



# From Peter Rugg to Paul Revere: An Account of some Bostonian Revolutionary Rides

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## *From Peter Rugg to Paul Revere: an Account of some Bostonian Revolutionary Rides<sup>1</sup>*

*A*lthough Jonathan Dunwell, the fictitious freelance correspondent of the *New England Galaxy*, never questioned Peter Rugg's existence seriously, he was however gripped by sudden doubts as to his true identity, precisely when he was about to speak to him for the first time: "Is Peter Rugg his real name, or has he accidentally gained that name?" (23), he asked, as the latter was approaching in his incredible old-fashioned chair. His fellow traveler's reply failed to provide the reader with any reliable information, for the former contented himself with producing this rather sibylline answer: "I know not, but presume he will not deny his name" (23). Beyond the tautological side of the formula, the use of the subjective phrase "I . . . presume," added to the aura of mystery surrounding the wanderer, discourages the reader from taking anything concerning Peter Rugg for granted, and questions *in fine* his veritable identity.

The only official statement on Rugg's identity is indirectly made both by the auctioneer who was charged by city authorities to sell his Bostonian estate, and by the greedy, inquisitive assembly attending the public sale. When Peter Rugg appeared in his outlandish equipage, he was immediately and beyond any doubt identified as the owner of the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper develops some of the arguments presented in my article "Mais qui était donc Peter Rugg? Sources historiques cryptées d'un écrit fantastique révolutionnaire." *Revue Française d'Etudes Américaines*, 68, 1996.

premises: "The confident look and searching eyes of Rugg, to everyone present, carried more conviction, that the estate was his, than could any parchment or paper with signature and seal" (51). However, if things are apparently made clear at the end of the narrative, there remains a doubt as to Rugg's status among Dunwell's contemporaries, sustained by the ominous tirade of an anonymous voice in the audience: "You were cut off from the last age, and you can never be fitted to the present. Your home is gone, and you can never have another home in this world" (52). Was Peter Rugg an improbable survivor miraculously rescued from a bygone era? One can doubt it for he obviously no longer had a place in the present. Rugg definitely belonged to the past, and was no more than an incongruous, gothic figure deported from the eerie world of the living-dead.

As a matter of fact, Dunwell was so eager to trace Rugg's wild ramblings across the continent that he paid little attention to his past — which may account for his doubts as to his identity — "I had resolved to speak to Peter Rugg, or whoever the man might be" (23). His main preoccupation was to collect recent information sensational enough to be published in the *Galaxy*, and, last but not least, to find the extravagant traveler. Even the narrative he obtained from Mrs. Croft in Boston referred to Rugg's nocturnal rides, but failed to bring him any clue about Rugg's past life in Middle Street. Old James Felt confirmed the rumors about Peter Rugg's disappearance, but his testimony was immediately questioned by Dunwell who concluded "that Mr. Felt was in his dotage, and [he] despaired of gaining any intelligence from him, on which [he] could depend" (26). The only substantial account of Peter Rugg's misadventures he eventually came across was challenged by the informer himself who introduced his narrative with the words: "I have heard my grandfather speak of him, as though he seriously believed his own story" (26). Although the account he produced is fairly detailed, it lacks the support of a trustworthy witness and is questioned again by its very conclusion: "And thus, Peter Rugg and his child, horse and carriage remain a mystery to this day" (29). And so it is for the modern reader...

Following vicariously Dunwell's investigations, the reader lacks any official landmark that could anchor Rugg's story into a fic-

tionalized "real world." However, the narrative is stuffed with numerous hints at real eighteenth and nineteenth century America: all the toponyms refer to real place-names of the time, and many historical facts mentioned belong to American history. Such a historical paraphernalia is conjured up by the auctioneer to convince the assembly of the inestimable value of Peter Rugg's estate:

"To you, then, the value of these premises must be inestimable. For, ere long, there will arise in front view of the edifice to be erected here, a monument, the wonder and veneration of the world. A column shall spring to the clouds; and on that column will be engraven one word that will convey all that is wise in intellect, useful in science, good in morals, prudent in counsel, and benevolent in principle, a name, when living, the patron of the poor, the delight of the cottage, and the admiration of kings; now dead, worth the whole seven wise men of Greece. Need I tell you his name? He fixed the thunder, and guided the lightning."

"Men of the North End! Need I appeal to your patriotism, in order to enhance the value of this lot? The earth affords no such scenery as this; there, around that corner, lived James Otis; here, Samuel Adams — there, Joseph Warren — and around that other corner, Josiah Quincy. Here was the birth place of Freedom; here Liberty was born, and nursed, and grew to manhood. Here man was new created. Here is the nursery of American Independence — I am too modest — here commenced the emancipation of the world; a thousand generations hence, millions of men will cross the Atlantic, just to look at the North End of Boston. Your fathers, — what do I say? Yourselves, yes, this moment, I behold several attending this auction who lent a hand to rock the cradle of Independence" (49).

One has little hesitation in identifying the legendary figure of Benjamin Franklin at the head of this prestigious list. In fact, the birthplace of the lightning-rod's inventor was not actually located in Middle Street but nearby, in Milk Street; however, Franklin did live for some time near Old North Church, Rugg's favorite landmark, which he associated with his own home. As to James Otis, Samuel Adams, Joseph Warren, and Josiah Quincy, all of them well-known heroes of the Revolution, they did indeed lead their secret revolutionary activities in Boston's North



End.<sup>2</sup> However, a close comparison of real Boston and Rugg's North End surprisingly brings to light the auctioneer's inexplicable omission of one of the greatest local Revolutionary figures.

