

“This is My Little Girl That I Was So Afraid the Red Coats Would Get”
The April 19, 1775 Civilian Evacuation of Lexington

~

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One important aspect of the Battle of Lexington that has been often overlooked by historians is the psychological and physical impact upon the civilian populace. Hours before the engagement, at approximately six o'clock in the evening of April 18, 1775, Lexington resident Solomon Brown observed nine British officers riding slowly along the 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 Sergeant William Munroe of what he had observed.¹

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.”² 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, militia Captain John Parker ordered his company to assemble.

When Lexington's alarm bell began to toll, most residents recognized that a hostile military force was marching directly towards them. With the possibility of the town being subjected plunder and destruction, a panic set in. Many who lived along the Boston Road prepared to evacuate. Anna Munroe, wife of Sergeant Munroe, started to bake bread for her

¹ *Deposition of William Munroe*, March 7, 1825, taken from Elias Phinney, *History of the Battle of Lexington, on the Morning of April 19, 1775*, (Boston:Phelps and Farnham, 1825) p. 33.

² Reverend Jonas Clarke, *The Fate of Blood-thirsty Oppressors, and God's Tender Care of His Distressed People. A sermon, Preached at Lexington, April 19, 1776. To commemorate the Murder, Bloodshed, and Commencement of Hostilities, Between Great Britain and America, in That Town, by a Brigade of Troops of George III, Under the Command of Lieutenant-Colonel Smith, on the Nineteenth of April, 1775. To Which is Added a Brief Narrative of the Principal Transactions of That Day*, (Boston: Powars and Willis, 1776); University of Michigan, Evans Early American Imprint Collection, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;idno=N11617.0001.001>.

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.”³

The Reverend William Gordon of Roxbury noted “the inhabitants had quitted their houses in the general area upon the road, leaving almost everything behind them, and thinking themselves well off in escaping with their lives.”⁴ Some escaped with a few select belongings. Others quickly hid or buried valuables before leaving. One 19th century Lexington account suggested many residents “hid their silver and mirrors and many other things in [a] swamp.”⁵ The Reverend 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.”⁶ Lydia Mulliken and her daughters, who lived along the Boston road, heard the alarm and hurriedly buried the family's silver and other valuables by a stone wall near their clock shop, then fled to distant safety.⁷ Mary Sanderson gathered her children and “taking such articles as they could hurriedly collect and carry in their arms, by the light of a lantern [made their way] to a refuge, the home of her father in New Scotland.”⁸ The Loring daughters scurried to hide the communion silver in a brush heap back of the house before fleeing.⁹

For some women, the flight was particularly difficult. Four women, Sarah Marrett, Amity Pierce, Sarah Reed and Betty White, were still likely bedridden having given birth over the past month. Sarah Reed and her newborn child had to be carried out her home on a mattress by her husband and in-laws. Three others, Dorcus Parker, Elizabeth Estabrook and Lydia Harrington, were all over eight months pregnant. Other women rushed to get their young children to safety. Abigail Harrington, took the her toddlers “down a lane back of the house across a meadow to the old place on Smock farm.”¹⁰ Anna Munroe fled from the family tavern with her three young children and hid on a hill behind the establishment.

³ Carrie E. Bacheller, *Munroe Tavern: The Custodian's Story*, (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Historical Society, date unknown), p. 6-7.

⁴ Rev. Mr. William Gordon, *An Account of the Commencement of Hostilities between Great Britain and America, in the province of Massachusetts Bay, by the Rev. Mr. William Gordon, of Roxbury, in a letter to a gentleman in England, May 17, 1775*. Northern Illinois University Libraries, Digital Collections and Collaborative Projects, <http://amarch.lib.niu.edu/islandora/object/niu-amarch%3A83085>.

⁵ Michael J. Canavan, *Canavan Papers*, (Lexington, Massachusetts: Self Published, 1910), Vol. 1, p. 136.

⁶ A. Bradford Smith, “Kite End,” *Lexington Historical Society Proceedings*, (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Historical Society, 1891) Vol. 2, p. 102..

⁷ Elizabeth W. Harrington, “A Few Words for our Grandmothers of 1775,” *Lexington Historical Society Proceedings*, (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Historical Society, 1887), Vol. 1 p. 52.. Canavan reports that Mulliken and her daughters went to Robert Munroe's house, Canavan, *Canavan Papers*, p. 353.

⁸ “George O. Smith, “Reminiscences of a Participant in the Occurances of April 19, 1775,” *Lexington Historical Society Proceedings*, (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Historical Society, 1890), Vol. 1, p. 61. New Scotland was a section of Lexington along the Woburn line.

⁹ Canavan, *Canavan Papers*, p. 126.

¹⁰ Obituary of Rebecca Harrington Munroe, (Boston), *Daily Advertiser*, April 11, 1834.

