

The Midnight Ride of Sybil Ludington: A Forgotten Hero in the Shadow of Paul Revere

Jessica Rebollo

Dr. Kate Murphy

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## Introduction

There are few people in the United States who have never heard *Paul Revere's Ride*, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's most famous work. The poem immortalized Paul Revere as a national American hero, telling of his famous horseback ride from Boston through Lexington and Concord on April 15, 1775 to warn the patriots of the advancing British troops. However, American history often neglects the fact that Revere had other accomplices on the night of the journey, including Samuel Prescott and William Dawes. Moreover, contrary to Longfellow's poem, Paul Revere's journey was a debacle. Samuel Prescott was the only one of the three to reach Concord; Dawes was thrown off his horse and forced to walk back to Lexington, and Revere was captured only twelve miles into his ride.<sup>1</sup> American historical memory has made Paul Revere an American folk hero; he is celebrated as a founding father, even though his midnight ride was less than stellar. There were in fact many patriots who made midnight rides during the American Revolution, and many of them had rides that were arguably more successful than Paul Revere's. One such patriot is Sybil Ludington, often known as the "Female Paul Revere."

Roughly two years after Paul Revere's famous ride, sixteen-year-old Sybil Ludington set out from her home in Putnam County, New York on the night of April 26, 1777. Her destination was Danbury, Connecticut. She had the mission of delivering a message to her father, Colonel Henry Ludington, head of the Dutchess County Militia, who was off with four hundred other militiamen.<sup>2</sup> A messenger had arrived at Colonel Ludington's home at around nine o'clock at

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<sup>1</sup> Derek W. Beck, "Dissecting the Timeline of Paul Revere's Ride," *Journal of the American Revolution*, April 9, 2014, [https://allthingsliberty.com/2014/04/dissecting-the-timeline-of-paul-reveres-ride/#\\_edn9](https://allthingsliberty.com/2014/04/dissecting-the-timeline-of-paul-reveres-ride/#_edn9)).

<sup>2</sup> "Sybil Luddington," Sybil Ludington (Historic Patterson, New York, 2017), <https://www.historicpatterson.org/Exhibits/ExhSybilLudington.php>

night, with an important note containing information on the impending British attack on the town of Danbury, where the Continental Army had a supply depot.<sup>3</sup> With no one at Colonel Ludington's house to deliver the message, "Sibyl Ludington, a spirited young girl of sixteen, mounted her horse in the dead of night and performed this service, and by the next morning the whole regiment was on its rapid march to Danbury,"<sup>4</sup> accounts historian Margaret Lamb. On that rainy night, Sybil traveled from Kent, New York, to Danbury Connecticut, for a distance of forty miles. In this era, thirty miles was considered a long day's journey; forty miles in one night is remarkable.<sup>5</sup> Successfully avoiding British troops and loyalists, she arrived in Danbury in the early morning on her horse. Although the patriots were not able to hold off the British army at Danbury, Sybil's actions were nonetheless heroic; the battle would have surely been much more deadly if it were not for her brave actions.

The first mention of Sybil Ludington's ride is in Martha J. Lamb's *History of the City of New York: Its Origin, Rise, and Progress*. Lamb published her book in 1880, nearly one hundred years after Sybil's historic ride. Her work is the main foundation for the history of Sybil Ludington's ride. Lamb recorded this history through consulting a wide variety of primary sources, including libraries, historians, old documents, records, pamphlets, and private individuals. Lamb was also in contact with the Ludington family, where it appears that most knowledge of Sybil's ride originated from.<sup>6</sup> The second mention of Sybil Ludington is by the historian Willis Fletcher Johnson, who wrote *Colonel Henry Ludington: A Memoir* in 1907.

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<sup>3</sup> Lisa Tendrich Frank, "An Encyclopedia of American Women at War: From the Home Front to the Battlefields," in *An Encyclopedia of American Women at War: From the Home Front to the Battlefields* (ABC-CLIO, 2013), pp. 365-366), 365 made her .

<sup>4</sup> Martha J. Lamb, *History of the City of New York: Volume 2* (New York, NY: A.S. Barnes and Company, 1880), 207.

<sup>5</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 139.

<sup>6</sup> Paula D. Hunt, "Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine," *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2015): pp. 187-222, [https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg\\_a\\_00452](https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg_a_00452), 190.

Johnson was no ordinary author; his prior projects included an exquisite five-volume series on the history of Cuba as well as the edited works of Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>7</sup> His works were therefore highly accredited. On the subject of Sybil's ride in the Ludington memoir, he states, "There is no extravagance in comparing her ride with that of Paul Revere."<sup>8</sup> Through his portrayal of Sybil, Johnson unintentionally succeeded in turning Sybil Ludington into a local Revolutionary War hero. What is most interesting about Lamb and Johnson's accounts is that they portray Sybil as an ordinary hero; not defined by her age or sex, which is where many subsequent historians in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries divert their focus.

For much of the rest of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries however, Sybil was left out of all major historical works on the Revolution, even those written by women. Leading into the twentieth century, the local Enoch Crosby chapter of Daughters of the American Revolution became Sybil's most passionate supporter.<sup>9</sup> The Daughters set up nine road markers in Putnam County commemorating Sybil's ride. The markers commemorating her ride soon turned into evidence for it, and a few local Putnam County historians were once again including Sybil in the historical narrative of the Revolutionary War.<sup>10</sup> By 1940, Sybil's popularity continued to grow, and a poem was written in commemoration of her. In a national publication of *This Week* magazine, this poem by Berton Bradley introduced Sybil Ludington to millions of Americans:

Listen my children, and you shall hear

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<sup>7</sup> Willis Fletcher Johnson, *Addresses and Papers of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Unit Book Publishing Co., 1909) and *The History of Cuba*, 5 vols. (New York: B. F. Buck & Company, Inc., 1920).

<sup>8</sup> Willis Fletcher Johnson, *Colonel Henry Ludington: a Memoir* (New York, NY: Printed by his grandchildren L.E. Ludington and C.H. Ludington, 1907), 90.

<sup>9</sup> Paula D. Hunt, "Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine," *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2015): pp. 187-222, [https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg\\_a\\_00452](https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg_a_00452), 196.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

Of a lovely feminine Paul Revere

Who rode an equally famous ride

Through a different part of the countryside

Where Sybil Ludington's name recalls

A ride as daring as that of Paul's<sup>11</sup>

It is evident that this poem is a direct imitation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's infamous poem *Paul Revere's Ride*. This is the first time that Sybil was recognized in conjunction with Paul Revere. As this poem was published at the onslaught of World War II, Americans were reconnecting with their patriotic roots. It was also a time when women's contributions to the national effort were more acknowledged; they kept the Homefront together while men were off at war. Images of Rosie the Riveter and stories of brave women like Sybil Ludington encouraged the women of the Second World War to fulfill their patriotic duty.<sup>12</sup> Due to these circumstances, the story of Sybil Ludington became a celebrated event, especially among the many women who were actively involved in the war effort.

From World War II and onward, Sybil became an important part of the female historical narrative. She was placed in media released by the National Organization for Women (NOW) and *Ms.* magazine. Sybil became a feminist hero. The next major work to detail the history of Sybil Ludington was by historian Carol Berkin in *Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence*, written in 2007. Berkin attempts to cure "the gender amnesia that surrounds the

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<sup>11</sup> Berton Braley, "Sybil Ludington's Ride," *This Week* magazine, Washington, D.C., 4 April 1940.

<sup>12</sup> Paula D. Hunt, "Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine," *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2015): pp. 187-222, [https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg\\_a\\_00452](https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg_a_00452), 200.

American Revolution” and the subsequent lack of historical accounts on women.<sup>13</sup> It is not until the rise of gender history in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that Sybil Ludington’s role in American history was truly respected. Even though a majority of Americans still do not know her name, she is an important figure in Revolutionary War history, and every American who knows Paul Revere should also be aware of Sybil Ludington’s story.

