What a Character!

FAMOUS WOMEN IN HISTORY

Notable Lives from History

Marilyn Boyer

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Sybil Ludington – Brave Messenger

April 26, 1777	Near Danbury, Connecticut

It was during the War of Independence that the British forces landed on April 25, 1777, at the mouth of the Saugatuck River with plans to attack Danbury, Connecticut. Danbury was only 25 miles from Long Island Sound. Major General William Tryon, royal governor of New York, had orders from General William Howe to destroy the Continental Army's military supplies stored there.

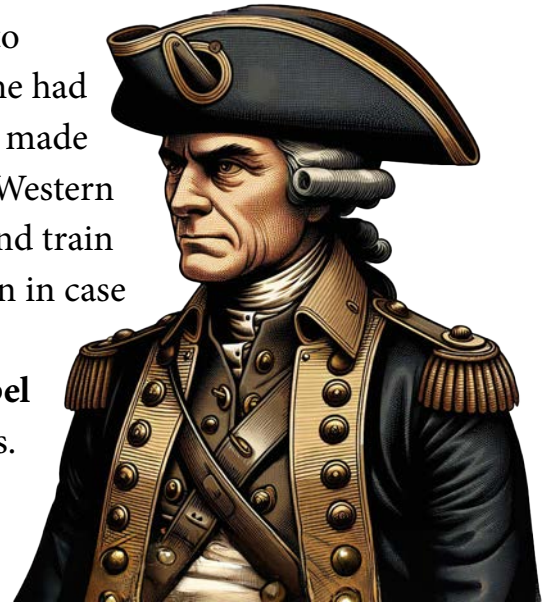
Who Was Sybil Ludington?

Sybil Ludington, the eldest of 12 children, was born on April 5, 1761, in Frederick (now Ludingtonville), New York. The family lived on a farm of over 200 acres. Her father was Colonel Henry Ludington. He had served under General William Tryon during the French and Indian War when he was fighting with the British. Now, he was on the side of the Americans fighting for independence from the harsh rule of King George III.

At the start of the Revolution, Colonel Ludington served as **aide-de-camp** to General George Washington. Since he had military experience, the local militia made him colonel of a unit of 400 men in Western New York. His job was to organize and train the militiamen in case they were needed to **repel** British attacks. The British offered a

aide-de-camp: Confidential assistant

repel: Oppose



reward for the capture of Sybil's father, so the family had to constantly be on guard. Sybil, though only 16 years old, often acted as a kind of **sentinel**, looking out for the family's welfare. The Ludington family's farmland was a **strategic** point between Connecticut and Long Island, which made the **Tories** want to **confiscate** it for their own use.

Always on Guard

One night, Sybil and her youngest sister Rebecca were standing guard when they saw a group of Tories surrounding their house. They quickly called to their four brothers and two sisters, gave them candles, and had them walk back and forth in front of the windows in every room of the house. The moving **silhouettes** in the candlelight created the impression that the house was heavily guarded. It worked! The Tories decided against attacking. Sybil and her siblings had tricked the Tories and escaped danger this time.

sentinel: Guard

strategic: Having a military advantage

Tories: Those loyal to the king

confiscate: Take possession of

silhouette: an outline against a lighter background

The British had sailed into Long Island Sound with 20 transports and six warships. There were 2,000 British troops aboard. They anchored in the mouth of the Saugatuck River, which was just 30 miles from the Ludington's home. They intended to destroy the supplies the Continentals had stored in Danbury. The supplies were crucial for the survival of the Continental Army. They included 5,000 pairs of badly needed shoes, socks, a printing press, bedding for army hospitals, thousands of bushels of grain, barrels of molasses, hundreds of barrels of beef and pork, and more than 1,000 tents, as well as muskets and ammunition.

As the British made their way toward Danbury, colonists hearing they were approaching began fleeing town. Some were taking wagons filled with their belongings over the badly rutted roads. Some were hiding in the woods or barns. Some were concealing their horses and livestock in the forests. Only a few decided to stay to guard their homes. Normally, 50 Continental soldiers guarded the town, but they were away fighting. The militia consisted of only 100 men. They were not enough to stand up against thousands of British soldiers. Danbury needed to be defended or all would be lost!

The British Descend on Danbury

Governor Tryon confiscated a house to set up his headquarters — the home of Nehemiah Dibble. Other British generals were **surveying** the town searching for suitable lodgings. Four young men were hiding in a house and fired at the British troops. The house was immediately set on fire, killing the men. The British were to be feared. Terrified, the families still in town tried to hide. One building that contained grain was burned to the ground. Another that held barrels of meat was burned, and fat from the meat ran in a stream down the street. To complicate matters, a rainstorm was brewing, threatening to turn the roads into a muddy mess.

surveying: Looking over

Around 9 p.m., the Ludingtons, unaware of what was happening in Danbury, heard a rider gallop up to the house. He breathlessly announced that Colonel Ludington was to **muster** his militia and set out to defend Danbury. There was one problem, though. Ludington's men had been allowed to return to their homes to plant their spring crops. Their farms were scattered far and wide throughout the countryside. It would take hours to alert them. And who could he send? The messenger who had arrived at his house was exhausted from his long, hard ride. Colonel Ludington himself needed to

muster: Gather

be available to lead his troops when they arrived. There was no time to waste.

