

BOSTON IN THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

by Crosby Milliman



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In the days of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table there also lived a Saxon monk who couldn't have cared less for the battles and banquets for the glory of the king and the Ladies Fair. Instead, this monk prayed by the shores of Lincolnshire, asking divine help for the simple sailor and fisher folk among whom he lived. Because their simple boats were too often no match for the cruel sea, Lincolnshire was afflicted with "widowitis." The people deeply appreciated the prayers of the good monk and they called him "Bot-holph," which is the Anglo-Saxon for "The Boat Helper."

The saintly monk was, in due course, canonized and admitted to the calendar as Saint Botolph. The monk was further honored with a church, and around the new edifice grew the village of Saint Botolph's Town.

Typically, for the English are notorious in this respect, strange things happened to the name of Saint Botolph's Town. It became Botolphs Town in less than fifty years, and was to change to Bottleston, Botolston, Bottston, and Buston.

Upon those faraway shores of the New World, specifically at the base of Trimountain, the name given to the three tall peaks at that time forming the top of Beacon Hill, landed a tiny group of exiles in 1630, many of whom were from Saint Botolph's old town. To more easily face the new winter ahead they voted on September 7, 1630 to change the name of their new home from Trimountain to the name of the beloved little town where their childhood memories were enshrined. St. Botolphs Street and Tremont Street today recall the earlier names of the town.

President and Mrs. Hall, Gordon and Ginger Frost, Harry Knode, Distinguished Guests, members and wives or friends of the American Society of Arms Collectors, welcome to Boston, Massachusetts.

Coincidentally, the feast day of Saint Botolph, June 17th, is also the anniversary date of the Battle of Bunker Hill, a day celebrated by different people in different ways, much as is March 17th, as will be made evident later.

It had originally been planned that I should come before the Society during this unique opportunity and speak about what could easily be the most interesting aspect in the field of arms collecting, namely, the myriad of small arms used during the American Revolution. While identifying the specimens in my modest collection and putting together the display, this supply sergeant's nightmare, which I hope speaks for itself, I became more aware of and greatly fascinated by the people who originally bore these arms. It is this profound human drama to which I direct some measure of enlightenment tonight.

No preliminary remarks on the events at Lexington, Concord, and Breed's Hill should be made without at least mentioning the causes that led to these memorable conflicts. The important relation which the skirmishes on Lexington Green, at Concord Bridge, and the Battle of Breed's Hill bear to the whole war of the American Revolution, makes a brief preface mandatory.

Personally active in the Seven Years' War, King George II lived to see the French give up all Canada but died from a heart attack on October 25, 1760 while strolling in his garden. He was succeeded by his grandson George III who, convinced of his own wisdom and unwilling to listen to advice, became an arbitrary ruler, unnecessarily alienating his colonial subjects and fostering in them dreams of independence.

The Seven Years' War was the costliest conflict in Great Britain's history, and by 1766 her national debt had climbed to in excess of 133,000,000 pounds sterling. It was not strange that, amid the various projects for meeting its annual obligations, the hope of a revenue from America should suggest itself. Proposals in successive British Parliaments for the taxation of the American colonists, without allowing them a representation in those Parliaments, first opened the issue of strife.

The taxing of America was first moved in the British Parliament March 1764 by George Grenville, first lord of the treasury, chancellor of the exchequer, and prime minister. The result of his motion was the Stamp Act, imposing a tax on all notes, bonds, papers, etc. This Act didn't receive the approval of George III until March 22, 1765. The object of this whole year's delay was to give the colonists an opportunity to suggest some other mode of raising the tax, which should be preferable to them. But this gilded bait did not tempt. Instead, there were demonstrations, petitions from a Continental Congress assembled at New York, the tolling of muffled bells, effigies, and finally the Act was wholly disregarded after the stamp agents were compelled to resign.

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The Stamp Act was repealed in 1766 by a new administration. What the Stamp Act did do for the colonists was bring into prominence Samuel Adams with his genius for politics and political agitation, and Patrick Henry, a spokesman against the King's prerogative. Both men were to serve as firebrands of revolution.

In 1767, under the administration of "Champagne Charlie" Townshend, several measures, most obnoxious to the colonists, were devised in succession, such as import duties on paper, glass, paints and teas, a list of civil officers to be named by the crown, with salaries fixed at the pleasure of the monarch, a requisition for providing articles of food and clothing for the soldiers at the expense of the colonies, together with the establishment, on tyrannical principles, of a custom house and a board of commissioners. These measures were all followed by intense excitements of the people and led to protective organizations. In 1770 Lord North brought about a repeal of the new duties with the exception of that upon tea. It was alleged that the duty on tea was retained for the purpose of upholding the disputed right of taxation.

