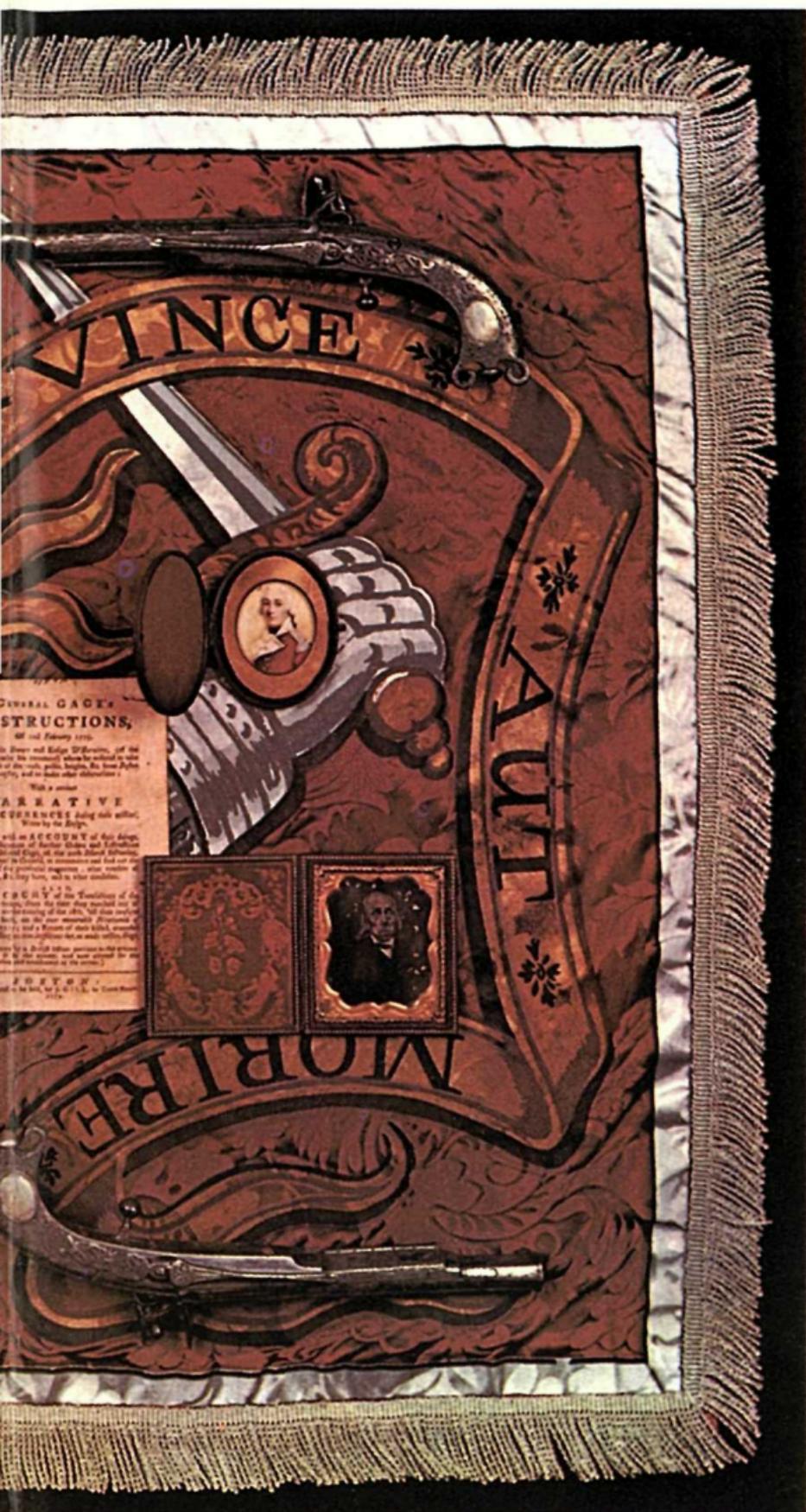


# Minute Man



National Historical Park, Massachusetts



**"I cannot but lament . . . the impending Calamities Britain and her Colonies are about to suffer, from great Imprudencies on both Sides—Passion governs, and she never governs wisely—Anxiety begins to disturb my Rest."**

