



Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere: The Making of a Revolutionary War Heroine

PAULA D. HUNT

ABOUT two weeks after Revolutionary War reenactors shouldered their muskets to commemorate the 232nd anniversary of the battles of Lexington and Concord, their counterparts in Carmel, New York, took to the field in April 2007. A young woman wearing a blue cape and sitting astride a white horse portrayed Sybil Ludington, “Putnam County’s teenage Paul Revere.” On the night of 26 April 1777 Ludington had ridden forty miles through the countryside to muster local militia against a British march on the military depot at Danbury, Connecticut, about fifteen miles to the southeast. The festivities in Carmel implied an American victory, but, in fact, the New York militia had not reached Danbury in time to prevent the British from destroying military provisions, torching the town, and fatally wounding Brigadier General David Wooster.¹ The burning of Danbury has, nevertheless, not harmed Sybil Ludington’s reputation over the years.²

I would like to thank reader Dr. Francesca Morgan for her invaluable assistance in completing this article. Thanks as well go to Dr. Earnest Pery and Dr. LeeAnn Whites of the University of Missouri, Kate Flaherty of the National Archives and Records Administration, Amy Menasché, and Cheryl Kempler.

¹The 2007 reenactments of Lexington and Concord took place on 14 April, the weekend in which the 19 April Patriot’s Day holiday was celebrated. Barbara Livingston Nackman, “Sybil Rides Again,” *New York Lower Hudson Valley Journal News*, 6 May 2007.

²For a brief overview of the burning of Danbury, and George Washington and John Adams’s reactions to the militia’s performance, see Mark V. Kwasny, *Washington’s Partisan War, 1775–1783* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1996), pp. 121–25.

The New England Quarterly, vol. LXXXVIII, no. 2 (June 2015). © 2015 by The New England Quarterly. All rights reserved. doi:10.1162/TNEQ.a.00452.

Recently, for example, she has been heralded as a suitable inductee into the proposed Women's National History Museum, intended for a site on the Mall in Washington, D.C. Democratic Representative Carolyn Maloney (N.Y.), who introduced the legislation along with Republican cosponsor Representative Marsha Blackburn (Tenn.), declared that such an institution was needed to recognize "the valid and incredibly important contributions of women" in the history of the United States. Among those who should be recognized, Maloney said, was "a woman who rode longer and farther than Paul Revere, and nobody even knows her name. Let's build this museum and talk about her contributions, too."³ How and why Sybil Ludington was transformed into an American heroine, a heroine whose exploits some see as rivaling Paul Revere's, tells us a good deal about how history is remembered, away from the influence of the academy, as Americans seek to define themselves in terms of a shared past that is constantly being renewed and reinvented.

As a story connected to the American Revolution, Sybil's ride embraces the mythical meanings and values expressed in the country's founding. As an individual, she represents Americans' persistent need to find and create heroes who embody prevalent attitudes and beliefs. In what follows, I will explore how Sybil was transformed into an American heroine, how her ride came to be considered a consequential part of the nation's foundational moment, and how her significance has been by turns heralded and challenged. Examining the story of Sybil reveals the various ways in which Americans of many stripes, in attempting to connect with the nation's past, can create a hero who advances their cause in response to contemporary political, social, and economic realities. Beyond the story of a woman who lived through the Revolutionary era and beyond the happenings of the night of 26 April 1777 in Dutchess (now Putnam) County, New York, Sybil's life and, even more important, her

³*Congressional Record*, 113th Cong., 2nd sess. (13 March 2014), H2421–28, quotations at H2425. The National Women's History Museum is currently an "online museum," located at <http://www.nwhm.org/about-nwhm/> (accessed 24 March 2014).

afterlife present an opportunity to explore how and why the American Revolution remains a defining and evocative event in our history as well as the many ways in which its legacy has been and continues to be contested.⁴



Sybil, daughter of Henry and Abigail Ludington, was born on 5 April 1761 in Fredericksburg, New York.⁵ On 21 October 1784 she married Edmund Ogden, who had served as a sergeant in a Connecticut regiment; he died on 16 September 1799.⁶ The couple had one son, Henry Ogden, who became a lawyer and a New York State assemblyman.⁷ In April 1838 Sybil attempted to obtain a widow's pension based on her husband's military service, but because she could not provide proof of her marriage, the U.S. War Department denied her claim.⁸ None of the sworn affidavits attesting to Henry Ogden's military service and the legitimacy of Sybil's marriage mentioned her ride, nor did she attempt to claim it as justification for a pension. According to the grave marker in the Presbyterian Church at

⁴In 1777, Dutchess County encompassed the area now known as Putnam County. Putnam County detached from Dutchess County in 1812.

⁵Sybil's date of birth is given in Willis Fletcher Johnson's *Colonel Henry Ludington: A Memoir* (New York: Charles H. Ludington and Lavinia Elizabeth Ludington, 1907), p. 44, a not wholly reliable source. Her name is spelled variously in sources. I will use the most frequent variation, while being faithful to the original when quoting directly.

⁶*Record of Connecticut Men in the Military and Naval Service during the War of the Revolution, 1775–1783*, ed. Henry P. Johnson (Hartford, Conn.: Case, Lockwood & Brainard, 1889), p. 67; *Revolutionary War Records of Fairfield, Connecticut*, ed. Donald Lines Jacobus and Kate S. Curry (1932; repr. Baltimore: Genealogical Publishing Co., 2004), pp. 239–40, 391; W. F. Johnson, *Colonel Henry Ludington*, p. 46; Ancestry.com, *U.S. Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files, 1800–1900* (database on-line; original publication, Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files [NARA microfilm publication M804, 2,670 rolls]); Records of the Department of Veterans Affairs, record group 15, National Archives, Washington, D.C.

⁷*New York Republican Watch-Tower*, 28 November 1809; "Election Returns, 1819," *New York Daily Advertiser*, 13 May 1819. W. F. Johnson reported (*Colonel Henry Ludington*, p. 219) that the Ludingtons raised four sons and two daughters; he likely confused Edmund with his son, Ogden, who did have six children.

⁸*Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files, 1800–1900*, where Sybil's age is listed as seventy-seven.

Patterson, New York, she died less than a year after submitting her petition, on 26 February 1839.⁹

The foregoing details did not make their way into Martha J. Lamb's *History of the City of New York: Its Origin, Rise, and Progress* (1880), where the story of Sybil's ride debuted. As she chronicled the city's role in the American Revolution, Lamb took note of Sybil's father, Colonel Henry Ludington, a commander in the Dutchess County militia. Lamb wrote that an exhausted messenger had arrived at the colonel's home with orders that he muster his troops, but "no one being at hand to call them, his daughter 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." Lamb reported she had consulted a wide variety of primary sources gathered from private individuals, historians, and libraries, including correspondence, "old sermons, records of trials, wills, genealogical manuscripts, documents and pamphlets."¹⁰ Given proof that she had communicated with the Ludington family, it seems likely that knowledge of Sybil's ride originated there.¹¹ Still, Lamb insisted, her methodological approach was carefully constructed to root out inaccuracies: "No one authority has been accepted and followed in any instance without further evidence; and where accounts have conflicted I have sought and secured every book and document relating to the subject, of which I

⁹"In Memory of Sibbell [*sic*] Ludington, Wife of Edmund Ogden, who died Feb. 26, 1839. Age 77 yrs. 10 mo. 21 ds."

¹⁰Martha J. Lamb, *History of the City of New York: Its Origin, Rise, and Progress*, vol. 2 (New York: A. S. Barnes & Co., 1880), pp. 159–60, vi.

¹¹E[*rminine*] S. Smith to Martha J. Lamb, n.d., Martha J. Lamb Papers, box 6, folder 9, New-York Historical Society, New York, N.Y. Smith writes: "I have just received a lovely note from Mrs. Ludington . . . [and] told her . . . that you felt sensibly the kindness of your numerous friends." Mrs. Ludington may have been the wife of Charles H. Ludington of New York City, who was among the "well-known grandchildren" of Colonel Ludington whom Lamb mentions in a footnote (*History of New York*, p. 213). C. H. Ludington apparently had in his possession a number of his grandfather's papers, including his commission in the New York State militia, a facsimile of which William S. Pelletreau reproduced in his *History of Putnam County, New York, with Biographical Sketches of Its Prominent Men* (Philadelphia: W. W. Preston & Co., 1886), pp. 695–96 (see W. F. Johnson, *Colonel Henry Ludington*, p. 192).

could obtain any knowledge, even if no more than one of my paragraphs was involved in the issues.”¹²

Lamb’s volume reflected conventional nineteenth-century historiography that conceived of the American Revolution as a momentous stage in the epic march toward progress that nationalism, capitalism, and the guidance and heroism of white men had facilitated. Published three to four generations after the events they recounted had transpired, histories such as Lamb’s were extremely popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹³ The nation’s noble past was still palpable, but it was also receding; print brought it close again, an effect that was particularly appealing for those whose forebears had been leading participants in, or whose locales had been sites of, glorious military action. As the editor of *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* observed in 1879, “Fortunately the Revolution is not so far behind us that immediate descendants of its heroes may not still be found who cherish the traditions of their families, and who have an unappeasable interest to find and to tell the truth that sheds lustre upon an ancestor.”¹⁴ The Ludingtons were just such a family.

At the same time as the colonial revival was reminding America of its Revolutionary past and Americans were endeavoring to find their links to it, sweeping social changes were also taking place. Immigration, particularly from eastern and southern Europe, surged from the mid-1890s to 1914, a phenomenon white, native-born Protestants viewed with alarm.¹⁵ To close

¹²Lamb, *History of New York*, p. v.

