

# EARLY ESPIONAGE AND INTRIGUE

As early as the pre-Revolutionary era, General George Washington already recognized the value of good intelligence concerning one's enemies. In this section, we include a 1755 exchange of letters between Washington and a governor of Pennsylvania regarding enemy movements during the French and Indian War. In the Revolutionary War, too, Washington had a small circle of spies to monitor British movements, starting (informally) with Paul Revere, who in 1775 made his famous "midnight ride" to warn of the coming of the British. Revere participated in a kind of intelligence-gathering ring, which he remembered fondly after the war. Espionage *against* the new United States also took place, most notably by U.S. General Benedict Arnold, who in 1780 revealed military secrets to the British and forever blackened his name as a synonym for a traitor.

We also include here an examination of the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798, which were passed in anticipation of war with revolutionary France but mostly targeted Republican opposition leaders in the United States. The laws restricted immigration and penalized American citizens for speaking or acting against the government—acts understood to be instances of sedition.

Then there is the encoded letter (1806) of American founding figure and general provoca-

teur Aaron Burr, addressed to the scandal-prone United States. General James Wilkinson. The letter implicated Burr in a plot to occupy western lands to set up a state there. Arrested for treason, Burr was ultimately acquitted on the grounds that the letter was a copy and could not be taken as evidence of his plans or intentions.

Jumping ahead to the mid-nineteenth century, we look at a similarly dubious bit of global intrigue conducted by the physician and mercenary William Walker. In 1856, Walker brought a private mercenary force into Nicaragua in order to seize its government for himself. His actions were roundly condemned by supporters of U.S. president Franklin Pierce, who passed an executive order against "filibustering," as it was called at the time.

Also in the mid-nineteenth century, the American Civil War erupted. During that conflict, the Union Army benefitted from the contributions of Allan Pinkerton and his Pinkerton Detective Agency. Pinkerton personally served as a spy on behalf of the Union, and in so doing he laid the groundwork of the modern spy agency.

Similar groundbreaking work was conducted near the end of the century by the chief of the U.S. Secret Service, Elbert Wilkie, against a Spanish spy ring during the 1898 Spanish-American War.



*A portrait of George Washington by John Turnbull.*

# ■ Exchange of Letters between George Washington and Robert Hunter Morris

**Date:** October 31/November 1, 1755, and January 1, 1756

**Author/s:** George Washington and Robert Hunter Morris

**Genre:** Letters

## Summary Overview

Beginning in 1754, in North America, the French and Indian War was fought between French and British forces and each nation's Native American allies (the Wabanaki Confederation and several Great Lakes tribes, for the French; the Iroquois Confederation and its allies, for the British). Initially, the French and their substantial number of Native America allies won virtually all the battles. With several battles in what is now southwest Pennsylvania, the Deputy Governor of Pennsylvania, Robert Hunter Morris, was concerned for the safety of the colony. Virginia, which at that time shared a common border with Pennsylvania in this region, had been the base of operations for British regular and militia forces. George Washington, as a ranking and respected colonial officer, commanded the Virginian forces. Thus, the sharing of intelligence information between these two individuals was important for their mutual security and the military success of both British regular and colonial forces.

## Defining Moment

It should be noted that the colony of Virginia included what is now the state of West Virginia and that the colonial leaders of Virginia claimed other extensive tracts of land, including the Ohio River valley. To secure these claims, and in light of an increased French presence in what is now western Pennsylvania, Virginia sent a military envoy (George Washington) to request the withdrawal of the French forces. This request, made in December 1753, was rejected by the French. The governor of Virginia then commissioned Washington to raise a militia (160 men volunteered) to secure a fort being built at the "Three Rivers" location by a smaller British militia force (estimated as 40) from further west in Virginia. At the same time, the French had sent troops (probably about 800) south from its Canadian colonies to secure the strategic location.

The smaller British force building the fort withdrew when demanded to do so by the French.

In May 1754, the French commander sent a small force from Fort Duquesne (in what would become Pittsburgh) to locate Washington and to instruct him to withdraw. Washington's ally, Tanacharison (leader of the Mingo Iroquois), located the encampment of the French forces. Washington, with about 40 men, and Tanacharison, with about 12, surrounded the 40 French soldiers. When Washington's troops were sighted, fighting began, and the British forces killed or captured many of the French. This was in fact the opening battle of the war. Subsequently, essentially every other battle in this region was won by the French, including the decisive defeat of a large contingent of British regular troops in July 1755. Thus, fear of the French and their allies had been increasing in the months prior to Morris writing his letter to Washington.

