Paul Revere's Ride

By Jamie Eves • April 5, 2020

On a cold April 5, 160 years ago today, a despondent Henry Wadsworth Longfellow visited the burying ground of the Old North Church in Boston, and the genesis of a poem began to emerge in his mind. "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere" would not see print until almost a year later, in the January, 1861, edition of *The Atlantic Monthly,* shortly after South Carolina seceded from the Union and the Civil War began. For many years, historians derided Longfellow's famous poem (by some accounts the best known American poem) for its historical inaccuracies, especially when they realized that Longfellow had been aware all the time that the poem was not good history. Such criticisms, however, fail to understand the true meaning of Longfellow's masterpiece, and are an object lesson in why it is important to evaluate historical literature in terms of the times in which it was written, not the date in which it was set. For "Paul Revere's Ride" was never about the Revolution. It was instead all about the impending Civil War, a war that Longfellow desperately hoped his country could avoid.

"Paul Revere's Ride" is set during the American Revolution, in April of 1775. The poem describes Revere waiting with his horse across the Charles River from Boston, in Charlestown, for a signal—lanterns hung in the belfry of the Old North Church – from a "friend" in Boston. When two lanterns appear, Revere learns the route that British troops are using in their raid on Concord, Massachusetts, and sets out to spread the alarm. Until Longfellow published the poem, most Americans were unfamiliar with Revere as a historical character and with his now-famous ride. The poem transformed Revere from a secondary figure of the American Revolution into a national hero.

But the poem is historically inaccurate. Revere did not ride alone, as the poem implies; there were others – William Dawes and Samuel Prescott – also on horseback that night. Revere never made it to Concord, although the poem flatly says that he did; like Dawes, Revere was captured by a Redcoat patrol less than halfway there, and only Prescott succeeded in making the complete journey – not that it mattered, for once word of the raid had been carried to Lexington, Colonial leaders alerted the Minutemen in Concord with a chain of prearranged musket fire. Longfellow refers to Revere's horse with a masculine pronoun; the horse was a mare. Revere did not row across the Charles River by himself; he was transported by three others. Revere did not refer to the Redcoats as "the British" (before the Revolution, they were all British), but as the "regulars." What is more, Longfellow was aware of all these inaccuracies. Seemingly, he deliberately fictionalized a historic event in order to transform the little-known Revere into a famous hero. Because the poem begins with the line, "Listen my children, and you shall hear / Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere," the assumption has arisen that Longfellow, like Mason Weems (who wrote the hagiographic biography of George Washington that contains the fictional cherry tree caper), had primarily sought to make Revere into a hero for the benefit of uplifting the country's youth.

However, that was not at all what Longfellow was doing. For one thing, despite its opening lines, the poem was not written for children, but for adults. Despite its easy-to-read meter, it is complex, rife with symbolism and imagery. The "children" to whom Longfellow referred were the children of the Revolution, those Americans born and raised in the years after the events of 1775, and who had no personal memories of the struggle for independence. Longfellow makes this clear when he writes, "Hardly a man is now alive, who remembers that famous day and year." Longfellow was concerned that Americans had forgotten something, and the poem was a reminder of what that something was.

Harvard professor Jill Lepore has defended "Paul Revere's Ride," arguing that it should be read primarily as an anti-slavery poem. There is some sense in her argument. Longfellow had been an abolitionist since the 1840s. In the poem, he refers to the British warship in Boston harbor past which Revere rows, the *Somerset*, symbolically recalling the well known Somerset case, an English trial that had challenged the legality of slavery. Longfellow compares the reflection of the masts of the ship to prison bars. And he was aware that many of those buried in the graveyard of the Old North Church, described in the poem, had been slaves. Certainly, it wouldn't be surprising that Longfellow had slavery on his mind when he worked on his poem in 1860. Lepore's essay led one critic to conclude that the poem was essentially a Unionist call to arms, spurring Northerners to march into battle to end slavery.

More likely, however, the poem was intended not as a call to arms, but as a plea for peace. Far from welcoming the Civil War as an opportunity to end the slavery that he abhorred, Longfellow dreaded it. Civil wars are terrible things. Passions inflame. Hatred grows. People die. Nations are torn apart. Longfellow's own son, Charles, was of military age. Indeed, Charles would join the Union army and suffer life-threatening wounds, something that Longfellow had feared. (His later poem, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," spoke to his anguish about his son.) The best interpretation of "Paul Revere's Ride" is that it was not an attempt to canonize Revere, but a cry for reason, a plea for Americans to remember who they were, what they had been – that once, in a time of desperation and need, they had united in a common cause (historians know this was not true, that Americans had been as divided about the Revolution – itself a civil war – as they were about the Civil War, but that was not how Longfellow saw it), that working together they had achieved something glorious, and that events now boded to destroy all that had been accomplished.

The poem can be divided into four parts. The first part is the introduction, where the narrator announces that he is going to tell a story about something important that has been forgotten, but which needs to be remembered. The second part, which is quite long, describes the events just before Revere begins to ride: the quiet city, peaceful in the moonlight; the stately church, almost empty at night; the stillness of the graveyard; Revere rowing slowly across the Charles River; his confederate placing the two lanterns in the church belfry, "one if by land, and two if by sea." The chief images in this part of the poem are ominous quiet, shadow, moonlight – a suspenseful calmness that builds tension.

Then, in the third part, the climax of the poem, the tempo explodes. The horse thunders into the darkness, its great strides eating up miles of country road. Iron horseshoes pound the gravel, striking stone after stone, each strike generating a spark, until the sparks become so numerous that they seem to flow through the night as a great river of fire. Longfellow draws our attention to the sparks that, lit that night, generated the flame that would be the Revolution and the new nation. Revere rides from town to town, uttering "a cry of defiance, and not of fear" — the battle cry of a new nation. Revere's alarm symbolizes Longfellow's own alarm, his warning about the impending Civil War.

The fourth and last part of the poem is the conclusion, where Longfellow sums up its meaning: that the poem is really not about the Revolution at all, which is why Longfellow felt himself free to fictionalize it; that it is rather about the looming threat of a divisive, horrific Civil War. It is Longfellow's own "cry of defiance" into the gathering gale of secession, his frantic and ultimately futile urging that Americans must remember what they have in common and work together to solve their problems, as one nation.

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.

In 1860 Longfellow hoped that Americans would be able to set aside their disagreements and hatreds and find common ground. He was, it turned out, too optimistic. Can we do better, today?

Here is a link to a recording of “Paul Revere’s Ride”:
https://video.search.yahoo.com/yhs/search;_ylt=AwrC_BxHTIpe5CMANSoPxQt.;_ylu=X30DMTByMjB0aG5zBGNp=paul+revere%27s+ride&fr=yhs-sz-001&hspart=sz&hsimp=yhs-001#id=13&vid=443aa1090e33412e4dfdf862f4a1ed0a&action=view.