

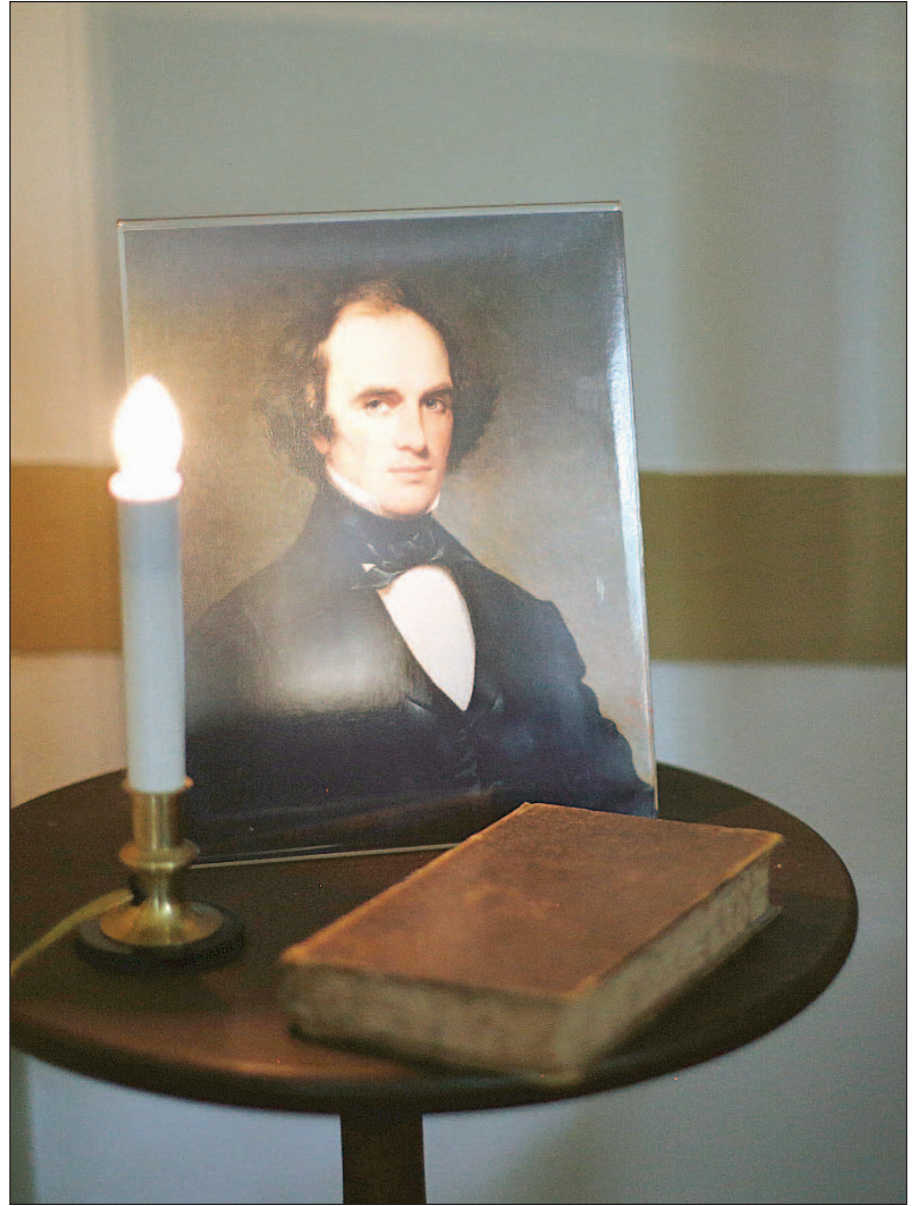
★ **REVOLUTION:
BERKSHIRES**

Melville writes the revolution

He challenged myths surrounding America's founders, beginning and ending in the Berkshires

An image of Herman Melville inside Arrowhead, his home in Pittsfield.

THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE



A faded print of a painting hangs in the second-floor study at Arrowhead, the 1783 Pittsfield farmstead on Holmes Road

where Herman Melville lived and wrote "Moby-Dick."

