

Three Strikes of the Match: April 19, 1775 and the Beginning of America

The Curious Beginning of the American Colonies

America was settled by outcasts and adventurers. It was England's dumping ground for religious minorities, losers from its civil wars, imprisoned debtors and the poor. It was also the 17th century equivalent of Silicon Valley - a place to make your fortune. If you were the junior son of a farmer, a merchant, or a tradesman and knew you wouldn't inherit, you could seek wealth in the New World. Gentlemen adventurers and the new joint stock companies might organize trade. If you came from the nobility, you could ask the King for a royal charter, which could grant you hundreds of thousands of square miles of land for free. But it was all wilderness, and worthless until you brought in settlers to build on it.

Why did Britain settle North America this way? Unlike the Spanish colonies in South America, there was no gold and silver here to be looted from the natives. The wealth was in land and resources, which took people and money to develop. And Great Britain was frequently broke. It kept getting involved in European wars that drained the treasury. So the King and Parliament were glad to have the colonies developed with someone else's money, and by people they were happy to get rid of.

The new American colonists were necessarily self-reliant. England was 3,000 miles and months away. The new arrivals had to build homes, hunt, raise crops and develop resources, usually with little help from the homeland.

The self-reliance extended to government. Most colonies were self-governing under their charters, elected their own legislators and determined their own taxes. To vote, you had to own a certain amount of land - a [property qualification](#). This was difficult in England, where land was scarce and expensive, and wages were low. But in America, land was very cheap and labor was scarce and wages high. The majority of adult white males had enough property to vote, and they got used to having a voice in town meetings and colonial assemblies.

Distracted by its civil and European wars, Britain did little to interfere in North America. Later called "[salutary neglect](#)", this policy lasted partly because it was so successful. Left to themselves, the colonies grew quickly. They became a major source of raw materials, a market for English merchants, and a source of revenue through import and export tariffs.

This policy of salutary neglect lasted from the first settlements in the early 17th century all the way to the 1750s. By then, some colonist families had been in America for five or six generations, and knew little of conditions in Britain. Their ideas of the rights and duties of Englishmen were based on their lives in America.

The policy of neglect was broken only once during this time. After a royalist victory in the [English Civil War](#), King James II installed a governor, [Sir Edmund Andros](#), in New

England and New York, canceling their colonial charters. After James was deposed in the [Glorious Revolution](#) of 1688, Andros and his deputy were run out of town by the colonists, who resumed governing themselves. This was a sign of things to come, though they took nearly 90 years to arrive.

The colonists were also self-reliant in military affairs. There was no standing army or regular troops in America for most of colonial times. People weren't just allowed to have guns - they were required. On the frontier, every family had at least one long gun for hunting, killing varmints and defense against Indian raids. Every town had a militia, and adult men were required to own a gun and practice in its military drills.

As the colonies grew more important, each European war among imperial rivals had an American theatre. Britain went to war with Spain, Holland, and most of all France. When war broke out, Britain would send over a team of officers and a few regular troops, and activate the colonial militia. There was a string of such wars starting from the 1660s on, about once per generation, each larger than the last. While militia training might be neglected between wars, the wars made sure that it was periodically renewed and each generation had some military experience.

Campaigning together might have produced mutual respect and comradeship, but it didn't. British officers disrespected colonists as non-professional, and certainly not gentlemen. Colonists resented militia being taken away from home defense, often heavy casualties due to disease, and were used to taking orders from their own officers, not aristocratic snobs.

How Did It Come to This?

The last war in the series was trouble. The [French and Indian War](#) of 1756-1763 was a true world war, but it started and was mostly fought in North America. It was a big victory for the British, and the French were finally kicked out of North America. But the national debt of Great Britain doubled during the war. Someone would have to pay it! Plus, the Crown decided to leave some regular troops stationed in the colonies. That would also be expensive.

From Parliament's point of view, the colonies had gotten the benefit of the victory. The threat of invasion from the French was gone, and they weren't around to stir up trouble with the natives any more. And if there was trouble, there would be regular troops to handle it. So, obviously, the colonists should carry a good part of the cost.

Britain started tougher enforcement of the [Navigation Acts](#) and the import and export duties. They also passed a series of direct taxes that applied to the colonies, the most famous being the [Stamp Tax](#).

When word got to the colonies, there was an uproar. Colonists had long paid taxes, for roads, defense, and so on. But they were voted by their own representatives, as guaranteed by their charters. Here was Parliament imposing taxes, Parliament where

they had no representation, Parliament that was ignoring their charters and traditional rights. The colonists started to suspect that the regular troops were stationed there not to defend them, but to oppress them.

The Stamp Act required that a tax be paid on paper before it could be put to a particular use - everything from calendars, to playing cards, newspapers and legal contracts and documents were taxed. In addition to being politically offensive, the Stamp Tax was a tactical blunder: It affected the most educated colonists, and they started to organize, including the first collaboration among the colonies at the [Stamp Act Congress](#).

The colonists resisted the Stamp Tax and others in many ways. The [Sons of Liberty](#) organized public protests. Tax agents and other government officials were harassed and intimidated. The stamp tax in particular was often ignored. Smuggling activity increased. And most importantly, the colonies agreed to stop buying goods imported from Britain.

