

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).
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THE GILDER LEHRMAN
INSTITUTE of AMERICAN HISTORY

TL TEACHING LITERACY
TH THROUGH HISTORY



The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere: Literature v. History

BY TIM BAILEY (created in 2013, revised in 2024)

Tim Bailey taught elementary and middle school in Utah for twenty years. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he currently serves as the Gilder Lehrman Institute's director of curriculum development and instructional design.

GRADE LEVELS: 3–5

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: Three 45-minute class periods

UNIT OVERVIEW

This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute's Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) 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 expressions of one of the most iconic events in American history: the midnight ride of Paul Revere on April 18–19, 1775. 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.

Students will be able to

- Describe and analyze the historical meaning and importance of a secondary source (e.g., a poem) and a primary source document (e.g., a letter)
- 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 a poem as a source of historical information

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What do you need to know before judging whether a source of information is accurate?
- Is Longfellow’s poem a reliable source of information about Paul Revere’s ride?
- What happened during Paul Revere’s ride on the night of April 18, 1775?

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.

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" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (excerpts)
- Summary Organizer 2: Paul Revere's Letter to Jeremy Belknap, ca. 1798, 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.
- Compare and Contrast Activity Sheet

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Paul Revere's Ride(s)

by Jonathan M. Beagle, Western New England University

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

So begins Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's famous 1860 poem about the Revolutionary Boston patriot Paul Revere, a poem that generations of schoolchildren have learned to recite and that has secured Revere's place in American history. Its stanzas tell a near mythical tale of Revere's horseback ride through the Massachusetts countryside on the night of April 18, 1775, as he warned inhabitants about British soldiers marching toward Concord to destroy rebel military supplies stored there. Because of Revere's efforts, and those of others who also spread the word, King George's troops (called "Regulars" at the time) would face an armed resistance that sparked the Revolutionary War and pushed the American colonies toward independence. Yet had Longfellow never published his stirring poem almost a century afterward, it is possible that the story of Paul Revere's "midnight ride" would have been a mere footnote in American history instead of the legendary tale it became.

On the eve of the American Revolution, Paul Revere lived with his family in a house that still stands in Boston's crowded North End, where he made a living largely as a silversmith. There he became increasingly involved in the local patriot movement's protests against British imperial policies toward the colonies, from the 1765 Stamp Act to the British army's occupation of Boston in response to town rioting in 1768. His skills as an artisan served the patriot cause well in 1770 when he crafted an engraving of the Boston Massacre that portrayed it as British military aggression against innocent Bostonians. By 1774, he also acted as a trusted messenger, carrying sensitive documents and information for Boston patriots as far south as Philadelphia and north to New Hampshire, where his warning about British military plans for Fort William and Mary prompted a rebel raid that nearly started the war in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, instead of Lexington and Concord. The ride that Longfellow chose to memorialize in rhyme was thus far from Revere's first, nor would it be his last. No mention of it was made in Revere's obituary when he died in 1818, and the story might have died with him but for local word-of-mouth, testimony collected from him shortly after the ride in 1775, and a much later account that he wrote for the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Despite surviving accounts of Revere's ride, Longfellow sacrificed historical accuracy to better capture the drama of the past in his poem. It singles out Revere's exploits while ignoring the many other rebel riders warning the countryside that night; it incorrectly implies that Revere learned of the British army's route to Concord ("One if by land, and two if by sea") only after a pair of lantern signals were hung in the tower of the Old North Church; it depicts Revere reaching Concord when, in fact, he was stopped short by a British patrol that confiscated his horse; and the poem speaks of a nation not yet born in 1775. Compounding Longfellow's errors is the national mythos of Revere crying "The British are coming! The British are coming!" as he rode through the night. But since he and those hearing him were still British subjects themselves in 1775, such a notion is nonsensical except as a patriotic way for later Americans to imagine their nation's birth in Revere's ride.

