

The Beginning of our United States

The Battles of Lexington and Concord – 1775

By David Petronis ~ 17 April 2023

One great transgression in the teaching of our children today is the omission of this fantastic account, story if you will, of the bravery and downright courage of our Colonial fore bearers at Lexington. They literally risked life and limb to pursue freedom from the Kingdom of Great Britain when these Patriots believed they endured taxation without representation and impositions of major controls in their daily lives. British soldiers were even routinely housed and fed in civilian homes!

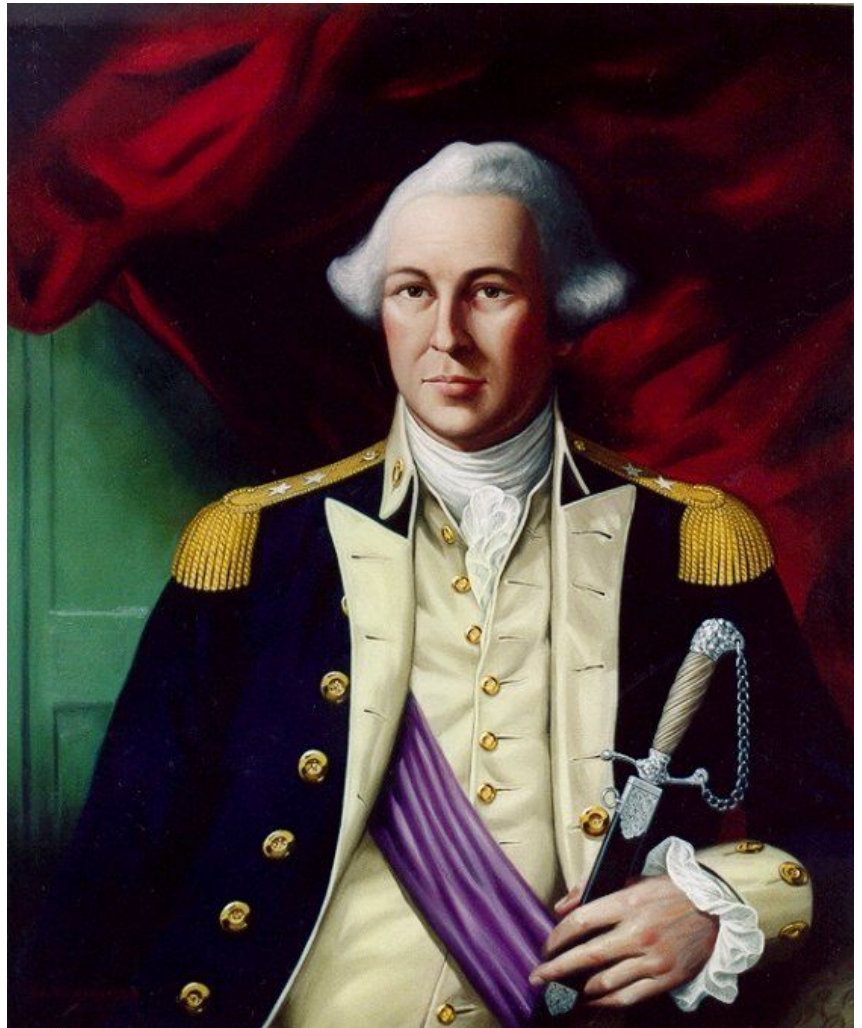
To set the stage for the upcoming hostilities in Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts we must know the circumstances leading up to those first shots fired. Know this one important fact, the major cause of armed conflict was the attempt of the ruling class to take away the means of defense from its' citizens. In 1775 they tried to grab their guns -- in 2023 and beyond – they are still trying to grab our guns. It seems things never change; we just get older.

The British in the Massachusetts Colony did not have enough troops in 1774 to actually rule the entire countryside and at that time were generally only in complete control of the City of Boston, its' harbor and its' coastline. The remainder of the Colony was ruled by the Colonials, who of course, were British Citizens. But in response to the degradations by their own British forces and firmly believing a possibility of armed conflict in the future, these citizens believed their Massachusetts Bay Charter, which gave self-governing privileges, mandated a new government body to be founded by these American Colonials and they did so on 5 October 1774.

The Provisional Revolutionary Governance of Province of Massachusetts Bay, was formed including the Massachusetts Bay Provincial Congress of Deputies with John Hancock as its' first President, succeeded the following year by Doctor Joseph Warren. Dr. Warren was a young patriot and one of the founding fathers of our American Revolution. A read into the life of this patriot should be mandatory by all school children.

