

Fear and Flight: Civilian Evacuations of Middlesex and Essex Counties, April 18-22, 1775

Alexander R. Cain

McAlpin77@gmail.com

(978) 891-2785

~

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.

The Civilian Evacuation Along The Boston Road

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 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.

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>.

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 to 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 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

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. Later in the day and from the safety of distant hills, many Lexington residents watched in horror as their homes were

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.

burned, destroyed or looted when the regulars retreated through the town.¹⁰ Pursuant to 18th Century law, the illegal breaking and entering into a home was a capital offense punishable by death. Thus, from an 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.”¹¹

However, an even stronger contributing factor may have been colonial Massachusetts 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.¹² 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.¹³

For some, the flight was particularly difficult. Four Lexington women, Sarah Marrett, Amity Pierce, Sarah Reed and Betty White, were still likely bedridden having given birth over the past month. 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

¹⁰ 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*.

¹¹ 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.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

Harrington, took her toddlers “down a lane back of the house across a meadow to the old place on Smock farm.”¹⁴ Anna Munroe fled from the family tavern with her three young children and hid on a hill behind the establishment.

Some men remained with the women and children during the evacuation. A few were ministers who tended to their flock. Others suffered from physical injuries and thus, could not field with their companies. At least seven Lexington men missed the fighting and participated in the civilian evacuation 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. Likewise, 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.”¹⁵

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.¹⁶ 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 minute man 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.”¹⁷

¹⁴ Obituary of Rebecca Harrington Munroe, (Boston), *Daily Advertiser*, April 11, 1834.

¹⁵ “Genealogy of the Estabrook Family,” Google Books, , accessed July 22, 2018, <https://goo.gl/zrBC2E>. It should be noted Joseph Estabrook, is a variable. A purported letter from Estabrook in the early 1820s asserted he was present at the Battle of Lexington and had bullets pierce the skirts of his coat as he retreated off the Green. Unfortunately, this letter is somewhat suspect as Estabrook's birth records suggest he was at most fifteen years old at the time of the skirmish and would have been too young to serve with the militia.

¹⁶ Smith, “Kite End,” p. 102.

¹⁷ *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.

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.”¹⁸

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, still known by that name in our community. 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, the large family Bible, a loaf of bread, and a looking glass, with what little silver she had, and bade farewell to the old dwelling, never expecting to gather her family about her again beneath that ancestral roof. 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.”¹⁹

Later in the morning, many Lexington residents realized that the British regulars would be marching back through their town again. As a result, most prepared to flee for a second time. One evacuee recalled that the roads were clogged with “women and children weeping.”²⁰ Some escaped back to woods and fields, while others traveled to nearby towns.²¹ Some sought refuge in homes far from the British path of retreat.²² 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.”²³

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 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

¹⁸ Samuel Hartwell account of Mary Hartwell’s tale, in “Stories of the Fight,” *Boston Daily Globe*, April 15, 1894, p. 25.

¹⁹ Abram English Brown, *Beneath Old Roof Trees* (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1896), pp. 221-222.

²⁰ Canavan, *Canavan Papers*, Vol. 1, p. 136.

²¹ For example, The Mead and Clarke families fled to the neighboring Burlington District of Woburn.

²² “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.

²³ *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.

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.'"²⁴

Lincoln's Mary Hartwell also remembered coming in close contact with the 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."²⁵

In the aftermath of the engagement, Mercy Warren recalled "it seemed necessary to retire to a place of safety till the calamity was passed. My partner had been a fortnight confined by illness. After dinner (19th) 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 with precipitancy were we driven to the town of Andover, following some of our acquaintance, five of us to be conveyed by one poor tired horse-chaise. Thus we began our pilgrimage, alternately walking and riding, the roads filled with frightened women and children, some in carts with their tattered furniture, others on foot fleeing into the woods. 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."²⁶

The Ipswich Fright

²⁴ Bacheller, *Munroe Tavern*, p. 6-7.

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

²⁶ Letter from Hannah Winthrop to Mercy Otis Warren, circa May 1775, "Massachusetts Historical Society. Founded 1791" Massachusetts Historical Society Website, accessed July 22, 2018, [http://www.masshist.org/database/3335?ft=Correspondence of Mercy Otis Warren and Hannah Winthrop&from=/features/warren-winthrop&noalt=1](http://www.masshist.org/database/3335?ft=Correspondence%20of%20Mercy%20Otis%20Warren%20and%20Hannah%20Winthrop&from=/features/warren-winthrop&noalt=1).

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. 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!”

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.”²⁷ 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 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.”²⁸ A witness recalled another Newburyport woman, “having concealed all her pewter and silverware in the well, filled a bag with pies and other edibles, and set off with it and her family for a safer place.”²⁹ Period accounts suggest Amesbury, Salisbury and Rowley were completely abandoned by its residents.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ John J. Currier, “History of Newburyport, Mass: 1764-1905, Volume 1”, January 1, 1906, , accessed July 22, 2018, <https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=ISQWAAAAYAAJ&rdid=book-ISQWAAAAYAAJ&rdot=1>.

²⁹ John J. Currier, “History of Newburyport, Mass: 1764-1905, Volume 1”, January 1, 1906, , accessed July 22, 2018, <https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=ISQWAAAAYAAJ&rdid=book-ISQWAAAAYAAJ&rdot=1>.

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, 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!”³⁰ 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 “not in deed, by the regulars among the people, but by the irregulars among her provisions.”³¹ 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.³²

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.³³

The panic continued well into the early morning of April 22, 1775. By then, residents of Exeter 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.”³⁴

Shortly thereafter, many residents returned to their homes.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.