

STAGES OF HISTORY

Plays About America's Past



WIM COLEMAN

PAT PERRIN

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Discovering America

Of Italians, Spaniards, and Vikings

Who discovered America—and when?

Let's start where history books usually start. In 1492, an Italian sailor named Christopher Columbus was in Spain, trying to get support from the Spanish king and queen. He chattered wildly about a fabled Asian land called Cathay, what we today call China. It was a place of untold riches—gold, jewels, silks, spices, and many other precious things.

Nobody doubted that Cathay was real. Unfortunately, it was far, far to the east, and all but impossible to reach overland. So Columbus promised the king and queen an easy sea route. The daring Italian was sure that he merely had to sail west across the Atlantic Ocean. Before long, he'd reach Cathay—for according to Columbus, Cathay was really quite close to Spain!

Columbus also promised that, once he got to Cathay, he could easily sail southwest and find a direct sea route to India—another land of riches and wonders. If only the king and queen would support the Italian sailor, Spain could become the most powerful country in the world.

King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella were impressed by this idea. And whatever you might have heard, Columbus did *not* have to convince them that the world was round! Educated people had known that for centuries.

So Ferdinand and Isabella gave Columbus three ships and sent him on his way across the Atlantic. He made four voyages in all. But every time Columbus sailed west, he kept bumping into islands and a mainland that were not part of Asia.

Poor Columbus! To his dying day, he refused to admit that he hadn't succeeded in his original plan. He always insisted that the island of Cuba was really the mainland of Cathay.

Others quickly realized that two whole continents lay between Europe and Asia—a “new world.” These continents became known as North and South America. And they were as full of wealth and wonders as Cathay and India. Spain sent conquistadors to subdue the New World and its people and bring back its riches. Soon, Spain became just as powerful as Columbus had promised.

The Scarlet Cloak

A Play About the Revolutionary War

1775



Deborah Hall, portrait of a young American woman, 1766, William Williams

Understanding the History

Things went well in the English colonies throughout the 1600s and most of the 1700s. The colonists remained loyal to England, and England did little to interfere in American life.

True, several colonies had royal governors, but for the most part, the colonists ruled themselves by elected assemblies. Also, England didn't impose many taxes on its American colonies—at least not at first. So the colonists grew more and more independent, even while they considered themselves loyal subjects of Great Britain.

Then, in 1754, the colonies were shaken by the French and Indian War. Colonial and English soldiers fought side by side to stop the French from dominating North America. Young American officers like George Washington got their first taste of command during this war. By 1763, England had defeated the French.

The French and Indian War seemed to draw England and her colonies even closer together. But it actually spelled the beginning of trouble.

After the war, the British army remained in America; the colonists were not pleased to have foreign troops among them. Also, the war left Great Britain deeply in debt, so at last, the mother country began taxing her colonies in earnest. Britain further angered the colonists by forbidding western settlement.

In 1770, things turned deadly in Massachusetts. On March 5 in Boston, English soldiers fired shots into a crowd of rioting colonists, killing five people; this became known as the Boston Massacre.

