

**“This is My Little Girl
That I Was So Afraid the
Red Coats Would Get”**

The April, 1775 Civilian
Evacuations of Middlesex and
Essex Counties



Introduction

- Many historians have overlooked the psychological and physical impact the Battles of Lexington and Concord and the Ipswich Fright had upon the civilian populace of Massachusetts.
- Both events not only led to the abandonment of homes and the flight to areas of relative safety, but also contributed to the brief collapse of society.

What We'll Discuss Today

- The Civilian Evacuation of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775
- Male Civilian Evacuees
- Lost, Carried and Hidden Property
- The Aftermath
- The Ipswich Fright of Essex County, April 21, 1775

Important Quote

“The word I’m
searching for, I can’t
say because there’s
preschool toys
present.”

~ *Toy Story*



*The Civilian
Evacuation of
Lexington and
Concord*

April 19, 1775



Historical Background: April 18, 1775

- Hours before the engagements at Lexington and Concord, at approximately six o'clock in the evening of April 18, 1775, Lexington resident Solomon Brown observed nine British officers riding slowly along a country road before him.
- The night was not very cold yet Brown noted that each of the officers was wearing a heavy wool blue overcoat under which he could see the shape of their pistols.
- Taken aback, Brown passed the officers and galloped towards Lexington. He rode directly to Munroe's Tavern where he informed William Munroe of what he had observed.

Source: Deposition of William Munroe, March 7, 1825

- By eight o'clock in the evening, Lexington received two messages from Elbridge Gerry, a member of the Massachusetts Provincial Committee of Safety and Supplies.
- According to Jonas Clarke “We received two messages, the first verbal, the other, by express . . . informing that eight or nine officers of the king's troops were seen just before night passing the road towards Lexington in a musing, contemplative posture; and it was suspected they were out upon some evil design.”

*Source: Reverend Jonas Clarke, “The Fate of Blood-thirsty Oppressors...”,
Preached at Lexington, April 19, 1776.*

- At eleven o'clock in the evening, alarm rider Paul Revere arrived in Lexington warning of a military expedition advancing from Boston.
- Approximately an hour later, a second alarm rider, William Dawes, arrived and confirmed Revere's report.
- As a result, Lexington militia Captain John Parker ordered his company to assemble.



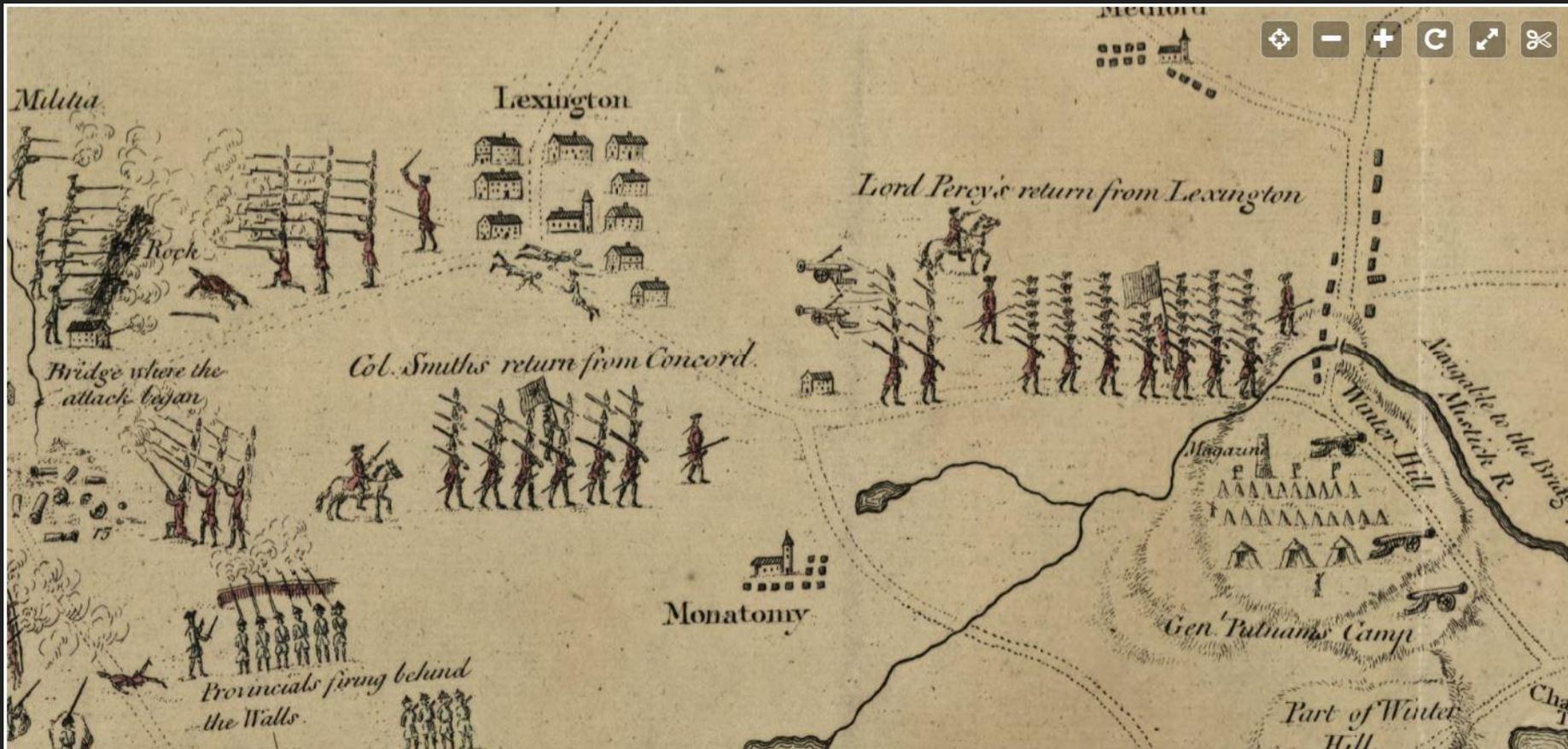
- When Lexington's alarm bell began to toll between Midnight and 1 AM, many residents realized that a hostile military force was marching directly towards them.
- With the possibility of the town being subjected to plunder and destruction, a panic set in. Many who lived along the Boston Road prepared to evacuate.
- Prior to fleeing their homes, some women helped their husbands, fathers and sons prepare for war.

