Ebenezer Locke and the First Shot Fired on Lexington Green, April 19, 1775

Written by Donald Johnson, Deering NH Heritage Commission

When we attended our one room schoolhouse in East Deering in the 1930s and 40s, each Memorial Day we would gather up the heaps of lilacs we had brought to school and after the teacher passed out the new American flags, we begin our march up to the Goodale cemetery on what is now named Driscoll hill. Upon arrival the student selected for this honor, almost always a well behaved girl would carefully place the American flag in the holder on Ebenezer Locke's gravestone. After we distributed our lilacs and flags to the other war veterans' graves, said the pledge of allegiance and sometimes sung the Star Spangled Banner or another patriotic song, we departed for our walk back to school.

We boys were eager to return to school with the old flags we had gathered from the sites where we had placed them the year before. After carefully tearing off the old flags from their wooden staffs we would proceed to divide up the flagstaffs, retrieve the bows we had been sure to bring to school that day and begin firing our new arrows at each other until the teacher brought a halt to our war games and sent us home.

Caught up as we were in the excitement of our new supply of arrows each year, we didn't fully grasp the significance of our Memorial Day celebration. We were often told that Ebenezer Locke had fired the first shot at Lexington Green, the shot that Emerson had called, "the shot heard round the world." Only years later did many of us come to realize that the man many in Deering claimed was the one who fired the first shot that began the Revolutionary War had actually lived in Deering and was buried in the very cemetery where we carried out our annual Memorial Day rituals.

Various patriotic groups recognized Ebenezer Locke's historic action and led many commemorations in Deering off and on throughout the 19th century as the Revolution and the Declaration of Independence came to be understood as essential parts of our collective creation story. Until the early 20th century, groups of veterans from Deering and surrounding towns came to Deering on the Fourth of July to march up the hill to Goodale cemetery to place a flag on Ebenezer Locke's grave and offer patriotic speeches in memory of our Revolutionary hero. However, by the time many of Deering's farmers abandoned their farms or faced foreclosure in the first decades of the 20th century and were replaced by new immigrants from Europe and Canada, Locke's memory seems to have faded. Few newcomers took the time to read George Patten's 1885 History of Deering where he explained. "Ebenezer [Lock] …discharged the first gun at Lexington, Mass, upon the British troops, April 19, 1775."

The legend of Ebenezer Lock and his pivotal role in fomenting our revolution was resurrected with a flourish in 1974 when the Deering Bicentennial Committee commissioned a special commemorative coin that featured on one side, "Early Settler Ebenezer Locke Fired First Shot of American Revolution." Soon after a Deering commemorative quilt was created that also featured Ebenezer Lock and his famous shot "heard round the world." These memorials further solidified the legend of Ebenezer Locke in Deering's

collective memory. In our own time the Wikipedia entry for Deering History, again reconfirms that Ebenezer Locke was indeed the man who fired the first shot of the Revolutionary War.

The legend of Deering's own Revolutionary War hero has persisted through most of Deering's history and with the 1974 Bicentennial celebrations, reclaimed once more as the man who fired the first shot at Lexington. Few have questioned the authenticity of Locke's heroic act; however, as any good historian would ask, do we really know for sure that Locke indeed fired that first shot

We do know that Ebenezer Locke was the great grandson of William Locke who was a fourteen year old orphan and a cousin of John Locke (1631-1704), the British philosopher whose ideas infuse our Declaration of Independence. William immigrated to Massachusetts in 1635, at the age of fourteen and accumulated a sizable land holding in Woburn. William's grandson Ebenezer Locke Sr. turned out to be the father of yet another Ebenezer, this one of Revolutionary fame, who was born in 1735 on his father's farm in Woburn. After marrying Lucy Wood, the couple had three sons, Ebenezer, Jonathon and Benjamin, all of whom eventually settled in Deering. The Locke family seemed to have enjoyed more connections in neighboring Lexington, than in their home town of Woburn. They were members of the Lexington Congregational Church; they did their shopping there and many of their relatives lived there as well.

