

The Battle of Lexington

In this exercise, you will unravel a mystery historians have been unable to solve for more than two hundred years. It is the question of which side fired first in the first battle of the Revolutionary War, the Battle of Lexington. Like many battles, there were many eyewitness accounts; but in this case, eyewitnesses tell very different versions of the story. Your job will be to evaluate what the witnesses say and try to sort out what actually happened. From the eyewitness accounts provided, piece together what you think is the most reliable account of the battle. In your answer explain how you arrived at your conclusion, what accounts are the most reliable, and why.

Each person should read each account and answer the following questions about each account:

1. If the person in the account was an eyewitness, do we know where he or she was at the time of the battle? If we do, mark his or her location on the map of Lexington included in CICERO, Unit 4, Historical Maps.
2. What “side”, if any, was this person supporting?
3. Would this person have any reason to lie or to exaggerate what he saw?
4. Was there anything that could cause this person to mistake what he says he saw?
5. According to this person or source, what happened at the Battle of Lexington? Do you think this source is reliable? Why or why not?
6. How long after the event did this person write or present this account?

Once you have completed this process, derive your solution to the problem; and write your essay, using quotes from the accounts to support your position.

Document #1 – Lt. John Barker

Barker was a British officer. He wrote this account in his personal diary on April 19, 1775, the same day as the battle:

“...about 5 miles on this side of a Town called Lexington, which lay in our road, we heard there were some hundreds of People collected together intending to oppose us and stop our going on; at 5 o’clock we arrived there, and saw a number of People, I believe between 2 and 300, formed in a Common in the middle of the Town; we still continued advancing, keeping prepared against attack tho’ 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 ’em to flight; several of them were killed, we could not tell how many, because they were got behind Walls and into the Woods; We had a man of the 10th light Infantry wounded, nobody else hurt. We then formed on the Common, but with some difficulty, the Men were so wild they could hear no orders; we waited a considerable time there, and at length proceeded on our way to Concord...”

Document #2 – Simon Winship

Winship was a colonist captured by the British as they approached Lexington around 4:00 A.M. He gave this account to a committee of the Massachusetts Provincial Legislature when the legislature investigated the battle several days later.

“Simon Winship, of Lexington, ...testifieth...that on the nineteenth of April instant, at about four o'clock in the morning, as he was passing the publick road in said Lexington, peaceably and unarmed, about two miles and a half distant from the meeting-house in said Lexington, he was met by a body of the King's Regular Troops, and being stopped by some officers of said Troops, was commanded to dismount. Upon asking why he must dismount, he was obliged by force to quit his horse, and ordered to march in the midst of the body; and being examined whether he had been warning the Minute-Men, he answered no, but had been out, and was returning to his father's. Said Winship further testifies that he marched with said Troops until he came within about a half of a quarter of a mile of said meeting-house, where an officer commanded the Troops to halt, and then prime and load. This being done, the said Troops marched on till they came within a few rods of Captain Parker's Company, who were partly collected on the place of parade, when said Winship observed an officer at the head of said troops flourishing his sword, and with a loud voice giving the word fire; which was instantly followed by a discharge of arms from said Regular Troops. And said Winship is positive, and in the most solemn manner declares, that there was no discharge of arms on either side till the word fire was given by said officer above.”

Document #3 – John Bateman

Bateman was a British enlisted man the colonists captured later in the day on April 19. He was questioned four days later while the colonist still held him.

“I, John Bateman, belonging to the Fifty-Second Regiment...on the nineteenth day of April instant, was in the party marching to Concord, being at Lexington...; being nigh the meeting-house in said Lexington, there was a small party of men gathered together in that place when our Troops marched by, and I testify and declare, that I heard the word of command given to the Troops to fire, and some of said Troops did fire, and 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.”

Document #4 – Lt. William Sutherland

Sutherland was a junior officer who gave this account in a letter to the office of General Gage, the British commander in Boston, dated April 27, 1775. It should be noted the British soldiers on this expedition brought no horses with them. The horse Sutherland was riding at Lexington was probably a horse confiscated from one of the civilians they had intercepted on the road that night.

