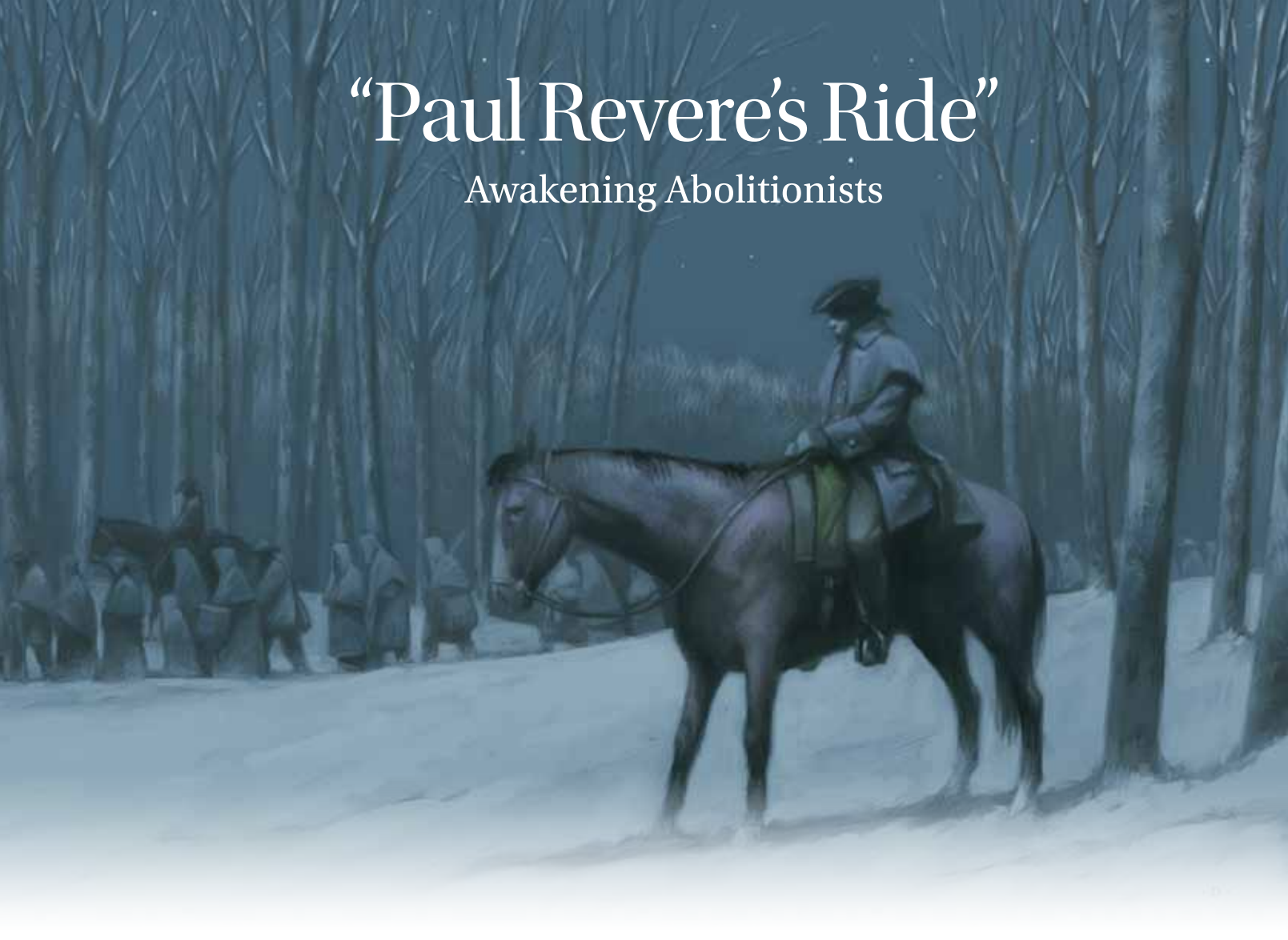


“Paul Revere’s Ride”

Awakening Abolitionists



BY JILL LEPORE

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow used to be both the best-known poet in the English-speaking world and the most beloved, adored by the learned and the lowly alike, read by everyone from Nathaniel Hawthorne and Abraham Lincoln to John Ruskin and Queen Victoria—and, just as avidly, by the queen’s servants. “Paul Revere’s Ride” is Longfellow’s best-known poem. It begins at a trot:

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

It clips (“impatient to mount and ride, / Booted and spurred,

with a heavy stride”); it clops (“impetuous, stamped the earth, / And turned and tightened his saddle-girth”); then it gallops—

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

—until, at last, it stops:

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!