¹³In *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), Michael Kammen wrote that “the last decades of the nineteenth century were characterized by a growing interest in regional and local history, especially the contributions made by particular localities to the Revolutionary cause” (p. 63).

¹⁴George William Curtis, “Editor’s Easy Chair,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, January 1879, p. 305.

¹⁵For a discussion of immigration and Americanization at the turn of the twentieth century, see Thomas J. Archdeacon, *Becoming American: An Ethnic History* (New York: Free Press, 1983); Edward George Hartmann, *The Movement to Americanize the Immigrant* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948); and Barbara Miller Solomon, *Ancestors and Immigrants: A Changing New England Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956).

the gap between present and past even more tangibly, Americans, especially those living in states that had been among the original thirteen colonies, erected monuments and mounted pageants, reenactments, *tableaux vivants*, and exhibitions of relics.¹⁶ Women were at the forefront of many of these efforts. They also championed historic preservation projects, promoted history curricula in the schools, wrote books about colonial life, and established patriotic hereditary organizations.¹⁷ Admission to such groups required documentation of direct descent from a verified patriot, thus suggesting authentic citizenship as well as special access to, and ownership of, the past. Members of organizations such as the National Society, Daughters of the American Revolution (established 1890), the Colonial Dames of America (1890) and its National Society (1891), and the General Society of Mayflower Descendants (1897) took pride in their genealogical association with America's historic past.¹⁸ Especially noteworthy, according to historian Francesca Morgan, was the effort of these nationalistic female organizations to reach "young and popular audiences" and to incorporate "foremothers, as well as forefathers, into its history and commemoration work."¹⁹

The desire to connect with and recapture America's past helped produce the second and more influential telling of Sybil's story. The biography *Colonel Henry Ludington* (1907), published privately by the colonel's grandchildren Charles H. and Lavinia Elizabeth Ludington, sought to honor a little-known patriot of the American Revolution. Written by the historian and newspaper editor Willis Fletcher Johnson, the

¹⁶David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), pp. 14, 15.

¹⁷Karal Ann Marling, *George Washington Slept Here: Colonial Revivals and American Culture, 1876–1986* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 85–91, and Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), pp. 267–69.

¹⁸Kathleen W. Hinckley, "A Century of Genealogy," at <http://www.genealogy.com/61.kathy.html#author> (accessed 28 May 2014).

¹⁹Francesca Morgan, *Women and Patriotism in Jim Crow America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), p. 5.

book offered a laudatory account of Colonel Ludington's ancestors, his service in the British military, and his resignation from it to join the New York State militia in the struggle for independence. Charles H. Ludington and Lewis Patrick, another Ludington descendant, supplied Johnson with a number of documents, in addition to which the writer drew from "Colonial, Revolutionary and State records, newspaper files, histories and diaries, correspondence, various miscellaneous manuscript collections, and some oral traditions of whose authenticity there is substantial evidence."²⁰

Johnson's narrative of Sybil's ride reprised the essentials from Lamb's history of New York City, but it included descriptive flourishes and details not found in the earlier version. Of special note, it drew an auspicious parallel: "There is no extravagance in comparing her ride with that of Paul Revere."²¹ The Ludington biography was certainly not of the order of Johnson's usual projects. He edited the works of Theodore Roosevelt, penned a biography of William Tecumseh Sherman, and produced large-scale histories of Cuba (five volumes) and of America's westward expansion.²² Indeed, neither Johnson's *New York Times* obituary nor a posthumous tribute to him in the *North American Review* cited the Ludington book.²³ Nevertheless, the *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* called it a "charming, simple memoir" and a "straight-forward account of an honorable military career."²⁴ The review made no mention of Sybil, but then it was not her book. It was designed to remedy a belief that the Revolutionary-era militia

²⁰W. F. Johnson, *Colonel Henry Ludington*, p. viii.

²¹W. F. Johnson, *Colonel Henry Ludington*, p. 90.

²²Works by Willis Fletcher Johnson are as follows: *Addresses and Papers of Theodore Roosevelt* (New York: Unit Book Publishing Co., 1909); *Life of William Tecumseh Sherman, Late Retired General U.S.A.* (Philadelphia: Edgewood Publishing Company, 1891); *The History of Cuba*, 5 vols. (New York: B. F. Buck & Company, Inc., 1920); and *A Century of Expansion* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1903).

²³W. F. Johnson Dead: Editorial Writer," *New York Times*, 28 March 1931; B. S. Stanoyevich, "Willis Fletcher Johnson: A Tribute by One of His Associates on the *North American Review*," *North American Review*, July 1931, pp. 74-75.

²⁴"Col. Henry Ludington. A Memoir," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 62 (January 1908): 106.

and its officers had not received the recognition they deserved and to ensure the colonel's place in American history.²⁵ Instead, it achieved something entirely different: contrary to the intentions of its originators, it broadcast the story of a little-known colonial teenager whose sole feat eclipsed her father's distinguished, years-long record of service.

Sybil's appearance in the Lamb and Johnson volumes was singular. Elizabeth Ellet's two-volume *Domestic History of the American Revolution*, one of the first and best-known compilations of women's lives during the colonial era, recounts stories like that of Jane McJunkin of South Carolina, who wrested a quilt out of the arms of a looting British soldier. Neither its first edition (1848–50) nor its 1900 reprint mentioned Sybil (although in an updated 1998 edition, editor Lincoln Diamant chided Ellet for having “completely overlooked” Sybil).²⁶ Two historical collections about Revolutionary-era heroines, *Noble Deeds of American Women* (1851) and *Daughters of America* (1882), neglected Sybil, and the popular nineteenth-century magazine *Godey's Lady's Book*, which often published celebratory stories about First Ladies and other notable women, failed to mention her ride.²⁷ Sybil is nowhere to be found in Oliver Bell Bunce's *The Romance of the Revolution* (1870), which included the story of thirteen-year-old Mary Ann Gibbes, who “sprang forward and heroically offered” to rescue a baby in a nighttime mission that involved dodging British bullets and cannon fire.²⁸ Aside from her cameo in Lamb's *History of the City of New York*, Sybil was nowhere to be found in the

²⁵W. F. Johnson, *Colonel Henry Ludington*, p. vii.

²⁶Elizabeth Fries Ellet, *The Women of the American Revolution*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: Baker and Scribner, 1848–50; repr. Philadelphia: G. W. Jacobs, 1900); story of McJunkin at 1:262. *Revolutionary Women in the War for Independence: A One-volume Revised Edition of Elizabeth Ellet's 1848 Landmark Series*, ed. Lincoln Diamant (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1998), p. 11.

²⁷*Noble Deeds of American Women with Biographical Sketches of Some of the More Prominent*, ed. Jesse Clement (Buffalo, N.Y.: George H. Derby & Co., 1851); Phebe A. Hanaford, *Daughters of America or, Women of the Century* (Augusta, Me.: True and Company, 1882).

²⁸Oliver Bell Bunce, *The Romance of the Revolution: Being the True Stories of the Adventures, Romantic Incidents, Hairbreadth Escapes, and Heroic Exploits of the Days of '76* (Philadelphia: Porter & Coates, 1870), p. 274.

bevy of local histories that appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: William J. Blake's *The History of Putnam County* (1849), William S. Pelletreau's *The History of Putnam County, New York* (1886), and Frank Hasbrouck's *The History of Dutchess County, New York* (1909).²⁹ Blake identified Colonel Ludington as "one of the most active, energetic, and unflinching patriots that was found in this part of the country during the Revolution," but the biographer did not name the colonel's children. Narratives of American women's lives filled nineteenth-century books, magazines, and newspapers. "By the 1870s," historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has observed, "there were hundreds of . . . stories about the contributions of women to the American Revolution."³⁰ Sybil's daring act, though, had not spread beyond Lamb's and Johnson's local histories.

No matter. Sybil's story made a decided impression on twentieth-century Putnam and Dutchess County residents. The lower Hudson River Valley had not lacked Revolutionary drama, but, as John Shy has commented, "the whole area had become notorious for its political apathy and open opposition to the Revolution," for its loyalist sympathizers and "dozens of nasty little raids, ambushes, and encounters."³¹ Through Sybil, residents could lay claim to a Revolutionary past untroubled by unwanted factionalism. In 1929 the *Putnam County Courier* ran a piece by resident George S. Turner. Republished from the *Minute Man*, the magazine of the National Society, Sons of the American Revolution, it was retitled to reflect the subject's important local connection.³² "Putnam County's Feminine Paul

²⁹William J. Blake, *The History of Putnam County* (New York: Baker & Scribner, 1849), quotation and colonel covered pp. 328–29; Pelletreau, *History of Putnam County*; and Frank Hasbrouck, *The History of Dutchess County, New York* (Poughkeepsie, N.Y.: S. A. Matthieu, 1909). Sybil finally received mention in John Wilson Poucher and Barbara Corliss, *Yearbook of the Dutchess County Historical Society*, vol. 30 (Poughkeepsie: Dutchess County Historical Society, 1946).

³⁰Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "How Betsy Ross Became Famous: Oral Tradition, Nationalism, and the Invention of History," *Common-Place* 8.1 (October 2007), at <http://www.common-place.org/vol-08/no-01/ulrich/> (accessed 10 June 2014).

³¹John Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 185, 189.

³²George S. Turner, "A Feminine Paul Revere," *Minute Man*, July 1929, pp. 74–75, and "Putnam County's Feminine Paul Revere," *Putnam County Courier*, 19 July 1929.