Many of the books that do mention Sybil Ludington were mostly written in and after the era of second-wave feminism, so she is most often portrayed as a feminist hero. There is a common historical interpretation of Sybil Ludington as an ordinary American girl whom despite being of the oppressed female class, took charge of her fate.<sup>14</sup> In 1975, Connecticut Republican Congressman Stewart B. McKinney noted that “during the past 198 years... we have continually attempted to throw off the yoke of discrimination against sex and age. Perhaps we can learn a valuable lesson from Sybil.”<sup>15</sup> Attempting to “throw off the yoke of discrimination” is what most twentieth and twenty-first century historians were trying to accomplish when speaking of Sybil. Historian Martha Nussbaum argues that “she was not a submissive traditionalist; she did what girls usually don’t do.”<sup>16</sup> Sybil Ludington’s heroic actions made her an ideal example for feminists everywhere. A 1974 edition of *Senior Scholastic* introduced young women to the concept of “herstory,” or history written from a feminist perspective, by examining the story of Sybil’s midnight ride.<sup>17</sup> While the first two mentions of Sybil in historical literature by Johnson

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<sup>13</sup> Catherine Kaplan, “Old Tales in a New Narrative: Rethinking the Story of Women and the American Revolution,” *Reviews in American History* 33, no. 3 (2005): pp. 309-313, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rah.2005.0052>, 310.

<sup>14</sup> Paula D. Hunt, “Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine,” *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2015): pp. 187-222, [https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg\\_a\\_00452](https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg_a_00452), 207.

<sup>15</sup> Stewart B. McKinney, “‘Pauline Revere’: A Lesson for Today,” *Congressional Record*, 94th Cong., 1st sess. (30 July 1975), H26157–58.

<sup>16</sup> Martha Nussbaum, “Teaching Patriotism: Love and Critical Reform” (University of Chicago Public Law & Legal Theory No. 357, 2011), 34.

<sup>17</sup> *Senior Scholastic* “Sybil Ludington,” vol. 105 (New York, NY: Scholastic Corporation, 1974)

and Lamb in the nineteenth century portrayed Sybil as an ordinary girl who did a heroic deed by simply trying to help her father, much of history from the mid-twentieth century onward has molded the image of Sybil Ludington into a feminist hero.

Notwithstanding everything that Sybil Ludington accomplished, there are a few historians who want to discredit all that Sybil did on the night of April 26, 1777; playing down her role or saying that her ride did not happen at all. They argue the fact that the first account of Sybil's ride by Martha J. Lamb provided no concrete evidence in her mention of Sybil in her book, besides the oral histories of the Ludington family. On the subject of Sybil Ludington being featured in a 1985 United States history high school textbook, scholar Robert Lerner complained, "She is portrayed in the textbook as being as important as Paul Revere. No objective historian believes that."<sup>18</sup> It is clear that Sybil Ludington faces an uphill battle in gaining her place in the historical narrative of the Revolutionary War. With that being said, Sybil Ludington is part of New York State's fourth grade curriculum, in which students learn about "courage" through reading her biography.<sup>19</sup> Outside of her home state of New York, Sybil is mostly written out of all history textbooks from the twenty-first century.<sup>20</sup> While Paul Revere is addressed in many popular books like *1776* by David McCullough and school textbooks like *The American Pageant*, Sybil's ride is left out.<sup>21</sup>

Even though Sybil Ludington's ride was arguably much more impressive than Revere's, she is one of history's forgotten women. This paper will explore the differences in popularity

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<sup>18</sup> Keith Watson, *Power and Responsibility in Education* (London, UK: Cassell Wellington House, 1997), 212.

<sup>19</sup> *New York*, vol. 3 (New York, NY: Macmillan/ McGraw-Hill, 2006), Chapter 5.

<sup>20</sup> Paula D. Hunt, "Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine," *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2015): pp. 187-222, [https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg\\_a\\_00452](https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg_a_00452), 203.

<sup>21</sup> David McCullough, *1776* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2005).

David M. Kennedy and Lizabeth Cohen, *The American Pageant* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2019).

between Sybil Ludington and Paul Revere, and why one evolved into an American folk hero while the other did not. The mythicized version of Paul Revere is celebrated by every American, but Sybil Ludington continues to face criticism from the ground that her ride may have never existed. I will argue that the difference in popularity between the two nightriders stems from a background of sexism in American history and the male domination of the American historical narrative. I further advocate for her inclusion into American history not for the sole likeness of her gender, but for the great historical feat that she accomplished. Sybil should be remembered in American history not solely because she is a pitied member of the minority sex, but because of the remarkable things she accomplished.

### **Personal Backgrounds of the Two Nightriders**

#### Sybil Ludington

To understand the circumstances of both Sybil Ludington's and Paul Revere's feats, it is first important to understand their backgrounds. Sybil Ludington's birth into an ordinary family as a female limited her opportunities; it was only through her father's position as a general that she was given the opportunity that she had to participate in the revolution. Sybil Was born on April fifth, 1761 in Fredericksburg, New York, to parents Abigail and Henry Ludington. Sybil was the first of twelve children, and grew up on two hundred and twenty-nine acres of farmland surrounded by dense woodlands. It was the toughness of growing up on the brink of wilderness and raising her eleven other siblings that in part aided in turning her into the brave young woman that she became.<sup>22</sup> Little is known about Abigail Ludington, besides the fact that she lived to the very old age of eighty. Even though she clearly did great things on the home front during the war

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<sup>22</sup>Vincent T. Dacquino, *Patriot Hero of the Hudson Valley: The Life & Ride of Sybil Ludington* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2018), 30.



by keeping the farm going and supporting her husband, her contributions to the war effort were ignored; as were most other females in the narrative of American Revolutionary War history.<sup>23</sup> Henry Ludington on the other hand was known to be a prominent member of society, serving as a member of the New York State assembly from 1777 to 1781, and later in 1786. He also served as sub-sheriff and was a member of the Committee of Safety, which was considered to be the law in many places.<sup>24</sup> Henry's military career originally started when he was seventeen years old and enlisted in the British army. It was in 1773 when his loyalty to the British crown was at a breaking point and he joined the local Dutchess County Regiment. Due to his extensive military history, Henry Ludington was given the rank of colonel in 1776, and the Dutchess County Militia became known as Colonel Ludington's Regiment.<sup>25</sup>

Throughout her childhood, Sybil was directly involved in her father's military activities. For a while, it is purported that Colonel Henry Ludington was involved with spies, working directly with John Jay, who was the acting judge for Dutchess County.<sup>26</sup> Sybil learned the code of secret signals that the local spies had, and she always made sure to be on guard when her father was absent.<sup>27</sup> Sybil Ludington also did other things for her father prior to her legendary ride. One night, a group of Loyalists led by the notorious Tory Ichabod Proctor, attempted to capture Colonel Ludington. To give Proctor and his men the illusion that the Ludington house was already being guarded by Tories, Sybil ordered all of her eleven siblings to march in front of

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<sup>23</sup> Susan Campbell, "An Unheralded Patriot Girl," *The Hartford Courant*, May 5, 2005, <https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-2005-05-30-0505300421-story.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Vincent T. Dacquino, *Patriot Hero of the Hudson Valley: The Life & Ride of Sybil Ludington* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2018), 30.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>26</sup> Susan Campbell, "An Unheralded Patriot Girl," *The Hartford Courant*, May 5, 2005, <https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-2005-05-30-0505300421-story.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Lisa Tendrich Frank, "An Encyclopedia of American Women at War: From the Home Front to the Battlefields," in *An Encyclopedia of American Women at War: From the Home Front to the Battlefields* (ABC-CLIO, 2013), pp. 365-366), 365.

the windows in military fashion. The trick worked; the Loyalists fled and Colonel Henry Ludington was saved.<sup>28</sup> She had shown great bravery through her wartime acts and should be recognized as a heroic figure. The fact that she took on responsibilities that were traditionally carried out by males made her a bit of an anomaly.