Generations of American schoolchildren have memorized these lines and recited them in class, sweating it out, which is why Longfellow is known as a schoolroom poet. “Dear Mr. Longfellow: I am a little girl nine years old. I have learned some of your poems and love them very much,” wrote Berta Shaffer from Ohio in 1880. This is, no doubt, a kind of acclaim. But for a poet’s literary reputation, to be read by children—and especially to be loved by children—is the sweet, sloppy kiss of death. Beginning even before

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the rise of New Criticism, literary scholars have paid almost no attention to Longfellow, dismissing “Paul Revere’s Ride” as just another cloying Longfellow poem, ho-hum and dum-de-dum-de-dum-de-dum, a piece of 19th-century romantic nationalism, drippy, contemptible, silly. “Rarely has so respected a writer been so discredited by posterity,” as the literary historian Lawrence Buell once put it.

Harvard literature professor, a scholar of poetry, and editor and translator of a landmark anthology, *The Poets and Poetry of Europe* (1845), Longfellow could speak eight languages and read more than a dozen. His own poems are thick with allusions, especially of the classical sort. But they were also so singularly accessible and so overwhelmingly popular that he has been blamed, preposterously, for the death of poetry, as if readers reared on Longfellow were ruined forever for anything tougher. He worked hard to make poetry look easy; his success was his failure.

Worse, his work has been described as “maternal,” which of course, does no one’s work any good, the maternal being generally and viciously thought to be opposed, at least since the Enlightenment, to the intellectual. Anyone who could possibly like Longfellow, the argument goes, is a twit.

That Longfellow has been neglected, and relegated to the domestic, the maternal, and the juvenile, means that he was never subjected to the scrutiny of New Historicists. If he had been, they might have picked up on something strange about “Paul Revere’s Ride,” which is that one way of reading it is as a poem less about liberty and Paul Revere, and more about slavery and John Brown.

This story starts in 1837, the year Longfellow arrived at Harvard, where he met the future senator Charles Sumner, four years his junior, who was lecturing at the law school. Longfellow and Sumner became best friends and remained best friends for the rest of their lives. The historian Frederick Blue, who has carefully documented their friendship, calls them an odd couple, which gets it just about right: Sumner was dogmatic and abrasive, even ferocious; Longfellow was gentle and retiring and contented, a famously nice man. Sumner pursued politics; politics made Longfellow cringe. They divided their talents. They once posed together for a portrait; it is titled *The Politics and Poetry of New England*. Everyone knew which was which.

At the beginning of 1842, Longfellow entertained Charles Dickens during his American tour; he took him to Boston’s North End to see Copp’s Hill and the Old North Church. Not long after, Longfellow sailed for Europe. (“I am desolate,” Sumner wrote, at Longfellow’s departure.) In London, Longfellow again ran into Dickens and listened to him fulminate over slavery and American hypocrisy. Meanwhile Sumner, back in the States, had become an ardent abolitionist. He wrote to Longfellow, begging him to put his pen to the cause. “Write some stirring words that shall move the whole land,” Sumner urged. “Send them home, and we will publish them.” Longfellow obliged; on the return sea voyage, he wrote seven poems in his cabin during “stormy, sleepless nights.” His *Poems on Slavery* was published later that year—they’re not that stormy. Longfellow had no appetite for combat and no interest in attacking slave owners (that was for Sumner to do); instead, he wrote mournfully—modern readers would say mawkishly—about the plight of slaves. His poems on slavery were, in his view, “so

mild that even a Slaveholder might read them without losing his appetite for breakfast.” Still, he was proud of them.

Longfellow is often considered to have held himself above politics, but really, he was afraid of it. He had little taste for political speech—even Sumner’s—and less for the fray. Longfellow may not have taken up politics in his poetry, but he followed it closely, and his diary is full of references to slavery and sectionalism and, after 1850, to the Fugitive Slave Act. (“If anybody wants to break a law, let him break the Fugitive-slave Law,” he wrote. “That is all it is fit for.”) His account books, too, are filled with references to slavery: month by month, year after year, in dozens and dozens of carefully recorded entries, Longfellow noted sums of money given to black newspapers, black schools, black churches, and, espe-

“Paul Revere’s Ride” echoes lines from Longfellow’s *Poems on Slavery*—poems full of fugitive slaves riding through the night, calling out, bearing witness, singing what Longfellow calls “songs of liberty.”

cially, to fugitive slaves. In 1854, for instance, his accounts include these items:

Jan. 25—For Slaves 3.00
Feb. 16—Slaves in Canada 5.00
March 29—Negro Church Buffalo
June 23—Mr. Spence Negro School 3.00

“June 13—To free a slave 5.00,” he wrote in his account book for 1856, and “Dec.—To ransom Slave 3.00,” two years later. Longfellow used some of the money he made writing poems to buy men, women, and children their freedom.

