



# WHO WAS PAUL REVERE AND WHY SHOULD YOU CARE?

## ERIC METAXAS

“Listen, my children, and you shall hear of the midnight ride of Paul Revere.”

Have you ever heard that thrilling line? Do you even know who Paul Revere is?

If you’re under, say, 30, I’m going to guess that the answer to both of these questions might be no.

This is a very serious problem, but it’s not your fault. It’s a serious problem because it means you have been cut off from one of our greatest American stories.

And it’s not your fault because no one bothered to teach you about this courageous man and the great American poet who made him famous. It seems professional educators decided that other topics were more important to your education.

But they made a mistake. A big one.

The story of Paul Revere is part of our heritage. It, and countless other stories like it, unite us as a distinct people with a shared noble past. They also inspire us and stir national pride. These are good things, vital to the future of the country. Without them, we’re just 300 million different individuals living between Canada and Mexico.

It wasn’t always this way. In fact, not long ago you couldn’t have left high school without memorizing the line I quoted and many of the lines that follow. So let me right a wrong and tell you about two remarkable Americans who lived half a century apart – one a silversmith, and one a poet.

Paul Revere and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

By 1775, the American colonists and their British masters were on the verge of war. The flashpoint was Boston. It wasn’t so much a matter of where the British would strike, but when. To give themselves some advance warning, the rebels created a team of couriers. One of them was a successful forty-year-old silversmith and engraver named Paul Revere.

On the night of April 18, two lanterns were lit in the tallest structure in the city, the Old North Church. This was the signal that the fateful moment had arrived. The British were coming. Revere rode out into the darkness to warn his compatriots to prepare for a fight. That fight came the next day in Lexington. The War of American Independence had begun.

But in the decades following, history mostly forgot Paul Revere. After serving in the war, he had an extraordinary career as an early industrialist, building a significant business that survives to this day as Revere Copper.

But when he died in 1818, his obituary made no mention of his daring ride. The only reason we still know of him is because of another crisis in American history – the Civil War.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow had been an ardent opponent of slavery, an abolitionist, from the time he was a young man. By 1860, he was America's most famous poet. An epic struggle was coming, one that would again determine the future of the nation. He anxiously wondered whether the people of the Northern states would be up to the challenge that lay ahead. What might he do to inspire them?

Longfellow remembered a story he had read many years before about Revere's ride. He recreated it with consummate skill. As you read his glorious poem, you can almost hear the thundering hooves of the silversmith's horse. Published in a new magazine called the Atlantic Monthly in January 1861, his brilliant ballad was an immediate success.

Schoolchildren began memorizing and reciting it at annual Independence Day celebrations. In 1883, a twenty-two-year-old sculptor, Cyrus Dallin, was commissioned to create a Paul Revere statue to stand in the plaza across from the Old North Church. It is still one of the most popular tourist sites in Boston.

What is Longfellow's poem asking of us who hear it today? It is doing what all great art does: it calls us to think of ourselves as part of something larger—as part of something noble, beautiful, good, and true. The men like Paul Revere who fought in the American Revolution were not merely fighting for themselves and for their families, but for something far beyond that – for a new kind of nation. The men who fought to free the slaves in the Civil War renewed that promise.

If we forget these brave men, we forget what they stood for, and therefore we will forget what America means. And, just like an individual who has lost his memory no longer knows who he is, a nation or a people that loses its memory no longer knows who they are.

Longfellow's poem reminds us.

So, go read Paul Revere's Ride by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. I promise, you'll be glad you did.

It begins like this: "Listen, my children, and you shall hear of the midnight ride of Paul Revere."

I'm Eric Metaxas, author of "If You Can Keep It: The Forgotten Promise of American Liberty," for Prager University.