

Understanding April 19, 1775

Some visitors taking a second look at the outbreak of the American Revolution in Massachusetts may ask: Why here? Why then? or Why did the day go so badly for the mighty British military? There were many converging circumstances that contributed to the outcome on that fateful day. This document is not a chronological narrative nor a tour outline. Rather it is a collection of critical factors from two perspectives about April 19th that can be referenced or added to your tour narrative where you see fit. Or it might be useful in answering questions from visitors who may be looking for a deeper understanding of the events of April 19th.

I. Background

The Colonists:

- With tensions building since the 1760s, it seemed that by early 1775, open hostilities in Massachusetts were imminent. Over time, the mounting taxes to help pay for the costly war Britain fought on two fronts, the Seven Years War in Europe and the French and Indian War in North America, were becoming burdensome to colonists.
- The last straw for colonists was the Tea Act of 1773. The defiant actions of about 100 rebellious Bostonians in December 1773 known as the Boston Tea Party were met with a punitive response from Parliament. In March of 1774 Parliament enacted **The Coercive Acts**, dubbed The Intolerable Acts by the colonists due to the hardship inflicted on the entire colony of Massachusetts. The Coercive Acts included:
 - The Port Act resulting in the closure of the Port of Boston. Fleets of British ships positioned in the harbor prevented goods and supplies from entering or leaving Boston. This blockade of the second largest port in the American colonies choked off all of Massachusetts. Neighboring colonies, sympathetic to Massachusetts and fearful of a similar fate, responded by moving goods over land - a slow and expensive solution.
 - The Massachusetts Government Act which revoked Massachusetts' Provincial Charter, stripping colonists of their rights to participate in town meetings and to be represented on the governor's council. A de facto government emerged in the form of the Provincial Congress holding underground meetings in taverns and homes. John Hancock and Sam Adams were in Lexington on April 19th for just such a series of meetings.
 - The Quartering Act which required colonists to house and feed British soldiers in their communities in unoccupied buildings or if necessary, in their homes.

- The Coercive Acts marked the tipping point for Boston and the entire colony, eventually turning moderate colonists against Parliament. Massachusetts' neighboring colonies also organized Provincial Congresses and ultimately the Continental Congress convened to coordinate a united resistance to any British aggression in Massachusetts.
- Massachusetts colonists began to stockpile arms to defend their communities in the event of open conflict. Heavy artillery like the canons at Barrett's farm were of particular importance in amassing an arsenal against the British army.
- Several local militias formed an elite group of first-responders, known as Minute Men, to be ready at a moment's notice to defend their communities. Lexington had a militia. Concord and **Menotomy** had both militias and Minute Men.
- British troop presence in Boston steadily increased until their numbers far exceeded half the total civilian population by the end of 1775. Boston became an occupied city and was considered unsafe for colonial leaders who were under the growing threat of arrest for treason.
- Leaders in the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts established the Committee of Safety after an erroneous alarm known as the Powder Alarm resulted in the near-outbreak of hostilities on September 1, 1774. The committee established specific criteria for an alarm: British troops must exceed 500 and be carrying provisions and artillery. In addition, the committee created a vast network of riders to spread an alarm quickly and accurately throughout Massachusetts and beyond.
- The highest ranking patriot leader remaining in Boston on April 18th was Dr. Joseph Warren who had a clear view of the harbor from his home in the North End. Upon seeing the lowering of small boats into the water from British ships, he ordered Paul Revere and William Dawes on their rides thus setting in motion the Committee of Safety's system of riders who would alert the entire countryside.

British Forces:

- In May of 1774, just three months after the Coercive Acts were passed, General Thomas Gage was appointed Royal Governor of Massachusetts with instructions to enforce the Coercive Acts, crack down on the rebellious population and arrest its leaders. Gage's ten years of service as commander in chief of the British military in North America and his marriage to an American woman from New Jersey were seen as advantages in his new appointment as the governor of the troublesome colony.
- In spite of pressure from Parliament, Gage, who was known for his measured approach to governing, took a less aggressive tack. Rather than enflame matters by making arrests, he continued to order drills into the countryside to confiscate weapons.