The day John Brown was to be hanged, Longfellow wrote in his diary: “The second of December, 1859. This will be a great day in our history; the date of a new Revolution,—quite as much needed as the old one. Even now as I write, they are leading old John Brown to execution in Virginia for attempting to rescue slaves! This is sowing the wind to reap the whirlwind, which will come soon.”

This is Longfellow, an almost maddeningly restrained and genteel man, at his most ardent. Was there a way he could do his part, in his timid manner? John Brown had started “a new Revolution.” Longfellow, writing poems about history, got to thinking about the old one.

“**P**aul Revere’s Ride” was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in January 1861. The issue appeared on newsstands in Boston on December 20, the day South Carolina seceded from the Union. The poem was read at the time as a call to arms, rousing northerners to action, against what Charles Sumner called the “Slaveocracy”—

“a warning voice” waking those who would concede to barbarism from what George Sumner (Charles’s brother) called “their precious Sunday slumbers.” This meaning was once popularly understood—and taught. A public school manual from 1913 reminded teachers that in order for students to understand “Paul Revere’s Ride,” they had to know “enough about the Civil War to grasp the purpose Mr. Longfellow had in writing the poem.” That meaning has been forgotten. And the poem can also be read as concerning not just the coming war, but slavery itself: “Paul Revere’s Ride” is, in one sense, a fugitive slave narrative.

During the weeks Longfellow was writing “Paul Revere’s Ride,”



the plight of slaves was very much on his mind. He was attending lectures by Frederick Douglass. He was listening to George Sumner condemn the Supreme Court’s decision in *Dred Scott*. He was fervently reading speeches given by Charles Sumner. He was casting his vote for Lincoln. He was sympathizing with John Brown. Fearful of politics, Longfellow was, nevertheless, wishing he could do his part, quietly, gently, poetically. “I long to say some vibrant word, that should have vitality in it, and force,” he had written to Charles Sumner. And there is more: much in “Paul Revere’s Ride” echoes lines from Longfellow’s *Poems on Slavery*—especially “The Slave’s Dream,” “The Slave Singing at Midnight,” “The Witnesses,” and “The Warning”—poems full of fugitive slaves riding through the night, haunted by the dead, hurrying through the darkness, calling out, bearing witness, singing what Longfellow calls (in “The Slave in the Dismal Swamp”) “songs of liberty.”

Longfellow’s historical sources for his account of Revere’s ride appear to have been limited and, of course, the poem wasn’t meant to be accurate. Longfellow loved lore. He began “Hiawatha”: “Should you ask me, whence these stories? / Whence these legends and traditions, / . . . I should answer, I should tell you, / ‘From the forests and the prairies.’” He had, though, seen at least one old document: a letter written by Paul Revere in 1798 to Jeremy Belknap, founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society, describing the night of April 18, 1775. Longfellow almost certainly read this letter because it was published in October 1832 in *New England Magazine*, in the same issue in which a very early poem of Longfellow’s appeared.

Revere described starting out in Boston: “I . . . went to the north part of the town, where I had kept a Boat; two friends rowed me across the Charles River, a little to the eastward where the *Somer-*

set Man-of-War lay. It was then young flood, the ship was winding, and the moon was rising. They landed me in the Charlestown side.” Longfellow, starting out his poem, stays close to Revere’s account:

. . . 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;

But then he leaves Revere’s description behind. His ship takes on a different cast:

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.

Why? To Longfellow’s abolitionist readers, the name *Somerset* would have readily called to mind the landmark 1772 *Somerset* case, which outlawed slavery in Britain. And here the “phantom ship” conjures something more. It is as dark and haunting as a slave ship—a dominant conceit in abolitionist writing—“each mast and spar . . . like a prison bar.” Longfellow had written about just such shackled ships in “The Witnesses,” where across the “Ocean’s wide domains . . . Float ships, with all their crews, / No more to sink nor rise”:

There the black Slave-ship swims,
Freighted with human forms,
Whose fettered, fleshless limbs
Are not the sport of storms.