Another milestone on the road to American independence was the so-called Boston "Massacre," a classic in the art of propaganda. There is reason to believe (one of the victim's deathbed accusations) that Samuel Adams provoked the whole thing. There had been several minor clashes between Bostonians and locally garrisoned "Lobsterbacks." The inevitable climax festered through the afternoon of March 5, 1770 and came to a head outside the Custom House on King Street around 9 P.M. Some ten soldiers of the 29th Worcesters who had reinforced a severely taunted and menaced sentry were themselves so provoked that they fired into the "irresponsible mob of some 60 rioters," killing three outright and mortally wounding two. An up-and-coming silversmith, Son of Liberty, and horseman by the name of Paul Revere would have you believe, with his famous engraving of the incident, that "a party of the 29th Regiment" slaughtered what appears to be a relatively small docile group of solid citizens. British Captain Thomas Prescott had in fact tried to stop the brawl instigated by a crowd of Boston toughs. In any case, Revere's "Massacre" was grist for Sam Adams' propaganda mill. The significant consequence of this incident was the withdrawal of British troops to Castle William, a fortress on Castle Island in Boston Harbor.

In the evening of December 16, 1773 an event took place which thereafter caused all relations between the colonists and the mother country to run downhill. One hundred fifty (150) Boston patriots, thinly disguised as Mohawks and led by Masons of the Lodge of St. Andrews, boarded English ships and dumped 342 chests of tea into Boston Harbor. Bountiful harvests in India had brought the near-bankrupt East India Company a tremendous surplus of tea. To unload the ruinous supply and rescue the company, Parliament had passed the Tea Act earlier in the year. This Act allowed the East India Company to sell tea directly to America, thus eliminating the English middleman and cutting the price in half. Nevertheless, Sam Adams claimed that Parliament was trying to bribe the colonists. The destruction of some three cargoes of tea was plain evidence that the people were determined to resist the duty which Lord North's bill had left to be exacted on that import. Paul Revere left the "tea party" to spread the word to New York and Philadelphia. His journey by horseback took him 11 days, a much harder ride than was to be his historic ride to Lexington.

The King and British ministers, determined to make Boston pay damages of nearly \$75,000 for loss of the tea, passed the Boston Port Bill, the so-called Intolerable Acts, in March 1774, which closed the port on June 1, 1774, thus besieging the city until damages should be paid. This Act also deprived the colony of many of its charter rights. The passage of this bill was procured under the expectations that the other ports of this and the other colonies would delight in the humiliation of Boston and selfishly seize the opportunity to draw commerce to themselves. Here again did the ministry delude itself by another gross miscalculation. The effect of the bill was wholly opposite to their expectations. Within four months the delegates of twelve colonies representing three millions of people were convened in Philadelphia at the First Continental Congress "to concert a general and uniform plan for the defense and preservation of our common rights." In the meantime, had it not been for the activity of smugglers and the generosity of neighbors, many of the 16,000 citizens of Boston might have starved. All New England hung on every thread of news to leak out of Boston, and it wouldn't take but a mere spark now to set this entire region afire.

Since 1768 Boston's most distinguished son, Benjamin Franklin (whose birthplace can still be seen down on Milk St.) had been an agent and lobbyist for Georgia, and for New Jersey and Massachusetts since 1770. Through a series of appointments he was virtually colonial ambassador. Until 1774 when Franklin began to despair, he believed in the ultimate success of moderation on both sides and used his talents in efforts to bring about understanding and reconciliation. Personal abuse had been on the upswing all this time, but on January 29, 1774 the solicitor general called Franklin a rogue and a thief before the Privy Council in London, and, among other things, he lost his post as deputy postmaster general of the colonies. It had been Franklin's misfortune that six confidential letters in his possession, written to Grenville's secretary by Massachusetts' Governor Hutchinson urging "an abridgement of what are called English Liberties" of the colonists, fell into the hands of, of all people, Sam Adams. Naturally, these letters were printed far and wide, caused quite a sensation and greatly embarrassed Franklin. Curiously, the last days of recent years had been omens for the coming year and 1774 was no exception. On Christmas Day, Franklin paid an evening call on Admiral Lord Howe, not knowing at the time that his wife Deborah had died three days earlier in Philadelphia. Finally, convinced that reconciliation was hopeless, Franklin sailed for home on March 20, 1775.