Soon the [boycott](#) was hurting British merchants, and costing the Crown its tariff revenues. They were losing more money than the taxes might have gathered. In 1766, Parliament gave up and repealed most of the taxes, including the Stamp Tax. But it did two other things that offended the colonists. It passed the [Declaratory Act](#), which stated that Parliament had “full power and authority to make laws and statutes of sufficient force and validity to bind the colonies and people of *America*, subjects of the crown of Great Britain, *in all cases whatsoever*.” Further, it decreed that judges and governors would be both appointed and paid by the Crown, and colonists could be sent to England for trial there, rather than by a jury of their fellow citizens.

Colonists continued to resist the taxes and new laws, and for the first time Britain sent regular troops into the towns, in particular Boston, in order to enforce them. This led to clashes between the troops and citizens, and in 1770 five citizens were killed by regulars in the [Boston Massacre](#).

Then, in 1773, a [tax was imposed on tea](#) imported to the colonies. Again, the colonists organized to resist it. Merchants who had contracted to sell the tea were persuaded or intimidated to resign and return it to England. But in Boston, the governor would not allow it to be returned, and the colonists would not allow it to be landed. The standoff resulted in the famous [Boston Tea Party](#) in December, 1773, when three ships-full of tea was thrown into the harbor by colonists and sailors thinly disguised as Indians. The tea destroyed would be valued at about \$1.5 million today.

Preparing for Conflict

The Tea Party was the last straw for Parliament. A large majority decided the colonists were engaged in sedition and treason and decided to punish them. They passed the [Coercive Acts](#), called the Intolerable Acts in the colonies. This included closing Boston harbor to all trade, suspending the Massachusetts charter and all its town meetings, and replacing the judges and half the legislature with Royal appointees. To enforce this,

martial law was declared in Boston and it was to be occupied by regular troops, many of them quartered in private homes without compensation. All of this would stay until the tea was paid for.

3,000 British redcoats occupied Boston. They were led by [General Thomas Gage](#). He had been in America since 1755 and had been supreme military commander there since 1764. He had an American-born wife, Margaret Kemble Gage, and had even been a friend of George Washington during the previous war. Surely, he would know how to handle the situation.

But this was no more effective than before. Town meetings outside Boston continued. Even in Boston itself, citizens' meetings that were 'continuations' or 'unofficial' kept on. No one would serve on juries or plead cases before the royal courts, and some court and other officials were harassed or run out of town. Other towns and colonies combined to send food and other support to Boston, suffering under the port closure. The Massachusetts legislators relocated to Concord, and kept on meeting. It became obvious that the King's writ was only good where a redcoat stood.

The Patriot leaders (known as the [Committee of Safety](#)) also reactivated the militia system, including organizing the famous Minutemen. Militia companies began to drill and towns made sure all adult men had guns and ammunition. Cannon were also collected, some brought onshore from ships, and four even smuggled out of Boston under the regulars' noses. In an [officially illegal meeting in Suffolk County](#) (Boston) it was voted that "*...we are determined to act merely on the defensive, so long as such conduct may be vindicated by reason and the principles of self-preservation, but no longer.*" This was endorsed by the [Continental Congress](#), and presumably led to the orders later followed by militia groups.

Both sides had good intelligence on the other's activities. Regular officers were quartered in Boston homes, and colonists had been hired to clean barracks and laundry and tend to horses. With even small children watching, it was hard for the British to make a move without it being seen and reported to the Patriots. The British knew the leaders of their opposition: [John Hancock](#), the richest merchant in Boston, [Sam Adams](#) the rabble rouser, and [Paul Revere](#) the networker and messenger. Gage had also subverted a [Dr. Church, a paid traitor](#) in the highest Patriot councils. And many loyalist colonists - [Tories](#) - reported on the activities of their Sons of Liberty neighbors.

Gage understands the developing threat. It's impossible to seize all arms - every family has a gun. But the colonists have a weakness: They have no way to manufacture gunpowder. It must be imported. If Gage can get the colonists' powder, the guns are useless.

First the British ban all imports of powder and guns. Then Gage makes a plan. [Black powder](#) is explosive (unlike modern gunpowder), and homes are heated and lighted with fire - a bad combination. So large quantities of powder are stored away from people, in

town or provincial powder houses. Gage's regulars will try to seize those powder stores.

On the night of September 1st, 1774, Gage's troops make a nighttime march to the provincial powder house in nearby Somerville, and clean it out. Before the colonists know what has happened, the regulars are back in Boston with the powder. Thousands of militia converge on Boston in what is called the [Powder Alarm](#), but there is little they can do against the redcoats.

Having now learned Gage's strategy, the colonists organize an alert system. There is a pre-planned network of riders and alarm signals among the Massachusetts towns. In Boston, a network of spies and messengers has been organized. The man coordinating the passing of messages is Paul Revere, a well-known silversmith with friends among both the working class and the wealthy, a member of more Patriot organizations than any other man in Boston.