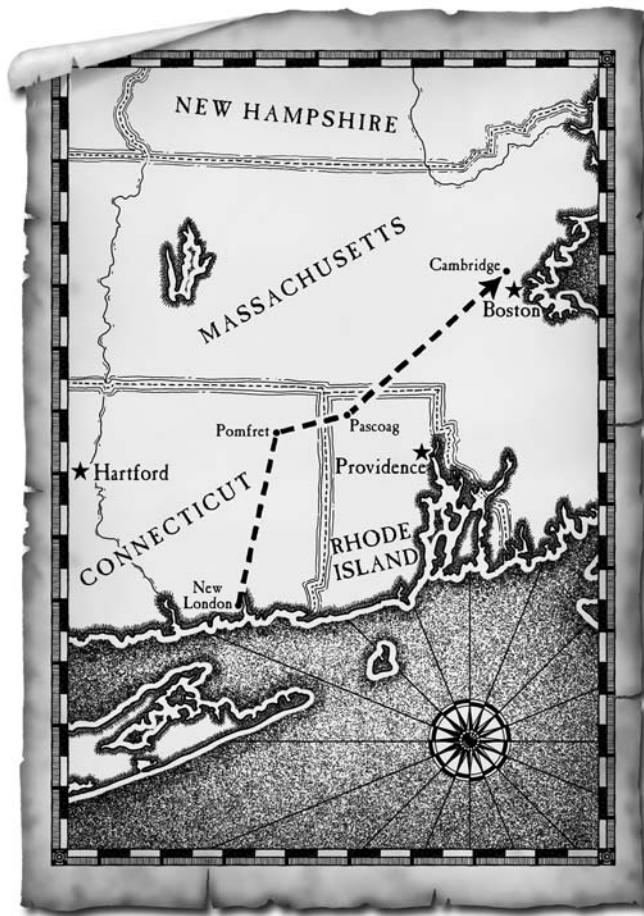
Then, in 1773, England provoked further trouble by imposing a colonial tax on tea. On the night of December 16, a group of rebellious Bostonians held what they called the “Boston Tea Party.” They dressed up as Indians, boarded English ships, and dumped tons of English tea into Boston Harbor.

The British responded by blockading the harbor, stirring sympathy for Boston throughout the colonies. In 1774, men from all 13 colonies met in Philadelphia for the Continental Congress. War seemed more and more likely.

Finally, on the night of April 18, 1775, a Boston silversmith named Paul Revere rode from town to town, warning colonists of

the arrival of British troops. The next day, fighting broke out between colonial and British soldiers at Lexington and Concord in Massachusetts.

The American Revolution had started, and was to affect the lives of colonists everywhere—soldiers and civilians, men and women. For example, in September, 1775, a young Connecticut woman was sent on a dangerous errand.



The map shows Deborah Champion's route from New London, Connecticut, to Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Reviewing the Map

The map on the facing page shows the route Deborah Champion takes in our play—from New London to Pomfret, then to Pascoag, Rhode Island, and on to Cambridge, Massachusetts. According to a letter in which she described her ride, she did stop in Pomfret for a short rest. But did she really cut across Rhode Island, which was occupied by the British? In her letter, she writes about trying to avoid Rhode Island. But she did encounter British sentries at some point on her ride—which seems likely to have happened only in British-occupied territory.

Thinking While Reading

The 19th-century Scottish thinker Thomas Carlyle once wrote that “the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here.” Carlyle said nothing about great women—and less than nothing about the ordinary men and women who have contributed to history in small but important ways. Indeed, you’re not likely to find the story of Deborah Champion in many American history books. As you read this play, consider why this is so.

The Scarlet Cloak

CHARACTERS

DEBORAH CHAMPION, 22 years old

ARISTARCHUS, African-American servant of the Champion family, about the same age as Deborah

COLONEL CHAMPION, Deborah's father, in his mid-40s

A CORPORAL in the Continental Army

MRS. CHAMPION, Deborah's mother, in her mid-40s

A FARM WOMAN, in her 40s or 50s

BETTY BLESSING, Deborah's aunt, Colonel Champion's sister; in her mid-40s

A TORY GENTLEMAN

TWO BRITISH SENTRIES

MARTHA WASHINGTON, wife of George Washington; 43 years old

A SERVANT WOMAN at George Washington's headquarters

MRS. PERCY, a lady of Cambridge

TWO VIRGINIA LADIES

GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON, 43 years old

SETTING *New London, Connecticut; Cambridge, Massachusetts; various places in between, including the villages of Pomfret, Connecticut and Pascoag, Rhode Island*

TIME *September 1775*

A Word About Staging

This play calls for a number of scene changes, which should be carried out as simply and quickly as possible. Decide exactly what props, pieces of furniture, and scenery pieces are needed to define a setting, then clutter the stage with nothing more. Some scenes really need no scenery at all. Instead of full blackouts between scenes (or worse, drawing a curtain), simply dim the lights a bit and execute scene changes in full view of the audience; use music to cover the time. Various scenes call for horses; these can be suggested by large sawhorses which actors can either mount or "lead" by a tether.