Revere" introduced the *Courier's* readers to an important historical figure they had hitherto neglected.³³ Among them were members of the local Enoch Crosby Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), who would become Sybil's most passionate promoters and defenders.³⁴



In its first effort to honor Sybil, the Enoch Crosby Chapter took advantage of a program, overseen by the University of the State of New York, which was charged with allocating state-appropriated funds for commemorating the 150th anniversary of the American Revolution. A portion of the initiative's \$75,000 budget was set aside to erect historical roadside markers, relatively inexpensive but increasingly popular means for states and localities to promote tourism.³⁵ New York State Historian Alexander C. Flick spoke of the markers' utility in loftier terms; the markers would, he predicted, educate young people about their state and national history, instill a sense of pride in the populace, and "create a more intelligent and more active type of citizenship."³⁶ The executive committee in charge of the venture took no part in selecting who or what the historical

³³See the following pieces from the *Putnam County Courier* that covered events ostensibly relating to Sybil Ludington but did not mention her: "Burning of Danbury by British in 1777," 13 August 1926; "D.A.R. to Hold Patriotic Service at Court House Here," 2 July 1926; "D.A.R. Hear Historical Sketch of Putnam County," 23 December 1927; "Historical Sketch of the Patterson Baptist Church," 16 March 1928.

³⁴The Enoch Crosby Chapter was organized in May 1926. Enoch Crosby was an American spy for the Continental Army in the American Revolution. Crosby lived in Dutchess County and has been identified as the central character in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground* (1824). See *Putnam County Courier*: "Meeting of Enoch Crosby Chapter D.A.R., Thursday," 2 April 1926, and "D.A.R. Has Interesting Session in Patterson," 11 April 1930.

³⁵On the background of the program, see William Leland Thompson, "The Observance of the 150th Anniversary of the American Revolution in New York," *New York History* 15.1 (January 1934): 59–65. On the rising popularity of roadside markers, see William B. Rhoads, "Roadside Colonial: Early American Design for the Automobile Age, 1900–1940," *Winterthur Portfolio* 21.2/3 (1986): 133; Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, p. 338; and "History for the Tourist," *New York Times*, 26 April 1936.

³⁶A. C. Flick, "Historical Markers for New York State," *Proceedings of the New York State Historical Association* 8.3 (July 1927): 254.

roadside markers would recognize but, instead, delegated to each community the responsibility for identifying subjects and placement.³⁷ The Enoch Crosby Chapter took leadership of the Putnam County project. The blue-and-buff cast iron markers began to appear in 1934, in the midst of the Great Depression; those honoring Sybil Ludington and her father were installed the following year.³⁸

The commemoration of the relatively obscure New York State militia officer and his daughter marked the convergence of two cultural trends of the 1930s: a resurgence in the popularity of George Washington and the American Revolution, and a celebration of Everyman. In a nationally broadcast radio address on 30 May 1931, President Herbert Hoover compared the challenges of the Great Depression to those faced by the Revolutionary War general and his soldiers at their 1777–78 winter encampment. “The American people are going through another Valley Forge at this time,” Hoover said. “God grant that we may prove worthy of George Washington and his men.”³⁹ Images that commemorated the bicentennial of Washington’s birth in 1932 were widely circulated; among them was a set of twelve stamps issued by the United States Post Office Department and reproductions of the popular Norman Rockwell oil painting *Guiding Influence* (1934), which rendered youth, patriotism, and democracy in its depiction of a white boy seated at a desk with a spectral vision of the first president hovering above him.

³⁷*Proposed Program to Commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the American Revolution* (Albany, N.Y.: University of the State of New York, State Department of Education, 1925), p. 3.

³⁸Peter Nelson to Mrs. John Miller Horton, 24 August 1926, and correspondence files of the executive secretary of the Executive Committee on the 150th Anniversary of the American Revolution, ser. B0568, 1926–29, New York State Archives, Albany, N.Y. Correspondence between Raymond H. Torrey, secretary of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society in New York City, and Irving Adler, of the Archives and History Division of the State Education Department in Albany, suggests that confusion over ordering the markers and a dispute over who had the authority to install them delayed their placement (unprocessed historical marker file, New York State Archives).

³⁹“America in New ‘Valley Forge’ Must Prove Worthy of Patriots,” *Spokesman-Review*, 31 May 1931; Herbert Hoover, “Memorial Day Address at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania,” The American Presidency Project, at <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=22683> (accessed 20 April 2014).

If Washington represented an aspirational response to hardship, the tenacity of ordinary Americans in the face of economic catastrophe offered a different kind of solace and an alternative model of heroism. Presidential candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Forgotten Man" radio address hailed average citizens and acknowledged their crucial role in the country's economic recovery.⁴⁰ Movie audiences identified with the everyday heroes of director Frank Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and they cheered on the workaday thoroughbred Seabiscuit. "There should be a lesson to two-legged animals in a four-legged one," the *Saturday Evening Post* (1940) wrote of "the Biscuit," who finally won a race in his eighteenth start. "He went on to beat the best there were and to win more money than any horse ever did before."⁴¹ Like real, fictional, and equine heroes, the Ludingtons represented ordinary people who had performed extraordinary feats during times of adversity.

For Putnam County residents, honoring Colonel Ludington and Sybil with historical roadside markers was a way of recognizing two unsung Americans who had been in their own way important to the fulfillment of the country's promise. "It has been a pleasure to all of us concerned in this undertaking," reported Raymond H. Torrey, secretary of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society, "to clear away some of the mists of the past around [the Ludingtons] and to make more widely known and, we hope, permanently appreciated, the nature of their services." The father and daughter, he noted, "should never be forgotten by the people of this region, as among the most loyal and effective patriots in the years of the

⁴⁰Franklin D. Roosevelt, "The Forgotten Man Speech," 7 April 1932, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1928-1932*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1938), pp. 624-25. The term "forgotten man" was actually coined by Yale economist William Graham Sumner in "*The Forgotten Man*" and *Other Essays* (1876; repr. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1918).

⁴¹For Frank Capra as a populist filmmaker, see Glenn Alan Phelps, "The 'Populist' Films of Frank Capra," *Journal of American Studies* 13,3 (1979): 377-92, and Jeffrey Richards, "Frank Capra and the Cinema of Populism," *Film Society Review* 7.7-9 (1972): 38-46, 61-71. "Champion," *Saturday Evening Post*, 27 April 1940, p. 28. For the perception that Seabiscuit was a populist hero, see Laura Hillenbrand, *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001).

American Revolution.”⁴² The installation of the historical roadside markers, which became physical links between the region’s residents and its two local heroes, was covered extensively in the *Putnam County Courier*. It reprinted speeches, schedules of events, descriptions of activities, and the “Historic Facts” behind them.⁴³ Of the thirty-three markers, two carried the colonel’s name alone, nine carried both his and his daughter’s names, and of those nine Sybil received top billing on seven.

The markers pertaining to Sybil were strategically placed along the route of her ride through the countryside. However, since neither Lamb nor Johnson had offered any information about Sybil’s course, it was left to the project’s managers to come up with one. The determination—shared among Enoch Crosby Chapter members, local historians, a descendant of Colonel Ludington, and Raymond H. Torrey⁴⁴—was likely made with reference to a map prepared by Continental Army surveyor Robert Erskine and cross-referenced with muster rolls of Colonel Ludington’s militia unit.⁴⁵ Despite their speculative origins, from their first appearance the historical roadside markers were assumed to accurately trace Sybil’s heroic forty-mile ride.⁴⁶ And, in due time, they reflexively became evidence

⁴²“Historic Facts Reviewed at Dedication of Markers by D.A.R. Monday,” *Putnam County Courier*, 17 May 1935. The American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society was closely involved in the historical marker project in Dutchess County. “Cooperation of the Society on Roadside Historical Markers,” *Scenic and Historic America* 4.4 (January 1937): 20–22.

⁴³“Historic Facts Reviewed at Dedication of Markers.”

⁴⁴Raymond H. Torrey, “Signs to Mark Historic Ride of Revolutionary Heroine to Be Seen by Motorists Tomorrow,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 9 September 1934. Torrey’s name and signature appear on eight forms entitled “Report of Unmarked Historic Site or Building,” issued by the State Education Department, that were used to recommend sites for historical roadside markers about Sybil Ludington. Johnson’s book and descendants of Colonel Ludington are cited on the forms as sources for her history, but how they contributed to establishing her route is not divulged.

⁴⁵Robert Erskine, Map of Roads in the Area Bounded by Peekskill and Fishkill, Quaker Hill, and Ridgeberry (Conn.), record no. 159, Erskine Dewitt Map Collection, New-York Historical Society, New York, N.Y.; Berthold Fernow, *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, vol. 1 (Albany: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1887), pp. 283–84; Blake, *History of Putnam County*, pp. 98–99; James A. Roberts and Frederick G. Mather, *New York in the Revolution as Colony and State*, vol. 1 (Albany: J. B. Lyon Company, 1904), pp. 149–52.

⁴⁶See Fred C. Warner, “Sybil Ludington’s Famous Ride,” *The Yorker*, January–February 1962, p. 5; Torrey, “Signs to Mark Historic Ride of Revolutionary Heroine to

of it. This evidence, in turn, was used by succeeding writers who sought to chronicle her story. By 1937, writers composing a guidebook of historic Dutchess County for the Federal Writer's Project of the Works Progress Administration did not even bother to identify Colonel Ludington by name when discussing the exploits of "Sibyl Ludington, daughter of a colonel of [the] Continental militia."⁴⁷ Just a generation after playing a small supporting role in a book about her father, Sybil had overtaken him as Putnam County's leading American Revolutionary War hero.