- At Gage's repeated requests, British troops in Boston nearly doubled from 5700 in 1774 to 10,000 by the end of 1775. The population of Boston was 15,000.
- Of the British troops in Boston, 68% were under the age of 25. Fifty-five percent had less than five years' experience in the military and although they were trained as a professional force, most were too young to have been tested in battle.
- With reports of ammunition stockpiled in the center of Concord and two canons hidden at Barrett's farm, Gage assembled an elite force of 700 grenadiers and light infantry from different companies. They were to embark on a top-secret mission to seize the munitions and either destroy them or return them to Boston. Gage was most eager to acquire the canons so they were no longer in the hands of hostile colonists.
- General Gage learned of the Committee of Safety's criteria for sending an alarm from Dr. Benjamin Church who, as a key member of the Committee of Safety, attended their meetings and reported back to General Gage. It soon became clear to the committee that there was a traitor among them.
- To avoid raising suspicion, Gage sent his 700 troops on this 40 mile round trip march with no extra provisions. Gage's decision to forgo towing wagons of provisions allowed the troops to take the more direct route to Concord "by sea".

II. April 19th

- After Col. Francis Smith reached **Menotomy** around 2:30 a.m. and suspected that the mission was no longer "secret", his message to Gage requesting reinforcements got delayed twice for reasons that are unclear. Thus Lord Percy did not depart Boston with his 1100 fresh troops, wagons of provisions and field artillery until 9:00 a.m., taking the longer route over land.
- The thorough preparation on the part of the Committee of Safety paid off in the swift speed with which its riders spread the alarm throughout Massachusetts. As a result, what began as a confrontation between 700 British Regulars and 75 militia on the Lexington Green, had grown into a conflict against 1000 militia and Minute Men in Concord.
- The elite British troops, assembled into a patchwork force for this critical mission, were led by commanders they didn't know. The absence of a symbiotic relationship between officers and rank and file soldiers contributed to a series of miscommunications in the battle in Concord and resulted in the deterioration of order and discipline during the embattled retreat along Concord Road in **Menotomy**.

- With 1100 reinforcements joining them on their retreat to Boston, the British Regulars were once again outnumbered by over 2000 militia and Minute Men gathered in **Menotomy**, a crossroads village of Cambridge.
- While the weather on April 19th was clear and dry, by afternoon there was increasing wind from the west. Smoke from the firing of their own muskets hovered over the retreating column. It became difficult for the Regulars to aim their muskets at snipers hiding in houses and behind trees and stone walls. But militia firing on the rear of the column found that the troops, clad in their red coats, were hardly camouflaged by the gun smoke. These conditions forced Percy to order his troops to enter dwellings and clear them of snipers. The flanks sent north and south of the main column through **Menotomy** were an attempt to regain an advantage through surprise.
- By late afternoon, Dr. Joseph Warren headed west to join the fighting at **Foot of the Rocks** in **Menotomy**. Considered one of the most charismatic of the patriot leaders, Warren was drawn to the fight, believing that to truly lead, one must lead in battle as well. Joseph Warren died two months later in the battle of Bunker Hill.
- At the end of the day on April 19th the British suffered heavier losses than the colonists. More than half of the fatalities on both sides occurred in **Menotomy**. Of the 25 colonial fatalities there, only three were Menotomy residents. Citizens returned to claim their fallen loved ones from what was described as “the bloody fields of Menotomy” where horses and cattle lay dead and homes with broken windows were perforated with musket ball holes.
- In the days that followed, militia continued pouring in around the city of Boston from points as far north as New Hampshire, preventing British troops from ever heading west again. The siege of Boston had begun.
- In July of 1775, George Washington arrived in Cambridge to command the new Continental Army. Organizing a professional army from ragtag militias, coupled with the low morale of militiamen after the loss of Dr. Warren, proved a challenge for Washington.
- Eight months later the siege of Boston ended. On March 17, 1776 British troops left the city. Known as Evacuation Day, March 17th remains an official holiday in the City of Boston.
- With the evacuation of British troops from Boston, George Washington and the battle for independence moved south to New York.

Sources:

- “Bunker Hill: A City, A Siege, A Revolution” by Nathaniel Philbrick c. 2013
- Munroe Tavern (The British Perspective) 1332 Massachusetts Ave. Lexington, Ma. Lexington Historical Society.

Compiled by Elaine Ropi, May 2021