Scene 1

(Colonel Henry Champion's house in New London, Connecticut. Two rooms are visible. Stage left is the front hall, with a table and two chairs; the table is scattered with correspondence. Stage right is the parlor. Center stage is a door that divides the two rooms. DEBORAH CHAMPION is sitting in the parlor at her spinning wheel, spinning woolen yarn. ARISTARCHUS sits in a chair near her reading a newspaper. DEBORAH begins to hum a tune to herself.)

ARISTARCHUS. Deborah. You're humming again.

DEBORAH. Oh, dear—am I? I wasn't listening.

ARISTARCHUS. You hum when you're bored.

DEBORAH. Why wouldn't I be bored, spinning the day away?

ARISTARCHUS. It's still early morning. You've got the rest of the day to go.

DEBORAH. Don't remind me. *(Pause; she continues to spin.)* What's in the newspaper?

ARISTARCHUS. Well ... Mr. Horton is going to assume the late Mr. Crane's duties as the church's minister ...

DEBORAH. Mr. Horton's so old, he'll be dead himself before long.

ARISTARCHUS. Not so old. Forty-three, I think.

DEBORAH. That's not old? Read me something exciting.

ARISTARCHUS. Mr. and Mrs. Weems are pleased to announce the marriage of the last of their daughters, Emily. She's 23 years old. Mr. and Mrs. Weems are greatly relieved. They'd

just about given up hope for her.

DEBORAH. It doesn't say that.

ARISTARCHUS. It does—right here.

DEBORAH. What else is there?

ARISTARCHUS. The town council can't decide what to do about potholes in the streets.

DEBORAH. I said something *exciting*.

ARISTARCHUS. The council tried to determine—is it too late in the year to fill them in, with fall underway and winter coming? The vote was tied between “yeas” and “nays.” The council will debate the issue again next week. Meanwhile, after the recent rains, frogs have moved into the potholes, and demand representation in next week's vote.

DEBORAH. You're making that up.

ARISTARCHUS *(offering the paper)*. Here. Read it yourself.

DEBORAH. My hands are full. Go on and read—but stop making things up.

ARISTARCHUS. Here's a story about General Washington.

DEBORAH *(jumping up from her chair and crossing to ARISTARCHUS, leaving the spinning wheel turning)*. Give me that!

ARISTARCHUS. Look what you've done. You let the distaff go. The yarn's knotting up in a wad.

DEBORAH *(trying to read over his shoulder)*. What does it say?

ARISTARCHUS *(reading, playfully keeping the newspaper away from her)*. Boston is still held by British troops under General Howe. But our Continental Army has Boston completely blockaded.

DEBORAH. That's not news. Boston's been blockaded all summer.

(DEBORAH grabs the newspaper away from ARISTARCHUS and reads for herself.)

DEBORAH. Our army's still doing nothing! *(Pause)* I can't understand it.

ARISTARCHUS. I can. If General Washington keeps the British holed up in Boston long enough, they'll get bored and hungry and sail on home and leave us Colonials alone.

DEBORAH. That's not a hero's way of doing things.

ARISTARCHUS. Maybe Washington's not the hero you think he is.

DEBORAH *(scanning the newspaper story).* He is. I know he is. He's being held back by insubordinate officers. And by Congress. He *wants* to attack Boston.

ARISTARCHUS. Oh, I see. A ragtag hodgepodge of militias that's hardly fit to be called an army, attacking the greatest military power in the world. *That's* what your hero wants, is it? To commit military suicide? Maybe he's smarter than he is heroic.

