

## **The Second Strike of the Match**

**Compiled and written by Alan Tremblay April, 2010**

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Her name was Hannah, and on that Tuesday morning of April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1775 she was 29 years old.

Hannah and her husband, Isaac, lived on Hayward Rd in Acton, MA, about seven miles from Concord. Isaac made his living as a gunsmith and farmer. The couple had four children, the youngest of whom was barely 15 months old.

It was an early spring, the warmest on record in New England. The roads were already dry, and farmers were already busy plowing fields and making preparations for spring planting. This was a good thing, too, as the stores of food and firewood were **very** low, as was the supply of hay and grain for the animals. That said, the early spring flowers and the emerald green grass were a sight for sore eyes.

In addition to the difficulty of the nearly empty pantry, Hannah and Isaac's children were showing signs of the dreaded canker rash, a variant of Scarlet Fever: a fever, skin rash, and severe sore throat. This malady had been spreading rapidly throughout Acton that winter. It was particularly deadly to the young, and many families had already suffered the loss of one or more child.

Things were more complicated now that the port of Boston was closed by order of King George. It was becoming increasingly difficult to get the staples of life without the trade upon which the colonies depended. The other colonies were quietly shipping goods north, and the country folk were spiriting goods into Boston to help out, but the closure was certainly a great blow to Boston city folk, and their punishment by the British and resulting poverty spread into the countryside. The English government vowed not to open the port again unless the tea dumped into the harbor during the Tea Party was paid for. Given the way colonists felt about the Intolerable Acts, that wasn't going to happen any time soon.

Hannah agreed with the colonists' protests. Hadn't they fought valiantly, as loyal British subjects, during the French and Indian War, a war that they hadn't started? The colonists knew, first hand, about war and the devastation and the evil that came of it. Their blood had been spilt learning how to fight and survive in battle, and those memories were still vivid and fresh.

That the British Parliament would see fit to burden the colonies with taxes after the war was over, to pay for England's indebtedness here and in Europe was a real surprise,

insult, and huge offense to loyal colonists. Worse, they had no say about it in Parliament, and their petitions for representation, or redress of their grievances, had been ignored by both King and Parliament.

As a result of these ongoing tensions, and partially due to General Gage's powder raid on Charleston Armory that previous September, the Acton men, including her husband Isaac, were training again. Twice a week, from November to April, they took time off from vital chores and drilled together, upgraded their equipment, made musket balls, and practiced their shooting skills for accuracy. Isaac, a gunsmith, was fully involved in, and committed to, the colonial militia; his band of "Minutemen", as they were now called, had elected Isaac as their Captain six months earlier, a fact of which Hannah was very proud. The townsfolk had recognized the efforts of these men, even voting to provide some compensation for their efforts, a remarkable action for the usually frugal colonists! Isaac saw to it that each man in his company was well-armed and equipped, with a good musket, bayonet, cartridge box and canteen. The Acton men were certainly the most completely-equipped company to muster on that day. Isaac's own musket, a product of his own shop, was perhaps the best musket on the field that day.

Hannah and Isaac spoke often of politics and Isaac's men, particularly after the children were in bed. Hannah understood well what was at stake, with the potential for sudden death or a noose for her husband, and the ensuing poverty which would result for her, if things went badly. When apart from their husbands, many of the Acton women talked amongst themselves about the fear and uneasiness which gripped them all. It was upsetting, not knowing what would come next, and life was precarious enough as it was. It was as though a wide river of fear, fed by many small tributaries, wound through the small towns of New England.

Just that past week, while Isaac and Hannah were in Concord seeking provisions, an owl had somehow gotten into the house, and perched on Isaac's favorite musket, which was hung over the mantel of the fireplace. No one dared to disturb its brooding presence, and it had been nearly four days until, near sunset, the owl had managed to fly out through the open door. An owl was considered a harbinger of death. Hannah wondered about the children and the canker rash. Isaac was particularly quiet and introspective these days, wondering if the owl's omen was somehow meant for him, foretelling some coming disaster.