In the meantime, Parliament had also enacted the Quebec Act which, on May 20, 1774, established a highly centralized government in Canada, the Catholic Church was given a preferred status in French Canada, and, worst of all, excluded Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Virginia from their long-claimed western lands by declaring the boundaries of Canada to be on the Ohio River. Sensing what was ultimately in store for them, Americans naturally got further alarmed and exasperated.

About this same time, the people of Massachusetts petitioned the King for the immediate removal of Governor Hutchinson whose letters to England had made unfair and prejudicial representations of the state of things in this colony. Hutchinson sailed for England in June, 1774, his house having been destroyed by a mob and his property and papers scattered to the winds. He was succeeded by General Gage, the Commander in Chief of the British Forces in America who had returned to Boston on May 17, 1774 to implement the government's punitive policies against the city. What had heretofore been a "garrison" was soon built up to the largest British troop concentration in America. By the beginning of 1775 General Gage had about 4500 combat troops, to say nothing of a substantial fleet at his disposal. (By the middle of June his strength in rank and file would increase to between 6340 and 6716). Before the year 1774 came to an end, winter came on and there could be no more camps on the Common. Under the revised Quartering Act of 1765, a billeting officer could knock on any door and demand lodging for the troops of the King. Fortunately the winter of 1774-75 was mild for New England. Such measures could only add to local tension, which needed no further tautening.

Even schoolboys were to demand satisfaction of General Gage because British soldiers had smashed their snow forts. He is supposed to have murmured, "The very children here draw in a love of liberty with the air they breathe." Although Gage had the reputation of being the decent, good-natured gentleman who would let the boys have their snow forts, Boston also knew that he believed in and would enforce every decree imposed on the colonies by the King. In so doing, General Gage could foresee that sooner or later he would be facing some of his old colonial friends on the field of battle. This was already a time of torturing conflicts of loyalty which tested men's will to freedom.

In October of 1774 delegates from the different towns met at Salem and there constituted the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts. A committee of this body was directed to ascertain the character and amount of the military stores in the province, and to encourage military discipline. A Committee of Safety, with executive authority, was chosen, and general officers, Colonels Ward, Thomas and Pomeroy, were invested with the command of the provincial military.

News reached Boston in December, 1774 that the King had placed an embargo on arms to the colonies and had ordered two regiments of British soldiers from Boston to reinforce Fort William and Mary in Portsmouth Harbor, New Hampshire. Four hundred patriots of the New Hampshire militia, under the leadership of John Sullivan and John Langdon, carried out the first act of armed rebellion by surprising and capturing the fort. One hundred kegs of gunpowder and a quantity of small arms were taken, buried beneath the pulpit of an old meeting house, and used the following year primarily at Breed's Hill.

Besides Benjamin Franklin, another notable warning voice was lifted in solemn tones to counsel the mother country. On January 20, 1775, Lord Chatham, after long retirement and severe bodily suffering, rose in the House of Lords. He foretold the event of these ruinous measures; he implored the nation to pause and consider, and then proposed that a humble request be made to the King to require General Gage to evacuate Boston. But the voice of warning was not heeded.

The Provincial Congress met again in February, organized their committees, arranged their correspondence, and provided military preparations and stores, designating Worcester and Concord as places of deposit. General Gage was well informed of all these proceedings and, hearing of some stores at Salem and Danvers, he sent 150 men to seize them. However, the attempt was rendered fruitless by resistance on the way.

There was a third session of the Congress in March, when vigorous measures were adopted. Large companies were organized, composed of men who held themselves ready for service at a minute's warning. More British troops arrived, and General Gage was equally determined to pursue his blind and misguided measures.

Nor were legislative enactments the only grievances of which the people complained; insults and indignities of various kinds were offered them by officers and soldiers, which annoyed and vexed the colonists. On the 8th of March, Thomas Ditson from Billerica, while buying a musket in Boston, was seized by the regulars and covered with tar and feathers. He was carried through the streets on a wagon, guarded by twenty soldiers with fixed bayonets, a label attached to his back reading "American Liberty, or a Specimen of Democracy," while a promiscuous crowd of officers, negroes and sailors followed and the drums and fifes played "Yankee Doodle," a tune used by the British in ridicule of the provincials. The selectmen of Billerica sent a protest to General Gage and told him that if it did not answer the purpose, they would "hereafter use a different style of petition and complaint."

