

# Polly Sumner

## An Antique Treasure

By Richard C. Wiggin

**A**ntique doll collectors may have heard of Polly Sumner. She is an old doll with quite a story to tell, a fashion doll who arrived in Boston on one of the Tea Party ships in 1773. She had a front-row seat for the parade of patriots, disguised as Mohawks, who dumped the tea into the harbor. She witnessed the Battle of Bunker Hill from a rooftop in Roxbury. She watched George Washington inspect fortifications opposite Boston Neck, and years later she waved to Lafayette during his Grand Tour.

This extraordinary doll was the treasured playmate of five generations of children of a prominent Boston family—and a witness to much more history—before being entrusted to the stewardship of The Bostonian Society and its Old State House Museum in 1919. There, she has held court amidst other objects from Revolutionary Boston, inspiring children of all ages with her historic journey.

Polly Sumner leaves no doubt as to her authentic character. Her thoughtful black eyes and cheery smile bring the iconic events of our storied Revolutionary history to life for young visitors, inspiring curious minds to understand the enduring significance. As the personification of this history, she makes it real and relevant.

I first encountered Polly, some years ago, as Executive Director of Boston's Old State House. Even more than her antiquity—and

The doll, Polly Sumner (ca., 1773), as she appears today in her contemporary light gray silk dress, matching bonnet, and black leather boots. Photo courtesy of Revolutionary Spaces.





Through the years, Polly Sumner has received fan mail from young visitors to the Old State House. These envelopes are postmarked from the 1930s and 1940s. Courtesy of Revolutionary Spaces.



her unparalleled historic journey—it was her ability to connect young people with Revolutionary history that struck me as special.

Children live in the present, and the challenge of teaching them history is to make the past seem real and relevant, and to find historical content to which they can relate. The key to learning history is often a good story, and the key to a good story is a good storyteller. A child-friendly historical narrative, with emotional links to a story's characters invariably works better as a teaching tool than the traditional textbook focus on names, dates, and facts. Polly Sumner's ability to communicate with imaginative young minds far surpasses anything I had ever seen or experienced. I was astounded by the fact that an inanimate historical artifact has been the recipient of fan mail from young visitors through the years.

I decided that we needed to expand upon Polly's unique ability to connect with young people by commissioning a storybook history of Polly. We contacted a number of children's authors, but we never found the right candidate to capture Polly's emotional appeal within the context of an accurate rendering

## Little Girl

### Corresponds With State House Doll

*Boston Globe - Oct 29, 1939*

#### New York Child on Visit to Boston Fell in Love With 166-Year-Old Polly

Who Lives in a Glass Case

A doll known as Polly Sumner, a doll who resides in a glass case in the Old State House, pleases everyone who sees her and has bewitched one little girl who lives on far away Long Island.

Gloria Boser of Baldwin, N. Y., fell in love with Polly six years ago. Gloria was so small at that time she had to be lifted up to look at Polly in her glass case.

Gloria was on a vacation trip to Boston with her mother and father when she first met Polly. After she returned home, she thought of the doll so often that she could not let Christmas go by without sending a card to Polly. She chose a beautiful one all decorated with reindeers and holly and addressed it in care of "Grandfather Hurd," the custodian of the State House.

Early the following Spring Gloria's parents made a special week-end trip to Boston so she could see the doll again. On second night Polly Sumner and Boston became dearer to Gloria than ever.

**Her Letters Answered**

Gloria comes to see Polly whenever she can and for Polly six years she has written letters to the doll.

Charles Hurd, the custodian of the State House, who touched when the first letter came to Polly Sumner that he replied to Gloria. Gloria was delighted and Mr. Hurd had a picture taken of Polly and sent that picture to Gloria who was eight years old at that time. Here is the letter Gloria wrote in thanks to Polly and Mr. Hurd.

**Dear Polly:**

"Dear me, am I proud? Polly! Your lovely letters and the picture of you! O, My! I just can't believe it. My parents say that since I got them, I stroll all around the house, but between you and me, Polly, you should see them. All their buttons are Pollypopping off.

"Gosh, all year nothing happens to me, and now when I've got something grand to show the kids, I can't because there is no school.

"I think you were very brave to look at that funny black box and have the (carnal) man pop that firecracker thing in your face, but since you were in the big war (Revolution) I guess it didn't seem so much. I all ways knew you were a smart doll, but I didn't know you could write such nice letters.

"Your Grandfather Hurd must be very proud of you. I like him an awful lot because he takes such good care of you. I have to close now, Polly dear, but I'm thinking of you in the Spring. With best of love,

"Your friend for life,"

"Gloria Boser."