Anna Munroe, wife of Sergeant Munroe, started to bake bread for her husband. Later she confessed “I mixed my bread last night with tears coming, for I feared I should have no husband when the next mixing came.”

Source: Carrie E. Bacheller, Munroe Tavern: The Custodian's Story.



*Before the Battle: The First Wave of
Evacuation*



- As the Lexington militia assembled on the common at approximately 1 AM many of the town's civilian population who lived along the Bay Road fled from their homes.
- The Reverend William Gordon of Roxbury noted “the inhabitants had quitted their houses in the general area upon the road ... and thinking themselves well off in escaping with their lives.”

Source: Rev. Mr. William Gordon, An Account of the Commencement of Hostilities between Great Britain and America

- Lydia Mulliken and her daughters, who lived along the Boston road, heard the alarm and fled to distant safety.
- Mary Sanderson gathered her children and “by the light of a lantern [made their way] to a refuge, the home of her father in New Scotland.”

- Abigail Harrington, took her toddlers “down a lane back of the house across a meadow to the old place on Smock farm.”
- Anna Munroe fled from the family tavern with her three young children and hid on a hill behind the establishment.

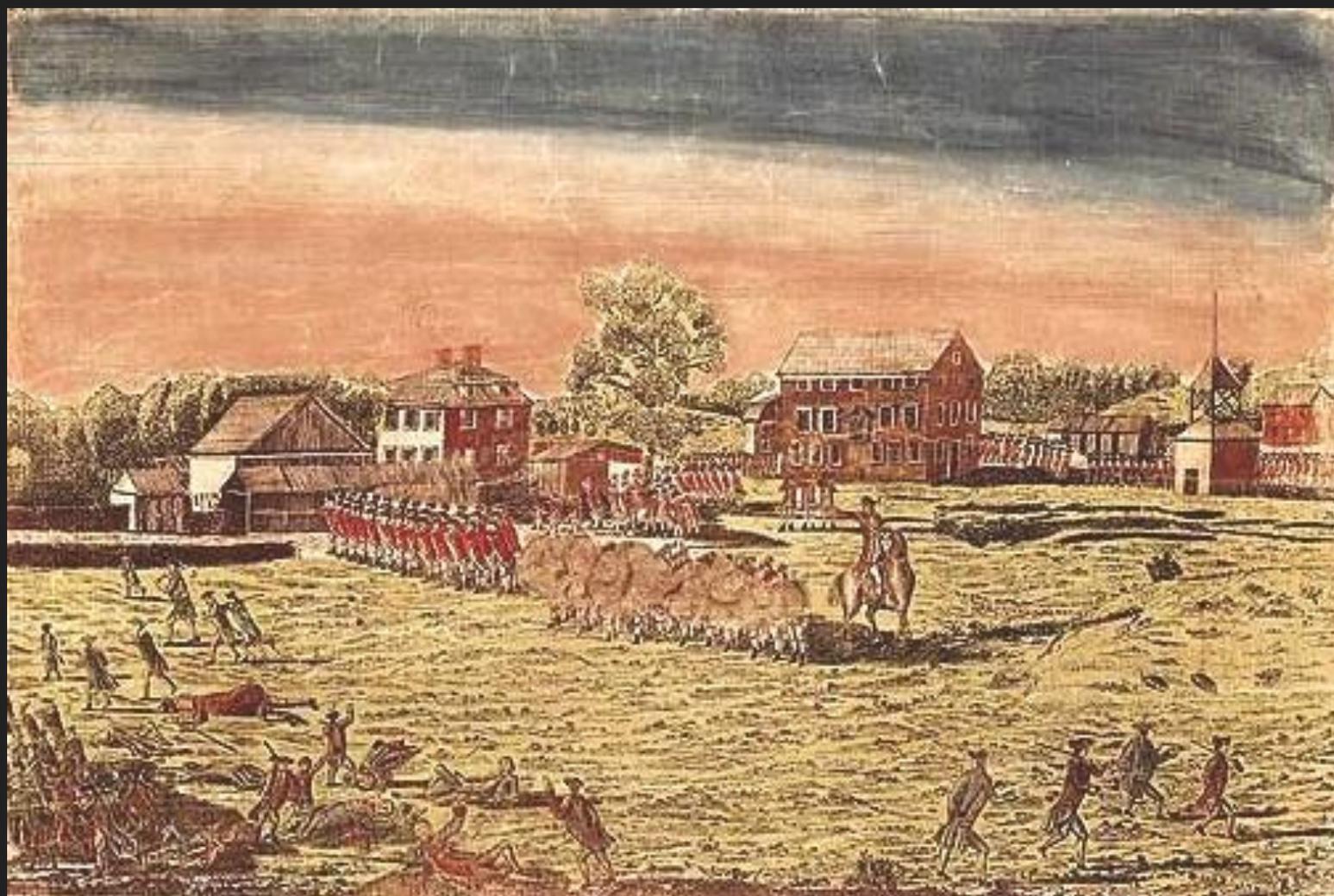
Source: Obituary of Rebecca Harrington Munroe, (Boston), Daily Advertiser, April 11, 1834