As the colonial anti-British sentiments rose to a boiling point in the 1770s, Ebenezer volunteered for the Woburn Training Band, part of the Middlesex Regiment of the Massachusetts Militia. In the early morning of that fateful day, April 19, 1775, Ebenezer and his cousin Amos, also a minuteman volunteer, heard the Church bell's warning that British troops were coming and they headed to Lexington Common, then known as Lexington Green.

Setting the Scene

Lexington Green still closely resembles the site of the outbreak of the American Revolution. Jonathan Harrington's house is still there on the north side of the common with a plaque that explains how he took a shot to his chest and staggered home to die on his doorstep. Across the street is another maker that reads, "Line of the Minute Men, April 19, 1775 – Stand your ground – Don't fire unless fired upon, but if they mean to have a war, let it begin here – Captain Parker." On the southern side of the common facing toward the route that the British army led by Major John Pitcairn was marching on that fateful day, stands a bronze statue of a defiant minute man.

The Buckman Tavern, named for its 1775 landlord, stands to the east of the green. The building, then known as The Stone Tavern with its large chimneys and gambrel roof highlighting the clapboard building, is not very different from its appearance of 1775. The tavern served as the meeting place for the minute men while they waited for orders. John Hancock had hidden his personal papers on the second floor of the tavern. Knowing that a British discovery of the trunk would lead to the arrest of many revolutionaries, Paul Revere and John Lowell hid the papers in the woods behind the tavern just before the British troops arrived in Lexington. Ebenezer's

cousin Amos Locke is known to have stayed the night of April 18th in the tavern and the musket he used the next day now hangs on the wall of this historic building.

About 700 British Army regulars, under Lieutenant Colonel Francis Smith, with Major John Pitcairn as his executive officer, left Boston on the night of April 18th with the mission of capturing the guns, powder and shot that John Hancock and Samuel Adams had stored in Concord. The two Revolutionary leaders were staying with Jonas Clarke in the Lexington parsonage. On that same evening William Dawes, Samuel Prescott and Paul Revere, together left Boston by separate routes to Lexington and Concord to warn the leaders and minutemen of the impending British arrival. The riders were assisted by some sixty patriot spies spread through the area.

According to William Poole, the great, great, great, great, great, great grandson of Ebenezer, and also at 76, a loyal member of the annual reenactment of the Battle of Lexington, writes that Ebenezer and Amos:

> Coming across lots over the hill by George Wright's house and by Warren Duren's to the common where they found the militia rallying. They stood around for some time, and then someone came up the road with the report that there weren't any regulars anywhere between Boston and Lexington. With this, Amos and Ebenezer decided to return home to their families, but had not proceeded far, when they "heard a firing." "We immediately returned," Amos recalled, "coming up towards the easterly side of the common, where under the cover of a wall about twenty rods distant from the common, where the British then were, we found Asahel Porter of Woburn shot through the body; upon which Ebenezer Lock took aim, and discharged his gun at the Britons who were about twenty rods from us." Amos and Ebenezer were then forced to retreat from the protection of the wall, probably because the [British] regulars were by then rampaging through the center of town. [1]

To demonstrate how this story began and got reincarnated over the years into something far more heroic, let's look at an 1890 version from a prominent Deering citizen, Benjamin L. Bartlett:

> On the memorable 19th of April, Pitcairn, having given the signals of war, the Americans, flew to arms. Instead of joining the army on the green, Mr. Locke took position in an open cellar and for some ten minutes and worked valiantly bringing down an enemy at nearly every shot. A volley of balls lodged in the opposite wall told that he was discovered, but he continued to load and fire till closely pressed by the British. Having but one bullet left, he lowered his gun at the soldier nearby, dropped the weapon as the man fell shot through the heart and sprang for the orchard, his only way to escape. The balls whistled close around him, but reaching the brink of a steep hill he threw himself to the ground, rolling downward as if mortally wounded, thus escaping unhurt. [2]

The Lockes in the Revolutionary War

Following the Battles of Lexington and Concord that began our nation's struggle for independence, Ebenezer Locke rejoined his company and may have gone with them the same day to fight at the much bloodier Battle of Concord Bridge. Soon after Ebenezer

fought with the 38th Massachusetts Regiment as they engaged the British in Boston and his regiment later joined the Washington's continental army.