The narrative contains enough clues to locate accurately Rugg's fictional real estate patrimony: "Fronting on Middle-street, [the premises] extended in the rear to Ann-street, and embraced about half an acre of land" (47). A 1750 map of Boston shows the corresponding block in which Rugg's house was supposed to stand: Middle Street, now absorbed by Hanover Street, ran parallel to Ann Street — today North Street. At a stone's throw from Peter Rugg's fictional home and situated between these two streets, stands Boston's oldest private house which belonged to the Bostonian Revolutionary hero *par excellence*, Paul Revere (1735-1818), who became famous for his April 1775 midnight ride to Lexington and Concord, to warn Samuel Adams and John Hancock of the British advance "to take them, or go to Concord, to destroy the Colony stores." Thus, according to Paul Revere's local reputation and great popularity and considering the proximity of Rugg's fictional estate, the auctioneer, eager to gain the assembly's confidence, should not have omitted such a famous name in his list of Revolutionary heroes. The omission sounds all the more improbable that Paul Revere had close links with the other Revolutionary figures quoted by the auctioneer. Indeed, all of them belonged to the same patriot secret society — the Long Room Club —, met frequently and collaborated in their subversive activities.

So, although the auctioneer was anxious to mention extensively all the historical figures of the neighborhood, he omitted the very one who spent his life in North End<sup>3</sup> in a house that stood just a hundred yards from Rugg's fictitious home! The paradox suggests two plausible

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<sup>2</sup> The Green Dragon Tavern, for instance, close to Middle Street (present day, Hanover Street), sheltered the activities of the Bostonians who prepared to fight the British "oppressor."

<sup>3</sup> Paul Revere lived in this house from 1770 to 1780 before he moved to Charter Street, between North Church and Middle Street (now Hanover Street), where the Revere statue now stands. It can still be visited today and constitutes one of the most popular places of interest in historical Boston.

hypotheses. The first one rests on the manifestation on the author's part of some early form of political correctness. Though the three sections of "Peter Rugg" were published anonymously — they were signed with the name of Jonathan Dunwell —, William Austin might have been willing to respect the conspiracy of silence surrounding Revere's exploits in the first decades following Independence. Indeed, the myth of wounded innocence<sup>4</sup> promoted by Whig leaders as an instrument of their cause did not fit well with the revelation of the circumstances surrounding Revere's midnight ride.<sup>5</sup> The meticulous preparation of his mission, the intelligence network which allowed the alarm to be given on time, contradicted the official image of unresisting people caught off guard under British fire. Consequently, Paul Revere's high deeds were passed over in silence, at least officially:<sup>6</sup>

Through Paul Revere's lifetime, the reticence of the revolutionary generation continued. It appeared even in his obituary, which abundantly praised his private life and public service, but made no mention of the midnight ride or any of his clandestine activities before the Revolution (Hackett Fisher 329).

Nevertheless, "in the years after Revere's death in 1818, . . . attitudes began to change [and] published accounts of the midnight ride began to multiply" (Hackett Fisher 329), which makes it unlikely that Austin's discretion was politically motivated. However, one may also assume that Austin only wanted to fictionalize the spirit of the time by making his character's speech — the auctioneer's — conform to the exigencies of local politics in those days. In that case, the city employee would only

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<sup>4</sup> The Patriots wished to impose their own version of history, according to which America was the "innocent" and unprepared victim of British aggression. Hence the crucial — and controversial — issue about who fired the first shot at Lexington...

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed study of Revere's midnight ride, see Hackett Fisher 78-112.

<sup>6</sup> With the notable exception of Revere's letter to the correspondent of the Massachusetts Historical Society, Jeremy Belknap, in which he related briefly a self-effacing version of his midnight ride. In spite of Revere's precautions to render his writing anonymous, Belknap "identified Revere as the author without permission" (Hackett Fisher 329).

respect the official position, and he behaves accordingly by omitting Revere's name.

The second hypothesis gives the omission a structural value. The absence of Paul Revere's name and the censoring of his neighboring home in Austin's narrative create a blank, a void, which is virtually occupied by Peter Rugg and his abandoned estate. It is no wonder then if Revere is missing in the auctioneer's panegyric: his list of regional heroes, manifestly incomplete, indirectly — by contrast — highlights a notable absence, "compensated" in the fiction by Peter Rugg himself, who literally incarnates "the missing man" of the narrative's subtitle. Does this mean that Peter Rugg *is* Paul Revere? Beyond common initials (P. R.) and housing, the two men share many other features and the study of their respective rides reveals a multitude of common points, which makes Peter Rugg an unexpected but creditable counterpart of his illustrious fellow citizen.

A renowned silversmith, Paul Revere was, and still is, celebrated for his famous engraving of the Boston Massacre in 1770. This is precisely the very year that Peter Rugg disappeared inexplicably: "If Peter Rugg . . . has been travelling since the Boston massacre, there is no reason why he should not travel to the end of time" (26). This bloody episode of the long process which led America to independence symbolized British repression for the Bostonians, and contributed to setting the spirits on fire, until the first military confrontations between the Patriots and the Redcoats broke out. [It was the beginning of the American Revolution, an event which Peter Rugg mysteriously missed all along the line... He missed Independence and kept missing Boston, the spearhead of rebellion. He is the one who missed everything, *the "missing" man*.

