

Chapter 11

The Battle of Lexington

England had hoped to bring the colonists to their knees with the Intolerable Acts. She succeeded only in increasing their determination to defend themselves and excited an outpouring of sympathy for the oppressed New Englanders. In September of 1774, the first Continental Congress met in Philadelphia. The Congress called for a total boycott against British imports, began authorizing preparations for a "defensive" war, and addressed a series of declarations of rights and grievances to mother England.

With the Congress calling for united action, each colony began to arm itself. Everywhere guns were primed, ammunition was stored, and men were drilled. In Massachusetts the preparations were inspired and coordinated by Samuel Adams and John Hancock. Meanwhile General Thomas Gage, appointed to replace Governor Hutchinson, re-occupied Boston with his hated redcoats and waited for reinforcements to arrive from overseas. One of Gage's officers, Major John Pitcairn, called for "one active campaign and burning two or three of their towns to set everything to rights."

Early in the morning of April 19th Captain John Parker stood before his hastily gathered militia while Pitcairn was riding toward Lexington, Parker placed his men, about 70 in number, on the village green, a few yards away from the road to Concord. The British appeared in the morning mist and formed seemingly endless rows of soldiers. The major shouted for the colonists to disperse and the fate of America hung in the balance.

Then a shot was fired – or was it two? Without awaiting orders, the British regulars opened fire and the air rang with the screams of the injured and the moans of the dying. John Harrington dragged himself to the front porch of his house where he died in his wife's arms. Seven other militiamen were killed and ten were injured that April morning. Two British soldiers and the major's horse suffered slight wounds. Pitcairn finally regained control of his troops and marched them to Concord. At the same time, Samuel Adams was making his escape from Lexington. Hearing of the firing, he is said to have exclaimed, "Oh, what a glorious morning it is."

Who fired the first shot? Eyewitnesses on each side claimed it was the other side. The conflicting accounts presented in this chapter provide evidence for the reader to weigh and determine who was the aggressor at Lexington.

Two Commanders' Accounts

Six days after the battle, John Parker, commander of the colonial militia, gave the following report in sworn testimony:

Lexington, April 25, 1775

I, John Parker, of lawful age...declare, that on the nineteenth, in the morning, about one o'clock, being informed that there were a number of Regular Officers riding up and down the road, stopping and insulting people as they passed the road, and also was informed that a number of regular troops were on their march from Boston, in order to take the Provisions Stored at Concord, ordered our Militia to meet on the common in said Lexington, to consult what to do, and concluded not to be discovered, nor meddle or make with said Regular Troops if they should approach, unless they should insult us; and upon their sudden approach, I immediately ordered our Militia to disperse and not to

*fire. Immediately said Troops made their appearance, and rushed furiously, fired upon and killed eight of our party, without receiving any provocation therefore from us.*²⁰

Major Pitcairn told his version of the battle to President Stiles of Yale. Although the account was written down by Stiles, it represents Pitcairn's version of the event.

*His (Pitcairn's) account is this – that riding up to them he ordered them to disperse; which they not doing instantly, he turned about to order his troops so to draw out as to surround and disarm them. As he turned he saw a gun in a peasant's hand from behind a wall flash in the pan without going off; and instantly or very soon 2 or 3 guns went off by which he found his horse wounded. These guns he did not see, but believing they could not come from his own people, do and so asserted that they came from our people; and that thus they began the attack. The anger of the King's troops were such that a promiscuous, uncommanded, but general fire took place, which Pitcairn could not prevent; tho' he struck his staff or sword downwards with all earnestness as a signal to cease firing.*²¹

Accounts by Soldiers

A member of the colonial Militia testified as follows:

*I, Thomas Fessenden, of lawful age, testify and declared that being in a pasture near the meeting-house at said Lexington, on Wednesday last, at about half and hour before sunrise...I saw three officers on horseback advance to the front of said Regulars when one of them being within six rods of the said Militia, cried out, "Disperse, you rebels, immediately;" on which he brandished his sword over his head three times; meanwhile the second officer, who was about two rods behind him, fired a pistol pointed at said Militia, and the Regulars kept huzzaing till he had finished brandishing his sword, he pointed it down towards said Militia, and immediately on which the said Regulars fired a volley at the Militia and then I ran off, as fast as I could, while they continued firing till I got out of their reach. I further testify, that as soon as ever the officer cried "Disperse, you rebels," the said Company of Militia dispersed every way as fast as they could, and while they were dispersing the Regulars kept firing at them incessantly.*²²

The following account came from the personal diary of a British officer, Lieutenant John Barker:

We heard there were some hundreds of People collected together intending to oppose us and stop our going on; at 5 o'clock we arrived there, and saw a number of People, I believe between 200 and 300, formed in a Common in the middle of the Town; we still continued advancing, keeping prepared against an attack tho' without intending

²⁰ Quoted in Peter S. Bennett, *What Happened on Lexington Green?* Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Menlo Park, Calif., 1970 pp. 13-14.

²¹ Quoted by Arthur Tourtellot in *The Treasury of American Heritage*, p. 109, from Harold Murdock, *Nineteenth of April, 1775: Concord and Lexington*.

²² Quoted in Peter Bennett, *op. cit.* p. 9