- The flight was particularly difficult for new mothers.
- Four Lexington women, Sarah Marrett, Amity Pierce, Sarah Reed and Betty White, had recently given birth and were still likely bedridden on April 19th.
- Three others, Dorcus Parker, Elizabeth Estabrook and Lydia Harrington, were all over eight months pregnant.



The Aftermath of the Battle of Lexington



- Upon hearing the exchange of musketry from the Battle of Lexington, Lydia Parker sent her eldest son to the top of a nearby hill to see whether the British regulars were plundering Lexington homes.
- Once certain the British column had moved on to Concord, many returned to the town common only to discover the dead and wounded of Captain John Parker's Company.
- As they surveyed the scene, over two hundred men from Woburn's militia and minute companies arrived and immediately started to assist in the treatment of the wounded.

By mid morning,
residents of Lexington
buried their dead in a
makeshift grave hidden
underneath a dirt and
brush pile.



“Father sent Jonas down to Grandfather Cook's to see who was killed and what their condition was and, in the afternoon, Father, Mother with me and the baby went to the Meeting House. There was the eight men that was killed, seven of them my Father's parishioners, one from Woburn, all in Boxes made of four large boards nailed up and, after Pa had prayed, they were put into two horse carts and took into the graveyard where some of the neighbors had made a large trench, as near the woods as possible and there we followed the bodies of those first slain, Father, Mother, I and the baby, there I stood and there I saw them let down into the ground, it was a little rainy but we waited to see them covered up with clods and then for fear the British should find them, my Father thought some of the men had best cut some pine or oak bows and spread them on their place of burial so that it looked like a heap of brush.”

Source: Elizabeth Clarke to Lucy Allen, April 20, 1835

Meanwhile, in Lincoln and Concord, news of the British expeditionary force advancing into the countryside spread. After the Lincoln minute companies departed for Concord, Mary Hartwell recounted “I did up the chores of the barn and cared for the children as well as I could in my anxiety . . . I feared that I should never see your grandfather again.”

Source: Samuel Hartwell account of Mary Hartwell’s tale, in “Stories of the Fight,” Boston Daily Globe, April 15, 1894, p. 25.



According to Mary Hoar Farrar of Lincoln, “The Concord families living nearest to our home fled this way for safety, and with my grandmother and others of the family left this house, and took refuge in ‘Oakey Bottom,’ a retired piece of forest land about one-half mile in the rear of the house ... Grandmother in her haste had sufficient self-possession to think of the cattle tied in the barn. These she let loose, desiring to save them from the flames that she expected would be kindled by Gage’s army. She took her babe, Samuel (the third), in her arms ... and bade farewell to the old dwelling, never expecting to gather her family about her again ... Every little while they would venture out far enough to look over the hill to see if the soldiers had set the house on fire.”

Source: Abram English Brown, Beneath Old Roof Trees (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1896), pp. 221-222.

According to the petition of Martha Moulton of Concord, “on the 19th day of April 1775, in the fore noon the town of Concord, wherein I dwel was beset with an army of regulars, who in a hostile manner enter’d the town ... all our near neighbors ... were drawn off ... from the thickest part of the town, where I live and had taken with them their families & what of their best effects they could carry ... some to a neighboring wood and others to remote houses for security.”

