

# The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere: Literature v. History



"Paul Revere's Ride, April 19, 1775," by Charles Green Bush in  
*The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution*, vol. 1, by Benson Lossing (1860).  
(New York Public Library Digital Commons)

THE GILDER LEHRMAN  
INSTITUTE of AMERICAN HISTORY

**TL** TEACHING LITERACY  
**TH** THROUGH HISTORY



# The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere: Literature v. History

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## UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. These units were developed to enable students to understand, summarize, and evaluate original materials of historical significance. Through a step-by-step process, students will acquire the skills to analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned viewpoints on primary sources and literary texts.

Over the course of three lessons the students will compare and contrast two different versions of one of the most iconic events in American history: the midnight ride of Paul Revere. The comparison will be made between the poem "Paul Revere's Ride" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and a description of the event written by Paul Revere himself. Students will use textual evidence from these two sources to draw their conclusions and write an argumentative essay.

## UNIT OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to

- Describe and analyze the historical meaning and importance of a poem
- Describe and analyze the historical meaning and importance of a primary source document
- Compare, analyze, and assess the similarities and differences between a poem and a primary source document
- Complete a Venn diagram with the option of writing a short persuasive essay, arguing the reliability and validity of the poem as a source of historical information

**NUMBER OF CLASS PERIODS:** 3

## ESSENTIAL QUESTION

To what extent is Longfellow's poem a reliable source of information about Paul Revere's ride?

**GRADE LEVEL(S):** 4–6

## COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.1: Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.3: Explain the relationships or interactions between two or more individuals, events, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text based on specific information in the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.6: Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RI.5.9: Integrate information from several texts on the same topic in order to write or speak about the subject knowledgeably.

## LESSON 1

### OVERVIEW

The students will listen to and read excerpts from the poem “Paul Revere’s Ride,” written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1860. They will analyze both the meaning of the poem and the story it tells. Students’ comprehension of the text will be determined during classroom discussion and by examining the summary organizers completed by the students.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow was one of the most popular poets in American history. In 1860, as the American Civil War loomed on the horizon, Longfellow wrote a poem telling the story of the midnight ride of Paul Revere eighty-five years earlier. Longfellow had set out to write a poem that would inspire a feeling of patriotism and unity as the United States was tearing itself apart. He sought to show Paul Revere’s bravery and independence. What he created was a folk hero. In the years following its publication in the *Atlantic Monthly*, the poem began to be taken as historical fact and has been used in textbooks as the basis for teaching what actually happened during the night of April 18–19, 1775.

### MATERIALS

- Teacher’s Resource: Full text of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “Paul Revere’s Ride,” *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), pp. 18–25.
- Summary Organizer #1: “Paul Revere’s Ride” (excerpts)

### PROCEDURE

You may choose to have the students do the lessons individually, as partners, or in small groups of three or four.

1. Discuss the information in the Historical Background.
2. Read the entire text of “Paul Revere’s Ride” aloud to the students. (There are also dramatic readings available online.)
3. Hand out Summary Organizer #1: “Paul Revere’s Ride.” “Share read” the excerpts from the poem with the students. This is done by having the students follow along silently while you begin reading aloud, modeling prosody, inflection, and punctuation. Then ask the class to join in with the reading after a verse or two. Continue to read along with the students, still serving as the model. This technique will support struggling readers as well as English language learners (ELL).
4. Students will look at several verses from the poem and determine which words or phrases are the most important. For this lesson, because they will need to assess the usefulness of the poem as a source of information, they will be looking for concrete historical terms, like *red-coats* or place names such as *Medford*, rather than the words the poet used to create mood, like *spectral* or *borne on the night-wind*. They will copy the selected words and phrases into the box on the right side of the table. After they have determined what is most important, they will summarize the text in their own words.

