

# ‘Mercury of the Revolution’

*Paul Revere’s most famous ride was only one of many he made for the cause of independence.*

By Bill Hudgins

**M**ost of us can quote the opening couplet of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem, “The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere.” The pounding iambic pentameter evokes the rhythm of hoofbeats on a dark and lonely road, making it irresistibly memorable.

*“Listen my children and you shall hear/  
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere.”*

Longfellow’s poem took liberties with the facts and, in doing so, fixed Paul Revere in the public mind as a lone horseman inspired by patriotic fervor to this single daring act.

In fact, Revere’s midnight ride to warn Lexington and Concord of advancing British troops was only one of a number of important and delicate missions he undertook mainly for Boston’s committees of Correspondence and Safety between December 1773 and the end of 1775.

He spent so much time on the road during that period that he became known as “The Mercury of the Revolution” after the winged Roman messenger god.

And Revere was more than a mere errand boy. The man whom Longfellow’s poem describes as “a voice in the darkness, a knock at the door,” was a well-established, longtime member of the inner circles of Revolutionary Boston.

His peers considered him an emissary—discreet, honorable, trustworthy, privy to sensitive information and empowered to act on behalf of the Patriot leaders.

## ‘A Great Joiner’

Born around January 1, 1735, (by the Gregorian calendar) to a French Huguenot father and Yankee American Puritan mother, Revere learned the silversmith trade from his father, Paul Revere (née Apollos Rivoire). In 1754 his father died, and Revere took over the family business in early 1756, following his 21st birthday.

The business thrived and, like many successful men of that era, Revere became involved in civic affairs. He was “a great joiner” who believed in serving his community in whatever capacity he could. This included being a public health officer and a member of a committee that installed the first streetlights in Boston.

Revere also helped found an insurance company and helped organize fellow artisans and “mechanics”—skilled craftsmen—into the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanics

Association, which aided the poor and needy.

He served in the militia in the French and Indian War, and in 1760 became an active, avid and devoted Mason, rising to be master of his lodge in 1770. Revere seemed to know everyone, up and down the social scale. Being a Mason helped facilitate this—the secretive order promoted equality among its members, regardless of their rank outside the lodge walls, and created bonds that transcended class.

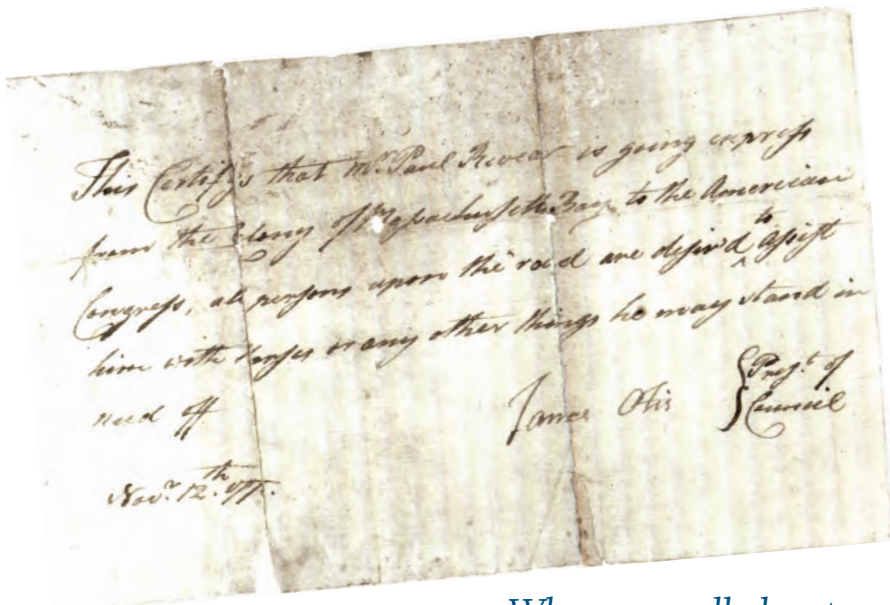
The renowned Boston Patriot and Mason Dr. Joseph Warren became one of Revere’s close friends. As tensions grew between Great Britain and the Colonies—and especially Massachusetts—Warren and Revere joined other secretive patriotic groups such as the Sons of Liberty, who were united in resistance to British policies and, eventually, British rule.