Benjamin Franklin, February 5, 1775

A thin line of armed Americans, drawn up across Lexington Green on the morning of April 19, 1775, marked the beginning of a new era in world history. True, if the line had not been drawn at that time and that place, it would soon have been drawn elsewhere, for there was crisis in the air, sharper than any man on the green realized. A few Boston Whigs, opponents of the English Parliament, had hoped to lure the British soldiers stationed in that city out into the countryside where they could be dealt with more easily, but the farmers and laborers on the green had no such expectations.

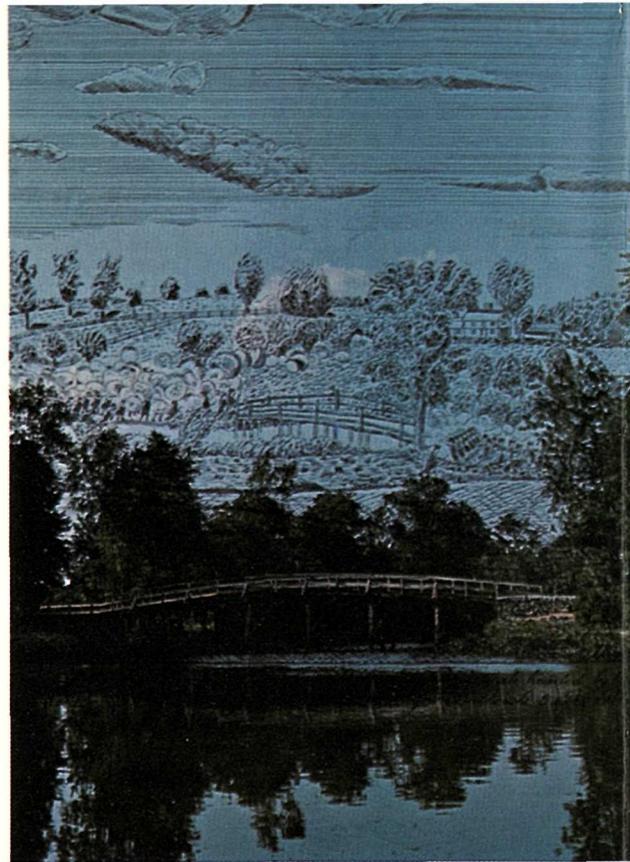
When asked decades later why he had taken his musket and gone out to face the soldiers, one man who had turned out that day said simply, "We had always governed ourselves, and we always meant to. They didn't mean we should." That was the issue for New England. In some of the other colonies, where the farmers were Tories (the "King's Friends") and the aristocrats Whigs, the conflict with Britain arose over different issues—tinder which the sparks from the guns on Lexington Green ignited.

For six generations, New Englanders had governed themselves. Each town even chose its own minister, and each church determined its own form of faith. The colonists had always defined their liberties as "the rights of Englishmen," and now, as loyal Englishmen, they were determined to defend themselves against a Parliament intent, it seemed, on infringing those rights. But the British Ministry had no intention of "ruling" them.

The British imperial system was, in fact, the most liberal the world had ever seen. It inflicted no oppression. But the Empire had recently endured a world war (the Seven Years War, touched off by young George Washington at Fort Necessity on the Pennsylvania frontier), and victory had brought not only new territory but new responsibilities and greater expenses. The British Ministry believed not only that the American colonies should contribute toward the cost of maintaining the western garrisons and the British fleet which protected their shipping, but also that Parliament possessed the power to tax the colonists.

