

Minuteman Handbook

Chapter 1 — The Minutemen - 1775

A People Armed and Numerous

— an account of the battle of April 19, 1775 —



— The Old North Bridge —

Where it all started.

At the far end of the bridge, stands the most famous Minuteman statue of all — with one hand on his plow — the other on his rifle — he stands ready to use either, in a minute's notice, in the defense of liberty.

The discontent smoldering in the American colonies under British rule flared into open hostilities on April 19, 1775. On a stretch of country road outside Boston, a prolonged skirmish between 3,500 colonial militiamen and 1,700 of His Majesty's redcoats opened the American Revolution. The initial fighting in the war was a local action between Britain and

her recalcitrant colony of Massachusetts. The government had clamped down in reaction to the colony's resistance to the Mother Country's economic policies. For a year a British army, under Gen. Thomas Gage, had occupied Boston. Pressed by the ministry in London to quell rebellion by arresting the rabblers Samuel Adams and John Hancock, Gage chose

instead to take what he thought was the less inflammatory step of confiscating the patriots' arm's supply in Concord; but incompetence and miscalculation doomed what he meant to be a limited, routine operation. Gage depended on secrecy to seize the arms before the people of Concord could resist, but Boston knew of the operation before his troops left, and the arms at Concord were soon hidden. Couriers Paul Revere and William Dawes notified Adams and Hancock in Lexington that the British were on their way. Mixups delayed the British departure for hours, giving the colonists more time to prepare. Finally, the local militia and minute men were not the contemptible, undisciplined mob Gage took them to be. They had trained for months and had well-rehearsed plans for immediate reaction to a British incursion.

Gage gave command of the British troops to Lt. Col. Francis Smith, a ponderous, tactically unimaginative officer who slowed an already delayed operation. By the time Smith's advance troops, under Maj. John Pitcairn arrived in Lexington it was dawn and Capt. John Parker had his militia lined up on Lexington Common. Because he had only 77 men, Parker had no thought of impeding the 700 British soldiers. He wanted to make a display of patriot resolve, but as the militiamen slowly obeyed Pitcairn's order to disperse, a shot was fired — it is not clear from which side — and the green British soldiers, ignoring orders to stop, began firing at will at the fleeing Americans. When Pitcairn and Smith regained control, eight Americans lay dead. As the British troops continued down the road to Concord, news of the shooting spread to neighboring communities, and militiamen flocked to the British line of march between Boston and Concord.

At Concord, British soldiers began searching house-to-house for arms. Smith

sent seven companies across the North Bridge to seize the supplies hidden at Col. James Barrett's farm. The militiamen who had fallen back to Punkatasset Hill advanced on the three companies left to guard the bridge. As the militia approached, they saw the smoke of burning military supplies rising from town. Fearing that their homes were being put to the torch, they set out to save them. After the British withdrew across the bridge the colonials continued to advance until the British fired a volley. Major Buttrick of Concord then gave the order, "Fire, fellow soldiers, for God's sake, fire!", and for the first time Americans fired a volley into the ranks of British soldiers. The British, outnumbered four to one and with half of their officers wounded, retreated to the center of town. The troops returning from Barrett's farm were allowed to march by unharrassed. After pausing about two hours to regroup and feed his troops, Smith began the march to Boston. Flankers moved along the mile-long ridge on the left that separated the column from the colonials. At Meriam's Corner, where the ridge ended, the flankers had to be drawn in to cross the narrow bridge, and the militia, reinforced by companies from towns to the north; gathered near the road, taking cover where they could. Here began the running skirmish, which continued to Boston. The British encountered heavy, unrelenting fire from the hundreds of militiamen behind building, wall, and tree, but the range was too great for the muskets to do much damage, and the British escaped with relatively few injuries.

Having attacked a British column, the Americans had committed themselves. From this point on, the British ranks had to run a gauntlet of colonial fire. Already there seemed to be a musket behind every tree, and fresh militiamen were pouring

in from towns like Reading, Salem, and Lexington. Luckily for the British, the Americans were far enough from the road most of the day that few of the thousands of bullets fired found their mark. When the flanking parties could operate, most of the militiamen were driven out of range; but British soldiers fell steadily at every hill or curve where the Americans had position. After the column had passed one spot, the militiamen would cut across country and be ready for them farther up the road. Exhausted and near panic, the British troops staggered into Lexington at about 2:30, where they were met at last by 1,000 reinforcements under Lord Percy. Under cover of artillery, the British rested briefly before starting the final retreat to Boston. Percy knew that his troops were in danger of annihilation unless they kept moving. The worst fighting occurred on the road into Menotomy (now Arlington), where over 5,000 men were involved and both sides lost more men than in any other fighting along the road. After escaping Menotomy, Percy had to use cannon several times to scatter the Americans concentrated at his rear. That was proba-

bly the edge that allowed him to make it across Charlestown Neck after nightfall to the safety of Bunker Hill, where he was protected by the guns of HMS Somerset in Boston Harbor. However, he had lost 73 dead and 174 wounded, with 26 missing. The American losses were 49 dead, 40 wounded, and 5 missing. Soon after, Boston was under siege and Gage was reduced from governor to a general of forces occupying one city. The performance of the militia that day convinced Percy that this rebellion ran deeper than he or the ministry had suspected. The Americans were indeed prepared to fight for their rights.

To British soldiers trained in formal European warfare, the militias' tactics were cowardly and undisciplined, but British General Percy recognized that their "irregular" attacks were carried out with "perseverance and resolution." The militias' preference for individual firing from behind cover nullified the British tactic of close-range volleys at opposing ranks followed by a bayonet charge.
