**The Battles of Lexington and Concord and Their Virginia Connection: A 250th Commemoration**

**By David A. Welker**

As Colonial Patriots became increasingly serious about openly confronting Britain—with Virginia leading the way in March 1775, following Patrick Henry’s famous speech at the Second Virginia Convention—London decided to act first and seize the initiative. British leaders concluded rightly that the rebellious colonists’ greatest weakness for conducting a war were shortages of military supplies – chiefly arms and gunpowder. If British troops already in the colonies could quietly and quickly remove arms and gunpowder not already under British control, then perhaps open revolt could be quashed before it began.

In early April 1775, Lieutenant General Thomas Gage, commanding His Majesty’s Forces in North America, received intelligence that Colonials had gathered military supplies at Concord, Massachusetts, just 20 miles from Boston. This information was indeed accurate - the Massachusetts Committee of Supply had stored gunpowder, military supplies, and 14 cannon in Concord. When on April 14th Gage learned that the king had in February declared Massachusetts to be in rebellion, he knew it was time to act decisively to forestall this revolt.

Yet Gage wanted to take these supplies quietly, sending a clear message while not emboldening the rebels. He directed British officers to use their routine horseback rides through the countryside to scout routes to Concord, then to use their troops’ regular marches from the barracks to quietly take the weapons. Gage also hoped to arrest John Hancock, John Adams, and other rebel leaders known to be in Lexington. However, Gage’s plans would not unfold as he hoped, thanks to the local Sons of Liberty.

These patriots had already learned of British plans and not only warned the Provincial Congress, but set up a network of riders to alert if British troops moved from Boston, reflected in Paul Revere and Rufus Dawes’ famous midnight rides.

Late on April 18, 1775, 700 British grenadiers, light infantry, and Marines left their barracks near Boston Common, each man carrying just 36 rounds of ammunition. Commanding the expedition was the 10th Regiment of Foot’s Lt. Col. Francis Smith, with Major John Pitcairn of the 1st Battalion of Marines as his second in command. Their orders were “to seize and destroy all Artillery, Ammunition, Provisions, Tents, Small Arms, and all Military Stores whatever” found at Concord “for the avowed Purpose of raising and supporting a Rebellion against His Majesty.”

Alerted by the presence of an advance British cavalry patrol, Lexington militia commander Captain John Parker at 1 a.m. on April 19th ordered the meeting bell rung, calling out his 130 men to form on Lexington Green, a two-acre triangle of land in the center of town. Parker instantly ordered his men were not to provoke the Regulars, even if the British picked a fight.

At 5:00 that morning when Captain Parker had the company’s drummer beat assembly, 70 Patriot militia formed in ranks at the northern end of the green to face the approaching Regulars. Upon arriving in Lexington, British troops filed from the Bedford Road onto the Green, forming in front of the Meeting House.

When British officers shouted “Surrender!” “Disperse, ye Rebels!” Captain Parker did just that to prevent his greatly outnumbered and outgunned company from having their precious muskets taken. Ordered to slowly leave, local militia began dispersing and walking away, firelocks in hand.

British Major Pitcarin now set the stage for disaster. Ordered to not fire, the British soldiers were nonetheless told to “Surround and disarm them!”

Breaking ranks to disarm the scattering Americans, the British troops lost their order and organization. As British Lieutenant Barker, of the King’s Own, recalled “Our men, without any orders, rushed in upon them…the men were so wild they could hear no orders.“

Then someone fired.

In the chaos, British Regulars opened a wide, scattered fire. Captain Parker recorded that the British soldiers “rushed furiously [and] fired upon and killed eight of our party without receiving any provocation therefor from us.” Americans returned a scattered fire—including now from nearby Buckman’s Tavern—but only eight Minutemen ever returned fire, which paled in comparison to the Redcoats’ volume.

Major Pitcairn rode furiously through the mob, shouting orders to cease firing, but in the chaos his men either could not hear him or would not obey him. Only when British commander Colonel Smith arrived did the killing stop.

