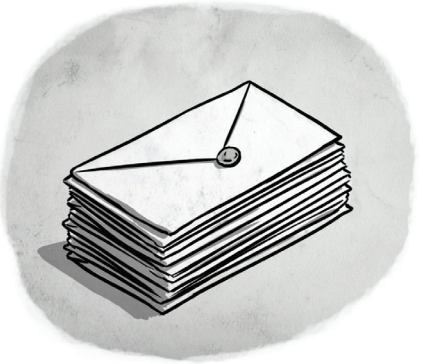
Adventures on the American Frontier

Mail Riders

Revised Edition



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Paul Revere, Cross-Country Carrier

It was rainy and cold that Thursday in December of 1773. The three ships in the harbor at Boston rocked gently, their sails folded in patient waiting. The *Dartmouth*, the *Beaver*, and the *Eleanor* had been there so long that they seemed to be part of the gray, misty harbor itself, like the pilings and piers that edged it.

Guards walked back and forth along the waterfront, collars pulled close against the rain and the chill, waiting for the long day to end. As the gray turned to black, gusts of wind swept the mists away. Looking up, the guards saw the

half-moon riding above the chimney pots of the city, with ragged clouds chasing one another across its face.

"Something's got to happen soon," one of the guards said as he met another at the end of his march. "You can feel it in the air. Word should have reached that meeting by now to say whether or not those ships can take that load of tea back to England."

Just then, from back in the city, the guards heard a wild cry.

"News must have come!" said the other guard, and the two turned away from each other. As he marched on, each man listened and watched, but the shouting quickly died into a thud of running feet. In a few minutes, the city was quiet. Little by little, the stiff shoulders of the guards relaxed. Nothing was happening after all. Once again they huddled into their coat collars, trying to keep warm. The lapping of the waves against the docks and the whistle of the wind was all they heard.

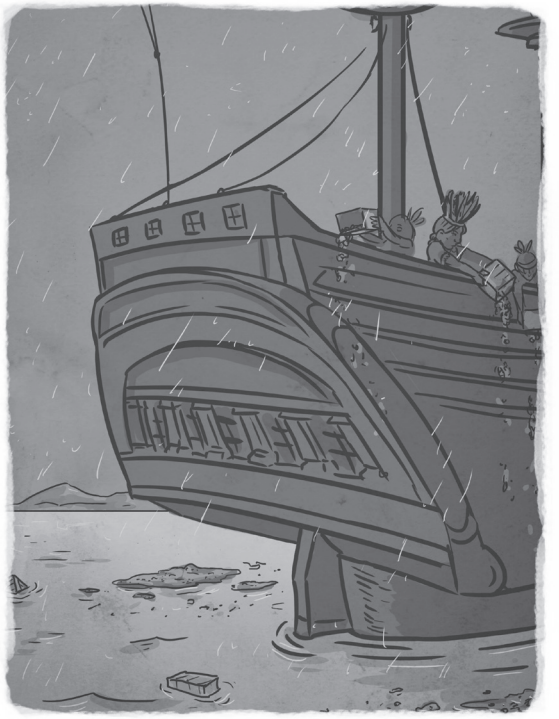
They did not see the men with painted and soot-smeared faces, ragged clothing, and feathers stuck in their hair, who slipped up behind them in the dark and tied their hands and feet. They saw the men running to the docks then, swinging hatchets and axes. Soon every rowboat to be found was full of men moving out toward the *Eleanor*, the *Dartmouth*, and the *Beaver*.

The sound of splintering wood came to them, for on the ships, the men, who were dressed to look like Native Americans, were hauling wooden box after wooden box up from the hold. They split open the boxes and dumped the

dry tea leaves inside them over the side into the sea. The Boston Tea Party was in full swing.

The men of Boston had been angry ever since the three ships had arrived, for they had been ordered to pay a new tax on English tea but were not allowed to buy tea that came from anywhere except England. The people in the American colonies did not have a chance to vote on the new laws. They felt that it was unfair to make them pay taxes and to obey laws that they had no part in making. The men on the ships were the Sons of Liberty, and they had been working together to try to make things better.

That day word had come that the English government would not let the ships go back to England with the loads of tea. The Sons of Liberty were seeing to it that no one in Boston would buy the tea and pay the tax.



Hour after hour the men worked. The tide came in and rimmed the beach for miles with a dark line of water-soaked tea leaves. In the darkness of early morning, silent groups of tired men rowed back to shore and headed for home. When the deep tones of the church bells on Brattle Square Church told the people of the city that it was five o'clock and the new day of December 17, 1773, had begun, the Boston Tea Party was over.

Watching Paul Revere walk home, no one would have guessed that he had met with the Sons of Liberty all day and then worked all night. This stocky, dark-haired man who wouldn't wear a wig, even though all of his friends did, was said to be able to do the work of three men. He was the best silversmith in the city. When business was poor, he made false teeth for people out of hippopotamus tusk, carved and wired into place. And after his own working hours, he was always ready to work for the Sons of Liberty.

Paul had a long walk to North Square, where his home was. The house was of brown wood, with small, diamond-paned windows and a second story that hung a foot or two out over the low-ceilinged first floor. Paul was proud of his home. He had been able to buy it only a short time before.

His wife, Rachel, was waiting for him in the big room with the fireplace. "Paul! Look at you!" she cried. "It's a good thing the babies are asleep. They would be frightened to see their own father like this!"

Paul laughed. "Never mind how I look, Rachel. We did a good night's work. I don't think the king will be sending any more tea to Boston—not until the laws are changed!"

"You must be tired," said Rachel as Paul began washing off the soot and red paint. "You'll need to sleep for a while."

