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Teaching American History: A More Perfect Union
Final Paper

When looking back upon early American history, there are certain names that everybody recognizes. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Samuel Adams are just a few that come to the minds of anybody who remembers their grade school years. Paul Revere is another name which certainly comes to mind, thanks to the famous poem “Paul Revere’s Ride” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Learning about how Paul Revere made his heroic journey across eastern Massachusetts countryside to warn that the “British are coming” is something every elementary school student learns – and remembers. However, thanks to the writing of David Hackett Fischer and his own version of Paul Revere’s Ride, we learn that Revere is perhaps one of the most misunderstood of all the famous American historical figures. Fischer does an excellent job of uncovering the real Paul Revere in addition to recounting the days surrounding what Bostonians now celebrate as “Patriot’s Day” every April 19th.

Fischer begins his work by giving a bit of background on Revere himself. We learn of his French ancestry and his early days growing up on the streets and waterfront of Boston where Fischer talks of him learning many lessons on his way to becoming a true “Yankee.” Revere lost his father at the age of 19 and took over the family goldsmith shop, on his way to becoming a silversmith, his primary source of employment during the Revolution. Revere was a Christian who felt all humans shared a dual-calling of working in one’s own vocation as well as doing Christ’s work in the world. We learn that Revere followed this principle closely during the Revolution. In addition to his own vocation and principles, we learn that like many Americans during the 16th century, death was a constant part of the lives of many. We learn Revere suffered from anxiety as a result of losing 10 of his 16 children before adulthood, 7 of his eleven brothers and sisters, losing his father at 19 and mother at 42, in addition to losing his first wife after 16 years of marriage. Fischer also describes Revere as a gentleman who was faithful and energized in his vocation as well as the commitment he felt towards his family, religion, and his city.

What Fischer does best in his work, however, is to open the eyes of the reader in telling a fascinating tale of the many ways Revere was involved in the American Revolution, in addition to breaking down some of the myths that surround Revere to this very day. Even before the night of his famous ride, Revere was becoming instrumental in the city of Boston. Revere was one of the main organizers of the Sons of Liberty who worked against the hated Stamp and Townshend Acts. Revere and the Sons of Liberty found their policy of terrorizing customs and tax officials with blackened faces and white nightcaps pulled around their heads to be a good way to encourage them to leave Boston. (p. 22) Revere is also known to have helped organize and participate in the Boston Tea Party. His famous engraving of the Boston Massacre is also one of the things for which Revere is best known. In fact Paul Revere became so well-known and active in Boston that it was said General Thomas Gage knew Revere by name and referred to him as “the most sly and artful” of them all in his correspondence. (p. 31)

Paul Revere was the definition of a Bostonian through and through. Perhaps more than any other role, Revere’s importance was in being a messenger for not just the city, but for the Revolution as a whole. In fact Fischer refers to Revere as the Mercury of the Revolution. (p. 27) Revere was also extremely important to the cause in that he seemed to know people in every circle in Boston. Other men were perhaps better known including Samuel Adams and John Hancock, however, Revere provided a link throughout the entire city and moved between different parties.

As a courier, Revere’s work was critical not just to Boston, but to other major cities in the young nation. Between 1773 and 1775, Revere made at least five journeys to New York and Philadelphia. (p. 26) Perhaps most impressive in terms of timeliness was his journey to Philadelphia in which he was carrying the Suffolk Resolves to the Continental Congress in response to the Intolerable Acts. Revere left Boston on September 11, 1774 and reached Philadelphia on September 16th. Revere covered a distance of 350 miles in just five days, unprecedented for the time period of riding horseback on rough, windy, oftentimes muddy roads. Revere returned home to Boston on September 18th after Congress endorsed the Suffolk Resolves and made it back by September 23rd. Revere spent the next few days with his bride

and was back on his saddle once again to meet with leaders in Philadelphia and New York, making it back to Boston on October 19th. (p. 27)

While Revere was not on the road traveling, he was busy using his eyes and ears in Boston. He was also constantly in meetings with different committees, some of which he was the leader. These committees would meet in secrecy to discuss British policy, movement of British soldiers, and gaining what intelligence they could from British loyalists. One of the most interesting tales that Fischer brings to life is the altercation between patriots and British troops that took place in Portsmouth, NH in December 1774.

Every American history student tends to associate the fighting at Lexington and Concord as being the start of American Revolution. However, the start could just as easily be traced back to another incident involving Paul Revere. Early in December 1774, Revere and other Boston patriots heard news that a British Order in Council prohibited the importation of arms to the colonies. This also ordered British Imperial officials to secure any known ammunition supplies already in America. One such supply which included gunpowder, a canon, and small arms existed at Fort William and Mary in Portsmouth, NH. Revere and his network received news of a rumor that the British planned on sailing up the coast from Boston to Portsmouth to secure the supplies. Revere, although not sure of exactly when, was quick to act in alerting the people of Portsmouth that British forces were on their way to apprehend the supplies. This would prove to be one of Revere's most difficult tasks. Revere left Boston on December 13th and made his way through deep snow, slush, and mud to make it to Portsmouth by the afternoon, determined to beat the British regulars.

