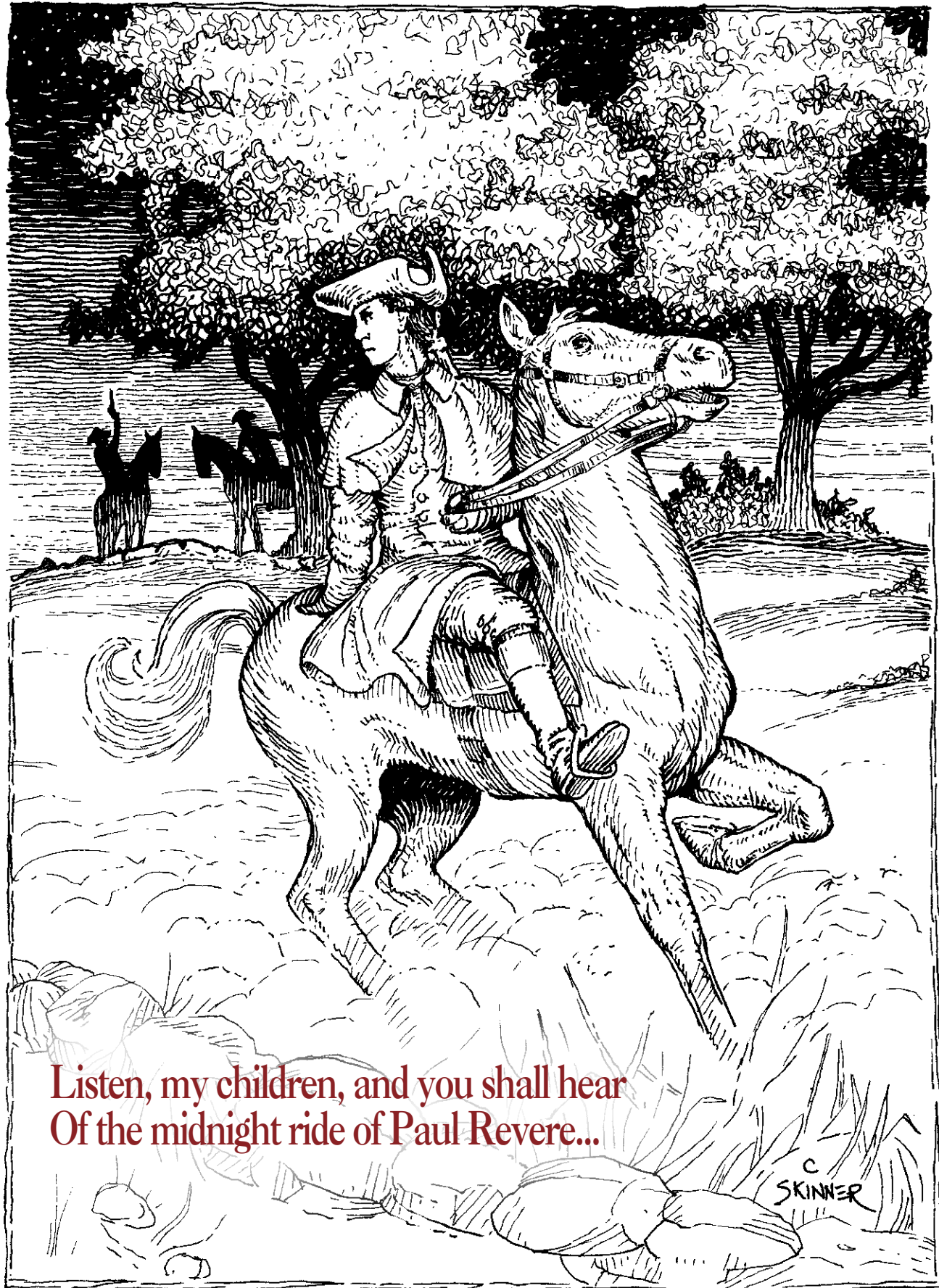


Paul Revere's Ride

The Real Story



Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere...