Speaking of the potential for alarms or conflict with the British garrison, just that Saturday, hadn't Mr Revere ridden into Concord and warned the citizenry to move all the powder, ball, and cannon out of the town and into hiding? Hadn't the men and boys worked all day on **Sunday**, of all days, to move the arms and munitions, moving all but some 24 lb cannon to Acton and Woburn? The last of the supplies were at Barrett's farm, and were scheduled to be moved as soon as possible. Was General Gage planning

another raid? Would the Acton Minutemen be called upon? The river of fear and unease spread as the townsfolk speculated. Some even talked of leaving.

On the eve of April 18<sup>th</sup>, Hannah and Isaac bathed the two children already showing signs of the rash with a weak lye solution, followed by a tea of Meadow fern. A gargle of Bayberry tonic was administered. The parents gave a solution of Slippery Elm to the other two children, who were feverish and restless. Afterwards, both Isaac and Hannah, devout Puritans, knelt to pray with the children. It was all the treatment they had. Hannah banked the fire, and she and Isaac crawled into their bed to stare at the pealed log rafters and wonder about the fate of their children, and themselves as well.

It was a three-quarter moon that night, and it was clear and bright with only a few small clouds scudding by. There was a light breeze, which brought the sweet smell of earth after it gives up the frost. There were buds bursting out on the honeysuckle and olive giving them the faint appearance of future flowers. There had not been frost in over three weeks now, and it felt like an early spring, even though the night temperatures still occasionally dipped into upper 30s.

It was about 3:30 in the morning when young John Robbins, then 13, and the son of the other militia captain in Acton, came belting up the road and pounded on Hannah and Isaac's door. Isaac was up instantly, musket in hand, and at the door to respond to the summons. Young John was breathless, but the message was clear. "The Regulars are out and headed for Concord. Meet at Punkatasset Hill by the North Bridge as quick as you can." Isaac sighed heavily and told John that he would come as soon as he could muster 30 men. He then turned back into the house, only to lock eyes with Hannah, who was standing by the fireplace, her arms crossed across her chest in an effort to keep herself from falling apart from concern about the potential confrontation between the colonial minutemen and the British professional soldiers.

What went on inside the house, and outside in Acton, over the next half hour, is lost in history. But soon enough the Minutemen began to gather in Isaac's front yard, in response to the alarm shots being fired all over town. Hannah's kitchen was invaded by burly men looking for flour with which to whiten their hair to make themselves presentable for the upcoming meeting with the British Regulars. Some men hastily built a fire and poured a few extra lead balls out in the yard, just in case. Hannah tried to comfort her children, some crying and uncomfortable with their illness.

There was some talk among the gathering men about "getting a hit at old Gage". Isaac rebuked his men, reminding them that this was "a most eventful crisis for the colonies. Blood would be spilt, that was certain; the crimson fountain would be opened; none could tell when it would close, nor with whose blood it would overflow. Let every man gird himself for battle and be not afraid, for God is on our side." Hannah was shivering,

although the fireplace was by now burning brightly again.

Isaac, preparing to leave, formed his men into a column. Hannah later remembered, "My husband said but little that morning. He seemed serious and thoughtful; but never seemed to hesitate as to the course of his duty." As he left the house, Isaac suddenly turned and faced his wife. She thought he wanted to tell her something. He stood silent, pensive, searching for words. Then, looking into her eyes, he said simply, "Take good care of the children," and then disappeared into the darkness. Hannah was overwhelmed by an agony of emptiness and despair, sensing with the clarity of a woman's intuition that she would never see him alive again.

Isaac marched his men up the lane and over Nashoba Brook by an old stone bridge to Strawberry Hill on the way to Concord. It would take them just over an hour and a half to cover the distance to Concord. The fifer and drummer struck up the company's signature tune '*The White Cockade*'.