Source: Petition of Martha Moulton of Concord, February 4, 1776, Massachusetts Archives Volume 180, p. 306

*The British Retreat to Boston: The Second
Wave of Evacuation*

Later in the morning, many residents along the Boston Road realized that the British regulars would be marching back through their respective towns again.



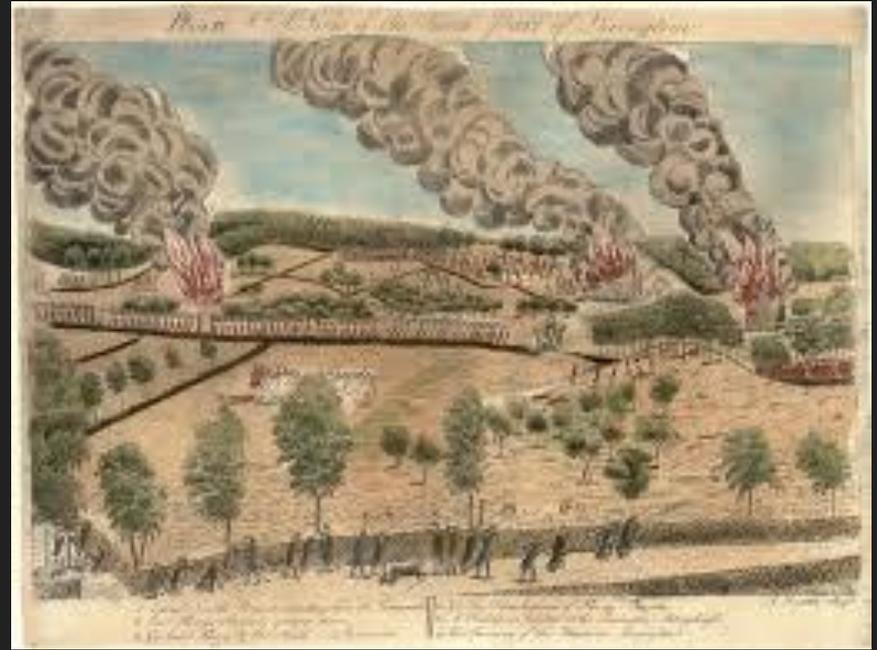
- One evacuee recalled that the roads were clogged with “women and children weeping.”
- Some escaped to woods and fields, while others traveled to nearby towns. Some sought refuge in homes far from the British path of retreat.
- “When news of the advance of the British arrived April 18, 1775, many women and children took refuge [in Josiah Smith’s home in Weston] until the struggle of the 19th of April had passed.”
- By the time the retreating regulars returned to Lexington, “the women and children had been so scattered and dispersed, that most of them were out of the way.”

Sources: Smith, “Kite End,” p. 114.; Deposition of Elijah Sanderson, December 11, 1824

Hannah Winthrop fled from Cambridge with her ill husband. As she recalled “it seemed necessary to retire to a place of safety till the calamity was passed ... we set out not knowing whither we went. We were directed to a place called Fresh Pond, about a mile from the town, but what a distressed house did we find there, filled with women whose husbands were gone forth to meet the assailants; seventy or eighty of these with numbers of infant children, crying and agonizing for the fate of their husbands. Another uncomfortable night we passed, some nodding in their chairs, others resting their weary limbs on the floor.... To stay in this place was impracticable. Thus we [were] driven to the town of Andover, following some of our acquaintance, five of us to be conveyed by one poor tired horse-chaise.”

Source: Letter from Hannah Winthrop to Mercy Otis Warren, circa May 1775

- Unfortunately, some families waited until the last moment to escape and came in direct contact with the British army.
- Anna Munroe, daughter of William and Anna, was five years old when the Battles of Lexington and Concord took place. After returning to Munroe Tavern following the first evacuation, the family was forced to flee again.



According to her 19th Century account, Anna “could remember seeing the men in redcoats coming toward the house and how frightened her mother was when they ran from the house. That was all she could remember, but her mother told her of her very unhappy afternoon. She held Anna by the hand, brother William by her side and baby Sally in her arms . . . She could hear the cannon firing over her head on the hill. She could smell the smoke of the three buildings which the British burned between here and the center of Lexington. And she did not know what was happening to her husband, who was fighting, or what was happening within her house. . . Anna’s mother used to talk to her of what happened on April 19th and she remembered that her mother used to take her on her lap and say: ‘This is my little girl that I was so afraid the Red coats would get.’”

Source: Bacheller, Munroe Tavern, p. 6-7

Lincoln's Mary Hartwell also remembered coming in close contact with retreating British forces. " I saw an occasional horseman dashing by, going up and down, but heard nothing more until I saw them coming back in the afternoon all in confusion, wild with rage and loud with threats. I knew there had been trouble, and that it had not resulted favorably for their retreating army. I heard musket shots just below by the old Brooks Tavern, and trembled, believing that our folks were killed.