Here are the real facts about the events of April 18–19, 1775

Is Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem “Paul Revere’s Ride” historically accurate?

Unfortunately, Longfellow’s version of Revere’s ride has all too often been taken for fact. Longfellow wrote many poems about historical figures and events and at times used authentic period accounts as source materials, but just as frequently he relied on secondary works, folk tales, or even casual conversations as the basis for his poetry. In the case of “Paul Revere’s Ride,” though it now is fairly clear that Longfellow had access to Revere’s own description of the events, which appeared in an 1832 issue of *New England Magazine*, he did not use it to inform the writing of the poem.

According to his own diary, on the day before he began work on the poem, (April 6, 1860), Longfellow took a long walk with his friend George Sumner and a Mr. Harris from his home in Cambridge, Massachusetts, through the North End and back again. Along the way the three men visited Copp’s Hill Burying Ground, and then walked down the hill to Old North Church (Christ Church) where they were allowed to ascend into the bell tower. Longfellow appears to have based a large portion of his poem on the information and impressions he gathered on this walk, and presumably on a retelling of the events of April 18–19, 1775, provided by Mr. Harris, who acted as their guide.

A careful examination of the poem reveals that a significant portion is devoted to a detailed description of the Old North Church, its surroundings, and the hanging of the signal lanterns in the bell tower. Revere’s ride is described only briefly, and none of the other persons involved in the events that night, such as Samuel Adams, John Hancock, or William Dawes, are mentioned at all.

The two significant deviations from fact in the poem concern the purpose of the lanterns hung in the Old North Church tower, and Revere’s apparent arrival in the town of Concord at 2:00 a.m. early the next morning. According to the poem, Paul Revere contacted a friend and instructed him to set the signals (“one, if by land, and two, if by sea”) as soon as he observed the movements of the British troops. Revere then rowed himself across the Charles River, past a British man-of-war (the *Somerset*) and waited “booted and spurred” for the signal to send him on his way. In fact, Revere knew before he left Boston that the troops were preparing to cross the river. Revere communicated this information to a friend, probably Robert Newman, the sexton of the Old North Church, and instructed him to set the signals to warn the Sons of Liberty in Charlestown. He then proceeded to a point on the northern shore of Boston where two other friends waited to row him across the river. All of this had been arranged in great detail the previous weekend, when Revere made a reconnaissance ride into the countryside as far as Concord and returned through Charlestown. Revere had every reason to fear that he would not be able to row across the river without being stopped by sentries posted on the *Somerset*. As it turned out, Revere reached the Charlestown shore safely and even verified with a committee of the Sons of Liberty that they had received the signals, although by then they were no longer necessary.

The second major inaccuracy in the poem is simpler. Longfellow describes Revere arriving in Concord, Massachusetts, at 2:00 a.m. As Revere states in his deposition taken just after the events in question, he and two other riders (Dawes and Prescott) were stopped just outside of Lexington by a party of British officers. Of the three, only Prescott managed to escape and reach Concord. Nothing about Revere’s capture (or anything about Dawes or Prescott) is mentioned in Longfellow’s poem.

Surprisingly, Longfellow's poem was criticized as early as the 1870s, when Henry Holland (author of *William Dawes and his Ride with Paul Revere*, 1878) accused Longfellow of various "high historic crimes and misdemeanors," in particular of having left his ancestor, Dawes, out of the story altogether. Curiously, knowledge of the inaccuracies in Longfellow's poem have decreased over time, and Americans today rely more on Longfellow for the historical facts of Revere's famous ride than did their ancestors a century ago. Longfellow's poem was clearly written to create a particular atmosphere, rather than to relate a series of historical events. There is no question that its creation on the eve of the Civil War is no accident. Perhaps the greatest disservice done to the poem has been to assume that it was intended to be an historical document, which it was not. Longfellow was a poet, not an historian, and was not attempting to write history when he penned "Paul Revere's Ride."