When the British evacuated Boston, Locke and his regiment marched to New Haven, Connecticut and boarded ships that took them to New York where the British were preparing a major assault. Washington's forces were severely tested in several battles on Long Island and forced to retreat to Manhattan. Ebenezer's regiment fought bravely during the crucial days of retreat and contributed greatly to Washington's success in regrouping his army in White Plains, New York where they successfully held off the British attacks.

The 28th marched with Washington to the area around Princeton and on Christmas Eve, 1776, crossed the icy Delaware River and launched a surprise attack against the celebrating German troops. This victory was among Washington's first and gave a serious boost, not only to his own men, but to the young nation as well. Soon after when Washington decided to attack the British at Princeton, the men of the 26th who had decided to stay on, were chosen to lead the assault. After the Continental Army set up winter camp at Morristown, New Jersey, Ebenezer and his son were discharged in April 1777.

Following their army service Ebenezer and son sold his farm in Woburn, Massachusetts and moved to Deering where the other two sons, Benjamin and Jonathon were already living. Ebenezer chose to live with his son Benjamin until the father's death in 1816, at age 82. The senor Locke likely told and retold his Revolutionary War experiences to his grandchildren and neighbors. There is no record that he made the claim that he had actually fired the first shot of our founding war.

In identifying the original house where the elder Ebenezer came to live in Deering, we are faced with sifting through sparse records. We do know that he came to live with his son Benjamin, so a search for the son's home is a likely place to begin. The first real history of Deering was written in 1885 by George Patten, who lived in the present Hazel Vogelien house in North Deering. Patten's brief entry on Ebenezer Locke states that:

> EBENEZER LOCK, son of Ebenezer Lock and Elizabeth, his wife, of Woburn, Mass., was born 1734; married Lucy Wood. He had three sons,--Ebenezer, Jonathan and Benjamin, -- all of whom settled in Deering and died there. Ebenezer, the father, discharged the first gun at Lexington, Mass, upon the British troops, April 19, 1775, working away some ten minutes before a shot was fired elsewhere by the Americans. He served through the war as a private, and some years later joined his sons in Deering with his youngest son, Benjamin, and died in 1816. [3]

Benjamin Lock lived on a farm on what is now Driscoll Hill opposite the Goodale Cemetery. The Patten history states "BENJAMIN LOCK, third son of EBENEZER, was born 1765. He married Anna Eastman of Weare. He enlisted in the Continental service in 1780, at the age of fifteen, and served until the close of the war. The farm finally settled upon by him is recognized as the one on which Wm.Whitaker now lives.[4] On

the 1858 Map of Deering, William Whitaker's house is clearly marked on the site across from Goodale Cemetery. Benjamin and his father Ebenezer are both buried in Goodale Cemetery, the only tangible proof of Ebenezer's presence in Deering.

We know that Ebenezer" other son, Jonathan Lock, later sold his house to Alfred Hadlock. On the 1854 and 1892 Deering maps A. Hadlock's house is clearly the present home of Ray Farrell. However, there is no record that Ebenezer Lock ever lived with his son Jonathan. Ebenezer, the son of the war hero is listed as a Deering Selectman in 1793, indicating the continued respect for the Locks by the Deering citizens.

If locating the Deering house where Ebenezer lived with his son Benjamin is a puzzle, and then the fact of his firing the first shot at Lexington is even more daunting. Poole and the many other writers who have explored the mystery of that famous first shot have all had at their disposal only one eye witness account from Ebenezer's cousin, Amos Locke. Forty nine years after the event, Ebenezer's cousin swore:

> …on Dec. 29, 1824, that he
> and Ebenezer Lock responded to the ringing of
> the bell, and on reaching the meeting house
> found the militia collecting. Shortly after, some
> person came up the road and reported that no
> regulars were coming, so they concluded to re-
> turn to their families.
>
> They had not proceeded far before they heard
> firing, and immediately returned.
>
> Under cover of a wall they found Porter,
> about twenty rods from where the British then
> were, shot through the body, upon which
> Ebenezer Lock took aim and fired at the British. [5]

