

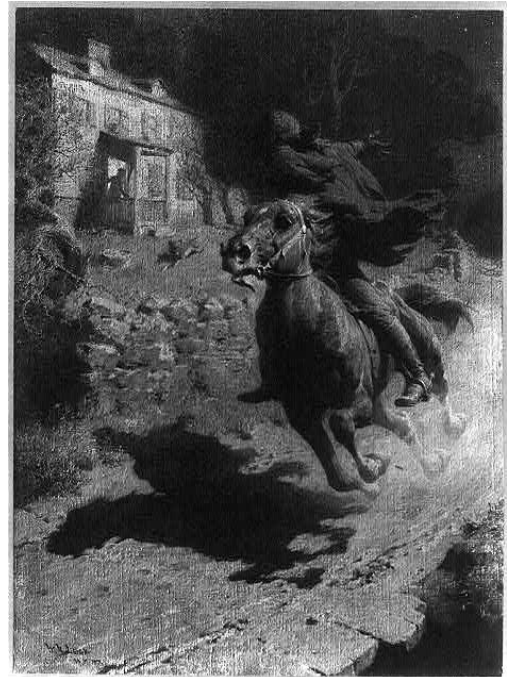
BROADSIDE

A Journal of the Wars for Independence for Students

THE LEXINGTON ALARM: FACTS VS MYTH

Americans tend to look at our history through the lens of mythology which is often reinforced by popular culture. Case in point is Paul Revere's epic April 18/19, 1775 ride of where he is imagined exhorting his fellow patriots to rouse from their beds, shouting, "The British are coming! The British are coming!" Nothing could be further from the truth. Colonists believed themselves to be British subjects and were proud of that association. Their beef with Great Britain was that they felt they were not treated as equals, since they unlike their British counterparts had no representation in Parliament, hence the phrase, "No Taxation Without Representation."

Chances are Revere would have shouted something like, "The Regulars are out!" or "The King's Troops are out." Interestingly Revere never finished his ride he was captured several miles west of Lexington by a British patrol that was reconnoitering the roads that led from Boston to Concord. Paul Revere's best public relations officer was the poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who wrote his epic poem, "Paul Revere's Ride" almost a century after the event as the nation was on the brink of Civil War as Longfellow sought to ignite the patriotic ardor of those who supported the Union and were non-plused at the thought of southern secession.



"Awaken," c. 1917 (Library of Congress)

"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 forevermore!"

Popular myth also has American's believe that the Minute Man and Patriot militia units of Middlesex County, Massachusetts were all white. Recent research suggests otherwise and that local African-American or enslaved persons also participated in the fights at Lexington Green, the North Bridge in Concord and along the Battle Road, which marks the British return route to Boston. Most notably was Prince Estabrook from Lexington, who was enslaved and owned by Benjamin Estabrook of Lexington, from which Estabrook took his name. Estabrook was one of the Americans standing on Lexington Green squaring off against the British as a sign of defiance. To be clear, Lexington's Minute Man Captain, John Parker, did not have his seventy men block the road to Concord, the British destination, but rather he lined his men in two columns adjacent to the road. They were standing there not so much as a show of force but rather in an act of gesture politics and defiance. It was the British who moved off the road and went into battle formation against the patriots. Parker allegedly said to his men, "Stand your ground. Don't fire unless fired upon. If they mean to have a war, let it begin here." That remark is enshrined on Lexington Green on what is known as the Minute Man Boulder.

With the British in battle formation, Parker ordered his men to disperse and return home. However, a gun fired and the British responded with a volley into mostly the backs of the fleeing patriots. No one is sure to this day who fired the first shot. Several patriots were killed and others wounded, including Prince Estabrook. Estabrook survived his wounds and went on to serve in the Continental Army. When the war was concluded, Estabrook, was granted his freedom by his master.



Amos Doolittle's Battle of Lexington (Library of Congress)

In 2008 the town of Lexington dedicated a marker to Estabrook's role in the opening event of the American Revolution. It not only recognizes Estabrook's contribution but those of other African Americans who served in the cause of Liberty. The marker reads:

Of Danvers.
 Mr. Henry Jacobs,
 Mr. Samuel Cook,
 Mr. Ebenezer Goldthwait,
 Mr. George Southwick,
 Mr. Benjamin Daland, jun.
 Mr. Jotham Webb,
 Mr. Ferley Putnam.

Of Salem.
 Mr. Benjamin Peirce.

WOUNDED.

Of Lexington.
 Mr. John Robbins,
 Mr. John Tidd,
 Mr. Solomon Peirce,
 Mr. Thomas Winship,
 Mr. Nathaniel Farmer,
 Mr. Joseph Comer,
 Mr. Ebenezer Munroe,
 Mr. Francis Brown,
 Prince Esterbrooks,
 (A Negro Man.)

A list of casualties (PBS)

“In Honor of Prince Estabrook -- Prince Estabrook was a slave who lived in Lexington. At dawn on April 19, 1775, he was one of the Lexington Minute Men awaiting the arrival of the British Regulars at the Buckman Tavern. In the battle which followed, Prince Estabrook was wounded on Lexington Green. Through circumstances and destiny, he thus became the first black soldier to fight in the American Revolution. -- This monument is dedicated to the memory of Prince Estabrook and the thousands of other courageous black patriots long denied the recognition they deserve.”

Activity

Share with students a copy of the Patriot Broadside that appeared in Massachusetts and New England in the days after the battle of Lexington and Concord. Using the Primary Source Document Analysis sheet found at (insert website) have them complete the worksheet and discuss their answers

Have students engage in a dramatic reading of Longfellow's Poem, "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere." When they are done ask them to consider why and how history is influenced by popular culture.