Source: Samuel Hartwell account of Mary Hartwell's tale, in "Stories of the Fight," Boston Daily Globe, April 15, 1894, p. 25.

In Menotomy, Hannah Adams had given birth to a daughter approximately ten days earlier. The pregnancy and subsequent delivery were particularly difficult and as a result, she was still bedridden on April 19th.

As the British column retreated towards her village, her husband, Deacon Joseph Adams, allegedly panicked, abandoned his wife and family and hid in a nearby hayloft.

Shortly thereafter, three regulars burst into her bedroom. One threatened to kill her with his bayonet.

According to Hannah Adams, “[Upon] the return of the Kings Troops from Concord, divers of them entered our house by bursting open the doors, & three of the soldiers, broke into the room, in which I then was, laid on my bed; being Scarcely able to walk, from my bed to the fire, & not having been to my chamber-door, from my being delivered in Child-birth to that time - One of the soldiers, immediately opened my Curtains with his Bayonet, fixed, pointing the same to my breast. I immediately cried out – For the Lords Sake, don’t kill me- He replied Damn you- One that stood, near, Said We will not hurt the Woman if she will go out of the house, for we will surely burn it- I immediately arose, threw, a Blanket, over me, went out & crawled into a Corn House, near the door with my infant in my arms, where I remained until they were gone They immediately Set the house on fire, in which I had left five Children, & no other person,- but the fire was happily extinguished when the house was in the utmost danger of being utterly consumed.”

Source: Deposition of Hannah Adams, May 17, 1775, Massachusetts Archives, Volume 138, 369A

Hannah Adams. Wife of Deacon Joseph
 Adams, of the Second Precinct, in Cambridge
 Testifyeth, That, on the Eleventh
 day of April last past, upon the return of the
 Troops from Concord, divers of them
 entered our house, by bursting open the doors,
 or force of the Soldiers, broke into the room, in
 which I was, was laid on my bed; being scarcely
 able to rise, from my bed to the fire, & not ha-
 ving seen to my Chamber door, from my being
 delivred, in Cuffs, to the time
 one of the Soldiers, immediately opened my
 Curtains with his Bayonet, fixed, pointing the
 same to my breast - I immediately cried out -
 for the Gods sake don't kill me - he replied
 Damn you - one Mr. Wood, near, said
 I will not hurt the woman - if she will go out
 of the house, for we will surely burn it -
 I immediately arose, threw a blanket, over
 me, went out, & crept into, a Corn house, near
 the door, with my infant, in my arms, where
 I remained, until they were gone
 they immediately set the house on fire, in
 which I had left five ~~children~~ children, & no other
 persons - but the fire was happily extinguished,
 when the house was in the utmost danger of
 being utterly consumed
 Hannah Adams

Middlesex's 1st Cambridge Second Precinct 17 May 1775
 Hannah Adams the Subscriber of the above Deposition
 personally appeared and made Oath ^{by the} to the same
 before me J^o: Haffington Jus: Peace

Male Evacuees

- Not all Middlesex men saw combat on April 19, 1775.
- A few men who remained with evacuees were ministers who tended to their flock.
- Others suffered from physical injuries and thus, could not field with their companies.
- At least four Lexington men missed the fighting and participated in the civilian evacuation because they were caring for their wives, mothers or daughters.



Special Circumstances

- Three men from Lexington did not see combat due to special or unusual circumstances.
- The first was John Raymond, who was employed by William Munroe as a general laborer. Following the Battle of Lexington, Raymond kept watch over the family tavern while Anna Munroe and her children fled the property.
- Early 19th Century accounts have argued Raymond was “a lame man”, a “simple man” or “a cripple”. However, historian J.L. Bell has suggested that Raymond was actually an active member of Captain Parker's Company and only suffered from a temporary disability.
- Raymond was shot and killed by British soldiers under Percy's command the afternoon of April 19th.

- Another was Elijah Sanderson. The Lexington militiaman served as a mounted scout in the early morning and watched the Battle of Lexington from back of the common. After the battle, Sanderson went home to retrieve his arms and accouterments. Unfortunately, his brother got there first and took them. As a result, Sanderson was forced to watch the afternoon fighting in Lexington from a nearby hilltop.
- James Reed also missed the afternoon fight because he was guarding captured British prisoners hidden inside his house.
- At least four Lexington men missed the fighting because they were caring for their wives, mothers or daughters.

Moses Reed and his father-in-law Jacob Whittemore carried Sarah Reed and her newborn child out of the family home on a mattress. It is believed they remained with Sarah throughout the day.



Teenager Joseph Estabrook and his father “assisted in carrying his mother with a young infant (Solomon) in her arms, in an armchair, about a mile back from the scene of danger.”