At the town line, crossing into Concord, Isaac stopped and gave any man who did not wish to proceed, the chance to turn around and return to his home - no one did. Their route then took them past Barrett's farm, where a contingent of Regulars were searching for arms and breaking up gun carriages they had found and setting them on fire. Little did they know that Captain Barrett's sons had plowed up a nearby field just that day and had laid out the muskets and cannon in the furrows and turned them back over to cover them with dirt. Twice, without a clue, the Regulars marched past the prizes they sought that day. Acton's Minutemen skirted around them by going off the road, once again playing "*The White Cockade*", through a section of woods and fields, and rejoining the road again about a half-mile ahead.

Isaac avoided a confrontation with these Regulars, to reach the pre-arranged meeting place on Punkatasset Hill, overlooking the North Bridge. He and his company took a place at the far left of the line, dictated by the fact that Isaac was the most junior officer present at the time. Isaac then hurried up the hill to meet with the other officers to decide a course of action. Additional groups were steadily arriving from neighboring towns, swelling their numbers to over 700, approaching rapidly the number of Regulars sent by General Gage. It was then about 6:30 am, and a bright clear morning.

To the gathered men and officers of the militia, the presence of the British in Concord posed a special problem. They knew nothing of the events that had unfolded earlier in Lexington, or of the blood spilled by their brethren. They knew that if they took action against the British soldiers, it would be interpreted as treason. They knew that once they crossed that line, there would be no going back. Their lives would never be the same.

The debate concerning what course of action to take was interrupted when smoke was

spotted billowing out of the town center. Unbeknownst to the colonists, the British were burning gun carriages they had found, and the nearby 'town house' had accidentally caught fire. A bucket brigade, which actually included British soldiers, was at that moment trying to extinguish the flames.

The colonists assumed that the British were on a rampage, and young Joseph Hosmer of Concord cried out "Will ye let them burn the town down?" The officers responded with a resounding "No" and proceeded to draw up the militia into a column. Isaac and the Acton Minutemen were placed at the head of the column, perhaps because they were the best-outfitted company present, complete with bayonets, which were the weapons of choice for close combat. When asked to lead, Isaac responded, "I will go, and I haven't a man who is afraid to go." Colonel Barrett had the men load their muskets, and admonished them "not to fire until the British fired first, but then to fire as fast as you can."

The British had pulled back across the bridge, astonished at the sight of militia advancing upon them in an orderly fashion, like regular troops. They began pulling up bridge planks to stop the column from crossing. There was confusion in the British ranks when ordered to assume a 'street fighting' formation at the base of the bridge. It was a maneuver that they had never practiced. The militia came on in double file, fifer and drums playing the "*White Cockade*," and the men carrying their muskets at the trail in their left hands.

To the horror of Captain Laurie, the senior British officer, a shot rang out from one of his troops, followed by two more, and then a ragged volley. No order to fire had been given. For the most part, the shots flew high and over the heads of the militia which now was within 50 yards. This was typical of inexperienced troops who often turned their faces away at the moment of ignition.

But for the militia, this was the watershed moment. They had advanced to a point where the faces of their adversaries were clear, and the first few shots galvanized them into action. With adrenaline pumping, they raised their muskets to return fire.

As Isaac raised his musket to his shoulder, a .75 caliber ball from a British musket slammed into his chest and cut straight through his heart. His heart sent a gout of bright red arterial blood out through the bullet hole. The blood drenched the men around him, as he stumbled back and crashed to the grass. The owl had called his name.

Private Abner Hosmer received a fatal head wound and the fifer, Luther Blanchard, was wounded, and three others hit. To the astonishment of the British, the colonists came steadily on with military precision. Captain Barrett called out, "Fire, fellow soldiers, for God's sake fire!" In that first colonial volley, half of the eight British officers present

were hit, three privates were killed and nine more wounded.

The British Regulars, stunned by the accuracy and volume of the militia's response, wavered and broke, running pell mell back to Concord center, leaving their dead and wounded behind. The militia, for their part, were equally shocked by their success, and for a short while dissolved into chaos, with some crossing the bridge to chase the retreating British, some turning to their dead and wounded, or simply milling around and talking excitedly.