One must admit at this point that Rugg's destiny seems definitely to wander from Paul Revere's, but a close study of the latter's ride to Lexington and Concord<sup>7</sup> shows clearly that in fact, Rugg does his very best to follow his tracks: the many coincidences and corresponding

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<sup>7</sup> Revere never actually reached Concord for he was arrested on the way by British Regulars.

clues between their respective rides are much too numerous to be entirely innocent.

First of all, both started from Boston North End, almost from the same street, intending to reach Concord, Mass.. To do so, they decided to cross the Charles River to Charlestown, a northern suburb of Boston, neglecting the only other possible route through the Boston Neck.<sup>8</sup> Revere sailed across the river on a small boat, and reached the opposite bank without being noticed, whereas Rugg took the ferry "between Boston and Charlestown" (25). Then Revere made a long detour northward to escape by a hair's breadth from Regulars patrolling on horseback, which led him to cross the Mystic River twice. Though he had no such reason to wander from the shortest route, Rugg also crosses — or rather thought he crossed — the Mystic River:

"Sir," said I to Rugg, practising a little deception, "pray tell me, for I am a stranger here, what river is this, and what city is that opposite? for you seem to be an inhabitant of it."

"This river, sir, is called Mystic River, and this is Winnisimmet ferry, we have retained the Indian names, and that town is Boston" (43).

Strangely enough for a man who professes to know the country like the back of his hand, Rugg does not marvel at seeing that he is not on the right road... He is also reported to have gone through Menotomy — today's Arlington. It is precisely here that Revere met the main road to Concord after his saving detour through the hamlet of Mystic — now Medford. Then, he carried on his course on King's Highway, a road that Rugg must have followed on his way to Concord, and on which he wonders at finding a tollgate several years later:

"Toll! why," said Rugg, "do you demand toll? There is no toll to pay on the King's highway."

"King's highway! do you not perceive this is a turnpike?"

"Turnpike! there are no turnpikes in Massachusetts" (38).

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<sup>8</sup> The place was unsafe for it was guarded by British sentries. Nevertheless, William Dawes, whose mission paralleled Revere's, managed to leave the town across the Boston Neck, probably in disguise (see Hackett Fisher 97,98).

Not unlike Rugg who never managed to come back to Boston, Revere never reached Concord. After he raised the alarm in Lexington, he started off again for Concord with two other patriot messengers, William Dawes and Samuel Prescott. Unfortunately, the three of them were soon intercepted by the Regulars in patrol. As Dawes and Prescott managed to run off, Revere was arrested, deprived of his horse, and examined by a British officer, Major Edward Mitchell, whose mission it was to stop "[the American messengers and keep them from giving the alarm]" (Hackett Fisher 89). This English cognomen in the history of Paul Revere is not without an echo in the fiction. When Rugg, whom nobody seems able to stop in his wild run, is eventually caught on board the Hudson ferry to New York, he offers an unusual sight in his out-of-date chair drawn by his savage black horse, soon catching everybody's attention. The ferry-man, perplexed, then exclaims: "Mr. Dunwell, we have got a curiosity on board, that would puzzle Dr Mitchill" (41). The answer seems inspired by the episode during which Revere was arrested by the British soldiers: "Ah, Mr. Hardy," said I, "you have, indeed, hooked a prize; no one before you could ever detain Peter Rugg long enough to examine him" (41). The verb "to examine" — to interrogate closely —, associated with the surname Mitchill,<sup>9</sup> calls to mind Paul Revere's long cross-examination by Major Mitchell in order to discover the veritable aim of his nocturnal mission: "[he] said he was going to ask me some questions, and if I did not tell the truth, he would blow my brains out" (Revere, *Draft Deposition*: ca. April, 24, 1775).

Undoubtedly, one of the primary protagonists of Rugg's mad rides is the formidable steed — "a majestic black horse of unusual size" (34) —, no doubt a devilish creature — "the hoofs of his forefeet had been split" (42) —, who seems to command his master's destiny: "It appears to me that Rugg's horse has some controul of the chair; and that Rugg himself is, in some sort, under the controul of his horse" (*sic*, 36). To accomplish his perilous mission, Revere needed 'an exceptional mount, capable of outrunning any other ordinary horse. He found one actually, "one of the fleetest animals in town . . . an excellent specimen

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<sup>9</sup> Dr Samuel Latham Mitchill (1764-1831) was a distinguished ichthyologist specialized in the Hudson wildlife (Zimbalatti 122-23).



of a New England saddlehorse — big, strong, and very fast” (Hackett Fisher: 106). The outstanding steed which he borrowed from John Larkin, a deacon of the Congregational Church, was named “Brown Beauty.” This cognomen is echoed by Jonathan Dunwell’s Virginian informer who described Rugg’s black horse, Lightfoot,<sup>10</sup> in quite enigmatic words: “A more beautiful horse I never saw; his hide was as fair, and rotund and glossy as the skin of a *Congo beauty*” (36, our italics). However, one detail here seems not to fit with History: Rugg’s horse is recurrently depicted as a *black* devilish creature, contrary to Revere’s *Brown Beauty*. Yet, before his master disappeared on his way back from Concord, Rugg’s horse was still “a fine large *bay* horse” (27, our italics): this inexplicable change of color adequately symbolizes their passage from the world of the living to that of the dead, from earthly America to the realm of the supernatural.

