



# Lexington and Concord: Tipping Point of the Revolution

Advisor: Timothy H. Breen, William Smith Mason Professor of American History, Northwestern University, National Humanities Center Fellow.

## Framing Question

How did the Battles of Lexington and Concord change the character of American resistance to British rule?

## Understanding

From the early 1760s to 1775 American colonists complained bitterly about British policies that taxed them without representation. Nonetheless, they did not advocate taking up arms against king and parliament. The Battles of Lexington and Concord changed that. The killing of Americans by British troops altered popular perceptions of imperial rule and transformed a largely peaceful resistance into an armed rebellion.

## Text

### Selections for classroom use

- Diary entries of Matthew Patten, 1775.
- Announcement of the Battle of Lexington and Concord, 1775.
- Resolution to resist “force by force,” 1775.
- Jonas Clark, The Fate of Blood-Thirsty Oppressors, 1776 (excerpts).



*A View of the South Part of Lexington, 1775 (detail)*

## Background

Early on the morning of April 19, 1775, General Thomas Gage, commander of British forces in America, dispatched regular troops to Concord, Massachusetts, where spies informed him the Americans had stored weapons. The movement of so many soldiers out of Boston came as no surprise to the American insurgents. Paul Revere and others had warned the inland communities of the impending threat. About seventy members of the local militia gathered on the Lexington Green, intending to watch as the British marched past them on the road to Concord.

### Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of texts are we dealing with?
2. When were they written?
3. Who wrote them?
4. For what audience were they intended?
5. For what purpose were they written?

But after a British officer ordered the Americans to lay down their guns, someone fired, and after a few minutes, eight colonists were dead. The news spread quickly throughout the region. Within hours hundreds of Americans confronted the British at Concord. The death of the Lexington militiamen and the pitched battle that developed as British troops retreated to Boston electrified the communities from New Hampshire to Georgia. People who had assumed that resistance to taxation without representation involved peaceful strategies such as boycotts and petitions dramatically discovered that the imperial crisis had taken a violent turn. Ordinary men and women suddenly and decisively came forward and transformed protest into a massive insurgency.

During the 1760s and early 1770s Americans spoke eloquently about abstract principles such as liberty and rights. After 1775 the political landscape changed radically. Unhappy colonists discovered that successful revolutions—the mobilization of sufficient numbers of ordinary people to sustain resistance against a powerful empire—required an emotional component. American historians seldom mention anger and hate as aspects of revolutionary ferment, preferring to concentrate on reasoned academic texts written by men such as John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and John Dickinson. These pamphlets undoubtedly served to instruct the colonists about their rights as citizens and British subjects. What goes missing from this perspective is the sense of outrage that propelled the revolution forward.

## Text Analysis

### Diary entries of Matthew Patten, April 18–21, 1775

18th — I made a new handle to our Spade and made a pole to fish at the ponds

19th — I got James Orr to make two hoops for our great Kettle one of them was my iron the other was Sheds and he made part of a chain for my Canoe of my iron and writ a deed from Alexander McCalley to his son Alexander and I took the acknowledgement unpaid.

20th — I Recd [received] the, [Melancholy](#) news in the morning that General Gages troops had fired on our Contrymen at Concord yesterday and had killed a large number of them our town was notified last night We Generay met at the meeting house about 9 of the Clock and the Number of twenty or more went Directly off from the Meeting house to assist them And I came to Sheds and James Orr made me a great wheel Spindle of my Steel and he mended the Ear of a little kettle and finished the chain for my canoe he found iron for near a quarter of the chain the rest was mine And our John came home from being down to Pentucket and intended to Sett off for our army to morrow morning and our Girls sit up all night bakeing bread and fitting things for him and John Dobbin

21st — our John and John Dobbin and my bror [brother] Samuell two oldest sons sett off and joynd Derryfield men and about six from Goffestown and two or 3 more from this town under the comand of Capt John Moor of Derryfield they amounted to the No of 45 in all Sunkook men and two or three others that joined them marched in about an hour after they to 35 there was nine more went along after them belonging to Pennykook or thereabouts and I went to McGregores and I got a pound of Coffie on Credit

WILLIAMSBURG, SATURDAY, April 29, 1775.  
**L**A T E last night an exprest arrived from Philadelphia, with the following melancholy advices from the province of Connecticut, forwarded to the committee of correspondence in this city.