Longfellow's poem captured the American imagination, in part, because of the circumstances surrounding its 1860 publication. The poet had long been troubled by the inhumanity of slavery and used his talents to support its abolition, contributing a collection of anti-slavery poems for the cause in 1842. Historians have suggested the influence of these earlier works on "Paul Revere's Ride" and now often interpret it as an abolitionist piece. Moreover, within months of the poem's appearance in the anti-slavery magazine *The Atlantic Monthly*, the Civil War erupted when Southern rebels fired on federal troops in Fort Sumter, named after a South Carolina Revolutionary War general. As memories of that earlier conflict came rushing back with the subsequent rush to arms, it gave Longfellow's poem national significance in rallying Northerners to defend the Constitution and ultimately extend its promise of liberty to the enslaved. Every generation since has made the story of Paul Revere's ride its own, ensuring that, as Longfellow envisioned:

*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.*

Jonathan M. Beagle is a professor of history and associate dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at Western New England University.

PAUL REVERE'S RIDE IN LONGFELLOW'S WORDS, 1860

BY TIM BAILEY (created in 2013, revised in 2024)

OVERVIEW

The students will listen to a reading of 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.

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” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (excerpts)

PROCEDURE

1. You may choose to have the students work independently, as partners, or in small groups of three or four.
2. Discuss the concept of a “secondary source” with the students. Sources that were not written at the time of the events they describe are called “secondary sources”; sources created at the time of the events being described are “primary sources.” This poem is a work of art, but it was also written many years after the event that it summarizes and richly describes. “Paul Revere’s Ride” is, for many Americans, how they learn about Paul Revere and what he did.
3. Read the entire text of “Paul Revere’s Ride” aloud to the students. (There are also dramatic readings available online.)
4. Discuss some of the Historical Background related to Longfellow’s authorship of the poem, but do not give too much away, because we want the students to get their ideas directly from the text of the poem.

Tim Bailey taught elementary and middle school in Utah for twenty years. Named the 2009 National History Teacher of the Year, he currently serves as the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s director of curriculum development and instructional design.

GRADE LEVELS: 3–5

RECOMMENDED TIME FOR COMPLETION: One 45-minute class period

UNIT OVERVIEW: This unit is one of the Gilder Lehrman Institute’s Teaching Literacy through History™ (TLTH) resources, designed to align with the Common Core State Standards. Students will learn and practice skills that will help them analyze, assess, and develop knowledgeable and well-reasoned points of view on visual materials. Over the course of three lessons the students will compare and contrast two different expressions of one of the most iconic events in American history: the midnight ride of Paul Revere on April 18–19, 1775. 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.

5. Hand out Summary Organizer 1 with excerpts from “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).
6. 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.” 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.
7. They will copy the selected words and phrases in the right column. After they have determined what is most important, they will summarize the text in their own words.
8. 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 verses in their own words.
9. Class discussion: Have groups or individual students share their summaries and compare them with other groups’ summaries. You should also ask students what questions they have about Revere’s ride that might not be answered in the poem, and if there are any places where the poem’s story seems unlikely. How could they discover the answers to their questions?

PAUL REVERE'S RIDE IN REVERE'S WORDS, CA. 1798

BY TIM BAILEY (created in 2013, revised in 2024)

OVERVIEW

The students will read Paul Revere's own 1798 report of 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.

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.

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PROCEDURE

1. Hand out Summary Organizer 2 with excerpts from 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.
2. Share read the excerpts from the letter with the students as described in Lesson 1.
3. Students will look at the selected passages from the letter and determine which words or phrases are the most important. They will copy those words and phrases in the right column. After they have determined what is most important, they will summarize the text in their own words.
4. Students can brainstorm as partners or in small groups but must fill in their own organizer to complete the assignment.
5. Class discussion: Have groups or individual students share their summaries and compare them with other summaries.

LONGFELLOW AND REVERE, 1860 AND 1798

BY TIM BAILEY (created in 2013, revised in 2024)

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 reports on the events that occurred that April night in 1775. The students will identify the similarities and differences between the poem and the primary source. They will then write a short essay arguing the reliability of the poem as a source of historical information.