During the latter half of 1755, Morris, seeking to secure Pennsylvania colonists, had encouraged the construction of small forts along the western edge of the settled regions of the colony. While working on a limited budget, Morris was successful in having George Croghan and Benjamin Franklin oversee various aspects of these defensive fortifications. However, although Pennsylvania had a large population like that of Virginia, it did not have a large militia. This was because many leaders in Pennsylvania were Quakers, a church that held pacifist ideals. Morris was the opposite, advocating an aggressive stance against the French, including scalping. This made it logical for Morris (not originally from Pennsylvania nor a Quaker) to collaborate with Virginia military leaders in attempting to secure the area that is now western Pennsylvania. This exchange of letters, coming at what was a low point for the British and British colonial forces, affirmed the cooperation between the two colonies, as well as the need for the exchange of information on military affairs. These letters were also written prior to the global spread of the conflict in the form of the Seven Years War in 1756.

### **Author Biography**

---

Robert Hunter Morris's birth date has been given in the range from 1700 to 1713, with his death being on January 27, 1764. Born into a wealthy, well-connected family in Westchester County, New York, he was educated at home. When his father became governor of New Jersey, Morris was appointed Chief Justice of the colony's Supreme Court, a position he held until his death. Having met the Penn family, Morris was appointed the Deputy Governor (Thomas

Penn being the formal governor) of Pennsylvania in 1754, serving for two years. Advocating for Penn, Morris struggled against Benjamin Franklin over the inclusion of Penn property on the tax role, which Franklin believed was reasonable to pay for the colony's defense. With Morris vetoing the tax bill, the Pennsylvania Assembly blocked funds for his salary, leading to his resignation. Morris never married, but had three acknowledged children.

George Washington was born on February 22, 1732, in Virginia, on his father's Popes Creek plantation. His parents, Augustine and Mary Ball Washington, were moderately well-off, although Augustine died when George was eleven. George had two older half-brothers and five younger siblings. With no formal education, Washington learned surveying, becoming a county surveyor at the age of seventeen, and at age twenty-one became adjutant of Virginia's southern district militia with the rank of major. It was in this capacity that he was sent to the Ohio Valley to demand the withdrawal of French troops. That being an eventful journey, his journals were published by the Virginia governor, making Washington famous through the colonies and in England. Because of this, and his military leadership in the French and Indian War, Washington became a military leader in the American Revolutionary War. Prior to the Revolutionary War, he served in Virginia's House of Burgess from 1758 to 1776 and farmed his Mount Vernon plantation. After leading the colonial troops to victory, Washington chaired the Constitutional Convention and was elected as the nation's first president. Washington married Martha Custis, a widow with two children. The Washingtons had no children. He died on December 14, 1799.

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENT: Robert Hunter Morris to George Washington

[31 October–1 November, 1755]

Sir

Good Intelligences being of the utmost Consequences at this Juncture, and Mr Gist knowing more of Indians and of the Nature of the Country than any man here I have availed myself of his coming and desired him to go by Mr Weisers & consult with him in what manner to obtain true Accots of the Motions of the Enemy & to settle a Correspondance with You at Fort Cumberland. He will not be long detained in doing this & by him you will receive full and certain Intelligence.

Several of my Letters say that there is a large Body of French & Indians destined Against this Province and Virginia & that they were seen to pass the Alleghany Hills.

The Party intended for Virginia will no doubt begin their Hostilities at or near the Fort. That wch marches this way it is suspected have a Design to seize and fortify Shamokin and to send their Indians especially the Delawares whose Scheme this is said to be as a means to put them again into Possession of their Country to scalp the Inhabitants and hinder them from obstructing this grand Design.

*There is nothing more necessary than good intelligence to frustrate a designing Enemy: and nothing that requires greater pains to obtain.*

I hope this Scheme is not in the Intention of the Enemy for if it be I know not how it can be prevented without large assistance from the Neighboring Provinces & a Detachment of regular forces.

I have ordered that the earliest Intelligence be sent to you of the Motions & Progress of the Enemy, that in case you can spare any Assistance it may be properly employ'd or want it from our Inhabitants who are all Volunteers & without any compensation or Pay for their Services they may assist you. I am Sir Your most humble Servant

Robt H: Morris

Please to direct your Letters to the Care of Mr Wm Buchanan at Carlisle. I have given him directions to forward them to me.

As there may be more danger in Cumberland County than in York County I desire you will direct your Letters to the care of George Stevenson Esquire at York who has my Directions to forward your Dispatches to me.