Thanks to his powerful mount, Revere managed to lose the two British riders who chased after him near Mystic, and they were soon “far behind the long stride of Deacon Larkin’s splendid *mare*” (Hackett Fisher 108, our italics). The paradoxical feminization of Rugg’s overpowering horse — it is compared to “a Congo beauty” — does make sense after all in the context of the Richmond race ground. Like Revere who outdistanced his two pursuers so easily that they finally gave up the race, Peter Rugg left his two competitors far behind.

Directly in the rear of Dart and Lightning, a majestic black horse of unusual size, drawing an old weather-beaten chair, strode over the plain; and although he appeared to make no effort, for he maintained a steady trot, before Dart and Lightning approached the goal, the black horse and chair had overtaken the racers, who, on perceiving this new competitor pass them, threw back their ears, and suddenly stopped in their course (34).

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<sup>10</sup> Lightfoot was the alias of a notorious robber of the time, who happened to be placed under the custody of William Austin’s brother, the sheriff of Middlesex County, Mass., so that “the name Lightfoot would have been automatically associated with lawlessness and depravity by both Austin and his readers” (Zimbalatti cix,cx).



So "Brown Beauty" becomes "a Congo beauty" in Austin's fiction, as Rugg's horse is identified with Paul Revere's borrowed mare.

Innumerable other details in the narrative implicitly call Paul Revere's ride to mind. When the latter crossed the Charles River under the English sentries' noses, he had to use a small boat. Such a craft is precisely conjured up by the name of Rugg's friend in Menotomy, Mr *Cutter* — cutter being "a ship's boat for carrying stores or passengers," or "a small sailing boat . . . with a single mast" (*Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*: 1987). It is known that in the dead of night, Revere escaped the watchfulness of the vigilant sailors on board the British man-of-war HMS *Somerset*, anchored in the mouth of the Charles River. In the original publication in the *Galaxy*, the name of the warship appears — hardly modified — to label Rugg's hysterical acrobatic feats accompanying his terrible fits of temper:

He would sometimes throw his heels over his head, and come down on his feet, uttering oaths in a circle; and thus in a rage, he was the first who performed a *summersett*, and did what others have since learnt to do for merriment and money (27, our italics).

The word "summersett," in times past spelled "somerset" (1591) no doubt stands here for "somersault" (ca. 1530) whose pronunciation is very similar. This inventive spelling was not reproduced in later editions as it was certainly taken either for an unfortunate misprint or for a queer misspelling by the author himself. However, this perfectly justified correction in modern editions leaves veiled the possibly deliberate hint at the most famous British warship in Boston Revolutionary history, precisely associated with Paul Revere's midnight ride. Moreover, Rugg's uncommon spells of anger uncannily parallel Revere's fiery nature:

Paul Revere was known for candor and directness, even to a fault. He was in the habit of speaking his mind; and when words failed him sometimes he used his fists. In 1761, at the age of thirty-six, he came to blows with Thomas Fosdick, a hatter who had married one of Paul Revere's many Hitchborn cousins (Hackett Fisher 19).

Not unlike Rugg, Revere literally had — at least, on one occasion — to pay the price of his fits of rage. When Rugg, after systematically refusing tolls, eventually settles his debt by paying “thirty shillings” (43) on the Hudson ferry, Revere, had to pay a fine of “six shillings and eight pence” after “a stern New England judge found him guilty of ‘assaulting and beating’” (Hackett Fisher 19).

In Boston, Rugg wonders at the disappearance of King Street: “‘No such street as King-street! Why, woman! you mock me. You may as well tell me there is no King George’” (25). Rebaptized “State Street” after the Revolution, the place was the scene of the bloody Boston Massacre in 1770, after which Peter Rugg was mysteriously snatched from his time. If he is indeed the fictional double of Paul Revere, the artist who gave eternal fame to the event in his well-known etching, Rugg’s indignation is easily understandable, for it is as if a part of himself had fallen into oblivion.

Unquestionably, the Bostonian public building which at best means home for Peter Rugg is Old North Church, situated in the immediate vicinity of Middle Street. In fact, this venerable edifice was, and probably still is, the highest structure of North End, and was easily spotted when one approached Boston from a northern route. Even his horse could not miss it, nor what it meant: “‘Fret not the horse,’ said Rugg, ‘and he will do no harm. He is only anxious, like myself, to arrive at yonder beautiful shore; he sees the North Church, and smells his own stable’” (43). Due to its remarkable location, North Church held a decisive part in the Patriots’ plan to spread the alarm, for its prominent steeple was used to install a signal which could be easily seen from the opposite bank of the Charles River:

If the British went out by water, we would shew two lanthorns [lanterns] in the North Church steeple, and if by land, one, as a signal, for we were apprehensive it would be difficult to cross the Charles River, or git over Boston neck (sic) (Revere to Belknap, ca. 1798: *Revere Family Papers*).

Once again, Revolutionary Boston is at the core of the narrative. The lanterns episode is even allusively staged in Austin’s short story when

Rugg's neighbors watch for him at night "with lanterns" (28) and try in vain to stop him.