Gage tries twice more to seize powder and weapons during the winter of 1774-5, in Portsmouth, New Hampshire and Salem, Massachusetts. Both attempts are foiled by the colonists, who remove the arms and powder and harass the British troops. Gage also learns that the colonists have replaced the militia officers who were appointed by the royal governor with new officers, elected by the militiamen themselves. The Patriots have now completed a take-over of the local armed forces.

Gage writes to England asking for 20,000 more troops. This is more than the entire peacetime army of Britain! Gage is telling his superiors that they need to put England on a war footing to subdue Massachusetts. The Army has been used before to suppress riots and rebels in Ireland, Scotland and England, and has not needed that many men. Gage does not get his big army. He's sent a few hundred more men, and told to get on with it. There are known to be stores of arms and powder in Concord, and that's where the renegade legislature is meeting. He's to deal with both of them.

The colonists' friends and spies in England get word to them even before Gage gets his orders, so they know what's coming. But when? It's hard to conceal that something is going on - troops are being drilled, boats are being moved. But Gage knows he is being watched closely, and keeps the secret from all but two people: the commander of the Concord raid, and his American-born wife. And yet, the Patriots learn the date and the direction of the raid: the night of April 18th, a raid on Concord starting with boats across the Back Bay. Was it his wife who told?

A Strike of the Match

On April 18th, 1775, the Massachusetts colony is a powder keg ready to explode. The colonists are determined to resist the Intolerable Acts and to continue to rule themselves. General Thomas Gage is equally determined to follow his orders, suppress the rebels and restore royal rule.

And yet, the colonists still think of themselves as British subjects. Ill-used and put upon, perhaps, but still loyal as far as they are concerned. All they want is the traditional rights of Englishman, a say in their own governance, and they will happily stay part of the empire. Few want a war with Britain, and even fewer think of independence. Even patriot leaders like [John Adams](#) (Sam's cousin) think of this as a political problem, that would eventually be solved politically.

We call the story of how that changed the Three Strikes of the Match, because it took three events to detonate that powder keg. By the end, the 'strikes' had shown that the colonists wanted to become fellow Americans, rather than be part of the British empire, and that they were willing to fight and die for it.

During the day on the 18th of April, small groups of British officers ride out of Boston into the surrounding countryside. This isn't unusual, but it's noticed that they are heavily armed, and they do not return to town at dusk.

That evening, British troops are awakened quietly in their barracks in Boston, and began to assemble and march to the Charles River waterfront. Who are these regulars, the redcoats?

Every British regiment contains two companies of picked men. [Grenadiers](#) are large men, with the big bear-fur hats. They are shock troops. [Light infantry](#) are well conditioned, agile, lightly equipped, scouts and skirmishers. Gage's plan uses grenadiers and light infantry from several regiments, leaving the ordinary troops to guard Boston. This has not been practiced before, and the officers and their men aren't used to working together. And while they are picked men, the troops are green, and have never faced combat.

Those red coats aren't identical. The rank and file get cheaply made and dyed coats, which soon fade to a brownish-pink in the sun. The officers are gentlemen, and buy their own well-made and dyed coats that do not fade. So, it's easy to tell the officers from their men at a distance.

The redcoats carry the [Brown Bess](#) musket. It's a heavy, long muzzle-loading smoothbore gun, firing a 3/4" lead ball. Because it's not rifled, it's very imprecise. Its effective range is 100 yards at best. A Brown Bess doesn't even have sights. When firing, an entire company 'presents' its muskets at the enemy, and fires a volley together, so that some of the shots will hit. After one or two volleys, they usually charge with the bayonet. This is a 16" steel spike on the end of the musket. A well-trained soldier can fire four rounds a minute from his Brown Bess. As they leave Boston, the redcoats have only the 36 rounds they each carry in a cartridge box.

General Gage is a secretive general, and even though the colonists have already learned the purpose of the raid, only his most senior officers have been told. The leader of the raid is [Lieutenant Colonel Francis Smith](#), a cautious, 'by the book' soldier. His

second in command, leader of the advance guard of light infantry, is [Major John Pitcairn](#). Pitcairn has previously written *"I have so despicable an opinion of the people of this country that I would not hesitate to march with the Marines I have with me to any part of the country, and do whatever I was inclined. I am satisfied they will never attack regular troops."*

For his part, Gage thinks *"Should hostilities unhappily commence, the first opposition would be irregular, impetuous, and incessant from the numerous bodies that would swarm to the place of action, and all actuated by an enthusiasm wild and ungovernable."* However, he was *"...firmly persuaded that there is not a man amongst [them] capable of taking command or directing the motions of an army."* Gage knows there might be opposition, but he expects his troops to be facing a poorly organized mob.

While the regulars assemble, Paul Revere puts his plan into action. The first part is a signal - the famous "one if by land, two if by sea" lanterns hung in the North Church. That signal is actually a backup plan, in case neither of two messengers can get out of Boston. One of the messengers is [William Dawes](#), a leather merchant. He does get out by land, across the [Boston Neck](#), just before the regulars close it down.

The other messenger is Revere himself. He's being rowed across the river to Charleston by two friends. There's a moon shining this night, but trees and buildings on the south shore cast shadows across the water. Revere and his friends stick to the shadows, row quietly, and pass by unseen, right under the guns of the [H.M.S. Somerset](#), anchored in the middle of the river.

