

CONFLICTING ACCOUNTS OF THE BATTLES OF LEXINGTON AND CONCORD 1775

In April 1775, the first shots of the American Revolutionary War were fired at the battles of Lexington and Concord. The clash occurred when the British general in Boston ordered his troops to seize the arms and ammunition that colonists had stored in nearby Concord. Warned that the British were coming, colonial militiamen met the royal army first at the Lexington village green. Shots were fired—no one knows who fired first—and eight colonials were killed. Later, as the British troops retreated to Boston, sniper fire from the militiamen inflicted numerous casualties. The following accounts, one American and one British, present two different interpretations of the event.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Contrasting

Describe the differences between these two accounts of the Battles of Lexington and Concord.

An American Account

Last Wednesday the 19th of April, [1775] the Troops of His Britannick Majesty commenced hostilities upon the people of this Province¹ . . . The particulars relative to this interesting event, . . . we have endeavoured to collect as well as the present confused state of affairs will admit.

On Tuesday evening a detachment from the Army,² . . . proceeded with silence and expedition on their way to Concord, about eighteen miles from Boston. The people were soon alarmed, and began to assemble in several Towns, before daylight, in order to watch the motion of the Troops. At Lexington, six miles below Concord, a company of Militia,³ of about one hundred men, mustered⁴ near the Meeting-House; the Troops came in sight of them just before sunrise; and running within a few rods of them, the Commanding Officer accosted the Militia in words to this effect: “Disperse, you rebels—damn you, throw down your arms and disperse”; upon which the Troops huzzaed,⁵ and immediately one or two officers discharged their pistols, which were instantaneously followed by the firing of four or five of the soldiers, and then there seemed to be a general discharge from the

1. **Province:** the colony of Massachusetts

2. **Army:** the British army

3. **Militia:** local (colonial) volunteer-soldiers, mostly made up of ordinary citizens

4. **mustered:** gathered

5. **huzzaed:** cheered

whole body: eight of our men were killed, and nine wounded. In a few minutes after this action the enemy renewed their march for Concord; at which place they destroyed several Carriages, Carriage Wheels, and about twenty barrels of Flour, all belonging to the Province. Here about one hundred and fifty men going towards a bridge, of which the enemy were in possession, the latter fired and killed two of our men, who then returned the fire, and obliged the enemy to retreat back to Lexington, where they met Lord Percy,⁶ with a large reinforcement, with two pieces of cannon. The enemy now having a body of about eighteen hundred men, made a halt, picked up many of their dead, and took care of their wounded. At Menotomy,⁷ a few of our men attacked a party of twelve of the enemy (carrying stores and provisions to the Troops), killed one of them, wounded several, made the rest prisoners, and took possession of all their arms, stores, provisions, &c., without any loss on our side. The enemy having halted one or two hours at Lexington, found it necessary to make a second retreat, carrying with them many of their dead and wounded, who they put into chaises and on horses that they found standing in the road. . . . Notwithstanding their field-pieces, our people continued the pursuit, firing at them till they got to Charlestown Neck⁸ (which they reached a little after sunset) over which the enemy passed, proceeded up Breed's Hill, and soon afterwards went into the Town, under the protection of the *Somerset* Man-of-War of sixty-four guns . . . The savage barbarity exercised upon the bodies of our unfortunate brethren who fell is almost incredible: not contented with shooting down the unarmed, aged, and infirm, they disregarded the cries of the wounded, killing them without mercy, and mangling their bodies in the most shocking manner.

We have the pleasure to say, that, notwithstanding the highest provocations given by the enemy, not one instance of cruelty, that we have heard of, was committed by our victorious Militia; but, listening to the merciful dictates of the Christian religion, they “breathed higher sentiments of humanity.”

A British Account

General Gage having received intelligence of a quantity of military stores⁹ being collected at Concord, for the avowed purpose of supplying a body of troops to act in opposition to His Majesty's Government, detached,¹⁰ on the eighteenth of April at night, the Grenadiers of his Army, and the Light-Infantry, under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Smith, of the Tenth Regiment, and Major Pitcairn, of the Marines, with orders to destroy the said stores; . . .

Lieutenant-Colonel Smith finding, after he had advanced some miles on his march, that the country had been alarmed by the firing of guns and ringing of bells, despatched six Companies of Light-Infantry, in order to secure two bridges on different roads beyond Concord, who, upon their arrival at Lexington, found a body of the country people under arms, on a green close to the road; and upon

6. Lord Percy: Earl Percy, a British officer

7. Menotomy: present-day Arlington, Massachusetts

8. Charlestown Neck: a narrow land bridge leading to Charlestown, Massachusetts, near Boston

9. military stores: weapons and ammunition

10. detached: sent out from the main army

the King's Troops marching up to them, in order to inquire the reason of their being so assembled, they went off in great confusion, and several guns were fired upon the King's Troops from behind a stone wall, and also from the meeting-house and other houses, by which one man was wounded, and Major Pitcairn's horse shot in two places. In consequence of this attack by the rebels, the troops returned the fire and killed several of them. After which the detachment marched on to Concord without any thing further happening, where they effected the purpose for which they were sent, having knocked off the trunnions¹¹ of three pieces of iron ordnance,¹² burnt some new gun carriages and a great number of carriage-wheels, and thrown into the river a considerable quantity of flour, gunpowder, musket-balls, and other articles. Whilst this service was performing, great numbers of the rebels assembled in many parts, and a considerable body of them attacked the Light-Infantry, posted at one of the bridges, on which an action ensued, and some few were killed and wounded.

On the return of the Troops from Concord, they were very much annoyed, and had several men killed and wounded by the rebels firing from behind walls, ditches, trees, and other ambushes; but the brigade, under the command of Lord Percy, having joined them at Lexington with two pieces of cannon, the rebels were for a while dispersed; but as soon as the troops resumed their march, they began to fire upon them from behind stone walls and houses, and kept up in that manner a scattering fire during the whole of their march of fifteen miles, by which means several were killed and wounded; and such was the cruelty and barbarity of the rebels, that they scalped and cut off the ears of some of the wounded men who fell into their hands.

It is not known what numbers of the rebels were killed and wounded, but it is supposed that their loss was considerable.

Source: Excerpt from *American Archives*, Series Four, Volume 2, edited by Peter Force (Washington: M. St. Clair Clarke and Peter Force, 1837), pp. 391–392, 945–946.

11. **trunnions:** the equipment that cannons are mounted on

12. **ordnance:** a cannon

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: ANSWER

The American account states that the British, unprovoked, fired first at Lexington. The British are described as savage and merciless. The British account suggests that the colonials fired first and notes that the major's horse was shot. This account describes the cruelty and barbarity of the militiamen in ambushing the retreating British.