

ISRAEL BISSELL

Unheralded Hero of America's First War of Secession

ISRAEL BISSELL—WHO WAS HE? You have heard of Paul Revere and his famous ride. Bissell is the same thing, only much, much more. It is like the difference between lightning and a lightning bug—the difference between 20 miles and 345 miles. Riding night and day for over four full days, the little-known, 23-year-old post rider carried the call to arms from Watertown, Massachusetts to the Philadelphia City Hall, alerting Colonists along the way of the April 19, 1775 British attack on Lexington, “the shot heard round the world.”



Open any schoolchild's textbook today, and you will be able to read about Paul Revere's midnight ride from Boston to Lexington (about 20 miles) during the wee hours of April 19 in order to alert John Hancock and Samuel Adams that “the Regulars are coming out” and that the two were to be arrested. But not a word is given to another rider, **Israel Bissell**, above, who set off on a far greater journey only a few hours after Revere. For four days and six hours Bissell rode, covering nearly 350 miles from Watertown, Massachusetts, to Philadelphia, shouting through each town, “To arms, to arms, the war has begun.”

BY JOHN TIFFANY

Paul Revere gets all the glory for his famous “midnight ride”—a striking tale of patriotism told by a master storyteller—but a young messenger who called the colonists to arms during a remarkable five-day dash across five states is a mere footnote—a man mentioned in historical documents that didn't even get his first name right. They called him “Trail,” but his actual name was Israel Bissell. Bissell is one of the American history's most unheralded heroes.

Bissell, who may or may not have been of Jewish extraction, was a 23-year-old postal rider when the war broke out, April 19, 1775. He rode day and night with little sleep in a 345-mile journey from Boston to Philadelphia. He rode one horse so hard the poor animal died beneath him as he arrived in Worcester, about two hours after leaving Watertown. Yet few people know about the heroic Israel because he did not have good “PR”: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow didn't write a poem about him.

Robert Thompson, professor of television and popular culture at Syracuse University, said the poem marginalized Bissell's accomplishments and enhanced Revere's reputation for reasons that have nothing to do with the facts. “‘Paul Revere’ rhymes with a lot more than ‘Israel Bissell,’” he said. “And it is one of those poems that gets in your head and won't let go.”

“To arms! To arms! The war has begun!” Bissell yelled as he passed through each town. Dozens of other messengers also raced on horseback to spread the news, making it likely that the Revere of the poem was a composite of these men, said J.L. Bell, a Massachusetts writer specializing in Revolutionary War-era Boston.

In response to their cries, church bells were rung and muskets