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Battle at Lexington Green, 1775

Massachusetts Colony was a hotbed of sedition in the spring of 1775. Preparations for conflict with the Royal authority had been underway throughout the winter with the production of arms and munitions, the training of militia (including the minutemen), and the organization of defenses. In April, General Thomas Gage, military governor of Massachusetts decided to counter these moves by sending a force out of Boston to confiscate weapons stored in the village of Concord and capture patriot leaders Samuel Adams and John Hancock reported to be staying in the village of Lexington.

The atmosphere was tense, word of General Gage's intentions spread through Boston prompting the patriots to set up a messaging system to alert the countryside of any advance of British troops. Paul Revere arranged for a signal to be sent by lantern from the steeple of North Church - one if by land, two if by sea. On the night of April 18, 1775 the lantern's alarm sent Revere, William Dawes and other riders on the road to spread the news. The messengers cried out the alarm, awakening every house, warning of the British column making its way towards Lexington. In the rider's wake there erupted the peeling of church bells, the beating of drums and the roar of gun shots - all announcing the danger and calling the local militias to action.

In the predawn light of April 19, the beating drums and peeling bells summoned between 50 and 70 militiamen to the town green at Lexington. As they lined up in battle formation the distant sound of marching feet and shouted orders alerted them of the Redcoats' approach. Soon the British column emerged through the morning fog and the confrontation that would launch a nation began.

"Lay down your arms, you damned rebels."

Twenty-three-year-old Sylvanus Wood was one of the Lexington militia who answered the call that spring morning. Several years after the event he committed his recollection to paper in an affidavit sworn before a Justice of the Peace which was first published in 1858:

"I, Sylvanus Wood, of Woburn, in the county of Middlesex, and commonwealth of Massachusetts, aged seventy-four years, do testify and say that on the morning of the 19th of April, 1775, I was an inhabitant of Woburn, living with Deacon Obadiah Kendall; that about an hour before the break of day on said morning, I heard the

After dispersing the Lexington militia, the Redcoats marched on to Concord where a battle with a large patriot contingent forced a bloody retreat back to Lexington and then to Boston.

Lexington bell ring, and fearing there was difficulty there, I immediately arose, took my gun and, with Robert Douglass, went in haste to Lexington, which was about three miles distant.

When I arrived there, I inquired of Captain Parker, the commander of the Lexington company, what was the news. Parker told me he did not know what to believe, for a man had come up about half an hour before and informed him that the British troops were not on the road. But while we were talking, a messenger came up and told the captain that the British troops were within half a mile. Parker immediately turned to his drummer, William Diman, and ordered him to beat to arms, which was done. Captain Parker then asked me if I would parade with his company. I told him I would. Parker then asked me if the young man with me would parade. I spoke to Douglass, and he said he would follow the captain and me.

By this time many of the company had gathered around the captain at the hearing of the drum, where we stood, which was about half way between the meetinghouse and Buckman's tavern. Parker says to his men, 'Every man of you, who is equipped, follow me; and those of you who are not equipped, go into the meeting-house and furnish yourselves from the magazine, and immediately join the company.' Parker led those of us who were equipped to the north end of Lexington Common, near the Bedford Road, and formed us in single file. I was stationed about in the centre of the company. While we were standing, I left my place and went from one end of the company to the other and counted every man who was paraded, and the whole number was thirty-eight, and no more.

Just as I had finished and got back to my place, I perceived the British troops had arrived on the spot between the meeting-house and Bucknians, near where Captain Parker stood when he first led off his men. The British troops immediately wheeled so as to cut off those who had gone into the meeting-house. The British troops approached us rapidly in platoons, with a general officer on horseback at their head. The officer came up to within about two rods of the centre of the company, where I stood, the first platoon being about three rods distant. They there halted. The officer then swung his sword, and said, "Lay down your arms, you damned rebels, or you are all dead men. Fire!" Some guns were fired by the British at us from the first platoon, but no person was killed or hurt, being probably charged only with powder.

Just at this time, Captain Parker ordered every man to take care of himself. The company immediately dispersed; and while the company was dispersing and leaping over the wall, the second platoon of the British fired and killed some of our men. There was not a gun fired by any of Captain Parker's company, within my knowledge. I was so situated that I must have known it, had any

thing of the kind taken place before a total dispersion of our company. I have been intimately acquainted with the inhabitants of Lexington, and particularly with those of Captain Parker's company, and, with one exception, I have never heard any of them say or pretend that there was any firing at the British from Parker's company, or any individual in it until within a year or two. One member of the company told me, many years since, that, after Parker's company had dispersed, and he was at some distance, he gave them 'the guts of his gun.'"

References:

Commager, Henry Steele, Morris Richard B. The Spirit of 'Seventy-Six vol I (1958); Fischer, David, Paul Revere's Ride (1994).

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