When he lands, Revere is loaned a horse named 'Brown Beauty'. He heads west towards Lexington, but soon runs into one of the British patrols, who chase him. He has a better horse and knows the territory, so he escapes but is forced to ride the long way around north to Lexington. As he goes, he spreads the alarm. Not with "The British are coming!" - remember, the colonists still thought of *themselves* as British - but *"The regulars are coming out!"* He must have also said something about where the redcoats were heading - to Concord. The important thing is that he tells men who spread the alarm further on, by riders, alarm bells, musket shots and bonfires. It's as close to an Internet as they had in those days. Spreading the alarm was a community project, not a one man show.

Around midnight Revere makes it to Lexington, where John Hancock and Sam Adams are hiding out, and warns them the redcoats are on the way. The alarm is sounded to muster the local militia. Half an hour later Dawes rides up as well. As they leave to ride on to Concord, they meet a [Dr. Samuel Prescott](#), himself from Concord. What's he doing in Lexington at one in the morning? He's been courting his fiancée, Miss Lydia Mulliken, a renowned beauty of the area. Prescott is a high Son of Liberty himself, and when he finds out what Revere and Dawes are doing, he joins them.

As they head towards Concord, the three of them leapfrog up the road alerting households. But before too long, they run into another of the patrols of British officers. Dawes and Prescott whip up their horses and escape. Dawes falls off of his horse and passes out of the story, but Prescott makes it through to alarm Concord.

Revere is captured, and one of the officers claps a pistol to his head and asks him his name and business. Revere not only gives his name and his mission, he also tells his captors what *their* mission is - remember, they don't know. And he says they should tell their commander to avoid Lexington, because 500 militia are already mustered there. The officers are skeptical, but then they hear a volley of musketry nearby. At that, the patrol takes Brown Beauty and rides off towards Boston, leaving Revere to walk back to Lexington.

Imagine being awakened in the chill of a New England night. It's an age before electricity, so by the light of a candle or a whale oil lamp, you dress, grab your musket, powder horn, and shot pouch, and say goodbye to your family and go out into the cold. The moon is up, so you can see to walk down the path towards Lexington, and along the way your neighbors, ghost-like in the moonlight, appear and join you walking to the muster.

When you get to the Lexington green, the whole town is awake, candle light gleaming in windows. The whole militia has turned out, from teenagers to the elders, seventy or more in total, standing on the village green under the moon, muskets loaded and ready.

The militia leader you've voted for is there. [Captain John Parker](#) is 46, and he's dying. Parker has tuberculosis (then called consumption) and it's fatal since there is no treatment. You elected him because he's a veteran, and he's also turned out in the middle of the night, coughing in the chill.

Lexington has been settled for over 130 years. In those generations, many of the founding families have remained and intermarried. One quarter of Captain Parker's militia are related to him. Three generations of Harringtons muster with you. There are eight father and son pairs on the green this night.

But the redcoats haven't appeared, and Hancock and Adams are still fussing about getting ready to leave. So Captain Parker says go ahead and get out of the cold, but don't go far, stay within sound of the muster drum. Then he asks for a couple of volunteers to ride scout towards Boston, to see if the regulars really are out. [Buckman](#) has opened up his tavern and it looks warm, and inviting for other reasons as well. So you and your friends decide to go there. But it won't do to carry a loaded musket inside, so you all fire a volley into the night sky to clear them. Not so far away, Revere and his captors hear that noise.

Meanwhile, the redcoats have been having a hard time. There aren't enough Navy boats to carry all the men across to Cambridge, so it takes two trips. The boats are so heavily loaded that they run aground off shore, making the men wade ashore, nearly up

to their middles in icy water. Then it turns out they've landed in a swamp, and there's more wading in mud to get to solid ground. Then they stand around waiting for rations provided by the Navy to arrive, which turn out to be moldy and maggot-ridden. Finally, the officers decide they need to rearrange the marching order - more delays.

The regulars still have 18 miles to go to reach Concord. Meanwhile, the alarm started by Revere has reached all the way to the New Hampshire border, 30 miles away. Finally the march gets underway, at 2AM, heading west through Cambridge. The men don't know where they are heading, or why. In the distance they can sometimes hear bells, or musket shots, and see the glow of bonfires. Colonel Smith decides that General Gage needs to know the countryside is alarmed, and sends a courier back to Boston.

Smith also sends Major Pitcairn on ahead with the faster marching light infantry, trying to make up lost time before dawn. Soon they meet up with the patrol that has caught and released Revere, who tell Pitcairn that the colonists know their mission, and there are 500 militiamen waiting up ahead. Alarmed, Pitcairn stops his leading companies, and issues the command: "Load!" Then they resume marching towards Lexington.

It's dawn of April 19, 1775. The scouts that Parker sent out have been stuck behind the marching redcoat column. Only now does one work his way around and get back to Lexington, shouting the alarm. Parker has drummer William Diamond beat the recall, but only thirty-some men are formed up on the green by the time the redcoats come in sight. Parker needs every one of them. There are many versions of what he says next, but this is what was heard by Paul Revere, who was within earshot: *"The first man who offers to run shall be shot down."* (Parker is saying this to his kinsmen and neighbors.) *"Let the troops pass by. Don't molest them, without they being first."* (Recall the Suffolk Resolves.)