Was Paul Revere the only midnight rider?

By no means. An unknown number of riders, at least several dozen, spread the word of the British advance on the night of April 18–19, 1775. The best known of these riders, Paul Revere and William Dawes, were sent to Lexington, Massachusetts, by separate routes, to warn patriot leaders Samuel Adams and John Hancock that British regular troops were marching to arrest them. Dawes left Boston first but arrived in Lexington later than Revere because he took the longer land route out of Boston Neck and around Back Bay to the south before turning north again. Revere took a shorter route directly across the Charles River by boat to Charlestown. Along the way, Revere planned to "alarm" the countryside, which he accomplished, not by racing through each town crying out the alarm (which would have accomplished little beyond getting himself captured very quickly), but by stopping at houses individually. Other riders then carried the news to outlying villages and farms.

Not every messenger abroad that night received the news from Revere or Dawes. Acting on his own (perhaps well ahead of Dawes) Ebenezer Dorr alarmed the town of Roxbury, just south of Boston. Richard Devens, having noticed a number of British officers on the main road in Cambridge, succeeded in informing his fellow members of the Committee of Safety then meeting in Menotomy (present-day Arlington), one of whom, Elbridge Gerry, sent an express rider who reached Adams and Hancock long before Revere arrived in Lexington. Devens also claimed to have seen the lantern signals from the Old North Church and to have sent his own messenger to Lexington with the news about the troops. (If this is true, the man never arrived.) In a memorandum drawn up at a later date, Devens even took credit for dispatching Revere to Lexington — a claim discounted by most historians and contradicted by Revere's own account of his ride. In addition to Devens, another rider, Solomon Brown of Lexington, observed several armed officers on the road from Cambridge and galloped into Lexington with the news. After the officers passed through, Brown and two others were dispatched to follow them, but they managed the job ineptly and were themselves captured.

Revere arrived in Lexington sometime after midnight, and approached the house where Adams and Hancock were lodged. When a sentry challenged him and requested that he not make so much noise, Revere replied, "Noise! You'll have noise enough before long. The regulars are coming out!" After delivering his message, Revere was joined by Dawes; the two men decided to continue on to Concord, where arms and provisions for the colonial militia had been collected. Along the road they were overtaken by Dr. Samuel Prescott, a Concord man whom they recognized as a "high Son of Liberty." Soon afterwards all three riders were stopped by the same patrol that had captured Solomon Brown and his men some time earlier. Prescott escaped almost immediately, jumping his horse over a fence and disappearing into the woods. Familiar with the local terrain, Prescott easily found his way home, alarming the militia in Lincoln along the way. According to tradition, Dawes managed to elude his pursuers by means of a ruse, making it appear that he had arranged an ambush. Revere, an experienced express rider who was probably well-known to his captors, was held for some time, questioned, and then released. Deprived of his horse, Revere returned to Lexington on foot in time to witness part of the skirmish on Lexington Green.

Did Paul Revere finish his midnight ride?

It is a known fact that Revere was captured on the road outside of Lexington, and that he never arrived in Concord. One must consider, however, what Revere and Dawes intended to accomplish when they set out from Boston. While existing evidence (primarily Revere's own accounts of his activities that night) is somewhat vague or contradictory on certain points, the main outline of Revere's (and Dawes's) mission seems clear. Both Revere's and Dawes's primary objective was to contact Samuel Adams and John Hancock in Lexington. It appears that they were given a fairly specific, perhaps written, message to deliver to the patriot leaders. In addition, the two riders were supposed to "alarm" the countryside as they went. A third objective was almost certainly to continue on to Concord to verify that the "Colony Stores"—provisions and ammunition for the Massachusetts militia—were safely dispersed and hidden. Both men assumed they might be halted at any point. They were well aware that many British officers were patrolling the roads that night for the specific purpose of intercepting messengers like themselves.