5. Model the response to the first section of the organizer with the class. You can demonstrate strategies such as selecting historical facts versus purely descriptive language.
6. Students can brainstorm as partners or in small groups but must fill in their own organizer to complete the assignment. Remember to emphasize that they are to first select the author's words to determine what is important in the text and then summarize the meaning of the passage in their own words.
7. Class discussion: Have groups or individual students share their summaries and compare them with other groups' summaries.



## LESSON 2

### OVERVIEW

The students will read a letter by Paul Revere in which he describes the events surrounding his famous ride on April 18, 1775. They will analyze one of the most iconic moments in American history as told by the one person who would know best what actually happened. Students' comprehension of the text will be determined during classroom discussion and by examining their summary organizers.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Paul Revere provided three accounts of his ride on April 18, 1775. His first two accounts, a draft and a corrected copy of a deposition, both dated 1775, were made at the request of the Massachusetts Provisional Congress. These depositions, taken from all eyewitnesses to the skirmish on Lexington Green, were compiled in the hopes of obtaining proof that the British had fired the first shot.

Though written twenty-three years after the event, the most complete account of the ride is Paul Revere's letter to Jeremy Belknap, corresponding secretary of the Massachusetts Historical Society, dated 1798.

### MATERIALS

- Summary Organizer #2: Paul Revere's Letter to Jeremy Belknap, ca. 1798 (excerpts), Manuscript Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts. The full transcript of the letter and images of the letter are available on the website of the Massachusetts Historical Society, [www.masshist.org](http://www.masshist.org).

### PROCEDURE

You may choose to have the students do the lessons individually, as partners, or in small groups of three or four.

1. Discuss the information in the Historical Background.
2. Hand out Summary Organizer #2: Paul Revere's Letter to Jeremy Belknap, ca. 1798. Make certain that students understand the purpose of the ellipsis points and that they are reading selected excerpts of the full text.
3. Share read the excerpts from the letter with the students as described in Lesson 1.
4. Students will look at the chunks of text from the letter and determine which words or phrases are the most important. They will copy those words and phrases into the box on the right side of the table. After they have determined what is most important, they will summarize the text in their own words.
5. Students can brainstorm as partners or in small groups but must fill in their own organizer to complete the assignment.
6. Class discussion: Have groups or individual students share their summaries and compare them with other summaries.

## OVERVIEW

The students will compare and contrast the famous poem “Paul Revere’s Ride” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow with a letter written by Paul Revere in which he reflects upon the events that occurred that April night in 1775. The students will identify the similarities and differences between the poem and the primary source document. The students will then write a short essay arguing the reliability of the poem as a source of historical information.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

For many years the poem “Paul Revere’s Ride” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow has been used to teach what happened in the early morning hours of the first day of the American Revolution. Paul Revere himself wrote letters in which he described, in great detail, exactly what happened that night. How reliable is the poem when compared to the writings of the man who was actually there?

## MATERIALS

- Completed Summary Organizer #1: “Paul Revere’s Ride” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
- Completed Summary Organizer #2: Paul Revere’s Letter to Jeremy Belknap, ca. 1798
- Compare and Contrast Activity Sheet

## PROCEDURE

You may choose to have the students complete the Venn diagram individually, as partners, or in small groups. However, each student is responsible for writing his or her own essay.

1. Discuss the information in the Historical Background.
2. The students should have the two completed assignments from Lessons 1 and 2. They will refer to them to complete the activity sheet.
3. Distribute the Compare and Contrast activity sheet. The students will complete the Venn diagram, choosing exact wording from the two texts, both the poem and the letter, to draw their comparisons. This will give them better textual evidence to draw their conclusions.
4. Conclude with either a discussion of or written response to the question “Is Longfellow’s poem a reliable source of information about Paul Revere’s ride?” The students must use textual evidence from both the poem and the letter to make their arguments.



## Full text of “Paul Revere’s Ride” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Listen, my children, and you shall hear  
Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,  
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five;  
Hardly a man is now alive  
Who remembers that famous day and year.

