

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Paul Revere's Ride"

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,
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



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.

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.

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.

It is plausible to read this engaging narrative poem as a contribution to the American “nation-building” project which supplies a heroic memory of the founding generation of American patriots engaged in War of Independence. The American Revolutionary Army under George Washington was really a militia raised by the States who signed the Declaration of 1775 and ultimately succeeded in defeating the British forces under General Cornwallis at the siege of Yorktown in 1781. Fighting with them were some contingents sent by the King of France with whom the British were engaged in a global war throughout the colonies. The Treaty of Paris of 1783 signed in that city on 3 Sept. 1783 established independence of the United States while the Treaty of Versailles signed on the same day settled matters between Britain, France and Spain and all hostilities in North America ceased.

The American War of Independence was a sporadic affair involving no major battles though Lexington, Concord and Lincoln were the scenes of armed engagements. One effect is that the popular narrative of the war revolves around minor episodes such as the midnight ride of Paul Revere who brought warning to the American garrison at Concord that the British were planning an attack. Since it is a tale of one man’s patriotism and courage it is peculiarly suited to the American myth of the heroic individual pitting himself against a hostile power. In addition, the heavy focus of American memory and legend on horsemanship gives the theme of skillful riding a particular resonance as marching in companies would not.

Yet any reader who knows Robert Browning’s “How they Brought the Good News from Ghent” will recognise the thematic and rhythmic similarities—including some motifs and even some phrases—must feel that the poem is something like a reprise of Browning’s equestrian legend for the political purposes of the American nation. About those purposes, Longfellow is quite explicit both in the address to school-children and the mention of the subsequent history of war and liberation but also in the line which reads, “The fate of a nation was riding that night.” Not just one man, therefore, but a whole nation are thus involved in the story.

As to actual events, *Wikipedia* simply tells us that Paul Revere learned of the plan to attack Concord and seize the rebel militia’s munitions, capturing John Hancock and Samuel Adams in the process. “Revere learnt of the plan and notified Captain Parker, commander of the Concord militia, who prepared to resist the attempted seizure”. In reality, Revere rode with two other men and all three were arrested by the British on the way—only Revere being released in view of his status. Nevertheless the ride, and their meeting with Hancock and Adams on the way, alerted the rebels to the British plan and lead to the battle of Lexington in which the British were sent running, as Longfellow’s poem tells. The great simplification of reducing those events to a single player and a single exploit is a matter of poetic licence ... and national memory.