On the cusp of America's entry into World War II, Sybil was celebrated in verse. Appearing on 14 April 1940 in the nationally syndicated Sunday newspaper supplement *This Week* magazine, "Sybil Ludington's Ride" put the teenager's story into the hands of over five and a half million readers across the country. Berton Braley's poem, which echoed Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride" in rhyme, meter, and pacing, recast its famous opening lines:

Listen, my children, and you shall hear
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.⁴⁸

Be Seen by Motorists Tomorrow." In 1991, a second set of historical roadside markers was installed along Sybil Ludington's route by artist Eric Arctander, who received funding from the New York State Council on the Arts. See Eric Gross, "'Sybil's Run' Pays Tribute to an American Hero," *Putnam County Courier*, 16 December 1999, and Kathleen Sweeney, "Garrison Art Center Welcomes Teen Artists," *Putnam County News and Recorder*, 9 February 2000.

⁴⁷The Workers of the Dutchess County Unit, Federal Writers' Project, of the Works Progress Administration in the State of New York, *Dutchess County* (Philadelphia: William Penn Association, 1937), p. 116.

⁴⁸Berton Braley, "Sybil Ludington's Ride," *This Week* magazine, from the *Sunday Washington, D.C., Star*, 14 April 1940. See also N. W. Ayer & Son's *Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals, 1940* (Philadelphia: N. W. Ayer & Son, 1940), p. 658. The *New York Times* noted that Braley "wrote verses by the thousands, short stories by the hundreds and books by the score" ("Berton Braley, Poet, Dies at 83," *New York Times*, 27 January 1966).

Like Longfellow's poem, which first appeared in 1860, Braley's was published at a time when America was facing the possibility of war. When America did enter World War II in December 1941, the country reached back to reconnect with its patriotic past, and allusions to and images of the Founding Fathers appeared across the media, from army recruitment and war bond posters, to movies, to advertisements, to popular literature.⁴⁹ Women's contributions to the war effort, in particular their assuming traditionally male production jobs à la Rosie the Riveter were encouraged and praised. The poem about Sybil anticipated that development by presenting her ride as fully as "darling" as Paul's and, thus, just as essential to an American victory.

As David Hackett Fischer has noted, while Paul Revere was recognized as a patriot among his peers, not until Longfellow immortalized him in a poem published almost ninety years later did he become famous for a ride little noted in his own lifetime.⁵⁰ In Longfellow's hands, Revere was glorified as the lone hero who had had a profound effect on the Revolution, while in reality his actions had had no decisive impact on subsequent events. Revere's ride nonetheless became a touchstone in American history, and Sybil's proponents argued that hers should be as well. After all, she had ridden forty miles to Revere's twelve, and she was a mere girl.⁵¹



⁴⁹See Steven H. Jaffe, *Who Were the Founding Fathers? Two Hundred Years of Reinventing American History* (New York: Macmillan, 1996), p. 147. Esther Forbes's *Paul Revere and the World He Lived In* (1942) received the Pulitzer Prize in history (1943), and she received a John Newbery Medal (1944) for her juvenile novel *Johnny Tremain* (1944). See *Contemporary Authors, Permanent Series*, vol. 1 (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1975), p. 216. The movie *George Washington Slept Here* (1942), based on the George S. Kaufman and Moss Hart play of the same name, told the story of a couple who bought a home ostensibly haunted by the first president. Among the many advertisements featuring the Founding Fathers was one for war savings bonds that pictured Paul Revere, strategically published in the *New York Times* on 19 April 1942.

⁵⁰David Hackett Fischer, "Myths of the Midnight Rider," *New York Times*, 18 April 1994, and *Paul Revere's Ride* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 331–33.

⁵¹See Alison Rooney, "Sybil Ludington: Exactly What Americans Are Made Of," 21 January 2012, at Philipstown.info, <http://philipstown.info/2012/01/21/sybil-ludington-exactly-what-americans-are-made-of/> (accessed 29 May 2014); Michael Risnit, "Kent Historical Society Saying No to Sybil Movie Money," *New York Lower Hudson Valley Journal News*, 29 April 2007; and Antonia Petrash, *More Than Petticoats: Remarkable New York Women* (Guilford, Conn.: Globe Pequot Press, 2002), p. 30.

Sybil Ludington's Ride (1952), the first of many twentieth-century books to be written about the girl rider, was published as Cold War tensions were escalating. Pitched to ten- to fourteen-year-old readers, it was composed and illustrated by the well-known children's book author Erick Berry. While driving through Putnam County around 1950, Berry had noticed the historical roadside markers about Sybil. Her interest piqued, as the *New York Times* noted, she set out "to unearth scanty facts about this teen-age heroine of the Revolution." Praising the book's historical angle, the *Times* declared that "fact-founded adventures like this one always seem a little more satisfying than purely fictional ones."⁵² Berry listed as her sources "a short poem about [Sybil] written some years back, a short write-up and map made at the time the historical roadside markers were put up," and a "brief and colorlessly written book" about the Ludington family.⁵³ Despite Berry's claim that *Sybil Ludington's Ride* took only "a slight liberty with the Ludington household, but all other details are historically accurate," her book was essentially a work of fiction.⁵⁴

Berry jettisoned six of the Ludingtons' children and their mother, leaving Sybil and her younger sister, Rebecca, to carry

⁵²Nina Brown Baker, "Patriot's Ride," *New York Times*, 6 April 1952. Erick Berry was the pseudonym of Allena Best. For a biography of Berry/Best and a list of her published work, see Christine Nasso, ed., *Contemporary Authors Permanent Series*, vol. 2 (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1978), pp. 57–58. Berry received a Newbery Medal for her *Winged Girl of Knossos* (1933) ("Newbery Medal and Honor Books, 1922–Present," American Library Association, at <http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/newberymedal/newberyhonors/newberymedal#30s> [accessed 21 February 2014], and *Bulletin from Virginia Kirkus' Bookshop Service*, 1 February 1952, p. 76).

⁵³Erick Berry, *Sybil Ludington's Ride* (New York: Viking Press, 1952), dust jacket; author's note. Berry tells the story of how she got the idea for *Ride* on the dust jacket, which also has a photograph of Berry and her husband. More specifically, the sources were probably the Braley poem, a map of the roadside markers that accompanied Torrey's 9 September 1934 article "Signs to Mark Historic Ride of Revolutionary Heroine to Be Seen by Motorists Tomorrow" as published by the *International Herald Tribune* (among Berry's papers archived at the de Grummond Children's Literature Collection at the University of Southern Mississippi is a copy of the article), and the Johnson biography. The paste-downs on the inside front and back covers of *Sybil Ludington's Ride* reproduced the map that accompanied the *New York Herald Tribune* article about the installation of the historical roadside markers.

⁵⁴Berry, *Sybil Ludington's Ride*, dust jacket. Berry decreed on the book's dust jacket that "writers are allowed liberty with facts."

the narrative.⁵⁵ In Berry's imaginative rendition, Sybil threw on her father's clothes, carried a lantern, and rode a sorrel colt, Star—details that would emerge in later “histories.” Perhaps the most widespread invention Berry promulgated was the name of Sybil's horse, which neither Lamb nor Johnson had specified.⁵⁶ Berry would likely have been pleased with that development because, as she reported on her book's dust jacket, “really it's the little horse who interested me as much as Sybil's ride.”

Berry's industrious, self-reliant, and spirited Sybil fit neatly with 1950s ideas about youth and patriotism. While the danger of the Red Coats was long passed, that of the Red Menace loomed large. More sinister in every way, it threatened to infiltrate America and undermine its freedoms by indoctrinating its young people. Books such as E. Merrill Root's *Brainwashing in the High Schools: An Examination of Eleven American History Textbooks* and organizations such as the American Legion and the Chamber of Commerce warned that outside forces were targeting the country's most vulnerable citizens.⁵⁷ In *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), Fredric Wertham cautioned that mass media, particularly comic books (with their undertones of bondage and homosexuality), were having an insidious influence on youth.⁵⁸ As historian James Gilbert has commented, “Perhaps it is an exaggeration to say that America became obsessed with delinquency and youth culture in this period. . . . But something close to a single-minded worry focused on

⁵⁵Although Henry and Abigail Ludington would eventually have twelve children, only eight had been born by 22 April 1777. W. F. Johnson, *Colonel Henry Ludington*, p. 45.

⁵⁶See Wendy DeGiglio, “Race to Honor Sybil Ludington,” *Putnam Recorder Dispatch*, 4 April 1998; J. C. Haviland, “The Unsung Ride of Sybil Ludington,” *North County News/This Week* magazine supplement, 24 April 1985, p. 2; Jane McMahon, “Sybil Ludington Rides Again,” *Yonkers Herald Statesman*, 22 April 1977; Douglas Cunningham, “Putnam County History Day to Feature Revolutionary War Re-enactors,” *Putnam County News and Recorder*, 1 October 2003.

⁵⁷E. Merrill Root, *Brainwashing in the High Schools: An Examination of Eleven American History Textbooks* (New York: Devin-Adair Publishing, 1958); Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 85, 97.

⁵⁸Fredric Wertham, *Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rinehart, 1954).

the pernicious culture consumed by of [*sic*] American adolescents.”⁵⁹ What America’s youth needed was a role model like Sybil, who provided a moral counterweight to the corrupting cultural forces of Elvis Presley, movies like “Blackboard Jungle” (1955), and voluptuous characters like the comics’ Phantom Lady.⁶⁰

In the context of Cold War anxieties, Sybil’s ride was not simply an act of youthful courage but an affirmation of American exceptionalism that needed to be revived in an imperiled era. “We are living in troubled times,” warned “Onward for God and My Country,” the introduction to the 47th Annual Report of the Boy Scouts of America (1956). The threat seemed almost self-evident: “On the one hand, we have the free democratic nations, dedicated to the cause of peace, and on the other, the Communist-controlled people behind the Iron Curtain.”⁶¹ Nature and outdoor activities, in particular, were seen as conducive to building character, teaching self-reliance, and fostering good citizenship. During the 1950s, the popularity of summer camps, the Boy Scouts of America, and the Girl Scouts of the United States of America swelled.⁶² Catherine Tilley Hammett’s “Camping: Its Part in the National Defense” (1951) emphasized that “in times of stress,” camping skills were

⁵⁹James Burkhart Gilbert, *A Cycle of Outrage: America’s Reaction to the Juvenile Delinquent in the 1950s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 14.

