

Reader's Theater
Classics™

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's
Paul Revere's Ride



a play adaptation by Staci Swedeen

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Reader's Theater *Classics*[™]

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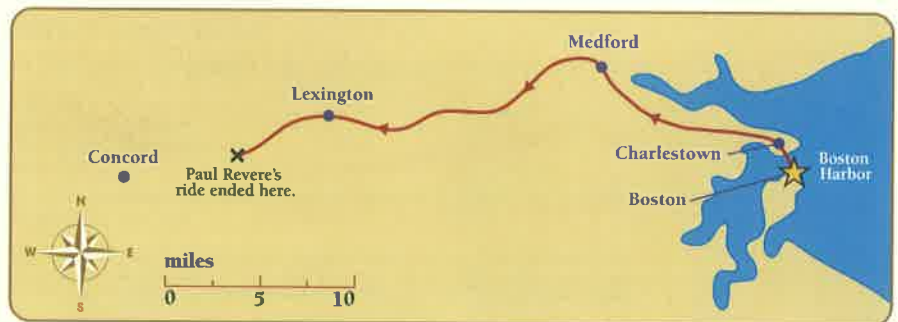
a play adaptation

Spotlight on the Classic

The Story of "Paul Revere's Ride"

In the mid-1800s, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was America's most famous poet. He wrote "Paul Revere's Ride" in the early 1860s, eighty-five years after the actual event occurred, when American history had reached another critical juncture. Civil unrest threatened to tear the country apart. Longfellow wanted a "call to arms" that would echo back to the unifying aims of the Revolution.

Longfellow's popular poem also created the enduring myth that Paul Revere was a lone rider who finished his journey on horseback. Neither statement is true and, ever since it was published, historians have complained about the inaccuracies in the poem. But Longfellow was not interested in history; he wanted to move people to action. His goal was to convince the public that fighting slavery and protecting the Union was the right thing to do. He wanted to show Americans in the 1860s that the actions of a single man *can* have a huge impact on the outcome of events.



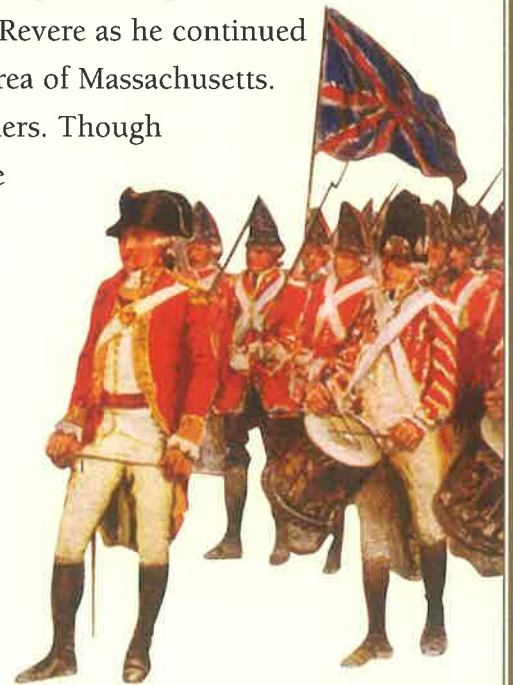
- ▲ On April 18, 1775, Paul Revere left Charlestown at 11 P.M. He rode through Medford and other towns, arriving in Lexington at midnight. British soldiers stopped him at 1 A.M., and he never made it to Concord.

The History of Paul Revere's Ride

On the evening of April 18, 1775, General Gage, the British commander, ordered 700 troops to cross the Charles River and head from their base in Boston toward Concord, Massachusetts. Their goal was to destroy the colonial arms supply and arrest Patriot leaders Sam Adams and John Hancock. Gage wanted his plan to be kept secret.

Paul Revere had a different goal. He wanted to warn Adams and Hancock about Gage's plan and spread the alarm. After verifying that two lanterns had been hung in the bell tower of the Old North Church in Boston (this was to signal that British troops would row "by sea" across the Charles River rather than marching "by land"), Revere reached the house where Adams and Hancock were staying, allowing them to flee in time. Two other riders joined Revere as he continued his journey through the Middlesex area of Massachusetts. A British patrol captured all three riders. Though two escaped, Revere was held captive for a few hours. Eventually, the British released Revere but kept his horse. Revere returned to Lexington on foot, arriving in time to witness part of the battle on the Lexington green that started the Revolutionary War.