"But not for long," said Paul. "We've made news this night, my dear, and I'll soon be riding to carry it to New York and Philadelphia. When they learn what we've done here in Boston with the royal tea, the Sons of Liberty in those cities will have the courage to stand up for their rights, too."

Rachel sighed. She wished that the regular mail carriers could take the news to New York and Philadelphia, but she understood why her husband had to be the one to do it. Paul was a man who could be trusted to carry the letters and to see that they were put into the hands of the right men in the other cities.

Unlike Paul, the regular post riders were slow. They couldn't earn enough money from just post office work because too many people had travelers carry their letters for them instead of paying the post office charges. So the post riders took time to do other things to earn money as they went along. Sometimes they would poke along the road, leading some plodding oxen they had been hired to deliver to the next town. Or perhaps they would take time to go to a house off the main road to pick up a package to take to someone in the next town. Often they would wait hours for a traveler to get ready for a trip, for the traveler would pay the post rider to be his guide through the woods and fields where the road was just a path and where robbers sometimes waited for lone travelers.

Most of the post riders couldn't be trusted to keep news a secret, either. People crowded around them to hear news from other towns. The riders usually sold newspapers that

the postmaster in their hometowns printed to help earn money. Sometimes they even read the letters they carried and told everyone what they said.

No, the regular post would not do at all for the Sons of Liberty. For what they had done, the king could have them all shot. If the Sons of Liberty in New York and Philadelphia let the king's ships unload tea in their cities, punishment would be sure to come to the Boston men, and all their fighting for fair government would be wasted. The news must get through, and quickly!

"We'll have letters ready in a few hours, Paul," the leaders told him when the Tea Party was over. "You're the only man we can count on who's a good horseman, too. Will you ride for us?"

Paul remembered that Christmas was only a week away, and his children would be disappointed if he wasn't home. The post rider took from six to nine days just to ride from Boston to New York City. The trip to Philadelphia and back would be about seven hundred miles altogether—a long ride at any time of year, and not likely to be pleasant in winter.

"Of course I'll go," he said. "If we Sons of Liberty don't stand together on this, we'll get nowhere—except into jail or worse. Get the letters ready, and I'll start when you bring them to me."

A few hours later, Paul was on his way to the stable where he kept his horse. His little brown mare greeted him with a toss of her head and a nuzzling of her nose against the pocket where he carried an apple for her. Paul laughed and pulled the apple out. While she munched it, he saddled her.

"We've got a long, hard ride ahead of us this time, girl," he said when his saddlebags were in place and the girth was tightened to suit him. "We're carrying news that means a great deal to our country, so let's be on our way."

He checked to make sure he had the oilskin-wrapped letters, buckled his silver spurs onto his boots, and climbed into the saddle. His horse knew the way through the narrow streets. Paul's thoughts were on the journey ahead. He didn't notice the smell of fish and tar and the sea that always hung over the city, nor did he hear the bells of the merchants who pushed little handcarts as they sold their goods from door to door. The business of the day was going on as usual, in spite of the brown tea leaves along the waterfront to remind everyone of the important matters that hung in the balance.

Boston in those days was almost an island, connected to the rest of Massachusetts by a narrow strip of land. Paul headed out the dirt track that was the road everyone leaving Boston had to use. Where the road was good, he touched his spurs lightly to his mare's sides, and she swung into a gallop. Where it was bad and full of mud holes, he let her take her time.

When night came, the chill of the damp air cut into Paul's bones. He saw the swinging iron sign of an inn ahead. That meant a warm fire in the big room inside and, if he was lucky, good food and good company to share it. He turned into the inn yard. While he cared for his mare, he thought he could smell a good roast of beef. There would be plenty of country bread and butter and perhaps some roasted apples, hot and bubbling from the big fireplace.

He took his saddlebags and went inside. Luckily, there was room for him—a bed all to himself, in fact. After supper, the landlady would warm the coarse sheets with the long-handled warming pan that was hanging by the fireplace, ready to be filled with glowing red coals. In the morning, before dawn, Paul would have to leave the cheer of the inn, but he and his horse would both feel better because of the rest and the food.

The next day, on he went, through woods and fields, crossing small streams by riding through them, for there were few bridges. At larger rivers, he often had to awaken the ferryboatman and get him to pole his boat across the river. At the end of the fourth day, Paul reached New York. He rode through the woods of Manhattan Island to the little town at its lower end and thought it not nearly so fine a city as Boston.

The Sons of Liberty there were excited when they read the letter he brought them. They kept Paul up all night telling

them the story of how he and the other men had dumped the tea. They also wanted to hear about the other things the Boston men were doing to fight for the rights that the King of England was denying the American people.

"You did right to dump the tea in the ocean. We shouldn't give in on even small things, or we'll never win the right to have a vote in our laws. And we must all stand together," the men told Paul, both in New York and, two days later, in Philadelphia.

So the special-delivery mail rider, having delivered his important letters, took messages back to Boston with a heart full of courage. The Boston Sons of Liberty went ahead with step after step that led to the birth of a new nation, the United States of America.

It was a year and a half after the Tea Party that Paul Revere made his most famous ride to awaken the people to the beginning of the Revolutionary War. That ride, in April of 1775, was made only after Paul had already done more than his share as mail rider for the Sons of Liberty.

Michigan Mail Boy

While the colonies fought to become a free nation, no one had time to think about better mail service. It went on more or less as usual. There was even one post rider in Revolutionary War days who knitted his own socks as he ambled along on his sleepy old horse.

When the war ended, the people who called themselves Americans had a new nation on their hands. It was bigger than most of the countries of Europe, reaching from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mississippi River. It took about ten years to get the government going well enough to do anything about a postal service.

The first mail carriers rode in shiny, new, dark green coaches pulled by fast-stepping four-horse teams. The coach doors had "United States Mail Stage" painted in yellow