= = =

## HISTORICAL DOCUMENT: George Washington to Robert Hunter Morris

[Winchester, 1 January 1756]

To the Honourable Robert Hunter Morris, Governour of Pennsylvania.  
Honourable Sir,

I am sorry it has not been in my power to acknowledge the receipt of yours until now. At the time that your Letter came to Winchester, I was at Williamsburgh; before I got back, it was conveyed thither; and so from place to place has it been tossing almost until this time.

There is nothing *more* necessary than good intelligence to frustrate a designing Enemy: and nothing that requires greater pains to obtain. I shall therefore cheerfully come into any measures you can propose to settle a correspondence for this salutary end: and you may depend upon receiving (when the provinces are threatened) the earliest and best intelligence I can procure.

I sympathized in a general concern to see the inactivity of your province, in a time of imminent danger: but am pleased to find, that a feeling sense of wrongs, has roused the spirit of your martial Assembly to vote a sum; which with your judicious application, will turn to a general good.

We took some pretty vigorous measures to collect a force upon our frontiers, upon the first alarm; which have kept us peaceable ever since: how long this may last, is uncertain. Since that force (which were Militia) are disbanded; and the Recruiting Service almost stagnated.

If you propose to levy Troops; and their destination is not a secret; I should be favoured, were I let into the scheme; that we may act conjunctly, so far as the nature of things will admit. Pray direct to me, at Alexandria; to which place I design to go, in about ten days from this. I am &c.

G:W.

Winchester, January 1st 1756.

## GLOSSARY

The spelling of many words in these letters differ from modern American usage, due to changes over time, use of British variants, and archaic abbreviations.

**Shamokin:** Native American settlement at what is now Sunbury, Pennsylvania

take notice of it: However as I am previously apprized of these alterations, and that I may soon expect orders in pursuance of them; It will be absolutely necessary for me to hold a Council of War at New York, consisting of Governours and Field Officers, <sup>(if to be had)</sup> according to his Maj<sup>ty</sup>'s Instructions, before I enter upon any Operation.

In my way thro' Connecticut I will engage Gov<sup>r</sup>. Fitch, ~~and~~ as I will Gov<sup>r</sup>. Hopkins likewise if I can, to be present at the Council: and as it is a matter of great Importance to his Maj<sup>ty</sup>'s Service, as well of Consequence to my self, I must intreat the Favour of you not to fail meeting me at New York; which would infinitely oblige,

My Dear Sir,  
I shall both acquit  
- ted himself in the busi- Your most affectionate,  
- ness, I rest him upon. Humble Servant,  
with much honour to  
me, and to himself in  
the Opinion of the Ministry.

W. Shirley

The Affairs of Jamaica must be a dead Secret. I set out from hence for New York on Wednesday afternoon without fail; and shall be there by Monday night after.

A letter sent to Robert Hunter Morris (from his papers).

## Document Analysis

---

The letter from Morris to Washington begins with a truth that applies not only to the situation in 1755 but to all military conflicts. The need for “Good Intelligences” in this case reflects the series of defeats that the British and their allies had suffered, and which had driven them out of what is now western Pennsylvania. As with most espionage efforts, having confidence in the people undertaking the mission is key. Thus, Morris’s mention of people with whom Washington was familiar (for example Gist had been with Washington on his diplomatic mission to the French) is an effort to cement ties between the two leaders. In his response, Washington summarizes the support, or lack thereof, for the war effort and promises cooperation.

In his letter to Washington, Morris shares information that he has regarding events in the West. Morris had assigned Christopher Gist the task of obtaining further information and sending it on to Washington. Anticipating that this communication from Gist to Washington would happen shortly, and that the French and their Native American allies were not only strengthening their presence in the Allegheny Hills (the Pittsburgh area) but moving eastward, Morris clearly hoped that Washington would quickly move against the enemy. Although the Susquehanna River offered some protection, Morris was also uncertain that the Iroquois Confederation would continue to offer any support. Leaders of the British regular forces had not readily accepted offers of friendship from the Native Americans, in addition to making clear they considered the American colonists second-class soldiers. Thus, Morris needed “assistance from Neighboring Provinces.” The uncertainty of Pennsylvania’s ability to hold out if the French attacked was the reason for the several addresses given to Washington for any reply he might have to Morris of Pennsylvania militia leaders.

In his reply, Washington demonstrates one problem that politics can create in wartime: He had to spend time seeking support in the capital rather than being at his headquarters. Thus, there was a delay of some weeks in the communications because Morris’s letter was sent to Washington’s headquarters in Winchester, while Washington had been in the colonial capital of Williamsburg. Washington notes his continued travel in asking that any response be sent to Alexandria, which meant that he would be visiting his home at Mount Vernon, several miles outside of Alexandria.