British soldiers
were called Regulars. ▶



Paul Revere's Ride

by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow



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 . . .

. . . 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.

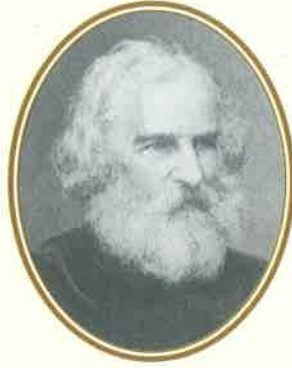
He has left the village and mounted the steep,
And beneath him, tranquil and broad and deep,
Is the Mystic, meeting the ocean tides;
And under the alders, that skirt its edge,
Now soft on the sand, now loud on the ledge,
Is heard the tramp of his steed as he rides . . .

. . . 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 for evermore!
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.

Couplets and Quatrains

“Paul Revere’s Ride” is one of the most famous poems in American history, memorized and recited by generations of schoolchildren. Nineteenth-century readers were fond of long poems that combined the pleasure of a story with a musical cadence. This poem is written in a series of rhyming couplets and quatrains that capture the galloping pace of Revere’s horse. A couplet is a pair of lines. A quatrain is a unit within a poem that consists of four lines with at least two that rhyme. A quatrain usually follows an abab, abba, abcb, aabb, or aaba rhyme scheme.

The Author of the Classic



Name: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Born: February 27, 1807

Died: March 24, 1882

Hometown: Portland, Maine

Early Years: The second son in a family of eight siblings, Henry started school when he was only three years old. By the age of six, he knew Latin grammar, and he could read, spell, and multiply. He entered Bowdoin College at the age of fourteen and delivered a commencement speech upon graduation. One of his classmates was fellow writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, who became a lifelong friend.

Famous works: *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie* (1847), *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), *The Courtship of Miles Standish and Other Poems* (1858), and *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (1863), the book that contains "Paul Revere's Ride"

Famous quote: "It takes less time to do a thing right than explain why you did it wrong."

Interesting fact: No American poet of any era has been both as prolific and as popular as Longfellow. He is the only American to have a bust placed in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey in London.

Paul Revere's Ride

CAST OF CHARACTERS

in order of appearance



Narrator 1

Narrator 2

Dr. Joseph Warren

a Boston physician

Paul Revere

express rider and Son of Liberty

Sergeant William Munroe

a guard and one of Lexington's Minutemen

John Hancock

a founder of the Massachusetts Sons of Liberty

Samuel Adams

a founder of the Massachusetts Sons of Liberty

Billy Dawes

a rider, friend of Paul Revere, and fellow Patriot

Dr. Prescott

a resident of Concord

Hicks

a British officer



SETTING

The countryside in and around Boston during the late evening of April 18 and early morning of April 19, 1775

Narrator 1: It is nearly ten in the evening on April 18, 1775, when Dr. Joseph Warren looks outside his window. The dark streets of Boston seem deserted. Fortunately, a full moon is predicted.

Narrator 2: Dr. Warren has spent the past few months working with his fellow Patriots to fight against the restrictive rule of the British. But will there actually be a revolution? Suddenly there is a loud knock at the door.

Warren: Come in, come in. I was starting to get worried!

Revere: (*breathing heavily, entering*) I took the back route to avoid suspicion. I got here as fast as I could.

Warren: I spoke with Billy Dawes a little while ago.

Revere: Dawes? What's going on?

Warren: Word is that General Gage has issued warrants for the arrest of our good friends Sam Adams and John Hancock.

Revere: They'll be taken to London and hanged for treason if that happens!

Warren: Which is why you must reach them before the British do. Are they still staying at the Clarke house in Lexington?

Revere: Yes. So the Regulars are finally on the move?

Warren: Dawes told me they were assembling on North Square.

Revere: If they head toward Lexington, they'll be close to Concord and could easily seize all the weapons we've been storing up in case of a fight.