Such were the ministerial enactments, the public grievances, and the military outrages which were preparing the way for a civil war. Meanwhile, the militia drilled openly, rapidly completed company organizations, and made many sacrifices to procure arms, powder, and other materials of war. The Home government, in view of the serious aspect of affairs, ordered Generals Howe, Henry Clinton, and "Gentleman Johnny" Burgoyne to join General Gage, and announced that "ample reinforcements would be sent out, and the most speedy and effectual measures would be taken to put down the rebellion," then pronounced to already exist.

On April 8th, the Provincial Congress resolved to take effectual measures to raise an army, and requested the cooperation of Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire. On the 13th it voted to raise six companies of artillery, to pay them, and to keep them at drill. On the 14th it advised citizens to leave Boston and move to the country. On the 15th it solemnly appointed a day for Public Fasting and Prayer. The Committee of Public Safety at once undertook the task of securing powder, cannon, and small arms. "Nothing was wanting but a spark, to set the whole continent in a flame."

The "Sons of Liberty" and Paul Revere's North End Club were just two of many such organizations formed to bring about unity of action against the British. They patrolled the streets and reported movements of British

troops. At the Green Dragon Tavern, on the evening of April 16th, one of Revere's scouts reported to Joseph Warren, Boston physician and chairman of the Committee of Safety, that a British expedition had been organized to seize John Hancock and Samuel Adams, who were hiding at Lexington, and to destroy the stores of munitions at Concord. Warren and his associates made plans to forestall the British. Paul Revere was to ride and spread the alarm. To gain a good start, he would be rowed across the Charles River past the HMS Somerset at anchor to Charlestown, given Deacon Larkin's good horse, and await the famous prearranged signal from the tower of the Old North Church.

General Gage communicated his plan for the seizure of the stores at Concord to but one person, or so he thought. When Lord Percy left Headquarters on the evening of April 18th, he passed a group of men on Boston Common and heard one man say, "The British troops have marched, but they will miss their aim." "What aim?" inquired Lord Percy. "Why, the cannon at Concord," was the reply.

Meanwhile, Revere was being chased by a British patrol and hurried on to Medford where "I awaked the captain of the minutemen. And after that I alarmed almost every house 'Til I got to Lexington" about midnight and barely in time to awaken Hancock and Adams in the Hancock-Clarke house and help them to escape. Immediately, minutemen began to assemble at the Buckman Tavern. Approximately 1 AM, and four miles beyond Lexington, Revere and fellow courier William Dawes, who had come the land route via Boston Neck, overtook Dr. Samuel Prescott, a young Concord doctor returning home from a hot and heavy date in Lexington with one of the Mulliken girls. Revere and Dawes recognized Prescott as a "high son of liberty," and so did a British patrol. "In an instant, I saw four officers who rode up to me with their pistols in their hands and said, ' .stop! If you go an inch further, you are a dead man!" And so, near the Hartwell Farm, ended the ride of Paul Revere. Dawes escaped on foot through the woods after having been thrown from his horse. Young Prescott knew the area like the back of his hand and, thanks to moonlight and the charms of Miss Mulliken, was able to jump his horse over a stone wall, reach Concord with the news, and help his patriot neighbors finish hiding most of their stores before daylight.

The road from peace to war was 35 miles long - from Boston to Concord and back. The English detachment, consisting of the Grenadiers of the garrison, the Light Infantry, and Major John Pitcairn of the Royal Marines, all under the command of the fat, slow-witted Lt. Col. Francis Smith of the 10th Lincolnshires, started on the night of the 18th with every reason to believe that their movement was a secret to all but Governor-General Gage and themselves. Taking boats up the Charles River as far as Phipps' farm, later known as Lechmere Point and now as East Cambridge, the British waded ashore just before midnight. Cold and miserable, the troops were delayed nearly two hours while extra provisions were brought ashore and distributed. Having already been issued rations back on Boston Common, most of the troops would throw away the latest provisions. The vital hours thus lost would prove to be very costly indeed. Starting once again about 2 A.M. Smith waded his column through a waist-deep ford so that the noise of crossing a plank bridge wouldn't be heard above the bell ringing and firing of small arms by an already aroused countryside. The soundest tactical decision Smith was to make all day was to report the local situation to Gage and request reinforcements.

At about the same time that Smith was finally getting underway at Phipp's Farm, Capt. John Parker, 45, commanding the Lexington company of militia, was assembling upwards of 70 men on the 2-acre common. Parker, who had served with Rogers' Rangers during the French and Indian War, ordered the roll to be called and every man to load his piece with powder and ball. After remaining on parade for some time in the chilly darkness of the early morning, and there being no reports of the approach of the British, Parker dismissed his company with orders to remain within call of the drum. In the meantime, a small body of Regulars, on "point" in front of Major Pitcairn's advance guard, were moving as stealthily as possible, keeping to the sides of the road and scooping up all scouts sent out from Lexington to bring back word of the British approach.