### Paul Revere

In contrast, Paul Revere had a much different background. The societal connections that Revere was able to make growing up were made possible because he was a man; he thus had more opportunities and grew to be more well-known than Sybil. Revere was born on January 1, 1735 in the North End of Boston to Apollos Revere, a French Huguenot, and Deborah Hitchborn, of an established Boston family. Like Sybil, he had eleven other siblings, being the second eldest. When he was thirteen, Paul Revere became an apprentice for his father as a silversmith. At the age of just twenty, Revere lost his father, and he thus became the head of the household. This placed a tremendous responsibility on the young man, and required him to quickly mature as the family faced financial struggles. Tight finances may have been a major factor in his decision to enlist in the Provincial Army during the French and Indian War.<sup>29</sup> His time in the army was short, and he came back to Boston to take over his father's silver shop and marry Sarah Orne in 1757. Sarah came from a prominent Boston family, and this connected Revere with many prominent members of Boston society. This would help him not only with his

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<sup>28</sup>Vincent T. Dacquino, *Patriot Hero of the Hudson Valley: The Life & Ride of Sybil Ludington* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2018), 30., 33.

<sup>29</sup>Jayne E. Triber, *A True Republican: The Life of Paul Revere* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 21.

silversmith business, but during the revolution as well, when he collaborated with many other well-known founding fathers.<sup>30</sup>

Individually, Paul Revere had a rough personality and was known for being short-tempered. He found himself in police court on more than one occasion; once for assaulting and beating a man.<sup>31</sup> His uptight demeanor might explain why he was involved in so many revolutionary activities; joining the Sons of Liberty and participating in many protests, including events like the Boston Tea Party. Paul Revere was commissioned as a major in the Massachusetts militia in 1776, eventually rising to the role of lieutenant colonel. Overall, Revere's military career was relatively uneventful. The most significant incident from his time in the military was actually a huge disaster. In 1779, four years after Revere's midnight ride, British troops had set up a base in Penobscot Bay in present-day Maine, which was then part of Massachusetts.<sup>32</sup> Although it was supposed to amount to an easy patriot victory, the entire expedition turned out to be a complete disaster. Commanders quarreled over control of the expedition and couldn't agree on tactics or strategies. When British reinforcements arrived, the entire Massachusetts fleet was nearly destroyed.<sup>33</sup> Revere, who was in charge of the artillery unit for the expedition, refused to follow many orders from top commanders. He was also punished for not considering himself under command of the leading general, neglect of duty, and for "unsoldierlike behavior during the whole expedition to Penobscot, which tends to cowardice."<sup>34</sup> After the incident, he was placed under house arrest with his salary and rations suspended.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>31</sup> Charles Ferris Gettemy, *The True Story of Paul Revere, His Midnight Ride, His Arrest and Court-Martial* (Boston, MA: Little Brown and Co., 1905), xv.

<sup>32</sup> Joel Miller, *The Revolutionary Paul Revere* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 220.

<sup>33</sup> Jayne E. Triber, *A True Republican: The Life of Paul Revere* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 135-136.

<sup>34</sup> *Collections and Proceedings of the Maine Historical Society*, vol. 2 (Princeton University, 1894), 381.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 161.

Because of the fiasco, Paul Revere's reputation was tarnished. In years prior, Revere had become a respected member of Boston society, but he could no longer distinguish friend from foe, now having many great enemies. Revere continuously sought a court martial to clear his name, but he was not exonerated until 1782.<sup>36</sup> After some time had passed, Revere was eventually able to gain back his reputation, and lived out the remaining years of his life as a respected Bostonian. Even though Paul Revere was much less successful in his endeavors, he is the one that is remembered by history because the Revolutionary War and is considered by historians to be a "man's war," fought by men and for men.<sup>37</sup> Women were not expected to participate in the war, so Sybil was forgotten.

## **The Construct of Gender**

### Gender History

In assessing why Sybil Ludington has been pushed out of the American historical narrative, one must understand the concept of gender and its historical relation. By riding her horse through the dead of night to warn of advancing British troops, she broke the common eighteenth century principle assumption on gender. During this period, women were expected to "subordinate themselves accordingly and assume domestic identities and responsibilities."<sup>38</sup> Sybil's defiance of these expectations turned her into a maverick. As historian Karen Harvey notes, "differences of sex were seen as differences of degree."<sup>39</sup> By pursuing an action that was

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<sup>36</sup> Jayne E. Triber, *A True Republican: The Life of Paul Revere* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 139.

<sup>37</sup> David C. Geary, *Male, Female: The Evolution of Human Sex Differences*, II (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2010), 233.

<sup>38</sup> Claire Duchon, "Gender," *Paragraph: A Journal of Modern Critical Theory* 17, no. 3 (1994): pp. 227-235, <https://doi.org/10.3366/para.1994.17.3.227>, 230.

<sup>39</sup> Karen Harvey, "The Century Of Sex? Gender, Bodies, And Sexuality In The Long Eighteenth Century," *The Historical Journal* 45, no. 4 (December 2002): pp. 899-916, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0018246x02002728>, 901.

only attributed to males, she was challenging the authority of a society run by males.<sup>40</sup> Males have also been the dominant historians throughout American history, and these historians have chosen to omit female heroes like Sybil and instead focus on history's male figures.<sup>41</sup>

While examining Sybil Ludington through the scope of gender history, it is important to understand the concept of gender. Historian Joan Scott argues that gender “is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.”<sup>42</sup> Historian Kathleen M. Brown further argues that “gender is a product of culture and an inherently historical concept.”<sup>43</sup> Sybil Ludington chose to go against the traditional eighteenth-century English notion of gender. In doing so, she was testing eighteenth century power structures set in place by these gender expectations. Women in late eighteenth century America had no legal status and protection. The popular viewpoint at the time was that women were expected to stay at home, help run the household, and raise virtuous children.<sup>44</sup> Girls in colonial America were subject to their fathers, and married women were subject to their husbands. As William Blackstone notoriously noted in *Commentaries on English Law* in 1769, “the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband: under whose wing, protection, and cover, she performs everything.”<sup>45</sup> Gender roles in colonial and revolutionary America were extremely hindering.

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<sup>40</sup> Susan Campbell, “An Unheralded Patriot Girl,” *The Hartford Courant*, May 5, 2005, <https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-2005-05-30-0505300421-story.html>.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): pp. 1053-1075, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/91.5.1053>, 1067.

<sup>43</sup> Kathleen M. Brown, “Brave New Worlds: Women’s and Gender History,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1993): pp. 311-328, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2947077>, 313.

<sup>44</sup> David M. Kennedy and Elizabeth Cohen, *The American Pageant* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2019), 159.

<sup>45</sup> William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, vol. I (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1796), 442.

By carrying out these brave acts that men were only thought capable of doing, Sybil proved that her gender did not define who she was as a person. Historian Raewyn Connell argues that “gender is a large-scale social structure, not just a matter of personal identity.”<sup>46</sup> Sybil Ludington proved that a woman living in 1777 Revolutionary America could show acts of leadership and courage without the guidance of a man. She broke the traditional social structure surrounding gender and showcased the capabilities of a woman.<sup>47</sup> Because Sybil chose to undertake many brave actions on her own, she does not fit the mold of the stereotypical late-eighteenth-century woman, making her stand apart from the majority of the women in her time period.

The concept of gender is also directly linked to power structures. Joan Scott also argues that gender is not only “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes,” but it is also “a primary way of signifying relationships of power.”<sup>48</sup> In eighteenth century America, men held all of the political, economic, and social power. Although the only thing that separates men from women is physical anatomy, the social construction of gender cemented women as being inferior to men. In 1776, Abigail Adams so famously wrote “remember the ladies” to her husband John in reference to the constitution being constructed.<sup>49</sup> John responded with, “We know better than to repeal our Masculine tendencies, and that giving more rights to women would certainly lead to “Despotism of the Petticoat.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*, vol. 1 (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1987), 243.

<sup>47</sup> Paula D. Hunt, “Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine,” *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2015): pp. 187-222, [https://doi.org/10.1162/tneq\\_a\\_00452](https://doi.org/10.1162/tnaq_a_00452), 211.

<sup>48</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review* 91, no. 5 (December 1986): pp. 1053-1075, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr/91.5.1053>, 1069.

<sup>49</sup> Abigail Adams, “Adams Family Papers,” *Adams Family Papers* (Massachusetts Historical Society), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760414ja>, 1.

<sup>50</sup> John Adams, “Adams Family Papers,” *Adams Family Papers* (Massachusetts Historical Society), accessed May 1, 2020, <https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760414ja>, 1.