Being President of this Congress he was also the Commander of the Militia, and it was their stores of ammunition, supplies, weapons and cannons that was housed in secret in Concord. Dr. Warren disbursed the midnight riders to Lexington and Concord to warn of the British March to seize the cache and arrest any conspirators. He also knew John Hancock and Sam Adams were there in the area and they needed to depart. On the eve of 18 April 1775 he withdrew from Boston and also headed for Concord as assurance of the warning.

*(Commander of the Militia General
Dr. Joseph Warren)*





Since February of 1775 the British government had declared a state of rebellion within the Massachusetts Bay Colony and regular patrols were sent out from Boston as a show of force by the British Commander-in-Chief, General Thomas Gage. Knowing that there would be British patrols throughout the area Joseph Warren dispatched Paul Revere and William Dawes to take separate routes to Concord and they were to meet in Lexington. When the pair met again they also came upon Samuel Prescott, a resident and physician of Concord, who requested to ride with them to spread the word. Shortly into their final mission they three were stopped by a British patrol and Revere was detained but Dawes and Prescott escaped only to have the former's horse throw him while Prescott jumped his horse over a stone wall and rode into woods and swamp emerging at the Hartwell Tavern to warn of the coming Regulars. Dr. Warren also ended up in Concord and was engaged in both battles plus the following siege of Boston that evening.

A Shot Heard Round the World

Early in the morning of 19 April 1775 around 700 British Regulars of the 10th Regiment of Foot, led by Lieutenant Colonel Francis Smith secretly made route to Concord Massachusetts under orders from General Gage to capture and destroy suspected arms and munitions secretly housed by insurgent parties of Colonists. This force was assembled by enlisting men from various units in Boston so as to alleviate any major structure being removed from a particular post. Also, as done secretly, this assemblage was not as noticeable from prying eyes of the Colonists.

However, the entire force was thus lacking a proper command structure and the camaraderie of regular troops. General Gage did not anticipate this unit to engage with individuals enroute nor come under attack. Though the prior months had become precipitous he did not believe a civil war was in the making.



This force was observed, however, and Dr. Joseph Warren subsequently sent riders to warn the conspirators in Concord to move whatever supplies they could to keep them from confiscation by the British.

Lieutenant Colonel Smith believed there might be confrontation on his journey, so he naturally deployed scouts and infantry ahead of his main body under the charge of Major John Pitcairn. Amid this march, the force was to pass through Lexington and because of the warning by riders Revere, Dawes and Prescott, Captain John Parker of the American Colonial Militia of Lexington was aroused and prepared his men on Lexington Green to await the British forces; They were 77 strong.

(Above left; British Commander in Chief General Thomas Gage.)

(Left; British Lieutenant Colonel Francis Smith)

The arriving British force was not an unusual occurrence as there were marches like this throughout the countryside during the winter months and early spring, so Captain Parker is actually unsure of the exact significance of what this force was. When Pitcairn's advanced guard came onto the common green he observed the Militia standing there in force and he ordered them to, "Lay down your weapons and disperse, you rebels." At that time both antagonistic forces were under orders not to fire their weapons and in fact Captain Parker actually ordered his Militia men to disperse. Then a shot rang out, to this day who fired it is not known but that was "the shot heard round the world" as poet Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote about in 1836.

In moments eight Patriots lay dead while ten more were wounded but only one of the British Regulars was wounded. The Minute Men carried either flint lock rifles or smooth bore fowlers and their intermittent firing had little effect upon the British line whilst the Regulars returned a volley of Brown Bess musket fire at one hundred yards with devastating effect. Nearly twenty-five percent of the Colonials were taken out of battle in minutes and the remainder either tried to help their fallen comrades or needed to flee the field or to be shot, bayoneted or captured. The first battle of Lexington went to the victorious Red Coats.



(Above; British Major John Pitcairn)



The melee was soon reported as a massacre to all the local towns people and farmers. During the fight Captain Parker witnessed his cousin, Jonas Parker, bayoneted and slain by a British Regular. All survivors dispersed with Regulars chasing them through the town and fields. Parker's words to his Colonial Militia were recorded as, "Stand your ground, don't fire unless fired upon, but if they mean to have a war, let it begin here!"

(Captain Parker, a soldier and former French and Indian War participant was a smith, farmer, and patriot who went on

to the Siege of Boston that same day but then died of tuberculosis on 17 September 1775 at age 46.)

Later that same April day, he managed to rally his troops and others to revenge his cousin's death by staging an ambush on the Regulars on their return trip to Boston. Good going, John Parker!