Agreeing with Morris that “good intelligence” could “frustrate a designing Enemy,” Washington seems hopeful that by the two of them sharing information, a better outcome would result. While Virginia supported the war effort more strongly than did Pennsylvania, Washington understood that neither colony fully supported the cause. Just as Morris had mentioned the need for regular British troops in addition to assistance from neighbors, Washington was clear that Virginians did not support a standing militia. Washington was generous in his assessment of Virginia’s “vigorous measures to collect a force” during the “first alarm,” since the enlistment goal had been for 400 soldiers and he deployed with only 160. Even this group had since disbanded, and Washington was having a hard time recruiting any soldiers in case the French moved against settlements in Virginia. Thus, he sympathizes with Morris’s problems in Pennsylvania and its general “inactivity,” or lack of a response.

## Essential Themes

---

Although one was a colonial official and the other a military leader, both Morris and Washington agreed that the sharing of military intelligence would be key to a victory against the French. Within these letters only Morris had any such information to share with Washing-

ton, but the two men were united on the need to share anything that might benefit the other. Morris promised Washington that he would send information on the “Motions & Progress of the Enemy,” while Washington promised to send the “best intelligence I can procure.” As Washington stated, getting good information necessitated the utmost effort, and this would be true for Pennsylvania’s and Virginia’s efforts. Washington hoped that the two colonies could coordinate military efforts based on this sharing. Both seemed to understand that widespread cooperation, especially with information, was the key to victory.

As illustrated in these letters, two very divergent colonies with competing territorial interests could establish the means to work together. This was important not just for the French and Indian War, but for the Revolutionary War. Representing two major divisions among the colonies, Virginia and Pennsylvania understood that a shared effort was necessary. As illustrated in his letter, this war gave Washington vital experience not only on the battlefield but, just as important, as a recruiter and quartermaster. When Washington commanded the American troops during the Revolution, his broad military experience, and canny use of “spies” against the British, gave him the ability to be successful.

—Donald A Watt, PhD

## **Bibliography and Additional Reading**

---

- Anderson, Fred. *Crucible of War: The Seven Years' War and the Fate of Empire in British North America, 1754–1766*. New York: Knopf Publishing, 2000. Print.
- Borneman, Walter R. *The French and Indian War: Deciding the Fate of North America*. New York: Harper, 2006. Print.
- Ellis, Joseph J. *His Excellency: George Washington*. New York: Knopf Publishing, 2004. Print.
- Mount Vernon Ladies' Association. “French & Indian War.” *George Washington's Mount Vernon*. Mount Vernon VA: Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union, 2020. Web. 15 May 2020.
- Morris, Robert Hunter. “Robert Hunter Morris to Thomas Penn, 28 November 1755.” *Founders Online*. (Franklin) Washington: National Archives, 2020. Web. 15 May 2020.
- Ward, Matthew C. *Breaking the Backcountry: The Seven Years' War in Virginia and Pennsylvania 1754–1765*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004. Print.



*A portrait of Paul Revere by John Singleton Copely.*

# ■ Letter from Paul Revere Describing Secret Intelligence Gathering and the “Midnight Ride”

**Date:** 1798

**Author/s:** Paul Revere

**Genre:** Personal Memoir

## Summary Overview

This document is a letter that Paul Revere wrote to Jeremy Belknap, who was the corresponding secretary of the Massachusetts Historical Society. The letter was sent sometime in 1798, although the original document has no date indicated. It is Revere’s own account of his famous ride on the night of April 18, 1775, when he rode to warn patriot and militia leaders that British troops were on the march from Boston to Lexington and Concord. Revere also gives some background about his work as a dispatch rider for various patriot groups, dating back to 1773. He also describes the formation of a group of about thirty men, in the fall of 1774 and winter of 1775, whose purpose was to observe the movement and activities of British soldiers in and around Boston.

## Defining Moment

The first battles of the American Revolution were at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts on April 19, 1775, but the roots of the conflict go back more than a decade earlier. Since the end of the French and Indian War in 1763, there had been a growing sense of estrangement between the American colonists and the British imperial government. Although there were some violent incidents in the protests against the Stamp Act in 1765, until the 1770s most of the protests by American colonists were peaceful, and often took the form of simply boycotting British imports. Beginning in 1767, British troops were placed on occupation duty in Boston, and by 1775 more than 3500 troops were stationed there. As tensions mounted, the Boston Massacre occurred on March 5, 1770, when troops guarding a tax collection office fired into a group of protesters. In June, 1772, a British tax collecting vessel, the *Gaspée*, ran aground on the coast of Rhode Island; a group of colo-

nists burnt the stranded ship, and a conspiracy of silence kept the British from ever identifying those involved. In December 1773, in what came to be known as the Boston Tea Party, patriots (including Paul Revere) dumped chests of tea worth over £9,000 into Boston Harbor as a protest against a monopoly given to the British East Indian Company for importing tea into the colonies.