*The blow (so much dreaded by our noble friend LORD CHATHAM) is now struck, a great deal of blood spilt, and much more, it is likely, than the present advices communicate. That great man, in his speech upon the necessity of withdrawing the troops from Boston (delivered in the House of Lords the 20th of January last) says: "Perhaps, even whilst I am now speaking, the decisive blow is struck, which may involve millions in the consequences; and, believe me, the very first drop of blood that is spilled will not be a wound easily skinned over; it will be irritabile vulnus, a wound of that rancorous and festering kind, that, in all probability, will mortify the whole body."*

PHILADELPHIA, April 24, 1775.  
*An exprest arrived at five o'clock this evening, by which we have the following advices, viz.*

WATERTOWN, Wednesday morning, near 10 o'clock.  
*To all FRIENDS of AMERICAN LIBERTY.*

**B**E it known, that this morning, before break of day, a brigade, consisting of about 1000 or 1200 men, landed at Phipps farm, at Cambridge, and marched to Lexington, where they found a company of our colony militia in arms, upon whom they fired, without any provocation, and killed six men, and wounded four others. By an exprest from Boston, we find another brigade is now on its march from Boston, supposed to consist of 1000 men. The bearer, Trial Britlet, is charged to alarm the country, quite to Connecticut; and all persons are desired to furnish him with fresh horses, as they may be needed. I have spoken with several, who have seen the dead and wounded. Pray let the Delegates from this colony to Connecticut see this; they know Col. Foster, one of the Delegates.

J. PALMER, one of the committee.  
*A true copy from the original, by order of the committee of correspondent of Worcester, April 1775.*

*Attested and forwarded by the committees of Brookline, Norwich, New London, Lyme, Saybrook, Killingworth, E. Guilford, Guilford, Brandford, Newhaven.*

*Broadside announcing the Battle of Lexington and Concord, published by the Williamsburg, Virginia, Committee of Correspondence, April 29, 1775*

1. How would you describe Matthew Patten's diary? How does it differ from 21st-century ideas of what a diary is for?

2. Can we trust Patten's diary? Why or why not?

3. How does Patten's matter-of-fact presentation affect our perception of Bedford's preparation for war?

4. What impact did the news from Lexington and Concord have upon Bedford?

5. What does it suggest that men from surrounding towns joined Bedford men on the march to Concord?

6. What does the speed with which the region's men organized themselves suggest?

7. Would it not have been wiser for Matthew's son and his friends to have waited a few days before rushing off to join the American army?

8. What does Patten's use of the term "our Countrymen" suggest?

9. From this passage what can you infer about the role women played in the mobilization?

## Excerpts from the Williamsburg Committee of Correspondence

WILLIAMSBURG [Virginia], SATURDAY, April 29, 1775.

LATE last night an express [news bulletin sent by stagecoach or person on horseback] arrived from Philadelphia, with the following melancholy advices [news] from the province of Connecticut, forwarded to the committee of correspondence in this city...

PHILADELPHIA [Pennsylvania], April 24, 1775.

An express arrived at five o'clock this evening, by which we have the following advices, viz. [namely]:

WATERTOWN [Connecticut], Wednesday morning, near 10 o'clock.

To all FRIENDS of AMERICAN LIBERTY.

Be it known, that this morning, before the break of day, a brigade, consisting of about 1000 or 1200 men, landed at Phipps farm, at Cambridge [Massachusetts], and marched to Lexington, where they found a company of our colony militia in arms, upon whom they fired, without any provocation, and killed six men, and wounded four others. By an express from Boston, we find another brigade is now on its march from Boston, supposed to consist of 1000 men. The bearer, Trial Bisset, is charged [ordered to] to alarm [warn] the country, quite [all the way] to Connecticut; and all persons are desired [requested] to furnish him with fresh horses, as they may be needed. I have spoken with several, who have seen the dead and wounded....

J. PALMER, one of the committee.

A true copy from the original, by order of the committee of correspondence of Worcester [Massachusetts], April 1775.

Attested and forwarded by the committees of Brookline [Massachusetts], Norwich, New London, Lyme, Saybrook, Killingsworth, E. Guilford, Brandford, Newhaven [Connecticut towns].

10. How would you imagine the readers of this report would react?

11. Which details would evoke the strongest response?

12. How do the presumed author, J. Palmer, and the distributors of this dispatch seek to assure readers of its credibility?

