

Chapter 10

The Revolutionary War Begins: Lexington and Concord

I've heard of the Battle of Lexington and Concord. Was that the first battle of the Revolutionary War?

Those were actually two battles that occurred on the same day: April 19, 1775. The first shots of the Revolutionary War were fired at the town of Lexington, which is located about 15 miles west of Boston. Later that day another fight took place at Concord, which is located about five miles west of Lexington.

You said earlier that the Redcoats were going to march to Concord to take away the Patriots' weapons and to arrest their leaders. Did they have to pass through Lexington to get to Concord? Is that why the Redcoats were there?

Yes. You see, the Redcoats had two objectives: to arrest the Patriot leaders, John Hancock and Samuel Adams, and to take away the Patriots' weapons. Hancock and Adams were staying in Lexington, not Concord, so the Redcoats needed to march into both towns to complete their mission.

Why did the British want to arrest Hancock and Adams? I mean, what was the charge?

The charge was treason—against England. Hancock and Adams had been very outspoken in their opposition to British policies in America, and they both urged independence from England. For example, John Hancock had given a speech condemning the British for their role in the Boston Massacre, and Samuel Adams had taken part in the Boston Tea Party.

When the Redcoats arrived in Lexington, did they arrest Hancock and Adams?

No. The Patriot leaders had been warned of the Redcoats' plans and escaped.

Who warned them?

Another Patriot who was a member of the Sons of Liberty and a messenger for the Committees of Correspondence—Paul Revere.

He's the one who made that famous midnight ride on horseback—the midnight ride of Paul Revere, right?

Right. But Revere's mission wasn't only to warn Hancock and Adams in Lexington. He was also to warn the Patriots in Concord—as well as Patriots along the route—that the Redcoats were on the way to seize the colonists' store of weapons there.

And that's why Paul Revere is so famous—because he saved the Patriot leaders and the store of weapons?

Actually, Paul Revere was one of two Patriots who rode from Boston to Lexington that night to warn Hancock and Adams. The other, William Dawes, traveled separately and took a different route. But neither Revere nor Dawes ever made it to Concord.



Paul Revere

Why not?

Revere and Dawes were met at Lexington by a third rider, a doctor named Samuel Prescott. The three left Lexington for Concord after midnight but were soon captured by the British. Prescott managed to escape, and it was he, and he alone, who successfully reached Concord and warned the militiamen—the colonial citizens who were ready to fight, that is—that the Redcoats were coming.

If Prescott was the only one to get through, why isn't he the famous one? Why don't we hear about the midnight ride of Sam Prescott?

Paul Revere wasn't particularly famous in his lifetime. But exactly 85 years after the battles of Lexington and Concord, on April 19, 1860, the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow immortalized Revere with his now-famous poem "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere." It begins: "Listen my children and you shall hear/Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere."

But why didn't Longfellow write the poem about Dawes or Prescott?

Maybe he liked the way the name "Revere" sounds coming after the word "ride"—because they both start with the letter *r*, I mean. Or maybe he liked the way "Revere" rhymes with "hear."

So, just because Longfellow thought the name “Revere” worked best poetically, he singled out Paul Revere as a hero and ignored the others? That’s why Paul Revere is the famous one?

We don’t know for sure, but that is what some scholars believe.

Didn’t Paul Revere have some kind of signal—using one or two lanterns in a Boston church tower—to alert his countrymen of the Redcoats’ arrival?

You must be thinking of “one if by land and two if by sea.”

Yes. But that doesn’t make sense to me. How could the British come by land? There’s no land route from England to America.

The lantern signal didn’t concern British soldiers coming to America from England. It concerned Redcoats who were *already stationed* in America—in Boston. The question was whether the Redcoats would make their move from Boston to Lexington and Concord by land or by sea.

But that doesn’t make sense either. If they were already in Boston and had to go west toward Lexington, how could they have gone by sea? The sea would have taken them back to England.

That phrase, “one if by land and two if by sea,” wasn’t actually used by Paul Revere. It comes from the poem by Longfellow. In the phrase, the word “sea” doesn’t refer to the Atlantic Ocean.