Revere, in his letter to Belknap, next described leaving Charlestown. “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.” Mark, “hung in chains,” refers to the rotting remains of a slave from Charlestown who was executed in 1750, after he and a slave woman named Phyllis were convicted of poisoning their master, a Charlestown merchant, with arsenic. Phyllis was burned at the stake in Cambridge, not far from Longfellow’s house, in a place called Gallows Hill; Mark was executed in Charlestown, and his body was left, hanged in chains, as a warning to Boston’s slaves of the danger of rebellion. By the time Revere made his ride in 1775, Mark’s bones had been hanging at Charlestown Neck for a quarter century, bearing witness.

Maybe it was Revere’s remark about that landmark, Mark’s bones, that sparked in Longfellow this thought, but here the poem takes a turn. In Boston, the man who mounts the belfry of the Old North Church to light the lanterns looks out at Copp’s Hill, the burying ground where Longfellow had taken Dickens and where Puritan minister Cotton Mather lay entombed, but which was also, by the 1850s, far better known as the place where Boston’s blacks were buried:

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!"

In "The Witnesses," Longfellow's dead whisper something else,
from the depths:

These are the bones of Slaves;
They gleam from the abyss;
They cry, from yawning waves,
"We are the Witnesses!"

By now, Longfellow has departed quite radically from Revere's account (which, in any event, was written long after the fact). "In Medford, I awaked the Captain of the Minute men," Revere wrote Belknap, "and after that, I alarmed almost every House, till I got to Lexington." Revere stopped in Lexington for half an hour and had a bite to eat while he talked with John Hancock, Samuel Adams, and William Dawes. On the way to Concord, he stopped again, this time to talk with Dr. Samuel Prescott, and was then captured by the British. But in Longfellow's poem, Revere races onward,

... 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.

That flight, too, has a counterpart not only in abolitionist literature—where, in the wake of the Fugitive Slave Act, the fate of the nation was often said to ride on a slave's flight—but also in Longfellow's *Poems on Slavery*. In "The Slave's Dream," another horseman rides wildly through the night:

... at furious speed he rode
Along the Niger's bank;
His bridle-reins were golden chains,
And, with a martial clank,
At each leap he could feel his scabbard of steel
Smiting his stallion's flank.

This man, though, is a slave, dreaming of riding all the way home to Africa. And while Revere, Longfellow's Son of Liberty, rides through New England farms and towns, to the sounds of the barnyard—

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.

—his son of slavery rides to the howls of African beasts:

At night he heard the lion roar,
And the hyena scream,
And the river-horse, as he crushed the reeds
Beside some hidden stream;
And it passed, like a glorious roll of drums,
Through the triumph of his dream.

But that triumph is no triumph at all. The slave never wakes from his dream. "The Slave's Dream" ends with death: "For Death had illumined the Land of Sleep, / And his lifeless body lay / A worn-out fetter, that the soul / Had broken and thrown away!" But "Paul Revere's Ride" ends with the rider, having wakened from his slumber every New England village and farm, riding on, into history ("You know the rest. In the books you have read"):

For, borne on the night-wind of the Past,
Through all our history, to the last,
In the hour of peril men will hear



The midnight message of Paul Revere,
And the hurrying hoof-beat of his steed.

That, anyway, is what Longfellow wrote. But, in a letter written on November 23, 1860, Longfellow's brilliant editor, J. T. Fields, offered a decided improvement.

Dear Longfellow.

Dont you think it better to end Paul Revere's Ride on this line,

In the hour of darkness and peril and need,
The People will waken and listen to hear
The hurrying hoof-beat of his steed,
And the midnight message of Paul Revere.

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“Paul Revere’s Ride”

(Continued from page 31)

It seems to me the last line as it stands above is stronger than the end as it now remains in the proof.

What do you say?

Longfellow said yes.

“Paul Revere’s Ride” is a poem about waking the dead. The dead are Northerners, roused to war. But the dead are also the enslaved, entombed in slavery—another common conceit: Frederick Douglass once wrote about his escape as “a resurrection from the dark and pestiferous tomb of slavery.”

Soon after “Paul Revere’s Ride” was published, Longfellow wrote in his diary, “The dissolution of the Union goes slowly on. Behind it all I hear the low murmur of the slaves, like the chorus in a Greek tragedy.” Listen, and you shall hear. □

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