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The American Revolution

Blood Is Shed at Lexington and Concord

April 19, 1775

Tensions had been rising for a decade. So strained was the relationship between colonies and mother country that the colonial assembly of Massachusetts had been dissolved by order of General Thomas Gage. Colonies all along the Atlantic seaboard were disturbed by events unfolding in Massachusetts and apprehensive about future plans of the British authorities. Open rebellion seemed a genuine possibility.

The political leaders of Massachusetts had responded to the dissolution of their legislature by establishing a provincial congress in Concord in defiance of General Gage and the army that was prepared to enforce his decrees. Colonial militiamen had begun drills clearly designed as preparation for resistance to British troops. Arms and munitions were being stockpiled in Concord.

General Gage faced a dilemma. Action against the provincial congress or an attempt to seize the weapons cache at Concord might provoke or preempt bloodshed. Inaction could produce either of these results as well.

Gage chose to seize the colonial weapons stockpile. The colonists chose to resist. The resulting confrontation on the morning of April 19, 1775, was a moment that changed the course of history.

First Impressions

The Incidents at Lexington and Concord

The firsthand accounts of Lexington and Concord are noteworthy for their partisanship. Two forces in confrontation, experiencing the same events, cite opposing facts and behaviors.

Source 1 **Account of General Thomas Gage, written April 29 and published in the *Virginia Gazette*, May 25, 1775**

The following was this day received by the post, inclosed in a letter from General Gage dated, Boston, April 29, 1775, which we give to the public by authority.

A circumstantial account of an attack, that happened on the 19th of April, 1775, on his Majesty's troops, by a number of the people of the province of Massachusetts Bay.

On Tuesday the 18th of April, about half past ten at night, lieutenant col. Smith of the 10th regiment, embarked from the common at Boston, with the grenadiers and light infantry of the troops there, and landed on the opposite side; from whence he began his march towards [C]oncord, where he was ordered to destroy a magazine of military stores, deposited there for the use of an army, to be assembled in order to act against his Majesty and his government—The colonel called his officers together, and gave orders that the troops should not fire, unless, fired upon; and after marching a few miles, detached six companies of light infantry, under the command of major Pitcairn, to take possession of two bridges on the other side of Concord; soon after, they heard many signal guns and the ringing of alarm bells repeatedly, which convinced them the country was rising to oppose them, and that it was a pre-concerted scheme to oppose the King's troops, whenever there should be a favourable opportunity for it.—About three o'clock the next morning, the troops being advanced within two miles of Lexington, intelligence was received that about 500 men in arms were assembled, and determined to oppose the King's troops; and on major Pitcairn's galloping up to the head of the advanced companies, two officers informed him that a man (advanced from those that were assembled) had presented his musket and attempted to shoot them, but the piece flashed in the pan; on this the Major gave direction to the troops to move forward, but on no account to fire, nor even to attempt it, without orders. When they arrived at the end of the village, they observed about 200 armed men drawn up on a green, and when the troops came within one hundred yards of them, they began to file off towards some stone walls on their right flank; the light infantry observing this, ran after them; and the Major instantly called to the soldiers not to fire, but to surround and disarm them; some of them who had jumped over a wall, then fired 4 or 5 shots at the troops, wounded a man of the 10th regiment, and the Major's horse in two places, and at the same time several shots were fired from a meetinghouse on the left: upon this, without any order or regularity, the light infantry began a scattered fire, and killed several of the country people, but were silenced as soon as the authority of their officers could make them.

After this, colonel Smith marched up with the remainder of the detachment, and the whole body proceeded to Concord, where they arrived about 9 o'clock, without any thing further happening; but vast numbers of armed people were seen assembling on all the heights, while col. Smith, with the grenadiers and part of the light infantry remained at Concord to search for cannon; and there he detached capt. Parsons with six light companies, to secure a bridge at some distance from Concord, and to proceed from thence to certain houses, where it was supposed there was cannon and ammunition: capt. Parsons, in pursuance of these orders, posted three companies at the

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bridge and some heights near it, under the command of capt. Lawrie of the 43d regiment, and in about an hour near after, a large body of them began to move to the bridge; the light companies of the 4th and 10th then descended and joined capt. Lawrie, the people continued to advance in great numbers, and fired upon the King's troops, killed three men, wounded four officers, one sergeant, and four privates; upon which, after returning the fire, capt. Lawrie and his officers thought it prudent to retreat towards the main body at Concord, and were soon joined by two companies of grenadiers. When capt. Parsons returned with the three companies over the bridge, they observed 3 soldiers on the guard, one of them scalped, his head much mangled and his ears cut, though not quite dead, a sight which struck the soldiers with horror; capt. Parsons marched on and joined the main body, who were only waiting for his coming up to march back to Boston.