It doesn’t?

No. You see, much of colonial Boston was separated from the mainland of Massachusetts by a river—the Charles River. Only the southern part of the city was connected by land to the mainland of Massachusetts. The Redcoats, who were stationed in Boston, needed to get to a road that led to Lexington. The question was whether they would get to that road by land (by walking first south, then west, then north) or by water (by rowing across the Charles in boats). In the poem, the word “sea” simply means “water” and refers to the Charles River.

Oh. Then why didn’t Longfellow say “one if by land and two if by boat” or “...two if by river”?

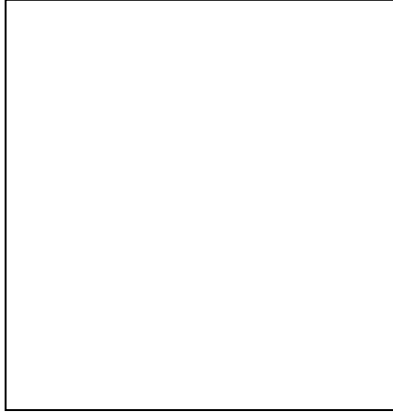
Perhaps for the rhyme scheme: “One if by land and two if by sea/And I on the opposite shore will be.” “Sea” rhymes with “be.”

Oh. Well, which way did the Redcoats go?

They rowed across the river in boats. So two lanterns were hung in the tower of Boston’s Old North Church to let the countrymen know that. By the way, when Paul Revere and William Dawes left Boston for Lexington, Dawes, who departed first, took the “south, then west, then north” land route; Revere crossed the Charles in a boat.

But something else doesn’t make sense. What difference did it make if the Redcoats traveled by land or sea? In either case they’d end up at Lexington, where the action was going to be, so why the different signals?

The Patriots were afraid that Revere and Dawes might be captured by the Redcoats before they were able to spread the alarm. The main reason for the signal light was to let the countrymen on the other side of the Charles River know that the Redcoats were on the way—in case Revere and Dawes were caught.



The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere

Then why couldn’t just one lantern be used as a signal—to show simply that the Redcoats were on the move, no matter how they crossed the Charles? No shots were fired until Lexington. That must mean that the Patriots weren’t expected to shoot at the Redcoats along the route to Lexington. Again, what difference did it make if the Redcoats traveled by land or sea?

The fact that no shots were fired until Lexington doesn’t mean that the Patriots were told not to fire at the Redcoats along the way. None of the Patriots knew what was going to happen. Remember, communication was very poor then—no phones, no email, no anything. The Patriot fighters were expected to make their own decisions about what to do. Some gathered at Lexington, but most gathered at Concord, where their military supplies were stored. Just because no Patriots fired at Redcoats along the route to Lexington doesn’t mean that they *couldn’t* have fired; they might have.

What about the Redcoats? Did they know what was going to happen?

They didn't know either. They hoped that the size and swiftness of their professional-looking army would scare the Patriots into backing down.

Okay, but once the Redcoats crossed the Charles River, wouldn't their *land* route to Lexington be the same, no matter how they crossed the river? So again, didn't it really not make a difference how they crossed the river—and couldn't just one lantern have been used as a signal?

No. Picture an imaginary straight line between Boston and Lexington. If the Redcoats had traveled by land, they would have taken a route south of that line, through present-day Brookline. That route, as I said, is the one William Dawes took. But the Redcoats traveled by "sea," forcing them onto a route north of that imaginary line, through present-day Medford.

So, the Redcoats' actual route took them through a different set of towns than traveling "by land" would have. And in case there might be fighting along the way, the Patriots needed to know that route, right?

Right. And on top of that, there was the time factor.

What do you mean?

The northern route was considerably shorter and required less time than the southern one. The Patriots needed to warn Hancock and Adams and to hide the weapons at Concord before the Redcoats arrived. The signal from the church tower—one or two lanterns—gave the Patriots an idea of how much time they actually had.

Oh. Okay, so on April 19 the Redcoats arrived at Lexington, and the colonists—who didn't want the British soldiers to get to Concord, where the weapons were—were ready for them. What happened?