When the actual commander of the force, Lieutenant Smith, finally arrived at Lexington Green the British Regulars that were disbursed by chasing the Rebels were then reorganized and he continued his march despite his officers expressing that they should return to Boston. However, Smith did admonish Lt. Col. Pitcairn and then ordered his men to resume their mission to destroy the cache of arms and cannon in Concord.

When the British force finally reached Concord they proceeded to search for any supplies and upon discovering a cache of weaponry they set it on fire, which quickly grew out of hand. The Colonists perceived the British were burning the entire town down resulting in more and more Patriots coming to defend Lexington. By what is known as the North Bridge about 400 Militia gathered around 11:00 AM and confronted 100 Regulars who were defending the bridge. Shots again rang out but with inferior numbers those British needed to retreat and rejoin the main body now heading back to Boston via Lexington. The Battle of North Bridge, Concord went to the Patriots. They then pursued the Regulars back to Lexington.

At this same time a rescue force was underway by British Brigadier General Hugh Percy with 1000 strong from Boston and met up with Lt. Colonel Smith in Lexington. Then with nearly a combined force of 1700 men the British column began a retreat back to Boston about an 18-mile march.



During this retreat, Capt. John Parker and his men exuded their “revenge” on the column while nearly 4000 Patriots continued to gather around the British, harassing the column with skirmish fire from concealment. They eventually blocked the land passage to the peninsula of Boston and the British sought safety in Charlestown. This occurrence enacted the “Siege of Boston” on the evening of 19 April, which eventually forced the British Fleet out of Boston Harbor, and they left the city on 17 March 1776 for Nova Scotia.

During the siege the British had plans to capture some undefended high ground near Charleston and Dorchester Heights. This plan became known to the Colonials and Colonel William Prescott was ordered with 1200 men to take charge of this ground, known as Bunker Hill.

On deployment of his troops, he decided that a small area, Breeds Hill, was closer to the Harbor and at a better position of defense so he built a Redoubt by digging out a trench deep enough to be waist high when piled with dirt and other debris. From here they could defend any assault.

The Colonials withstood two major attacks on 17 June 1775, but the third British attack successfully breached the Redoubt on Breeds Hill when the Patriots ran out of ammunition, then retreated over Bunker Hill and disbursed. A force of over 3000 Regulars were dispelled by about 2400 Patriots until bayonets were the only weapon left. To conserve ammunition and to fire with more accuracy, Colonel Prescott used the term, “Don’t fire until you see the whites of their eyes!”

About 450 Patriots were killed, wounded or captured but they inflicted heavy losses upon the British who lost twice as many killed, including 19 officers, and nearly three time as many wounded. The battle of Bunker Hill was a costly British victory, but which also convinced the British command that these Rebels could actually fight and from there forth the British learned not to make frontal assaults upon Colonial breastworks.

Dr. Joseph Warren, who was actually a General in the Colonial Militia, enlisted himself to the service of Colonel Prescott as a Private in defense of Breeds redoubt. At which time he was to inspire the combatants to repel the British assaults. It was here that Dr. Warren was shot in the head and died on the defense of the withdrawing Colonials on 17 June. Upon the British capture of the hill his body was stripped and bayoneted beyond recognition then dumped in a hole where he laid until exhumed by another British officer weeks later and then was spit upon, stomped and beheaded by yet another British officer, Lieutenant James Drew of the Sloop Scorpion. So much for the “gentlemanly” conduct of a British officer.

So, we learned several things from the early war months and the performance of Colonial farmers, storekeepers and patriots who turned Militia. When the populace feel threatened they band together and arm themselves. When fighting for a cause, such as liberty and freedom, they are instilled with the spirit to win. When odds are against a freedom loving community they found a way to become a “Minute Man”, one who could respond to a call to arms at a minute’s notice. And, that war is warranted, on occasion and some good men will die. This short historical journey of these early battles also portrays the bravery and optimism that was needed by the Patriots, or Whigs, as they were known. The pessimists were the loyalists to King George III, and known as Tories, and they were the older generation who didn’t want conflict at this particular time or were comfortable traders with the British Empire and saw no benefit in conflict. Our first Civil War. Sound familiar in today’s world?

Concord Hymn ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson

Written to commemorate the completion of an obelisk erected as the Concord Monument on 19 April 1836.
Sixty-one years after the Battle at North Bridge, Concord, Massachusetts.

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their Flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood,
And fired the Shot Heard Round the World.