In response to this, early in 1774 Parliament passed the Coercive Acts, aimed at punishing Boston for the Tea Party. The American colonists labelled these new regulations “The Intolerable Acts,” and after the passage of these laws, open resistance to British colonial rule became common in the colonies. In late January 1775, orders were sent from London to General Thomas Gage, commander of the British Army troops in Boston, directing him to arrest the major leaders of the patriot movement. Gage did not receive these orders until April 14, but when he did, he immediately made plans to send troops to Concord, hoping to capture John Hancock and

Samuel Adams (a cousin of John Adams), and to capture militia supplies stored there, so that patriot forces would not have access to these supplies. Paul Revere made one ride on April 16 to warn patriot leaders to move the militia supplies, and his more famous ride on the night of April 18 to warn Hancock and Adams to flee.

### Author Biography

Paul Revere was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 1, 1735. He learned silversmithing as an apprentice in his father's shop. He had many connections with the leaders of the patriot resistance to British rule, and was among

the founders of the Sons of Liberty in 1765. He became a dispatch rider for the Boston Committee of Public Safety and made many trips to New York and Philadelphia to carry news to patriot leaders there. Although best known for his ride to alert the colonial militia about the British march on Lexington and Concord in April 1775, he did not become a folk hero in connection with that ride until Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere" was published in 1860. After the revolution, he continued his silversmith business but was also involved in manufacturing iron, bronze, and copper products. He died in Boston on May 10, 1818.

### HISTORICAL DOCUMENT: "Midnight Ride" Letter from Paul Revere

[to the Corresponding Secretary (Jeremy Belknap) of the Massachusetts Historical Society]

Dear Sir,

Having a little leisure, I wish to fulfill my promise, of giving you some facts, and Anecdotes, prior to the Battle of Lexington, which I do not remember to have seen in any history of the American Revolution.

In the year 1773 I was employed by the Select men of the Town of Boston to carry the Account of the Destruction of the Tea to New-York; and afterwards, 1774, to Carry their dispatches to New-York and Philadelphia for Calling a Congress; and afterwards to Congress, several times. In the Fall of 1774 and Winter of 1775 I was one of upwards of thirty, chiefly mechanics, who formed our selves in to a Committee for the purpose of watching the Movements of the British Soldiers, and gaining every intelligence of the movements of the Tories. We held our meetings at the Green-Dragon Tavern. We were so carefull that our meetings should be kept Secret; that every time we met, every person swore upon the Bible, that they would not discover any of our transactions, But to Messrs. HANCOCK, ADAMS, Doctors WARREN, CHURCH, and one or two more.

About November, when things began to grow Serious, a Gentleman who had Conections with the Tory party, but was a Whig at heart, acquainted me, that our meetings were discovered, and mentioned the identical words that were spoken among us the Night before. We did not then distrust Dr. Church, but supposed it

must be some one among us. We removed to another place, which we thought was more secure: but here we found that all our transactions were communicated to Governor Gage. (This came to me through the then Secretary Flucker; He told it to the Gentleman mentioned above). It was then a common opinion, that there was a Traytor in the provincial Congress, and that Gage was possessed of all their Secrets. (Church was a member of that Congress for Boston.) In the Winter, towards the Spring, we frequently took Turns, two and two, to Watch the Soldiers, By patrolling the Streets all night. The Saturday Night preceding the 19th of April, about 12 o’Clock at Night, the Boats belonging to the Transports were all launched, and carried under the Sterns of the Men of War. (They had been previously hauld up and repaired). We likewise found that the Grenadiers and light Infantry were all taken off duty.

From these movements, we expected something serious was [to] be transacted. 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, where Messrs. Hancock and Adams were, and acquaint them of the Movement, and that it was thought they were the objets. When I got to Dr. Warren’s house, I found he had sent an express by land to Lexington—a Mr. Wm. Daws. The Sunday before, by desire of Dr. Warren, I had been to Lexington, to Mess. Hancock and Adams, who were at the Rev. Mr. Clark’s. I returned at Night thro Charlestown; there I agreed with a Col. Conant, and some other Gentlemen, that if the British went out by Water, we would shew two Lanthorns in the North Church Steeple; and if by Land, one, as a Signal; for we were aprehensive it would be difficult to Cross the Charles River, or git over Boston neck. I left Dr. Warrens, called upon a friend, and desired him to make the Signals. I then went Home, took my Boots and Surtout, and 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. It was then young flood, the Ship was winding, and the moon was Rising. They landed me on Charlestown side. When I got into Town, I met Col. Conant, and several others; they said they had seen our signals. I told them what was Acting, and went to git me a Horse; I got a Horse of Deacon Larkin. While the Horse was preparing, Richard Devens, Esq. who was one of the Committee of Safty, came to me, and told me, that he came down the Road from Lexington, after Sundown, that evening; that He met ten British Officers, all well mounted, and armed, going up the Road.