When Lord Grenville, the King's chief minister, invited the colonists to share these costs through a series of tax measures, they protested that the proposed taxes were unconstitutional and a dangerous precedent. The taxes finally laid by Parliament were hardly more than tokens of imperial authority, but they were bitterly resented—a condition that helped to bring about the Boston "massacre" of 1770 and the now-famous "Tea Party" 3 years later. To maintain order and prop up the Massachusetts Bay government, British soldiers were sent to Boston in 1774; but instead of subduing local passions, their presence only served to intensify the colonists' desire to resist.

Resolving to nip revolution in the bud, the Ministry in London authorized 56-year-old Gen. Thomas Gage, commander in chief of His Majesty's forces in North America, to take appropriate action. Gage, who was also the military governor of Massachusetts, knew that the colonists were stockpiling arms and ammunition and other military stores in Concord, 32 kilometers (20 miles) west of Boston, to oppose his authority. So on the night of April 18, 1775, he sent some 700 soldiers (the light infantry and grenadier companies of several regiments) across the Charles River in boats to

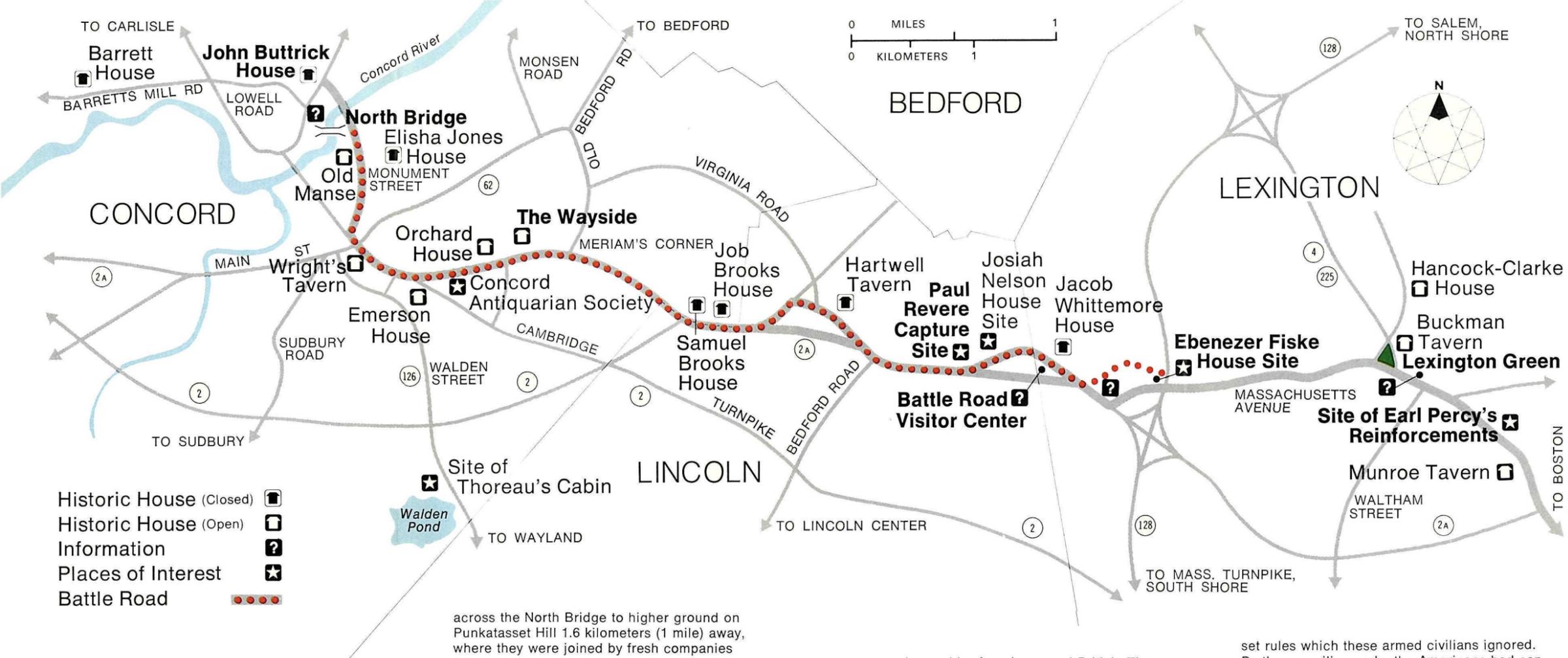


Photographs by Ross Chapple

begin their march to confiscate the colonists' military supplies. Their commanders were Lt. Col. Francis Smith, a fat, sluggish old soldier who had had a long association with Gage, and 53-year-old Maj. John Pitcairn of the Royal Marines, an able officer and a charming gentleman who was popular both among his own men and the Americans.

Thanks to an elaborate intelligence network, Gage's intentions were no secret to the patriots in Boston. Even before the British soldiers were underway, 40-year-old Paul Revere, a well-known local silversmith and engraver and the principal messenger of the patriot leaders, had crossed the river to Charlestown and rode out to alarm the countryside. He reached Lexington, a small, quiet village 9.6 kilometers (6 miles) east of Concord, about midnight. There he warned Samuel Adams and John Hancock, whom Gage considered the "most obnoxious" of the patriot leaders and who were staying at the parsonage of the Rev. Jonas Clarke. The alarm also brought out Capt. John Parker and about 130 members of the Lexington militia company, but when the British soldiers failed to appear they were dismissed. Joined by William Dawes, another messenger who had taken a longer route from Boston, and Dr. Samuel Prescott, a Concord physician, Revere continued his ride. In Lincoln, a small community midway between Lexington and Concord, a British patrol intercepted the party and took Revere into brief custody. Dawes was forced to turn back, but Prescott eluded capture and carried the warning on to Concord.