He said to his friend, “If the British march  
By land or sea from the town to-night,  
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry arch  
Of the North Church tower as a signal light,—  
One, if by land, and two, if by sea;  
And I on the opposite shore will be,  
Ready to ride and spread the alarm  
Through every Middlesex village and farm,  
For the country-folk to be up and to arm.”

Then he said, “Good night!” and with muffled oar  
Silently rowed to the Charlestown shore,  
Just as the moon rose over the bay,  
Where swinging wide at her moorings lay  
The Somerset, British man-of-war;  
A phantom ship, with each mast and spar  
Across the moon like a prison bar,  
And a huge black hulk, that was magnified  
By its own reflection in the tide.

Meanwhile, his friend, through alley and street,  
Wanders and watches with eager ears,  
Till in the silence around him he hears  
The muster of men at the barrack door,  
The sound of arms, and the tramp of feet,  
And the measured tread of the grenadiers,  
Marching down to their boats on the shore.

Then he climbed to the tower of the church,  
Up the wooden stairs, with stealthy tread,  
To the belfry-chamber overhead,  
And startled the pigeons from their perch

On the sombre rafters, that round him made  
Masses and moving shapes of shade,—  
Up the trembling ladder, steep and tall,  
To the highest window in the wall,  
Where he paused to listen and look down  
A moment on the roofs of the town,  
And the moonlight flowing over all.

Beneath, in the churchyard, lay the dead,  
In their night-encampment on the hill,  
Wrapped in silence so deep and still  
That he could hear, like a sentinel’s tread,  
The watchful night-wind, as it went  
Creeping along from tent to tent,  
And seeming to whisper, “All is well!”  
A moment only he feels the spell  
Of the place and the hour, and the secret dread  
Of the lonely belfry and the dead;  
For suddenly all his thoughts are bent  
On a shadowy something far away,  
Where the river widens to meet the bay,—  
A line of black that bends and floats  
On the rising tide, like a bridge of boats.

Meanwhile, impatient to mount and ride,  
Booted and spurred, with a heavy stride  
On the opposite shore walked Paul Revere.  
Now he patted his horse’s side,  
Now gazed at the landscape far and near,  
Then, impetuous, stamped the earth,  
And turned and tightened his saddle-girth;  
But mostly he watched with eager search  
The belfry-tower of the Old North Church,  
As it rose above the graves on the hill,  
Lonely and spectral and sombre and still.  
And lo! as he looks, on the belfry’s height  
A glimmer, and then a gleam of light!

He springs to the saddle, the bridle he turns,  
But lingers and gazes, till full on his sight  
A second lamp in the belfry burns!

A hurry of hoofs in a village street,  
A shape in the moonlight, a bulk in the dark,  
And beneath, from the pebbles, in passing, a spark  
Struck out by a steed flying fearless and fleet;  
That was all! And yet, through the gloom and the light,  
The fate of a nation was riding that night;  
And the spark struck out by that steed, in his flight,  
Kindled the land into flame with its heat.

He has left the village and mounted the steep,  
And beneath him, tranquil and broad and deep,  
Is the Mystic, meeting the ocean tides;  
And under the alders, that skirt its edge,  
Now soft on the sand, now loud on the ledge,  
Is heard the tramp of his steed as he rides.

It was twelve by the village clock  
When he crossed the bridge into Medford town.  
He heard the crowing of the cock,  
And the barking of the farmer's dog,  
And felt the damp of the river fog,  
That rises after the sun goes down.

It was one by the village clock,  
When he galloped into Lexington.  
He saw the gilded weathercock  
Swim in the moonlight as he passed,  
And the meeting-house windows, black and bare,  
Gaze at him with a spectral glare,  
As if they already stood aghast  
At the bloody work they would look upon.