At approximately 4:30 A.M., and the first vestiges of daylight, Parker's fourth scout Thaddeus Brown had no sooner galloped out of his captain's sight when he spotted lurking elements of the British point less than a mile and a half away, turned his horse and clattered back into Lexington. "Parker immediately turned to his drummer (16-year old William Diamond) . . . and ordered him to beat to arms." Although 130 Minutemen were within earshot by this time, fewer than 70 armed men formed on the green; many others raced over to the town's supply of ammunition in the meeting house, while another small group topped off their "courage" in John Buckman's Tavern, a delay which would later contribute immeasurably to a prolonged controversy.

Pitcairn's advance guard came upon Orderly Sergeant William Munroe parading the militia company north of the meeting house facing them south at about 5 A.M. just at sunrise. Hearing the militia drum beat, and supposing it to be a challenge, Major Pitcairn ordered his men to load their arms, and to move at double-quick time from march column into battle line, huzza-ing and shouting as they ran. Pitcairn demanded that the Minutemen lay down their arms. Parker, watching the "Redcoats" spread out to a front of two platoons, seeing the danger to his men and feeling the responsibility for their lives, gave the order to disperse and not to fire.

As the Americans were disbanding there was a single shot, followed by two or three others. Pitcairn "found his horse wounded and also a man near him wounded," these being the only British casualties on Lexington Green. The Major insisted later that the "peasants" shot first and that his own men fired against orders. Certain contemporary documents coming to light in our time reveal that the firing started when a musket, in the hands of a Minuteman behind a wall, flashed in the pan without going off, and shots followed from persons also not on the Common but in the immediate vicinity of the meeting house and Buckman's Tavern. Ever since that fateful morning of April 19, 1775 there have been American depositions which establish that Parker's men on the Green did not fire the first shot. Therefore, of late, the finger of suspicion has started moving back among the American spectators around Lexington Green. Still, there will be those documents and historians

who will insist that the first shot was fired from a British officer's pistol. The controversy got so carried away at one point that doubts were even raised as to whether or not any Lexington man ever fired back, and the towns of Lexington and Concord refused to celebrate the centennial together.

The so-called "battle" lasted less than a half an hour. Eight Americans were killed and 10 wounded. Jonas Parker, the captain's cousin, vowed that he would never run. Standing in the ranks, with his musket balls and flints in his hat on the ground between his feet, Jonas was cut down by the British second volley. Struggling on the ground, attempting to load his gun, he was run through with a bayonet. Jonathan Harrington's wife and young son watched in horror as their man crawled 100 yards across the Green in agony to die on his doorstep. Caleb Harrington was shot down while attempting to leave the meeting house with a quantity of powder. And old Robert Monroe, a hero at the siege of Fortress Louisbourg 30 years before, died at the hands of the redcoats with whom he had once fought side by side.

Tacticians still wonder why Captain Parker, "a soldier of experience," formed his vastly outnumbered men in a hopelessly exposed position just yards from the road the British would have to take to Concord. There is evidence to support the theory that the patriot cause had been slipping and that Parker had acted under orders of Sam Adams who needed another "massacre" to exploit. It is known that Adams, John Hancock, and possibly Reverend Clark, had consulted with Parker just before Adams and Hancock made good their escape from Lexington. The outcome was exactly contrary to what the minutemen had decided three hours earlier at midnight, namely, "not to be discovered by, nor meddle or make with said regular troops." Sam Adams probably figured that if Parker's men faced the British face to face, the inevitable bloodshed would unify the colonies against the mother country.

When the Lexington company had dispersed and the firing ceased, the British troops drew up on the Green, fired a volley, and gave three huzzas in token of victory while "heavyweight" Smith brought in the remainder of his force. Closed up with Pitcairn's advance guard, the entire force then marched on for Concord, six miles away, where they arrived about 7 A.M. without further opposition.

Concord had, in the meantime, received Dr. Prescott's alarm between 1 and 2 A.M., and the men were busy hauling muskets, balls and powder from storerooms and hiding the munitions in the woods. The fields of the 65-year old local militia commander, Col. James Barrett, were plowed deep, and cannon laid in the furrows and covered. When Concord's saddler Reuben Brown returned to Wright's Tavern with the dreaded news and an eye-witness account of the events at Lexington, the local companies formed and set out down the Lexington road, joined by minutemen from nearby Lincoln. What these men lacked in military dash, the more than made up in courage and a touch of pageantry. With fifes and drums up front, they trudged out to meet the British about a mile from town. Then, almost as if to act as an escort of honor, "we was orded to the about face and march'd before them with our Droms and fifes agoing and also the B(ritish). we had grand musick." It must have been quite a sight - the orderly but drab and unhurried militia followed a short distance by the blaze of color including the laced, arabesqued, and chevroned British musicians.