I set off upon a very good Horse; it was then about 11 o’Clock, and very pleasant. After I had passed Charlestown Neck, and got nearly opposite where Mark was hung in chains, I saw two men on Horse back, under a Tree. When I got near them, I discovered they were British officer. One tryed to git a head of Me, and the other to take me. I turned my Horse very quick, and Galloped towards Charlestown neck, and then pushed for the Medford Road. The one who chased me, endeavoring to Cut me off, got into a Clay pond, near where the new Tavern is now built. I got clear of him, and

went thro Medford, over the Bridge, and up to Menotomy. In Medford, I awaked the Captain of the Minute men; and after that, I alarmed almost every House, till I got to Lexington. I found Messrs. Hancock and Adams at the Rev. Mr. Clark's; I told them my errand, and inquired for Mr. Daws; they said he had not been there; I related the story of the two officers, and supposed that He must have been stopped, as he ought to have been there before me. After I had been there about half an Hour, Mr. Daws came; we refreshid our selves, and set off for Concord, to secure the Stores, &c. there. We were overtaken by a young Docter Prescot, whom we found to be a high Son of Liberty. I told them of the ten officers that Mr. Devens mett, and that it was probable we might be stoped before we got to Concord; for I supposed that after Night, they divided them selves, and that two of them had fixed themselves in such passages as were most likely to stop any intelegence going to Concord. I likewise mentioned, that we had better allarm all the Inhabitents till we got to Concord; the young Doctor much approved of it, and said, he would stop with either of us, for the people between that and Concord knew him, and would give the more credit to what we said. We had got nearly half way. Mr Daws and the Doctor stoped to allarm the people of a House: I was about one hundred Rod a head, when I saw two men, in nearly the same situation as those officer were, near Charlestown. I called for the Doctor and Daws to come up;—in an Instant I was surrounded by four;—they had placed themselves in a Straight Road, that inclined each way; they had taken down a pair of Barrs on the North side of the Road, and 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 and swords, they forced us in to the pasture;—the Docter jumped his Horse over a low Stone wall, and got to Concord. I observed a Wood at a Small distance, and made for that. When I got there, 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, and what my Name Was? I told him. He asked me if I was an express? I answered in the afirmative. He demanded what time I left Boston? I told him; and aded, that their troops had catched aground in passing the River, and that There would be five hundred Americans there in a short time, for I had alarmed the Country all the way up. He imediately rode towards those who stoppd us, when all five of them came down upon a full gallop; one of them, whom I afterwards found to be Major Mitchel, of the 5th Regiment, Clapped his pistol to my head, called me by name, and told me he was going to ask me some questions, and if I did not give him true answers, he would blow my brains out. He then asked me similar questions to those above. He then orderd me to mount my Horse, after searching me for arms. He then orderd them to advance, and to lead me in front. When we got to the Road, they turned down towards Lexington. When we had got about one Mile, the Major Rode up to the officer that was leading me, and told him to give me to the Sergeant. As soon as he took me, the Major orderd him, if I attempted to run, or any body insulted them, to blow my brains out. We rode till we got near Lexington Meeting-house, when

the Militia fired a Volley of Guns, which appeared to alarm them very much. The Major inquired of me how far it was to Cambridge, and if there were any other Road? After some consultation, the Major Rode up to the Sargent, and asked if his Horse was tired? He answered him, he was—(He was a Sargent of Grenadiers, and had a small Horse)—then, said He, take that man’s Horse. I dismounted, and the Sargent mounted my Horse, when they all rode towards Lexington Meeting-House. I went across the Burying-ground, and some pastures, and came to the Revd. Mr. Clark’s House, where I found Messrs. Hancock and Adams. I told them of my treatment, and they concluded to go from that House to wards Woburn. I went with them, and a Mr. Lowell, who was a Clerk to Mr. Hancock. When we got to the House where they intended to stop, Mr. Lowell and my self returned to Mr. Clark’s, to find what was going on. When we got there, an elderly man came in; he said he had just come from the Tavern, that a Man had come from Boston, who said there were no British troops coming. Mr. Lowell and my self went towards the Tavern, when we met a Man on a full gallop, who told us the Troops were coming up the Rocks. We afterwards met another, who said they were close by. Mr. Lowell asked me to go to the Tavern with him, to git a Trunk of papers belonging to Mr. Hancock. We went up Chamber; and while we were giting the Trunk, we saw the British very near, upon a full March. We hurried to wards Mr. Clark’s House. In our way, we passed through the Militia. There were about 50. When we had got about 100 Yards from the meeting-House the British Troops appeared on both Sides of the Meeting-House. In their Front was an Officer on Horse back. They made a Short Halt; when I saw, and heard, a Gun fired, which appeared to be a Pistol. Then I could distinguish two Guns, and then a Continual roar of Musquetry; When we made off with the Trunk.