"The Battle of Bunker's Hill, June 17, 1775," painted by John Trumbull in 1786, dramatizes the death of patriot Joseph Warren during that famous battle in Charlestown, across from Boston. A major general, Warren insisted on fighting

there as a private. Few artworks better convey Americans' memory of the founders as flawless martyrs, martial heroes and philosophical geniuses.

Melville's literary art was different. Knowing human nature, he refused to glorify cultural icons. "Moby-Dick" used New England's storied whaling industry to warn that hubris, ambition and obsession invariably wrought disaster. Ahab, a captain madly pursuing a great white whale, drives himself, his ship and its crew to oblivion.

The same irreverence marks "Israel Potter; His Fifty Years in Exile," Melville's 1855 novel of the American Revolution. Its protagonist is an ordinary volunteer from the Berkshires who barely survives Bunker Hill and ensuing misadventures.

Israel Potter, in fact, was an actual veteran from Rhode Island. To secure a pension, he published a fanciful and partly falsified memoir. Melville used it to satirize patriot leaders like Warren. Making Potter a Berkshire bumpkin, Melville wrote a parody that transformed a noble revolution and wise founding into tragic comedy. Humanizing America's revolutionaries, Melville's bizarre but wickedly entertaining fiction revealed truths about their enigmatic lives and legacies, and their contradictory meanings.

HISTORY IS BUNK(ER HILL)

Bunker Hill's battle symbolized the mythmaking magic of Americans' revolutionary memory. Stoic but proud, New Englanders made this defeat legendary. Bunker Hill proved Americans would stand and fight the world's most powerful military. That defiant spirit carried them through six years of war, to victory.

Trumbull's romantic painting, treasured by Melville, fed the myth.

Actually, the battle was fought on Breed's Hill. The night before, in the dark, patriots mistook it for Bunker's, the hill they were supposed to fortify.

Joseph Warren did not die reclining in repose, comforted by a comrade. British troops stormed the Yankees' redoubt on their third assault, after patriots ran out of ammo. Short on musket balls, they fired nails and scrap iron, aiming at redcoats' legs and officers. Unlike the British,



About this series

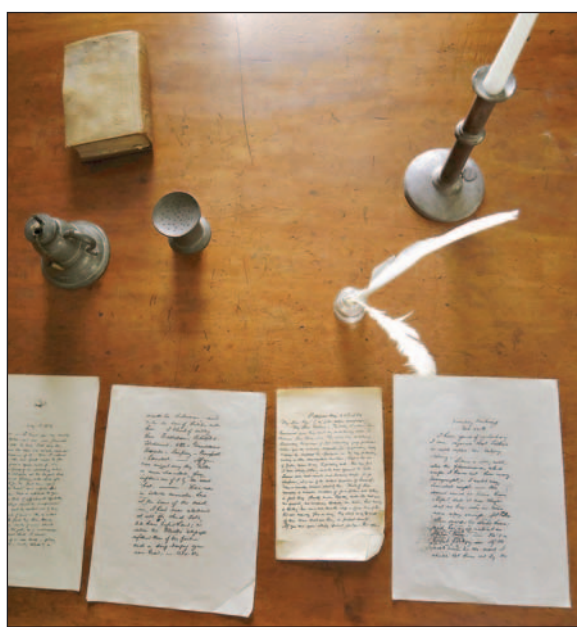
This is the 11th installment of Revolution: Berkshires, a yearlong monthly series exploring Berkshire County's surprising role in the American Revolution. Too often, the story of America's founding is told as if it began and ended in Boston, Philadelphia or Washington. But history is rooted in place, and here in the Berkshires, town

meetinghouses, farms and village greens became laboratories of democracy where the principles of liberty and self-government took hold.

Through this series, historian Justin F. Jackson traces how ordinary Berkshire residents — farmers, merchants, ministers, landowners and newcomers — debated, resisted and acted in ways that helped shape the nation's founding ideals. As we approach the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, these local stories remind us that America's revolution was not just born in distant halls of power, but also in small communities like ours. Their choices and words still echo today.

Herman Melville's writing desk, below, in the study at Arrowhead, above, his Holmes Road home in Pittsfield.