Col. Smith had executed his orders without opposition, by destroying all the military stores he could find: Both the colonel and major Pitcairn having taken all possible pains to convince the inhabitants that no injury was intended them, and that if they opened their doors when required to search for the stores, not the slightest mischief should be done, neither had any of the people the least occasion to complain; but they were sulky, and one of them even struck major Pitcairn. Except upon capt. Lawrie at the bridge, no hostilities happened from the affair at Lexington, until the troops began their march back. As soon as the troops had got out of the town of Concord, they received a heavy fire on them from all sides, from walls, fences, houses, trees, barns, [etc.] which continued without intermission, till they met the first brigade with two field pieces near Lexington, ordered out under the command of lord Piercy to support them: upon the firing of the field pieces, the people's fire was for a while silenced, but as they still continued to increase greatly in numbers, they firing again as before from all places where they could find cover, upon the whole body, and continued so doing for the space of 15 miles. Notwithstanding their numbers, they did not attack openly the whole day, but kept under cover on all occasions. The troops were very much fatigued, the greater part of them having been under arms all night, and made a march of upwards of forty miles before they arrived at Charlestown, from whence they were ferried over to Boston.

The troops had above 50 killed, and many more wounded.—Reports are various about the loss sustained by the country people; some make it very considerable, others not so much.

Source 2 **Article in the *Spy and Oracle of Liberty*, May 3, 1775.**

AMERICANS! LIBERTY OR DEATH! JOIN OR DIE!

AMERICANS! forever bear in mind the BATTLE OF LEXINGTON!—where British troops, unmolested and unprovoked, wantonly and in a most inhuman manner, fired upon and killed a number of our countrymen, then robbed, ransacked and burnt their houses! nor could the tears of defenceless women, some of whom were in the pains of childbirth, the cries of helpless babes nor the prayers of old age, confined to beds of sickness, appease their thirst for blood!—or divert them from their DESIGN of MURDER and ROBBERY! . . .

About 10 o'clock on the night of the 18th of April, the troops in Boston were disclosed to be on the move in a very secret manner, and it was found that they were embarking of boats at the bottom of the Common; expresses set off immediately to alarm the country, that they might be on their guard. . . . The body of troops . . . crossed the river and landed at Phipp's Farm; They immediately, to the number of 1000, proceeded to Lexington, about 6 miles below Concord, with great silence: a company of militia, of about 80 men, mustered near the meeting-house; the troops came in sight of them just before sunrise; the militia upon seeing the troops began to disperse; the troops then set out upon the run, hallooing and huzzaing, and coming within a few rods of them, the commanding officer accosted the militia, in words to this effect, "Disperse, you dam'd rebels!—Damn you disperse!" Upon which the troops again huzzaed and immediately one or two officers discharged their pistols, which were instantaneously followed by the firing of four or five of the soldiers; and then there seemed to be a general discharge from the whole body; It is to be noticed that they fired on our people as they were dispersing, agreeable to their command, and that we did not even return the fire; Eight of our men were killed and nine wounded;—The troops then laughed, and damned the **Yankees**, and said they could not bear the smell of gunpowder.

The Colonists Turn against the Empire

The direct taxing of domestic goods and services under the Stamp Act, the taxing of imports under the Townshend Acts, the tax on tea, the Coercive Acts that followed resistance to British authority by the people of Boston, and the exclusion of colonial representatives from the Parliament that enacted such measures—these were without doubt grievances that stirred the American generation of the 1770s. But were these grievances and others felt by the colonists so unique, oppressive, and unbearable that blood had to be shed to redress them?

Was it the matter of taxation? If a tax on sugar or glass or paint or lead is enough to rouse Americans to rebellion, why are the Americans of today passive? Every single item taxed by Britain in the months before April of 1775 is taxed higher and more pervasively today. Was it the specific tax on tea? The Tea Act of 1773 actually allowed Americans—in spite of the three-pence a pound tax—to buy tea at a lower cost than what they had been paying for the smuggled Dutch tea they had used. And if Americans feel so strongly about the injustice of taxation without representation, why do so few even bother to vote? Rare is the election that draws more than half the electorate to the polls.

If the oppression of British rule was so intolerable, why did the English colonies of Canada and the West Indies continue to tolerate it? The English colonies of Australia and New Zealand were able to grow into mature nations within the "constraints" of the British Empire. Moreover, the "oppressive" British authorities permitted those countries to do so.

Why, then, did Americans think it necessary to rebel?

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