Revere was a doer, a man who “was an organizer of collective effort in the American Revolution,” writes David Hackett Fischer in *Paul Revere’s Ride* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

“During the pivotal period from the fall of 1774 to the spring of 1775, he had an uncanny genius for being at the center of events,” Fischer adds. “Like Benjamin Franklin, another Boston-born descendant of Puritan artisans, Paul Revere became highly skilled at the practical art of getting things done.”

For instance, Revere mobilized his mechanics association to spy on the British army and royal officials and relay the information to Patriot leaders, and to carry out other acts of defiance.

Their best-known coup was the Boston Tea Party, whose organizers and leaders included Warren and Revere.



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According to Esther H. Forbes' Pulitzer Prize-winning biography, *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In* (Houghton Mifflin, 1942), when the merchant vessel *Dartmouth* docked in Boston on November 28, 1773, the captain was warned not to unload his cargo of tea.

Revere and his comrades kept watch to ensure the tea stayed aboard *Dartmouth* and two other ships that arrived over the next two weeks. Fearing other tea ships would try to land at nearby port towns, the Committee of Correspondence on November 30 sent Revere and five other riders to warn neighboring towns not to allow them to unload.

### Riding for Revolution

On December 17, the day after the Boston Tea Party, the Committee of Correspondence asked Revere to take news of the event to New York and Pennsylvania. He also was to encourage them to support Boston's actions by refusing to allow unloading of tea at their docks—not the kind of task with which a simple messenger would be entrusted, Fischer notes. Revere succeeded in both tasks.

Though Fischer writes that Revere sometimes rode his "own large gray saddle horse," the Paul Revere Memorial Association says the peripatetic Patriot may not have owned a horse during the Revolution. Whenever called on to make a ride, he rented a steed. He did so for the first trip, and his bill for the ride still exists—he billed the committee for 14 pounds, 2 shillings, for expenses, hiring a horse and his time.

Revere rode to New York and to Philadelphia again in May 1774, bringing news of the Intolerable Acts, Britain's response to the Boston Tea Party. Also called the Coercive Acts, the laws closed the port of Boston, appointed General Thomas Gage as temporary governor while Royal Governor Thomas

Hutchinson sailed to England to discuss the situation in person, put the town under control of British troops, and replaced many key local officials with royal appointees.

Revere was dispatched to advise New York and Philadelphia of what had happened—and that they could be next. New York had already received a copy of the orders, and its Patriot leaders promised full support.

Philadelphia leaders also promised support, and began moving toward calling the First Continental Congress. Revere returned home after 12 hard days on the road, arriving just before Gage carried out his orders and closed the port.

In the summer of 1774, Revere made at least one trip to New York to attend discussions about the upcoming Congress. Then on September 11, he again rode south to New York and Philadelphia, taking copies of the Suffolk Resolves to the First Continental Congress.

Drawn up by Warren and endorsed by Patriot leaders in Boston and other towns in Suffolk County, Mass., the Suffolk Resolves denounced the Intolerable Acts as unconstitutional, and called for open defiance of them, as well as for a boycott of British imports and curtailing exports to Britain.

The resolves further demanded the resignations of the newly appointed officials and declared Massachusetts would not pay taxes until royal control of local government was lifted. Perhaps most incendiary, the Suffolk Resolves proposed to set up an autonomous Massachusetts government and urged other Colonies to begin raising militia.

Revere covered the 350 miles of crude roads to Philadelphia in just five days. The Continental Congress overwhelmingly endorsed the resolves, and Revere left for home with that good news on September 18. On September 29, he headed back to Congress with news of Boston's response to the British actions. He returned to Boston in mid-October.