PHOTOS BY STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN
THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE



militiamen lacked bayonets.

In a chaotic, brutal melee, the Americans tried to escape the redoubt. Warren was notorious for his good looks. Backing away, he was shot in the face, killed instantly.

On June 17, 1825, Bostonians marked the battle's 50th anniversary by cheering the construction of a giant obelisk on Bunker Hill. It inspired Washington's monument, in the nation's capital.

Melville demolished such patriotic memory, exchanging honor for humor. Making fun of the founders, "Israel Potter" was publishable only after most Americans who survived the Revolution passed away.

BONFIRE OF THE VENERABLES

Melville wrote "Israel Potter" as part of a desperate effort to keep his writerly career afloat. "Moby-Dick," published in 1850 (the year he moved to Arrow-

head) was a success only in the 20th century, when rediscovered.

Melville penned a semi-autobiographical novel, "Pierre; or, The Ambiguities," lampooning his era's genteel literary culture. Its epitome was Catharine Maria Sedgwick, of Stockbridge, whose novel "A New England Tale" popularized the Berkshires as a rural retreat.

Pierre, a failed writer languishing at a fictionalized Arrowhead, succumbs to insanity. He hurls his father's portrait into the fireplace and burns his own writings. Before Melville died in 1891, he incinerated most of his manuscripts.

Critics called "Pierre" "utter trash." One Boston editor, panicking it as "perhaps, the craziest fiction extant," thought it more like the "product" of "a lunatic hospital" than "the quiet retreats of Berkshire."

Melville, born in 1819, watched his father's descent into madness;

he died when Herman was 12. With "Israel Potter," Melville metaphorically torched the portraits of venerated revolutionary grandfathers.

Herman's father was Thomas Melvill (with most references lacking the second "e"), born in 1751, a Bostonian friend to Samuel Adams, who dumped tea in Boston harbor; there, in 1776, he fired the first gun convincing the British fleet to evacuate. Joining the Rhode Island campaigns, Melvill sailed with the U.S. Navy. Oliver Wendell Holmes paid him a poetic tribute in 1830 (the same year Holmes published "Old Ironsides," to save the USS Constitution from the scrapheap), two years before Thomas died.

Herman's maternal grandfather was a Dutch-American New York aristocrat, Col. Peter Gansevoort. Gansevoort joined the invasion of Canada in 1776. The next year, he successfully defended Fort Stanwix on the

state's Mohawk Valley frontier.

Perhaps Melville resented feeling he would never measure up to such giants. Israel Potter's autobiography became the foil he would use to bring the Founding Fathers' pantheon down to earth.

POTTER'S POTBOILER

"The Life and Remarkable Adventures of Israel R. Potter" was too good to be true. Publishing it in 1824, Potter presented himself as an ardent patriot who suffered captivity, and then exile and poverty in England for nearly 50 years. Potter wrote it to win a pension the U.S. government now offered Revolutionary War veterans. It had denied his application.

In his memoir, Potter claims he was born of "reputable parents" at Cranston, R.I., in 1744. When his father spurns an 18-year-old Israel's romantic interest in the girl next door, Potter, according to his narrative, runs away to the New Hampshire and New York wilderness. Hunting, trading skins with Indians, and working for a surveyor's team, he uses savings to buy land he clears.

Potter the yeoman farmer revisits Rhode Island, and his love interest, but finds her betrothed. Enlisting in a Coventry militia company, young Israel after Lexington and Concord races to Boston. Wounded at Bunker Hill, he recovers and enlists on a new warship, named the Washington, only to be captured by the British Navy.

