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

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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

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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.

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

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.


7New 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.

8Revolutionary 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 musters 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.”


11E[rrinine] 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.”

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. 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.” 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. To close

12 Lamb, History of New York, p. v.
13 In 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).
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

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.”

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.” 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. Indeed, neither Johnson’s New York Times obituary nor a posthumous tribute to him in the North American Review cited the Ludington book. Nevertheless, the New England Historical and Genealogical Register called it a “charming, simple memoir” and a “straightforward account of an honorable military career.” 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

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20 W. F. Johnson, Colonel Henry Ludington, p. viii.
21 W. F. Johnson, Colonel Henry Ludington, p. 90.
and its officers had not received the recognition they deserved and to ensure the colonel’s place in American history. 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). 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. Sybil is nowhere to be found in Oliver Bell Buncé’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. Aside from her cameo in Lamb’s *History of the City of New York*, Sybil was nowhere to be found in the

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


Revere” introduced the *Courier’s* readers to an important historical figure they had hitherto neglected. 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.

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. 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.”

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33 See 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.

34 The 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.


36 A. 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. 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.

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.”

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.

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38 Peter 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).

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.\textsuperscript{40} Movie audiences identified with the everyday heroes of director Frank Capra’s \textit{Mr. Deeds Goes to Town} (1936) and \textit{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 \textit{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.”\textsuperscript{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


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


43 “Historic Facts Reviewed at Dedication of Markers.”

44 Raymond 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.


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.” 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.


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 “daring” 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


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.”

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. 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.

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


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.”
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. 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. 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. 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

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55 Although 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.


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


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.” 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.

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.” 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.

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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. 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. 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


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. 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. Ms. magazine ran a story about Sybil in its antisexi st, multiracial Stories for Free Children series, while the documentary The American Woman: Portraits of Courage opened with a scene featuring Sybil. 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

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against sex and age. Perhaps we can learn a valuable lesson from Sybil.” 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,

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.”

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. 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.

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


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 pro-
fessed marginalized groups as African Americans, Native Amer-
icans, 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 rever-
ence 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 fem-
inist 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 Nuss-
baum 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 mul-
ticultural 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 
Dutchess and Putnam Counties, was folded into the fourth-grade course of study in districts around New York State. 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. 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). This test, along with textbooks such as Houghton Mifflin’s *America Will Be*, 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


a state-administered assessment test that included a reading comprehension component based on her story.\textsuperscript{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.”\textsuperscript{83} In 1995, Lerner and several other critics published \textit{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.”\textsuperscript{84} Paul C. Vitz, another critic of the ostensible bias in American textbooks, dismissed Sybil’s ride as “a feminist piece.”\textsuperscript{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.

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

\textsuperscript{83}Howard Rudnitsky, “Golden Books,” \textit{Forbes}, 15 February 1993, p. 44; Lerner also quoted p. 44.


\textsuperscript{85}Paul C. Vitz, \textit{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.” The blogger “Girls4RonPaul,” who described herself as “follow[ing] the libertarian philosophy towards life,” heralded Sybil as an example of “true feminism.” 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. 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). That individuals from the same side of

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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.”

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.” 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. 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. 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.


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


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

The 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. 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. 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.” 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. 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

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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, 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


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


celebrated Huntington, a renowned member of the DAR, not her subject. 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.” In 2003, the Enoch Crosby Chapter’s application to have Sybil’s grave marked as the daughter of a patriot was approved.

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. 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. 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.” Meanwhile, the national DAR banished from its

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


105 Darryn 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.


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.


not feted with a birthday cake large enough to feed one thousand people.  

While some had expressed doubts about Sybil’s story over the years, their voices had been drowned out by an overwhelming acceptance. 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. 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. 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.” 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).


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.”

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.”

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

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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.

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