So the narrative allusively invites the attentive reader to grasp transcient hints at the Revolutionary period; however fleeting, they are so insistently numerous that they eventually carry away one's conviction that the whole story is stuffed with cryptic signifiers. So it is, for instance, when the ferry-man gives Dunwell a picturesque description of Peter Rugg. His antiquated appearance inspires in him the following comparison: "it is a man, who looks as if he had lain hid *in the ark*, and had just now ventured out" (41, our italics). The biblical Ark metaphor here may as well be one more allusion to historical North End and to Noah's Ark Tavern, at the corner of Clark Street and Ann Street, situated a hundred yards from Rugg's presumed house, and another glorious location of Revolutionary activism.

Impressed by Rugg's horse's incredible velocity, someone ironically comments: "I wonder why the government do not employ him to carry the mail" (22). If Peter Rugg is indeed a fictional version of Paul Revere, his remark may as well be taken at face value, for the latter was the courier of the Bostonian Revolutionary figures and authorities of his time, and he soon became, due to his reputation as a speedy horseman, "the principal express rider for Boston's Committee of Safety" (*Encyclopedia Britannica*: 19, 239). Even if he conducted most of his rides on horseback, it is admitted that Revere used at least once a one-horse-chair quite similar to Peter Rugg's (Hackett Fisher 53).

When Rugg happens to reach Boston during his wild runs, he is quickly taken away by his rebellious horse on new highways, but like Revere on his midnight ride, the noise he makes wakes up everybody in the vicinity:<sup>11</sup>

on every dark and stormy night the wife of Peter Rugg would fancy she heard the crack of a whip, and the fleet tread of a horse, and the

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<sup>11</sup> When Rugg crossed the Charleston bridge, the toll-gatherer was waken "with a noise equal to a troop" (28).

rattling of a carriage, passing her door. The neighbours, too, heard the same noises, and some said they knew it was Rugg's horse (27).

This is reminiscent of Revere's arrival in Lexington on the evening of April 18, 1775, when he retorted to the sergeant who reproached him with keeping people awake: "Noise! . . . You'll have noise enough before long! The Regulars are coming out!" (Hackett Fischer, 109). Moreover, just as Joseph Warren's mysterious informer<sup>12</sup> revealed the British plan "[to] burn the stores at Concord" (Belknap, quoted by Hackett Fisher 95), this is precisely what happened to Rugg's house in his absence: "The old mansion house had become powder post, and been blown away" (47).<sup>13</sup> Significantly, the powder stores of Concord are opportunely transferred to Boston in the fiction: like Peter Rugg who never reached Boston, Revere was not able to accomplish his mission entirely and reach his second aim, as he was prevented from going to Concord.

In effect, gathering more parallels between Rugg's peregrinations and Revere's midnight ride would not add anything to our demonstration. But this interpretation projects a new light on the narrative in which many metaphorical elements and images gain sense by being deciphered as disguised references to the American Revolution — what Rugg specifically misses. As a *missing man* who has unwillingly escaped the founding events which gave birth to the new nation, he "will have no hold on this world" (26). Logically, he appears to nineteenth-century Americans "to be a man not of this world; and [Rugg and his daughter] appeared to Rugg a strange generation of men" (42). Having skipped the Revolution, Rugg and Jenny "do not look . . . as though they belonged to this world" (22). Austin recurrently insists on their radical inability to belong to independent America and makes of his characters out-of-date wanderers, torn from a bygone era: "You were cut off from

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<sup>12</sup> Probably British General Gage's American wife (Hackett Fisher 96).

<sup>13</sup> Zimbalatti noticed the parallel between Rugg's destiny and Austin's on this particular point: "During the battle of Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775, the British burned much of Charlestown. The Austin house perished in the fire. . . . Austin was deeply affected by the realization that one's house and home could be taken away without warning by forces beyond one's control" (xvi).

the last age, and you can never be fitted to the present. Your home is gone, and you can never have another home in this world" (52). In fact, Peter and Jenny Rugg symbolize the irreversibility of American History, which may account for the immediate popular success of Austin's fiction.

Peter Rugg's fate represents a national experience: our break with the past and the restless movement that Frederick Jackson Turner found the dominant characteristic of American life (Doubleday 51).

But although Rugg misses the Revolution and is not aware of the changes it implied, he does not totally escape it, as his obstinate denials of the transformations he observes and constant references to pre-Revolutionary times do not cancel the effects of History *in the real*. His subjective position is affected by the event, though it is not yet integrated in his psyche. In fact, Rugg reacts like a person who tries desperately to repress something unacceptable but who fails to do so satisfactorily. As a consequence, he is doomed to repeat the event on a symbolic level, according to the *repetition compulsion* Freud discovered in neurotic symptoms. Rugg keeps on trying to come back to Boston, but fails again and again. His stubborn determination is in fact of parapraxical essence, and his very failure is significant. If Rugg is Revere's *alter ego*, the failure he repeats may be interpreted as the consequence of Revere's own miscarriage of his mission to Concord.

Moreover, although Rugg traveled as far as Cape Horn (36) or Amsterdam (45), his horse always brought him back to Massachusetts. Rugg never ceased to circle round Boston which he even crossed sometimes without being able to stop at his home. Boston is indeed the *pivot* of his wanderings,<sup>14</sup> the axis around which his fated existence revolves.