DEBORAH. Poor man, he must be as bored as I am.

(On the other side of the door, COLONEL CHAMPION enters the hall, followed by a CORPORAL. COLONEL CHAMPION is holding a sealed packet of papers.)

COLONEL CHAMPION *(loudly, to the CORPORAL).* Confound it, man, talk some sense!

CORPORAL. With due respect, Colonel, General Schuyler's orders make

perfect sense. This package must be delivered to General Washington in Cambridge. It's supposed to reach him today.

COLONEL CHAMPION. Obviously, that's not going to happen. It's a physical impossibility.

CORPORAL. Then tomorrow at the latest.

COLONEL CHAMPION. So must one of my horsemen ride like the devil because you rode too slowly?

ARISTARCHUS *(to DEBORAH).* Sounds like your father's riled about something.

DEBORAH. Let's listen!

(DEBORAH and ARISTARCHUS huddle together with their ears at the door, listening as COLONEL CHAMPION and the CORPORAL continue.)

CORPORAL. Orders are orders.

COLONEL CHAMPION. Deliver it yourself, why don't you?

CORPORAL. I explained that already, sir. My orders are to deliver this package to you, then return straightaway to Canada.

COLONEL CHAMPION *(about to open the package).* Well, let's just see what's so urgent about these papers—

CORPORAL. Sir, you mustn't. That's General Schuyler's seal. It may not be broken. This document is for General Washington's eyes only.

COLONEL CHAMPION. So not only am I supposed to put somebody's life at risk, I'm not even allowed to know why.

CORPORAL. You understand the situation, sir. Washington is quartered at the Morton Percy residence in Cambridge—which is secret information, by the way. Your man will need a password to get by the sentries. It’s “Madeira.”

COLONEL CHAMPION. I’ll take care of it, Corporal. Be on your way.

CORPORAL. I’ll tell General Schuyler you’re carrying out his instructions, sir.

COLONEL CHAMPION. Tell him reluctantly. No, resentfully.

CORPORAL. But sir—

COLONEL CHAMPION. Tell him exactly that. He can file a report against me if he pleases—or have me court-martialed, for all I care. Be on your way, I said.

CORPORAL (*saluting*). Yes, sir.

(*The CORPORAL exits. DEBORAH cautiously opens the door and enters the other room, followed by ARISTARCHUS.*)

DEBORAH. Pardon me, Father ... I couldn’t help overhearing—

COLONEL CHAMPION (*sitting down at the table and skimming some correspondence*). No, I don’t imagine you *could* help it, with your ear glued to the door. And you, too, Aristarchus! Two such enormous ears—I didn’t realize the door was big enough to fit both of them. Does anything ever happen in this house that the two of you don’t overhear?

DEBORAH. Father, be honest. Is there a single man in your militia who can ride better than I can?

COLONEL CHAMPION. It’s not “my militia” anymore, daughter. It’s part of the Continental Army of the United Colonies.

DEBORAH. Don’t send one of your men. Send me.

COLONEL CHAMPION. Deborah—

DEBORAH. No, hear me out. You *know* I can ride better than any man you’ve got. And I know the way better than anybody, too—every *possible* route to Cambridge, every little short cut or side road, and every farmhouse practically. Somebody else is liable to get caught, but I can stay clear of Tories and British soldiers.

COLONEL CHAMPION. Now daughter—

DEBORAH (*snatching the package*). Don’t try to talk me out of it. You know how stubborn I get when I set my mind to anything. I’ll start right away. And I’ll take Aristarchus.

ARISTARCHUS (*aside to DEBORAH*). Did I volunteer?

DEBORAH (*to her father*). Tonight I’ll stay at Aunt and Uncle’s tavern in Pomfret. I’ll be at General Washington’s headquarters tomorrow night. Oh, Father, please. If I have to spend another day sitting at that spinning wheel, I’ll die of boredom.

