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Sybil Ludington: Double the Distance, Half the Recognition

Elizabeth E. Saylor, Mardi Schmeichel, & Jillian Tullish

This article describes a lesson for elementary students based on Sybil Ludington's midnight ride during the Revolutionary War. The tasks and activities presented in the lesson afford students the opportunity to learn about this period in history by comparing Ludington's ride to Paul Revere's ride. Through an analysis of the stories told about these midnight rides, students are also encouraged to think about the reasons why Revere's story is the one most often presented in history books and to consider the consequences of excluding the experiences of marginalized groups when telling stories from the past.

"Women have always been an equal part of the past. We just haven't been a part of history."
- Gloria Steinem

Introduction

In 1777, the United States was in turmoil and in the middle of a revolution. There were emphatic calls for patriots to join the revolutionary cause throughout the thirteen colonies. While the women living in the colonies were not expected to take up arms, many women and girls made important contributions to the American Revolution. In fact, although they are often omitted from historical accounts (Crocco & Davis, 1999), women and girls have made major contributions to events throughout history (Ashby & Ohrn, 1995; Waisman & Tietjen, 2013). In order to broaden students' perceptions of the past and their understanding of the contributions of people who were neither male or white, it is important for social studies educators to include the history of women and others in marginalized groups in their classrooms. This article describes how teaching the story of a sixteen-year old woman named Sybil Ludington can contribute to the inclusion of stories about people whose stories have often been ignored.

The story of Sybil Ludington's midnight ride is similar to Paul Revere's famous ride. Revere's story is well known, at least in part because of the inclusion of his story in many states' elementary social studies curriculum. However, few people know about the young woman named Sybil Ludington. The lesson described in this article rectifies that oversight by describing tasks and activities that allow students to not only learn about Sybil, but to consider the reasons why her story has been excluded from most history books.

In the following section, we present a brief review of Sybil's story and present a justification for including her as a subject of study in the elementary social studies curriculum. We then describe a lesson on Sybil Ludington and the experience of implementing a lesson on an unknown woman hero in a 5th grade elementary classroom.

“Women have done things of great importance that go unrecognized because women did them”
- Nel Noddings

Sybil’s Story

Details of Sybil Ludington's role as a revolutionary hero emerged in an article written in 1907 by her great-nephew, Connecticut historian Louis S. Patrick. Patrick noted that Sybil Ludington rode approximately forty miles through the night of April 26, 1777, to tell the militiamen under her father's command to assemble at his house, from which they would march to defend Danbury.

The story of Sybil Ludington's role in this event was retold later in 1907 in Willis Fletcher Johnson's *Colonel Henry Ludington: A Memoir*, a book-length family tribute to the colonel. His account of the event has served as the basis of subsequent retellings. Johnson wrote:

At eight or nine o'clock that evening a jaded horseman reached Colonel Ludington's home with the news [of the fall of Danbury] ... But what to do? [Ludington's] regiment was disbanded; its members scattered at their homes [for April planting]. He must stay there to muster all who came in. The messenger from Danbury could ride no more, and there was no neighbor within call. In this emergency he turned to his daughter Sibyl, who, a few days before, had passed her sixteenth birthday, and bade her to take a horse, ride for the men, and tell them to be at his house by daybreak. One who even rides now from Carmel to Cold Spring will find rugged and dangerous roads . . . but the child performed her task, clinging to a man's saddle, and guiding her steed with only a hempen halter. . . There is no extravagance in comparing her ride with that of Paul revere and its midnight message. Nor was her errand less efficient than his was. By daybreak, thanks to her daring, nearly the whole regiment was mustered before her father's house at Fredericksburgh, and an hour or two later was on the march [to Danbury] for vengeance on the raiders. (pp. 89-90)

Why Should We Teach About Sybil Ludington?

Sybil Ludington is a hero in our nation’s history. It is important that students understand that hero is a word that can be applied to many kinds of people, not just leaders, kings, or war heroes. As highlighted in the lesson here, it is important for young children to understand that women are heroes too and that they should be recognized for their heroic deeds and contributions to our communities and our nation.

Women’s stories, perspectives, and contributions have gone largely unwritten and unrecognized throughout the pages of history (Saylor, 2017). However, the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s galvanized historians and sociologists to examine the various forms of curricular inequities in educational institutions. Researchers began to analyze the paucity of women in powerful positions and through the process, expanded their examination to include myriad marginalized groups and individuals (Lerner, 1975; Trecker, 1971). Specifically, research on the presence of women in textbooks illuminated severe inequalities in the ways women were included in text and illustrations (Commeyras & Alvermann, 1996; Tetreault, 1986). As Bennett and Williams (2014) surmised, “as men had been the principal writers of United States history since the nation’s inception, ‘herstory’ had been forgotten or minimized” (p.15). Since the middle of the twentieth century, efforts have been made to include more women in U.S.

history textbooks. Quantitative and qualitative analyses indicate that *some* progress has been documented regarding the representation of women in United States history and civics books over the past 40 years (Avery & Simmons, 2000; Bradford, 2008; Chick, 2006; Clark, Allard, & Mahoney, 2004; Clark, Ayton, Frechette, & Keller, 2005; Reese, 1994; Tetreault, 1986; Trecker, 1971; Woyshner, 2006).