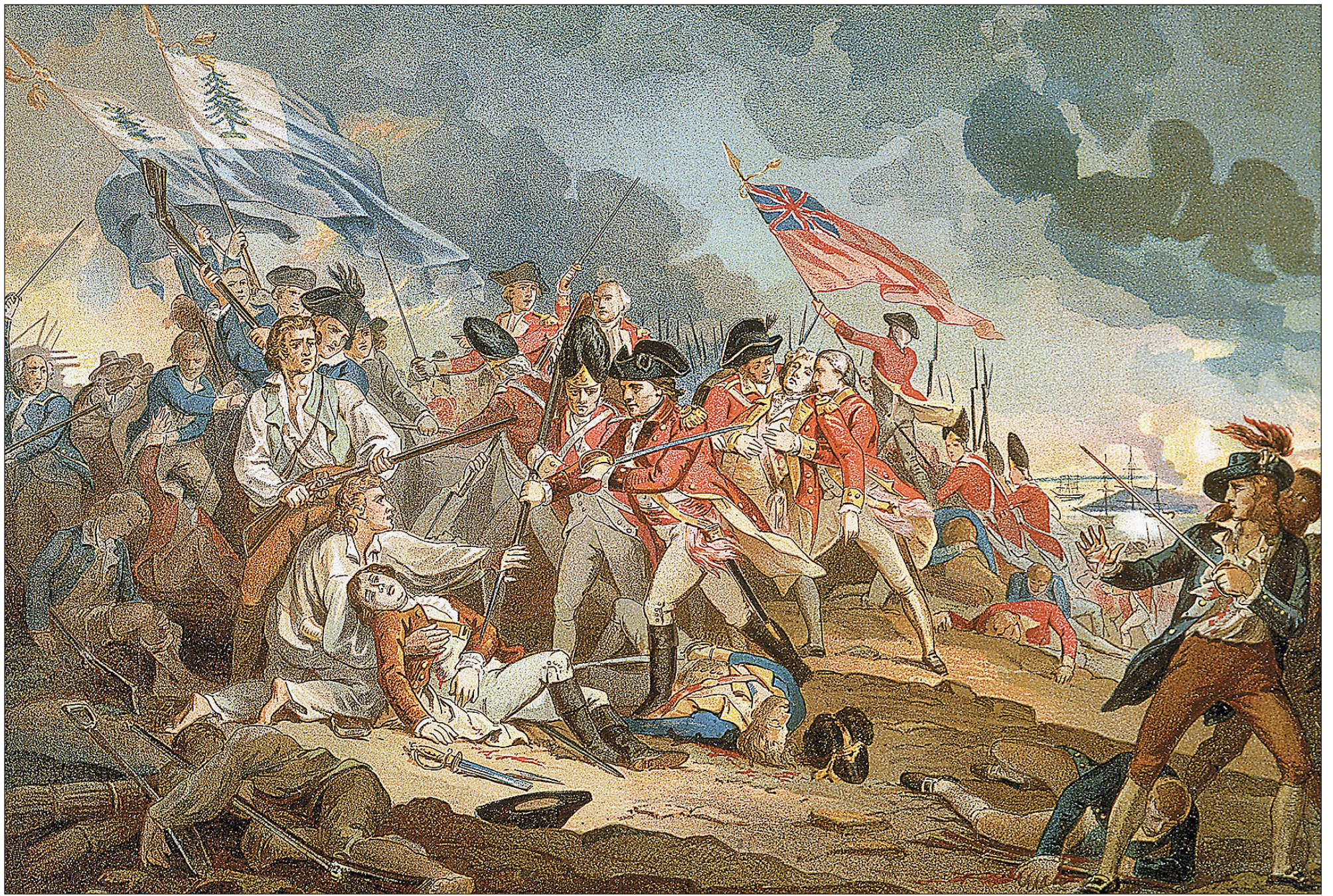
En route to England aboard a British frigate, Potter is caught planning a prisoner uprising. On English soil he escapes but is recaptured, then escapes again. Pursued, starving and seeking shelter, Israel meets a man supervising laborers on an estate, outside London, who gives him work.

It is Kew Gardens, a royal property. One day, Israel, graveling a walkway, encounters King George III. Israel, overawed, admits he is an escaped American prisoner of war. Magnanimously, the king promises to protect him while employed there.

Homesick, Potter departs but meets several English gentlemen who sympathize with America's cause. They offer to help him return to the states if he will carry messages to Benjamin Franklin, conducting diplomacy in France. Agreeing, Potter meets Franklin at Paris, but is stuck in England when the French declare war.

Returning to London, Potter barely survives by scavenging, making bricks and fixing furniture. Wandering London, crying "Old Chairs to Mend," he is jailed for debts. Marrying, he has 10 children; seven die before the age of 5, two before they reach 20. His wife dies.

