

LESSON 17 Who Fired First at Lexington Green?

Background Information

On April 19, 1775, a group of British soldiers marched into Lexington on their way to seize some colonial military supplies stored in Concord. They were met on Lexington Green by colonial militia led by Captain John Parker. In the next few moments shooting started and several colonists were killed. One question that has arisen about this event is "Who fired first?"

Why do you think it is important in a war to know who fired the first shot? Look at the map below and the evidence on the following pages. Write the strengths and weaknesses of each piece of evidence on the worksheet, then make up your mind who you think fired first. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation were modernized throughout the evidence presented.

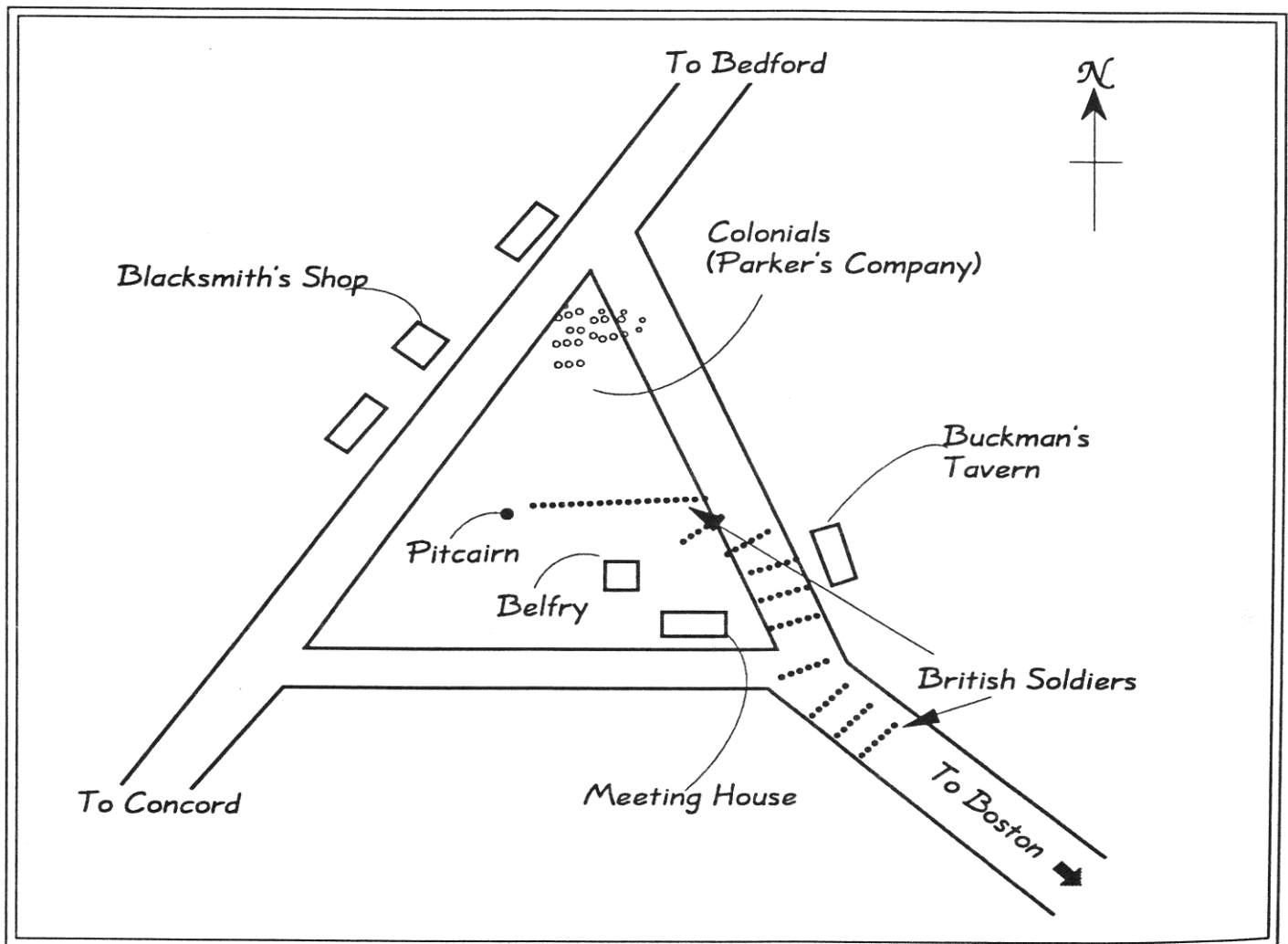


Figure 6: Map of Lexington Green, April 19, 1775.

[Continued on next page.]

- 1 Official deposition (testimony written down under oath) of John Parker, commander of the colonial militia.

I, John Parker, of lawful age, and commander of the Militia in Lexington, do testify and declare, that on the nineteenth instant [April 19], [about one o'clock] in the morning..., being informed that there were a number of Regular (British) officers riding up and down the road, stopping and insulting people as they passed..., and also...that a number of regular troops were on the march from Boston in order to take the Province Stores at Concord, ordered our Militia to meet on the [Lexington] Common...to consult what to do. [We] concluded not to be discovered, nor meddle or make with said Regular Troops, if they should approach, unless they should insult us. Upon their sudden approach, I immediately ordered our Militia to disperse and not to fire. Immediately said Troops made their appearance, ...rushed furiously, fired upon and killed eight of our party without receiving any provocation therefore from us.

- 2 Personal diary of Lieutenant John Barker, a British officer.

