

Primary Sources: The Ride of Paul Revere

By Paul Revere, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.13.17

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Paul Revere's ride, courtesy of the National Archives.

Editor's Note: Paul Revere is famous for his midnight ride on April 18, 1775. He rode to warn the American revolutionaries that British troops were approaching Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts as the Revolutionary War was about to start. Revere gave accounts of his ride to the Massachusetts Provisional Congress. The Congress wrote down accounts from all eyewitnesses to the battle in Lexington, Massachusetts. The Congress was gathering eyewitness accounts in the hopes of getting proof that the British had fired the first shot. But the most complete account of the ride is Paul Revere's letter to Jeremy Belknap. Belknap was a historian with the Massachusetts Historical Society. Revere's letter to Belknap was written in 1798, about 23 years after the event. Revere explained some things about the event that he had not mentioned in his original account to the Congress. Below is part of that letter.

Dear Sir,

As I promised, here are some facts, that led up to the Battle of Lexington. This is information which I have not seen reported in any history of the American Revolution.

"We Had A Spy In Our Group"

In the fall of 1774 and winter of 1775, I was part of a group of more than 30 men watching the English soldiers and people who were still loyal to the king. We held our secret meetings at the Green-Dragon Tavern. Every time we met, every person swore upon the Bible that he would protect our leaders, John Hancock, John Adams and Doctors Warren and Church.

Around November 1774, things began to grow serious. A gentleman who was friendly with those still loyal to the king told me that we had a spy in our group. We trusted Dr. Benjamin Church and did not think he was a spy. We moved our meetings to another place. But we found that all our plans still got to the English general, Thomas Gage. The traitor was Dr. Church, who was a member of the Massachusetts Provisional Congress. (He was arrested in June of 1775 and later found guilty of spying.) In the winter, towards the spring, we frequently took turns, watching the soldiers, by patrolling the streets all night. On Saturday night, the 15th of April, around midnight, small boats were being moved toward the backs of the English war ships. We also found that the English soldiers were all taken off duty. We knew something serious was beginning.

"I Was Also Being Sent To Warn Them"

On Sunday, Dr. Warren sent me to Lexington to tell John Hancock and John Adams what was happening. I returned at night through Charlestown. There I set up a plan with Colonel Conant. If the British were coming by water, we would show two lanterns in the North Church Steeple, and if by land, there would be one lantern. On Tuesday evening, the 18th, many soldiers were seen marching towards the ships. About 10 o'clock, Dr. Warren sent for me. When I arrived, I found he had already sent Mr. William Dawes off to Lexington by land to warn Hancock and Adams. I was also being sent to warn them. But I was to ride to the north part of town. There I would cross the Charles River in order to get to Lexington.

I left Dr. Warren and had my friend set the two lanterns in the North Church. I then went home. I got my boots and coat. I met my two friends, who rowed me across Charles River to Charlestown. It was low tide and the war ship was unable to move as the moon was rising. I met Colonel Conant, and several others, who said they had seen our two lanterns. I told them what was happening. I went to get me a horse and rode off. It was then about 11 o'clock, when I saw two men on horseback, under a tree. But when I got near them, I saw they were English officers. They started after me. I turned my horse quickly towards Charlestown Neck, and then pushed for the Medford Road. One got close and tried to cut me off. But he fell into a clay pond, so I got away. I went through Medford, over the bridge. I awakened the captain of the Minutemen. After that, I woke everyone in every house, until I got to Lexington. I found Hancock and Adams at the home of the Rev. Clark. I told them why I had come. I asked about Mr. Dawes, but they said he had not been there. He arrived about a half hour later. We set off for Concord, where the guns and ammunition were stored. On the way, we met Dr. Prescott, who was also a brave Son of Liberty.

"The English Troops Were Coming"

We decided we needed to warn all those on the way to Concord. We had got nearly halfway when I saw some English soldiers. I called for the doctor and Dawes to help me, but was surrounded by four of them. The doctor rode toward me and we tried to get past them. But they had pistols and forced us into the pasture. The doctor and Dawes jumped their horses over a low stone wall and got to Concord. I saw some woods nearby and rode toward them, but out came six officers on horseback and ordered me to dismount. An officer questioned and asked where I came from, and

what my name was. I said it was Revere. He asked if it was Paul and I told him yes. He asked me if I was a mail express rider. I said yes. He demanded what time I left Boston. I told him and said that the English troops on the ship were stuck in the river at low tide as I was passing. I added that there would be 500 Americans there in a short time. Then he aimed his pistol at my head. He told me he was going to ask me some more questions and if I did not give him true answers, he would kill me. I answered them. Then he ordered me to mount my horse. When we got to the road, they turned down towards Lexington.

We rode until we got near Lexington Meeting House, when our fighters fired their guns. This seemed to worry them. The major asked me how far it was to Cambridge, and if there was another road. After we talked, the major rode up to the sergeant and asked if his horse was tired. He told him it was. He made me get off my horse and give it to the sergeant. When they all rode towards Lexington Meeting House, they let me go. I went across the burying ground and some pastures. I got to the Rev. Clark's House, where I found Mr. Hancock and Mr. Adams. I told them what had happened. They decided to go from that house towards Woburn. I went with them along with Mr. Lowell, who worked for Mr. Hancock. When we got to the house near Woburn, Mr. Lowell and myself returned to the Clark home to find out what was going on. Mr. Lowell and I went towards the tavern. We met a man on a full gallop who told us the English troops were coming. Mr. Lowell asked me to go to the tavern with him to get a trunk of papers belonging to Mr. Hancock. We went up to the room and were getting the trunk, when we saw the English were very near. They were coming fast. We hurried towards the Clark house. On our way, we passed through a group of 50 of our fighters. When we had got about 100 yards from the Meeting House, the English troops, led by an officer on horseback, appeared on both sides of the Meeting House. I saw, and heard, a gun fired. It sounded like a pistol. Then I heard two guns and a continuing roar of muskets. We ran off with the trunk.