COLONEL CHAMPION. Stop fussing and whining, daughter. And put that packet down.

DEBORAH. But Father—

COLONEL CHAMPION. And silence! I’ve already made up my mind who to send.

(Pause; with a defeated look, DEBORAH puts the package on the table.)

COLONEL CHAMPION. I'm sending you.

DEBORAH *(stunned)*. You are? I mean ... you *are*. Of course, you are.

COLONEL CHAMPION. Don't imagine for a blessed second that you talked me into it. It's true that you ride well enough. But there's not a woman in the world who can ride as well as some of my better men.

DEBORAH. Now you know that's just not—

COLONEL CHAMPION. Do you want me to change my mind?

DEBORAH. No.

COLONEL CHAMPION. Then hear *me* out for a change. Sit down.

(DEBORAH sits down at the table. COLONEL CHAMPION gets up and paces as he talks.)

COLONEL CHAMPION. This General Washington—what have you heard about him?

DEBORAH. Well ... that he's a giant of a man.

COLONEL CHAMPION. And?

DEBORAH. That he shows nobility in his every thought and deed.

COLONEL CHAMPION. And?

DEBORAH. Oh, a great many things. They say he's invulnerable to gunfire.

COLONEL CHAMPION. Is he, now?

DEBORAH. During the war with the French and the Indians, they say he'd ride between armies mowing each other down by the hundreds, muskets

and cannons firing from all directions, and he never suffered a scratch.

COLONEL CHAMPION. Sheer, foolhardy luck.

DEBORAH. Providential protection, many folks say.

COLONEL CHAMPION. He's also said to be an incompetent backwoods Indian fighter who hasn't the first idea how to command an army in the field. And he's impious.

DEBORAH. Impious?

COLONEL CHAMPION. Well, certainly not religious after our Connecticut fashion. *(Holding up a piece of paper)* I have here an order, direct from his headquarters, that my men are to dig latrines on Sundays! Latrines! On the holy Sabbath!

DEBORAH. War knows no Sabbath, I suppose.

COLONEL CHAMPION. True. But slaughtering our foes is one thing, digging latrines quite another! Should I jeopardize the souls of good Congregationalists by forcing them to dig latrines on Sundays?

DEBORAH. Why are you asking me, Father? I don't understand.

(Pause)

COLONEL CHAMPION. I saw him once. Didn't properly meet him. It was in Cambridge, at his first review of the Colonial troops a couple of months ago. He sat on his horse under an elm tree. I marched in line with the

other officers, and when it came my turn, I halted before him and saluted. He handed me my colonel's commission without a word, as if he were giving a penny to a beggar. I turned and marched away. Didn't get a good look at him—nor did he really bother to look at me. I only observed that he's tall, with sandy hair. I can't even say the color of his eyes. (*Regretfully*) I wish I'd noticed the color of his eyes. And now—we New Englanders are under orders from a Virginian. It's most disturbing—especially now that he's gotten sole command over the Continental Army. He might just assume absolute power over us all. There's even talk of him becoming king of the Americas! Nonsense, of course—but dangerous nonsense. We must all remember that we're still loyal subjects of King George III, even if we're fighting everything he stands for to the very death.

(COLONEL CHAMPION *sits down at the table across from* DEBORAH, *looking at her intently.*)

COLONEL CHAMPION. I could send any of a half dozen men on this mission. They'd get the packet to Washington, no doubt about that. But if I ask them to learn something about him—*anything*—they'll fail. They'll come back and tell me what they think I want to hear. Or what they think he wants them to say. Or maybe a mixture of both. Anything but the truth. (*Pause*) I hear he's extremely daunting.

DEBORAH. I'm not easily daunted.

COLONEL CHAMPION. I know. It's one of the reasons you're having such trouble finding a husband.

DEBORAH. Now Father—

COLONEL CHAMPION. Never mind that. I believe I can trust you to ... well, draw him out. Or simply to *observe* him, and tell me whatever you can.