John Adams firmly believed that women already held a substantial amount of power through their womanhood, and granting women more rights would lead to a case in which women had more power, thus creating higher inequality. It is evident that men feared powerful women, and had to resort to the law to keep them in their place. Many writings from the time period, such as trial records, diaries, and testimonial transcripts have a gender bias.<sup>51</sup> As also evidenced by the Salem Witch trials of the previous century, constructed gender roles taught society to fear women that did not conform; those who showed characteristics that did not pertain to gendered female expectations became targets. Sybil Ludington's punishment for breaking gender norms was being omitted from history by a majority of scholars.

### The Paradox of Gender

Given that there are many other American women who went down in history for their deeds in the Revolutionary War, it is perplexing my Sybil Ludington was forgotten. Yet, there is one thing that more famous women like Molly Pitcher and Betsy Ross have in common: they were either sexualized as beautiful women, or commemorated for confining their activities to gender expectations.<sup>52</sup> Most images of Molly Pitcher show a beautiful young woman dressed in colorful gowns. Because she conformed to feminine beauty standards, she was commemorated for her actions in helping her husband and other men on the battlefield. Her deed of transporting water to men is also seen as her fulfilling her domestic duties.<sup>53</sup> Betsy Ross is likewise portrayed as a dainty older woman in elaborate dress, and her feminine activity of sewing was viewed as a

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<sup>51</sup> Holly Hartman, "Gender in Colonial America: Women and Witches," Western Oregon University Digital Commons, 2009, <https://digitalcommons.wou.edu/his/199/>, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Hughes, Bethany. "Why Were Women Written out of History? ." English Heritage , February 28, 2017. <http://blog.english-heritage.org.uk/women-written-history-interview-bettany-hughes/>.

<sup>53</sup> Emily J. Tiepe, "Will the Real Molly Pitcher Please Stand Up?," *The National Archives: Prologue Magazine*, 1999) <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/1999/summer/pitcher.html>.

normal gendered activity. On the contrary, Sybil was never sexualized as a beautiful young woman, nor were her actions feminine. This gave a reason for many historians to turn a blind eye to her. Even Elizabeth Ellet, who was credited with writing the first history of women during the American Revolution, omitted Sybil Ludington from her work and instead only discussed women from the view of the domestic sphere.<sup>54</sup> In more recent historical writings, women who break out of traditional gender roles are also often left out. A 2017 study found that women are excluded because standard historiographical framework preferences male-oriented exceptional leadership while over-emphasizing women's domestic roles.<sup>55</sup> Sybil Ludington had broken out of the domestic sphere which historians gravitate around, and she was therefore left out of the common historical narrative.

When Sybil Ludington exhibited characteristics of heroism and power, she was going against the traditional gender norms of the time, and was thus seen as an infringement on male power. While Paul Revere is unquestioningly celebrated for his midnight ride, Sybil Ludington was not celebrated for hers. She exhibited characteristics like heroism and bravery that were exclusively paired with the male gender; her actions were therefore seen as a threat to masculinity and the concept of the female domestic sphere.<sup>56</sup>

### The Study of Women in the American Revolution

Women played a major role in the American Revolution and all prior and subsequent wars, yet their contributions are almost entirely written out of the most popular works of

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<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Fries Ellet, *The Women of the American Revolution*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Baker and Scribner, 1848; repr. Philadelphia: G. W. Jacobs, 1900).

<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Maurer, "Where Are the Women?," *National Women's History Museum*, 2017, [https://www.womenshistory.org/sites/default/files/museum-assets/document/2018-02/NWHM\\_Status-of-Women-in-State-Social-Studies-Standards\\_2-27-18.pdf](https://www.womenshistory.org/sites/default/files/museum-assets/document/2018-02/NWHM_Status-of-Women-in-State-Social-Studies-Standards_2-27-18.pdf), 4.

<sup>56</sup> Susan Campbell, "An Unheralded Patriot Girl," *The Hartford Courant*, May 5, 2005, <https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-2005-05-30-0505300421-story.html>).



American history. The very first *History of the American Revolution*, written in 1789 by David Ramsay, makes no mention of women's contributions to the cause.<sup>57</sup> Other famous books like *The Birth of the Republic, 1763-89*, written in 1956, and the more recent *1776* by David McCullough, written in 2005, barely mention women.<sup>58</sup> When gender is viewed as a form of power, this explains the lack of female presence in documentation on Revolutionary War history. As the common saying goes, "history is written by the victors," whom are always men.

There are certainly many history books that do mention women, but most of these are books written from a gendered history perspective and focused solely on women. This is because women's history remains marginalized; female contributions are not yet deemed worthy of being listed in major historical works alongside men.<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth F. Ellet's *The Women of the American Revolution* published in 1819 was the first book to mention the female contribution in the Revolutionary War. Since then, there have been a few notable books written, including Carole Berkin's *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence*, published in 2009, and *Women in the American Revolution: Gender, Politics, and the Domestic World*, published by Barbara B. Oberg in 2019.<sup>60</sup> It is apparent that the scholarly works on women's contributions to the Revolutionary War are limited. All of these works also mainly focus on typical, domestic women, and less on women like Sybil who broke feminine gender roles.<sup>61</sup> Most books describing female contributions to the Revolutionary War effort are written by women and

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<sup>57</sup> David Ramsay, *The History of the American Revolution*, vol. 1 (Appelwood Publishing, 1795).

<sup>58</sup> David McCullough, *1776* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2005) and Edmund Sears Morgan, *The Birth of the Republic, 1763-89*, 4th ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1956).

<sup>59</sup> Susan Campbell, "An Unheralded Patriot Girl," *The Hartford Courant*, May 5, 2005, <https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-2005-05-30-0505300421-story.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for Americas Independence* (New York, NY: Doubleday Publishing, 2009). And Barbara B. Oberg, *Women in the American Revolution: Gender, Politics, and the Domestic World* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2019).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

targeted for women. Women must be included in all Revolutionary War textbooks so their contributions can be recognized alongside those of men.

Even though the scholarly works on women in the Revolutionary War are limited, there are a handful of children's books pertaining to women in the American Revolution. For example, many of the books about Sybil Ludington are geared towards young girls, including *Sybil Ludington's Ride*, published by Erick Berry in 1952, and *Sybil Ludington's Midnight Ride*, written by Marsha Amstel in 2000.<sup>62</sup> It is evident that these books aim to inspire young girls through Sybil's courageous story. However, the young women who read these books as girls are brought into a world that has little professional attention on the female role in American history. Due to the abundance of children's books and subsequent lack of scholarly works, it is clear that women's contributions are not taken seriously. There are many books aimed at inspiring young girls with heroic accounts of female revolutionary heroes, like *Wonder Woman: Sybil Ludington* (2018), complete with graphics and colorful drawings.<sup>63</sup> However, the absence of professional study means that the voices of female participants in the American Revolution will continue to be marginalized. Incorporating the role of the female into the historically male-dominated narrative of the Revolutionary War ensures that this silenced female portion of the population is no longer forgotten.

Women like Sybil should have their place in common American textbooks that focus the female contribution alongside the male. After all, women did play a huge role in the American Revolution. This war was fought right in front of women; in their streets and their backyards. As

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<sup>62</sup> Erick Berry, *Sybil Ludington's Ride* (New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1952). And Marsha Amstel, *Sybil Ludington's Midnight Ride* (Minneapolis, MN: Millbrook Press, 2000).

<sup>63</sup> Nicole Orr, *Wonder Woman: Sybil Ludington* (Kennett Square, PA: Purple Toad Publishing, 2018).

the war began, women's peacetime activities were transformed into wartime endeavors, "becoming the unofficial quartermaster corps of the continental army and of their state regiments."<sup>64</sup> The early nineteenth century female historian Elizabeth Ellet noted that when a woman's home was attacked, she became "an Amazon in both strength and courage," meaning that just like men, they rose to the occasion during extraordinary times.<sup>65</sup> Avoiding the conflict of revolution would have been impossible. Historian Carol Berkin argues that "women remain unmentioned means one of two things, there was a mass state of catatonia among women, or someone's not telling the story right."<sup>66</sup> Women were not in a mass state of catatonia. The fact of the matter is, they were stripped of the power to record history, and were therefore left out of it.