*It was then a common opinion that there was a Traytor in the provincial Congress, and that Gage was possessed of all their Secrets.*

As I have mentioned Dr. Church, perhaps it might not be disagreeable to mention some Matters of my own knowledge, respecting Him. He appeared to be a high son of Liberty. He frequented all the places where they met, Was encouraged by all the leaders of the Sons of Liberty, and it appeared he was respected by them, though I knew that Dr. Warren had not the greatest affection for him. He was esteemed a very capable writer, especially in verese; and as the Whig party needed every Strenght, they feared, as well as courted Him. Though it was known, that some of the Liberty Songs, which We composed, were parodized by him, in favor of the British, yet none dare charge him with it. I was a constant and critical observer of him, and I must say, that I never thought Him a man of Principle; and I doubted much in my own mind, wether He was a real Whig. I knew that He kept company with a Capt. Price, a half-pay British officer, and that He frequently dined with him, and Robinson, one of the

Commissioners. I know that one of his intimate acquaintances asked him why he was so often with Robinson and Price? His answer was, that He kept Company with them on purpose to find out their plans. The day after the Battle of Lexington, I met him in Cambridge, when He shew me some blood on his stocking, which he said spirted on him from a Man who was killed near him, as he was urging the Militia on. I well remember, that I argued with my self, if a Man will risque his life in a Cause, he must be a Friend to that cause; and I never suspected him after, till He was charged with being a Traytor.

The same day I met Dr. Warren. He was President of the Committee of Safety. He engaged me as a Messenger, to do the out of doors business for that committee; which gave me an opportunity of being frequently with them. The Friday evening after, about sun set, I was sitting with some, or near all that Committee, in their room, which was at Mr. Hastings's House at Cambridge. Dr. Church, all at once, started up—Dr. Warren, said He, I am determined to go into Boston tomorrow—(it set them all a staring)—Dr. Warren replied, Are you serious, Dr. Church? they will Hang you if they catch you in Boston. He replied, I am serious, and am determined to go at all adventures. After a considerable conversation, Dr. Warren said, If you are determined, let us make some business for you. They agreed that he should go to git medicine for their and our Wounded officers. He went the next morning; and I think he came back on Sunday evening. After He had told the Committee how things were, I took him a side, and inquired particularly how they treated him? he said, that as soon as he got to their lines on Boston Neck, they made him a prisoner, and carried him to General Gage, where He was examined, and then He was sent to Gould's Barracks, and was not suffered to go home but once. After He was taken up, for holding a Correspondence with the Brittish, I came a Cross Deacon Caleb Davis;—we entred into Conversation about Him;—He told me, that the morning Church went into Boston, He (Davis) received a Bilet for General Gage—(he then did not know that Church was in Town)—When he got to the General's House, he was told, the General could not be spoke with, that He was in private with a Gentleman; that He waited near half an Hour,—When General Gage and Dr. Church came out of a Room, discoursing together, like persons who had been long aquainted. He appeared to be quite surprized at seeing Deacon Davis there; that he (Church) went where he pleased, while in Boston, only a Major Caine, one of Gage's Aids, went with him. I was told by another person whom I could depend upon, that he saw Church go in to General Gage's House, at the above time; that He got out of the Chaise and went up the steps more like a Man that was aquainted, than a prisoner.

Sometime after, perhaps a Year or two, I fell in company with a Gentleman who studied with Church—in discoursing about him, I related what I have mentioned above; He said, He did not doubt that He was in the Interest of the Brittish; and that it was He who informed Gen. Gage That he knew for Certain, that a Short time

before the Battle of Lexington, (for He then lived with Him, and took Care of his Business and Books) He had no money by him, and was much drove for money; that all at once, He had several Hundred New Brittish Guineas; and that He thought at the time, where they came from.

