



Launching a Revolution

James H. Hillestad, Member No. 6, chronicles the first battle of the American Revolution

When researching subjects for *The Standard*, I try to go “outside the box.” In the article on Antietam in this issue, rather than focus on the much-discussed Burnside’s Bridge, I chose the battle waged in Miller’s cornfield, because this was the pivot point of much that happened that fateful day.

So it was with Lexington and Concord. The Lexington Village Green and the North Bridge over the Concord River are undeniably historic -- if not epochal -- but they tend to overshadow the rout of the British troops and their retreat back to Boston. This article and accompanying diorama highlight that hazardous trek.

For decades, American colonists had protested taxes and various punitive measures imposed on them by the British Parliament. The Boston Massacre in 1770 fueled the flames, and in 1773, the historic “Boston Tea Party”



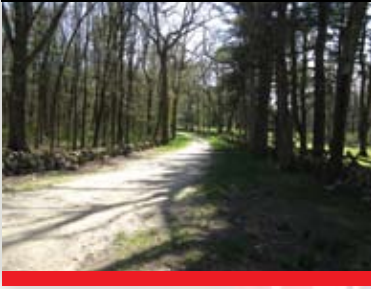
Marching along “Battle Road”

erupted. This was followed by the burning of tea ships in New York, Philadelphia and Charleston. As tensions heightened, American militiamen began stockpiling weapons and ammunition.

King George III became furious in the face of these acts of defiance -- though, ironically, English law required the colonists, as members of the Crown militia, to possess a musket, bayonet, and a quantity of ammunition. The Brit-

Did you know?

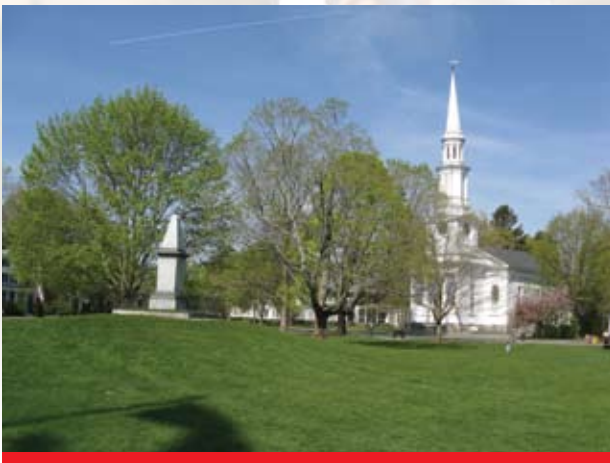
Note: The colonial “rebel” forces were made up of militia geared to protecting local needs. From this body, one-fourth were formed into companies of Minutemen, ready for action at a moment’s notice. They received the best equipment, and were composed of the best men.



The road at the "Bloody Angle" where the British were ambushed on their way back to Lexington from Concord.

*By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here once the embattled farmers stood,
And fired the shot heard 'round the world.*

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1837)



Lexington Battle Green



The North Bridge over the Concord River, near the British memorial. The "Minute Man" statue is in the background. (Carol is on the bridge.)

ish characterized their treatment of the colonies as benevolent colonialism. The colonists, on the other hand, largely viewed it as tyrannical oppression. Reflecting this difference of opinion, the British referred to the colonists as rebels, while the colonists regarded themselves as patriots.

BELOW
Map of the battle area.

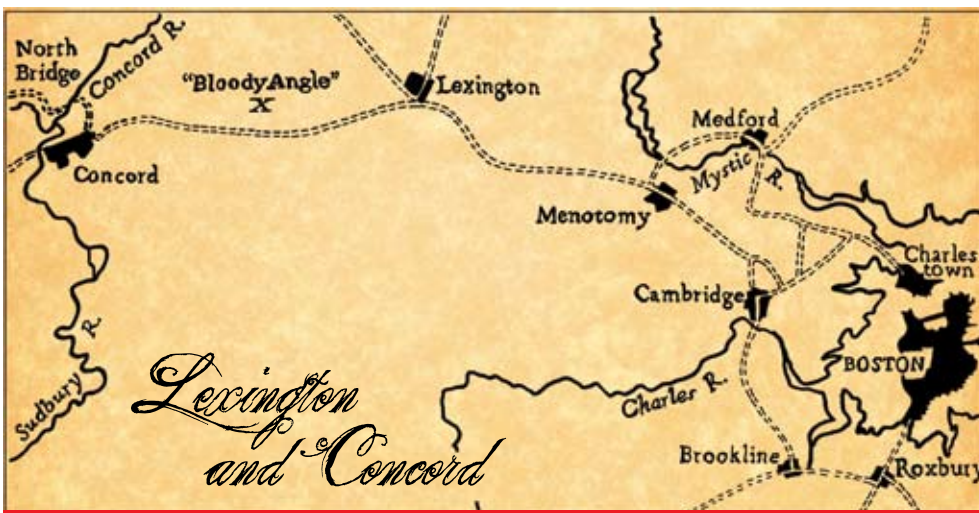
The King directed his military, under the command of General Thomas Gage, to suppress the rebels. On April 18, 1775, Gage ordered his troops to surreptitiously march from Boston to Lexington, a distance of 16 miles, to arrest rebel leaders John Hancock and Samuel Adams. The troops

