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The Old North Church

“One if by land, two if by sea.” Most of us are familiar with these instructions from Paul Revere to his “friend” in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*. This plan to give Revere the signal was to take place at the Old North Church, and marked the beginning of the Revolutionary War.

The Old North Church, as it is still known, was founded in 1722, and is formally known as Christ Church in the City of Boston. It was the second Anglican Church built in Boston. Its 191 foot steeple was the tallest in the city (since surpassed by the 217 foot steeple of Park Street Church), and was, therefore, the perfect place for sexton Robert Newman and Vestryman Capt. John Pulling to warn the Charlestown patriots of advancing British soldiers. The church is an example of Georgian architecture, inspired by the London churches designed by Sir Christopher Wren. The majority of the congregation members were loyal to the King, including the Royal Governor of Massachusetts. The King had provided the silver used in services, as well as its Bible. The church’s liturgy included prayers for the King. The church’s bells, eight of the oldest bells still in a United States church, are one of its greatest treasures. They were cast in Gloucester, England in 1744 and hung in 1745.

Although Paul Revere was not a member of the Old North Church (his family was Congregationalist), he was a bell-ringer there as a young man. The church still has the contract signed by him and five other boys in 1750. He was also a friend of one of its members, the sexton, Robert Newman. Newman was loyal to the Patriot cause and a member of the Sons of Liberty. The Sons had discovered a plot by General Thomas Gage to send troops to Lexington and Concord, arrest John Hancock and Sam Adams, as well as seize rebel munitions. Revere and William Dawes planned to warn the countryside of the advance of British troops, by land or by sea. On April 18,

1775, Revere met with Newman to tell him of the plan. Newman met with Sons of Liberty Capt. Pulling and Thomas Bernard. Bernard was to keep watch outside. Newman, as sexton, could open the church. He and Pulling climbed stairs and ladders up eight stories to hang the two lanterns just for moments. It was enough to warn the Patriots.

The Old North Church has had its steeple damaged twice by hurricanes, once in 1804, and again in 1954. The church is now an active Episcopal church and also houses the first bust of George Washington. There are historic box pews here, several with furnishings of the families who owned them. In the basement of the church are 37 crypts containing the remains of over 1000 members of former members of the church's congregation. One of these was Major John Pitcairn, a British hero who led the battle of Lexington and Concord, and was later killed at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Although originally buried beneath the Church, he was scheduled to be sent home to England's Westminster Abby. However, the remains of Lt. Shea were sent by accident.

References

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