

Paul Revere and the Battle of Concord and Lexington

by Wilbur Fisk Gordy

After the "Boston Tea Party," affairs became more serious than ever in Massachusetts. As a punishment to the rebellious colonists for daring to oppose their royal master, the English authorities closed the port of Boston to all trade, and made General Gage military governor of Massachusetts.

One of the first acts of the new Governor was to dismiss the Colonial Assembly, thus depriving the people of their right to make laws, and subjecting them wholly to the will of the King. The colonists felt this to be an outrage upon free government, and immediately organized a new governing body which they called a Provincial Congress. With John Hancock as its president and Samuel Adams as its leading spirit, this congress began at once to make rapid preparations for war. It called for an army of 20,000 men who were to be ready, at a minute's notice, to march to any point of danger. These first soldiers of the Revolution, thus hastily mustered, were called "minute-men."

Meanwhile General Gage, who was in command of 3,000 British troops in Boston, had received orders from England to seize John Hancock and Samuel Adams as traitors. General Gage knew that Hancock and Adams were staying for a while with a friend in Lexington. He had learned also through his spies that the minute-men had collected some cannon and military stores in Concord, eighteen miles from Boston. The British General planned, therefore, to send a body of troops to arrest the two leaders at Lexington, and then to push on and destroy the stores at Concord.

Although he acted with the greatest secrecy, he was not alert enough to keep his plans from the watchful minute-men. Gage's failure was brought about by one of these minute-men, Paul Revere, whose famous "midnight ride" was one of the exciting episodes of the Revolution.

Paul Revere was born in Boston, in 1735, in what is now called the north end of the town. He followed his father's trade, and became a goldsmith. To this occupation he added copper-plate engraving, and not only produced prints of many current events, but engraved plates for money issued by the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts.

He had taken an active part in the "Boston Tea Party," and in 1774, with about thirty other young patriots, formed a society to spy out the British plans. Always on the watch, these young men at once made known any suspicious movement to such leaders as Samuel Adams, John Hancock, and Dr. Joseph Warren.

On the evening of April 18, 1775, Revere and his friends reported to Dr. Warren certain unusual movements of troops and boats, and their belief that General Gage was about to carry out his plan of capturing Adams and Hancock and of destroying the military stores at Concord.

Dr. Warren quickly summoned William Dawes and Paul Revere, and despatched them on horseback to Lexington and Concord, to give the alarm. He sent them by different routes, hoping that one at least might escape capture by British patrols, with whom Gage had carefully guarded all the roads leading from Boston.

Dawes was soon making his way across Boston Neck, while Paul Revere went home and put on his riding suit for his long night-ride. Then, leaving orders for a lantern-signal to be hung in the belfry

of the Old North Church, to indicate by which route the British forces were advancing, "one if by land and two if by sea," he rowed across the Charles River, passing near the British war-vessels lying at anchor.

On the opposite bank he soon got ready a fleet horse. There he stood, bridle in hand, watching to catch sight of the signal lights. At eleven o'clock two lights gleamed out from the belfry, and told him that the British troops were crossing the Charles River on their march through Cambridge.

Leaping into his saddle he sped like the wind toward Lexington. Suddenly two British officers sprang out to capture him; but quickly turning his horse, he dashed into a side path, and soon outdistanced his pursuers. Ten minutes later he arrived at Medford.

Then at every house along the road, he stopped and shouted, "Up and arm! Up and arm! The regulars are out! The regulars are out!"

When he reached Lexington it was just midnight. Eight minute-men, guarding the house where Adams and Hancock were sleeping, warned him not to disturb the household by making so much noise. "Noise!" cried Paul Revere. "You'll have noise enough before long. The regulars are out!"

William Dawes soon joined Paul Revere, and after a few minutes spent in taking refreshments they rode off together toward Concord accompanied by Dr. Prescott. About half way there they met some mounted British officers, who called to them to halt. Prescott managed to escape by making his horse leap a stone wall, and rode in hot haste toward Concord, which he reached in safety; but Paul Revere and William Dawes both fell into the hands of the British.

In the meantime, the British troops, numbering 800 men, under Lieutenant-Colonel Smith, were on their way to Lexington. But they had not gone far before they were made aware, by the ringing of church-bells, the firing of signal guns, the beating of drums, and the gleaming of beacon-fires from the surrounding hilltops, that the minute-men knew of their movements. Colonel Smith, disturbed by these signs of threatening storm, sent Major Pitcairn ahead with a picked body of light infantry, in the hope that they might reach Lexington before the town could be aroused. He then sent back to Boston for reinforcements.