Reality superceded pageantry. The militia withdrew across the North Bridge over the Concord River to the ridge of the old Muster Field to await reinforcements. The British meanwhile occupied the town and proceeded to disperse their troops. The Grenadiers searched Concord and proceeded to toss flour and musket balls into the millpond, and set fire to a blacksmith shop, to entrenching tools found in the courthouse, to the liberty pole, and to several creosoted cannon carriages, wheels and limbers. South Bridge was guarded by one light infantry company and three were left at North Bridge. Three other companies of raiders were sent on to Barrett's farm in vain.

The militia, reinforced by companies from Acton, Bedford and Lincoln, saw the smoke rise from the center of town and suspected that the British were burning Concord. Barrett ordered his men down towards North Bridge where the British, facing them across the river, started to tear up the bridge planks. As the militia advanced to the tune of fifes and drums, the British, still bleeding from Lexington, didn't hesitate this time to fire the first shot. "Their balls whisled well." Fortunately for the Americans, the British were so formed that only one company could bring their Brown Besses to bear on the rebels led in double file by the gunsmith Capt. Isaac Davis and his Acton company. In the 3-minute exchange the British lost 3 killed and 8 wounded; the patriots lost Davis and Abner Hosmer, both Acton men, and three wounded. Although the casualties at Concord's North Bridge were relatively light, these were the shots ". . . heard round the world."

From this moment in the early forenoon at Concord until dusk when they finally arrived back at Charlestown Neck completely spent, the British were forced into running a 16-mile gauntlet of horrors they could not soon forget. Why elements of the finest army in the world broke at North Bridge in panic and fled back through Concord can only be explained by several known factors involved. Typically, the reinforcements were late at the bridge because fat old Lt. Col. Smith insisted on leading them himself. Further, he had tarried in Concord until noon hopefully awaiting General Gage's reinforcements from Boston. Smith's poor leadership and series of delays were particularly costly and demoralizing to the rank and file with whom there were few if any of their own officers. No doubt their Boston conditioning and the previous night's harrowing march exacted an undetermined toll.

As for the three companies which had gone on to Barrett's farm, they returned to Concord empty handed and recrossed the scarred North Bridge unopposed. However, before reaching Concord they came onto a wounded British soldier who had apparently been mutilated. Later, Gage improved upon the account from Smith's command by reporting that this soldier had been "scalped, his Head mangled, and his ears cut off" while still alive. Shortly after leaving Concord for Boston, the word ripped down through the British ranks

relating the American atrocity. In later accounts it is written that a teen-age boy came upon the wounded soldier, after the bridge skirmish, and attacked him with an ax. This story isn't very pretty at all, but it may be the only accounting for the British ruthlessness during the retreat to Boston.

For about a mile out of Concord, back towards Lexington and Boston, the British encountered very little, if any, opposition. However, Americans had, by this time, been collecting in considerable numbers and, at Miriam's Corner, the British came under heavy fire from, among others, the Reading minutemen under Capt. John Brooks, who later became governor. "They seemed to drop from the skies." Many historians and students of the American Revolution feel that this action was the first real fight of the day and thus of the entire war.

At this time the road from Concord to Lexington was very hilly, crooked, and edged with dense woods and thickets. The Americans kept up a constant and well directed fire all afternoon from countless favorable positions. Not far beyond Miriam's Corner, at Fiske Hill, the tired British, low on ammunition and generally in serious trouble, decided to make a stand. For all their trouble, Lt. Col. Smith got shot in the leg, and Major Pitcairn's horse bolted out from under him. The major's horse charged into the American lines delivering probably the greatest collectors' items of the Revolution - Pitcairn's matched pair of silver-mounted Scottish listols, subsequently used throughout the rest of the war by General Israel Putnam and now in the Lexington Historical Museum. These pistols are of unique interest also in that one of them may have been the instrument that started the whole fuss. Nevertheless, the British returned the fire of the Americans, but without much effect.

In Lincoln the British were met by the regrouped Lexington company still under Capt. Parker who was proceeding towards Concord. Parker turned his men aside to the stone walls in the fields, and, as the British passed, they were exposed to an extremely galling fire from his exasperated men.