Source: “Genealogy of the Estabrook Family”.





*“Are You Going to Kill
Us, Ishmael?”*

*The Fear of a Slave
Uprising*

- In Menotomy, where the women and children had gathered in houses safely removed from the firing, a rumor began to circulate that the town's slaves were about to launch a revolt of their own and "finish what the British had begun by murdering the defenseless women and children."
- When Ishmael, an enslaved man belonging to the Cutter family of Menotomy, approached the house of George Prentiss, one of the many terrified women gathered inside asked, "Are you going to kill us, Ishmael? No, Ishmael replied; he wasn't there to kill them; he was there to see whether his owner's wife, Mrs. Cutter, was safe."

- According to an early 19th Century account, A similar fear overtook the women of Framingham.
- After the town's minute and militia companies mobilized for Concord, a rumor started to spread that the enslaved people of the town had risen up in revolt and “were coming to massacre them all!”
- Women and children fled to the home of the Framingham Minute Company captain. Under the leadership of the Captain's wife, they armed themselves with “axes and pitchforks and clubs” and waited for the coming massacre that never came.

- Many enslaved people risked their own lives by remain relatively close to their master's properties to safeguard homes from the British column.
- In West Cambridge, retreating regulars broke into Cutter's Tavern. The soldiers carried off what they could, left the taps of the molasses and spirit casks open, destroyed furniture, drove a bayonet through the best mirror, and set the house on fire.
- A family slave, however, had watched from a safe distance what had happened, and, as soon as the soldiers left the property, crossed the fire and extinguished the flames.

A Snapshot of the Brutality of the Day



“The news reached us about nine o’clock A.M. The east company in Needham met at my house as part of the Military stores were deposited with me, they there supplied themselves, and by ten o’clock all marched for the place of action with as much spirit and resolution as the most zealous friends of the cause could have wished for. We could easily trace the march of troops from the smoke which arose over them, and could hear from my house the report of the cannon and the Platoons fired by the British.”

Source: Excerpt from Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel West, Pastor (1764 – 1788), First Parish, Needham Massachusetts

Lost, Carried and Hidden Property

- When many of women who resided along the Bay Road fled their homes on April 19, 1775, they either carried off or scrambled to hide personal valuables.
- Why was there a desire to protect some valuables? Naturally, a fear of looting, vandalism and theft at the hands of British troops was a contributing factor.



- However, It appears part of the motivation may have to do with Massachusetts colonial inheritance laws.
- While all property technically belonged to the husband, household movables such as textiles, furniture, the tools of domestic production, silverware and dishes were generally passed from generation to generation through the female line and were considered properly part of women's domestic sphere.
- For example, Hannah Stone, bequeathed almost the whole of her estate “to my beloved daughter Tabitha Merriam.” Hannah Stearns willed to her daughter-in-law Patty her porridge pot and flat irons. Abigail Bridge left her riding hood to one daughter-in-law and a dark calico gown to another.
- Thus, a woman's household goods was a woman's closest representation of legitimate possessions and gave her a sense of ownership

Source: Mary B. Fuhrer, Research for the Re-Interpretation of the Buckman Tavern, Lexington, Massachusetts: Conceptions of Liberty, (Lexington Historical Society, 2012), 26.

Examples of Civilians Hiding Property Before Fleeing the Bay Road in Lexington

- A Lexington family “hid their silver and mirrors and many other things in [a] swamp”
- The Reverend Jonas Clarke’s family hid “money, watches, and anything down in the potatoes.”
- Captain Parker’s wife, Lydia, “took all the valuables and hid them in a hollow trunk of a tree standing some distance from the house.”
- Jonathan Loring’s daughters scurried to hide the communion silver in a brush heap in back of the house before fleeing.

Property Lost or Stolen on April 19, 1775

- Jonathan Harrington's family lost "an eight-day clock, clothes, books, moose-skins and other articles." *Source: Massachusetts Provincial Congress, May 2, 1775*
- Levi Harrington deposed that "The British soldiers seized all his books, carried them into the road and burn them. Among them were some Latin books, which were valuable to him as he was studying Latin at that time." *Source: Account of the Battle of Lexington as signed by Levi Harrington, Lexington Historical Society*
- "An account of the real and personal estate belonging to Joseph Loring of Lexington . . . carried off by British troops . . . a large quantity of pewter and brass ware, three cases of drawers . . . all the wearing apparel of my family, consisting of nine persons." *Source: Massachusetts Provincial Congress, May 2, 1775*

- “Jeremiah Harrington . . . I lost on the nineteenth of April, 1775, the following articles . . . One pewter platter . . . Eight pewter plates . . . Six pint porrages . . . Six spoons . . . One pair shoes.” *Source: Ibid*
- “Hepzideth Davis . . . One pair of sheets . . . Two pair of pillow cases . . . Three napkins . . . Two table cloths . . . Shoes, caps and other articles.” *Source: Ibid*
- “Jonathan Smith Jr. . . . The account of things I lost by the British troops on the 19th of April, 1775 . . . Three silver spoons . . . One pair of silver buckles . . . One pair of sleeve buttons . . . two pewter porringers . . . One block tin tea pot . . . One blanket.” *Source: Ibid*

The Aftermath



According to the Reverend Gordon, “you would have been shocked at the destruction which has been made by the Regulars, as they are miscalled, had you been present with me to have beheld it. Many houses were plundered of everything valuable that could be taken away, and what could not be carried off was destroyed.”