Historian Arthur Tourtellot wrote of Lexington: “The engagement on the Common was less a battle or even a skirmish than a hysterical massacre at the hands of badly disciplined British soldiers.”

By 5:30, as the victorious British continued their march to Concord, only one of their comrades had been wounded. However, Gage’s low-key plan lay in ruins. And eight Americans lay dead, with 10 more were wounded. The American revolution had begun.

By 7:00, the British reached Concord, where they immediately began ransacking the town searching for hidden military supplies. They also cut down the town’s Liberty Pole. When British troops set fire to tents and wood the flames inadvertently spread, setting several Concord homes on fire.

Patriot commander Colonel Barrett, having just learned of the deadly Lexington fight and seeing the Redcoats approaching, ordered his militia and Minutemen across the Concord River’s North Bridge to secure high ground that commanded the town and to buy time for more Patriot soldiers to join him. Barrett also worried that if he couldn’t stop them, the British would soon be heading to his farm, where some of the military goods they sought were hidden.

Seeing smoke rising above Concord, Colonel Barrett’s adjutant asked “Will you let them burn the town down?” and Barrett at once ordered his 500-man brigade to advance toward town. Loading as they marched, the men were cautioned not to fire unless the British fired first.

About 10:00 a.m., holding the opposite end of the North Bridge—which the Patriots need to recross to reach Concord—was an advance force of three British infantry companies, commanded by Captain Walter Laurie of the 43rd Regiment of Foot. Forming line, Captain Laurie ordered a volley into the advancing Patriots as they neared the bridge, which killed Captain Isaac Davis and another man.

American Captain Timothy Brown of Concord shouted “God damn it, they are firing ball!” and Patriot Major John Buttrick at once commanded his Americans “Fire, fellow soldiers, for God’s sake, fire!”

The Patriots fired what has come to be known as the “shot heard round the world.” Then the firing became general.

Minuteman Amos Barrett recalled “The balls whistled well. We were then ordered to fire [those] that could fire…” Americans surged across the North Bridge in pursuit and Patriot Amos Barrett saw “there were two dead and another almost dead. There were eight or ten that were wounded and a running and a hobbling about, looking back to see if we were after them.”

Shocked by the Patriots’ steady, effective fire and their own growing casualties, the Regulars broke, falling back in disorder toward Concord. The British had left on the ground by the North Bridge four of their eight offices, a sergeant, and four Regular privates. Once the British force was reunited in Concord, Colonel Smith concluded it was time to return to Boston.

About noon, Smith led his tired 700 Regulars away toward safety. But throughout their 20-mile trek the British were harassed by scattered fire from every town and hamlet along the route. Every nearby local militia and Minuteman force had been mustered and now some 14,000 Patriots were under arms to resist and impede the British. These actions have given American history names such as Meriam’s Corner, Brooks Hill, the Bloody Angle, Parker’s Revenge, Fiske Hill, Menotomy, Watson’s Corner, and Charlestown Neck.

The fights at Lexington and Concord had cost the British 273 casualties: 73 killed, 174, wounded, and 26 missing – 20 percent of the force that had left Boston the previous night. Patriots suffered 93 casualties, of which 49 were killed, 39 wounded, and 5 missing – roughly 2 and ½ percent of their forces involved.

Two days after Lexington and Concord, Virginia had its own “gunpowder incident.” On April 21, 1775, Virginia’s Royal Governor Lord Dunmore took his own actions to secure military stores from the rebellions Patriots, ordering the 15 half-barrels gunpowder stored in Williamsburg’s Magazine moved to the Royal Navy ship *Magdalen,* waiting in the James River. In response, militia companies began mustering throughout the colony and Patrick Henry led a small militia force toward Williamsburg to force return of the gunpowder. However, by then the powder was securely at sea and Dunmore’s £330 payment to Henry (a sum as valuable to the Patriot cause as the lost powder) ended the matter - temporarily. Although Virginians involved in the Gunpowder Affair had no idea what had happened two days earlier in Massachusetts, these parallel events fueled the spark of Liberty, ignited by dumping tea into Boston Harbor, into a fire that could not be contained until American independence had been won.