The Lexington green is triangular, and Parker has formed up his men at the point farthest from the road from Boston to Concord. Knowing that Concord is the regulars' destination (and that the military stores there have already been moved or hidden) he may expect that they will turn left up the Concord road, pass by, and return disappointed later in the day. He will yield the road to the King's troops, but maintain the right of an Englishman to stand peacefully in arms. Many of the townspeople gather near the green as observers.

The first three companies of British light infantry to arrive at the green are led by a hot-headed junior officer, Lieutenant Jesse Adair. Perhaps unwilling to have the militia on his flank, he turns his force right, towards the colonists, rather than up the Concord road, and deploys them facing the militia. A British officer rides between. *"Lay down your arms, you damned rebels. Disperse, damn you, disperse!"*

Maybe sixty militia are on the green now, facing over 250 regulars. Parker sees he is badly outnumbered, and orders his men to leave the green. As they begin to leave, carrying their guns, a shot rings out. Spectators agree that it comes from neither the

militia nor the British line. Perhaps an officer's pistol, or a shot from a civilian onlooker. Without orders, the redcoats fire first a few shots, then a full volley at a range of 60 yards, into the retreating militia. The townspeople run screaming, as the regulars charge with bayonets and hunt down fleeing militia.

Robert Monroe and Jonas Parker are shot down where they stand. Parker has put his ammunition in his hat at his feet, and sworn not to run. He fires one shot, and then is hit and bayoneted before getting off another.

Four other militia are cut down from the rear. Jonathan Harrington, whose home faces the green, is shot in the back as he flees to it. He crawls bleeding to his doorstep and dies in front of his wife and young son. A colonist taken prisoner by the redcoats tries to flee, and he is also shot. Five of the eight father and son pairs are broken by death this day.

Four militiamen have been in the meeting house, which is also the town's powder magazine. They emerge just as the firing starts. Caleb Harrington is shot dead and another man wounded. Joshua Simonds dodges back inside, points his musket at a powder barrel, and prepares to fire it and explode the magazine if the regulars break in.

At this point Colonel Smith arrives, and watches in horror as his men run out of control chasing colonists. He finds a drummer and orders the recall sounded. The regulars turn back just before entering the powder magazine. After restoring some sort of order, Smith allows the soldiers to empty their muskets in a victory volley, and to give a cheer. Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah! rings out over the grieving town. Their total casualties are one man and one horse wounded.

This is the first strike of the match. The colonists have stood in arms against the redcoats. They have not fired first, but have rather been massacred. No regulars have been killed. If it ends here, if the regulars return to Boston, there might be some trials and hangings, but no war.

Now Colonel Smith finally calls all of his officers together and tells them the mission. Many are horrified. The countryside is alarmed, surprise is lost, and blood has already been spilled. A return to Boston would be prudent, but Smith was chosen because he's a 'by the book' soldier, and he has his orders. The regulars march on towards Concord. Captain Parker's men gather up their dead and wounded, and wait for the redcoats to return.

2nd Strike: Concord and the North Bridge

Concord has been alerted by Doctor Prescott, then he and his brothers ride on to warn other towns. The Minutemen, regular militia and older alarm list from Concord and nearby Lincoln muster in Concord town. Colonel James Barrett, 64 years old, is the militia commander. Major Buttrick commands the minutemen, who are mostly younger.

A junior officer, Lieutenant Hosmer, is made their aide as a gesture to the youngest men.

Scouts are sent out towards Lexington, and one rides back to report the redcoats are firing. Asked if the regulars are firing blanks or ball (real bullets), he thinks ball. There's a disagreement on what the militia should do and the leaders debate while standing on a lookout hill near the town meeting house. The younger men want to march out and meet the redcoats. The older heads think they should remain in town, or maybe even retreat across the nearby [North Bridge](#).

In the end, about 200 of the militia move out towards Lexington, but don't get far before they see the regulars approaching: 1/4 mile of redcoats and glittering steel bayonets. Thinking the better of it, they retreat back to Concord. Barrett and Buttrick then lead the militia out of town to avoid an incident, ending up about a mile away on Punkatasset Hill, across the North Bridge but in view of town.

Once in Concord, Colonel Smith divides his forces. He sends one company of grenadiers to the South Bridge. Three companies of light infantry go to the North Bridge, the direction in which the militia have withdrawn. Two of these companies have just participated in the massacre in Lexington. Another four light infantry companies march across North Bridge, and then further West to Colonel Barrett's farm, where Tory spies have said that supplies are hidden. The rest of the troops remain in Concord to search the town.

This division of force was dictated by General Gage's detailed orders. It results in the smaller units being out of supporting range of one another if there is a fight. Smith's experience so far makes this not a great worry. His regulars have routed one militia unit, and the local men have left without a fight. But if he's wrong about the size or competence of the colonial forces, he could be in trouble.

Smith's men get to work in town. Spies have said there are arms hidden at the local tavern. The owner refuses to open, so the door is broken down. Major Pitcairn holds him at gunpoint and forces him to show where three large siege guns are buried in his yard. The regulars dig them up and knock off their pivots. Curiously, Pitcairn then orders breakfast for some of his men, and pays for it.