Source: Rev. Mr. William Gordon, An Account of the Commencement of Hostilities... , May 17, 1775

In Lexington

- In addition to suffering the highest casualty rate of the American forces on that day, Lexington also had extensive property damage. Several homes were burned or destroyed and while others were looted.
- Andover minuteman Thomas Boynton noted “after we came into Concord road we saw houses burning and others plundered and dead bodies of the enemy lying by the way, others taken prisoners.”
- Another Andover soldier, James Stevens, recalled “we went in to Lecentown . . . we went a long through Lecintown & we saw . . . three or fore houses was Burnt & som hoses & hogs was cild thay plaindered in every hous thay could git in to thay stove in windows & broke in tops of desks.”

- Upon returning home, some Lexington residents discovered their homes had been vandalized and defiled.
- A “Mrs. Muzzy” discovered that British soldiers had broken her mirrors and valuable crockery, fired bullets into the wall and left the floor smeared with blood.

- When Anna Munroe returned to the family tavern, she quickly noted that the retreating soldiers had eaten her freshly baked bread, broken into her supplies, and consumed all the alcohol in the shop.
- Her household linens were used as bandages for wounded soldiers.
- She also discovered the soldiers had piled up her furniture, including a mahogany table, and set it on fire in an attempt to burn the tavern down.

- In the aftermath of the Battles of Lexington and Concord, many Lexington residents started to compile a running list of lost, stolen or destroyed property.
- The approximate damage to Lexington property alone exceeded £4500, *which is equal to almost one million dollars (US) in 2020.*
- Ultimately, claims for compensation for property lost or destroyed were submitted to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress.
- For many, they would never receive full compensation for the property destroyed.

In Menotomy

On April 20, 1775, Hannah Winthrop and her husband started the journey back from Andover to their home in Cambridge. As they passed through Menotomy (Arlington), she recalled “But what added greatly to the horror of the scene was our passing through the bloody field at Menotomy, which was strewn with the mangled bodies. We met one affectionate father with a cart looking for his murdered son and picking up his neighbors who had fallen in battle, in order for their burial.”

Source: Letter from Hannah Winthrop to Mercy Otis Warren, circa May 1775

“Dreadful were the vestiges of war on the road. I saw several dead bodies, principally British, on & near the road. They were all naked, having been stripped, principally, by their own soldiers. They lay on their faces. Several were killed who stopped to plunder & were suddenly surprised by our people pressing upon their rear.... The houses on the road of the march of the British, were all perforated with balls, & the windows broken. Horses, cattle & swine lay dead around. Such were the dreadful trophies of war, for about 20 miles!”

Source: Diary of Reverend David McClure, April 20, 1775

- Many of the homes along the path of the engagement in Mentomy were littered with dead militiamen and British regulars. According to Jason Russell's wife, the blood was "almost ankle deep" in one of the rooms and her house was "riddled with bullets."
- As with Lexington, many of the homes in Menotomy fell victim to theft and vandalism as well. Property claims submitted to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress included reports of stolen clocks, alcohol, clothing, jewelry and furniture.

In Cambridge

- The fighting in Cambridge was just as brutal as Menotomy and East Lexington.
- A “Mrs. Butterfield”, who lived on the north side of the Boston Road, returned to her own house to find her best bed covered with blood and occupied by this British officer. A wounded Provincial from Framingham was lying in a nearby second bed. The American recovered, but the officer lingered along a fortnight and then died.
- A “Mrs. Adams” was “obliged to step over the dead body of a British soldier, in order to enter her back door. And in the front room lay another soldier mortally wounded, the white sanded floor beneath him red with the blood which had flowed from his wounds.”

- As with the other towns, the homes of Cambridge were also plundered.
- “On the summit of what we call “Peirce’s Hill” was a house occupied by Mr. Robbins. The family had fled on the approach of the enemy. The flank guard ransacked the premises, destroyed the clock, and set a fire on the kitchen floor, which was extinguished by the wet clothes falling upon it, after it had burned off the lines.”

What About Boston?

- Shortly after dawn, word of the fighting at Lexington reached Boston residents and predictably, fear set into the populace there as well.
- “Early on Wednesday the fatal 19th April, before I had quited my chamber, one after another came runing up to tell me that the kings troops had fired upon & killed 8 of our neighbors at Lexington in their way to Concord. All the intelligence of this day was dreadfull. Almost every countenance expressing anxiety & distress.”