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<sup>14</sup> The exact pivot is his *Middle* Street home, or rather the absence of it since "[his] estate, indeed, remains, but no home" (52). Zimbalatti makes of Middle Street "a metaphor for the Puritan ideal known as 'the middle way' . . . [which] illustrates that Rugg is indeed a wayward Calvinist who has fallen out of the favor of his Calvinist God" (lxxix). Paul Revere was born of a Calvinist family, but had no leaning for the stern way of life recommended by orthodox Calvinism, being at the same time "a moralist and also something of a hedonist — a man who sought the path of virtue but enjoyed the pleasure of the world" and



But what is a "revolution" if not the "motion of any figure about a center or an axis" (*Webster's*)? In his own manner, Peter Rugg lives his own "revolution" by reproducing Paul Revere's whereabouts in his famous "Revolutionary rides." Austin proves here beyond any further questioning that nobody living on the American soil can escape America's destiny.

In full accordance with the elated, self-centered beliefs of the times, Austin's story makes of America the center of the world as far as the advancement of freedom is concerned — "Here was the birth place of Freedom; here Liberty was born, and nursed, and grew to manhood. Here man was new created" (50). This exaggerated vision is corroborated by the toll-gatherer's account of Rugg's passing the toll-gate: "two such horses, give them a place to stand, would check the diurnal motion of the earth" (39).<sup>15</sup> This development suggests a higher level of interpretation. Obviously, the text focuses — *revolves* — around historical Boston, "the cradle of Independence" (50), shamelessly promoted to the rank of *axis mundi*. But the nature of the axis is that of a paradox. Instead of spinning about solid hard facts, the story — and History — revolves around a hole, an absence, and borrows the series of events which made up American Revolution. Thus, the narrative coils up around a structural vacuum, like a maelstrom of words and images organized into a story. This particular structure — that of a *vor-text*<sup>16</sup> — makes "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" a more modern — or even a futuristic postmodern-like — story than it may seem at first sight.<sup>17</sup>

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was, from a strict Calvinist point of view, more likely to lose the "middle way" (for more details on Revere's character, see Hackett Fisher 3-14).

<sup>15</sup> "Would check the diurnal motion of the earth." This phrase has unexplainably disappeared from further editions and has been replaced with the following: "would overcome any check man could devise."

<sup>16</sup> For further details about the *vor-text* structure in other pieces of literature, see Alain Geoffroy, "Like peas in two inkwells: Text and Vortex in *Sanctuary* by William Faulkner," 23-34.

<sup>17</sup> From a contemporary viewpoint, and as far as the genesis of the text is concerned, this mitigates Zimbalatti's conception, according to which "Austin was less a man *ahead of his time* than he was a man *of his time*" (Zimbalatti clxxv, his emphasis).



The thunderstorm which never leaves Rugg *in peace*, conveys a violent atmosphere that does not escape the Virginian toll-gatherers. One of them even accuses Lightfoot of having shot a cannon ball at him!

An ammunition wagon which had just passed on to Baltimore, had dropped an eighteen pounder in the road, this unlucky ball lay in the way of the horse's heels, and the beast, with the sagacity of a demon, clinched it with one of his heels and hurled it behind him. I feel dizzy in relating the fact, but so nearly did the ball pass my head that the wind thereof blew off my hat, and the ball bedded itself in that gate-post, as you may see, if you will cast your eye on the post. I have permitted it to remain there in memory of the occurrence, as the people of Boston, I am told, preserve the eighteen pounder which is now to be seen half bedded in Brattle-street church (39)

The incident is clearly "Revolutionary," all the more so as it occurred, if we are to believe the toll-gatherer, "during the late war" (39) — *i. e.* the "Second War of Independence" (1812-1815) — and as the allusion to Brattle Street Church refers to a real episode of the Revolution.<sup>18</sup> Let us note here that Jonathan Dunwell too eventually followed a "Revolutionary" route, on Rugg's tracks: in Trenton, precisely where General Washington crossed the Delaware to inflict a harsh defeat on the British troops at the dawn of military hostilities, he found the tracks of the powerful horse which he trailed to New Brunswick. There, the local toll-gatherer was no less imaginative than the previous one:

"You may recollect, the night was uncommonly dark. Well, sir, just after I had closed the gate for the night, down the turnpike, as far as my eye could reach, I beheld what at first appeared to me, two armies engaged. The report of the musketry, and the flashes of their firelocks were incessant and continuous" (40).

The storm, the thunder and the flashes of lightning are here so many metaphors of the war which pursued Rugg because he defied it in his fatal curse: "*Let the storm increase,*" said Rugg, with a fearful oath, "*I will see home to-night, in spite of the last tempest! or may I never see home!*" (27). The meaning of the word "storm" — there are ten occur-

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<sup>18</sup> Brattle Street Church has since been destroyed.

rences of it in the text — is thus undeniably historical as it symbolizes the “brewing storm” of 1770, when the Bostonians were about to rebel and shake off the yoke of colonialism. Evoking Revere’s role as a patriot messenger in a letter, Governor Wentworth wrote: “Paul Revere went express thither yesterday noon. It portends a storm rather than peace” (Wentworth to Waldron: January 27, 1775). Significantly, the black cloud which pursued Rugg is mentioned as a “storm-seed” and Rugg himself as the “storm-breeder” (20), which symbolically corresponds, in full accordance with Wentworth’s phrase, to Paul Revere, the messenger of — and the one who spread — future troubles.

