

Boston, the U.S. Revolution and the Freedom Trail

- By Ramón Bannister



Figure 1: Three Men re-enacting the times of the revolutionary war.

one man with a snare drum can make. Combined with another man who yelled out orders, his playing caught everyone's attention. The musician would play, stop, and wait for a cue from the commander. The commander would project his loud voice into the air and say military stuff I didn't understand. Then, they would all walk to the left, right, forward, or wherever he told them to move, complete with the order to "Guard your bayonet!" Listen to the audio clip below to get a better sense of this action.

The re-enactment took everyone by surprise. It wasn't announced, so no one knew it would take place. Suddenly, these strangely-dressed men marched in the middle of the courtyard, military fashion, as they did back in the late 1700s. It was fascinating to watch and think about how times have changed. To brush up on my history, I later went on a tour known as "The Freedom Trail." I learned that Boston was a center of activity during the war for independence.

This part of the Street Musicians in Boston series takes us down memory lane. As I explained in the Boston Pride Parade story, where there are a lot of people advocating for their rights, there is music. And Boston was no exception during the revolutionary war when colonialists battled the British Red Coats, so named from the suits the British soldiers wore. In the photograph, you can see young men dressed in these red coats and holding rifles with bayonets. They were enacting Boston's history, most likely memorializing the role Boston militias played in holding back the British crown. Except that these guys represented the British.

What I was most interested in was the musician. It's amazing how much noise



Figure 2: Old North Church, where two lanterns were placed to warn of the British invasion. ©2010 Ramón Bannister

It is on the Freedom Trail that I learned that Boston is where the revolutionary war began. The city and surrounding area was full of independent militias ready to die for freedom. They knew the Brits would march onto colonial soil, but it was not known from where they would enter. Colonialist leaders figured out that there were only two ways the British would cross onto land. The plan was to station people to watch these areas and warn the militias about the coming onslaught. The messengers were to be informed by one person using a code. Hang one lantern at the bell tower of Old North Church if the soldiers came in through a small strip of land on the outskirts of Boston. Two lanterns were to be hung if the soldiers came inland via a water channel. Hence, there is a famous saying in Boston: “1 if by land, and 2 if by sea.”

It turned out the British chose to cross by sea through the Charles River. One person stationed near that water channel was some guy

named Paul Revere. If you don't know him by name, don't advertise that when you're in Boston. People out here feel a sense of pride about Revere and the other militia men – dubbed Minute Men – and you'd obviously be an outsider. So, let me remind you. That “guy” was the same man who warned townfolk about the exact location of British soldiers. He has attained a mythical status as the person who rode his horse yelling, “THE RED COATS ARE COMING! THE RED COATS ARE COMING!!” Yup, that's the same man I learned about in elementary school back in cowboy land – Arizona, where you learn about some guy named Revere and then you forget about him, preferring instead to learn about the local history of how the Tohono O'odham and

other native groups were forced on reservations, and how cowboys with their sense of manifest destiny kicked the Mexicans off of their own land.

We can't forget that Paul Revere probably single-handedly saved our country as we know it. Otherwise, this land might still be in conflict between France, Spain, Mexico and the U.K. Oh, and the man who put up lanterns at the church on April 18, 1775, Robert Newman, was spotted by British soldiers. But Newman escaped before they could reach him. Paul Revere got the message and spread it to patriot leaders Sam Adams and John Hancock in the town of Lexington. A mystery remains because it is said that someone tipped off Newman that the British were coming. But no one has yet discovered who that was.



Figure 3: Paul Revere's House. ©2010 Ramón Bannister

If it's any indication of how revered Paul Revere, Sam Adams and John Hancock are, here are a few interesting cultural details. Yes, the most famous beer in Boston is called Sam Adams; the tallest skyscraper in Boston is called the John Hancock Tower; and the original house where Paul Revere lived is a historical landmark and museum for tourists, and is considered one of the oldest surviving structures in Boston (built in 1680)!

You can see all of these structures and more on what's called the "Freedom Trail." This is a self-guided tour – with mini-tours for a fee – of Boston's history. You can even see the very battle ship that George Washington used. For a small fee, you can pick up a guide at the Boston Common where the trail begins, and then follow the red-brick or red-painted line the entire way. It's about 2 or two-and-a-half miles, so take comfortable shoes. Warning for women: It's not for women with high heels! If you do it in the summer, you're going to sweat, and it'll take about two to three hours, depending on how long you take at all the stops along the way.

Much of the historical information for this story was taken from:
"The Walker's Guide to The Freedom Trail." 2008. Published by Pocket Metro LLC.