⁶⁰*Time* magazine even published a special issue on the topic: “Teenagers on the Rampage,” *Time*, 1 March 1956.

⁶¹*Annual Report of Boy Scouts of America, 1956*, Congressional Serial Set, vol. 9 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1957), p. 1.

⁶²Between 1950 and 1958, the total membership of the Boy Scouts of America rose from 2,795 to 4,951 (an increase of 77 percent), and the total membership of the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. rose from 1,646 to 3,295 (an increase of 100 percent) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1959* [Washington, D.C., 1959], p. 296). For more on the effort to draw American youth into scouting and nature, see Jay Mechling, *On My Honor: Boy Scouts and the Making of American Youth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Leslie Paris, *Children’s Nature: The Rise of the American Summer Camp* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Peter Schmitt, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990); David E. Shi, “Ernest Thompson Seton and the Boy Scouts: A Moral Equivalent of War?” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 84.4 (1985): 379–91; and Abigail Ayres Van Slyck, *A Manufactured Wilderness: Summer Camps and the Shaping of American Youth, 1890–1960* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

more important than ever to the country's well-being. Outdoor recreation was not entertainment, Hammett wrote, but a purposeful activity in which young people needed to "realize that they are doing their part to serve the country."⁶³ Accordingly, Girl Scouts in Putnam County could earn badges at the Sybil Ludington Camp, and young campers could hike along the route of Sybil's ride as laid out by the 1930s historical markers.⁶⁴

The reassuring American past Sybil represented could also be imaged by summoning an association with the natural world. The *Poughkeepsie New Yorker* (1952) ran a photograph and described an oak tree Sybil had supposedly ridden past in 1777 as having had "known the wildness of a young country, and [witnessed] the development of the enterprising, democratic civilization for which the freedom-loving Sybil Ludington of its earlier days had dreamed and fought."⁶⁵ As a longstanding symbol of strength and significance in American history, the oak tree also suggested a fitting and natural kinship with the girl rider who embodied the best of the country's values. While the Cold War decades were not the only era in which outdoor recreation was advocated as a means of promoting healthy minds and bodies or in which natural elements of the landscape were taken to be long-lived witnesses to man's noble feats, Sybil's specific, homegrown association with the social rewards of goal-directed activities and her link to the American Revolution indicated that local residents, in particular, believed her to be an especially meaningful representation of a patriotically useful past.



⁶³Catherine Tilley Hammett, "Camping: Its Part in National Defense," *Recreation*, June 1951, pp. 158, 159.

⁶⁴"Girl Scouts Enjoying Life at Sybil Ludington Camp," *Putnam County Courier*, 12 July 1951; Nathan Dykeman, "County Can Share Credit in Young Sybil's Night Ride to Summon Father's Troops," *Poughkeepsie Journal*, 2 July 1961; "1952 Campers Trace Route of 1776 [sic] Ride," *Putnam County Courier*, 14 August 1952.

⁶⁵"White Oak Is Symbol of Early History, Marks Route of Sybil Ludington's 1777 Ride," *Poughkeepsie New Yorker*, 27 January 1952; the article included a photograph of the tree.

Sybil took another stride toward national recognition in 1961 when the Enoch Crosby Chapter dedicated a four-thousand-pound bronze sculpture of her on the shores of Lake Gleneida.⁶⁶ Unlike Revere's statue in Boston, which depicts him as a stately Founding Father, both his mount and his emotions carefully in check (see fig. 1), Sybil's portrays a woman bent on shaking up history (see fig. 2). Mouth agape and sitting sidesaddle on an agitated horse straining at the bit, she waves a stick in her right hand. Sculptor Anna Hyatt Huntington, who was herself a member of the DAR, said her work was inspired by a poem about Sybil. "Her exploit," the artist explained, "was exciting and she was interesting and appealing." The *Putnam County Courier* proclaimed that Sybil's statue "would remind residents over the centuries of the staunch predecessors who defended their countryside," and, indeed, it has served its purpose well.⁶⁷ Still, there are no statues in Dutchess or Putnam counties commemorating "staunch predecessors" Colonel Ludington and the American soldier and spy Enoch Crosby, for whom the local DAR chapter was named. On the contrary, they have continued to slide into obscurity.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the emerging discipline of social history provided a framework for a generation of scholars eager to study the past from the bottom up. Linda Grant DePauw, for one, criticized historians for "not think[ing] anyone would be interested in reading about the lives of ordinary people, especially ordinary women." Academics and others needed to

⁶⁶"Statue Unveiled of 1777 Heroine," *New York Times*, 4 June 1961. Smaller replicas of the statue were also installed at the headquarters of the National Women's Party in Washington, D.C., and in front of the Danbury Library in Danbury, Connecticut ("Ludington Statue Replica Unveiled in Washington Saturday," *Putnam County Courier*, 23 May 1963). Sybil is referred to as "Danbury's Paul Revere" in Stacy Davis, "Women's Fight Is Not Over," *Danbury News-Times*, 6 April 2012.

⁶⁷Ann V. Masters, "Anna Hyatt Huntington Carves Female Paul Revere," *Bridgeport Sunday Post*, 21 August 1960. Huntington said that she depicted Sybil riding sidesaddle because "All the historians say women rode side saddle at that time." Huntington had apparently not read, or simply ignored, Johnson's book on Sybil's father in which she is described as "clinging to a man's saddle" (*Colonel Henry Ludington*, p. 89). In contrast, in 1915, Huntington had sculpted Joan of Arc astride her horse (George Frederick Kunz, "The Dedication of the Statue of Joan of Arc" [New York: Museum of French Art, French Institute in the United States, 1916], p. 7).

seek out authentic “hidden heroines,” she urged, rather than resorting to the usual standard bearers like Betsy Ross, who was “known for something she did not do.” DePauw singled out Sybil Ludington as among those women whose stories were “both truer and more dramatic” than Ross’s and needed “to be brought to public attention.” Yet, in pressing her case for Sybil, she alluded to a number of relevant facts that were, in truth, fictions: a horse named Star, a stick in her hand, and a forty-mile ride.⁶⁸ The historical interpretation of Sybil as an ordinary, overlooked American girl who despite membership in an oppressed class had taken charge of her fate resonated with scholars seeking to place women at the center of their historical narratives. That the details of Sybil’s particular deed were rarely questioned only served to enhance her usefulness.

As planning for the observance of the International Year of the Woman (1975) and of America’s bicentennial (1976) got underway, projects that included Sybil further elevated her national profile. The National Organization for Women (NOW) produced a multimedia slideshow, *Our North American Foremothers*, which included Sybil along with Harriet Tubman, Margaret Sanger, and the 1872 presidential candidate Victoria Woodhull.⁶⁹ *Ms.* magazine ran a story about Sybil in its antisexist, multiracial *Stories for Free Children* series, while the documentary *The American Woman: Portraits of Courage* opened with a scene featuring Sybil.⁷⁰ In remarks headlined “Pauline Revere,” Representative Stewart B. McKinney (R. Conn.) asserted in 1975 that it was particularly important to acknowledge Sybil’s heroics because “during the past 198 years . . . we have continually attempted to throw off the yoke of discrimination

⁶⁸Linda Grant De Pauw, *Founding Mothers: Women in America in the Revolutionary Era* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), pp. xi, 161, 163–64.

⁶⁹Laurie Johnston, “Show Dramatizes Women’s Victories,” *New York Times*, 14 November 1972. One of the slideshow venues was a National Education Association conference on “sexism in education.” See also “NOW Remembers Sybil, Putnam’s Paul Revere,” *Patent Trader*, 7 December 1972.

⁷⁰Ruth 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.



FIG. 1.—Statue of Paul Revere, Boston, Mass. Sculpted by Cyrus E. Dallin, c. 1883; dedicated 1940.

against sex and age. Perhaps we can learn a valuable lesson from Sybil.”⁷¹ For decades, the comparison with Paul Revere had served to authenticate Sybil as a genuine American hero insofar as it offered a white male archetype with whom she could be linked. As the rank of famous women grew and Sybil assumed her place among them, she took on her own authority. She now had the power to confer heroic status on others,

⁷¹Stewart B. McKinney, “Pauline Revere: A Lesson for Today,” *Congressional Record*, 94th Cong., 1st sess. (30 July 1975), H26157–58.



FIG. 2.—Statue of Sybil Ludington, Carmel, N.Y. Sculpted by Anna Hyatt Huntington; dedicated 1961.

and yet she also remained a convenient go-to personality when a politician, scholar, or representative of the media wanted to demonstrate his or her grasp of gender issues.