One year the Boser family reached the Old State House after it had closed for the day, and Gloria wrote mournfully:

"Dearest Polly:

"We arrived too late to see you. I am very disappointed because I was looking forward so much to seeing you. We will try hard to come back later in the Summer. Am writing this across the street from the State House, wishing I could come inside to see you and Mr. Hurd.

"Loads of love,"

"Gloria Boser."

Last Christmas Gloria saved \$3 out of her spending money for Polly. Here is the letter that accompanied the gift:

An unknown but skillful artist painted soft black hair onto her head, and very gentle features upon her face.

Polly wears a two-toned gray satin gown trimmed with gray chiffon and Valenciennes lace. Her bonnet is satin with chiffon trimmings. A tiny breast pin of polished steel, like antique shoe buckles, holds her ruffles in place. Lace edges her sleeves and a chiffon ruche finishes her neckline.

**Has Won Six Prizes**

Her high, shiny black boots amaze one with their stoutness. They appear more suitable for a sports occasion than a fragile satin dress.

Despite her clumsy feet, Polly Sumner has won six blue ribbons and one silver medal in "show girl beauty" contests. The last contest that bestowed the medal upon Polly took place in 1903.

Today Polly's charm remains as potent as ever. One glance at her sweet face tells why she has been beloved. After the Williams family had loaned Polly to the Old South collection of dolls, the small daughters would develop a dreadful hankering for their doll, and Mother Williams would be compelled to take Polly out of her glass case and bring her home for a period of six months at a time. Now all the Williams children have gone, and doubtless Polly appreciates the love of another flesh and blood child.

By Mary Lincoln Orr.

POLLY SUMNER

She arrived in this country just in time for the Boston Tea Party.

"Dear Polly: "A very merry Christmas to you! "This year I went bargain hunting for all my Polly dolls and things, 'cause I wanted to send you a Christmas present, and here it is. "It isn't very much, 'bit I think the good Old State House can use every penny, so will give it to your nice man, who will give it to another, and so on, who will find something to do with it. It was fun saving for my Polly Sumner fund. "All my love, a big hug, a great big kiss from "Your loving friend, "Gloria Boser."

"I Just Saved Her"

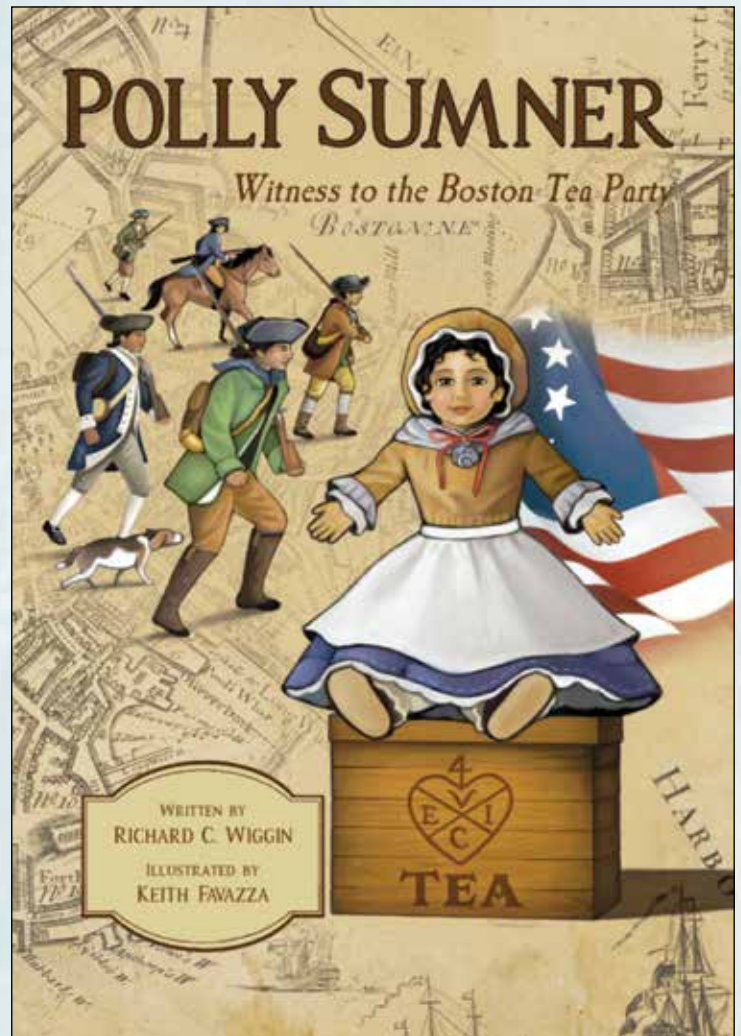
Gloria says, "At first I thought Polly was a costume doll dressed up to show the style that ladies wore long ago. I always liked dolls in grown-up clothes. When Mr Hurd told us how very old she was, and of the terrible war she lived through, and her beauty prizes, I just loved her. She was no longer a doll to me, but someone very real from Colonial days. Now that I am studying Colonial history in school, Polly Sumner means more to me than ever. "Polly deserves the adoration of little girls. "She was an elegant doll from England when she was first offered for sale on "Tea Party Day," Dec. 16, 1773, in a Boston shop. She came over on the same ship that held the tea. "For some time she sat behind the shop-paneled window of the tiny store among the drums and toy soldiers because Boston people were boycotting English goods. The Stamp act had enraged them. Even a pretty doll could not persuade penny out of the Colonialists' pockets. "Eventually Mr. John Williams of Roxbury, who was a cousin of Gov. Increase Sumner, bought the doll for \$1 for her daughter, Abigail. Abigail was born two days before the battle of Bunker's Hill. Polly was actually living in the Williams