### **Gender in Relation to Power Differentials**

#### Sybil Ludington

Although accepted by many historians to be true, there are a few who attack the lack of accountability for Sybil Ludington's story. They use this to attack her legitimacy while also ignoring the fallacies of Paul Revere's narrative. As previously mentioned, the story of Sybil Ludington's ride was published in 1880, over a century since she originally completed her night ride in 1777. This is odd, considering that it was such an important event. In the later years of Sybil's life, she sought a pension for her husband Edmund Ogden's military service. Yet none of the sworn affidavits attesting to her husband's military service and the legitimacy of Sybil's marriage mentioned her ride.<sup>67</sup> She did not attempt to claim her ride as a justification for her

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<sup>64</sup> Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for Americas Independence* (New York, NY: Doubleday Publishing, 2009), xv.

<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth F. Ellet, *The Women of the American Revolution*, vol. III (New York, NY, 1850), 314.

<sup>66</sup> Susan Campbell, "An Unheralded Patriot Girl," *The Hartford Courant*, May 5, 2005, <https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-2005-05-30-0505300421-story.html>).

<sup>67</sup> Paula D. Hunt, "Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine," *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2015): pp. 187-222, [https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg\\_a\\_00452](https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg_a_00452)), 189.

pension at all. Why would a woman who committed such brave and heroic acts during the revolution keep her historic ride hidden? There could be a plethora of reasons; it is also why a few historians doubt that her ride even took place. But sexism surely played a role. Most of the women who lived in revolutionary America displayed low self-esteem, and had very limited conceptions of themselves and their roles, and tended to habitually degenerate their sex in general.<sup>68</sup> It is very possible that Sybil did not disclose of her midnight ride to friends and family because it was something that went against traditional gender roles of the time. Sybil grew up to be a respected woman, and boasting of her night ride in which she took on seemingly male gender characteristics would have been unladylike.<sup>69</sup> Even Sybil's grave only comes with the commemoration as "Wife of Edmund Ogden."<sup>70</sup> After her death, she was still exclusively seen through her subservience to her husband. This explains why stories of other women who committed fearless rides during the revolution were forgotten as well. Notable women like Prudence Cummings Wright, a minutewoman from Massachusetts, Lydia Darragh, an undercover spy, and a scornful of others, have all been lost to history. Their actions were by no doubt braver and more courageous than actions exhibited by a majority of men, but because they were so vehemently denying gender roles, they were not celebrated and remembered in the way that they should be.

### Paul Revere

On the contrary, Paul Revere had an easy path to memorialization because he was a man. While Sybil was forced to always follow in the shadow of her father or husband, Revere was a

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<sup>68</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *Liberty's Daughters: the Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1990), xviii.

<sup>69</sup> Paula D. Hunt, "Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine," *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2015): pp. 187-222, [https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg\\_a\\_00452](https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg_a_00452), 219.

<sup>70</sup> In Memory of Sibbell [sic] Ludington, Wife of Edmund Ogden, who died Feb.26, 1839. Age77yrs.10mo.21ds."

man for himself. He was a white male with a respected occupation, meaning he had all the political, economic, and social freedoms that women did not. One thing to note about Sybil is that she would not have had the opportunity to get involved in the war in the way that she did were it not for her father, Colonel Henry Ludington. All of her actions were tied to her father's career; had it not been for him, a messenger never would have come to the Ludington house in the early hours of the night with a message for her to relay. On the contrary, Paul Revere was able to carve his own destiny. Because he was a man, it was also okay for him to be loud and outspoken, while Sybil was expected to remain quiet and ladylike.<sup>71</sup> On the subject of Paul Revere's personality, historian Nan Wolverton states, "I think he was an aggressive person who kept at something until he achieved his goals. I don't think his personality is one I'd admire".<sup>72</sup> Since Revere was a man, it was acceptable and encouraged for him to exhibit these traits, because they are often to be considered traits of a strong male leader.<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, Sybil walked the fine line of femininity.

Due to the fact that Paul Revere was a man, he was exposed to levels of society that Sybil Ludington was not. Revere was a white male with money and therefore had one of the highest degrees of freedoms in early America.<sup>74</sup> While young women like Sybil were expected to stay home and take care of the household, Revere was permitted to engage with the public dealings of Boston. Being a silversmith also allowed him to make many connections with Bostonian society,

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<sup>71</sup> David Veevers. "Gender." In *The Corporation as a Protagonist in Global History, C. 1550/1750*, edited by Veevers David and Pettigrew William A., (187-210. LEIDEN; BOSTON: Brill, 2019. Accessed June 01, 2020) doi:10.1163/j.ctvrzgvw0.12., 195.

<sup>72</sup> James Barron, "Paul Revere, Beyond the Midnight Ride," *New York Times*, September 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/11/arts/design/paul-revere-beyond-midnight.html>.

<sup>73</sup> "What Makes a Good Leader, and Does Gender Matter?," Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project, December 31, 2019, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2015/01/14/chapter-2-what-makes-a-good-leader-and-does-gender-matter/>.

<sup>74</sup> Jayne E. Triber, *A True Republican: The Life of Paul Revere* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 14-15.

which helped him immensely during the revolution.<sup>75</sup> He was able to collaborate with many other leading patriots; Sybil was not given that opportunity.

Paul Revere's status as a respected white male also meant that he had connections to the most powerful institution in America: the realm of politics. Not only was he able to connect with noteworthy patriots during the revolution; this also afforded him easy access to a life in politics. During the war, he was a courier for the Boston Committee of Correspondence, the Massachusetts Committee of Safety, and the North Caucus, which was a committee that planned for the destruction of the East India Tea Company.<sup>76</sup> Being a man of higher status meant that Revere had easy access to the higher elite circles that were orchestrating the revolution. Sybil Ludington definitely had strong opinions about the war for independence, but she was cut out of the circles where important decisions were being made because she was a woman. In revolutionary America, women had no political voice.<sup>77</sup> This is one reason why Paul Revere went down in history and Sybil Ludington did not; historians will document the man who died an iconic statesman over a widowed woman like Sybil who died in near poverty.<sup>78</sup>

### **Sybil Ludington: A Feminist Icon and Political Debate**

#### Feminism's Effects on Sybil's Story

The feminism of the twentieth century brought much attention to Sybil Ludington, but it did so at the expense of altering the story of Sybil Ludington into a feminist hero rather than an

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>76</sup> "Biography of Paul Revere," Paul Revere House, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.paulreverehouse.org/biography/>.

<sup>77</sup> Carol Berkin, *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for Americas Independence* (New York, NY: Doubleday Publishing, 2009), 3.

<sup>78</sup> Debra Michals, "Sybil Ludington," National Women's History Museum, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/sybil-ludington>).

American hero. The legacy of Sybil Ludington's historic ride first got its big break in the 1970's when second-wave feminism was taking hold. Second-wave feminism focused on equality and discrimination; women were seeking empowerment.<sup>79</sup> This led to a celebration of female heroines throughout American history. One of those female heroines that got noticed was Sybil Ludington. The acclaimed feminist historian Linda Grant DePauw once criticized other historians for "not thinking anyone would be interested in reading about the lives of ordinary people, especially ordinary women."<sup>80</sup> Sybil Ludington turned out to be that ordinary hero that feminists of the 1970's craved. She was an ordinary girl who threw herself into an extraordinary situation. Feminist scholar Martha Nussbaum discussed her feelings the first time she heard about Sybil Ludington's story as a little girl: "She was a defiant girl, not a submissive traditionalist, and so I linked love of country to that spirit of autonomy."<sup>81</sup> For women and young girls everywhere, Sybil embodied that feminist patriot that every American girl aspired to be. She was an ordinary heroine; an everyday girl that did courageous things for America.

As second-wave feminism progressed, so did the story of Sybil Ludington. 1975 was the International Year of the Woman, and the United States Bicentennial was celebrated a year later in 1976. These celebrators were hoping to diversify their idols, and the young female heroine of Sybil Ludington was the perfect match.<sup>82</sup> Sybil's feature in a multimedia slideshow produced by the National Organization for Women titled *Our North American Foremothers* included a portion on Sybil, and placed her in the likes of other famous American heroines like Harriet

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<sup>79</sup> "Ohio Humanities" (National Endowment for the Humanities, April 27, 2018), <http://www.ohiohumanities.org/betty-friedan-the-three-waves-of-feminism/>.