In 1823, Potter, now 79 years old and eager to collect a pension, returns to Boston and visits Bunker Hill. Yet his pension application is rejected. Israel would die in Rhode Island three years later, penniless, buried in an unmarked grave.



Revolution

FROM PAGE 6

PATRIOTISM, GORED

Melville wished to rescue himself from poverty and obscurity by turning Potter's autobiography into an "adventure" novel. "Israel Potter" skewered the Revolution's mythology, using its gaudy memory to ridicule the founders. Absurd antiheroes, unaware of the history they make, American patriots personify the meaninglessness of wars and the nations they found.

Melville establishes the novel's comedic tone in its faux dedication: "To His Highness, the Bunker Hill Monument." Mocking Americans' republican values, it implies their memory ignores the common soldier.

Hailing the 221-foot tall obelisk as "the Great Biographer," the dedicatory is astonished that the "anonymous privates of June 17, 1775" never "received other requital than the solid reward of your granite." Despite "faithful services," Israel Potter had been "promoted" merely "to a still deeper privacy under the ground, with a posthumous pension."

Potter is a simpleton, virtuous only for his bumbling fidelity to America. His name renders him the fitting object of a satire ending in tragedy. "Israel" signifies Puritan settlers' fantasy that New England would be a Christian paradise. "Potter" alludes to fields where towns buried paupers in mass graves.

Melville makes Potter the archetypal American: a western frontiersman. His natal Berkshire home is somewhere north of Otis, along the road to Windsor, in a moon-like mountain landscape "almost as unknown to the general tourist as the interior of Bohemia."

Like the Revolutionary heroes he encounters, Israel Potter blissfully ignores the meaning of events. Fighting at Bunker Hill, he thinks no more of killing redcoats than shooting deer.

Meeting King George, Potter addresses him repeatedly as "sir," not "your majesty." The monarch, continuously upbraiding his apologetic employee, surrenders to his awkwardness. George, stuttering, invites Israel to join his army. Ever faithful, Potter declines. The king, stammering that the Americans are a "stubborn race," putters away, absent-mindedly.

Potter finds Benjamin Franklin at Paris a huckstering hypocrite. Mouthing proverbs from "Poor Richard's Almanac," Franklin violates them at every turn. Urging temperance, he quaffs wine; endorsing chastity, he chases chambermaids; vaunting scientific reason, he wears a conjurer's robe. Franklin never mentions any high principle at

British troops storm Breed's Hill during the Battle of Bunker Hill in an illustration after John Trumbull's famous painting. The heroic image helped shape the patriotic memory Herman Melville later punctured in "Israel Potter," a satirical novel that turned Revolutionary glory into tragic comedy.

HULTON ARCHIVE — GETTY IMAGES

Opening chapter

Here is the opening paragraph to the first chapter of Herman Melville's "Israel Potter: His Fifty Years of Exile." Melville starts his 1855 Revolutionary War novel about a Berkshire soldier by describing the eastern Berkshires as rugged, remote and "almost as unknown to the general tourist as the interior of Bohemia."

Chapter I — The Birthplace of Israel

The traveller who at the present day is content to travel in the good old Asiatic style, neither rushed along by a locomotive, nor dragged by a stage-coach; who is willing to enjoy hospitalities at far-scattered farmhouses, instead of paying his bill at an inn; who is not to be frightened by any amount of loneliness, or to be deterred by the roughest roads or the highest hills; such a traveller in the eastern part of Berkshire, Massachusetts, will find ample food for poetic reflection in the singular scenery of a country, which, owing to the ruggedness of the soil and its lying out of the track of all public conveyances, remains almost as unknown to the general tourist as the interior of Bohemia.



The study, above, at Arrowhead in Pittsfield, onetime home to iconic American author Herman Melville, left, seen circa 1850.

ABOVE: STEPHANIE ZOLLSHAN — THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE
LEFT: HULTON ARCHIVE — GETTY IMAGES



stake in the war.