She was on call, notably, when critics alleged that plans for the commemoration of the bicentennial of the American Revolution were insufficiently attuned to the need for diversity. In response, the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission agreed to accept recommendations from “special interest

groups, citizen organizations, youth and ethnic-racial groups.”⁷² In a concession to cultural pluralism, Sybil, dubbed a “Youthful Heroine,” was featured along with an African American soldier, a Hispanic soldier, and a Jewish financier in a four-stamp sheet set included in the United States Postal Service’s Bicentennial Contributors to the Cause series.⁷³ The stamp was a coup for the Enoch Crosby Chapter, which had begun lobbying the Postal Service in the early 1970s. In a letter to local U.S. Representative Hamilton Fish Jr., the group argued that “since Putnam County played such an important part in the American Revolution, it would seem fitting that one of our heroines be honored by a Bicentennial stamp.” The women did not make a case for Colonel Ludington, nor did the DAR recognize him with a commemorative pewter medal, as it did his daughter.⁷⁴



The bicentennial disputes of the 1970s in which Sybil played a part foreshadowed the splintering of a consensual understanding of the American Revolution in the last twenty years of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. Diversity, inclusivity, and the politics of recognition became important drivers of public policy as well as engines of ideological

⁷²For debate about the preparations for the bicentennial, see Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), pp. 146–54; American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, *The Bicentennial of the United States of America: Final Report to the People*, 5 vols. (Washington, D.C.: American Revolution Bicentennial Administration, 1977), 1:244–46.

⁷³“Sybil Stamp Scheduled for March 25 Issue,” *Putnam County Courier*, 23 January 1975; “Sybil Ludington Stamp Issued,” *Putnam County Courier*, 6 March 1975; Jane McMahon, “Sybil Ludington Has Her Day,” *Putnam County Courier*, 26 March 1975; and Samuel A. Tower, “Space ‘Pioneers’ Hailed by U.S.,” *New York Times*, 9 February 1975. Sybil’s recognition by the Postal Service is noteworthy, David Bushnell writes, 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 (“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).

⁷⁴Mrs. Ruloff Both to Hamilton Fish Jr., 13 July 1974, Sybil Ludington file, Enoch Crosby Chapter, DAR, Carmel, N.Y. Sybil’s image was engraved on one of the thirty-six commemorative coins in the Great Women of the American Revolution series issued by the DAR from 1974 to 1977 and produced by the Franklin Mint.

conflict over the nature and substance of history. Like such professed marginalized groups as African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics, women, too, sought to remedy their past omissions from the narrative of American history.⁷⁵ Historian Carol Berkin, who would later include Sybil in *Revolutionary Mothers: Women in the Struggle for America's Independence* (2007), wrote that it was particularly important that girls be introduced to strong women who could instill in them a reverence for liberty and an appreciation of history. According to Berkin, "You read some of these huge tomes on the American Revolution, and they don't even mention women."⁷⁶ The feminist scholar Martha Nussbaum said that her patriotic feelings were stirred when she was about six years old as she read a book about Sybil. "Something as abstract as political liberty acquired motivational force through its embodiment in the persona of a little girl whom I wanted to be," Nussbaum acknowledged. "She was a defiant girl, not a submissive traditionalist, and so I linked love of country to that spirit of autonomy."⁷⁷ For Nussbaum and others, Sybil's youth and gender as they related to her heroism transcended the little that was known about her and forged affecting bonds between contemporary women and America's past. These bonds in turn served to validate efforts to construct a more diverse and pluralistic history of the American Revolution.

Sped along by the energies of an increased emphasis on gender, the rise of social history, and campaigns to create multicultural curricula, Sybil galloped into America's classrooms. Her story, which had been a staple in elementary schools in

⁷⁵See DePauw, *Founding Mothers*; Paul Engle, *Women in the American Revolution* (Chicago: Follett Publishing Company, 1976); David James Harkness, *Northeastern Heroines of the American Revolution: A Bicentennial Publication* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Continuing Education Series, 1974); Edith Patterson Meyer, *Petticoat Patriots of the American Revolution* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1976); Diane Silcox-Jarrett, *Heroines of the American Revolution: America's Founding Mothers* (New York: Scholastic, 1998), p. 5.

⁷⁶Quoted in Susan Campbell, "An Unheralded Patriot Girl," *Hartford Courant*, 30 May 2005.

⁷⁷Martha Nussbaum, "Teaching Patriotism: Love and Critical Reform," University of Chicago Public Law & Legal Theory Working Paper No. 357 (2011), pp. 1, 33.

Dutchess and Putnam Counties, was folded into the fourth-grade course of study in districts around New York State.⁷⁸ Through classes and seminars offered by the New York Historical Association, the Institute of History, Archaeology and Education, and SUNY Orange's Continuing and Professional Education Program, educators learned about Sybil's pedagogical value and applications thereof.⁷⁹ In 1995 the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education used a narrative of Sybil's deeds to test students' literacy for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (better known as the Nation's Report Card).⁸⁰ This test, along with textbooks such as Houghton Mifflin's *America Will Be*,⁸¹ introduced Sybil to children across the country, transforming her from a local heroine into a truly American one. Sybil may never have envisioned an America extending beyond the Alleghenies, but in the early twenty-first century, Texas sixth-graders took

⁷⁸See New York City Office of Curriculum and Professional Development, *Colonial and Revolutionary Periods, Grade 4: Unit 3* (New York: Department of Social Studies, NYC Department of Education, 2008). See also Emerson J. Dillon *Middle School 7th Grade Social Studies Curriculum* (Phoenix, N.Y.: Phoenix Central School District, 2008), at <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:ZUQTsWv1e6sJ:https://jalfier4.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/edited-curriculum-word-format.doc+&cd=23&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us> (accessed 16 February 2015); *Grade 4 Social Studies Curriculum* (Rome, N.Y.: Rome City School District, 2003), at <http://www.romecsd.org/Page/482> (accessed 16 February 2015); *West Hempstead U.F.S.D. Social Studies Core Curriculum* (Hempstead: West Hempstead Union Free School District, 2009), at <http://www.whufsd.com/pdf/district/curriculum/projects/Social%20Studies%20Grades%204-6,%202009.pdf> (accessed 24 April 2014).

⁷⁹"Sybil Ludington: Correcting American History," American Revolution Teacher-hostel, Institute of History, Archaeology and Education, June 2011, at <http://www.ihare.org/programs.teacher2011revolution.html> (accessed 24 April 2014); "College Offers Hudson Valley History Course," *Times Herald Record* (17 January 2103), at <http://www.recordonline.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20130117/COMM/301170315/-1/NEWS43> (accessed 24 April 2014); "Sybil Ludington and the Art of DBQs [Document-Based Questions]," 2008 October Conference for Teachers, New York State Historical Association Cooperstown, N.Y., at http://www.nysha.org/files/october_teachers_conf/oct_program_2008.pdf (accessed 24 April 2014).

⁸⁰Paul L. Williams et al., 1994 *NAEP Reading: A First Look: Findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress* (Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, 1995). National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, *Reading Literacy in the United States: Findings from the IEA Reading Literacy Study* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1996).

⁸¹Beverly J. Armento, Gary B. Nash, Christopher L. Salter, and Karen K. Wixson, eds., *America Will Be* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1991).

a state-administered assessment test that included a reading comprehension component based on her story.⁸²

But while Sybil's ride into classrooms nationwide furthered her status as a bona fide American hero, it also occasioned scrutiny and criticism as well. Her detractors, many of whom were conservatives, viewed her presence in schoolrooms as an offense perpetrated by what Howard Rudnitsky called the "forces of political correctness." According to these critics, special interests and pressure groups had demeaned American history to the detriment of America's children by elevating marginal figures and left-wing causes. Rudnitsky quoted scholar Robert Lerner, who complained, "[Sybil] is portrayed . . . as being as important as Paul Revere. No objective historian believes that."⁸³ In 1995, Lerner and several other critics published *Molding the Good Citizen: The Politics of High School History Texts*, which singled out Sybil in a chapter titled "Filler Feminism," which claimed that including figures such as the girl rider in school curricula "weaken[ed] students' respect for American history."⁸⁴ Paul C. Vitz, another critic of the ostensible bias in American textbooks, dismissed Sybil's ride as "a feminist piece."⁸⁵ To conservatives such as Rudnitsky, Lerner, and Vitz, the issue was not simply that Sybil was not of the same historical caliber as established American heroes; more troubling was that she represented the dangerous ideological myths that were pushing aside time-honored narratives about the American past. While concerned about the negative effects of political correctness and gender history on vulnerable young minds, Sybil's critics were oddly not troubled by the lack of evidence for her ride or the possibility that it might not have taken place at all.

⁸²Grade 6 Reading, Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) (Austin: Texas Education Agency, 2009).

⁸³Howard Rudnitsky, "Golden Books," *Forbes*, 15 February 1993, p. 44; Lerner also quoted p. 44.

⁸⁴Robert Lerner, Althea K. Nagai, and Stanley Rothman, *Molding the Good Citizen: The Politics of High School History Texts* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1995), p. 66.

⁸⁵Paul C. Vitz, *Censorship: Evidence of Bias in Our Children's Textbooks* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Books, 1986), p. 70. Vitz mistakenly described Sybil as "dressed as a man" when "she warned local pro-Independence farmers about a British threat" (p. 70).

Not all conservatives joined the Sybil bashing. Tea Party radio talk show host Scott Hennen praised her as one of America's original "grassroots patriots who saw what needed to be done, and . . . did it."⁸⁶ The blogger "Girls4RonPaul," who described herself as "follow[ing] the libertarian philosophy towards life," heralded Sybil as an example of "true feminism."⁸⁷ Second Amendment supporters also found something to like about Sybil when the issue of gun control erupted anew in the 1990s. At the height of the debate, in 1995, the National Rifle Association instituted an award for women who supported the Second Amendment. Explaining its decision to call its honor the Sybil Ludington Women's Freedom Award, the NRA stated, "Sybil made a profound difference in America's successful pursuit to become a free and independent nation." Among the "modern heroines" who received the award (in 2010) was former Alaska governor and vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin.⁸⁸ Elsewhere, NRA member and former Texas senator Kay Bailey Hutchison singled out Sybil for her service during the American Revolution, and Lynne Cheney, former chairwoman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, included Sybil in her children's book *A Is for Abigail: An Almanac of Amazing American Women* (2003).⁸⁹ That individuals from the same side of

⁸⁶Scott Hennen, *Grass Roots: A Commonsense Action Agenda for America* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2011), p. 30. Former Vice President Dick Cheney contributed a blurb for Hennen's book and Karl Rove wrote the foreword.