Upon arriving to Portsmouth, Revere immediately alerted the Portsmouth Committee of Correspondence that two British regiments were coming to seize the powder and that new munitions would not be easy to come by in the future. While Revere's news was not totally accurate (no British expedition had yet left Boston for Portsmouth), the people of Portsmouth quickly assembled a militia of 400 men for an assault on the fort. On December 14th, the militia approached the fort which was guarded by only 6 British invalid soldiers and demanded a surrender. After a brief entanglement which saw the British fire several canon shots, Captain Cochran surrendered to the New Hampshire men and had to bear witness to them pulling

down the King's colors. Physical altercations were reported to have occurred with punches being thrown between sides. Perhaps history books should make students aware that these could truly be considered the first blows of the American Revolution. By the following day, Paul Revere's news had spread to other parts of New England and over 1000 militia assembled in Portsmouth. (p. 56) Paul Revere could now return to Boston satisfied that his mission was complete. One wonders if Revere ever felt threatened as a result of his role as Fischer states that most British officials were aware of the identity of the man who brought them their humiliation and defeat.

Fischer also does an excellent job of discussing the events leading up to the fighting at Lexington and Concord and the role that Revere played in it. Based upon the famous poem by Longfellow, we are led to believe that Revere was a solitary figure riding through the dark night like Santa Claus, somehow able to awaken every citizen living in the outskirts of Boston. What we learn thanks to Fischer is that Revere was very much involved in the planning process for the events leading up to his famous ride. Revere and the various committees he worked with had to work extremely hard to set up channels of communication as the British had begun to make it extremely difficult to move in and out of the city without being questioned. Revere and his team had to be sure they had all their bases covered or their plan to warn the western towns never would have happened. Like the history books tell us, Revere can be credited for coming up with the backup plan of hanging lanterns as signals in the steeple of the Old North Church. Revere also is one of the major reasons why the colonists and Whigs were extremely well prepared for any military action brought by Britain. Fischer notes that Revere was constantly in motion, making trips to Concord on April 8th and to Lexington on April 16th. (p. 87) Thanks to the work of Revere and others like him, much of the Massachusetts countryside was fully aware that Britain was planning some military move.

When reporting on the events of his actual "midnight ride", Fischer does well in noting that the events of that night were a true collective effort and could never have happened without the efforts of so many people. He also informs the reader that in addition to alerting the countryside of British military activity, Revere's other mission was to warn both John Hancock and Samuel Adams that they were objects of British desire, in addition to capturing

the munitions which were thought to be stored in Lexington and Concord. From there, Fischer helps unlock many other important and very interesting pieces of information regarding the events of that evening. Many students have become familiar with the two other riders of that evening, William Dawes and Dr. Samuel Prescott. It is interesting to note that while Dawes had planned on being a part of the events that night and left Boston with Revere, Dr. Samuel Prescott's story is much more interesting. While Dawes and Revere made their way through the darkness of the early morning, they came across Prescott on the road. Where else would a young man be coming back from at such an hour? Why he was reportedly courting with his female interest and was making his way back home. Dawes and Revere informed Prescott of their role and he was quick to join the cause. In fact, Prescott hurried home and roused his younger brother from bed who would also assist in alerting the towns of eastern Massachusetts on this evening. Fischer notes that there were many young patriots who were thrown into the early events of the American Revolution who happened to be returning back from their love interest in the early hours of the morning. (p. 129)

Other points of interest involving the midnight ride that might conflict with what we remember from our history classes would be the fact that nobody, including Paul Revere, is ever reported to have said "the British are coming!" In 1775, Fischer notes that most of the people from Massachusetts thought they were British. It is much more likely that Revere would have said "the Regulars are coming." Another interesting twist on the Revere story that we would never know based upon the original poem was that Revere was actually captured on his midnight ride. While Prescott and Dawes were able to avoid capture, it was Revere who was held captive for several hours during the early morning when most Americans think of him as waking every homestead. While in captivity, Revere was honest with his captors and informed them that the ongoing British plans of marching to Lexington and Concord were widely known and that the countryside was in the process of arming themselves in preparation. Fischer notes that Revere is lucky to have survived the night at all. Revere had decided to leave his gun behind before leaving that evening. When the British had captured him and searched for weapons, they might not have decided to leave him alive had they found a pistol. (p. 133) Interestingly, the British decided to release Revere after a few hours of interrogation at which

point he was able to carry on with alarming the countryside. One other note of interest from Fischer is the manner in which Revere and others were alerting towns. Revere was obviously not able to alert every home as the words of Longfellow might indicate. Most towns in Massachusetts had already set up a warning system. It was the job of the midnight riders to know who in town to contact. That person would then set off whatever alarm system the town had designated. In some cases it could be a series of gunshots, in others it could be to ring some type of bell.

Based upon how the events of April 19th went, it is safe to say that the work of Paul Revere made a large impact on how prepared the countryside was for the British. The British perspective on the “yankees” was one lacking respect. However, the way the patriots carried themselves in battle showed the British that they had a much tougher fight on their hands than they expected. In terms of the fighting at Lexington and Concord, Paul Revere was present in Lexington, however, was not involved in combat himself. True to form, however, he was involved in a unique and very important way. Just as the first shots were fired on Lexington Green, Revere could be seen lugging a trunk belonging to John Hancock and dragging it into hiding in the woods. The trunk was rumored to be holding extremely valuable documents that needed to be kept out of the hands of the British.

And of this we should not really be surprised. Fischer does an admirable job of breaking some of the mythology of Paul Revere but at the same time almost building his legacy further. His book is extremely interesting and very readable. It is true that Revere was not the lone midnight rider and does not perhaps deserve the credit he gets in that department. However, Fischer sheds light on the many other important roles that Revere played during the Revolution. From a courier, master organizer, and silversmith, Revere defined what it meant to be a patriot and a Bostonian. He was a husband, father, and more importantly to the Revolution, a true leader.