# Our Capitalistic Founder

Paul Revere was the only major patriot who was also a founder—literally. He started a successful iron foundry in 1788, and remains the patriot most associated with industrial capitalism and free enterprise. Yet with one important exception, the midnight rider has been overlooked in the recent mania for the founders, an omission that *Midnight Ride, Industrial Dawn* seeks to remedy.

Robert Martello's well-researched and interesting new study focuses on Revere's business and technological practices, mostly eschewing his wartime experiences. His portrait of Revere nicely harmonizes with the one drawn by David Hackett Fischer in his classic *Paul Revere's Ride*, a book that Martello almost entirely ignores. Still, despite his focus on Revere's post-Revolutionary business ventures, Martello could easily have begun his book just as Fischer did with the Texas adage describing Paul Revere as "the yankee who had to go for help."

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Fischer used this epigram to emphasize that Revere was not a lone ranger by any stretch of the imagination, but was instead just one important part of a large community of patriots. Martello makes a parallel argument about Revere the entrepreneur, placing him within an "allied network of innovators, politicians, and influential people who worked together to pool their expertise and solve common problems" (62).

The first third of this book, dealing with Revere's early life and career, drags a bit. Based mostly on secondary sources, it covers well worn ground. Like Fischer, Martello focuses on Revere's status anxieties as a successful artisan craving acceptance from upper class merchant founding fathers and on

his uncanny ability to forge personal connections that contributed to his wartime and business successes.

Martello's account really comes alive when he begins relying more heavily on the extensive Revere Family Papers for the period beginning around 1790. Despite never achieving the level of social respectability he longed for, Revere became very rich as a bell and cannon founder and the first American to produce copper sheeting for ships during his post-war career.

Martello uses the concept of proto-industrialization as his theoretical framework for discussing Revere's career, arguing that Revere, like European proto-industrialists, represents a transitional phase between the world of the artisan and industrial capitalism. However, this is proto-industrialism with a twist. Martello argues that American proto-industrialism occurred not in agricultural settings (as in Europe) but within the "early manufacturing community" (8), which included artisans, capitalists, hewers of raw materials, consumers, and government officials. As Martello examines Revere's career, he focuses on changes in capital production, technology, labor, and the environment.

As an artisan, Revere never had the sort of access to capital that was available to early manufacturers who came from more mercantile backgrounds. His solution was to use the social capital he built up during the war years to secure government contracts. It is astounding how Revere was able to capitalize on his connections throughout his career by landing government contracts for cannon and copper sheeting, procuring a loan from the naval department to help him develop his copper rolling mill, convincing government officials to help him collect used copper, and pushing (unsuccessfully) for tariff protection. Indeed, while Revere may well be a founding father of modern capitalism, some free enterprise promoters would, no doubt, be troubled by such frequent reliance on government largesse.

Revere also adopted modern techniques and technologies, everything from double-entry bookkeeping to mechanical copper rolling, although he never quite attained the industrialists' goal of full standardization. In the case of copper rolling, he became a bold technological pirate who sent his son to England to memorize the state-of-the art equipment employed there. Usually, though, Revere's activities were less dramatic. He was a supreme networker who shared ideas with a broad circle of techies, ranging from fellow manufacturers to government officials to important scientists. Martello suggests that his connections with one such British scientist helped to feed his continual desire for social status. This propensity to share information resembles the behavior of machinists recently described by David R. Meyer in *Networked Machinists* and, as Martello points out, it seems far removed from Revere's artisan heritage in which practitioners sought to protect the secrets and mystery of their craft.

Revere's use of labor clearly fit the proto-industrial framework. Having moved away from the formal apprenticeships and journeyman labor of the artisan shop,

Revere’s operation nevertheless remained relatively small scale (with perhaps 10 to 20 employees at most) and workers maintained close personal ties to their boss. Martello’s discussion of the environmental effects of Revere’s business is suggestive, if a bit thin, focusing on riparian disputes and on fuel procurement. He concludes that Revere “increasingly acted in a capitalist-industrialist manner, treating the environment as a commodity and limitation” (151).

For all its divergences from traditional accounts of the founders, like most other founding father biographies, this one ultimately casts its subject in a heroic mold. Martello resists portraying Revere as a modern-day self-interested capitalist working his government connections for all they are worth, preferring to accept Revere’s more patriotic self image. Martello’s Revere saw himself as an industrial hero for bringing English copper rolling technology to America, fulfilling in that process his earlier ambitions to be venerated as a social leader. Revere “could accurately consider himself the founder of what we now call a national industry as others followed in his footsteps, sought his advice, built upon his achievements, and continued his work” (343).

While Martello occasionally intimates that Revere was typical of artisan-manufacturers of his age, he provides little evidence, and Revere’s remarkable career seems to belie such suggestions. Nevertheless, whether Revere was representative or *sui generis* in his technological adventurousness, his hard-headed business savvy, his gregarious social networking, and his knack for getting government support make for fascinating reading, and Martello’s account of Revere’s life is a welcome addition to the literature on American industry and on the founding fathers.