It was two by the village clock,  
When he came to the bridge in Concord town.  
He heard the bleating of the flock,  
And the twitter of birds among the trees,  
And felt the breath of the morning breeze  
Blowing over the meadows brown.  
And one was safe and asleep in his bed  
Who at the bridge would be first to fall,  
Who that day would be lying dead,  
Pierced by a British musket-ball.

You know the rest. In the books you have read,  
How the British Regulars fired and fled,—  
How the farmers gave them ball for ball,  
From behind each fence and farm-yard wall,  
Chasing the red-coats down the lane,  
Then crossing the fields to emerge again  
Under the trees at the turn of the road,  
And only pausing to fire and load.

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!  
For, borne on the night-wind of the Past,  
Through all our history, to the last,  
In the hour of darkness and peril and need,  
The people will waken and listen to hear  
The hurrying hoof-beats of that steed,  
And the midnight message of Paul Revere.

Source: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Tales of a Wayside Inn* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1863), pp18–25.



## Summary Organizer #1: “Paul Revere’s Ride” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (excerpts)

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Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere,  
On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five;  
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He said to his friend, “If the British march  
By land or sea from the town to-night,  
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry arch  
Of the North Church tower as a signal light,—  
One, if by land, and two, if by sea;  
And I on the opposite shore will be,  
Ready to ride and spread the alarm  
Through every Middlesex village and farm,  
For the country-folk to be up and to arm.”

Then he said, “Good night!” and with muffled oar  
Silently rowed to the Charlestown shore,  
Just as the moon rose over the bay,  
Where swinging wide at her moorings lay  
The Somerset, British man-of-war;  
A phantom ship, with each mast and spar  
Across the moon like a prison bar,  
And a huge black hulk, that was magnified  
By its own reflection in the tide. . . .

Key words/phrases:

In your own words:

. . . Meanwhile, impatient to mount and ride,  
 Booted and spurred, with a heavy stride  
 On the opposite shore walked Paul Revere.  
 Now he patted his horse's side,  
 Now gazed at the landscape far and near,  
 Then, impetuous, stamped the earth,  
 And turned and tightened his saddle-girth;  
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Under the trees at the turn of the road,  
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In the hour of darkness and peril and need,  
The people will waken and listen to hear  
The hurrying hoof-beats of that steed,  
And the midnight message of Paul Revere.

Key words/phrases:

In your own words:

**Summary Organizer #2:**  
**Paul Revere's Letter to Jeremy Belknap, ca. 1798 (excerpts)**

Dear Sir,

. . . On Tuesday evening, the 18th, it was observed, that a number of Soldiers were marching towards the bottom of the Common. About 10 o'Clock, Dr. Warren Sent in great haste for me, and begged that I would imediately Set off for Lexington. . . . The Sunday before . . . I agreed . . . that if the British went out by Water, we would shew two Lanthorns in the North Church Steeple; & if by Land, one, as a Signal; for we were apprehensive it would be dificult to Cross the Charles River. . . . I went to the North part of the Town, where I had kept a Boat; two friends rowed me across Charles River, a little to the eastward where the Somerset Man of War lay.

Key words/phrases:

In your own words:

. . . They landed me on Charlestown side. . . . When I got into Town . . . I told them what was Acting, & went to git me a Horse . . . I set off upon a very good Horse; it was then about 11 o'Clock, & very pleasant. . . . I saw two men on Horse back, under a Tree. When I got near them, I discovered they were British officer. . . . I turned my Horse very quick, & Galloped towards Charlestown neck, and then pushed for the Medford Road . . . one who chased me, . . . I got clear of him, and went thro Medford. . . . In Medford, I awaked the Captain of the Minute men; & after that, I alarmed almost every House, till I got to Lexington. I found Messrs. Hancock & Adams at the Rev. Mr. Clark's; I told them my errand . . . and set off for Concord. . . .