### A Literal Powder Keg

On December 12, 1774, Revere braved winter roads to warn Patriots in Portsmouth, N.H., that British troops were en route to reinforce the tiny garrison at Fort William and Mary in nearby New Castle and to seize suspected caches of Patriot arms and gunpowder. The warning gave the local Sons of Liberty enough time to attack and take the lightly defended

fort, seize some five tons of munitions stored there and carry them away. But the Redcoats did encounter the stockpile a few months later—the guns and powder from New Hampshire were used by Patriots at the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Though most accounts say Revere simply carried the warning and returned the next day, there's evidence that he stayed a full five days to help the Portsmouth Patriots in one of the earliest confrontations with British army forces, according to historian Peter Flood.

"He was there for both the Patriots' attacks on the fort, during which more than five tons of gunpowder and many cannon were taken on flat-bottomed boats by tidal flow all the way to Major John Sullivan's dock on the Oyster River at Durham, N.H.," Flood says.

"Revere was undoubtedly involved in helping to foment the attacks," Flood adds, "coaching the participants to exercise great restraint [no one was killed], and being the 'messenger' that Sullivan reported as arriving at his house with 110 barrels of gunpowder after the first attack."

Details about this and some other trips Revere made are sketchy, Flood notes.

"Many of the Patriot leaders in New Hampshire, including Sullivan, were Masons," Flood says. "It is probable that Revere took an oath of secrecy about his mission and other Masons, informed of that secret, would also keep that secret for life."

The events at Portsmouth enraged King George III and led to Parliament's passing harsh punitive measures designed to bring Boston in line. Instead, they caused the Colonies to explode into open rebellion.

### Ill-kept Secrets

Despite oaths of secrecy, Revere's trip to Portsmouth did not go unnoticed. British authorities had already identified Revere as a troublemaker and concluded that wherever he went, trouble followed. "He was known as a storm warning," according to Forbes.

But unknown to Revere and the others, their efforts at secrecy were in vain, because Gage had a spy at the heart of the Patriot establishment. Dr. Benjamin Church, who served on the Committee of Safety, was a paid British agent.

Church was so successful in his duplicity that he was appointed as chief physician and director general of the medical service of the Continental Army from July 27, 1775, to October 17, 1775. It was only after an encrypted letter of his was intercepted and decoded that he was arrested and court-martialed.

Though Gage possessed inside information on many clandestine Patriot activities, he nevertheless allowed them to

continue instead of arresting the rebellious Bostonians. Perhaps he was protecting his highly placed source or likely he was trying not to provoke a further rebellion. He may have worried that others would take the place of those he arrested, and the alarmed remaining leaders would improve their security.



After arriving on horseback from Boston, Paul Revere warns Maj. John Sullivan at Durham, N.H., of British plans to occupy the fort and harbor at Portsmouth, N.H., December 13, 1774.

### The Midnight Ride: Myth vs. Fact

Revere's famous midnight ride was actually the third time that he galloped from Boston to warn of possible British attacks in April 1775.

On April 8, Revere went to Concord with what proved to be a false alarm, though it put Patriots on guard. They began to hide military supplies, and the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, which had been meeting at Concord, adjourned and left town.

On April 16, he rode to Lexington and Charlestown to apprise Samuel Adams and John Hancock of new, ominous British movements. On this trip, Fischer writes, Revere and his colleagues discussed how to warn local towns of sudden British movements.

Their plans included numerous fast riders, clandestine routes and "a backup system of lantern signals from Boston to Charlestown."

The British knew about the Patriots' early warning system and especially about Revere's central role in the supposedly clandestine communications network. And when Gage decided he would move on Lexington and Concord on April 18, he took steps to thwart the Patriots' messengers.

On the morning of April 18, Gage sent out a mounted patrol with orders to stop any American couriers. The patrol divided into smaller groups to monitor the main routes from Boston to Concord and Lexington.

The Patriots in Boston soon learned about this activity. Warren summoned Revere and another rider, William Dawes. As Revere wrote years later, Warren "begged that I would immediately set off for Lexington, where Messrs. Hancock and [Samuel] Adams were, and acquaint them of the movement, and that it was thought they were the objects."

Dawes left Boston on horseback through the heavily guarded main entrance to the town on Boston Neck. With the help of two trusted friends, Revere planned to take a boat to Charlestown, then borrow a horse and ride on to Lexington.