In this perspective, the moral of Austin’s fantastic fable can be stated as follows: *No one can escape the aftermath of the Revolution*, not even Peter Rugg who only swears by King George and refuses to pay tolls, an unconvincing echo of the patriot’s well-known slogan “no taxation without representation.” But Rugg’s protest does not suffice to make him a budding patriot — tolls derisively represent post-Independence authorities — and his overall attitude is more that of a moderate Loyalist. The repeated use of the word “to tarry” (23, 24, 27) and its double meaning — “to wait, to linger,” but also “covered with tar” (*Webster’s*) sounds like a reminder of what the Patriots did to those who were “tarred and feathered” during the Revolution, when they were suspected of helping the British. Seen from this angle, Peter Rugg’s fear of “tarrying” betrays his attachment to the “Old Regime.” His ambiguous position is pointedly revealed by his chair which is compared to a “Nantucket coach” (42), a local expression used to designate a whaleboat tugged by the whale once the harpoon has been stuck into the animal.<sup>19</sup> Austin may have only meant to suggest the incredible speed at which Rugg’s coach was drawn by his powerful horse, but in the Revolutionary context, the allusion to Nantucket implies another much less disengaged interpretation. During the Revolution, the local authorities and many inhabitants of the island of Nantucket refused to support openly the patriot cause and preferred to stay neutral, largely because of

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<sup>19</sup> Zimbalatti refers to the phrase as a “Nantucketism.” “A Nantucket coach is not a type of stagecoach, but a reference to a whale. . . . Nantucket whalers referred to the upper jaw of a whale as both a ‘coach’ and a ‘sleigh.’ . . . Austin merely substitutes the synonymous term ‘coach’ for ‘sleigh’ (127).”

their geographical vulnerability, but primarily owing to their religious beliefs — many of them were Quakers and convinced pacifists. Peter Rugg, like the Nantucketers, stayed on the sidelines of the Revolution.

In fact, William Austin deliberately *clouds* the issue, making Peter Rugg a Revolutionary antihero, a fictional negative of Paul Revere, who will never again have his place in nineteenth-century America. However, Austin scrupulously warns his readers: neither the many rumors circulating in Boston concerning Paul Revere's midnight ride, nor Peter Rugg's muddled peregrinations, are reliable because, as Dunwell remarks, "so uncertain are all things called historical facts" (35). Nevertheless, considering Revere's ambiguous status in the official patriot version of his role,<sup>20</sup> Austin's choice to cipher his text is easily understandable. One may see in it an early attempt at restoring Revere's popularity after his death (1818), and, at the same time, at bypassing the prohibition of authoritative propaganda, not only by fictionalizing his "hero" but also by hiding his own name behind that of the narrator, Jonathan Dunwell. The name of the fictional correspondent of the *Galaxy* has already been commented upon at length. The word "dun" among other things means "a demand for payment" (*Webster's*) which corresponds to Dunwell's active role in the narrative (44). He is the one who makes Rugg's payment of the thirty shilling fare on the Hudson ferry to New York possible, after which Rugg eventually manages to find his way to Middle Street (Terramorsi: 1994). This interpretation makes the end of Rugg's doom sound like the payment of a debt. But the publication of the story may even be seen as the settlement of another kind of debt. Paul Revere belonged to several Revolutionary more or less secret societies of Boston,<sup>21</sup> like his friend Joseph Warren, a fellow Free-mason. One may interpret the publication of "Peter Rugg, the Missing Man" in the *New England Galaxy* as a compensation for the

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<sup>20</sup> After he served the patriot cause as a courier, Revere was commissioned by Congress to serve in a militia unit. Being a poor strategist, he was accused of cowardice and relieved of his command. He recovered his honor after a court acquittal in 1792.

<sup>21</sup> Revere is known to have belonged — at least — to the North Caucus (1771), the Long Room Club (1773), the London Enemies List (1775) and he participated in the Boston Tea Party (1773) (Hackett Fisher 306).

forced silence surrounding Paul Revere's deeds during the Revolution, a sort of moral support from a Masonic magazine to one of the most famous Bostonian Free-masons.<sup>22</sup>

To some extent, Austin's fiction makes up for those "stranger things [which] have happened in [his] days, without even a newspaper notice" (26), as Mr Felt put it enigmatically. It must be noted that the director of the *Galaxy*, Joseph Buckingham, issued a few years later (1832), in his *New England Magazine*, a long essay outspokenly rehabilitating Paul Revere. Of Revere's letter to Belknap, which he published again in his journal, Buckingham said subtly that "[it] contained incident enough to supply a novelist with the basis of a romance" (Hackett Fisher 331). No doubt Austin was already fully aware of it when he wrote "Peter Rugg."

Alain Geoffroy, *December 1995*.<sup>23</sup>



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<sup>22</sup> In 1770, he was elected the master of St. Andrews Lodge.

