



*A Relic of History, Old Derby Wharf, Salem, 1915*  
Philip Little (1857-1942)

Peabody Essex Museum  
Salem in History, 2006

## *A Relic of History, Old Derby Wharf, Salem, c. 1915*

Philip Little (1857-1942)  
Salem, MA  
Oil on canvas  
Gift of Philip Little  
107515



### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“Throughout its history Salem has proven to be a city of industrious people. In response to global and local conditions, Salemites have transformed their economy in order to survive and prosper... During and after the American Revolution... Salem engaged its ships and wealth in the China trade.” This short period of time marked the most prosperous of Salem’s rich history. Merchants like Elias Hasket Derby (1739-1799) took tremendous risk to send ships to foreign ports, and they were rewarded with tremendous wealth. “Reeling from Jefferson’s embargo, the War of 1812 and a consolidation in the ports of the United States in the 1820s, the port of Salem lost significance and revenue and was forced to reinvent itself once again.”<sup>1</sup> This time, Salem turned to industry. Ships that once brought forth fine goods and spices from around the world now carried coal and raw materials that were loaded onto train boxcars and shipped to factories. The once-golden name of Derby and his wharf were covered in soot and by 1915; only magnificent Federal Period mansions, street names, and relics served as reminders of Salem’s short, but illustrious “Great Age of Sail.”

### ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Much of Little’s work was inspired by the land, sea, and history of Salem and New England. In this work, Little selected Salem’s Derby Wharf, named for Elias Haskett Derby, who was one of America’s first millionaires. Another image in this guide depicts Derby Wharf from about 1797, when it was used for mooring merchant and fishing vessels during Salem’s “Golden Age” of trade. Philip Little paints the same site well past its glorious moment. His choice of the word “relic” is telling; Little understands the power of Salem’s past, but he also acknowledges that like any important token of history, the wharf (and perhaps, Salem) does not hold the power, prestige and importance that it once commanded when Elias Haskett Derby lived.

In terms of style, Little employs the loose brushstrokes and soft colors that were typical of impressionist painting at the turn of the 19th to 20th centuries.

### SAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What objects did Little include in his painting of Derby Wharf?
- Who might work on this wharf? What would their occupations be? Is this different from occupations of people who would have worked on this wharf in 1800? Why or why not?
- Why do you think Little does not show us any people performing their work?
- Why do you think Phillip Little calls Derby Wharf a “Relic of History?”
- How does Little suggest to us the changing economy of Salem from a maritime, merchant economy to an industrial economy?

### SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Compare this painting with the 1797 image of Derby Wharf in this guide. Notice the physical differences that have occurred over time. What do you describe the different interests each artist had in creating their views of the wharf?
- Compare Philip Little’s photo of Derby Wharf (1910, online at: <http://www.saleminhistory.org/SalemAsPlace/SalemInWorld/primarysources.htm>) with his 1915 painting. What did Little choose to change? Why do you think he made these choices? Can you suggest other titles for his painting?

2003 Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Frameworks: 3.9, 3.11, 3.12, 3.13, 5.11, USI.27, USI.28

<sup>1</sup> David Buckhoff, “Lesson Plan: Wealth in Transition: From Sail to Loom” (2005) Online at: <http://www.saleminhistory.org/LessonPlans/Buckhoff/index.html> [Viewed 1 November 2006].