

“Revere’s Vigil for Liberty”

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Revere's Vigil for Liberty

By the night of his immortal “midnight ride,” Paul Revere was already a prominent patriot. A Son of Liberty, Boston Tea Party participant, and courier for the Committees of Safety, Revere’s most famous contribution to the patriot cause occurred the night of April 18, 1775.

As the winter snow thawed, colonial-British tensions did not. General Gage received orders to seize colonial weapon stores, and with the illegal Provincial Congress recently adjourned, he believed the scattered hotheads could not respond to a march on the cache at Concord. Patriot eyes watched the British prepare to strike. Joseph Warren, a leading Son of Liberty, sent Paul Revere to warn Sam Adams and John Hancock in Lexington. News also reached Concord that day—perhaps Revere delivered it. As colonists hid the arms there, Revere continued to Charleston and arranged the famous lantern signal: one if the British marched overland, two if they crossed the bay and followed the north road. Returning to Boston, Revere completed this first, preparatory ride.

Patriots waited tensely on April 18th until news arrived from spies: the British would cross to Charleston and continue toward Concord. As planned, Revere rowed with muffled oars to Charleston, mounted a readied horse, and traveled the route Redcoats would tramp a few hours later. Another messenger, William Dawes, passed British road blockades disguised as a country drunk and headed overland to Concord, gathering minutemen as he went. As both these men slipped from Boston, two lanterns flickered from the North Church belfry.

Cantering northwest toward Hancock and Adams, Revere spread the warning. At Lexington he urged the two leaders to flee, then continued toward Concord with Dawes and a new companion, Samuel Prescott. Unfortunately, the riders made little progress before they

encountered British sentries patrolling the roads. Prescott leapt a low wall and carried the warning to Concord while Dawes escaped on foot, but the soldiers forced Revere to dismount. According to his own account, the sharp-tongued silversmith spoke saucily to the captain, announcing that the countryside knew their plans. Alarmed, the soldiers suddenly rode away—and Revere clambered back to Lexington.

As April 19th dawned, the British met nearly seventy minutemen on Lexington green. Revere, however, was in Buckman's Tavern looking for a trunk of Hancock's important papers—papers full of treason. Literally at the same moment Major Pitcairn cried, "Disperse, ye rebels," Revere hauled the trunk through the militiamen toward a parsonage across the green. As he wove between the minutemen, a shot rang out. Revere wrote that he "heard the report and turned [his] head" but continued toward the parsonage with his priceless load. By the time he stashed the trunk, eight colonists were dead and the rest running, but Revere's call to arms had changed the history of the world forever.

Though to modern Americans his ride represents an exciting step on the path toward a new nation, Revere could not have realized the pivotal importance of that sleepless night. His mission began with muffled oars, but it ended with a shot heard round the world. The conflict began over a small store of arms, but it was fought for justice and inalienable rights. The cause of liberty began with local minutemen, but it continues to require the vigil of every American today.

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