13. Why was it important to list the Committees that forwarded the dispatch?

14. Who are the "Friends of American Liberty"?

15. What does this bulletin suggest about the colonists' readiness for a British attack?

## Excerpt from the Resolution signed by citizens of Cross Creek, Cumberland County, North Carolina, 1775

The actual commencement of hostilities against this Continent by the *British* Troops, in the bloody scene on the nineteenth of *April* last, near *Boston*; the increase of arbitrary impositions, from a wicked and despotick Ministry [Parliament]; and the dread of instigated insurrections in the Colonies, are causes sufficient to drive an oppressed People to the use of arms: We, therefore, the subscribers [signers], of *Cumberland* County, holding ourselves bound by that most sacred of all obligations, the duty of good citizens towards an injured country, and thoroughly convinced that under our distressed circumstances we shall be justified before you in resisting force by force; do unite ourselves under every tie of religion and honour, and associate as a band in her defence against every foe; hereby solemnly engaging, that whenever our Continental or Provincial Councils shall decree it necessary, we will go forth and be ready to sacrifice our lives and fortunes to secure her freedom and safety.

16. Judging from this resolution, what impact did the news from Lexington and Concord have on the inhabitants of Cumberland County, North Carolina?

17. Do you think everyone in Cumberland County agreed with the sentiments expressed in the resolution?

18. What does the author mean by “instigated insurrections”?

19. Why should people in North Carolina care about the rights and liberty of Massachusetts farmers? What reasons does the resolution provide?

20. Since the Continental Congress had not declared independence at this point, what is the meaning of an “injured country”?

21. Why did the inhabitants of this community appeal to “religion and honor”?

22. To what extent is this resolution a response to the Battles of Lexington and Concord, and to what extent is it designed to provoke a response to the battles?

23. What does this resolution commit the men of Cumberland County to do?

**Excerpt from Reverend Jonas Clark's sermon, *The Fate of Blood-Thirsty Oppressors*, preached in Lexington, Massachusetts, April 19, 1776, on the first anniversary of the Battles of Lexington and Concord**

... [One great purpose of this sermon] is to rouse and excite us to a religious acknowledgment of the hand of God, in those distressing scenes of MURDER, BLOODSHED and WAR, we are met to commemorate, upon this solemn occasion.... And this is the place where the fatal scene begins! — They [British troops] approach with the morning's light; and more like *murderers* and *cut-throats*, than the troops of a *christian king*, without provocation, without warning, when no war was proclaimed, they draw the *sword of violence*, upon the inhabitants of this town [Lexington], and with a *cruelty* and *barbarity*, which would have made the most hardened savage blush, they *shed* INNOCENT BLOOD! — But, O my GOD! How shall I speak! — or how describe the distress, the *horror* of that *awful morn, that gloomy day!* — Yonder field can witness the *innocent blood* of our brethren slain! — And from thence does their *blood* cry unto God for vengeance from the ground!... From this *remarkable day* will an important *era* begin for both *America* and *Britain*. And from the *nineteenth of April, 1775*, we may venture to predict, will be dated, in future history, THE LIBERTY or SLAVERY of the AMERICAN WORLD, according as a sovereign God shall see fit to smile, or frown upon the *interesting cause*, in which we are engaged.

24. Why does Reverend Clark urge his congregation to acknowledge God's hand in the battles of April 19th, 1775?

25. Identify the specific elements that Reverend Clark uses to rouse the emotions of his congregation.

26. Was it fair for Reverend Clark to call the British troops "murderers" and "cut-throats"?

27. What did Reverend Clark mean when he said that April 19th, 1775, was the beginning of a new AMERICAN WORLD?

28. According to Reverend Clark, what would a colonist have to do to avenge the killing of local militiamen?

29. Could the people who listened to Clark's sermon turn back and restore the old imperial order?

## Glossary

**melancholy:** sad, mournful

**commencement:** start, beginning

**arbitrary:** made by personal whim, not based on any reason or system

**imposition:** unfair or unwelcome demand or burden

**instigated:** started or brought about on purpose

**insurrection:** revolt, uprising

**foe:** enemy, opponent

**provocation:** incitement, something that causes a strong response in another person or persons

**yonder:** over there [“that field over there”]

**brethren:** brothers, i.e., fellow men [humans, Patriots, etc.]

## Images

- Ralph Earl (artist), *A View of the South Part of Lexington*, hand-colored engraving by Amos Doolittle, 1775 (detail). Courtesy of the New York Public Library, Digital ID 54390.
- Broadside announcing the Battle of Lexington and Concord, published by the Williamsburg, Virginia, Committee of Correspondence, April 29, 1775. Digital image from online collection Early American Imprints, American Antiquarian Society with Readex/Newsbank, Doc. 14602, from the original in the Library of Congress. Reproduced courtesy of the Library of Congress and the American Antiquarian Society.