Key words/phrases:

In your own words:

. . . I likewise mentioned, that we had better allarm all the Inhabitents till we got to Concord. . . . We had got nearly half way. Mr Daws & the Doctor stoped to allarm the people of a House: I was about one hundred Rod a head, when I saw two men, . . . — in an Instant I was surrounded by four; —they had placed themselves in a Straight Road, . . . & two of them were under a tree in the pasture. The Docter being foremost, he came up; and we tryed to git past them; but they being armed with pistols & swords, they forced us in to the pasture; —the Docter jumped his Horse over a low Stone wall, and got to Concord. . . .

Key words/phrases:

In your own words:

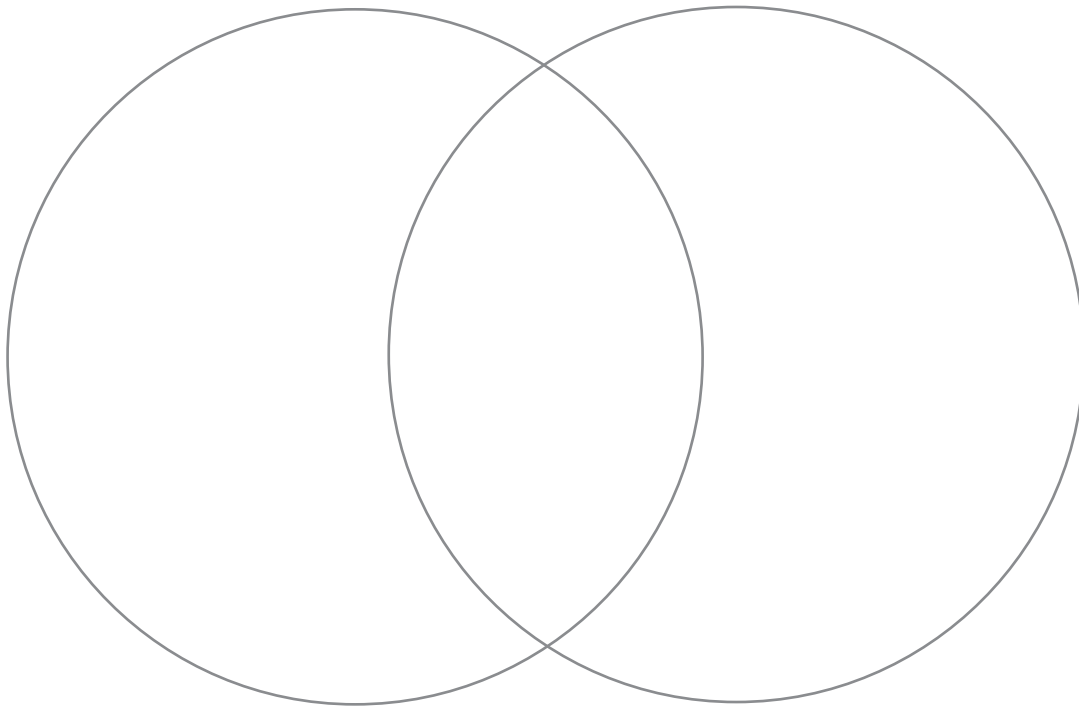
. . . out Started Six officers, on Horse back, and orderd me to dismount; —one of them, who appeared to have the command, examined me, where I came from, & what my Name Was? I told him. . . . He demanded what time I left Boston? I told him . . . and that There would be five hundred Americans there in a short time, for I had alarmed the Country all the way up. . . . one of them . . . Clapped his pistol to my head, called me by name, & told me he was going to ask me some questions, & if I did not give him true answers, he would blow my brains out. . . .

Key words/phrases:

In your own words:



**Compare and Contrast:  
The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere**



**Paul Revere's Ride**

**The Belknap Letter**

Use the information from both Longfellow's poem and the letter that Paul Revere wrote to Jeremy Belknap fill out the Venn diagram and answer the following question: Is Longfellow's poem a reliable source of information about Paul Revere's ride? Use evidence from both texts to support your argument.

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