The alarm system devised by the patriots, and set into motion by Revere and Dawes, was specifically designed to ensure that the capture of any one rider would not keep the alarm from being sounded. The mission was too important to leave to one rider alone, even one as experienced and trustworthy as Paul Revere.

What was the real purpose of the lantern signals?

On the evening of April 18, 1775, Dr. Joseph Warren sent for Paul Revere and gave him the task of riding to Lexington, Massachusetts, with the news that regular troops were about to march into the countryside. Revere contacted a friend (Robert Newman) and instructed him to show two lanterns in the tower of Christ Church (now called Old North Church) as a signal to patriots in Charlestown, in case Revere was unable to get out of town. He then proceeded a short distance to the northern shore of Boston where two friends (Joshua Bentley and Thomas Richardson) were waiting to row him across the river to Charlestown. Slipping past the British warship *Somerset* in the darkness, Revere landed safely. While in Charlestown, he verified that the local "Sons of Liberty" committee had seen his pre-arranged signal. (Two lanterns had been held up briefly in the highest bell tower window of Christ Church in Boston, indicating the troops would take the water route and row across the Charles River to Cambridge rather than taking the longer land route and march out Boston Neck.) Revere arranged for the signal the previous weekend as he was afraid he might be prevented from leaving Boston. Revere then borrowed a horse from his friend John Larkin, a Charlestown merchant and patriot sympathizer. About 11:00 p.m. Revere set off on his borrowed horse and, after several adventures arrived in Lexington sometime after midnight.

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To learn more about the ride and Revere

Paul Revere and the World He Lived In by Esther Forbes

Paul Revere's Three Accounts of His Famous Ride, Massachusetts Historical Society Publication

Paul Revere — Artisan, Businessman and Patriot, Paul Revere Memorial Association Publication

What Was the Name of Paul Revere's Horse by Patrick Leehey

A True Republican: The Life of Paul Revere by Jayne Triber

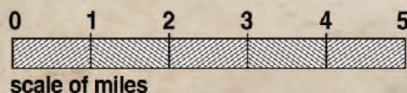
Paul Revere's Ride by David Hackett Fischer

Midnight Ride, Industrial Dawn: Paul Revere and the Growth of American Enterprise by Rob Martello

Map of Paul Revere's Ride



- KEY**
- Revere's route
 - - - Dawes's route
 - - - British route
 - Evening of April 18, 1775
 - Morning of April 19, 1775



TO CONCORD

1:00 a.m. - British patrol stops Revere; Dawes and Prescott escape.

2:00 a.m. - Revere is released.

12:45 a.m. - Revere and Dawes meet Prescott.

4:30 a.m. - Revere helps Adams and Hancock flee; enters Buckman Tavern to take Hancock's trunk.

12:15 a.m. - Revere arrives at the Clarke house; awaits Dawes.

5:00 a.m. - As Revere takes the trunk, battle begins on Lexington Green.

LEXINGTON

MENOTOMY

MEDFORD

3:00 a.m. - British reach Menotomy.

11:30 p.m. - Revere reaches Medford.

CAMBRIDGE

2:00 a.m. - British begin march to Lexington.

CHARLESTOWN

10:00 p.m. - British troops gather in Boston.

11:00 p.m. - Revere leaves Charlestown.

ROXBURY

BOSTON

9:30 p.m. - Dawes leaves Boston.

10:00 p.m. - Revere leaves Boston.

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Images from Revere's Ride



Photo by Ben Edwards

Hancock-Clarke House

Paul Revere arrived at the parsonage of Reverend Jonas Clarke in Lexington around midnight on April 18, 1775. Inside were patriot leaders Samuel Adams, John Hancock and other relatives. As Revere approached, a member of the Lexington militia who was guarding the house asked him to be quiet, noting that the family had gone to bed and did not wish to be disturbed. An irritated Revere replied, "Noise! You'll have noise enough before long. The Regulars are coming out!"

