

Revere House Radio

Episode 3

Revisit the Ride: What did Paul Revere Actually Say?

Welcome in to another episode of Revere House Radio, Midnight Ride edition — I'm your host Robert Shimp. In continuing our week-long commemoration of Paul Revere's Midnight Ride for its 245th anniversary, we are tackling some of the most frequently asked questions surrounding the evening of April 18, 1775. Today, we will be discussing perhaps one of the most iconic phrases in American history — "The British are coming!" The phrase has been interwoven into American lore as a key part of Paul Revere as a lone rider shouting the phrase through the countryside as his voice alerted village after village that the British soldiers were indeed on their way. Just because something is lore, however, does not mean we need to take it as truth — and in this case, the phrase is almost certainly one of those curious bits of history that became skewed and twisted through the years. In short, Revere almost certainly did not shout 'the British are coming' on his ride for a few reasons, and the iconic phrase really does not emerge in the historical record until after Revere's death, nearly 50 years after the ride itself.

To understand what Revere actually said, and why shouting 'The British are coming' would not have made sense at the time, we need to first understand a few of the underlying principles for both the American Revolution and for the Midnight ride itself. Regarding the phrase "The British are coming," it really would not have made a lot of sense, or at least it would have been confusing as in many cases, the colonists that Revere would have been contacting and interacting with that evening would have considered themselves to be British. At a conceptual level, one of the prime reasons, if not the prime reason for the Revolution itself (we can have that debate until kingdom come) but one of the reasons was to uphold the unwritten British constitution. Many colonists saw themselves as the true heirs and, through their actions, upholders of the ancient constitution and therefore true Britons. Through Parliament's taxation policies, measures like the Quebec Act of 1774 and the Intolerable acts of the same year, and their perception that King George III had abandoned them in the process, the colonists saw a betrayal and break with the unwritten constitution in London. They pushed back against the idea of virtual representation, or the view that every member of the British empire was represented, indirectly at least, by every member of parliament, arguing that tax acts in particular did not hold water without direct physical representation in London. For those reasons, shouting that the British were coming to his fellow Massachusetts neighbors would have been confusing phrasing at best for Revere.

To the point of Revere shouting along the way, that is also somewhat of a misperception of the ride. We will get into the specific details of what happened on the ride itself tomorrow, but from yesterday's episode we know Revere was already a known entity in London. On the night of his

ride, British regulars were out in patrols looking for Revere and other riders like him, and Revere in fact was nearly captured by a two-man patrol just as his ride began. His mission was supposed to be a secret one, so it would not have made sense to be drawing excess attention to himself. So along the route, he stopped at individual houses along the way, alerting trusted associates and households what was happening that evening. In the contemporaneous words of William Munroe of Lexington, sergeant in command for the town, in his deposition to the Massachusetts Provincial Council, said that Revere used the phrase “the regulars are coming out” – shorthand for the Regular Professional soldiers of the British army. This phrasing would have made sense at the time, and is the most likely of really all the possibilities for Revere’s wording, though of course there could have been deviations, Redcoats, Lobsterbacks, things of that nature, along the way.

So with this likely wording established, where does the phrase “The British are coming!” come into play? The first time the phrase seems to pop into the historical record seems to be from an 1822 dinner party that included Dorothy Scott, previously Dorothy Hancock, who was John Hancock’s fiancé at the time of the Midnight Ride, and on scene for the action in Lexington. According to William Sumner, a dinner party attendee, at this 1822 soiree, Scott recounted on that evening a man from Lexington came running by the Hancock/Clarke house and shouted “The British are coming!” as soon as he “saw the British bayonets” glistening. The important note here is that this recollection came long after the fact, but more importantly, that it came after two wars, the American Revolution and the War of 1812, that drew clear lines demarcating American and the United States from British and Great Britain. Terminology greatly shifted between 1775 and 1822, and especially after the War of 1812, clear and permanent lines were drawn between the nations. The phrase then popped up sporadically in other historical texts through the 19th century, and then by the 20th century, it seems Revere’s hushed “the regulars are coming out” had been completely swamped by the more iconic shout of “The British Are Coming!” So while the phrase most associated with Revere is something he almost certainly did not say in his life, the story of its origins allows us to return to the context for both the Ride and Revolution and piece together some of its key features.

As always, stay in touch via Facebook, Twitter, or email, and let us know what you think of these and other topics you might want answered either in this format or in our new blog, The Revere Express. We greatly appreciate your support, and if you are interested in continuing your support in these uncertain times, please consider membership or a donation to the Paul Revere House. Information on both can be found on our website, paulreverehouse.org. In the meantime, we will be back tomorrow with another episode to consider what actually happened on April 18, 1775. Until then, stay safe, and thanks for listening!