Grenadiers go through the town looking for supplies, though they ransack few homes. The inhabitants give them a cold reception, having heard some version of what happened at Lexington. The regulars find several hundred pounds of lead shot, and some barrels of flour and salt meat, which are considered military stores. This is all thrown into the mill pond (where the colonists recover most of it later).

The troops also find three large wooden gun carriages, and stack them up to burn. They cut down the town's liberty pole, the place for posting notices and assembling the militia, throw it on the pile, and light up the bonfire. Smoke starts rising, and the fire grows intense enough to catch on the nearby town meeting house. Townspeople

assemble to put out the fire, and at their request some of the regulars help. Meanwhile, the smoke plume gets larger.

While this is going on the light infantry expedition reaches Colonel Barrett's farm. The spies were right, there are arms there, but they have been laid down in furrows in a plowed field and are being covered over even as the regulars approach. No one thinks to look in the fields, and they find nothing in the home. The regulars force Mrs. Barrett to provide them a breakfast. As they leave they throw her a few shillings. She says "*This is the price of blood.*"

Outside of Concord, more militia companies arrive constantly, having mustered and marched when the alarm reached their towns. One of the units is the Acton Minutemen, captained by [Isaac Davis](#), thirty years old and a blacksmith by trade. He has used his skills to make bayonets and cartridge boxes for his men, and built a firing range in his back yard where they all practice twice a week. His unit is one of the few with equipment and experience comparable to the regulars.

When the muster call comes, in the middle of night, all of Davis' four children are sick with what was called canker rash - which we know as [scarlet fever](#) - often fatal since there was no treatment. The Minutemen crowd into Davis' cabin, with their muskets, bayonets, swords and tomahawks. Davis could send a deputy to lead them, and stay with his ailing family, but he turns to leave. Just as reaches the door, he turns back to his wife Hannah, and after a long pause, says just "*Take good care of the children*" and leaves.

By now most of two militia regiments, some 500 men, have assembled at Punkatasset Hill. After some discussion, the leaders move the militia closer to town, to their regular practice field about 300 yards from the North Bridge, right by Major Buttrick's home. One of the companies of regulars has been posted there, but they withdraw as the militia approaches.

Colonel Barrett arrays his men in formation on the hill. And just at that point, the plume of smoke rising from the escaped bonfire in town becomes visible. Young Lieutenant Hosmer asks the other officers "*Will you let them burn the town down?*" The leaders discuss driving the regulars from the bridge; Isaac David draws his sword and says "*I haven't a man who is afraid to go.*" The militia decide to march into the face of the toughest army in the world.

At that, Barrett orders his men to load. As was done at Lexington, he gives them strict order that they are not to fire unless fired upon. The militia comes down the hill in a double file, in an arc to the riverside road and towards the regulars at the bridge. Isaac Davis and his Acton men are in the lead and the other minutemen including Major Buttrick following, then the regular militia and the alarm lists in the rear. Alongside Davis is a young man named Luther Blanchard, the musician of the company. That day he marches against the best troops in the world, carrying nothing but a stick - a fife - and

he's playing a tune called "[The White Cockade](#)", thought to be insulting to the King's troops.

The captain commanding the three light infantry companies at the North Bridge is young and inexperienced. As the militia move in - unexpectedly keeping good military formation - he orders the regulars back to the south end of the bridge. He commands them to assemble in a complex street fighting formation, which would deliver intense fire across the bridge. However, there are no houses to protect their flanks, which will be wide open. These companies have never served together before, and never practiced the formation, and the order results in confusion. A few regulars heed the order of another officer, and spread out along the bank. Others begin pulling up boards from the bridge, to block the militia's advance.

At this Major Buttrick yells at the redcoats to leave the bridge alone. The militia and redcoats are within 50 yards of one another, well within effective range, when the regulars begin to fire without orders. First a few shots, then a ragged volley, most of which goes high. But one ball strikes Isaac Davis in the heart, and drops him instantly. Close by a private goes down dead, and Luther Blanchard falls wounded. At this, Buttrick yells out *"Fire, fellow soldiers. For God's sake fire, fire as fast as you can."*

With the militia spread out along the river, their fire rips into the flanks of the redcoat formation. Few of them are able to respond, their fire blocked by other regulars. The militia fire both fast and accurately. They target the brightly coated officers, and almost half of them fall in the first volley. Rank and file soldiers begin to be hit, and in the confusion, and with their commanders down, the remainder break and run, leaving their dead and wounded behind.

Victory disrupts the colonists almost as much as defeat. With the bridge taken, there is no further plan, and the men mill around. In the confusion, one young, enraged colonist takes his hatchet and splits the skull of a redcoat lying mortally wounded at the bridge. Eventually, Barrett and Buttrick regain control and reorganize. Buttrick and about 200 Minutemen take station behind a stone wall on the south side of the river, over-watching the bridge. Barrett takes the remainder of the militia back to the muster ground, overlooking the north end of the bridge.

