



Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

“I Love the Story of Paul Revere, Whether He Rode or Not”

So said President Warren G. Harding in 1923. Like most Americans at that time, Harding probably learned about Revere as a schoolboy when he read a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Later, when a skeptic claimed the story of Revere’s ride never happened, Harding sprang to the poet’s defense. But was Revere the hero Longfellow made him out to be?

In 1860, the young nation whose fight for freedom began at Lexington and Concord was in danger of falling apart. War clouds gathered as Americans debated the issues of slavery and states’ rights. The South, which had grown prosperous with slave labor, vigorously defended its way of life. The North, which had grown even more prosperous without slave labor, condemned slavery as morally wrong. Americans had never been so divided or so close to civil war.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was then the nation’s most popular poet. He was also a Northerner who opposed slavery. As he watched the nation move toward war, Longfellow began thinking about a new poem. He wanted it to be a call to arms for all who loved liberty in such a time of peril.

One day in April 1860, Longfellow took a walk with a friend in Boston. His companion told him a story that took place on another April day, some 85 years earlier. It was the tale of a midnight ride made by a silversmith named Paul Revere to alert the countryside to coming danger. Longfellow was inspired. Like Paul Revere’s ride, the poem he planned would be a cry of alarm to awaken a sleeping nation.

Longfellow set to work at once. His finished work, titled “Paul Revere’s Ride,” was published in 1861. Over the next century, generations of schoolchildren would read and memorize its stirring lines. As you read the excerpt that follows, can you see why the poem captured Americans’ imaginations?

“Paul Revere’s Ride” tells the story of Revere’s mission to warn the Minutemen. This Minuteman statue stands at the site of the battle in Concord, Massachusetts.



Over the years, American artists were drawn to the legend of Paul Revere. Most works, like this 19th-century painting, show Revere as a lone rider.



Longfellow Creates a Legend: The Lone Hero

Longfellow had set out to create a dramatic tale that would make patriotic hearts beat faster. In the process, he transformed Paul Revere from a local folk hero into a national legend. Even today, millions of Americans know the opening lines of Longfellow's poem.

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

When we think of the events that launched the American Revolution, we can picture them clearly. Revere asks a friend to send a signal from Boston's Old North Church when the British troops quartered there begin to move out.

*One, if by land, and two, if by sea;
And I on the opposite shore will be,*

The signal comes and Revere gallops into the night, waking the countryside with the news that the British are coming.

*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!*

Alerted by our lone hero, the colonists rise up to defend their homes and liberties.

*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 . . .*

The rest, as they say, is history. Or is it?

Skeptics Raise Doubts: Did Revere Really Ride?

Historians were quick to point out many inaccuracies in Longfellow's telling. For example, the poet omitted the fact that, during his ride, Revere was captured by British troops. Longfellow also left out the names of other messengers who rode that night, such as William Dawes and Samuel Prescott.

As doubts about the poem multiplied, skeptics began to question the entire story. Some said Revere's ride didn't happen at all. Or if it did, Revere was captured before he could warn many Patriots. Such talk annoyed President Harding. "Somebody made the ride and stirred the minutemen in the colonies to fight the battle of Lexington," he said. "I love the story of Paul Revere, whether he rode or not."

As time passed, some doubters threw cold water on the idea that Revere was a hero. One skeptic said that Revere "set out with two other guys for money." When the three were arrested, he "turned stool pigeon and betrayed his two companions." Is this true? Was Revere a traitor to his cause?

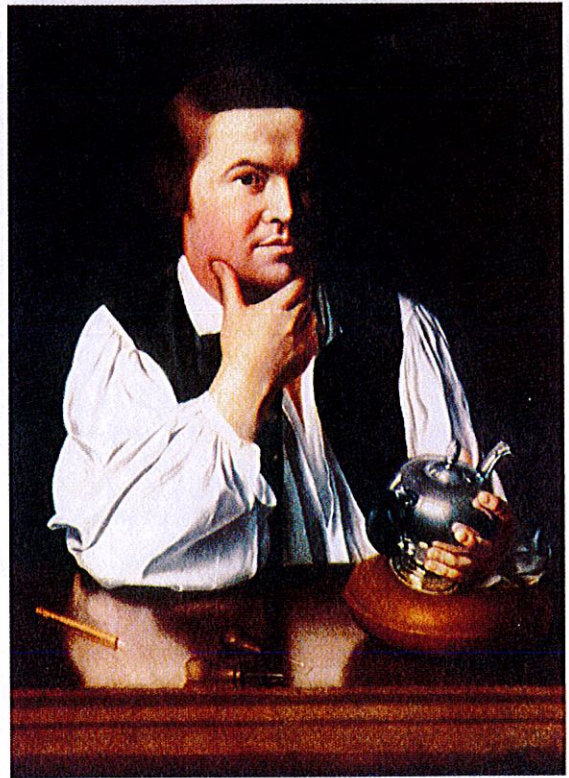
Historians Weigh In: The Real Meaning of Revere's Ride

Modern historians find no evidence that Revere was paid to ride or that he became an informer when he was captured. But they also remind us that Revere was not the only hero of that momentous night. Within hours of his ride, 122 colonists had lost their lives and many more lay wounded. As one historian writes,

Revere's ride was not the major event that day, nor was Revere's warning so critical in triggering the bloodbath. Patriotic farmers had been preparing to oppose the British for the better part of a year . . . His ride to Lexington . . . took on meaning only because numerous other political activists had, like Revere, dedicated themselves to the cause.

—Ray Raphael, *Founding Myths: Stories that Hide Our Patriotic Past*, 2004

The real meaning of Revere's ride is what it tells us about these unsung heroes. On hearing that the British soldiers were coming, those patriotic farmers had a choice. They could remain safe in their beds or rise up to defend their rights. Looking at their response, historian David Hackett Fischer writes, "The history of a free people is the history of hard choices. In that respect, when Paul Revere alarmed the Massachusetts countryside, he was carrying a message for us."



The Granger Collection, New York

Paul Revere was well known as a silversmith and a Patriot. When Revere sat for this painting by John Singleton Copley, he chose to hold one of the tea-pots he had designed. Just five years later, he was one of the Sons of Liberty at the Boston Tea Party.