Moving with fatal slowness, Colonel Smith and his soldiers did not arrive in Lexington until daylight on the 19th. As the redcoats marched up, 16-year-old William Diamond beat out a drum call for the militia to reassemble. Warned earlier by a "very genteel man" in a sulky that 600 men were gathered on the green deter-



mined to resist the soldiers, Major Pitcairn, commanding the advance infantry, ordered his men to stop and load their weapons.

When Pitcairn and his officers reached the green, they were relieved to see that there were less than 100 men, only about half of the Lexington militia, drawn up in two ranks near the Bedford Road. Other townspeople, including women and children, were gathered about the green and in nearby houses. All expected just to watch the British column pass by.

As the soldiers marched at quick time around the right side of the meetinghouse at the head of the green, the officers rode around the left. Parker, who never intended to block the vastly superior British force, ordered his men to disperse and not to fire. Pitcairn, whose light infantry was now chasing the Americans, also called upon his men not to fire but to surround the militia. Then, as the provincials moved toward the militia, tragedy struck. A shot rang out. Other shots followed. Now, acting without orders, a number of the British poured a volley of shots into the backs of the retreating militiamen. Pitcairn ordered a ceasefire, but the soldiers, their own officers absent, ignored the major and kept up an irregular fire. There was only a light answering musketry from a few men still on the green and from behind nearby walls and buildings.

Certain that they were being fired upon from the meetinghouse (the militia's munitions depot), the redcoats rushed that building. Pitcairn and Smith, who had finally arrived, blocked the doorway, knowing that once inside the soldiers would have bayoneted everyone, as the rules of war prescribed for sniping. After furiously berating their men for disobeying orders, the British officers reformed the column and resumed the march to Concord. Behind them lay eight Americans dead and 10 wounded.

When news of the skirmish reached Concord, minutemen from Concord and Lincoln set off down the Lexington road until they saw the British column about 1.6 kilometers (1 mile) away. The provincials waited as the soldiers closed. Then they faced about and, by marching along the ridge paralleling the road, escorted the soldiers into town, their fifes and drums joining those of the British in "grand musick."