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

1. The students should have the two completed assignments from Lessons 1 and 2. They will refer to them to complete the Compare and Contrast activity sheet.
2. 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.
3. 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.

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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), pp. 18–25.

**Summary Organizer 1: “Paul Revere’s Ride”
by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1860 (excerpts)**

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.”

Keywords/phrases:

In your own words:

. . . 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!

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How the British Regulars fired and fled,—
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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.

Keywords/phrases:

In your own words:

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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.

Keywords/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.

Keywords/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. The 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. . . .

Keywords/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. . . .

Keywords/phrases:

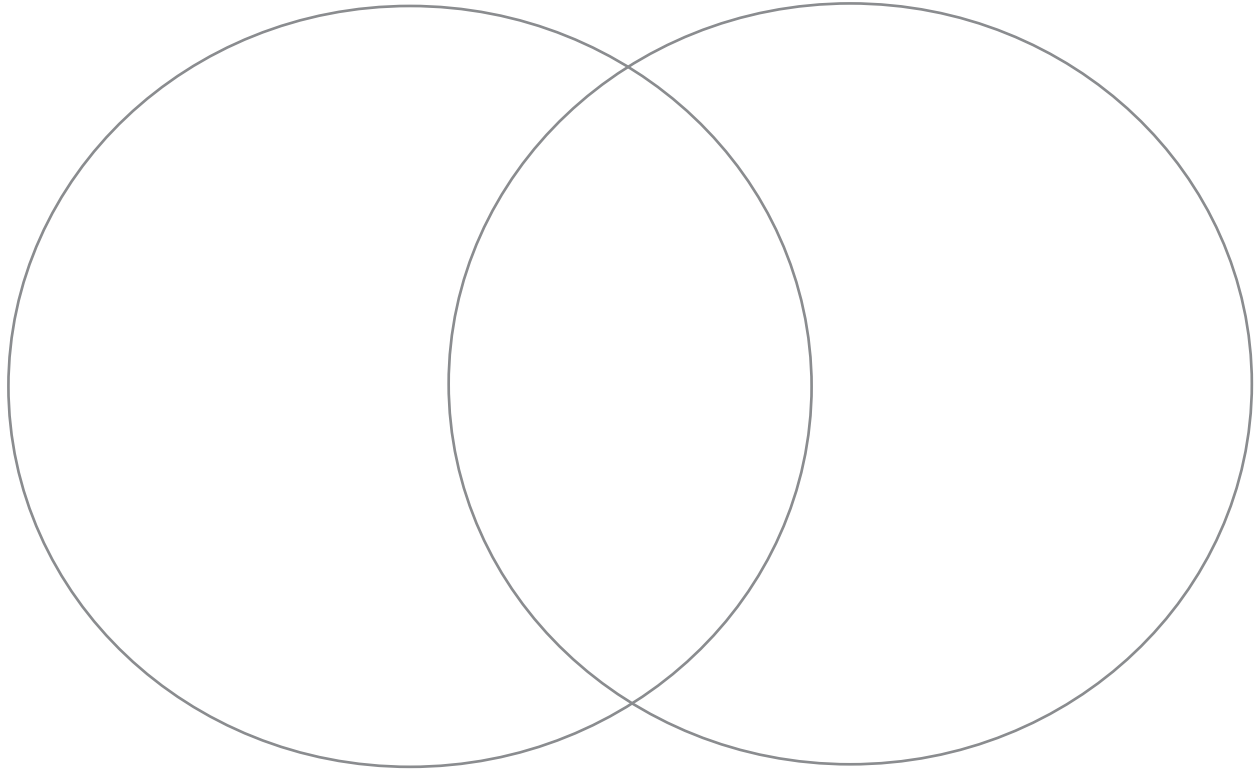
In your own words:

. . . 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. . . .

Keywords/phrases:

In your own words:

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



"Paul Revere's Ride"

Paul Revere's Letter

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