<sup>80</sup>Linda Grant De Pauw and Michael Pauw Linda McCurdy, *Founding Mothers: Women of America in the Revolutionary Era* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 5.

<sup>81</sup> Martha Nussbaum, "Teaching Patriotism: Love and Critical Reform," University of Chicago Public Law & Legal Theory Working Paper No. 357(2011), 33.

<sup>82</sup> Paula D. Hunt, "Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine," *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2015): pp. 187-222, [https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg\\_a\\_00452](https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg_a_00452), 207.

Tubman, Margaret Sanger, and Victoria Woodall.<sup>83</sup> She was also featured in *Ms. Magazine*, and in the documentary *American Woman: Portraits of Courage*.<sup>84</sup> By the end of the 1970's, Sybil Ludington had grown from a celebrated local hero in Putnam County, New York, to a national feminist icon. However, Sybil Ludington did not set out on her midnight ride with the purpose of liberating women from patriarchal domination; her goal was to help her father's regiment. While it is important that we recognize Sybil's gender in terms of why she has been omitted from history, her gender had nothing to do with the purpose of her midnight ride. She should be remembered as the American hero that she is, not as a heroine rebranded to fit the 1970's feminist agenda.

#### Conservative Critics Against a "Push for Diversity"

Sybil Ludington's rise to fame had many critics. Many argued that she was just another token of diversity. In a series of United States Postal Service stamps celebrating America's bicentennial, a stamp was commemorated to Sybil that featured her with a Hispanic soldier, an African-American soldier, and a Jewish financier.<sup>85</sup> This stamp was celebrated by many, including author David Bushnell, who noted that her stamp was important "not because she was a woman but because she was a female political figure; most women honored with stamps were from the world of arts and entertainment".<sup>86</sup> Sybil's placement on a stamp was important in that it honored her for her heroism; she was being honored for bravery, not beauty. However, many

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<sup>83</sup> NOW Remembers Sybil, Putnam's Paul Revere,"Patent Trader, 7 December 1972.

<sup>84</sup> Ruth Eby, "Ride on, Sybil Ludington,"*Ms.*, July 1975, pp.55–58; "The American Woman: Portraits of Courage,"*Lebanon Daily News*, 15 May 1976; *The American Woman: Portraits of Courage*, directed by Robert Deubel, Concepts Unlimited, 1976.

<sup>85</sup> Samuel A. Tower, "STAMPS: Contributors to the Cause," *New York Times*, March 16, 1975, p. 39, <http://ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/120448185?accountid=10362>).

<sup>86</sup> "Philatelic Feminism: The Portrayal of Women on Stamps of Argentina, Colombia, Cuba, and the United States [1893–2006]," *Women's Studies* 40.7 [2011]: 839).



saw her inclusion into the national historical agenda as pushed; she was nothing more than a cause for political correctness.<sup>87</sup> Her eventual inclusion into teaching curriculum in New York state and her appearance in the Houghton Mifflin textbook *America Will Be* brought anger to those who wanted the traditional institutions of American history to remain.<sup>88</sup> After a decade of learning about the great white men who built the United States, hearing that women and people of color played a role in the founding of this nation surely came as a shock to many.

Sybil Ludington's critics were mostly conservatives who viewed her presence in the media as well as schoolrooms as a form of forced political correctness. Her inclusion, as well as the inclusion of many other minorities into the story of American history would completely alter the way that American history had been taught for roughly two centuries. It was argued that special interest groups had successfully debilitated the minds of American youth by "elevating marginal figures and left-wing causes."<sup>89</sup> Conservatives contended that this was not the true version of American history. Psychologist Paul Vitz referred to Sybil Ludington's ride as a "feminist piece," further describing Sybil as "dressed as a man."<sup>90</sup> It is clear that the root cause for Sybil's detractors lies in sexism and misogyny. If Sybil's ride is a "feminist piece." then Paul Revere's ride must subsequently be regarded as a "masculinist piece." Furthermore, if she was dressed as a man (which she wasn't), how would that make Sybil's story any less remarkable? It

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<sup>87</sup> Robert Lerner, Althea K. Nagai, and Stanley Rothman, *Molding the Good Citizen: The Politics of High School History Texts* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1995), p. 66.

<sup>88</sup> Beverly J. Armento, Gary B. Nash, Christopher L. Salter, and Karen K. Wixson, eds., *America Will Be* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991).

<sup>89</sup> Paula D. Hunt, "Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine," *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2015): pp. 187-222, [https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg\\_a\\_00452](https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg_a_00452), 213.

<sup>90</sup> Paul C. Vitz, *Censorship: Evidence of Bias in Our Children's Textbooks* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Servant Books, 1986), 70.

is clear that Sybil's critics have their priorities in maintaining traditional gender roles and assuring that women remain the submissive sex.

The construction of American history is embedded with deep layers of misogyny and sexism. While women and other people of color have to fight to earn their place in the American historical narrative, white men are grandfathered in. When a minority does try to take a stand, they are met with conservative detractors who cry "liberal indoctrination."<sup>91</sup> Howard Rudnitsky even went as far to quote Robert Lerner complaining about Sybil Ludington's conclusion in a history textbook: "She is portrayed in the textbook as being as important as Paul Revere. No objective historian believes that."<sup>92</sup> But let's not forget that Sybil Ludington rode twice as far as Paul Revere and successfully avoided capture. To any other person looking at the evidence, it is obvious that Sybil's ride was much more successful than Revere's. It is evident that the only thing that makes Sybil's ride any less spectacular according to these men is the fact that she was a woman.

#### An attack on Sybil for Lack of Evidence

One thing that many of Sybil Ludington's critics attack her on is that there is no solid evidence that her ride took place.<sup>93</sup> Almost all of the sources on Sybil date back to Martha J. Lamb's *History of the City of New York: Its Origin, Rise, and Progress*.<sup>94</sup> She asserts that her

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<sup>91</sup> August Mayrat, "How Public Schools Indoctrinate Kids Without Almost Anyone Noticing," *The Federalist*, October 30, 2018, <https://thefederalist.com/2018/10/26/public-schools-indoctrinate-kids-without-almost-anyone-noticing/>).

<sup>92</sup> Rudnitsky, Howard. 1993. "History a La Carte." *Forbes* 151 (4): 44. <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=bsu&AN=9302030317&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

<sup>93</sup> Paula D. Hunt, "Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine," *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2015): pp. 187-222, [https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg\\_a\\_00452](https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg_a_00452)), 213.

<sup>94</sup> Martha J. Lamb and Burton Harrison, *History of the City of New York: Its Origin, Rise, and Progress* (New York, NY: A.S. Barnes, 1877).

book is historically accurate; claiming, “No one authority has been accepted and followed in any instance without further evidence.”<sup>95</sup> However, there is evidence that Lamb communicated with the Ludington family, so the consensus is that this is the primary source for information on Sybil’s ride.<sup>96</sup> Since the story of her ride most likely originates from the Ludington family itself, the validity of her ride does come into question. However, author Judy Hominick argues that “someone had to call out those men to go to Danbury to repel the British troops, and no one has ever proved that anyone else did it.”<sup>97</sup> If it was not in fact Sybil, there is someone that is not getting credit for the heroic ride that had taken place. If it were a man who rode that night, there would have most likely been some sort of documentation on the event.<sup>98</sup> If Sybil Ludington was the real messenger who committed the midnight ride, it is feasible that there is so little documentation. Sybil joins a handful of other women whose contributions to history were only known well after death. It is likely that Sybil herself was not aware of the importance of her ride; this may be the cause for why she never publicly spoke of it.<sup>99</sup> Women also weren’t allowed to be soldiers or directly participate in combat activity, and many of their brave acts were downplayed or went unnoticed.<sup>100</sup> Thus, there are a handful of reasonable explanations for the critiques surrounding the authenticity of Sybil’s ride. She was a fierce woman in an era that did not recognize women who rebelled against traditional gender roles.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Paula D. Hunt, “Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine,” *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2015): pp. 187-222, [https://doi.org/10.1162/tneq\\_a\\_00452](https://doi.org/10.1162/tnaq_a_00452)), 190.

