

## Lexington, Concord and the Beginning of the American Revolution

All through the late winter and early spring of 1775, General Thomas Gage, the Royal Military Governor of Massachusetts, thought about gunpowder: where was it, who controlled it, to whom did it rightfully belong, how could he keep it out of the hands of the Provincial militia? Without that powder, the troublesome people of Massachusetts could not fight his troops in open warfare.

From Gage's point of view, he and his predecessors had done everything they could to treat the colonists fairly, but the rude Yankees refused to be placated. Every attempt by Parliament to be conciliatory only emboldened the colonists, and Gage was sick of hearing them talk about their rights as British subjects. Even his American-born wife lectured him on liberty. In June of 1774 Parliament finally passed the Coercive Acts, tough measures he'd called for after the destruction of a shipload of British tea right under his nose in Boston Harbor. But the Yankees simply labeled the new laws the "Intolerable Acts" and stepped up their resistance. In December 1774 Provincial militia fired on British soldiers in New Hampshire and seized guns and powder that belonged to the King, then hauled their captured loot into the countryside; now Gage was going to get it back. The fifty-six year old general had seen combat and wanted to avoid bloodshed; but if blood was to be spilled, he was determined that his troops would prevail.

Paul Revere, a forty year old silversmith, had ridden hundreds of miles on behalf of Massachusetts' Committee of Correspondence, delivering news to New York and Philadelphia of New England's resistance. In December 1773 Revere was a leader in what the locals called "The Boston Tea Party," and by January 1775 he had organized an intelligence network to report on the comings and goings of British soldiers. Thanks to Revere and his men, General Gage couldn't move without all of eastern Massachusetts knowing about it.

By mid April Gage had decided to strike Concord, where, his spies told him, the Provincials held an arms cache. To command the expedition, Gage chose Lieutenant Colonel Francis Smith, who was near retirement, overweight and probably unfit for active service; but Smith was also mature, prudent and trustworthy. Gage needed an officer with seasoned judgment if he was to avoid a fight.

Revere's network learned of the British plans to strike Concord shortly after Smith got his orders on the afternoon of April 18, and by ten o'clock Revere and another rider, William Dawes, were on their way into the countryside. The men left Boston by separate routes, and Revere barely escaped capture by a British patrol before the two met and rode into Lexington, where they warned the local militia as well as resistance leaders Sam Adams and John Hancock. As Lexington's Minutemen answered the call to arms, Revere and Dawes pushed on.

When the sun came up on Smith's harried column of Redcoats, they were still east of Lexington and miles from their final objective. The soldiers also knew that the countryside had been alerted, and in the dim light they could see local militia running through the woods on either side of the road, hurrying to get to Lexington ahead of them. Colonel Smith, anxious because he was far behind schedule, put the aggressive Marine Major John Pitcairn at the front

of the column to maintain the pace. Pitcairn's lead companies, under Lieutenant Jesse Adair, reached Lexington just after first light and saw a small group of militia men formed in battle line on the Common. Adair faced a choice: he could turn left at the fork toward his objective at Concord, though this would leave an armed force on his vulnerable flank. Or he put his own men into battle line and face down the militia. Adair pushed two of his companies, about eighty men, into battle formation just as Major Pitcairn caught up with them. Pitcairn rode past his own soldiers to within earshot of the militia and ordered them to disperse.

Across the green were some seventy Lexington men commanded by a forty-five year old veteran of the French and Indian War. Major John Parker, knowing he was outnumbered and outgunned, ordered his men to disperse. As the locals began to move, someone—no one knows who and both sides blamed the other—fired a shot. The Regulars opened fire, killing eight and wounding another nine. Major Pitcairn could not gain control of his men, but the quick-thinking Colonel Smith had his drummer beat the command to form a column of march and the Redcoats, their anger spent, fell into line. When his column was back on the road to Concord, Smith finally told his officers their objective. Unsurprisingly, they were not eager to march farther into a hostile and alerted countryside.

In Concord the hours before dawn saw a number of militia companies from the surrounding towns gather, so that by the time the British column arrived around seven o'clock, there were several hundred armed men on hand. The Concord men knew of the gunfire at Lexington, but they did not know the details of what happened or even if there were casualties. Militia commanders James Barrett and John Buttrick, rather than force a fight in town, withdrew their men across the North Bridge to await reinforcements.

Smith's Redcoats began searching for the hidden arms as soon as they arrived in Concord, using information from Gage's spies. Major Pitcairn, alerted that there were cannon buried next to Ephraim Jones' tavern, forced his way in, seized the guns and then ordered and politely paid for his breakfast. Meanwhile Smith's grenadiers found some wooden gun carriages (the cannon tubes were hidden) and other military stores, which they set on fire. On the hill across the North Bridge, the militia men spotted the smoke and worried that the town was burning; they marched off their hill in column—a marching as opposed to battle formation—toward the bridge. When British Captain Walter Laurie saw the Provincials advancing on his men, he backed over the bridge, pulling up planks behind him. As the locals pressed on, Laurie ordered his men to fire warning shots; when that didn't stop the advance, the British fired a volley into the Provincials, killing two instantly. Return fire from the Americans wounded twelve Redcoats, three of them mortally. The Regulars, heavily outnumbered and with four of their eight officers down, broke ranks and ran back to town.

Militia companies now poured into the battle from all directions, and Colonel Smith knew he would have to fight his way back to Boston. At Merriam's corner, just a mile east of Concord, the militia unleashed the first of what would be a running series of ambushes over twenty miles. The Provincials fought as skirmishers, using roadside concealment and individual movement and creating a moving circle of fire that stuck to a British column burdened with wounded and running low on ammunition. East of Concord the road became more winding, with ravines and small streams that favored the attackers; British casualties mounted. Colonel Smith

was wounded trying to rally his men and prevent the retreat from turning into a rout. Around three o'clock Smith met a column of British reinforcements sent from Boston, but the attacks continued, and soon the relief column was also surrounded and under constant fire. For several hours it looked to the British commanders that they might run out of ammunition before they reached safety.

Around seven o'clock the British approached Charlestown, where they came under the protective guns of the Royal Navy. Some of the Redcoats had not slept since the night of April 17<sup>th</sup>; they had marched and fought their way over forty miles and had been under almost constant fire since that morning. Out of approximately fourteen hundred engaged, the British lost more than 270 killed, wounded or missing. Approximately four thousand Provincials fought at different times through the long day; the Americans suffered ninety-two total casualties.

General Gage probably foresaw his removal from command and recall to England, though it's unlikely he could have guessed that the war launched that day would last six more years. Nevertheless, he had a new appreciation for the men who stood up to his soldiers on April 19<sup>th</sup> and who would soon form their own Continental Army. After the battle he wrote, "The rebels are not the despicable rabble too many have supposed them to be, and I find it owing to a military spirit encouraged amongst them for a few years past, joined with an uncommon degree of zeal and enthusiasm. In all their wars against the French they never showed so much conduct, attention and perseverance as they do now."

**Our visit to the Old North Bridge will focus on the challenges faced by the participants that day. What did they know? What were their options? What lessons can we glean that will help us lead better today?**