Warren: That's right. And if those Redcoats get their hands on our weapons . . . well, let's just make sure they don't.

Revere: Will the lobsterbacks be coming from land or sea?

Warren: They're coming over the water. I knew it would be impossible for Gage to keep his plans secret for long—especially with that warship *Somerset* dropping anchor in the harbor. You've made the arrangements with Robert, the sexton at the Old North Church?

Revere: Yes. Robert has been waiting for me to tell him how many lamps to light. Now I know—two. Then I'll head down to the river. I've kept my boat hidden over the winter. Several men are waiting to row me across.

Warren: Good thinking. I've sent Dawes on ahead to Lexington. I hope he'll be able to make it across the Neck. The British will be looking to capture people tonight.

Revere: I pity the people who take Billy prisoner—he'll do nothing but play practical jokes on them.

Warren: Yes, but he's a good man and loyal to our cause. However, we need to get the word out as quickly as possible, which is why I sent for you. We'll increase our odds with two of you sounding the alarm.

Revere: I'm happy to put all my years as an express rider at your service.





Paul Revere's Account of His Ride

About 10 P.M.: "Dr. Warren sent in a great haste for me, and begged that I would immediately set off for Lexington, where Messrs. Hancock and Adams were . . ."

11 P.M.: Two friends row Revere across the Charles River to Charlestown.

11:30 P.M.: Revere reaches Medford, riding north along the Mystic River.

12:05 A.M.: In Lexington, Revere warns Adams and Hancock—"I found Messrs. Hancock and Adams at the Rev. Mr. Clark's; I told them my errand, and . . . they said [Mr. Dawes] had not been there . . ."

12:30 A.M.: "Mr. Dawes came; we refreshid ourselves, and set off for Concord to secure the stores, etc. there."

12:45 A.M.: "We were overtaken by a young Dr. Prescott, whom we found to be a high Son of Liberty."

1:00 A.M.: "I was about one hundred rod ahead . . . in an instant, I was surrounded by four . . . the doctor humped his horse over a low stone wall, and got to Concord."

2:00 A.M.: ". . . the Major ordered him, if I attempted to run, or any body insulted them, to blow my brains out." Revere is eventually let go and walks back to Lexington.

4:30 A.M.: At Buckman Tavern, Revere helps Adams and Hancock escape—" . . . we saw the British very near, upon a full march."

5:00 A.M.: "The shot heard 'round the world"—". . . I saw and heard a gun fired . . . Then I could distinguish two guns, and then a continual roar of musquetry."

▲ view of Boston Harbor showing British troops landing in 1768; color engraving by Paul Revere

Warren: You're one of the most dependable, trustworthy, and reliable people I've ever known. I even trusted you to make false teeth for me!

Revere: It would be nice if those teeth were kept safe for the rest of your life. Are you sure you don't need to go into hiding as well?

Warren: I'm not worried about myself. What's important is that we get the signal out in time. Our freedom depends on it.

Revere: Set your mind at ease, Dr. Warren. The lamps will be lit before General Gage can finish drinking his tea. Adams and Hancock shall be safe, and we'll all have a tale to tell in the morning. It's hard to believe that after all these months of waiting, this moment should come upon us so suddenly.

Warren: We both know how much depends on your ride tonight. Good luck, Revere.

Narrator 1: The two men shake hands. Dr. Warren wonders if they'll ever see each other again.

Narrator 2: Revere steps into the cold evening air and shivers. Should he head back home for his coat? He decides to go to the church first. He makes his way toward the tall spire of the Old North Church on Salem Street.

Revere: *(softly calling out)* Show two lanterns, Robert! The Regulars are coming by water!

Narrator 1: The young man in the belfry begins the task of lighting the lanterns. He and Revere agree that the lights can only flash for a moment—any longer and the British might also see this signal.

Narrator 2: Meanwhile, Revere heads back home. He needs his coat for the river crossing and his midnight ride in the cold night air. His wife and children anxiously greet him.

Revere: I have a few friends to see tonight, my dears. Don't worry about me. I'll soon be back to keep an eye on all of you.

Narrator 1: Revere doesn't want to worry his family about the danger of his mission. He quickly kisses them and slips out the back door.