The British commander had reason to be disturbed, for the alarm-signals were calling to arms thousands of patriots ready to die for their rights. Hastily wakened from sleep, men snatched their old muskets from over the door and, bidding a hurried good-bye to wife and children, started for the meeting-places long since agreed upon.

Just as the sun was rising, Major Pitcairn marched into Lexington, where he found forty or fifty minute-men ready to dispute his advance. "Disperse, ye rebels: disperse!" he cried. But they would not disperse. Pitcairn ordered his men to fire, and eighteen of the minute-men fell dead or wounded, before the remainder sullenly retired to wait for a hand in the struggle later in the day.

Before the arrival of Pitcairn the British officers who had captured Revere and Dawes returned with them to Lexington, where, commanding Revere to dismount, they let him go. Running off at full speed to the house where Samuel Adams and John Hancock were staying, he recounted what had happened, and then guided them across the fields to a place of safety at Woburn. On their way they heard the guns firing on Lexington Common, and the sound stirred the soul of Adams, who exclaimed with enthusiasm, "Oh, what a glorious morning is this!"

From Lexington, Colonel Smith hastened to Concord, arriving there at seven o'clock in the morning, about six hours after Dr. Prescott had given the alarm. The British could not find the military stores, most of which the people of Concord had hidden, but they cut down the liberty pole, set fire to the court-house, spiked a few cannon, and emptied some barrels of flour.

About 200 of them stood guard at the North Bridge, while a body of minute-men gathered on a hill beyond. When the minute-men had increased to 400 they advanced upon the British, and brought on a fight which resulted in loss of life on each side. Then continuing their advance they crossed the bridge, and forced the British to withdraw into the town.

By noon Colonel Smith could see that by reason of the ever-increasing body of minute-men, swarming into Concord from every direction, it would be unwise to delay his return to Boston. His men had marched eighteen miles with little or no food for fourteen hours, and were tired and hungry.

But when the British started back on their return march, the minute-men followed and began a deadly attack. It was an irregular fight. The minute-men, trained to woodland warfare, slipped from tree to tree, shot down the tired British soldiers, and then retreated only to return and repeat the annoying attack. The wooded country through which they marched favored this kind of fighting.

But even in the open country every stone wall and hill, every house and barn, seemed to the exhausted British troops to bristle with the guns of minute-men. The retreating army pushed wearily forward, fighting as bravely as possible, but on the verge of confusion and panic.

When they reached Lexington Common, at two o'clock, they met 1,200 fresh troops under Lord Percy, whose timely arrival saved the entire force from capture. The dismayed British troops, half-dead with exhaustion, entered the square Lord Percy had formed for their protection, and fell upon the ground, "with their tongues hanging out of their mouths like those of dogs after a chase."

After resting for an hour, the British again took up their march to Boston. The minute-men, increasing in numbers every moment, kept up the same kind of running attack that they had made upon the British between Concord and Lexington. A British officer, in speaking of the minute-men, said, "they seemed to have dropped from the clouds." The condition of the British soldiers was pitiable until, late in the day, they got under the protection of the guns of the war-vessels in Boston Harbor.

The British had failed. They had been driven back, almost in a panic, to Boston, with a loss of nearly 300 men. The Americans had not lost 100. It was a great day for the patriots, for they had not only defeated the regular troops, but they had tested their own strength and given fresh inspiration to their cause. Farmers, mechanics, men in all walks of life, now flocked to the army. Within a few days the Americans, 16,000 strong, were surrounding the British in Boston.

The Americans, eager to drive them out of Boston, threw up breastworks on Bunker Hill, which overlooked the town. But the next day—June 17th—after they had twice driven the redcoats down the hill—they had to retreat because their powder had given out. This was the battle of Bunker Hill, in which the British lost in killed and wounded 1,000 men; the Americans, 450.

Although Paul Revere took part in no important battle, he was active in the patriot cause, and became lieutenant-colonel of a Boston regiment of artillery. After the war he returned to his old business, and established a foundry in which church-bells and bronze cannon were cast. He died in

Boston in 1818, eighty-three years of age, held in high esteem by his countrymen.

Source:

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