

Revere House Radio

Season 1 Episode 4

Revisit the Ride: What Actually Happened on the Midnight Ride?

Welcome to another episode of Revere House Radio, Midnight Ride Edition. I am your host Robert Shimp, and we appreciate you listening in as we continue to investigate different facets of Paul Revere's Midnight Ride leading up to Patriots Day in Boston on Monday April 20. Today, April 18, we will commemorate Paul Revere's ride, which happened 245 years ago today, by answering the question of what actually happened that night? Previously, we have discussed the fact that he was a known and trusted rider for the Sons of Liberty, and that he did not shout "The British Are Coming!" along his route, but rather stopped at houses along the way and said something to the effect of: "the regulars are coming out."

With these points established, we can get into the nuts and bolts of the evening — how did the night unfold for Paul Revere? As we discussed on Thursday, Paul Revere and Dr. Joseph Warren had known for some time that a major action from the British regulars was in the offing at some point in April 1775, and on April 18, Revere and Warren's surveillance system of the British regulars paid off. Knowing an action was imminent, Warren called Revere to his house that night to give him his orders which —in Paul Revere's recollections — were to alert John Hancock and Samuel Adams that the soldiers would be marching to the Lexington area in a likely attempt to seize them. While this bit of the information was faulty — the primary goal for the regulars was to gather and take back munitions in Concord that the colonists were storing up — the need for the ride was real.

Revere left Warren's house around 10 PM, alerted his friend Robert Newman at Christ Church — now known as the Old North Church — to put their lantern signal system into motion. That evening, two lanterns were needed to alert Charlestown Patriots that the British soldiers would be crossing the Charles River by boats, not by land at Boston Neck. The famous system was of course, one if by land, two if by sea, and the soldiers were going by sea, the water route. Revere then retrieved his riding necessities, including his overcoat from his now famous house at 19 North Square — we hope to see you there soon — and set out to the water in Boston's North End.

Revere had wisely stashed a rowboat on the Boston side of the river, and two associates, Joshua Bentley and Thomas Richardson, rowed him across the river to Charlestown. There, he met up

with Colonel Conant and a few Sons of Liberty, who confirmed to Revere they had seen the lanterns, so the system worked. Upon receiving a horse from Deacon John Larkin's horse from Richard Devens — as an aside, the horse's name has been lost to the historical record, though all sorts of crazy names through history abound, with Brown Beauty being the most likely of all names, but I digress — Revere was alerted to British patrols in the area and he set off by moonlight around 11 PM.

Though he had avoided detection by the HMS Somerset which was positioned in Boston harbor, Revere was not able to avoid being seen by one of the roving British patrols. Shortly into his ride Revere ran into two British regulars, but avoided capture in what sounds like a scene straight from Hollywood. Revere was able to outpace one rider, while the other British regular became stuck in a clay pit and could not continue his pursuit. Avoiding capture, Revere stopped in Medford to alert the captain of the militia there of the situation, and then “alarmed almost every house” until he reached Lexington.

Upon arriving in the town, Revere made his way to Reverend Clarke's house, where Hancock and Adams were staying. Since he had nearly accomplished his primary mission, Revere decided to throw caution to the wind at this point, and made quite a commotion upon arrival, so much so that the sentry at the house told him to keep quiet for the residents had just turned in for the evening. According to William Munroe's testimony, Revere responded by shouting “Noise! You'll have noise enough before long — the regulars are coming out!”

Revere then convened with Adams and Hancock for a time, and the second rider from Boston, William Dawes — more on him tomorrow! — arrived about a half hour later. Revere noted that they ‘refreshed themselves’, likely took a little bit of a break, maybe some drink and food, and then decided to press their luck and carry on the alarm to Concord. Along the route, they ran into Dr. Samuel Prescott, who Revere defined as a “high Son of Liberty.” Prescott was out quite late for a weeknight, returning to his house after visiting with his girlfriend. Prescott decided to assist in the alarm.

At this stage, Revere's evasive luck ran out, as the three men ran into a large British patrol. Prescott was able to escape and of the three, he was the only one to make it to Concord to raise the alarm there. Dawes was also able to avoid capture, but Revere, after a few attempts to escape, was detained by the patrol. Revere was held for some time, but after the soldiers threatened him several times, Revere was able to talk his way out of the situation.

In short, his information proved to the soldiers Revere knew more about the impending action than they did, and they decided not to trifle with Revere and the few other riders they had collected that evening. They ultimately let Revere go, but took his horse, meaning he was forced to return to Lexington on foot. Revere arrived back to find Hancock and Adams still on site —

which must have been incredibly frustrating for him! – but the two political leaders left soon after. Revere’s final action for the evening — now early morning — was to assist Hancock’s secretary John Lowell to remove a trunk of very sensitive papers from the Buckman Tavern to the woods, which they accomplished just as the first shots rang out at Lexington Green. Revere’s work was done for the evening, but his story and his legend, of course, had just begun.

We will have much more to cover over the next two days, breaking down the story of the other riders that evening, and if Revere’s ride was actually important. As always, keep in touch on our social media platforms and be sure to send us videos or clips of your work in reciting the ride! We will be back tomorrow, and until then, stay safe, and thanks for listening.

Erratum:

This episode states that Paul Revere received Deacon John Larkin’s horse from Richard Devens. All we can say definitively is that Paul Revere received Deacon Larkin’s horse.

The episode makes reference to Paul Revere making a few attempts to escape capture by British soldiers in Concord. In Revere’s three accounts of the ride, he only lists one.