*Sarah Winslow Deming Journal, Page 3, Historic Winslow House Association,
Marshfield, Massachusetts.*

- As the day progressed, Boston broke into a state of panic. Many residents wandered about aimlessly, unsure of what the future held.
- In a letter to his son, the Rev. Andrew Elliot stated “I know not what to do, not where to go ... poor Boston, May God sanctify our distresses which are greater than you can conceive – Such a Sabbath of melancholy and darkness I never knew ... every face gathering paleness – all hurry & confusion – one going this way & another that – others not knowing where to go – What to do with our poor maid I cannot tell – in short after the melancholy exercises of the day – I am unable to write anything with propriety or connection ... Everything distressing.”

Reverend Andrew Eliot to His Son, April 23, 1775, Miscellaneous Manuscripts, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

The Ipswich Fright

Two days after the Battles of Lexington and Concord, widespread panic once again set in amongst the Massachusetts population.

Known as the “Ipswich Fright”, this psychological phenomenon led to the mass abandonment of homes and the evacuation of North Shore and Merrimack Valley residents into New Hampshire.



- Local tradition suggests that on the morning of April 21, 1775, a British naval cutter anchored at the mouth of the Ipswich River. In response, the local alarm list mobilized but did not engage the enemy. Nevertheless, an unfounded rumor began to spread inside the town that British regulars had landed and were laying waste to everything before them.
- With most Essex County minute and militia companies away at the Siege of Boston, a massive panic set in. The rumor quickly spread to other towns.
- A few hours later, the rumor had reached as far away as Newburyport.

- In Newburyport, a Congregationalist minister named Carey was holding a parish meeting when alarm rider Ebenezer Todd burst in and announced “turn out, turn out, for God’s sake or you will be all killed! The regulars are marching on us; they are at Ipswich now, cutting and slashing all before them!”
- The fright continued west to Haverhill and Andover. An early 19th century account of the incident suggests an alarm rider instructed Haverhill residents to “Turn out! Get a musket! Turn out . . . the regulars are landing on Plum Island!”

Source: John J. Currier, “History of Newburyport, Mass: 1764-1905”

As the panic set in, many residents quickly gathered their valuables and fled northwards. In Newburyport, Amesbury, Haverhill, Bradford and Methuen civilians overwhelmed the local ferries as they tried to cross the Merrimack River.



- In Newbury, one woman “having run four or five miles, in great trepidation, stopped on the steps of reverend Mr. Noble's meeting house to nurse her child and found to her great horror, that she had brought off the cat and left the child at home.”
- Residents of the North Parish district of Andover fled to a woodlot known as Den Rock and remained there for at least a day.
- In Newburyport “the houses at Turkey hill were filled with women and children who spent the night in great trepidation.”
- One Rowley man yoked up his oxen and taking his own family, and some of his neighbor's children in his cart, drove off to escape the regulars.”

Essex County civilians were so overcome with fear and despair that they began to turn on each other. According to one period account “a Mr. ____, having placed his family on board of a boat, to go to Ram island [Gloucester], for safety, was so annoyed with the crying of one of his children, that he exclaimed, in a great fright, ‘do throw that squalling brat overboard, or we shall all be discovered!’ ”



Source: John J. Currier, “History of Newburyport, Mass: 1764-1905”

- An Essex County woman fled her home with a market wallet filled with food. After travelling some distance she set it down to speak with someone. When she returned to the bag she discovered she had been robbed “by the irregulars among her.”
- Residents near the Parker River bridge in Newbury nearly came to blows over the proposal to destroy the structure in order to slow the regular’s advance.

Of course, some residents refused to flee. One Newbury account suggests an elderly resident took up a defensive post at his front door, loaded his musket and declared he intended to “shoot the devils” when they arrived.



Residents from the interior of the Merrimack Valley, including Andover and Bradford, fled north to Exeter, New Hampshire.

Period accounts suggest by early evening Amesbury, Salisbury and Rowley were completely abandoned by its residents.



Meanwhile in New Hampshire

The panic continued well into the early morning of April 22, 1775. By then, residents of Exeter (NH) had begun to suspect the entire ordeal was an unfounded rumor. In turn, the town dispatched an alarm rider towards Newburyport with a message that the account of a British army invading Essex County were false.



As Newburyport's Benjamin Greenleaf noted in a letter to the Hampton (NH) Committee of Correspondence that same day, "We were unhappily thrown into distress yesterday, by false accounts received by two or three persons, and spread abroad, of a number of Soldiers being landed at Ipswich and murdering the inhabitants. We have since heard that it arose in the first place from a discovery of some small vessels near the entrance of their River, — one at least known to be a Cutter, — and it was apprehended that they were come to relieve the captives there in jail."

Source: John J. Currier, "History of Newburyport, Mass: 1764-1905"

Questions??



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