

Presidents in the Port

As I See It

Kevin MacDonald

Over the last 235 years, several U.S. presidents visited Newburyport – for example, James Polk, U.S. Grant and Theodore Roosevelt – but it was often only for a short time.

Polk, for example, briefly visited Newburyport on July 5, 1847, while traveling by train from Portland, Maine, to Boston. Arriving about 2 p.m., he spoke for about 15 minutes at the train station on Washington Street, shook hands for 15 minutes, and was on his way.

Here are some of the presidents who have connected more directly with Newburyport over the years:

George Washington

The “father of our country” stayed overnight in Newburyport on Oct. 30, 1789, six months to the day after assuming the office of the presidency.

Touring the new United States in his first term, Washington records the visit in his diary. He was “received with much respect and parade,” and he heard a formal address from the “Citizens of Newburyport,” read by a young law student, John Quincy Adams, who was living in town at the time.

Washington dined at the Nathaniel Tracy house on State Street, then owned by Joseph Prince, and now home to the public library. He also wrote a short response to the citizens’ address. After spending the night at the Tracy house, Washington had breakfast early the next morning with local merchant and U.S. Sen. Tristram Dalton, and by 8 a.m., he was on his way to Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

Thomas Jefferson

Before he was president, Thomas Jefferson visited Newburyport in 1784, spending the night at the home of

his friend Nathaniel Tracy before sailing to France aboard one of Tracy’s ships, the *Ceres*.

However, Jefferson’s history with Newburyport is inextricably linked to the embargo. Responding to the seizure of American merchant ships, cargo and crews by French and British navies, Jefferson declared an embargo, or trade ban, on all trade with Europe in December 1807. For Newburyport merchants, who made their money trading New England farm and forest produce, and importing European manufactured goods, the embargo was ruinous.

At Town Meeting on Aug. 9, 1808, angry citizens drafted and sent a petition to Jefferson, pleading for a change in policy. When Jefferson replied in the negative, Newburyport and several other towns adopted anti-embargo resolutions that may have eventually led to armed rebellion had the embargo not been repealed shortly before Jefferson left office in March 1809.

James Monroe

The fifth president visited Newburyport on July 12, 1817. He had been expected on the 10th but was delayed in Salem by bad weather.

Monroe was touring the states that summer as part of an attempt to ease partisan tensions in the wake of the 1816 elections. Arriving from Ipswich via Newbury Green, Monroe was met by a citizens committee headed by Ebenezer Moseley, and including such local notables as William Bartlet, Joseph Marquand, and Moses Brown.

At Bartlet Mall, Monroe was saluted by the local Washington Light Infantry, then paraded up Market Street to Washington Street, down Green Street to Merimac Street, and finally up State Street to the Wolfe Tavern. Moseley delivered an address, then the president and the committee had

dinner at the tavern before Monroe headed north for Portsmouth.

John Quincy Adams

John Quincy Adams lived in Newburyport from 1787-89 while clerking in the law offices of local lawyer Theophilus Parsons. When George Washington visited Newburyport during his first tour of the states in 1789, Adams delivered the formal address to Washington from the citizens of the town – his father, of course, was vice president at the time.

Though Adams left Newburyport in 1790, he stayed in touch with the friends he had made here, and years later, on July 4, 1837, he returned to deliver a public address on the 61st anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

William H. Taft

President Taft has a rather ignominious association with Newbury – he was pulled over for speeding here.

After his 1909 inauguration, Taft was looking to find a summer cottage, finally settling on a 14-room estate in Beverly, which became known as “the Summer White House.” Teddy Roosevelt’s daughter also had a summer home in Beverly, and Roosevelt would often visit and play golf with Taft.

On Sept. 3, 1909, Taft left Beverly for Haverhill to visit Supreme Court Justice William Moody. Crossing into Newbury, the speed limit dropped immediately from 20 mph to 8 mph, and the car was pulled over in the “speed trap.”

When the police realized it was the presidential automobile, Taft promised them he would instruct his chauffeur to drive more slowly, and was allowed to proceed on his way.

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