DEBORAH. Of course, Father.

COLONEL CHAMPION. Now then, you must get going—immediately if not sooner. Your mother will help you prepare. (*To* ARISTARCHUS) And you—get the horses ready. Saddle up Dobbin for Deborah, Snowstorm for yourself.

ARISTARCHUS. Yes, sir.

COLONEL CHAMPION. And be quick about things for a change. I don't keep a servant in this house just to read newspapers.

ARISTARCHUS. Of course not, sir.

Scene 2

(DEBORAH's room. She is pacing back and forth, nervously humming.)

DEBORAH (*to herself*). Oh, Mother do hurry! I haven't got all day! Nor all morning! Nor even a minute! I should be gone already!

(MRS. CHAMPION *enters, carrying a pair of saddlebags with a red cloak folded on top of them, and also a large, hood-like white bonnet.*)

MRS. CHAMPION. Here's everything. (*Handing* DEBORAH *the cloak*) Put this on.

DEBORAH (*putting it on*). Oh, what a lovely cloak! When did you make it?

MRS. CHAMPION. I didn't make it for you. I made it for your father. But since you're off to do a man's job, you might as well wear a man's cloak.

DEBORAH. Don't be angry.

MRS. CHAMPION. I'm not angry.

DEBORAH. You're certainly not happy.

MRS. CHAMPION. I have no reason to be.

DEBORAH (*examining herself in the cloak*). It's very handsome. And it'll do for a woman as well as for a man.

MRS. CHAMPION. The fabric's rough. But it's the best I can weave from the wool you spin. Such bumpy and crooked yarn! Can't you do better work? And what a mess of it you made just now, letting the fibers bunch up in a wad! What were you thinking? (*Handing DEBORAH the cap*) Here, put this on, too.

DEBORAH. Oh, Mother—such an ugly calash.

MRS. CHAMPION. It's not ugly. You know perfectly well it's mine.

DEBORAH. So why are you making me wear it?

MRS. CHAMPION. It'll protect your hair. You don't want to look a fright when you meet the commander-in-chief himself. Now, don't argue. We don't have time.

(*DEBORAH reluctantly puts on the bonnet; MRS. CHAMPION hands her the saddle bags.*)

MRS. CHAMPION. And here are your victuals—bread, cheese, a bottle of Port, some smoked beef.

DEBORAH (*examining the contents of the bags*). We don't need all this. Why, here's enough food to feed Aristarchus and me for a week.

MRS. CHAMPION. You might be on the road for a week, going and coming back. Did you think of that?

DEBORAH. But it's too much weight.

MRS. CHAMPION. Don't argue, I said.

(*COLONEL CHAMPION enters.*)

COLONEL CHAMPION (*to MRS. CHAMPION*). Why such dawdling? She should be long gone by now. (*To DEBORAH*) Good Lord! You look like an old woman in that frightful headgear!

MRS. CHAMPION (*to COLONEL CHAMPION*). Do *I* look like an old woman when I wear it?

COLONEL CHAMPION. Of course not, dearest. But it doesn't suit your daughter.

MRS. CHAMPION. She's wearing it, and that's that. I deserve *some* say in this madness.

COLONEL CHAMPION. Isn't that my new cloak she's got on?

MRS. CHAMPION. She's got to cover herself with something. And she can carry the packet in the inside pocket.

COLONEL CHAMPION. So is she ready?

MRS. CHAMPION. She looks it, doesn't she? And are you proud of your little girl? And are you proud of yourself, sending her in a man's cloak on a man's horse to do a man's dangerous work? You ought to be ashamed.

COLONEL CHAMPION. Let's not quarrel.

MRS. CHAMPION. No, let's not, indeed—for nothing I say can matter. You raised her more like a boy than a girl, and she spent her growing-up years riding all over the countryside instead of learning skills proper to a young lady. And now she can barely spin a decent bobbin of wool, let alone weave or stitch or cook. Who'll ever marry her?