At approximately 2:30 P.M., completely exhausted and seriously considering surrendering to the Americans, the light infantrymen and grenadiers staggered into Lord Percy's reinforcements deployed in Lexington to cover the arrival of Smith's force. The 35-year old Percy had left Boston at 9 A.M., in response to Smith's early morning request from Phipp's farm, with sixteen companies of foot and a detachment of marines, or about 1400 men, and two 6-pound cannon. These cannon kept the Americans at a respectable range while the retreating troops halted a mile below the Lexington meeting house. After having taken some refreshment, Smith's tired troops were put back on their feet by Percy at 3:15 and proceeded, under cover of the cannon, to plunder, burn and destroy buildings and property.

The running fight from Lexington to Boston continued as it had been going. The Americans sniped from cover with added fury as the British column, with their light infantry patrolling the flanks, struggled along the route known today as the Battle Road. The British regulars became "so enraged at suffering from an unseen enemy that they forced open many of the houses from which the fire proceeded and put to death all those found in them. It wasn't until dusk that the British finally crossed Charlestown Neck under the protection of their naval guns, and the Americans could do no more than fan out for the beginning of the siege of Boston.

In what one British survivor in an understatement called an "ill plan'd and ill executed" expedition, General Gage listed 73 killed and 174 wounded out of the 1800 troops involved. Of some 3763 Americans computed to have been engaged at one time or another in the day's fighting, 49 were killed and 39 to 41 wounded. These tragic statistics are a sad commentary on the quality of tactics and marksmanship, both British and American. Nevertheless, the significance of the day's events stands out above all else while you consider that fatal moment at Concord's North Bridge when Major John Buttrick, hesitating over the body of Isaac Davis and considering the enormity of it all, gave the command to fire at the British whom he and many behind him had once marched with. Here was the transition from intellectual to armed rebellion. These Yankee tradesmen and farmers were no longer discontented colonial subjects of King George III; they had become Americans.

What few plans there may have been at the conclusion of that fateful April day, for the laying down of the siege of Boston, they couldn't have included much if any artillery support. The short supply of cannon for such a measure was extremely critical. It is interesting to note that two independent expeditions were planned to take Fort Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain, the key to the invasion route between Canada and the colonies. Learning of the action at Lexington and Concord, Benedict Arnold left New Haven on April 20 for Boston with his militia company. On the way he was reminded of the critical shortage of artillery, and on May 3rd had persuaded the Massachusetts Committee of Safety to commission him a colonel for the specific duty of leading an expedition against Ticonderoga. About the same time the Connecticut Assembly approved of a private enterprise to enlist Ethan Allen at Bennington with his Green Mountain Boys of the "N. Hampshire Grants," to accomplish the same objective. Thus shortly before dawn on May 10th, some 2 to 300 men, led jointly and quarrelsomely by Allen and Arnold, swarmed through the ruins of Ticonderoga's south wall and took a tiny garrison by surprise, thanks in part to the misfiring of a British sentry's musket. Contrary to the eloquence you may have read, the salty Allen bellowed to the sleeping British commander, "Come out of there, you damned old rat." Half asleep, Capt. Dilaplace surrendered the fort including at least 78 serviceable cannon, six mortars, three howitzers, thousands of cannon balls, 30,000 flints, and other stores. These munitions would play a key role in the siege of Boston the following spring.

Early on the morning of June 17, 1775 the whole of Boston was jarred out of bed by the crash of cannon. Rocking at anchor in Boston Harbor, the H.M.S. Lively was pounding a crude redoubt built overnight on a 62-foot crest in Breed's pasture on the Boston side of 110-foot Bunker Hill. Much to British amazement, the Americans had learned of Gage's intent to occupy the strategic Dorchester Heights on June 18th. To frustrate this plan, the Committee of Safety decided on June 15th to occupy and defend Bunker Hill on the opposite side

of Boston, at the end of Charlestown neck. Colonel William Prescott moved out at 9 P.M. on the 16th, and the Committee of Safety later reported that although the far less strategic Breed's Hill was selected by mistake, "it was the deliberate choice of the officers."

The following morning British Generals Gage, Howe, and Clinton hastily assayed fortified Charlestown Heights. Clinton suggested choking off Charlestown from the mainland by the neck. Howe didn't like the looks of the mud in that area; instead, he advised that a frontal attack would restore the morale of troops still shaken by their debacle on the Concord road. While the remainder of the British fleet joined the Lively and proceeded to raze Charlestown and its snipers, Gage agreed to the frontal plan of attack and ordered his regiments to march to the wharves and embark for Moulton's Point.