Narrator 2: After Revere crosses the Charles River, he checks the snugness of the saddle and adjusts his horse's stirrups.

Revere: *(to the horse)* Oh, look at you. You're a fine steed—slender and quick. There, there, settle down, my brown beauty. I know that it's all up to you now. That's a girl. Come now, we've got some distance to travel.

Narrator 1: Revere puts his left foot into the stirrup and swings himself into the saddle.

Narrator 2: He wonders if Billy Dawes has been able to start spreading the alarm and about how quickly General Gage will be able to move his troops through the countryside.

Narrator 1: There is a lot to think about and very little time. Revere realizes he needs to set a fast pace. Grabbing the reins, he touches his spurs to the steed's flanks and gallops into the night.

Revere: (*yelling*) The Regulars are out! Take care! The Regulars are out!

Narrator 2: When the Minutemen hear the alarm, they grab their muskets and gun powder. Women take their children and hide.

Revere: (*yelling*) The Regulars are on the move! They're armed and heading toward Concord!

Narrator 1: Word spreads quickly through Middlesex, the area surrounding Boston. At one point, Revere sees two British soldiers coming toward him. Once again, he touches his spurs to the sides of his horse.

Revere: Come on, beauty! I can see their holsters! Let's show them that a British charger is no match for a fine Yankee horse! Faster!

Narrator 2: It is midnight by the time he arrives at the home where Samuel Adams and John Hancock are staying.

Revere: The Regulars are out! Sound the alarm! Beat the drums! Ring the bells!

Munroe: What's all that yelling? What's the problem? Who goes there?

Revere: It's Paul Revere. I have to speak to Sam and John.



Munroe: If you're referring to Mr. Adams and Mr. Hancock, they've gone to bed. Go away and come back in the morning.

Revere: I demand to speak to them this instant! Sam! John! Are you in there?

Munroe: Be quiet! They requested not to be disturbed by any noise this evening.

Revere: (*shouting*) Noise? You'll have noise enough before long! The Regulars are out!

Munroe: Why didn't you say so in the first place? I'll wake them up this instant!

Hancock: Munroe! I thought we asked you to keep things quiet.

Munroe: It's Revere, sir! He says there's trouble!

Adams: Paul! What's the news? There's movement?

Revere: I hoped Dawes would have been here by now.

Hancock: There's been no one here this evening.

Revere: I hope Dawes is all right. Dr. Warren sent us both out. The British are crossing the Charles this evening!

Hancock: How many men?

Revere: It's not just the patrols—there are probably over a thousand light troops, too!

Adams: Then they're headed here to Lexington.

Hancock: Where's my gun? Somebody—bring me my gun and sword! I'm going to fight!

Adams: John, don't be foolish. Who would serve in your place in the Continental Congress?

Hancock: Sam, you're the one that's a fool! They're coming to kill us.

Adams: I may be a fool, but I know that a living John Hancock can do a lot more for the Patriot cause than a dead one.

Narrator 1: As the two men continue to argue, there is another loud pounding at the front door.

Dawes: (*bursting in*) Hello, gentlemen! Looks like the party's in here! Is there any food or drink to be had for a thirsty rider?

Adams: There's bread and ale on the sideboard.

Dawes: Paul, you must have set a good gallop to get here before me. Nice to see you safe and sound.

Revere: Good to see you, too, Billy. I'd like to keep us *all* safe and sound. Sam and John, you must leave here at once. Billy, once you finish eating, we need to continue on to Concord and warn the Minutemen.

Adams: Thank you, both, for all your efforts tonight.

Hancock: Sam, I'm telling you—I should go with them and take my place with the Minutemen!

Adams: And I'm telling you that we're not going to argue about it any longer! Now let's pack and leave. Good luck, Billy and Paul.

Narrator 2: As Adams and Hancock prepare for a quick exit, Revere and Dawes mount their horses once more and ride toward Concord. Before long, they see another man on horseback.

Revere: (*yelling*) You, sir! Identify yourself!

Prescott: My name is Prescott, Samuel Prescott. I'm a doctor.

Dawes: (*chuckling*) We'll have need of one of those if the Regulars know how to shoot.