A book written in 1907 featuring some of Colonel Ludington's memoirs states, "In this emergency, he turned to his daughter, Sybil, who a few days before, had passed her 16th birthday, and bade her to take a horse, ride for the men, and tell them to be at his house by daybreak."[1]

Sybil had a trusted horse named Star that she had trained herself. Her father had given Star to her when he had observed her love for and skill with horses. Sybil would ride each day after her chores were done. She was an expert rider and was known by all in the region. Her father trained the militia at their farm, and Sybil had grown up helping him by running errands and acting as a messenger for the militia. She knew where each militia man lived.

Sybil's Ride

It was a 40-mile ride and a dangerous mission. Bands of thieves known as "cowboys and skinners" often hid in the forest waiting to steal from those who might be passing by. To add to the danger, rain began to beat down on Sybil. She rode along the Croton River as she pressed forward to the town of Carmel. Arriving there, she shouted out loudly, "The British are burning Danbury! Tell the militia to join my father

at Ludington's mill. Tell your neighbors!"[2] She continued to alert the country folk by banging on their doors with a heavy stick. Sybil forged ahead to Kent Fields and then Redding Corners and finally back to Frederick, braving the driving rain as she raced through the countryside. Men were quick to volunteer and heed Sybil's warning. Soon, militiamen assembled at Ludington's mill. The march of ten miles to Danbury was made by many men that night.

Meanwhile, the British were proceeding to destroy Danbury. They found a supply of liquor and began to drink it. That **diversion** distracted the soldiers and slowed down the destruction, allowing a bit more time for the militia to gather. When General Tryon got the news that some of the Patriots were only a few miles away, he sent an order to rouse his sleeping men. Then he gave the order to destroy their foes. Houses marked with a cross belonged to Tories, and they were to leave those houses alone. Nineteen homes and stores were soon in flames.

diversion: Turning aside from an intended purpose

Tryon Retreats

General Tryon knew he needed to retreat before the Continental reinforcements showed up. He began to head his men back to their ships, but on

the way, he wanted to leave Danbury in flames. He suspected American troops would be waiting for him on the road by which he'd come into town. With the help of some Tories, he found another road for his retreat. Patriot citizens burned bridges and did all they could to deter his progress. American generals split their forces.

Tryon and his troops were busy eating breakfast when American General David Wooster's troops came upon them. The Battle of Ridgefield was the result. During the fighting, General Wooster was struck in the back of his head with a musket ball and died. Ludington's troops pursued the British as they retreated. An article in the *Connecticut Journal* reported, "The enemy's loss is judged to be more than double our numbers, and about twenty prisoners."[3]

Skirmishes continued to be fought all along the way until the British finally boarded their ships. By this time, Sybil was likely fast asleep in her own bed after her exhausting but successful night's work. Sybil had saved the day!

skirmishes: Small battles

Sybil Is Praised

Tryon's men reported 50 to 60 enlisted men and five officers killed or wounded in the two-hour Battle of Ridgefield alone. The British never again dared to attack the Connecticut interior. In the book *Colonel Henry Ludington: A Memoir*, this tribute is given:

> "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."[4]

Comparing Sybil's ride to Paul Revere, she rode twice as far, through dirt roads, in the dark of night, and through driving rain. Unlike Paul Revere, Sybil was able to avoid being captured. Paul Revere also had help from William Dawes and Wentworth Cheswell, who were also spreading the word that the British were coming. Sybil made the ride all by herself.

In 1935, the New York State Education Department placed a series of roadside signs marking the route Sybil and her faithful horse Star took that night. In 1961, a sculptor named Anna Hyatt Huntington molded a statue of Sybil, the ardent Patriot girl on her faithful horse, spreading her cry of alarm. The original statue is in the

town of Carmel and a smaller one is in Danbury. The Daughters of the American Revolution Museum in Washington, D.C., also has a smaller statue. A picture of Sybil was put on a postage stamp in 1975 as part of the **Bicentennial** Series.

After the War

Sybil continued to live with her parents until she married Edmond Ogden when she was 23. The couple gave birth to one son, Henry, born in 1786. Henry was only 13 when his father died of yellow fever, a highly contagious and deadly disease at the time. Sybil bought and ran a **tavern** in Catskill, New York, to support herself and Henry. When she sold it six years later, she made a profit of three times the purchase price. With that money, she bought Henry, who now had a new wife, a home in Unadilla, New York. She lived there with them for the next 30 years and enjoyed being a grandmother to their four sons and two daughters. Sybil died on February 26, 1839, at age 77 and was buried next to her parents in Patterson, New York. There have been several poems written about Sybil Ludington's famous ride, which can be found in books and other historical resources.

Bicentennial: 200th birthday

tavern: Restaurant and meeting place