The British force consisted of about 750 Redcoats. The Patriots didn't have an official army, but they had a militia—a group of civilian fighters known as *minutemen*.

Minutemen?

The American militiamen were called minutemen because they were ready to fight at a minute's notice. Anyway, the colonists' force at Lexington numbered only about 75 minutemen.

The colonists were outnumbered ten to one! What happened?

The minutemen's commander, Captain John Parker, gave this order to his men: "Stand your ground! Don't fire unless fired upon! But if they want to have a war, let it begin here!" The British commander, Francis Smith, didn't order his men to fire any shots. Instead, he told the American militia to drop their weapons and to go home.



Minutemen

What did the minutemen do?

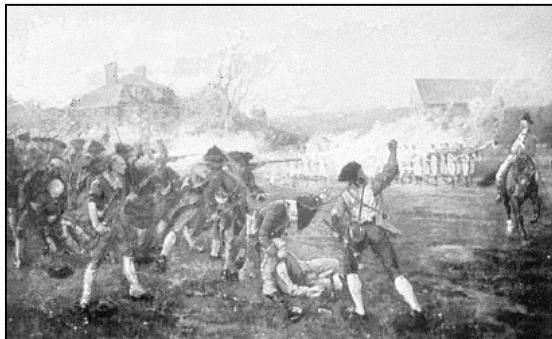
They saw that they were severely outnumbered, so they started to go home. But they didn't drop their weapons.

Then what happened?

Then a shot suddenly and unexpectedly rang out. And to this day nobody knows which side fired it. But once that first shot was fired, both sides started shooting. The Revolutionary War had begun.

But the minutemen were outnumbered ten to one. Were they all killed?

The British killed eight minutemen and injured ten others. The rest of the minutemen escaped into the nearby woods. By the way, that first shot fired is often referred to as the "shot heard 'round the world."



The Battle of Lexington

Why is it called that?

Not because it was so loud that it was literally heard all the way around the world. The phrase comes from 1837's "Concord Hymn," a poem by Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose own grandfather fought at Concord that day. The phrase implies that the news of the fighting spread around the world—and that the effects of the Revolutionary War were felt around the world.

After the minutemen scattered into the woods of Lexington, what did the Redcoats do? You said earlier that Hancock and Adams had already escaped.

Right. So the Redcoats marched to nearby Concord to burn the Patriots' military supplies.

What did the Patriots do?

A Patriot militia, numbering a few hundred, gathered at Concord, but they were still outnumbered. They merely watched from a hill as the Redcoats entered the city.

Did the Redcoats find the Patriots' weapons and burn them?

Most of the Patriots' military supplies had been moved to other locations before the Redcoats arrived. But the British did find a few remaining supplies and started to burn them.

And the Patriots didn't do anything?

At first, no—except that more and more minutemen, about 400 all together, arrived and gathered at Concord to watch the proceedings. Then, because the British were careless in the burning of the supplies they found, a building unexpectedly caught fire. The Patriots, not realizing that the burning of the building was accidental, were afraid that the Redcoats were planning to burn down the entire town of Concord! That's when the Patriots took action; they confronted the Redcoats at Concord's Old North Bridge.



The Battle of Concord

What happened?

At the bridge, the minutemen actually outnumbered the Redcoats. Gunfire was exchanged and several Redcoats were killed; several others were wounded. Seeing that the Americans outnumbered them, the Redcoats decided to retreat—to march back to the safety of Boston Harbor, that is.

And that ended the fighting?

No. The American fighters, who by this time numbered over a *thousand* men, moved *ahead* of the Redcoats and then shot at them—from behind walls, fences, trees, and bushes—all along the way back to Boston! By the time the Redcoats found safety in a British naval ship—the HMS *Somerset*—in Boston Harbor, they had suffered about 75 dead, 175 wounded, and 25 missing. The Americans had suffered only about 50 dead, 40 wounded, and 5 missing. In other words, the untrained American fighters had beaten the world's best-trained army in the Battles of Lexington and Concord—and there was no doubt that America and Britain were really at war.