Revere delivered the news of Regular's march to Adams and Hancock and expressed concern for their safety. A short time later, William Dawes arrived. He was the first rider sent that night by Doctor Joseph Warren and had taken the longer route, out Boston neck and around Back Bay. Dawes and Revere decided to continue on to Concord and spread the alarm. Along the road, a third rider and "high Son of Liberty" Doctor Samuel Prescott joined them.

At 1:00 a.m. a British patrol stopped the men. Dawes and Prescott escaped, but Revere was captured. He was held for a time, but released in the early morning hours of April 19. Revere returned to Lexington on foot and soon volunteered to retrieve John Hancock's trunk, containing his valuable papers, from Buckman Tavern.



Photo by Ben Edwards

Buckman Tavern

In the early morning hours of April 19, 1775, members of the colonial militia gathered in this tavern across from Lexington Common as they awaited the advance of the British troops. By 4:30 a.m. Paul Revere, along with John Lowell (Hancock's clerk), had returned to Buckman Tavern to retrieve John Hancock's trunk so its important papers would not fall into British hands.

From a window on the second floor of the Buckman Tavern, Paul Revere spotted the British Regulars nearing Lexington Common as he and John Lowell lifted the heavy trunk and then carried it down some narrow stairs and out the building's front entrance. The men soon passed through the ranks of Captain Parker and his militia who were forming on Lexington Common. The group of about 70 militia men anxiously awaited word from their leader.

As he passed, it is possible that Paul Revere heard Captain Parker's words, "Let the troops pass by, don't molest them without they being first." As Revere and Lowell carried the trunk across the Common, the Regulars had nearly reached the militia. Captain Parker's instructions continued, "Stand your ground! Don't fire unless fired upon! But if they mean to have a war, let it begin here!" As Paul Revere reached the far end of the Common and no longer had a clear view of the events, he heard the first shots fired. The American Revolution had begun.



Photo by Ben Edwards

Lexington Green

The Minuteman statue on Lexington Green is very near the spot where Captain Parker and his Lexington militia stood their ground and fought the powerful British army on the morning of April 19, 1775.



Photo by Ben Edwards

Paul Revere Capture Site

This site, on Route 2A in Lincoln, is where Paul Revere was captured by a British patrol.



Photo by Ben Edwards

This plaque, at the capture site, pays tribute to "The Midnight Riders."

PAUL REVERE'S RIDE

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Listen, my children, and you shall hear
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five;
Hardly a man is now alive
Who remembers that famous day and year.

He said to his friend, "If the British march
By land or sea from the town to-night,
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry arch
Of the North Church tower as a signal light,—
One, if by land, and two, if by sea;
And I on the opposite shore will be,
Ready to ride and spread the alarm
Through every Middlesex village and farm,
For the country folk to be up and to arm."

Then he said, "Good night!" and with muffled oar
Silently rowed to the Charlestown shore,
Just as the moon rose over the bay,
Where swinging wide at her moorings lay
The Somerset, British man-of-war;
A phantom ship, with each mast and spar
Across the moon like a prison bar,
And a huge black hulk, that was magnified
By its own reflection in the tide.

Meanwhile, his friend, through alley and street,
Wanders and watches with eager ears,
Till in the silence around him he hears
The muster of men at the barrack door,
The sound of arms, and the tramp of feet,
And the measured tread of the grenadiers,
Marching down to their boats on the shore.

Then he climbed the tower of the Old North Church,
By the wooden stairs, with stealthy tread,
To the belfry-chamber overhead,
And startled the pigeons from their perch
On the sombre rafters, that round him made
Masses and moving shapes of shade,—
By the trembling ladder, steep and tall,
To the highest window in the wall,

...continued on pages 11, 12 & 13

Where he paused to listen and look down
A moment on the roofs of the town,
And the moonlight flowing over all.