It was about this time that a twenty-one year old Concord man, named Ammi White, took out his hatchet and brained one of the wounded British soldiers, partially scalping him and leaving him there to die. There would be consequences later for this emotionally understandable, but thoughtless, action, when word of it spread and was exaggerated in the ranks of the British regulars.

Colonel Barrett, fearing an immediate response from Colonel Smith in Concord, managed to send half the militia under Colonel Buttrick over the bridge to take up defensive positions behind a stone wall on the hill overlooking the road to Concord center. The balance of the militia pulled back from the bridge to the higher ground leading back to Punkatasset Hill.

The four British units that had been searching the Buttrick and Barrett farms had heard the volleys and were rushing back to avoid being cut off from their own forces. To the surprise of the regulars, who were unnerved by being potentially flanked, the militia held their fire on both sides of the bridge, apparently still reluctant to engage if not first fired upon by the British troops.

Colonel Smith had indeed come forth with backup troops, seeing the results of the first encounter pour into Concord center, but upon seeing Buttrick's militia drawn up steadfastly behind the stone wall on high ground, he wisely ordered his men back into Concord.

For Isaac, the battle was over. His men first took him to Buttrick's farm where he was laid out in the parlor. The decision was then made to take him and his friend Abner Hosmer back to Acton.

It was about 4:30 in the afternoon, and Hannah was in her kitchen preparing some broth for the children, who were suffering from the miserable rash. Two of her children were running an incredibly high fever, and she was genuinely frightened as to whether or not they would make it through the night. Where was Isaac? What had happened in Concord? That was what she had been wondering all day long.

She had left the children, briefly, earlier in the day, to venture to the center of Acton to gather any news that might trickle back from Concord, but alas, there was no news . What she found instead was just a heavy fear that blanketed the small town. The other women were sure that bloodshed was inevitable. Hannah saw that some families were actually packing up their belongings to depart for anywhere, as long as it was far away from where the regulars might come. Groups of militia were passing through the town en route to Concord, having gotten the message later than Acton. The church was overrun with frightened families, women and children and older folks, unsure of what to do or whether to stay or run. People were actually digging holes in which to hide their precious belongings. The confusion, despair, and evident fear made Hannah feel even worse, and so she returned home to await Isaac's return and look after the children as he had asked.

Isaac returned to her shortly after 5 pm, carried by several of his company. She had heard the wagon pull up and she stood stone still without breathing as the door swung in and the men struggled in bearing their burden. She thought distractedly that, aside from his blood-soaked shirt, which was rapidly turning black, his countenance was not much changed. The man in front of her, Thomas Thorpe, was saying something she could not hear. In fact, she couldn't hear anything at all. She could only look at Isaac, and all else seemed somehow far away. Thomas was looking questioningly at her and she became aware that he was mouthing the word 'Where?' She waved towards the bedroom and the men carried Isaac back and laid him gently on their bed. Thomas returned and said something about 'making the bastards pay' and the men looked gently at her and were gone.

Hannah was alone in her house with her dead husband and four grievously sick children. With little money, short supplies, and the world crashing down upon her, Hannah sank down on the hearthstone, her head in her hands and wept uncontrollably.

## Epilogue

Hannah survived, and so did her children. She remarried twice more, both of her later husbands also pre-deceasing her. In 1818, when she was 71 years old and impoverished, she petitioned Congress for a pension. and was denied. Twenty years later, in her 90s, Hannah was finally granted a small pension. It was Senator Daniel Webster who championed her cause, noting that her husband Isaac had been one of the very first martyrs in the cause of liberty. Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, objected, fearing that a torrent of similar claims would materialize.

Her name was ***Hannah Davis***, and her husband ***Isaac Davis*** is now buried at Concord under the statue of 'The Minuteman' along with the remains of Abner Hosmer and

James Hayward who was killed at Fiske Hill later that fateful day.

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