It was about 7 a.m. when Smith and his force reached Concord. After conferring briefly with his officers, Smith sent seven companies of light infantry to secure the North Bridge over the Concord River and to destroy the military supplies believed to be hidden at Col. James Barrett's farm 3.2 kilometers (2 miles) beyond. In the face of this force, the militia pulled back

across the North Bridge to higher ground on Punkatasset Hill 1.6 kilometers (1 mile) away, where they were joined by fresh companies from neighboring towns.

Meanwhile, in Concord, the grenadiers conducted a gentlemanly and largely ineffectual search of private houses for military stores. Cannon found at the jail were rendered useless. In the town hall the soldiers found a large store of gun carriages, which they piled nearby and set on fire. The building also caught, and the officers might have let it burn if the townspeople had not persuaded them to put out the fire.

To the north, the Americans, now reinforced, were leaving Punkatasset Hill and marching toward the British stationed on the hill west of the North Bridge. After forcing the redcoats to retreat to a position on the road at the west end of the bridge, the provincials deliberated on their next move. The three British infantry companies at the bridge also waited, but without planning how they would defend their extremely vulnerable position. When the Americans saw the smoke from the burning military stores in Concord, they thought the town was on fire and set out to investigate. The British fell back across the bridge to the Concord side, taking up a few planks on the way. As the provincials came on, the soldiers fired shots into the water, then into the advancing ranks. The Americans returned the fire from along the banks of the river and made untenable the position of the redcoats, who fled toward Concord. Pursuing them only to the first turn, the minute men and militia took up positions on the ridge overlooking the road, which Colonel Smith came marching along with reinforcements. He halted under the guns of the provincials, but no one gave the order to fire, and he returned to the village unmolested.

The provincials who had chased the infantry from the bridge now returned to the high ground on the west side of the river. Had they taken up all of the planks on the bridge, they could probably have cornered the detachment coming back from Barrett's farm. But the Americans only watched the soldiers march by.

With his forces reunited and the captured stores destroyed, Colonel Smith prepared to return to Boston. The scarlet column set out about noon on the long eastward march, screened by the light infantry moving through the meadows on the right and along a ridge on the left. At Meriam's Corner, about 1.6 kilometers (1 mile) east of Concord, the column reformed on the road to cross a bridge. As the flanking troops slowly descended the ridge, a minute company from Redding arrived just ahead of the other companies and took cover on the Meriam farm. Across the Lexington road some of the men who had chased the redcoats away from the North Bridge waited for another crack at them. Here, for the third time that day, shots

were exchanged by Americans and British. The American fire was heavy, but most of it came from too great a distance to be damaging.

If the provincials were concerned in the morning about appearing as the aggressors, by afternoon they no longer gave it any thought. In steadily increasing numbers they took cover along the route of march to shoot at the retreating redcoats, who saw now that they would have to fight all the way back to Boston. In Lincoln the British had to pass through a gauntlet of fire delivered from woods on the right by fresh militia companies from Woburn and on the left by militiamen who had cut across fields from Meriam's Corner. Within 0.8 kilometer (0.5 mile) eight redcoats were killed. Three Americans were also killed when they were caught from behind by soldiers guarding the British flank.

As the British continued toward Lexington, the fire slackened but never entirely ceased. A shot hit Pitcairn's horse, which threw him to the ground and then galloped away to be captured by the Americans. Nearly out of powder and ball and with the flankers too exhausted to be effective, the soldiers approached Lexington Green in a state of near panic, and the officers used the bayonet in their attempts to control them. All knew that to survive they had to receive the reinforcements that Smith had summoned earlier in the day, and these they now saw—fresh scarlet ranks drawn up near where they had loaded their guns at daylight. It was 2:30 p.m.

The commander of the reinforcements, Hugh, Earl Percy, 33-year-old veteran of the Seven Years War, had left Boston that morning with 1,000 men and two 6-pounder cannon. Taking the long route, he passed through Roxbury and Cambridge, where he found the bridge over the Charles River (near the present Harvard Stadium) dismantled. The thrifty Yankees had neatly piled up the planks nearby, so the soldiers crossed over on the stringers and quickly repaired the bridge. At Harvard College, Percy received directions to the Concord road and, moving with swift efficiency, pressed on to a point on the Lexington road where he could place his cannon effectively and establish a position that would shelter Smith's battered army for a brief rest.

