

Portrait of an American Rifleman

Isaac Davis

After the renowned battle between the British Regular Army and the American Colonial Militia at Lexington and Concord, Lord Percy, an officer of the British Army remarked about the colonists that “there were men amongst them who knew what they were about.” Isaac Davis was a man who knew what he was about. Isaac Davis wasn’t just some farmer with a musket. A gunsmith by trade and a captain of the militia in Acton, Massachusetts (an organized group of able bodied men dedicated to the defense of their town), Isaac Davis played a significant role in supplying arms to his community and preparing for its defense. And on April 19, 1775, those preparations made history.

General Gage, commander of the British troops in Colonial America, predicted that local opposition to his troops might be “irregular, impetuous, and incessant” and the “bushmen” could be troublesome, men “who from their adroitness in the habitual use of the Firelock suppose themselves sure of their mark at a distance of 200 rods [1100 yards?].” But the British troops who marched to Concord from Boston to seize and destroy “. . . all military stores whatever” did not expect the organized opposition they met. Isaac Davis, a man of 30, with a wife and four children, was captain of Acton’s Minuteman Company. His men carried their muskets with them at all times. Davis’s men drilled twice weekly, practicing marksmanship in a field behind the Davis home since November of 1774, and were all outfitted with bayonets and cartridge boxes (which aided in increasing their rate of fire) provided by Davis himself. When the men were alerted of the British march, 37 of them rendezvoused at Davis’s house. Each man carried his musket, powder horn, cartridge box, bayonet and a ration of bread and cheese. Davis reportedly said before leaving his home, “I have a right to go to Concord on the King’s Highway and I will go to Concord.”

The Acton militia gathered with militia from Concord and other surrounding towns at a hill above Concord’s North Bridge. British troops were guarding the bridge to assure retreat of their fellow soldiers searching a nearby farm. As the militia officers were meeting, smoke was seen rising from Concord. Mistakenly believing that British troops were burning the town, the militia officers decided to take the bridge and go to the aid of the townspeople. Upon the approach of the militia men, the British Redcoats began retreating across the bridge towards Concord tearing planks off the bridge as they withdrew. For unknown reasons, Davis’s men were placed in the lead, a position normally reserved for a more senior officer. It is possible that Davis and the men of Acton led the formation due to their superior training and possession of bayonets. When asked if he was afraid to lead his men at the front, it is reported that Captain Davis replied “No, I am not and I haven’t a man that is.”

Reports of exactly what happened next are conflicting, but what is known is that as the militia moved toward the bridge with the orders, “Don’t fire first. . . don’t fire first!”, several volleys occurred between the British regulars and the colonists, with Isaac Davis being the first to fall by a fatal shot. The militia then crossed the bridge giving heavy fire with superior marksmanship. The militia pursued for a short distance and then took position on a hill while the “regulars” retreated. The rest of the day went as poorly for the British troops as they were routed by the “country people” all the way back to Boston.

Decades later, the famed Senator Daniel Webster spoke of Isaac Davis: “An early grave in the cause of liberty has secured to him the long and grateful remembrance of his country.” Today, every April 19th, proud New Englanders celebrate “Patriot’s Day” by retracing the “Line of March” from Acton to Concord, where a statue of a minuteman crafted in the likeness of Davis’s descendants stands. The statue is engraved with Emerson’s verse: *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.*

- *Would you like to carry on the tradition of the American Rifleman?*
- *Would you like to be able to make accurate shots out to 500 yards with an ordinary rifle?*
- *Would you like to learn more about the history on which our nation was founded and what has kept us strong for all these years?*

Attend an “Appleseed” weekend. The Appleseed Project is a program of the Revolutionary War Veterans Association, a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the tradition of the American Rifleman and his history. All you need is a good attitude, a rifle (borrow one if you have to), and to come out for an Appleseed near you. You’ll receive top notch shooting instruction and hear the exciting stories of America’s history.

Go to www.appleseedinfo.org for a schedule and more information.