<sup>97</sup> Susan Campbell, “An Unheralded Patriot Girl,” *The Hartford Courant*, May 5, 2005, <https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-2005-05-30-0505300421-story.html>)

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> A. C. Flick, “Historical Markers for New York State,” *Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association* 8.3 (July 1927): 254.

<sup>100</sup> V. T. Dacquino, *Patriot Hero of the Hudson Valley: The Life & Ride of Sybil Ludington* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2018), 108.

Even if Sybil Ludington's ride is fact, there are parts of her story that have been fabricated over the years. For example, it is claimed that she rode on her own horse named Star, but this is fiction.<sup>101</sup> And while it is commonly concurred that Sybil traveled a distance of forty miles on her ride, this is based off of the thirty-three plaques that were placed on roadsides in New York commemorating the route of her ride. These plaques were placed through research done by Daughters of the American Revolution, local historians, as well as a descendant of Sybil Ludington.<sup>102</sup> Martha J. Lamb and Willis Fletcher Johnson, the first historians to document Sybil's ride, made no mention of the supposed route she took, so educated guesses had to be made. Over the years, the route that these roadside markers document became historical fact, even if that route was not historically accurate.<sup>103</sup> With little documentation on her ride, the story of Sybil Ludington is left up to a lot of speculation.

### The Truth Behind Revere's Ride

Even if many accounts of Sybil Ludington's ride that we celebrate are false, it is nonsense that we criticize the facts of her ride so deeply while it is widely known that a majority of the details about Paul Revere's ride are false, yet he is so greatly celebrated nonetheless. Longfellow definitely knew of the historical inaccuracies of his poem when writing it; he meant for it to be a poem after all, not a work of historical nonfiction.<sup>104</sup> It is important to remember that the poem was written in 1860, ninety years after Revere's ride and right before the start of the Civil War. Longfellow was a staunch unionist whose main goal in writing the poem distill a

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<sup>101</sup> Paula D. Hunt, "Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine," *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2015): pp. 187-222, [https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg\\_a\\_00452](https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg_a_00452), 207.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>103</sup> Paula D. Hunt, "Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine," *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2015): pp. 187-222, [https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg\\_a\\_00452](https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg_a_00452), 218.

<sup>104</sup> William Sloane Kennedy, *Henry W. Longfellow, Biography, Anecdote, Letters, Criticism*, vol. 1 (Boston, MA: D. Lothrop Comp., 1882), 222.

sense of patriotism and keep the country together.<sup>105</sup> The poem starts off with the words “listen my children,”<sup>106</sup> however, it was first published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, which is not a children’s magazine. Through invoking children, he is attempting to pass on the legacy of Revolutionary War patriotism which is extremely important since “hardly a man is now alive who remembers that day and year.”<sup>107</sup> Longfellow’s goal was not to create a historically accurate biography of Paul Revere, but rather to create a legendary folk hero out of a man who was hardly known outside the state of Massachusetts. He wanted to create a hero that all Americans could look up to in the dark times of the antebellum period.<sup>108</sup> Therefore, Longfellow created a larger-than-life figure out of Paul Revere, even though a majority of the poem was historically inaccurate.

The first problem with *Paul Revere’s Ride* is that the ride was not a solo operation. The two other men he went with, William Dawes and Samuel Prescott, both had more successful rides than Paul Revere. However, they were not immortalized in Longfellow’s poem because their names did not rhyme.<sup>109</sup> Unlike the poem suggests, Revere also never reached Concord because he was captured only twelve miles into his ride. Later released, Revere was forced to walk back to Lexington after the British retained his horse.<sup>110</sup> Furthermore, Revere never shouted the famous phrase, “the British are coming!” Given that the operation was supposed to be discreet, it is not likely that he yelled throughout the night.<sup>111</sup> Patriots also still considered

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>106</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Paul Revere’s Ride*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin and Co., 1097).

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> “Paul Revere - The Midnight Ride,” Paul Revere House, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.paulreverehouse.org/the-real-story/>.

<sup>109</sup> Christopher G. Bates, *The Early Republic and Antebellum America: an Encyclopedia of Social, Political, Cultural, and Economic History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 822.

<sup>110</sup> “Paul Revere - The Midnight Ride,” Paul Revere House, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.paulreverehouse.org/the-real-story/>

<sup>111</sup> Jayne E. Triber, *A True Republican: The Life of Paul Revere* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 129.

themselves to be British at the time of the revolution, so he most likely used the term “regulars,” which was a name for British soldiers.<sup>112</sup>

Even though so much of Longfellow’s poem is historically inaccurate, it was regarded as fact for the rest of the nineteenth century. Leading into the twentieth century, there were a few historians who tried to portray a more accurate version of the ride.<sup>113</sup> Nonetheless, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem became immortalized as evidence on what happened on the night of April 18, 1775. It is this national legend that still continues to be taught in schools and passed down as a story of patriotism.

#### Historical Evidence and its Ties with Gender

Why is it that Longfellow’s false account of Paul Revere’s ride gets so engrained in the story of American history while Sybil Ludington’s ride is mostly ignored and discredited? A simple explanation is the double standard on gender in America. The story of Paul Revere as told by Longfellow represents the epitome of the American man: strong, fearless, and patriotic. On the contrary, Sybil Ludington was a rebellious woman who didn’t conform to her respective gender roles. As reporter Susan Campbell noted, “girls have a harder time cracking the history books- maybe especially girls who outride their male elders.”<sup>114</sup> A majority of American history has been recorded by elite men for elite men. It wasn’t until the last few decades that women truly had the chance to be scholars. Because of this, Sybil had no hope of being remembered as a national hero. She was mostly lost to history, just like multitudes of other brave women.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Susan Campbell, “An Unheralded Patriot Girl,” *The Hartford Courant*, May 5, 2005, <https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-xpm-2005-05-30-0505300421-story.html>

## **Memorialization of the Nightriders**

### **Paul Revere's Place in National History**

Gender didn't only affect the historical interpretation of Paul Revere and Sybil Ludington, but also the way in which they were memorialized; Sybil is commemorated on a smaller scale. One of the most popular tourist activities in Boston is the Freedom Trail, which is a two-and-a-half-mile walk through the most significant historic sites in Boston. Of these sites are the Bunker Hill Monument and the USS Constitution, all which had major roles in American history. The site also contains the house in which Paul Revere lived for thirty years of his adult life, as well as Old North Church, which has a statue of Paul Revere out front. The Paul Revere House was built in 1680, making it the oldest house in downtown Boston.<sup>115</sup> Previously, it was the location of the home to Cotton Mather.<sup>116</sup> After the thirty years of Revere's residency, the house also served as an immigrant tenement, a candy store, cigar factory, an Italian bank, and fruit and vegetable business.<sup>117</sup> It was later bought in 1902 by Paul Revere's great grandson who had it turned into a museum. Even though the house has so much other notable history, the thirty years that Revere lived there came to totally define the house; the folklore of Paul Revere overrides the rest of its true history.