Delayed by the tide, but covered by stepped-up bombardment, 28 barges moved out from Boston with 1500 troops and 12 guns at high noon. The temperature was already rising into the 90's. In the meantime, taking advantage of all the time they could get, Americans in round hats and shirtsleeves toiled on the sun-baked hillside to finish their earthworks. "Americans are much afraid of their legs," said Israel Putnam. "If you cover these, they will fight forever." As the lobsterbacks lined up below, bayonets glittering in the broiling sun, one Yankee fell to his knees and prayed while others licked parched lips, wiped sweat from their palms, and counted their shot.

This first American army to take the field included the likes of "Old Put," Israel Putnam, the bull-necked veteran of the French and Indian wars who marched his troops up from Connecticut; Henry Knox, witness to the Boston "massacre" and proprietor of The London Book Store who mastered the artilleryman's trade from books; Nathaniel Greene, the fighting Quaker from Rhode Island; John Stark, the tough New Hampshire backwoodsman and future hero of Bennington; and Joseph Warren, the fire-eating Boston physician who had exclaimed, "These fellows say we won't fight; by heavens, I hope I shall die up to my knees in blood." He did!

General Howe quickly deployed his two-pronged attack. While the grenadiers and marines marched straight up towards the redoubt, the light infantry trotted along the beach with the idea of coming in from behind. John Stark quickly moved to thwart the light infantry by leading two New Hampshire regiments down to reinforce Thomas Knowton's Connecticut regiment along a rail fence running to the beach and building a stone breastwork out on the beach. With the cunning of a veteran Rogers Ranger, Stark set a stake 40 yards out for this New Hampshire men, uncommonly good shots, and cautioned that "when those white gaiters pass it, shoot low, and look for the gorgets of officers." Up in the redoubt Prescott repeated: "aim low; pick off the officers; don't fire till you see the whites of their eyes."

Within 15 minutes after the first unsuccessful attack, Howe launched a second. The British recoiled, reformed, advanced, and were slaughtered. Reinforced with 400 fresh troops, Howe organized a third assault. In the broiling heat of the early afternoon the "lobsters" shed heavy packs, wool tunics, and grimly charged through two smashing volleys. The American's powder was gone.

Of the 3000 Americans on the peninsula, 140 were killed, 301 wounded. For the 2500 British involved, it was a much different story. They suffered 40% casualties; the officer casualties were particularly high, including Major Pitcairn. "It shook the nerve of Howe." Almost a year went by before the British resumed the offensive. "No grenadier who fought at Bunker Hill ever felt invincible again." This battle rallied the colonies, spurred the Continental Congress into action, and virtually banished any hope of reconciliation. The secret to any measure of success the Americans had at Breed's Hill, even little understood and appreciated today, lay in the military training its officers received during the French and Indian war.

The outstanding example of this prior training in the field was the tall Virginian who rode unceremoniously past the Yard at Harvard College on Sunday, July 2, 1775. Perhaps a few idle troops gave George Washington a salute. As Thomas Jefferson also noticed, Washington was "the best horseman of his age and the most graceful figure that could be seen on horseback." On the following day history held her breath as the southern officer took command of the Boston army, establishing his headquarters in the stately Wadsworth house set back from King's Highway (today's Brattle St.)

Washington's problems with the siege of Boston were mainly administrative. During the latter part of 1775 and the winter of 1776 he whipped the first American army into shape and at last felt ready to take on the British garrison in Boston. In the meantime he had reinforced the gun batteries at Cobble Hill, Lechmere Point, and Lamb's Dam, thus disguising his real plan to fortify Dorchester Heights, an extremely strategic position passed over by the British Generals Gage and Howe. By prodigious efforts, Henry Knox had provided the artillery, hauled over the thawing snow from Fort Ticonderoga, which was so vital to Washington's plans. On the night of March 4, 1776 Americans siezed Dorchester Heights under cover of heavy bombardment and fortified the site at a feverish pace. Howe looked up at the heights the next morning and reported that "the rebels" had done more work in one night than his whole army could have done in six months. Finally, by establishing a battery on Nook's Hill, only three quarters of a mile from Boston, the American army was able to shell the city with impunity. On March 17, 1776, the day after the American forces fortified Nook's Hill, the British abandoned Boston, never to return, and sailed for Nova Scotia. The anniversary of this date is celebrated in Saint Botolph's town as "Evacuation Day." The Boston Irish call it something else.