Marblehead's rare and remarkable 18th c. architecture that pre-dates the American Revolution

By Judy Anderson, 2024

On the eve of independence, Marblehead, Massachusetts was a prosperous, if gritty, international Atlantic seaport with a thriving economy based on the global commodity of North Atlantic fish. Out in the north Atlantic, large fish were caught by crews of about 8 to 10 fishermen on wide and stable schooners to weather the stormy and often churning northern seas, then transported back to Marblehead, dried on acres of wooden fences or racks more commonly known as "flakes," then shipped out in huge barrels out on the Atlantic — due east to the Iberian peninsula (primarily, but not exclusively Portugal and Bilbao Spain) or south to the West Indies islands (in the Caribbean). *(generally speaking)*

In the decades just prior to the American Revolution, Marblehead was, surprisingly to most people, is said to have been the sixth most populous metropolis in British North America, with just under 5,000 people and about 935 families in 1765 ~ living in 519 houses that year. Of those, about 300 still survive. Many have been modified over time. But nearly 100 survive from the 17-teens — a remarkable number. A few from the 1760s are some of the finest homes from that period surviving on the eastern seaboard. Many from the late 1720s – 1730s are extremely stylish survivals, from a time when homes in most other large towns were renovated or replaced. Marblehead's "Old Town House," built c.1727-29 as a purely municipal structure — separating church and state two generations before the U.S. Constitution did the same for the new county's government. It is the oldest surviving municipal building in the U.S. built of wood, and the second oldest in the country. (The first and third, built 1725 & 173_) are brick court houses in southeast Virginia.

In Massachusetts in 1765, Marblehead's population was second only to Boston. Salem was fourth (even if briefly), with 750 fewer people and 150 fewer men of working age. That is roughly the equal to the population of all of Manchester, MA at that time. Dartmouth, on the southeast coast of Massachusetts, was third; it was later divided into five separate towns.

But the Revolution that brought independence to the North American colonies devastated Marblehead's economy, with the service of approximately 1,400 or 1,500 men and boys from this one town of about a thousand families. Its economy did not fully recover until the 1830s, well after the end of the War of 1812 (and the subsequent "Year without a Summer" in 1816-17, and the nation-wide U.S. economic panic of 1819).

But that economic suffering is what preserved the pre-Revolutionary 18th-century houses in Marblehead that so remarkably survive — nearly 300 — which people live in, and visitors marvel at — and enjoy.