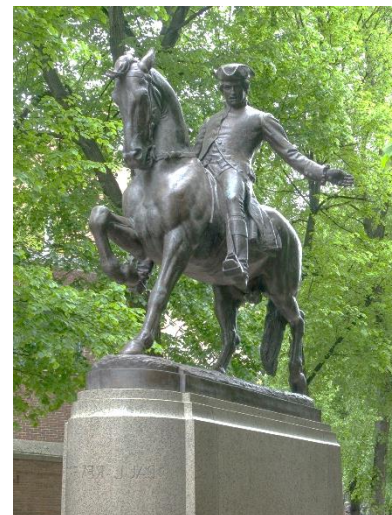
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<sup>115</sup> "Paul Revere - The Midnight Ride," Paul Revere House, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.paulreverehouse.org/the-real-story/>.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

The other reference to Paul Revere on the freedom trail is the Old North Church, which contains a plaque out front commemorating Paul Revere's midnight ride and his signal lanterns which were displayed in the churches' steeple. Across from the church in what came to be known as "Paul Revere Mall" stands a statue of Paul Revere mounted on horseback, which was molded in 1885 and casted in 1940.<sup>118</sup> The statue has become so famous that a replica was erected in Cerritos, California. The main statue in Boston is large; Revere is lifted on a pedestal and mounted on a ferocious-looking horse with Revere in a courageous and dignified pose with his hand outstretched. The 1883 statue design competition, which was won by Cyrus Dallin of Utah, asked artists to incorporate ideas expressed in Longfellow's poem into their models.<sup>119</sup> Ironically, Dallin won the contest because all of the other depictions of Paul Revere were deemed "historically inaccurate."<sup>120</sup> The design competition for the Paul Revere statue took place following the Civil War, when there was a huge increase in the number of public monuments erected across the United States.<sup>121</sup> The reconstructed nation was still healing from the wounds of the Civil War, and monuments served as a way to reinstall a sense of patriotism and restore pride in America.<sup>122</sup> For the people of Boston, the Paul Revere statue remains a sense of pride, and it is one of the most photographed sculptures in Boston.<sup>123</sup> The extent to which Paul




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<sup>118</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Paul Revere's Ride* (Norwalk, CT: Easton Press, 1996), 334.

<sup>119</sup> Rell G. Francis, "Cyrus E. Dallin and His Paul Revere Statue," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (1976): pp. 4-61, [https://issuu.com/utah10/docs/uhq\\_volume44\\_1976\\_number1](https://issuu.com/utah10/docs/uhq_volume44_1976_number1), 12.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>121</sup> Lorado Taft and Adeline Adams, *The History of American Sculpture*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1930), 255.

<sup>122</sup> Rell G. Francis, "Cyrus E. Dallin and His Paul Revere Statue," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 44, no. 1 (1976): pp. 4-61, [https://issuu.com/utah10/docs/uhq\\_volume44\\_1976\\_number1](https://issuu.com/utah10/docs/uhq_volume44_1976_number1), 11.

<sup>123</sup> Paul Revere Heritage Project, accessed May 20, 2020, <http://www.paul-revere-heritage.com/landmarks-monument.html>).

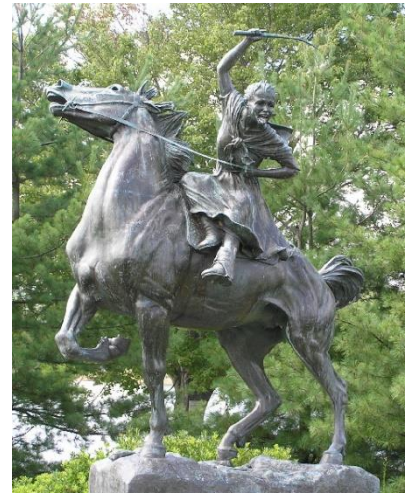


Revere is celebrated as part of Boston's history is an example of how overly glorified he is in American history. His midnight ride was nothing spectacular, but the monuments dedicated to him in Boston make you believe otherwise.

### Sybil Ludington's Statue

Thanks to the work of many women, Sybil Ludington eventually got her own monument.

In 1960, a statue was dedicated to Sybil Ludington in Carmel, New York, with a smaller model later being placed in Danbury, Connecticut, the destination of Sybil's ride. The sculpture was designed for the Daughters of the American Revolution by Anna Hyatt Huntington, one of the few American female artists who had a thriving career.<sup>124</sup> The statue features Sybil mounted sidesaddle on a horse whose front legs are bucked in the air. Her mouth is open as if



she is yelling, and she is waving a stick used as a whip, while her other hand grasps the reins. It even appears as if she is foaming at the mouth, only because the statue was incorrectly cast.<sup>125</sup>

Sybil Ludington's statue is very important considering it is one of the few statues in the United States that memorializes a female historical figure. In 2011, there were 5,193 outdoor sculptures in the United States, and only 394 (less than eight percent) depicted women.<sup>126</sup> This further shows how women are left out of history and are refused to be remembered. While men continue

<sup>124</sup> Myrna G. Eden, *Energy and Individuality in the Art of Anna Huntington, Sculptor and Amy Beach, Composer* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Pr., 1987), 4.

<sup>125</sup> Michael Pollack, "Heroine of 1777 Still All in a Revolutionary Lather: A Statue That Appears To Foam at the Mouth," accessed May 20, 2020, <http://ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.calpoly.edu/docview/109465927?accountid=10362>).

<sup>126</sup> Cari Shane, "Why the Dearth of Statues Honoring Women in Statuary Hall and Elsewhere?," *The Washington Post*, April 15, 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/why-the-dearth-of-statues-honoring-women-in-statuary-hall-and-elsewhere/2011/04/11/AFx8lgjD\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/why-the-dearth-of-statues-honoring-women-in-statuary-hall-and-elsewhere/2011/04/11/AFx8lgjD_story.html)).

to be immortalized in stone, women are lost to history. However, it is with the help of other women that Sybil Ludington now has her own statue. Thanks to the work of the Daughters of the American Revolution and sculptors like Anna Hyatt Huntington, Sybil will be remembered for as long as her statue stands. When women are able to tell their history in conjunction with men, the narrative drastically changes for the better. Although her statue is not as famous as the Paul Revere statue, it assures that Sybil Ludington gets the memorialization she deserves and that her history will not easily be forgotten.

### Depiction in Popular Culture

The difference in gender between the two nightriders also affects the way in which they are portrayed in popular culture. While Paul Revere is portrayed as an American hero appealing to all genders, Sybil Ludington is mostly portrayed as a feminine hero.<sup>127</sup> Since the publication of Longfellow's poem, Paul Revere has become a folk hero synonymous with American patriotism. Not only is he featured in school textbooks as historical fact, but he is also in paintings, plays, video games, television shows, movies, documentaries, and books. His depiction in popular children and young adult media like *Arthur* and *The Muppets* introduces and instills the mythical ride into young American minds from the start.<sup>128</sup> Sybil is also featured in popular culture too, but she is portrayed as a minority. Her depiction on a set of 1975 stamps along with African-Americans and Hispanics was dubbed as "a concession to cultural pluralism."<sup>129</sup> Nonetheless, Sybil has also been featured in a board game, a musical, and a movie.

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<sup>127</sup> Paula D. Hunt, "Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine," *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2015): pp. 187-222, [https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg\\_a\\_00452](https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg_a_00452), 210.

<sup>128</sup> "I'm a Poet and The Scare Your Pants Off Club!," *Arthur* (PBS, n.d.) and "The Muppet Club," *Don't Fence Me In!* n.d.

<sup>129</sup> Paula D. Hunt, "Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine," *The New England Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (2015): pp. 187-222, [https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg\\_a\\_00452](https://doi.org/10.1162/tneg_a_00452), 210.

The greatest thing that sets Sybil Ludington apart from Paul Revere in popular culture is that all of Sybil's appearances are marketed towards women.<sup>130</sup> Sybil is getting recognition, but it is under the guise of the feminist hero that second-wave feminism crafted her to be. Instead of remembering her as a great feminist hero, she should simply be regarded by all Americans as a hero of the Revolutionary War and not be defined by her gender.

### Conclusion

American history is a complex subject. Unlike math or science, which have a concrete set of variables, formulas, and theories, many of the variables in American history have been left out. Of the many minority groups marginalized from the pages of American history textbooks, one of the largest is women. After being forgotten for nearly one hundred years after her historic ride, Sybil Ludington's reemergence back into the historical narrative is mostly due in part by the efforts of female scholars. The fight to give Sybil her place in history faces many detractors, yet she is slowly getting the respect and commemoration that she deserves. She was even suggested as a replacement for Andrew Jackson on the twenty-dollar bill.<sup>131</sup> Just as the folklore of Paul Revere lives on in the minds of every American, we have the chance to make Sybil Ludington a national hero by passing on the story to our friends and family. However, Paul Revere will continue to be known as the one who committed the true night ride so long as sexism in the documentation of American history persists. It is time to change the male domination of the American historical narrative and give respect the unsung heroes of the American Revolution like Sybil Ludington.

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>131</sup> Gail Collins. *A Woman's Place Is On the \$20* New York Times (1923-Current file); Mar 21, 2015; (ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times with Index), A19.

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