The Real Story of Paul Revere’s Ride

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UPDATED:

JUN 18, 2020

ORIGINAL:

APR 16, 2015

In the spring of 1860, Harvard professor and well-regarded romantic poet [Henry Wadsworth Longfellow](http://www.biography.com/people/henry-wadsworth-longfellow-9385673) began working on a poem about an otherwise obscure messenger ride by American patriot [Paul Revere](http://www.biography.com/people/paul-revere-9456172) on the evening of April 18-19, 1775. Longfellow hoped to use the story of Paul Revere’s ride as a vehicle to warn the American Union that it was in danger of disintegrating (which it was). Even though there is good evidence that Longfellow knew the real story of Revere’s ride (from [Paul Revere’s 1798 letter to Dr. Jeremy Belknap of the Massachusetts Historical Society](http://www.masshist.org/database/99), published in a magazine Longfellow had almost certainly read), Longfellow chose to simplify and re-arrange parts of the story in the interests of creating a better and more effective poem.

In particular, Longfellow reversed the story of the famous signal lanterns hung in Christ Church tower to indicate that British troops had left Boston. According to Longfellow, Paul Revere was waiting “booted and spurred” in Charlestown across the river from Boston for the signal, whereas in fact Revere was still in Boston when the signals were shown. The signals were not “for” Paul Revere, but “from” Paul Revere to the Sons of Liberty in Charlestown, because Revere was apprehensive that he would be prevented from leaving Boston.

Revere was just a cog, although an important one, in an elaborate warning system

Longfellow also records Revere as arriving in both Lexington and Concord, when in fact Revere was captured outside of Lexington and never reached Concord (although his companion Dr. Prescott did). Perhaps most important is the fact that Longfellow presented Revere as a lone rider in opposition to the might of the British Empire, when in fact Revere was just a cog, although an important one, in an elaborate warning system set up by the Sons of Liberty to spread an alarm quickly and efficiently.

Unlike some historical events, a great deal is known about Paul Revere’s ride, derived largely from his own accounts – the draft and finished version of a deposition taken soon after the Revolutionary War broke out, and the 1798 letter to Dr. Jeremy Belknap referred to above. On the evening of April 18, 1775, Paul Revere was sent for by Dr. Joseph Warren, the last major patriot leader left in Boston and a personal friend of Revere’s. When he arrived at Dr. Warren’s surgery, Revere found out 1) that British regular troops were preparing that evening to march into the countryside, probably to Concord, Massachusetts, to capture or destroy military stores that had been gathered there. This was no surprise, as such a movement had been expected for several days. 2) Dr. Warren informed Revere that he had just received intelligence from his own spy network that the troops planned to stop in Lexington, Massachusetts, on the road to Concord and arrest [Samuel Adams](http://www.biography.com/people/samuel-adams-9176129) and [John Hancock](http://www.biography.com/people/john-hancock-9327271), patriot leaders who were staying in a house owned by one of Hancock’s relatives (As it turned out, this intelligence was inaccurate). Dr. Warren “begged” Revere to stop in Lexington and warn Adams and Hancock to get out of the way of the British troops. Warren also informed Revere that he had already sent one messenger to Lexington – a Mr. William Dawes – who had taken the longer land route out Boston Neck, around Back Bay, and over the bridge into Cambridge, Massachusetts, by Harvard College.

Revere contacted a "friend" and he implemented a signal

After Revere conferred with Warren, he returned to his own neighborhood, where he contacted a “friend” (Revere was very careful not to identify anyone he did not need to, in case his deposition fell into the wrong hands) to climb up into the bell tower of Christ Church (today known as the Old North Church) to set the famous signals. The “friend” hung two lanterns, meaning the British planned to leave Boston “by sea” across the Charles River, as opposed to a single lantern, which would mean the troops planned to march entirely “by land,” by the same route William Dawes had taken. Presumably the water route would be shorter, although as it turned out the troops were so slow it really mattered very little which way they went.

 Revere then stopped by his own house to pick up his boots and overcoat, then made his way to the North End waterfront, where two “friends” waited with a small boat to row him across the mouth of the Charles River. Successfully passing by the British warship HMS Somerset, that had been anchored close by where the ferries normally crossed to Charlestown, the two men dropped Revere off near the old Charlestown battery just outside of town. Making him way into Charlestown, Revere met with the local Sons of Liberty, who verified that they had seen his lantern signals (which by then were no longer necessary). Revere then borrowed a horse from Charlestown patriot John Larkin (who actually had to get the horse from his father, Samuel Larkin) and then set off through the countryside northwest towards Lexington and Concord.**7**

Narrowly escaping capture by a British patrol just outside of Charlestown, Revere charged his planned route somewhat and arrived in Lexington just past midnight. We do not know what he said at each of the houses along the road. We do know exactly what he said when he got to Lexington, however, as there was a sentry on duty outside the house where Adams and Hancock lodged, and that sentry, a Sergeant Monroe, later wrote down what happened. As Revere approached the house, Monroe told him not to make so much noise, that everyone in the house had retired for the night. Revere cried “Noise! You’ll have noise enough before long! The regulars are coming out!” Despite this, Revere still had trouble convincing the sentry to let him pass until John Hancock, who was still awake and heard the commotion, recognized Revere’s voice and said “Oh, you, Revere. We are not afraid of you” after which Revere was allowed to enter the house and deliver his news.

Revere wasn't a lone rider, but a cog —although an important one — in an elaborate warning system set up by the Sons of Liberty to spread an alarm quickly and efficiently.

Revere was captured but eventually released

About 30 minutes later William Dawes arrived. The two messengers “refreshed themselves” (probably got something to eat and drink) and then decided to continue on to the town of Concord, to verify that the military stores had been properly dispersed and hidden away. Along the road they were joined by a third man, a Dr. Samuel Prescott, who they recognized as a “High Son of Liberty.” Soon afterward they were all stopped by a British patrol. Dawes, who had probably turned aside to alarm a house, noticed what was going on and made his escape. The British herded Prescott and Revere into a nearby meadow, when Prescott suddenly said “Put on!” (meaning scatter) and the two patriots suddenly rode off in different directions. Prescott, a local man, successfully eluded capture, and alarmed the militia in Lincoln and Concord; Revere chose the wrong patch of woods to head for and was recaptured by more British soldiers. Held for a while, questioned, and even threatened, Revere was eventually released, although his horse was confiscated.

Making his way back into Lexington on foot, Revere assisted Adams and Hancock to leave for Woburn, Massachusetts. Revere and Hancock’s secretary, a Mr. Lowell, were engaged in carrying away a trunk of papers that Hancock had left behind when the British troops marched onto Lexington Green. Revere reported that he could hear the gunshots and see the smoke from the musket fire when the skirmish of Lexington Green began, but he could not identify who had fired first, as a building just then obscured his view. This is probably why Revere’s deposition was not included with the others when they were published soon after the war began. [Revere’s deposition](http://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=97) (draft and final copy) can today be found in the Revere Family Papers at the Massachusetts Historical Society, along with Revere’s 1798 letter to Dr. Jeremy Belknap.

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