The gunfire has alerted Colonel Smith that something is wrong, and he leads two companies of grenadiers towards the bridge, passing his routed light infantry. When he arrives, he finds Buttrick's 200 Minutemen fortified behind a stone wall, men that have just broken his elite troops. He has just 60 regulars with him - he takes a long look and marches back into town, leaving the militia in command of the field.

At this point Smith probably believes he will never again see the four companies he sent to Colonel Barrett's, because they must pass the North Bridge to rejoin him. Having also heard the gunfire, those companies march cautiously back to the bridge. There they pass beneath Barrett's watching militia, who let the redcoats file past. They reach and cross the bridge, and march below Buttrick's minutemen behind the wall, who also

let them pass, in an eerie and tense scene. As they go, many of the regulars notice the dying soldier at the bridge, who they believe has been scalped by the colonials.

This is the second strike of the match. For the first time, the militia have fired on the redcoats on orders. For the first time, they have killed the King's troops and then driven them off in defeat. But it did not turn into a general engagement, and the militia have let the rest of Colonel Smith's troop leave unmolested. It is still just possible, if nothing else happens - and likely after some hearings, courts martial and hangings - that the business can end without a war.

Third Strike and Retreat to Boston

Colonel Smith now knows he's in trouble. Three of his light infantry companies have been shredded by the militia's fire. Four others have returned only due to their mercy. His troops have at most 36 rounds each in their cartridge boxes. It's 18 miles back to Boston, and he has wounded to transport. He can see even more militia marching into the area.

He takes some of the colonists' wagons and carriages and loads up his wounded officers. The injured rank and file are left to make it back by themselves, if they can. By now, it's noon. The first leg of the road back to Boston lies below a ridge just to the North. Smith sends part of the light infantry to follow that ridge, as flankers to keep the colonials away. The rest of the British force starts down the road at a quick step, with the Concord militia following just out of range.

A mile along, the road crosses a bridge over a creek and the ridge ends, forcing the flankers to return to the main column. At this spot, several roads join near a farm owned by a man named Merriam. While Smith waited in Concord, more militia have been converging on this choke point, and now there are nearly two regiments there, some drawn up in military formation and some in position as snipers. By now, they know the stories of what's happened in Lexington and Concord, of both the massacre and the rout of the regulars at North Bridge.

Again they hold their fire as Smith's column approaches and begins to file across the bridge. But as their rear guard passes, the regulars level their muskets at one of the following militia companies as if to fire. Seeing this, all the colonists pour fire onto the regulars. The rear guard's volley misses, but the militia does not, as several redcoat officers and men fall dead or wounded.

This is the third strike of the match, at Merriam's Corner, the flare that sets off the powder keg, and makes war a fact. This time the militia have not waited to receive fire, but seeing the regulars threaten their fellow Americans, have opened the action. From here on, it's a running fight, with the militia trying to trap the redcoats on the road, and the regulars trying to battle their way through to Boston.

Many of the militia fight one by one from behind cover, but some units form in military order, either firing from behind stone walls or deploying in the open. At one spot two companies of militia - 200 strong - hide themselves in woods on both sides of the road and ambush the head of the redcoat column. Many regulars fall there. Not long after, over 500 militia engage in a running fight with the column.

On a hill near the edge of Lexington, John Parker and his surviving militia are waiting in ambush, some of them wearing bloody bandages from the morning. They wait until the British officers appear, and then open fire. Colonel Smith falls wounded. Major Pitcairn's horse is shot soon after, throwing him. He falls stunned for the moment, out of the fight. The light infantry charge the hill and drive off Parker's men, but the damage is done. Ever since, the spot has been called [Parker's Revenge](#).

As the redcoat column speeds up to get through the ambushes, it spreads out. Many wounded fall behind and are captured by the colonists. Water is giving out, and fights develop around spots where it may be found. Ammunition runs low, and survivors are taking it from the fallen. Morale is dropping, and some of the soldiers break ranks and run along the road. Officers draw their swords to try to stop the rout, with little success. Some are considering the horrible possibility of surrender when, surprisingly, they hear cheering at the head of the column.

The retreating redcoats have just come in sight of a relief force of 1,000 men, led by [General Hugh Lord Percy](#), and drawn up in formation at the far side of Lexington. General Gage had prepared a plan for reinforcements and when he learned the countryside was alarmed, put it in motion. Again, his fondness for secrecy causes problems: One of the orders is in a sealed note to Marine Major Pitcairn, who is already in the field. It takes hours to figure out why the Marines hadn't shown up, and so reinforcements that were supposed to march at 4:00 AM don't get started until 9:00.

Percy's column leaves Boston via the Neck, and marches across the Great Bridge over the Charles River, through Cambridge and out to Lexington. They bring two small field cannon with as much powder and shot as can fit on their carriages. Again, the private soldiers carry 36 rounds. Hearing the fighting in the distance, Percy finds a good position outside Lexington and sets up a defensive square formation. When, unbelievably, he sees the routed force of redcoats fleeing towards him, he orders the cannon fired. One shot goes right through the Lexington meeting house. Unused to cannon fire, the militia scatter and Percy opens up his formation to let the routed redcoats inside.