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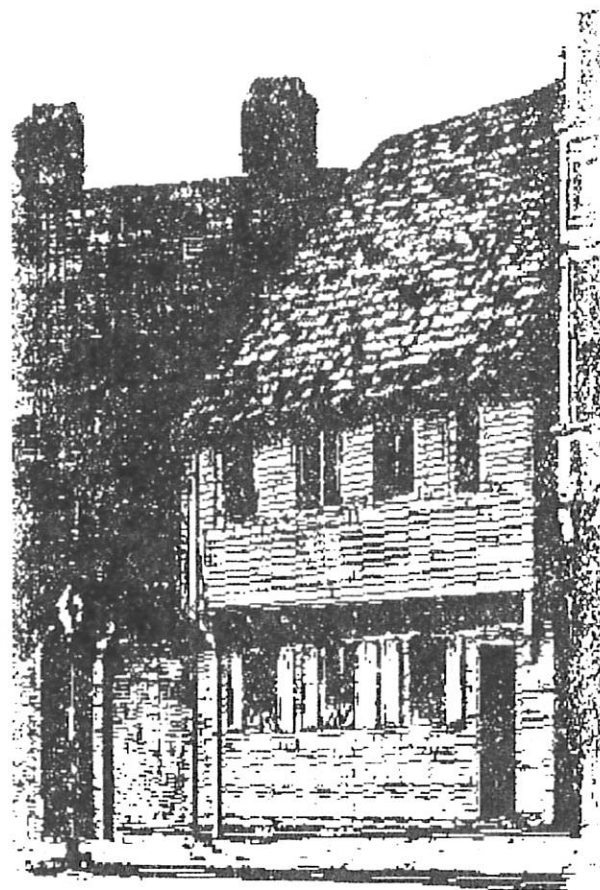
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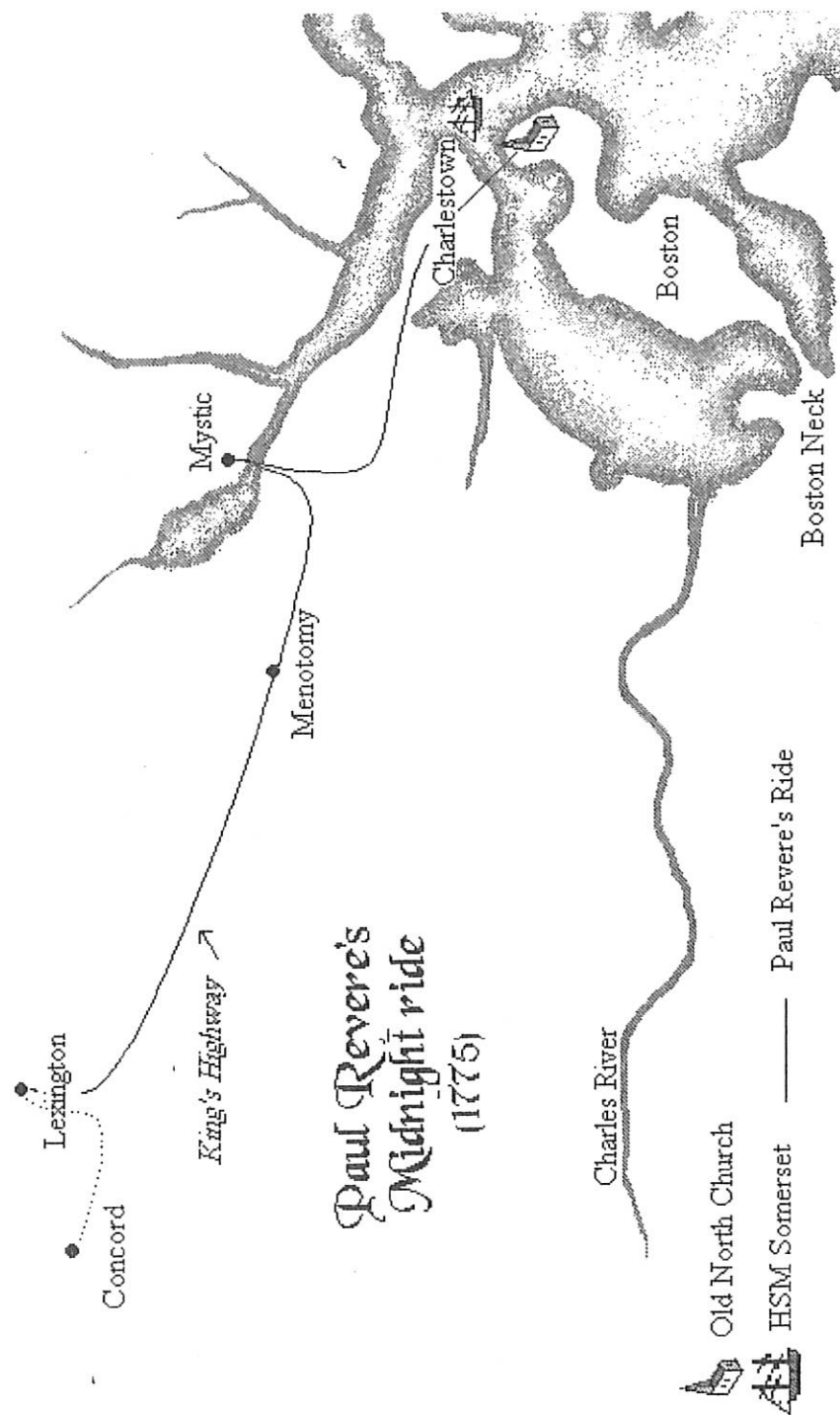
*Paul Revere's statue and Old North Church*  
(Drawing by Alain Geoffroy, July 1995)





Paul Revere's house in North End

(Drawing by Alain Geoffroy,  
after a photograph by Bernard Terramorsi)



(Map by Alain Geoffroy, 1995)