As the Paul Revere Heritage Project notes, Longfellow's account of the night contained many errors that have become part of the Revere myth.

For instance, the poem doesn't mention Dawes. It also says that Revere was in Charlestown when the famous "one if by land, two if by sea" signal was flashed; and that he made it all the way to Concord.

In fact, the lantern signals had been planned in advance and were sent at his orders to Patriots in Charlestown, while he was still making his way there.

Perhaps the biggest misstatement was that Revere rode, unmolested, all the way to Concord. In fact, soon after leaving Boston he ran into a British patrol and raced away as they pursued him. He eluded the soldiers and took a long detour through the town of Medford without seeing more Redcoat patrols.

Revere got to Lexington before Dawes and found Adams and Hancock at the home of a local clergyman. Dawes arrived as the three talked about the situation, and he and Revere decided to ride to Concord to warn Patriots that the British might try to seize military stores there.

As they left Lexington together, they encountered Dr. Samuel Prescott, who was returning to Concord from Lexington. After determining his political views, they told him what they were doing and he agreed to help.

Soon, however, they ran into another British patrol and tried to flee. Prescott managed to escape and made his way to Concord. Dawes also got away, but his horse threw him and ran off, leaving him stranded on foot in the countryside.

But the British captured Revere. When they interrogated him, he candidly told them that the countryside was being alerted and warned them that attempting to enter either Lexington or Concord would end in disaster.

Fischer argues that Revere's aim was to prevent their capturing Adams and Hancock, and that the ploy disconcerted the already edgy Redcoats. As they escorted Revere and some other captives toward Boston, they passed near Lexington, where bells were ringing and militia were already assembling. The British—under no orders to hold anyone for long, just to prevent anyone from getting through to Concord to warn the town that British troops were headed their way—released him and the others, though they took their horses.

### Last Rides

After the battles at Lexington and Concord, Revere spent 17 days—April 21 to May 7, 1775—on the road doing what was described as "out of doors work," this time for the Committee of Safety.



The spire of Old North (Christ) Church in Boston in which two lanterns glowed on the night of April 18, 1775, as a signal that the British were leaving Boston by water.

No detailed records have ever been found of where he went or his specific actions. But Fischer notes the committee was trying to raise an army, so Revere's work likely related to that. If so, he was successful—fighting men streamed into Boston in the prelude to Bunker Hill and the eventual siege of the town.

Revere was never paid for the midnight ride, but he did bill the rebel government 5 shillings a day for those subsequent 17 days. His request got caught in the bureaucratic machinery. "A tight-fisted Yankee committee insisted on reducing his daily allowance from five shillings to four," Fischer notes. The entire Massachusetts House of Representatives had to vote on the payment, and 16 officials had to sign the payment authorization, including Warren, Samuel Adams and John Adams.

Revere's final trip took place between November 12 and 24, 1775, when he rode to Philadelphia to learn how to manufacture gunpowder, which the Colonies constantly lacked.

Although his career as a political cartoonist ended in 1775, Revere remained deeply involved in the fight for independence. He worked as a commercial engraver and engraved money for the

Massachusetts government during the war.

After the Revolution, he diversified his business, building an iron and brass foundry in 1787 that produced household items as well as cannon and bells. He inscribed the bell he made for his church (the Second Congregational Church, also known as the New Brick Church) with the legend, "The first bell to be cast in Boston 1792 P. Revere." The Revere foundry manufactured more than 900 bells of all sizes between 1792 and 1828. One of those bells, cast in 1816, still rings each Sunday in Boston's King's Chapel. Paul Revere called it "the sweetest bell we ever made."

In 1800, Revere converted an old iron mill into a copper rolling mill. Copper had been scarce throughout the Revolution, and the growing nation needed a reliable source. A loan from the federal government helped finance the venture, and soon he was producing sheets for U.S. Navy ships, the dome of the Massachusetts State House and boilers on Robert Fulton's newfangled steamships.

Besides being profitable, the foundry and rolling mill helped provide the new nation with urgently needed materials—a proper Yankee mix of business savvy and patriotism and completely in keeping with Paul Revere's can-do character, Fischer notes. 🍷