⁸⁷Girls4RonPaul, "Sybil Ludington, 'The Female Paul Revere,'" 14 April 2010, at <http://girls4ronpaul.blogspot.com/2010/04/female-paul-revere-who-not-of-course.html> (accessed 16 February 2013). Another conservative blog, "Sybil Rides Again," celebrates "Politics, Freedom and Farm Life," at <http://runninghorsewebs.com/about-us/> (accessed 30 April 2014).

⁸⁸Legal scholar Franklin E. Zimring wrote, "In 1998, 1999, and 2000, gun policy disputes at the federal level were the single most important crime policy issue" ("Continuity and Change in the American Gun Debate," in *Evaluating Gun Policy: Effects on Crime and Violence*, ed. Jens Ludwig and Philip J. Cook [Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2003], p. 448, NRA qtd. p. 448; "Sybil Ludington Women's Freedom Award," National Rifle Association, at <http://womens-awards.nra.org/ludington-award.aspx> [accessed 16 February 2015]).

⁸⁹Kay Bailey Hutchison, *Leading Ladies: American Trailblazers* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), pp. 2–5, and Lynne Cheney, *A Is for Abigail: An Almanac of Amazing American Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers, 2003), n.p.

the political divide could so heartily disagree about Sybil speaks to her plasticity as a symbol. To some conservatives she stood as a warning against the intrusion of gender politics into the classroom, to others as a paradigm of true American womanhood.

Across the nation, New York State, especially Putnam County, asserted its claims on its heroine in an attempt to secure its link to the past. In her state-of-the-county address on 13 March 2014, Putnam County Executive MaryEllen Odell spoke to the ideals Sybil represented. "Putnam from the days of Sybil Ludington has always stood for the principles of what made our country great: tolerance and respect, freedom and values."⁹⁰ Even New York Senator Chuck Schumer (D), who resided in Brooklyn, a borough in which Sybil almost surely never set foot, tweeted, "Patriot Sybil Ludington, the Female Paul Revere, is memorialized by a statue in the Town of Carmel."⁹¹ Sybil's name and her image—usually some variation of her statue—were reproduced on everything from the official seals of Putnam County and the town of Kent to garbage cans.⁹² In 2004, Kent's newly constructed town center opened on a street christened "Sybil's Crossing," where the police station, city offices, and public library were located.⁹³ Ludingtonville, on the other hand, a hamlet within the town of Kent that had been named in honor of the colonel, no longer exists. In the 1960s, it was effectively erased from maps when the newly constructed Interstate 84 bisected it.⁹⁴

⁹⁰The slides in Odell's PowerPoint presentation carried a silhouette of Sybil Ludington's statue, and some featured photographs of it and of some of the historical roadside markers. MaryEllen Odell, "Putnam County State of the County Address Presentation 2014, at <http://maryellenodell.com/news/odell-delivers-state-of-the-county-address/> (accessed 24 April 2014).

⁹¹Chuck Schumer, @SenSchumer, #NYtownoftheday (accessed 3 March 2014).

⁹²"Artists Sought to Beautify Putnam's Trash Cans," *Putnam County News and Recorder*, 15 July 2009.

⁹³The town of Kent, along with Carmel and Patterson, was carved out of Fredericksburg Precinct, where the Ludingtons lived, in 1788. See Blake, *History of Putnam County*, pp. 326, 328. Author visit, 10 January 2010.

⁹⁴The Ludington mill, the only building from Sybil's era that survived into the twentieth century, was destroyed by fire in 1972. Guy Cheli, *Putnam County* (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), pp. 62–63. Its foundation is now part of the Kent Historical Society's Ludington Mill Preserve.

Sybil was not only a source of local pride but of tourist dollars as well. Her story, statue, and the route of her ride were prominently displayed on promotional brochures.⁹⁵ Reenactments of her feat drew crowds, bus tours (which included a free T-shirt) retraced her dash through the countryside, and two sporting events—a fifty-kilometer ultramarathon, the Sybil Ludington Historical Run, and a thirty-five-mile Tour de Sybil cycling event—carried her name.⁹⁶ The Putnam County Golf Course, whose logo featured her image, offered golfers a special Sybil Ludington Weekend: “We’re so proud of our local history we have devoted 4 ENTIRE DAYS OF SPECIALS to Commemorate The Historic Ride of Sybil Ludington in 1777.”⁹⁷ When the Hudson River Valley Institute, a center for historical study of the region, solicited contributions, it offered six different levels of giving; in its Patriots Society was a Sybil Ludington sponsorship available for \$1,000.⁹⁸ In featuring Sybil’s story on their websites, local real estate agencies implied that in transferring to the area, new residents would enjoy not just a splendid home but a special entrée into America’s founding history, with all

⁹⁵“Putnam County Travel Guide,” I LOVE NEW YORK Promotion Campaign, New York State Department of Economic Development (n.p.: Putnam Historian’s Roundtable and Putnam County Historian, n.d.); “Selected Revolutionary War Sites in Putnam County, New York” (Brewster: Office of the Putnam County Historian, 2003).

⁹⁶For reenactments, see “Sybil Ludington Rides Again,” *Putnam County Times*, 17 April 2002; “Putnam County History Day to Feature Revolutionary War Re-Enactors,” *Putnam County News and Recorder*, 1 October 2003; “Muskets Sound and Sybil Ludington Rides Again,” *Putnam County News and Recorder*, 18 April 2007; Maria Theodore Leiter, “8th Annual Putnam County Daniel Nimham Intertribal Pow Wow Draws Crowds,” *Putnam County News and Recorder*, 20 August 2008. For bus tours along the ride’s route, see “The Night Ride of Sybil Ludington, September 29, 2007,” at <http://www.cityguideny.com/eventinfo.cfm?id=12673> (accessed 29 May 2007); “The Ride of Sybil Ludington Is Rendered in a Dramatic Bus Tour as Part of Hudson Valley Ramble,” *Putnam County News and Recorder*, 17 September 2008. For the run and cycling event, see 36th Annual Sybil Ludington Historical Run, 26 April 2014, at <http://www.runner.org/sybil/> (accessed 22 April 2014); Mary Lynn Blanks, *New York: Hundreds of Ideas for Day Trips with the Kids* (Guilford, Conn.: Globe Pequot Press, 2007), p. 40.

⁹⁷Eric Gross, “100 Days from Start to Finish at Golf Course,” *Putnam County Courier*, 3 October 2013; “Sybil Ludington Weekend at Putnam County Golf Course,” at www.putnamcountyny.com (accessed 14 April 2014). The golf course’s motto is “A Revolutionary Experience.”

⁹⁸Hudson Valley Institute, Patriots Society, at http://www.hudsonrivervalley.org/about/patriots_society.html (accessed 4 August 2012).

the qualities of patriotism, freedom, and youthful energy that it epitomized.⁹⁹ The commodification of Sybil's story thus linked capitalist enterprise with a seminal period that personified the country's and its people's exceptional character, a "commercialization of the past" that, as historian Michael Kammen has noted, is an attempt to forge an emotional link with a conflict-free, idealized bygone era that never really existed.¹⁰⁰



Sybil's journey across the generations took a surprising detour in 1996 when the DAR denied the Enoch Crosby Chapter's application to mark her grave in Patterson, New York, as that of one of its recognized patriots.¹⁰¹ The apparent reason was that the chapter did not provide conclusive evidence of her Revolutionary War service, even though for decades the DAR's championing of the Revolutionary War's young heroine had suggested that she was an established DAR patriot.¹⁰² In its Washington, D.C., headquarters, the DAR continued to display a small replica of Sybil's statue and a large painting of Huntington sculpting it, but now the two works ostensibly

⁹⁹See Savannah Waring Walker, "Kent, N.Y.: There's Something About the Water," *New York Times*, 6 August 2014; New York Country Homes, at <http://www.nyccountryhomes.com/carmel-ny-real-estate.php> (accessed 10 June 2014); Real Living Five Corners Real Estate, at <http://www.fivecornerscarsdalerealestate.com/mahopac/>, and Century 21 V. J. F. Realty, at <http://www.century21vjf.com/info/neighborhoodDetails.php?fromPage=index&nhood=Carmel&subNeigh=1> (accessed 25 May 2014).

¹⁰⁰Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, p. 691.

¹⁰¹The DAR maintains a list of patriots (both men and women) who participated in the cause for America Independence between 1774 and 1783. For criteria on lineage, see National Society, Daughters of the American Revolution, "Is That Service Right?" (Washington, D.C.: National Society, Daughters of the American Revolution, 2005).