While acknowledging that progress has been made, scholars have also noted that the inclusion of women in social studies texts is frequently limited to the inclusion of a few women who are described in relation to well-known men and events like an afterthought. Nel Noddings (2001) referred to this strategy as the “add women and stir” approach. Despite the inclusion of more women in the curriculum over the last few decades, women are still substantially under-represented in standards and curriculum frameworks (Schmidt, 2012). For example, the *Social Studies Georgia Standards of Excellence for K-5* identifies 72 individual men and only 12 individual women in the content standards.

Questions about the marginalization of women in history allow students to consider the marginalization of women in the present. Inquiry-based lessons that guide the learning process and support students’ efforts to examine the past and present critically are particularly well suited to examine gender inequalities that may seem commonsensical to students (Schmeichel, Janis, & McAnulty, 2016). Specifically, inquiry lessons that focus on women encourage students to analyze, interpret, and evaluate the content and context in which women have been included or excluded in the school curriculum. In addition to learning more about women’s history, these types of lessons encourage students to become more critical consumers of all historical and contemporary media, which often focus on the experiences and concerns of a limited group of people.

Why don’t we know about women heroes? An inquiry lesson for 5th graders

The lessons described here occurred during a 5th grade American History unit, which centered around a history standard focused on the causes and events of the American Revolution. One of the objectives of this standard specified the teaching of individuals recognized as the nation’s “forefathers,” including George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. Considering the exclusive focus on individual men who participated in the nation’s founding and the American revolution, it was not surprising that the district-mandated texts and resources provided to support this unit solely consisted of descriptions of the contributions of a narrow demographic of men. To encourage students to think about the role that women played in this historical event, the classroom teacher researched accurate, grade appropriate, primary sources and resources about women in during this time period. She was able to find a variety of sources, including articles, poems, literature, interactive online maps, and video clips (*See Appendix for a list of resources and links*).

Next, the teacher created an evidence set with resources intentionally selected to represent different perspectives of the American Revolution. During one of the introductory lessons of this unit, students worked in small groups to explore some of the resources. Their objective during this inquiry was to consider the perspective of the authors and the individuals and groups that the resources described, which mainly focused on women and women’s contributions. This activity allowed the students to explore and consider issues like perspective and positionality. They were also able to compare information from their various sources to

think about the past. This opening activity promoted student interest in the topic, as many had never considered women or women's contributions during the American Revolution. A stirring began to ripple through the classroom as many students began to question why they had never heard of some of the women included in their resources. It sparked questions about the ways in which different sources position and provide a singular narrative of historical events. Further, exposing students to the resources focusing on women helped students develop a new perspective about what they understood, or thought they understood, about women's roles throughout history.

During the lesson that followed, the 5th grade students were tasked with examining the same resources and using evidence to compare two texts and two characters. The first resource provided for students to examine was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's (1860) poem, "Paul Revere's Ride." Upon completion of this examination, the teacher provided some brief yet critical information regarding how Longfellow changed some details of Paul Revere's story by taking some artistic liberties intended to make his poem more patriotic (see The Old North Church and Historical Site). Next, the teacher walked around the room and read *Sybil's Midnight Ride* (2009) by Karen B. Winnick. Following the reading, students were given a document with only the text from *Sybil's Midnight Ride* and a graphic organizer (see appendix for sample) to record evidence by comparing the two texts and the two characters.

It is important to note that the choice to present students with "Paul Revere's Ride" first was intentional. Presenting Paul Revere's story first allows students to gain an understanding of the historical context in which both rides occurred. Further, and perhaps more importantly, the deliberate ordering of the two stories in this way allowed students to develop a baseline understanding of the recognition Revere has received in our nation's history. Developing a deep understanding of Paul Revere's actual ride and the ubiquitous presence of Revere's contribution in accounts of the American revolution was critical. Possessing this detailed understanding granted students the ability to adequately compare Revere's recognition with the recognition Ludington has received (or hasn't).

During the discussion of the graphic organizers, the students in this classroom used the evidence they had recorded to compare the colorful and descriptive adjectives used to describe Revere and Ludington. The evaluation of the language used to describe the protagonists is an important component of helping students understand that the ways people and their actions are described has a great impact on whether or not they may be considered a hero.

In general, the students agreed that Paul Revere had been described as brave, sneaky, and helpful. However, when the discussion turned to the manner in which Sybil Ludington was described, the students noticed that the language used to depict her was more descriptive. At several different points during this discussion, they drew directly from Winnick's text to point out the language used to describe Ludington. For example, one student quoted the text directly during this discussion, noting that Ludington had been described as, "intelligent, since she snapped of a branch from a tree to bang on the doors, so she wouldn't have to get off her horse every time." Another student pointed to the portion of the text in which Ludington hid from a loyalist and "wooded" like an owl to mislead him and noted that this decision was described as "witty." While many of the students' observations about the way Ludington was described pointed to her positive characteristics, one student focused on a part of the text that described her as "foolish" and confidently defended his assertion that her actions were foolish.