were instructed to then march on to Concord, another 6 miles, and confiscate a cache of hidden weapons.

The troops numbered 700 and were the elite of Gage's army. Handpicked from eleven regiments, they comprised Grenadier companies (his biggest men) and Light Infantry companies (his fast, active troops).

The weakness of this force was not in its rank and file, but in their hasty and imperfect amalgamation. No officer in command could know all his subordinates, nor could they even know one another.

The officer chosen for overall command of this makeshift force was Colonel Francis Smith of the 10th Regiment. To lead the light infantry, Gage selected Major John Pitcairn, an able officer, but a marine unfamiliar with the army's way of operating. Pitcairn and the light infantry, some 400 strong,





The diorams, 25" x 45"



Hancock-Clarke House, from which Hancock and Adams had fled.



The "Minute Man" stone marks the spot where Parker formed his men.

would make up the advance party, to be followed by 300 grenadiers. They marched under cover of night, but their advance was observed by Paul Revere and others. Militia companies from all over the area were alerted and converged on Lexington. (Upon hearing of British intentions, Hancock and Adams left the Hancock-Clarke house in Lexington and fled up the road to Woburn.)

At the Lexington Green, Captain John Parker assembled in two ranks 70 militiamen to oppose the British advance guard of 400. Parker, realizing the odds, told his men to disperse, but to keep their arms. Militia eyewitnesses accuse a British officer of firing first. English eyewitnesses place the blame on a militiaman. The British then fired two volleys, and eight militiamen lay dead, ten wounded. Only one British soldier was injured.

The British then proceeded on to Concord, where they searched in vain for arms and ammunition. In the process, they crossed the North Bridge over the Concord



The British memorial at Concord Bridge.

River. It was here that they met opposition by almost 500 militiamen. Two regulars were killed and ten were wounded, including four of the eight officers present.

The British now began the long walk back to Boston. Meanwhile, the militia were gathering in increasing numbers. Just outside Concord, at Meriam's Corner, 1,100 militiamen deployed in the woods and behind stone walls on either side of what would be called "Battle Road."

As the regulars crossed Tanner's Brook and turned a sharp left between two copses, they came under fire, and eight of them were killed on the spot. More men were lost half a mile further on, where the road curved through a wooded area, now known as the "Bloody Angle." Caught in a deadly ambush, the soldiers escaped by breaking into a trot down the road -- a pace the militia could not maintain through the adjoining woods and swampy terrain.

Thirty soldiers and four militia



Militia firing from behind logs

were killed in the crossfire.

Battle Road became a gauntlet. The British finally stumbled through Lexington, where they met a relief column. With this added protection, they continued their withdrawal. The militia now numbered over 2,000. Some of the bloodiest fighting occurred in hand-to-hand combat in buildings and fields. As the sun set, the regulars crossed Charlestown Neck, where they found refuge on Bunker Hill.

The battles of Lexington, Concord, and the retreat back to Boston, resulted in 95 militia casu-



Light Infantry in action near the barn



Assault by Grenadiers



The statue of Captain John Parker on the Lexington battle Green.

Interesting Fact

Note: As coincidence would have it, my wife Carol and I toured the battlefield on April 19, 237 years to the day after the battle -- the photos of the sites described in this article reflect accurately the time of year during which the battle took place.



Memorial on Lexington Battle Green to the eight colonists who died that day and who are buried beneath the monument.

alties and a staggering 273 British killed, wounded and missing.

Devastatingly, a disorganized group of untrained, ill-equipped farmers had defeated crack troops from the world's most powerful, best-trained, and best-equipped professional army.

Boston was surrounded by a huge militia army, numbering more than 15,000 men. The Revolutionary War had begun.

In the next issue of The Standard, look for "The Siege of Boston and Bunker Hill." ■

Jim Hillestad operates under the name The Toy Soldier Museum. His museum, containing more than 35,000 figures and a large collection of militaria, is located in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. For directions and hours, call him at 570 629-7227, or visit his website: www.the-toy-soldier.com