Prescott: What are you talking about?

Revere: You have to give a few more answers before you can ask any questions. What are you doing out at this time of night? And are you favorable to the cause?

Prescott: I've been courting a young woman over in Lexington and I am now on my way home. And if by "the cause" you mean "the cause of freedom"—other than convincing this young woman to marry me, there is no greater cause. I'm a Son of Liberty. Now will you tell me why the two of you are riding so briskly?

Dawes: The Regulars are out, and we're on our way to Concord to sound the alarm.

Prescott: Let me join you. Concord is my home. The people there will trust a local far more quickly than they'll take the word of two strangers.

Narrator 1: Dawes and Revere quickly agree. The three men now gallop toward Concord. They stop at houses along the way to let people know of the coming danger, then continue riding through the countryside.

Narrator 2: But soon the danger is all too real. A troop of British soldiers spots the three men. Thinking the trio looks suspicious, the soldiers quickly surround them. One of the officers pulls out a gun and points it at Paul Revere's head.

Hicks: You there! Stop! If you go an inch farther, you're a dead man.

Prescott: Move aside, my good man. We are only out for a leisurely ride.

Hicks: At one in the morning? Then I recommend you take your horses for a "leisurely" stroll into that pasture with the barricade, or I shall be forced to blow your brains out.

Dawes: That's not a very nice thing to say.

Narrator 1: At that moment, Prescott digs his spurs into his horse and leaps over a small stone wall. A shot is fired after him but misses. In the commotion, Dawes gallops off in the direction of Lexington.

Dawes: Catch me if you can, boys! We have a few surprises in store for you Redcoats—you'll see!

Narrator 2: Revere also breaks away into the woods but soon finds himself surrounded by even more British officers. Hicks quickly catches up to him and puts a gun to his chest.

Hicks: I think that's enough riding for tonight, sir. Dismount!

Revere: Please give me a few moments. I'm trying to catch my breath.

Hicks: Tell me where you're from.

Revere: Boston.

Hicks: (*sarcastically*) A nice city when they aren't dumping tea into the harbor. What time did you leave there?

Revere: Shortly after ten.

Hicks: Ten *this* evening? You must be a very fast rider. What could be so urgent to send you galloping across the country?

Revere: It seemed like a nice night for a ride.

Hicks: Or perhaps you are on a mission? If so, sir, may I crave your name?

Revere: My name is Paul Revere.

Hicks: I've heard of you. You're a Patriot sympathizer, one of the so-called "Sons of Liberty"—a lawbreaker and troublemaker.

Revere: *You* are the ones making trouble! I know what the British soldiers are really trying to do this evening.

Hicks: We're only on patrol looking for deserters.

Revere: Ha! By now, everyone between here and Boston knows that you are coming to arrest our leaders and seize our arms. But didn't you hear that your boats ran aground? Pretty soon there will be five hundred Minutemen surrounding this village. Maybe a thousand! They'll know what to do with the likes of you!

Hicks: Ha to you! We have over fifteen hundred men in these woods.

Revere: Well, we have enough weapons hidden to blow you all the way back to England!

Hicks: You're lying. Tell me the truth.

Revere: The truth? The truth, sir, is that it is time for all Patriots to throw off the shackles of a king who will not listen to us, does not respect us, and will not honor us. We have tried to avoid this war, but now it is time to claim the liberty that is the right of *all* men. *That* is the truth!

Hicks: I should have followed my first inclination and shot you on sight.

Revere: You would miss your aim.

Narrator 1: Hicks angrily turns away from Revere and talks briefly with some of his fellow officers. After a heated discussion, he comes back to Revere.

Hicks: Sir, mount your horse. We are heading away from here. And give me your reins. I'll lead you.

Revere: Let me have the reins. I won't run from you.

Hicks: Do you honestly think I would believe anything you have to say at this point?

Revere: You must believe something of what I've had to say, or we wouldn't be heading out.

Hicks: Silence! I've heard enough out of you to last me a lifetime. When it comes time to hang men for treason, I shall be only too happy to put the noose around your neck myself, Mr. Revere. But for now, I have my duty to perform. If you insult me again, I promise I *will* blow your brains out!