¹⁰²See Helen Coats Miller, "A Patriot of Old Duchess [*sic*] County of New York," *National Historical Magazine*, August 1943, pp. 507–8; Mabel G. Sturdevant, "Paul Revere Outdone," *National Historical Magazine*, May 1958, pp. 487, 452, 562; Louise P. Townsend, "Sybil Ludington: Bronze Statue by Anna Hyatt Huntington Honors Teenage Heroine," *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine*, October 1961, pp. 580, 822; Eleanor Gay, "Anna Hyatt Huntington, N.A.," *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine*, May 1962, pp. 490, 519; Ruth Stowell Brown, "Anna Vaughn Hyatt Huntington, 1876–1973, Sculptress," *Daughters of the American Revolution Magazine*, October 1993, pp. 592–95.

celebrated Huntington, a renowned member of the DAR, not her subject.¹⁰³ In a 2006–7 museum exhibition *Myth or Truth? Stories We've Heard about Early America*, the DAR addressed Sybil's ride. Literature that accompanied the exhibition noted, "What we think: It's a great story, but there is no way to know whether or not it is true."¹⁰⁴ In 2003, the Enoch Crosby Chapter's application to have Sybil's grave marked as the daughter of a patriot was approved.¹⁰⁵

Although the national DAR had cast doubt on the legitimacy of Sybil Ludington's ride, the Enoch Crosby Chapter continued to promote it. Even as it prominently displayed Sybil's biography on its website, the local organization listed Colonel Ludington (who remained an official DAR patriot) as simply one among a long list of Revolutionary War worthies.¹⁰⁶ Enoch Crosby Chapter members continued to participate in events related to Sybil, and the media continued to interview them as experts on the subject of her ride. "There's no question that it is a true story," a chapter member had been quoted as saying in 1975.¹⁰⁷ Thirty-six years later, in a National Public Radio interview, another chapter member maintained, "I just have a feeling that she did something for her country, that she believed with her father wholeheartedly in helping all they could."¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, the national DAR banished from its

¹⁰³Bren Landon, media relations, Daughters of the American Revolution, telephone conversation with author, 16 April 2009.

¹⁰⁴Bren Landon, "DAR Museum Explores Early American Myths" (press release), National Society, Daughters of the American Revolution, Washington, D.C., 29 September 2006, p. 17.

¹⁰⁵Darryn Linklater, director, office of the registrar general and head genealogist for the Daughters of the American Revolution, e-mail message to author, 17 February 2015.

¹⁰⁶Enoch Crosby Chapter, DAR, "Sybil Ludington," at <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nyeccdar/sybil.ludington.htm> (accessed 23 July 2012); Enoch Crosby Chapter, DAR, "Patriots of the Enoch Crosby Chapter," at www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nyeccdar/Patriots.htm (accessed 23 July 2012).

¹⁰⁷Paula Bernstein, "A Legendary Woman Rides onto a Stamp," *New York Daily News*, 20 March 1975.

¹⁰⁸NPR interview with Enoch Crosby Chapter member Marilyn Cole Greene, 3 September 2011, www.npr.org/2011/09/03/140163745/Sybil-ludington-paul-revere-in-a-skirt (accessed 23 July 2012).

gift shop its own *Women and the American Revolution* (1974), which chronicled Sybil's ride.¹⁰⁹

The book Colonel Ludington's grandchildren had long ago commissioned told the story of a nineteenth-century American Revolutionary War hero, but over time it had evolved into the story of a twentieth- and twenty-first-century American Revolutionary War heroine. Sybil appealed to groups and individuals because her story exemplified values and beliefs they held about America. Unlike his daughter, Henry Ludington was never celebrated in a musical (*Heroine on Horseback: The Ballad of Sybil Ludington*), nor did he inspire an opera (*Sybil of the American Revolution*) or a board game.¹¹⁰ He did not star in an episode of the animated PBS television series *Liberty's Kids* (*Sybil's Ride for Freedom*), and he had only a supporting role in the live-action movie *Sybil Ludington: The Female Paul Revere*.¹¹¹ The Travel Channel did not feature him in its *Monumental Mystery* series, and the Putnam County Golf Course did not put his image on a golf ball.¹¹² He was

¹⁰⁹Hazel Kreinheder, assistant director of genealogy, National Society, Daughters of the American Revolution, interview with author, Washington, D.C., 5 February 2010. Mollie Somerville, *Women and the American Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: National Society, Daughters of the American Revolution, 1974). In 1972, the Putnam County Historian responded to a query from Somerville: "I must tell you, that to the best of our knowledge, there are no documents, primary sources, etc. pertaining to her ride" (Mrs. Charles Franklin to Mollie Somerville, 30 November 1972, Sybil Ludington file, Putnam County Historian's Office and Archives, Brewster, N.Y.).

¹¹⁰Julie Arden, *Heroine on Horseback: The Ballad of Sybil Ludington*, directed by Carol-Lee Kantor, White Pond Center, Stormville, N.Y., 23 and 24 April 1982; Mrs. Murray's fourth-grade class at Kent Elementary School, Carmel, N.Y., *Sybil's Ride for Freedom*, produced by Judy Allen, Putnam County Veterans Memorial Park, Kent, N.Y., 14 June 1997; Alex Ross, "Sybil, Daughter of the American Revolution," *New York Times*, 8 April 1993; Ludington's Ride Board Game, at <http://ludingtonside.com/boardgame.htm> (accessed 2 May 2014).

¹¹¹*Liberty's Kids*, DVD (Burbank, Calif.: DIC Entertainment/Cookie Jar Group, 2004). Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Jack Rakove, described as one of the series' "educational advisors," "oversaw the scripts [of *Liberty's Kids*] for accuracy" (M.S. Mason, "Pursuit of Life, Liberty, and Kids," 30 August 2002, at <http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0830/p19s01-altv.html> [accessed 2 May 2014], and Judith S. Gillies, *Washington Post*, 25 August 2002); Kim Robinson, *Sybil Ludington: The Female Paul Revere*, directed by Robinson, DVD (Sunbury, Ohio: KICKS Flicks, 2011).

¹¹²Travel Channel, *Female Paul Revere*, *Monumental Mysteries*, at <http://www.travelchannel.com/shows/monumental-mysteries/video/female-paul-revere> (accessed 15 February 2015); "Sybil Ludington Weekend at Putnam County Golf Course,"

not fêted with a birthday cake large enough to feed one thousand people.¹¹³ While some had expressed doubts about Sybil's story over the years, their voices had been drowned out by an overwhelming acceptance.¹¹⁴ Such disconnect between the historical record and the popular imagination is not uncommon. In her examination of the myth of Betsy Ross sewing America's first flag, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich observed that popular heroes often defy the doubts official arbiters of culture raise about them.¹¹⁵ In Sybil's case, the state-sanctified historical roadside markers, statue, and postage stamp celebrating her ride, and the many books and newspaper and magazine articles that retold her story, had created an aura of authority that effectively dispelled any intermittent bouts of skepticism.

The persistent popularity of Sybil Ludington's mythical ride suggests the value that Americans find in history and refutes a lingering complaint about their supposed disinterest. As Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen have written, just because Americans may not have a grasp of factual history does not mean that they are indifferent to the past.¹¹⁶ Rather, they engage with it on their own terms, seeing themselves as part of the larger patterns that give both the past and the present meaning.

Just sixty-five years after the ink had dried on the Declaration of Independence, the politician and legal scholar George Ticknor Curtis complained that "The age for declamation upon the American Revolution has passed away."¹¹⁷ It was time to stop talking about the past and using it to advance a campaign

at <http://www.putnamcountyny.com/sybil-ludington-weekend-at-putnam-county-golf-course/> (accessed 23 April 2014).

¹¹³Jane McMahon, "Sybil Ludington Rides Again," *Yonkers Herald Statesman*, 22 April 1977.

¹¹⁴For those expressing doubts, see Henry Noble McCracken, *Old Dutchess Forever! The Story of an American County* (New York: Hastings House, 1956), pp. 130–31; Bernstein, "Legendary Woman Rides onto a Stamp"; and Michael Pollak, "Heroine of 1777 Still All in a Revolutionary Lather," *New York Times*, 22 October 1995.

¹¹⁵Ulrich, "How Betsy Ross Became Famous." See also Marla Miller, *Betsy Ross and the Making of America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2010).

¹¹⁶Roy Rosenzweig and David Paul Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

¹¹⁷George Ticknor Curtis, *The True Uses of American Revolutionary History* (Boston: John H. Eastburn, 1841), p. 3.

or ideology; instead, Curtis insisted, Americans should simply try to understand it. Despite Curtis's admonishment, the American Revolution has continued to be a convenient wagon to which disparate, sometimes opposing, factions hitch their agendas. While it has been remarkably malleable in its applications, the struggle for independence has nevertheless remained the touchstone of the nation's vaunted core values—freedom, republicanism, self-determination—a legacy that is as enduringly attractive as it is powerful. As Jill Lepore has observed, “The Revolution was so brilliant and daring—and, of course, so original and definitive and constitutive—that everyone wanted to claim to have inherited it.”¹¹⁸ Sybil gave the residents of Dutchess and Putnam counties their own distinctive claim to the American Revolution. Boston may have had Paul Revere, but they had Sybil, a sixteen-year-old girl who rode three times farther *and* managed to avoid capture by the British.

In the realm of popular history, Sybil Ludington has been the ultimate protean hero of the American Revolution. Because there is so little information about her, Sybil Ludington could become what Americans needed her to be, a reminder, as one of her biographers has put it, of “exactly what Americans are made of.”¹¹⁹ Over the course of one hundred years, her story gradually coalesced into a dramatic origin myth about American identity, heritage, and civic engagement. Public institutions and private corporations and individuals adopted Sybil to shape narratives about American history, the Revolution, and their association with both. Sybil helps us see the ways in which American heroes are chosen and, over time, molded by diverse constituencies which are, in turn, influenced by shifting social, cultural, and political forces.

In the end, Sybil Ludington has embodied the possibilities—courage, individuality, loyalty—that Americans of different genders, generations, and political persuasions have considered to

¹¹⁸Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 23.

¹¹⁹Vincent Daquino, quoted in Rooney, “Sybil Ludington: ‘Exactly What Americans Are Made Of.’”

be the highest aspirations for themselves and for their country. The story of the lone, teenage girl riding for freedom, it seems, is simply too good not to be believed.

Paula Hunt is a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Missouri. Her dissertation, "The Press Cannot Be Silenced," explores the publishing enterprise of the American Anti-slavery Society between 1833 and 1840.