A particularly charming account of one of Polly's fans appeared in the October 29, 1938 edition of *The Boston Globe*. Courtesy of Revolutionary Spaces.

of the historical events. The unfulfilled promise of this bothered me after I left the Old State House. The idea that I might be able to write this story had never seriously occurred to me. But I realized then that I had to try.

Years later, after innumerable drafts and the assistance of many talented individuals, that story has now emerged, just in time for the 250th anniversary of the Boston Tea Party.

*Polly Sumner: Witness to the Boston Tea Party* is a child-friendly historical narrative. The storyline is as faithful as it can be both to the historical events and to the provenance of this historic doll. And as the storyteller, Polly brings her story to life for the young reader. Beautifully illustrated by artist/illustrator Keith Favazza, the book also contains a glossary, a historical timeline, and a bibliographical listing of resources for further learning. Targeted for ages 7-12, the book meets most state curriculum standards for elementary grades. My hope is that young readers will develop a kinship with Polly and internalize her journey as a real, living experience, while at the same time acquainting themselves with important elements of Revolutionary history and our founding American values.



Cover for the new children's storybook history, *Polly Sumner: Witness to the Boston Tea Party*, narrated by Polly Sumner, herself.



Three-year-old Annie Williams Langley holding Polly Sumner in her Quaker Gray outfit (ca. 1882). Annie was the fourth generation to play with Polly. Photo courtesy of Revolutionary Spaces.

The provenance of historical artifacts is often hard to document. Most of what we know about Polly's first hundred years comes from one of her second-generation playmates. Critics may dismiss family lore as undocumented and embellished, and so it may be. But invariably it is rooted in threads of truth, woven together from personal memories and established traditions. If the factual details of Polly's historical journey differ from her provenance, it cannot be by very much.

We are told that upon her arrival in Boston, this 20-inch high, wooden doll was consigned to a shop featuring fine English goods. Her splendid brocade gown stood stiffly over a large hoop. A pearl necklace and a cap with curled ostrich plumes completed her courtly appearance. Shortly after the destruction of the tea, a Mrs. Polly (Sumner) Williams, of Roxbury, newlywed and pregnant, happened by the shop, succumbed to the doll's charm, and purchased the doll for her unborn child. At home in Roxbury, Mrs. Williams' sister promptly named the doll, Polly, in her honor.



Polly Sumner sits with Mary (Williams) Langley, left, and Mary's sister, Anne Dowse Williams (ca. 1893). Photo courtesy of Revolutionary Spaces.

The new Polly Sumner watched tensions rise. When war broke out, she accompanied her playmate, with others, to a nearby rooftop to watch waves of Redcoats storm the hastily-constructed patriot fort on Bunker Hill. Later, she observed General Washington inspecting patriot entrenchments protecting Roxbury. It wasn't long before Polly's caretakers sacrificed her British finery on the altar of patriotism to a long blue cloak and hood with buff linings.

After the war, Polly was dressed and redressed in changing American styles. She graced Abigail Williams' eighteenth birthday ball fashionably attired in silk and lace. For Lafayette's Grand Tour in 1824, she cheered the Revolutionary hero in a well-worn blue merino gown, "with low neck and short sleeves, a vandyke or ruffled cape of white cambric, a little bonnet of Dunstable straw tied with blue ribbon, pantalettes, white openwork stockings and shoes of tea-colored kid bound with blue." And she accompanied Abigail's niece, Mary Williams, on an errand in a miniature copy of Mary's "best gown and nankeen pelisse, with a cottage bonnet and long kid mitts."