Narrator 2: The British soldiers and their prisoner ride for some distance in silence. The only sounds are the clinking of the spur chains, the soft thudding of the horses' hooves, and the occasional sound of a dog barking.

Narrator 1: After about an hour—just before sunrise—the sound of a gunshot shatters the silence.

Hicks: What was that?

Revere: That is the sound of good Patriots spreading the alarm and fighting for freedom. England doesn't want to rule us—she wants to destroy us. If you had any sense, you'd join our cause.

Hicks: You are nothing but a rebel and a scoundrel, sir! You'll *all* be put in your place soon enough!

Narrator 2: More gunshots are heard in the distance

Hicks: Revere, get down. I can't be slowed down by traveling with prisoners, and I won't have you distracting me from the work that my men and I need to attend to.

Revere: Please, let me keep the horse. As I said, I won't—

Hicks: Save your breath. At this point, it doesn't matter what you tell me—I fear you've already accomplished your goal of creating more trouble for the king. Men, help Mr. Revere off his horse. We may have need of it before this day is through. Make haste! We don't have another second to lose.

Narrator 1: The British troop thunders down the road. Revere stands alone on the dark road. His heart is racing. He wonders if he has accomplished his mission. Did Adams and Hancock make it to safety? Were the Minutemen prepared to face the British soldiers? Would there be an uprising?

Narrator 2: After a long walk back to Lexington, Revere sees British Regulars being confronted by Minutemen. There is yelling and arguing. He hears a single gunshot. He has his answer. The American Revolution has begun.

The End

Interpreting the Classic

1. Longfellow was familiar with the history of Paul Revere before he wrote his poem. Even though he changed some of the facts, he captured much of the excitement of national events. Pick a historical event that you are interested in and write a poem about it. (The poem doesn't have to rhyme.) How will you decide which facts to keep and which facts to leave out? (components of fiction and nonfiction; fact and opinion)
2. Longfellow used very strong images in writing about Paul Revere's ride. What do you think he meant by these lines: "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"? Why did he include them? (inferences)
3. How would you feel if you were Billy Dawes and your friend Paul Revere got all the credit for letting people know that the British soldiers were on their way to Concord? Discuss with a partner. Include some of the thoughts that Mr. Dawes might have had if he had lived long enough to read Longfellow's poem. (personal connections; dramatization)
4. Do you believe that one person can make a difference in world history? Why or why not? Can you think of any examples? If so, who? What did he or she do? (text-to-world connections)
5. Discuss possible reasons why Paul Revere and his comrades chose to use more than one messenger to warn the colonists. Use a map of the Boston area to find the towns and geographic features mentioned in the poem. (text organization—graphs and charts)

Glossary

Robust Vocabulary

belfry (BEL-free) the part of a tower or steeple in which bells are hung

crave (KRAVE) to ask earnestly for something

dismount (dis-MOWNT) to get off or down, as from a horse

inclination (in-kloh-NAY-shun) a preference, interest, or tendency

restrictive (rih-STRIK-tiv) limiting or restraining

seize (SEEZ) to take hold of suddenly or forcibly; grasp

spire (SPIRE) a structure that tapers to a point at the top, like a steeple

steed (STEED) a horse, especially a spirited one

sympathizer (SIM-puh-thize-er) one who shares or understands the feelings and beliefs of another

Idiomatic Expressions

lobsterbacks—British soldiers so-called because of their red coats

Minutemen—informal Patriot troops able to get ready for a military fight very quickly (“with a minute’s notice”)

you would miss your aim—a taunt meaning “you couldn’t get me if you tried”



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of famous short stories, poems, speeches, and
novel excerpts.

Paul Revere's Ride

The evening of April 18, 1775,
was a turning point in American
history. British troops gathered on
Boston Common to fight the Patriots.
The Sons of Liberty knew the British
planned to confiscate their ammunition,
arrest their leaders, and try them for
treason. Would tonight be the night
the British marched? If they did,
Paul Revere's mission was to alert
the Minutemen. The only question
was—could he do so in time?



ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Staci Swedeen is an award-winning playwright
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Staci enjoys reading about history and has written plays
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