“...We still went on further when 3 shot more were fired at us, which we did not return, & this is sacred truth as I hope for mercy These three shots were fired from a Corner of a large house to the right of the Church, when we came up to the main body, which appeared to me to Exceed 400 in & about the Village who were drawn up in a plain opposite to the Church, several Officers Called out throw down your Arms & and you will come to no harm...which they

refusing to do, instantaneously, the Gentlemen who were on horseback rode in amongst them of which I was one, at which instant I heard Major Pitcairns voice Call out Soldiers don't fire, keep your Ranks, form & surround them, instantly some of the Villains who got over the hedge fired at us which our men for the first time returned, which sett my horse a going who Galloped with me down a road above 600 yards among the middle of them before I turned him & in returning a vast number who were in a Wood at the right of the Grenadiers fired at me, but the distance was so great that I only heard the Whistling of the Balls, but saw a great number of people in the Wood, in consequence of their discovering themselves by firing, our Grenadiers gave them a smart fire, I shall take the liberty of observing here that it is very unlikely our men should have fired for some time otherwise they must have hurt their own Officers who galloped in amongst this Arm'd Mob. Our men now kept up the fire and on my coming up Colonel Smith turned to me, asked me, do you know where a Drum is, which I found, who immediately beat to Arms, when the Men ceased firing, during this time there was 3 shot fired at Col. Smith from... a house within 50 yards of us, & it was from the end of that house the first 3 Shot were fired upon us. Col. Smith and Major Pitcairn regretted in my hearing the too great warmth of the Soldiers in not attending to their Officers & keeping their ranks & recommending a more steady conduct to them for the future....”

Document #5 – Nathaniel Mulliken and Thirty-Three Others

Nathaniel Mulliken spoke for himself and thirty-three other Lexington militiamen who had been involved at the Battle of Lexington. He gave this deposition to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress investigating what had happened on the morning of April 19, 1775. The statement was taken on April 25, 1775.

“We, (followed by the names of Mulliken and that 33 other militiamen) do testify and declare that on the nineteenth of April instant, about one or two o'clock in the morning... understanding that a body of Regulars were marching from Boston towards Concord, with intent (as it was supposed) to take the stores belonging to the Colony in that town, we 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... about five o'clock in the morning, hearing our drum beat, we proceeded toward the parade, and soon found that a large body of 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.”

Document #6 – Lt. Edward Gould

Lt. Gould was a British junior-grade officer captured on April 19 and asked to testify to the Massachusetts Provincial legislature while being held captive on April 25, 1775.

“...on the evening of the eighteenth instant, under orders of General Gage, I embarked with the Light-Infantry and Grenadiers... and landed on the marshes of Cambridge, from whence we proceeded to Lexington. On our arrival at that place, we saw a body of Provincial Troops armed, to the number of about sixty or seventy men; on our approach they dispersed, and soon after firing began; but which party fired first, I cannot exactly say, as our Troops rushed on shouting

and huzzaing previous to the firing, which was continued by our Troops as long as any of the Provincials were seen....”

Document #7 – Capt. John Parker

Capt. Parker was the commander of the Lexington Militia and a combat veteran of the French and Indian War. He gave this deposition to the Massachusetts Provincial Legislature on April 25, 1775.

“I, John Parker...do testify and declare, that on the nineteenth instant, in the morning, about one of the clock, being... informed that a number of Regular Troops were on their march from Boston, in order to take the Province Stores at Concord, ordered our Militia to meet on the common in said Lexington, to consult what to do, and concluded not to be discovered, nor meddle or make with said Regular Troops (if they should approach) unless they should insult us; and upon their sudden approach, I immediately ordered our men to disperse and not to fire. Immediately said Troops made their appearance, and rushed furiously, fired upon and killed eight of our party, without receiving any provocations therefore from us.”

Document #8 – Major John Pitcairn

Major Pitcairn was the ranking British officer on the scene in Lexington when the fighting began. Pitcairn, like Lt. Sutherland, had acquired a horse somewhere on the way to Lexington, probably from one of the colonists intercepted on the road. The actual commander of the force, Col. Smith, was not present when the shooting started. This account is taken from Pitcairn’s official report of the incident to General Gage, the British commanding officer in Boston. Pitcairn submitted his report on April 26, 1775.

“... 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 toward 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 &c – some of the Rebels who had jumped over the wall, Fired Four or Five Shott at the Soldiers, which wounded a man of the Tenth, and my Horse was Wounded in two places...and at the same time several Shott 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....”

Name _____

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Questions:

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