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The Beale Ciphers

If you're good at code-breaking, you might want to try your hand at the Beale Ciphers. Solve them, and you'll walk off with $20 million in buried treasure. But be forewarned: The ciphers have baffled cryptanalysts for more than a century.

They are the work of prospector Thomas Jefferson Beale, who shared in a huge gold and silver strike in the Colorado Territory in 1818. Beale carried the treasure back to his native Virginia and buried it near present-day Montvale. Four years later, he returned west but left behind a padlocked chest in care of innkeeper Robert Morriss, instructing him to open it in 10 years.

Morriss waited 23 years before opening the box. Inside, he found three mysterious sets of numbers and a letter from Beale promising to send the keys to the encoded messages—but he never did. For 10 years, Morriss tried on his own to decode the numbers before finally relinquishing them to his friend James B. Ward.

Ward figured out that one of the ciphers was based on a consecutive numbering of all 1322 words of the Declaration of Independence. The message, when decoded, revealed the contents of the treasure—2921 pounds of gold, 5100 pounds of silver, and jewels worth $13,000. The two other codes, it said, would reveal the 30 heirs named by Beale and, more important, the treasure's precise location.

Since then, cryptanalysts have employed every known deciphering device—and invented others—to crack the two remaining codes. No one, including computer experts and clairvoyants, has had any luck. For more information and copies of the ciphers, send $1 and a large stamped, self-addressed envelope to Beale Cipher Association, P.O. Box 216, Medfield, Mass. 02052.

The Female Paul Revere

During the American Revolution, a 16-year-old girl named Sybil Ludington took a midnight ride for the rebel cause that was more dangerous and far longer than the famed ride made by Paul Revere.

On the night of April 25, 1777, 2000 British soldiers landed in Connecticut, marched inland to the town of Danbury and proceeded to destroy the rebels' storehouse of food and arms. Diverted by hogsheads of rum, the Redcoats thereupon got drunk, shot off their guns and began burning the town.

Wayne Bryant

Danbury statue honoring Sybil's ride

At 7 p.m., a messenger with a bullet in his back rode up to the Ludington house, 20 miles west of Danbury, and alerted Sybil's father, who was commander of a militia regiment. Colonel Ludington had a grave dilemma: If he rode off to notify his 400 volunteers, he might not return in time to lead them in battle. Sybil offered to go in his place.

Sidesaddle on a big bay horse, she rode 40 miles—26 miles more than Revere—through a dangerous no-man's land between British and American lines that was infested with deserters and hostile Indians. As she rode, she banged on doors with a stick and shouted the summons. The night almost over, she returned home and slid, exhausted, from her horse.

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