The British well knew that they were in great danger. While the provincials' numbers were likely to increase, there was little hope that General Gage could either reinforce or resupply them; and the road back to Boston could be obstructed in many places, disrupting the march and making easier targets of the bewildered British. War in that century was like a great chess game, played by professionals only, with

set rules which these armed civilians ignored. By the prevailing code, the Americans had conducted themselves like barbarians. Civilians firing upon any French or German army risked the murder of every man, woman, and child, and the burning of every building in sight. Percy did burn three houses in Lexington from which sniping could be expected, but as his force marched back toward Boston, his officers did their best to prevent the soldiers from destroying private property.

The most severe fighting of the day occurred as the combined British forces moved out from Lexington. At Menotomy (present Arlington), and Cambridge, many of the Americans who fired at the British from the cover of houses were caught from behind and bayoneted. (Nearly half the Americans killed that day died in Menotomy.) At what is now Porter Square in Cambridge, the Americans tried to divert the soldiers toward the partly dismantled bridge over the Charles. The British forced their way through and continued on toward Charlestown. Arriving after dark, they embarked for Boston, thoroughly shaken by their experience and its implications. They had suffered 273 casualties to 95 for the Americans, and they were certain that the next time one of their armies was caught in such a situation, not a man would escape.

Immediately after the battle, affidavits were taken from scores of participants and witnesses. None of these accused the British of atrocities, but the Whig politicians broadcast a version of events that would have made Attila blush. Thus when Maj. Isaac Gardner, the highest ranking officer killed that day, fell at the head of his Brookline militia company while trying to ambush Percy that day, the patriot newspapers described him as an unarmed gentleman who was pulled from his coach and murdered in cold blood. Fired by such stories, the English Whigs openly and vigorously opposed the war, in Parliament as well as in the Army and Navy, and made firm execution of it almost impossible.

When the news of Lexington and Concord reached the Middle and Southern colonies, civil wars of a different pattern broke out—to merge into a single struggle and eventually end in independence for the entire Thirteen Colonies. Their French allies took home revolutionary ideas, and in the generations which followed men continued to fight for the ideas and institutions for which the men of Lexington and Concord fought and died. Today, many observers trace the beginning of the end of the world's colonial systems back to April 19, 1775. The shots fired then still reverberate around the world.

**"The patriots of this province desire nothing new; they wish only to keep their old privileges."**  
John Adams, 1775

# Minute Man



**Cover:** The artifacts shown include a copy of the Bedford Flag, traditionally the flag carried by the minutemen at the Battle of Concord Bridge; an issue of *The Massachusetts Spy*, the radical Boston newspaper that fanned the flames of revolt; a miniature of Major Pitcairn; Pitcairn's pistols; an 1854 daguerreotype of Jonathan Harrington, one of the last survivors of the Battle of Lexington; a copy of *General Gage's Instructions*, one of the earliest published accounts of the Lexington-Concord fight; a knife taken from a captured British soldier; and the tongue of the Old Belfry bell which sounded the alarm on Lexington Green.

### About Your Visit

The North Bridge Unit is located at Concord, 30.6 kilometers (19 miles) northwest of Boston via Mass. 2. Fiske Hill, at the eastern end of the Battle Road Unit, is near the junction of Mass. 128 and 2A.

A substantial amount of the land within the proposed park boundaries is still privately owned. Visitors should respect private property rights.

### Administration

Minute Man National Historical Park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Box 160, Concord, MA 01742, is in immediate charge of the park.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

**National Park Service**  
**U.S. Department of the Interior**



Bedford Flag courtesy The Bedford Minuteman Company  
All other artifacts courtesy The Lexington Historical Society

National Historical Park, Massachusetts