Thus, Sir, I have endeavoured to give you a Short detail of some matters, of which perhaps no person but my self have documents, or knowledge. I have mentioned some names which you are acquainted with: I wish you would Ask them, if they can remember the Circumstances I alude to.

I am, Sir, with every Sentment of esteem,

Your Humble Servant,

Paul Revere

Col. Reveres Letter.

## Document Analysis

---

In the beginning of his letter, Revere describes his role as a courier for the patriot movement, taking messages to and from patriot leaders in Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia. He also describes the formation of a group to spy on British officials, troops, and on the “Tories”—American colonists who remained loyal to the British. Revere also notes suspicions of a leak within the patriot group, because their plans were often known fairly quickly by the British. Revere refers to Dr. Benjamin Church, noting “We did not then distrust Dr. Church.” After the war, however, it became known that Church had been a British informant.

Most of the letter recounts Revere’s famous ride on the night of April 18, 1775. Apparently, Dr. Joseph Warren, a leader of the Sons of Liberty, learned that British troops were to march to Lexington, to arrest Samuel Adams and John Hancock, and to go on to Concord to seize militia supplies there. Warren asked Revere to ride to Lexington to alert Hancock and Adams. It was not known if the British would march overland the entire distance, or if they would shorten their march by crossing the Boston harbor by boat. Revere arranged for a signal to be given by hanging lanterns (“lanthorns” in his spelling) in the steeple of the North Church in Boston. This signal (one lantern if the route was entirely overland; two if they are crossing “by sea” to the north shore) was intended to alert other patriots, in case Revere was trapped in Boston. The troops did cross the harbor in boats. Revere also crossed by boat, borrowed a horse from a friend, and set out for Lexington, where he found Adams and Hancock at the home of Rev. Jonas Clarke, a relative of Hancock’s, and warned them to flee. While Revere was there, William Dawes arrived. He was also spreading the news of the British march. Revere and Dawes set off for Concord, and along the way ran into a third rider on the same mission, Dr. Samuel Prescott.

About halfway between Lexington and Concord, when Revere was a riding bit ahead of the others, he was captured. He was interrogated, and his horse was confiscated. He was either released or managed to escape, and walked back to Rev. Clarke’s home.

The latter part of the letter is about Dr. Church’s betrayal of the patriot’s cause. Revere claims to have had doubts about Church, but when he became convinced that Church had fought at Lexington, he decided that Church must have been loyal. Revere admits that he never again doubted Church, until after the war when Church’s disloyalty became common knowledge.

## Essential Themes

---

Intelligence gathering and communication between those involved in an insurrectionary movement are two major themes that stand out in Revere’s description of his famous “midnight ride” and in the events leading up to it. Revere was part of a group of about thirty, who he described as “chiefly mechanics,” meaning manual labor workers or craftsmen like himself. Their purpose was to watch the British troops and the “Tories” or Loyalist colonists who wanted to remain under British rule. The secrecy of what they were doing was paramount, and Revere notes that whenever this group of intelligence gatherers met, they swore an oath not to reveal to outsiders what was said in their meetings. The group apparently had sources among the British forces or the Loyalists, because Revere noted that in the fall of 1774, someone “who had connections with the Tory party” told him that what was being said in their meetings was being reported to the British military commander, General Thomas Gage. So, while the patriots had their sources within the British military or the Loyalists, the British also had sources within the patriot movement. Such intelligence and

counter-intelligence activities are common in all military conflicts.

Revere’s ride to alert others about the march of the British troops upon Lexington was itself an example of the importance of communication to the patriot movement. Revere had also been employed as a dispatch rider for the patriot leadership and for the Massachusetts colonial legislature since 1773. The resistance to the British was centered in a few spots, mostly major port cities such as Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, and Charleston, South Carolina. It was important to keep the leadership of the movement informed of what was going on in other areas. Some of these groups were called Committees of Observation, Committees of Correspondence, or Committees of Safety. The organization of these various committees insured that patriot leaders not only knew what the British military might be doing, but could also be informed about any actions in various lo-

cales that were perceived to be an infringement of the rights of the colonists.

—Mark S. Joy, PhD

---

### **Bibliography and Additional Reading**

---

- Fischer, David Hackett. *Paul Revere’s Ride*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Leehey, Patrick M. “The Real Story of Paul Revere’s Ride.” April 17, 2015. <https://www.paulreverehouse.org/the-real-story/>. Accessed June 4, 2020.
- “Paul Revere’s Ride.” <https://www.revolutionary-war-and-beyond.com/paul-reveres-ride.html>. Accessed June 4, 2020.
- Triber, Jayne E. *A True Republican: The Life of Paul Revere*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.