Percy takes some time to reorganize the redcoats. He also orders some nearby homes to be burned. Meanwhile, militia keep arriving from all directions. Along with them comes [General William Heath](#). A general by title, he describes himself as a 'corpulent, balding farmer'. He's long had an interest in military tactics, and has studied books on the subject and even spent time discussing it with British officers. For obvious reasons, he's particularly interested in how to fight a moving column of regular troops. Knowing that militia are not well-suited to oppose the redcoats in formation in the field, Heath

concentrates on the tactics of the skirmish. He develops a procedure called the 'ring of fire'. The moving column will be surrounded from all sides with skirmishers firing from a distance. New men arriving will be placed in front of the column, and once it has moved past, the militia will attempt to move forward to the front once again.

Meanwhile, Percy is rearranging his forces. This time they will move in three columns, the largest on the road, with flanking forces on both sides. Compared to Smith's hasty retreat, he will move deliberately, both to allow his wounded to keep up, and to allow his vanguard to clear the buildings along the way. At about 3PM Percy moves out, and the militia begin shooting again. The ring of fire has begun.

East of Lexington, the countryside is more built-up, with homes and shops lining the road. The redcoats reach the town of [Menotomy](#) (now called Arlington). There the combat becomes house-to-house, with colonists fighting from their homes. Percy later says *"Many of them concealed themselves in houses, and advanced within ten yards to fire at me and other officers, though they were morally certain of being put to death themselves in an instant."*

Stung by the resistance, and having heard tales of the 'scalping' at North Bridge, the redcoats give no quarter. A man named [Jason Russell](#), 58 years old and too lame to walk, fortifies his home, saying *"An Englishman's home is his castle."* The grenadiers take it and kill every man they find inside. Nearby, a company of minutemen set up an ambush too close to the road, and are surprised by the redcoat flankers. Eleven are killed, some after they have surrendered. Two drunks in a tavern - uninvolved in the fighting - are impaled on bayonets and their heads broken open. Some of the regulars turn to looting of liquor and valuables, including the communion silver from a church. All told, the fighting along this section of road, from Menotomy into Cambridge, claims nearly half the casualties of the day for both the militia and the redcoats.

After Menotomy, the regular's column must turn south to recross the Great Bridge to Boston. But the militia have torn up the planks and thrown them in the river, and occupy the far bank. Redcoat ammunition is again running low. If pinned against the river, Percy's column might be destroyed. Thinking quickly, he turns his forces east, out onto the Charleston peninsula. The sudden move breaks the circle of fire for a time.

There's one more substantial force between Percy and safety. A regiment of northern Massachusetts militia led by [Timothy Pickering](#) occupies a hill in his way. Pickering is one of those who think that matters between the colonies and Britain can still be settled without war. Earlier in the day, he had to be shamed by his men into leading them towards Boston. Now, he orders no attack as Percy marches past, and finds refuge under the guns of H.M.S. Somerset.

As dark and rain begin to fall, Heath pulls the militia away from the redcoats, who start ferrying their wounded into Boston. By the end of the next day, Boston is under siege by 15,000 Massachusetts militia. The Revolutionary War has begun.

Aftermath

Contrary to the opinions of Gage and Pitcairn, after the battle Lord Percy ruefully observed: *“During the whole affair, the rebels attacked us in a very scattered, irregular manner, but with perseverance and resolution, nor did they ever dare to form into any regular body. Indeed, they knew too well what was proper, to do so. Whoever looks upon them as an irregular mob, will find himself very much mistaken. They have men among them who know very well what they are about.”*

The colonists don't forget the importance of communicating what's happened. Revere's network is now used to spread the word of Lexington and Concord throughout the colonies. Just as important, they gather statements of what happened from both militia and redcoat prisoners, and send them with the news on a fast ship to their friends in Britain. Their statement of the facts arrives weeks before Gage's version.

The British never make it out of Boston again. In June they try to break through the encircling colonists in the [Battle of Bunker Hill](#). They take the hill, but are unable to break through the siege. Redcoat casualties are heavy and many of those who survived the Concord march, including Major Pitcairn, die in the battle.

The redcoats remain in Boston under siege for most of a year. In October, Gage is recalled to England and replaced. His successors do no better, and in March 1776, the redcoats evacuate Boston and sail away, never to return. The war drags on for seven more years thereafter, but the campaign in Massachusetts is over.

The day after the Concord fight, John Adams, who had hoped the matter could be solved peacefully, rides along what was already known as Battle Road. He sees the burial parties, the burnt out houses, the displaced refugees, and speaks to those who fought and observed the battle. Later he remembers it as one of the great intellectual journeys of his life and he becomes convinced that *“the die was cast, the Rubicon was crossed”* and the only way ahead is through war.

Later, Adams was to write: *“Posterity, you will never know how much it cost the present generation to preserve your freedom. I hope you make good use of it. If you do not, I shall repent in heaven that ever I took half the pains to preserve it.”*

The legacy of that day, and those who sacrificed, is found in our form of government, and most particularly in our Constitution. When you read there statements about the quartering of troops, unreasonable search and seizure, the rights of assembly and to keep and bear arms, remember they were written by a people who had experienced the intrusive power of unlimited government. They set out to make sure that the new American government would never become such a monster. You can judge for yourself how well we are upholding that legacy today.

by 'Nero'