19th. At 5 o'clock we arrived there and saw a number of people, I believe between two- and three-hundred, formed in a Common in the middle of the town; we still continued advancing, keeping prepared against an attack although without intending to attack them, but on our coming near them they fired one or two shots, upon which our men without any orders, rushed in upon them, fired and put them to flight; several of them were killed, we could not tell how many, because they got behind walls and into the woods. We had a man of the 10th Light Infantry wounded, nobody else hurt.

- 3 Sworn testimony of Thomas Fessenden, a colonial onlooker, to the Justices of the Peace in Middlesex County.

Lexington, April 23, 1775. I, Thomas Fessenden..., testify and declare, that being in a pasture near the meeting-house at said Lexington on [last] Wednesday at about a half-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," [and] brandished his sword over his head three times. Meanwhile the second officer, ...about two rods behind him, fired a pistol pointed at said Militia, and the Regulars kept huzzaing (yelling) until he had finished brandishing his sword, and when he had thus finished..., he pointed it down towards said Militia, and immediately...the said Regulars fired a volley at the Militia and then I ran off, as fast as I could, while they continued firing until I got out of their reach. I further testify that as soon as 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, and further saith not.

Thomas Fessenden

[Continued on next page.]

[Continued from previous page.]

- 4 Official report of Major Pitcairn, commander of the advanced British party that first entered Lexington Green, to General Gage, his commander in Boston.

I gave directions to the troops to move forward, but on no account to fire, or even attempt it without orders. When I arrived at the end of the Village, I observed drawn up on a green near 200 of the Rebels. When I came within about one hundred yards of them, they began to file off towards some stone walls on our right flank. The Light Infantry, observing this, ran after them. I instantly called to the soldiers not to fire, but to surround and disarm them, and after several repetitions of those positive orders to the men—not to fire etc.—some of the Rebels, who had jumped over the wall, fired four or five shots at the soldiers, which wounded a man of the Tenth, and my horse was wounded in two places, from some quarter or other. At the same time several shots were fired from a Meeting House on our left. Upon this, without any order or regularity, the Light Infantry began a scattered fire, and continued in that situation for some little time, contrary to the repeated orders both of me and the officers that were present. It will be needless to mention what happened after, as I suppose Col. Smith has given a particular account of it, I am sir

Your most obedient humble Servant,

/s/ John Pitcairn
Boston Camp, 26th April, 1775

- 5 Sworn deposition of thirty-four colonial militiamen, submitted to the Justices of the Peace in Middlesex County.

Lexington, April 25, 1775 We, Nathaniel Mullekin, Philip Russell, Moses Harrington, Junior, Thomas and Daniel Harrington, William Grimer, William Tidd, Isaac Hastings, Jones Stone, Jr., James Wyman, Thaddeus Harrington, John Chandler, Joshua Reed, Jr., Joseph Simonds, Phineas Smith, John Chandler, Jun., Reuben Lock, Joel Viles, Nathan Reed, Samuel Tidd, Benjamin Lock, Thomas Winship, Simeon Snow, John Smith, Moses Harrington the third, Joshua Reed, Ebenezer Parker, John Harrington, Enoch Willington, John Hosmer, Isaac Green, Phineas Sterns, Isaac Durant, and Thomas Headly, Jr., all of lawful age, and inhabitants of Lexington, in the County of Middlesex, and Colony of the Massachusetts-Bay, in New England, do testify and declare, that on the nineteenth of April instant, about one or two o'clock in the morning, being informed that several officers of the [British] Regulars had, the evening before, been riding up and down the road, and had detained and insulted the inhabitants passing the same, and also understanding that a body of Regulars were marching from Boston towards Concord with intent, as it was supposed, to take the stores (military supplies) belonging to the Colony in that town, we

[Continued on next page.]

[Continued from previous page.]

were alarmed; and having met at the place of our Company's parade, were dismissed by our captain, John Parker, for the present, with orders to be ready to attend at the beat of the drum. We further testify and declare, that about five o'clock in the morning, hearing our drum beat, we proceeded towards the parade, and soon found that a large body of (British) Troops were marching towards us. Some of our Company were coming up to the parade, and others had reached it; at which time the Company began to disperse. Whilst our backs were turned on the Troops we were fired on by them, and a number of our men were instantly killed and wounded. Not a gun was fired by any person in our Company on the Regulars, to our knowledge, before they fired on us, and they continued firing until we had all made our escape.

6. Sworn testimony given on April 23, 1775, by John Bateman, a British Regular captured by the colonists.

I, John Bateman, belonging to the Fifty-second Regiment, commanded by Colonel Jones, on Wednesday morning on the nineteenth day of April instant, was in the party marching to Concord, being at Lexington in the County of Middlesex; being nigh (near) the meeting-house in said Lexington, there was a small party of men gathered together in that place when our Troopers marched by. I testify and declare that I heard the word of command given to the Troops to fire, and some of said Troops did fire. I saw one of said small party lay dead on the ground nigh said meeting-house, and I testify that I never heard any of the inhabitants so much as fire one gun on said Troops.

7. Sworn testimony given by Sylvannus Wood (colonist) on June 17, 1826, to the Justices of the Peace.

The British troops approached us rapidly in platoons, with a General officer on horseback at their head. The officer came up to within about two rods of the center of the company, where I stood. The first platoon [was] about three rods distant (away). They there halted. The officer then swung his sword, and said, "Lay down your arms, you damn'd rebels, or you are all dead men—fire." Some guns were fired by the British at us from the first platoon, but no person was killed or hurt, being probably charged only with powder. Just at this time, Captain Parker ordered every man to take care of himself. The company immediately dispersed; and while the company was dispersing and leaping over the wall, the second platoon of the British fired, and killed some of our men. There was not a gun fired by any of Captain Parker's company within my knowledge.

[Continued on next page.]