COLONEL CHAMPION. She can play the spinet.

MRS. CHAMPION. Well, then—we just need to find a man who cares about music and nothing else.

COLONEL CHAMPION. We don't have time for this.

MRS. CHAMPION. Indeed. It's best that she be gone and out of my sight, the sooner the better.

COLONEL CHAMPION (to DEBORAH). I hope I don't need to tell you to stay clear of Rhode Island.

DEBORAH. But it's directly on my way.

COLONEL CHAMPION. Yes, and it's overrun with redcoats. Ride due north from Pomfret to Massachusetts instead. Then head east.

DEBORAH. But that'll take—

COLONEL CHAMPION. More time, I know. Make up the time some other way.

(ARISTARCHUS has entered during the previous lines.)

COLONEL CHAMPION (to ARISTARCHUS). And *you*—what have you been doing all this time? Reading the newspaper, I suppose.

The horses ought to be ready by now.

ARISTARCHUS. They *are* ready.

COLONEL. Oh. (Pause) Well, then.

(A silence falls; no one seems to know what to say.)

DEBORAH. Let's go, Aristarchus.

(DEBORAH and ARISTARCHUS exit. COLONEL CHAMPION and MRS. CHAMPION stare at each other for a moment. Then MRS. CHAMPION rushes to the doorway and calls after DEBORAH anxiously.)

MRS. CHAMPION. Deborah! Oh, daughter, dear, *do* be careful!

Scene 3

(A road in Connecticut. ARISTARCHUS and DEBORAH have dismounted their horses and are leading them by the reins. Their clothes are considerably muddier than before. A short distance off, a FARMWOMAN is dipping water out of a spring with a bucket. DEBORAH is humming.)

ARISTARCHUS. You're humming again.

DEBORAH. Then I'm bored. We'd better get back on our horses and ride.

ARISTARCHUS. No, we'd better get our horses something to drink. If you want them to hold out till we get to Pomfret, we've got to go easier on them. Look, we're coming to a creek.

DEBORAH. And there's a woman at the spring nearby. (Calling out to the FARMWOMAN) Holla, there!

FARM WOMAN. Holla! What can I do for you?

Playwrights' Postscript

Deborah Champion described her adventurous ride in a letter to a friend. According to her letter, Deborah's father approached her while she was at her spinning wheel one morning and said, "Deborah, I have need of thee. Hast thee the courage and go out and ride, it may be even in the dark and as fast as may be, till thou comest to Boston town?"

Deborah's letter seems to be the only existing document that describes her ride. But what were the papers that she was carrying to George Washington? Did she stay clear of British-occupied Rhode Island? Exactly how long did it take her to reach her destination? Champion's letter leaves out many details.

So we've felt free to use our imaginations in writing this play. For example, Deborah left home the day after her father's request, not the same morning. Some events are fictional, including Deborah's pursuit by the Tory. Also, we've allowed Deborah and Aristarchus to make their journey faster than they probably could have done in real life.

Still, we've used many details from Deborah's own account. She did make a rest stop at her uncle's home in Pomfret, and we've portrayed her encounter with the English sentries much as she describes it in her letter. She really did fool the sentries by pulling her calash down around her face and pretending to be an old woman.

Champion writes that, when she met George Washington, he "was pleased to compliment me most highly both as to what he was pleased to call the courage I had displayed and my patriotism." As playwrights, we couldn't resist making more of their meeting than a simple compliment on a job well done.

What Happened Next?

The United States declared its independence from England in July, 1776. The last battles of the Revolutionary War were fought in 1781, and peace was officially declared in 1783. George Washington became the first president of the United States in 1789.

In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson purchased a huge tract of land called Louisiana from France, changing the United States forever. It also changed life for Native Americans who lived throughout that region—including a teenaged girl who had to make a difficult choice between loyalties.