Minnesota. But I did find a very exciting item.

Gwen Wright: Well Bob, thanks for bringing us this powder horn from the 1760s, the years just leading up to the American Revolution.

I tell Bob that I don't know how the horn ended up in Minnesota, but a Captain Richard Cobb did serve at the battle of Ticonderoga.

This was almost certainly his.

I have the probate record from Richard Cobb's death, and as you can see it says that his armory included one handgun, one cutlass, and not one but two powder horns.

Bob Burns: Oh my gosh. It actually...they're documented then

Gwen Wright: David Lambert had made a startling discovery.

David Lambert: The great grandson of Richard Cobb actually donated some artifacts..... the powder horn of Simeon Cobb, Richard's son.

Gwen Wright: Cobb's son had turned against the British, and even served under Washington himself. That's wonderful. Simeon Cobb, 1776. So this powder horn probably went into the revolutionary war.

David Lambert: As this one served in the French and Indian War. A father and son's powder horn. Probably put together for the first time.

Gwen Wright: I can't believe you found this.

Bob Burns: I'm blown away. I'll tell you, that's amazing.

Elyse Luray: And for our final story, an encore presentation.