Franklin connects Potter to John Paul Jones, the American naval hero. Recruited, Potter names Jones' flagship the Bonhomme Richard (a tribute to Franklin), but barely survives its 1779 battle with the HMS Serapis off England's coast. (Jones, when told to

surrender, famously declared: "I have not yet begun to fight!") Melville, according to a critic, paints Jones as a "fighting machine," a blood-thirsty pirate who "fights for the sake of fighting."

Melville playfully uses the battle, and Jones, to call his country's integrity into question. "Intrepid, reckless, predatory, with boundless ambition, civilized in externals but a savage at heart, America," wrote Melville, was "the Paul Jones of nations." Melville's Potter, again imprisoned in England, meets a fellow prisoner, Ethan Allen, the rough Vermont militia colonel who seized Fort Ticonderoga, in 1775. Yet Potter aborts an attempt to free him. (Allen, captured in Canada, was transported to Falmouth; surviving, he published a memoir in 1779.)

Melville compares Allen to a

"wild beast," a "jocular, reckless, and even braggart barbarian." An arrogant egotist, he introduces himself as "Ethan Ticonderoga Allen, the unconquered soldier!"

"If I, Ethan Allen, am to be hung like a thief," he proclaims, fearing execution, "the great Jehovah and the Continental Congress shall avenge me." Insisting he will show his captors "how a Christian gentleman can die," Allen asks captors for "a bowl of punch." He lets lady voyeurs cut locks of his matted hair for souvenirs.

Potter, stuck in London, dreams of the Housatonic. Yet Melville makes this octogenarian's return home, with a sole surviving son, more miserable. Disembarking at Boston on July 4, he is almost run over near Faneuil Hall by a carriage, in a procession celebrating the Bunker Hill monument's consecration that very day. The Revolution's Rip van Winkle, Potter awakens to a nation too busy to remember him.

ISRAEL EXPOSED

Melville knew Potter's memoir was a tall tale ghostwritten by Henry Trumbull, a Providence author. Trumbull made a cottage industry of publishing Revolutionary War veterans' memoirs, among "penny-thrillers" and other slop. (One of Trumbull's apprentices was arrested for peddling pornography he printed.)

Israel Potter's true story, since uncovered by historians, is stranger than fiction. Born at Cranston, R.I., in 1754 to a single mother, Israel was boarded with a drunkard before the town sent him to John Potter. Potter neglected to educate Israel, who died illiterate. A Quaker elder, John surveilled and punished local youth to ensure sexual propriety. He probably had discouraged Israel's courtship.

Israel did run off to the frontier, return to Rhode Island, and join its militia. In 1775, however, the Rhode Islanders arrived late to Boston's siege. Potter and comrades passed the day of Bunker Hill's battle peacefully, in Roxbury.

Potter's time aboard the Washington was a horror show. In disrepair, badly captained, the ship suffered a mutiny days into its first voyage. It was then captured — the first U.S. Navy vessel the British seized. Finding its crew guilty of "Rebellion or High Treason," "on the High Seas," the Brits sent Potter and fellow sailors to England. There they were invited to join the royal navy; if refusing, they were conscripted.

Potter, craving a pension, avoided mentioning such compromising details. Yet they may explain how Potter became a spy — for England.

Benjamin Franklin's papers note Israel Potter found him at Paris in February 1777. Franklin saw through his ruse, a "pretended letter" allegedly written by English sympathizers. Franklin gave Israel money for a voyage back to the states and dismissed him. Potter embezzled it and returned to England.

Potter possibly continued spying for the British. He may have been the mysterious American who visited Henry Laurens, the South Carolina patriot captured on a diplomatic mission to Amsterdam, when he was confined at the Tower of London in 1781.

Israel Potter, then, had good reasons to stay in England. In Melville's novel, though, this patriotic exile returns to the Berkshires to find his family home, in vain. The house long ago burned, all relatives died or moved west, no one recalls or recognizes poor Israel. Pension denied, scars his only medals, Potter expires there, "the same day that the oldest oak on his native hills was blown down."

Justin F. Jackson is a historian and visiting lecturer and scholar with the Department of History at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. His book, "The Work of Empire: War, Occupation, and the Making of American Colonialism in Cuba and the Philippines," was recently published with the University of North Carolina Press.