At this point in the lesson, the teacher specifically asked students to consider the ways in which the protagonists' actions were framed in each text. These questions included: Was Sybil Ludington foolish to take her ride? Was the word foolish used to describe Paul Revere? If Paul Revere's actions weren't described as foolish, is it fair to describe Sybil Ludington's actions that way? Most of the class vehemently rejected the claim that Ludington was foolish and some of these students turned back to the text to find examples of Ludington's competence.

As the dialogue continued, several students suggested that the word foolish may have been used because Sybil Ludington was both young and a woman. One student claimed that because of her age, gender, and accomplishments, she should be known as a hero. Convinced by the evidence offered by his peers, the student who initially said Ludington was "foolish" erased the word off of the characteristics list on his graphic organizer and replaced it with "brave." The language in Winnick's (2009) text creates a space for several different interpretations of Ludington, her character, and her decisions involving her midnight ride. In this lesson, the focus on language allowed students to practice using the text as evidence to support their different positions and provided direct experience of thinking about how the language used to describe a person shapes our perspectives and understandings.

Another lesson in this unit involved the teacher leading a student activity which the allowed them to track Paul Revere's ride using an online, interactive map (available at <https://www.paulreverehouse.org/the-real-story/>). The students identified where Revere began and traced his path over the countryside until they found the spot where he was captured. Some of the students were quick to point out that Longfellow's poem about Revere made no mention of his capture. One perplexed student asked if Sybil traveled farther and did not get caught, why don't we know who she is?"

This comment prompted a lively discussion about the ways in which gender roles, past and present, determined what kinds of experience people could and couldn't have in society. The topic of what jobs women typically had and the fact that women complete most of the domestic duties at home came up in the conversation. Then, one student stated that sexism is the reason that Sybil Ludington's ride is not known. Floored and excited by the student's observation, the teacher asked the class to work together to arrive at a definition of sexism, so that everyone in the class could understand the term and use it appropriately. After a lengthy discussion, the class decided to define sexism as "oppression based on being a boy or girl."

Drawing upon these students' specific interest in graphic novels, the next step of this unit focused on creating an opportunity for students to communicate and share their conclusions about Sybil being recognized as a hero. The final assignment tasked students with creating a comic book that told the story of Sybil Ludington's ride. The teacher began with activities that asked students to analyze the features of comic books, including chronological text structure, onomatopoeia, dialogue, and captions.

Students were required to describe events in the correct sequence and extract relevant information for use in the comic book. They referred to their previous assignments to develop a chronological account of Sybil Ludington's ride. They organized the events, dialogue, and caption that would be in each frame of the comic book. After receiving feedback, the students made a final copy of their comic book, which they illustrated.

The teacher observed the 5th grade students thrive in this creative setting. Struggling readers excelled at writing the dialogue because they were so engaged and willing to persevere

through the task. Some students with an IEP or 504 plan did need some additional scaffolding when ordering the events in the story to build a cohesive plot and drew on this extra support to write captions and dialogue, and create art that displayed the event accurately. The students were very proud of their comic books and the product they had created to tell the story of a heroic woman and her contribution during the American Revolution. They were also very eager to share their work with others and appeared to recognize that by creating their own sources, they were contributing to the promotion of knowledge about a hero of the American Revolution that almost no one knows about to this day.

Conclusion

Elementary students studying the American Revolution should be exposed to Sybil Ludington's story and her contribution to history. Not all well-known historical events featuring men have a parallel (but not well known) story featuring a woman. Sybil Ludington's ride presents a particularly powerful opportunity for elementary educators to integrate attention to gender and women heroes in their curriculum, while at the same time addressing the social studies standards.

However, in recognizing that Sybil Ludington has been largely ignored in the traditional Revolutionary War narrative, it's important to note she is only one of many compelling characters who are not included in our history texts. In fact, there are myriad individuals and groups who did important and compelling things, but who are largely ignored in accounts of the past due to their gender, race, and/or class. When considering the future of elementary social studies education, a subject with goals that include democracy, equality, and justice, it is critical to expand upon the traditional stories that we tell about the past. We need to continue to deliberately make space to include the perspectives and experiences of individuals and groups whose stories have been largely ignored, individuals and groups who represent the students in our classrooms.

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Appendices

Sybil Ludington and American Revolution Resources

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URL: <http://www.monumentsandmemorials.com/report.php?id=605>
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K-5 books

1	<i>Sybil Ludington: Discovering the Life of a Revolutionary War Hero</i> V. T. Dacquino
2	<i>Sybil Ludington's Midnight Ride (On My Own History)</i> Marsha Amstel
3	<i>Sybil's Night Ride</i> Karen B. Winnick

4	<i>We Were There, Too! Young People In U.S. History</i> Phillip Hoose
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Graphic organizer

**American Revolution Midnight Ride
Compare and Contrast**

Name: _____ Date: _____

	Sybil Ludington	Paul Revere
Age		
Midnight ride distance in miles		
Level of preparation for ride		
Ride completed alone or in a group		
Ride terrain		
Level of protection		
Adjectives used to describe individual		
Other factors		