After Confederate batteries fired on Fort Sumter, Polly watched from a window overlooking the Boston Common, as Massachusetts regiments departed for southern battlefields. Worn and tattered from the caresses and abuses of five generations, she was soon laid aside as family members dispersed in the chaos and dislocation of the times.

After the Civil War, an aging Mary (Williams) Langley retrieved her old playmate from storage. Reliving childhood memories, Mary repaired and replaced Polly's broken limbs, and restored her cherished friend with new makeup and a new outfit of Quaker Gray. Proudly, she exhibited Polly at the Old South Meeting House, where Polly had watched the poorly-disguised patriots gather to

A HISTORIC DOLL.



Polly Sumner,  
AGED 119.

The Polly Sumner doll has been the subject of several articles over the years. Pictured is a photograph of Polly in her Quaker outfit ("A Historic Doll" by Caro Atherton Dugan, *The New England Magazine*, May 1893)



**Polly Sumner, 1773**

As Polly's fame grew, she was featured in several publications, including *Goodhousekeeping* magazine, "Doll Days," by Nancy Vincent McClelland, December 1904.

march to the harbor. Polly's fame grew with appearances at a doll show at the Tremont Theatre, at a Roxbury church fair, and at a women's club luncheon. The press picked up her story. Her history made her a celebrity.

And so she remains today, an old doll with quite a story to tell. Polly's historical authenticity continues to inspire succeeding generations with the story of America's Revolutionary history and founding values. Now wearing a contemporary light gray silk dress, a matching bonnet, and black leather boots, Polly Sumner continues to tell her story to young visitors, making this history real and relevant.

Descriptions of Polly Sumner's wardrobe through the years are from Dugan, Caro Atherton, "A Historic Doll," *New England Magazine*, Vol. 14, Issue 3, May 1893. The author wishes to thank Revolutionary Spaces (formerly The Bostonian Society), which manages The Old State House, for its support of this project. *Polly Sumner: Witness to the Boston Tea Party* (Lawley Publishing, 2023) is available wherever books are sold.

**Learn More About Polly Sumner:**

- "Boston Has A Doll Show," *New York Times*, November 29, 1891.
- Dall, Caroline Wells Healey. *The story of a Boston family*. Boston: T. Todd, 1903. pp. 19-29.
- Dugan, Caro Atherton. "A Historic Doll," *New England Magazine*, Vol. 14, Issue 3, May 1893, pp. 325-334.
- "History of a Doll: Polly Sumner and her Career of Over a Century," *The Chicago Tribune*. May 13, 1893, p. 16.
- Lence, Fidelia. "Polly Sumner, A Boston Doll Who Has Resided Here Since 1773," *Remember the Ladies*, Doll Study Club of Boston, October 1978 (United Federation of Doll Clubs' Region 15 Souvenir Journal)
- McClelland, Nancy Vincent. "Doll Days," *Good Housekeeping*, December 1904.
- Starr, Laura B. *The Doll Book*. New York: The Outing Publishing Company, 1908, pg. 23.
- Turner, Charles Quincy. "Dominion Of The Doll," *The Craftsman: an Illustrated Monthly Magazine for the Simplification of Life*. Volume Eight. April-September, 1905, pp. 601-602.
- Williams, Lynn Manella. "Polly Sumner," *Doll Castle News*, March/April, 1985. p. 11.



Portrait of Mrs. Mary "Polly" (Sumner) Williams, by Gilbert Stuart (American, 1755-1828), for whom the doll Polly Sumner was named. She purchased the doll for her unborn child, shortly after the dumping of the tea in 1773. Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, *Mrs. John Williams (Mary Sumner)*, Gilbert Stuart (American, 1755-1828), 1812-14, Acc.16.107

**POLLY SUMNER — 1773 DOLL**

**POLLY SUMNER** — a doll older than the United States itself arrived on the Dartmouth in December 1773, one of three ships loaded with tea made famous at the Boston Tea Party.

The head and body are original, but her jointed wooden arms and legs, broken by too much affection, were repaired in the 19th century by new ones of stuffed kid leather. Her original costume was replaced about 1820 by the gray silk dress and bonnet she now wears.

Polly is now in the Collection of The Bostonian Society, Old State House, Boston, Massachusetts.



**POLLY SUMNER — 1773 Doll**

MADE IN U.S.A.

Artwork by an unknown artist of Polly Sumner, from an undated notecard, Cape Shore U.S.A. Photo courtesy of Revolutionary Spaces.