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 moving to plunder Lexington homes.¹¹ Once certain the British column had moved on to Concord, many returned to the town common. Upon arrival, they discovered that over two hundred men from Woburn's militia and minuteman companies had arrived and were assisting in the treatment of the wounded. By mid morning, residents of Lexington buried their dead in a makeshift grave. "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."¹²

Recognizing that the British regulars would be marching back through the town again, residents quickly prepared to flee to safety for a second time. One evacuee recalled that the Lexington roads were clogged with "women and children weeping."¹³ Some escaped back to woods and fields, while others traveled to nearby towns.¹⁴ Some sought refuge in homes far from the British path of retreat.¹⁵ 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."¹⁶

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 red coats coming toward the house and how

¹¹ Smith, "Kite End," p. 102.

¹² *Elizabeth Clarke to Lucy Allen, April 20, 1835* taken from Elizabeth Clarke, "Letter of Miss Betty Clarke", *Lexington Historical Society Proceedings*, (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Historical Society, 1908). Vol. 4, p. 92. Elizabeth was twelve years old at the Battle of Lexington.

¹³ Canavan, *Canavan Papers*, Vol. 1, p. 136.

¹⁴ For example, The Mead and Clarke families fled to the neighboring Burlington District of Woburn.

¹⁵ "When news of the advance of the British arrived April 18, 1775, many women and children took refuge [in Josiah Smith's home] until the struggle of the 19th of April had passed." Smith, "Kite End," p. 114.

¹⁶ *Deposition of Elijah Sanderson*, December 11, 1824, taken from Elias Phinney, *History of the Battle of Lexington, on the Morning of April 19, 1775*, p. 31.

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."¹⁷

Many Lexington residents from the safety of distant hills watched in horror as their homes were burned, destroyed or looted when the regulars retreated through the town.¹⁸ Pursuant to 18th Century law, the illegal breaking and entering into a home was a capital offense punishable by death. Thus, from American point of view, the plundering and burning of homes was not only highly offensive, it also served to fuel their anger and despair even further. 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; looking-glasses, pots, pans, etc. were broke all to pieces; doors when not fastened, sashes and windows wantonly damaged and destroyed. The people say that the soldiers are worse than the Indians."¹⁹

Lydia Mulliken lost everything when her house and clock making shop were burned to the ground. The only surviving valuables were the silver that she had hidden in a stone wall behind her house. Lydia's daughter, Rebecca Mulliken, particularly mourned the loss of "a

¹⁷ Bacheller, *Munroe Tavern*, p. 6-7.

¹⁸ Hannah Smith, whose husband was in the fight, went to the top of a nearby outcropping "where she could hear the rattle of the musketry and the smoke of the guns. In the afternoon she saw the buildings burning. Smith, "Kite End," p. 114; "In the afternoon I saw the reinforcement come up under Lord Percy. I then had no musket, and retired to Estabrook's Hill, Whence, I saw the reinforcement meet the troops retreating from Concord. When they met, they halted some time. After this, they set fire to Deacon boring's barn; then to his house; then to widow Mulliken's house; then to the shop of Nathaniel Mulliken, a watch and clock maker; and to the house and shop of Joshua Bond. All these were near the place where the reinforcements took refreshments. They hove fire into several other buildings. It was extinguished after their retreat." *Deposition of Elijah Sanderson*.

¹⁹ Gordon, *An Account of the Commencement of Hostilities*. Andover minute man Thomas Boynton noted "after we came into Concord road we saw houses burning and others plundered." Journal of Thomas Boynton, April 19, 1775. 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." Journal of James Stevens, April 19, 1775, taken from *The Journal of James Stevens of Andover, Massachusetts - Soldier in the American Revolution, 1775-1776*, (Salem, Massachusetts: Essex Institute Historical Collections, 1911), p. 42.

pocket which with great pride she had embroiders with crewels.”²⁰ The Loring family also lost everything, including all household furnishing and every stitch of linens and clothing.²¹ Fifer Jonathan Harrington's family lost “an eight-day clock, clothes, books, moose-skins and other articles.”²²

Some Lexington residents discovered their residences had been vandalized and defiled. A "Mrs. Muzzy" discovered that British soldiers had broken her mirror, valuable crockery, fired bullets into an interior wall and left the floor boards smeared with blood. When Anna Munroe returned to her 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. Ultimately, claims for compensation were submitted to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress and Massachusetts Legislature. The approximate damage to Lexington property exceeded £4500.

²⁰ Elizabeth W. Harrington, “A Few Words for our Grandmothers of 1775,” *Lexington Historical Society Proceedings* (Lexington, Massachusetts: Lexington Historical Society, 1896)Vol. 1 p. 52.

²¹ The Loring family's losses are reported in the *Journal of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts*. The family claimed they lost everything, including the “house, barn and outbuildings; all household furnishing and all the clothing for nine family members; stock, grains, and farms tools, totaling £720.” Massachusetts Provincial Congress, May 2, 1775. Northern Illinois University Libraries, Digital Collections and Collaborative Projects, <http://amarch.lib.niu.edu/islandora/object/niu-amarch%3A78567>.

²² Canavan, *Canavan Papers*, Vol. 1, p. 138.