Beneath, in the churchyard, lay the dead
In their night-encampment on the hill,
Wrapped in silence so deep and still
That he could hear, like a sentinel's tread,
The watchful night-wind, as it went
Creeping along from tent to tent,
And seeming to whisper, "All is well!"
A moment only he feels the spell
Of the place and the hour, and the secret dread
Of the lonely belfry and the dead;
For suddenly all his thoughts are bent
On a shadowy something far away,
Where the river widens to meet the bay,—
A line of black that bends and floats
On the rising tide, like a bridge of boats.

Meanwhile, impatient to mount and ride,
Booted and spurred, with a heavy stride
On the opposite shore walked Paul Revere.
Now he patted his horse's side,
Now gazed at the landscape far and near,
Then, impetuous, stamped the earth,
And turned and tightened his saddle girth;
But mostly he watched with eager search
The belfry-tower of the Old North Church,
As it rose above the graves on the hill,
Lonely and spectral and sombre and still.
And lo! as he looks, on the belfry's height
A glimmer, and then a gleam of light!
He springs to the saddle, the bridle he turns,
But lingers and gazes, till full on his sight
A second lamp in the belfry burns!

A hurry of hoofs in a village street,
A shape in the moonlight, a bulk in the dark,
And beneath, from the pebbles, in passing, a spark
Struck out by a steed flying fearless and fleet;
That was all! And yet, through the gloom and the light,
The fate of a nation was riding that night;
And the spark struck out by that steed, in his flight,
Kindled the land into flame with its heat.

...continued on pages 12 & 13

He has left the village and mounted the steep,
And beneath him, tranquil and broad and deep,
Is the Mystic, meeting the ocean tides;
And under the alders, that skirt its edge,
Now soft on the sand, now loud on the ledge,
Is heard the tramp of his steed as he rides.

It was twelve by the village clock
When he crossed the bridge into Medford town.
He heard the crowing of the cock,
And the barking of the farmer's dog,
And felt the damp of the river fog,
That rises after the sun goes down.

It was one by the village clock,
When he galloped into Lexington.
He saw the gilded weathercock
Swim in the moonlight as he passed,
And the meeting-house windows, blank and bare,
Gaze at him with a spectral glare,
As if they already stood aghast
At the bloody work they would look upon.

It was two by the village clock,
When he came to the bridge in Concord town.
He heard the bleating of the flock,
And the twitter of birds among the trees,
And felt the breath of the morning breeze
Blowing over the meadows brown.
And one was safe and asleep in his bed
Who at the bridge would be first to fall,
Who that day would be lying dead,
Pierced by a British musket-ball.

You know the rest. In the books you have read,
How the British Regulars fired and fled,—
How the farmers gave them ball for ball,
From behind each fence and farm-yard wall,
Chasing the red-coats down the lane,
Then crossing the fields to emerge again
Under the trees at the turn of the road,
And only pausing to fire and load.

...concluded on page 13

So through the night rode Paul Revere;
And so through the night went his cry of alarm
To every Middlesex village and farm,—
A cry of defiance and not of fear,
A voice in the darkness, a knock at the door,
And a word that shall echo forevermore!
For, borne on the night-wind of the Past,
Through all our history, to the last,
In the hour of darkness and peril and need,
The people will waken and listen to hear
The hurrying hoof-beats of that steed,
And the midnight message of Paul Revere.

This text of "Paul Revere's Ride" is *The Landlord's Tale* and was taken from a 1915 printing of *Tales of a Wayside Inn*. Longfellow's poem about Revere's ride first appeared in print in a Boston newspaper on December 18, 1860; later in the January 1861 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly* and finally in *Tales of a Wayside Inn* in the fall of 1863.

**To learn more about our site, programs,
and how you can support our work,
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