

Sybil Ludington — The Teenage Patriot Who Rode Into Legend

In the spring of 1777, two years into a Revolution still very much in doubt, a sixteen-year-old girl from the Hudson Valley is said to have mounted her horse in a driving rainstorm and ridden forty miles through the night — twice the distance of Paul Revere's famous ride — to rouse her father's militia and answer a British attack on Danbury, Connecticut. Whether every detail of Sybil Ludington's legendary ride can be fully confirmed by the historical record, the story that has come down through the generations captures something true and important about the founding era: that the Revolution was not made by famous men alone, but by ordinary citizens — including young women on horseback in the dark — whose courage and resourcefulness made American independence possible.

Sybil Ludington was born on April 5, 1761, in Fredericksburg, New York — a town that would later be renamed Ludingtonville in her honor — the eldest of twelve children born to Colonel Henry Ludington and Abigail Knowles.

The Night of April 26, 1777 On the evening of April 26, 1777, Colonel Ludington's militia was on furlough — most of the men were farmers, and it was planting season. A mud-soaked messenger arrived at the Ludington farmhouse with urgent news: British General William Tryon had landed 2,000 troops at Westport, Connecticut, marched inland, and was burning Danbury — the site of a major Continental Army supply depot containing provisions and munitions critical to the patriot cause.⁴ Colonel Ludington faced an immediate problem. He needed to organize and command his men when they arrived, and he needed someone to ride out through Putnam County and alert the 400 militiamen scattered across the

surrounding farms. The exhausted messenger who had brought the news was in no condition to go further. There was no one else available. According to the family tradition that has been passed down and gathered by historians, Sybil — just three weeks past her sixteenth birthday — either volunteered or was asked by her father to go. Around nine o'clock that night, she set out on horseback into a driving rainstorm, carrying a long stick she used both to knock on the shutters of farmhouses and to defend herself against any threats along the way.¹ What followed, by the account that has come down through history, was a forty-mile circuit through the dark and rain of Putnam County, New York — through Carmel, Mahopac, Stormville, and back — rousing farmer after farmer, militia soldier after militia soldier, telling them the British were burning Danbury and that Colonel Ludington needed them at the house by daybreak. She completed the ride just before dawn.³ By morning, nearly the whole regiment had assembled at the Ludington farm, ready to march. They could not save Danbury — it was already in ashes — but they joined forces with militias from Connecticut and, together with General Benedict Arnold (still a patriot at that moment), drove the British forces back to their ships at Westport. The British never mounted another inland raid in that region.⁴

A Story Rooted in Family Memory.

By morning, nearly the whole regiment had assembled at the Ludington farm, ready to march. They could not save Danbury — it was already in ashes — but they joined forces with militias from Connecticut and, together with General Benedict Arnold (still a patriot at that moment), drove the British forces back to their ships at Westport. The British never mounted another inland raid in that region.