We might rightly ask how reliable this testimony is. Not only was that April day of long ago filled with confusion and excitement, but Amos was recalling an event that happened forty-nine years earlier and he was eighty-two years old when he gave his deposition. Even then, it is apparent from his testimony that Ebenezer Locke could not have fired the first shot of the Revolutionary War because as Amos recalled, "they had not proceeded far before they heard firing." Only after hearing shots fired, did they return to Lexington Green and begin firing at the British. So, we might ask, if Ebenezer did not actually fire the first shot of the war, could he have fired the first minute man shot at the British?

The Militia leader, Captain John Parker, testified under oath:

“I ... 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 [British] Regular Troops (if they should approach) unless they should insult or molest us; and, upon their sudden Approach, I immediately ordered our Militia 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 Provocation therefore from us.” [6]

Another eye witness account by a Minute Man, Sylvanus Wood in his 1826 deposition, offers another version of events.

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 (32 feet) of the centre of the company, where I stood, the first platoon being about three rods distant. They there halted. The officer then swung his sword, and said, 'Lay down your arms, you damned 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 anv of Captain Parker's company, within my knowledge. I was so situated that I must have known it, had anything of the kind taken place before a total dispersion of our company. [7]

Wood’s testimony is supported by another militiaman, who claimed to speak for 32 other Minute Men:

> We Nathaniel Mulliken, Philip Russell, [and 32 other men ...] do testify and declare, that on the nineteenth in the morning, being informed that... a body of regulars were marching from Boston towards Concord. ... About five o’clock in the morning, hearing our drum beat, we proceeded towards the parade, and soon found that a large body of troops were marching towards us, some of our company were coming 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 continued firing until we had all made our escape.” [8]

However, another participant of the Massachusetts militia contradicts Wood and Mulliken and claimed that the minutemen did indeed fire at the British. Corporal John Munroe testified that:

> After the first fire of the regulars, I thought, and so stated to Ebenezer Munroe ...who stood next to me on the left, that they had fired nothing but powder; but on the second firing, Munroe stated they had fired something more than powder, for he had received a wound in his arm; and now, said he, to use his own words, 'I'll give them the guts of my gun.' We then both took aim at the main body of British troops the smoke preventing our seeing anything but the heads of some of their horses and discharged our pieces." [9]

We not only have an abundance of Minute Man depositions, but also a number of British testimonies on that fateful April Day. Colonel Smith, the officer in charge of the British troops, in his letter to King George III wrote:

> In the obedience to your Excellency's commands, I marched on the evening of the 18th inst. with the corps of grenadiers and light infantry for Concord, to execute your Excellency's orders with respect to destroying all ammunition, artillery, tents, &c, collected there.
>
> I think it proper to observe, that when I had got some miles on the march from Boston, I detached six light infantry companies to march with all expedition to seize the two bridges on different roads beyond Concord. On these companies' arrival at Lexington, I understand, from the report of Major Pitcairn, who was with them, and from many officers, that they found on a green close to the road a body of the country people drawn up in military order, with arms and accoutrement, and, as appeared after, loaded.
>
> In response to Pitcairn's demands, Capt. Parker ordered his men to disperse. Then a shot rang out - Hearing the shot, Major Pitcairn yelled Fire, damn you, fire! The first platoon of Marines fired, but over the heads of the militia. Some of the men in the Militia thought that the troops were firing blanks. However, when a second volley was fired, several of the Militia were killed or wounded. The Lexington Militia fled
>
> The Militia then retreated into the woods to avoid the British fire. Firing a last volley, the Marines shouted huzzahs as an expression of victory before marching off toward Concord. When the Militia retreated, eight Americans were dead from musket shot and bayonet wounds, and 10 more were wounded.[10]

Major Pitcairn, the British commanding officer at Lexington Green, testified that the Massachusetts Militia that fired the first shots at Lexington:

> At 2 o'clock we began our march by wading through a very long ford up to the middles; after going a few miles we took three or four people who were going off to give intelligence; about five 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 200 and 300, formed in a common in the middle of town; we still continued advancing, keeping prepared against an attack through without intending to attack them; but on our coming near them they fired on us two shots**,** upon which our men without any orders, rushed upon them, fired and put them to flight; several of them were killed, we could not tell how many, because they were behind walls and into the woods. We had a man of the 10th light Infantry wounded, nobody else was 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 our way to Concord.[11]

Many historians have engaged the question on who actually fired first at Lexington Green touching off the revolution that made us a free and independent nation. Virtually all of these historians, and Ebenezer Lockes great, great, great, great, great, grandson as well, conclude that the answer to this question, based on the available evidence, will never be known for sure. As David Hackett Fisher, one of our premier historians writes in his book, Paul *Revere's Ride*, the "shot fired from an unknown source. [12]

Yet despite the overwhelming consensus among our historians 'conclusion, many Deeringites are still quite sure that Ebenezer Locke of Deering was the man who fired the first shot of our

historic revolution. The bicentennial committee that planned Deering's grand celebrations in 1974, chose to commission both a commemorative coin and a historic tapestry that enshrined Ebenezer Locke's historic first shot as true history. If Lexington Green of April 1775 is an important event in our American creation story, then Locke's presumed first shot is certainly part of Deering's creation story as well.

The case study of Ebenezer Locke and the mystery surrounding who actually fired the first shot at Lexington on that fateful April morning is part of the larger story of the tension between history and memory. The great historian Tony Judt, recently wrote that history and memory are step siblings that "hate one another while sharing just enough in common to be inseparable. …They are constrained to squabble over heritage. Memory is younger and more attractive, much more disposed to be seduced – and therefore she makes many more friends. History is the older sibling; somewhat gaunt, plain and serious, disposed to retreat rather than engage in idle chit-chat. And therefore she is a political wallflower – a book left on the shelf."[13]

Another of our major historians of early American History goes on to suggest that "perhaps history and memory…may act usefully upon each other." While our memories may be shaped by critical history, our larger history "may be kept alive, made vivid and constantly relevant and urgent by the living memory we have of it." [14]

---

[1] . William Poole, quoted in Boston Globe, April 19, 2010 http://www.boston.com/news/local/massachusetts/articles/2010/04/19/who_started_the_revolution_heres_one_smoking_gun_theory/

[2] . Benjamin L. Bartlett, "Ebenezer Locke" in John N. McClintock, Editor and Publisher, Granite Monthly New Hampshire Magazine Devoted to Literature, History and State Progress, Concord, NH: Republican Press Association, Volume 13, 1890, pp. 53, 54

[3] . George Patten, History of Deering, in History of Hillsborough County, New Hampshire. Philadelphia: J.W. Lewis & co., 1885

[4] . Patten, History of Deering

[5] . Quoted in Frank Warren, "Fiction and Truth About the Battle on Lexington Common, April 19, 1775." A Paper Read Before the Lexington Historical Society, December 12, 1916

[6] . Arthur Tourtelot, *Lexington and Concord*. New York: Norton & Co., 1959, 194-96

[7] . Sylvanus Wood 1826 deposition quoted in Historical Sketch of Lexington, MA; http://history.rays-place.com/ma/middlesex/lexington.htm

[8] . Statements of American combatants at Lexington and Concord contained in supplement "Official Papers Concerning the Skirmishes at Lexington and Concord" to *The Military Journals of Private Soldiers, 1758-1775,* by Abraham Tomlinson for the Poughkeepsie, NY museum, 1855.

[9] . http://www.motherbedford.com/Chronology06.htm

[10] . http://www.ushistory.org/us/11c.asp

[11] . British Documents about April 19, 1775 http://www.winthrop.dk/reports.html

[12]. David Hackett Fisher, *Paul Revere's Ride*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, 190-91

[13] . Tony Judt with Timothy Snyder, *Thinking The Twentieth Century*. New York: The Penguin press, 2012.

[14] . Bernard Baylan, Remarks at the 1998 conference on the Atlantic slave trade, quoted in Gordon S. Wood, "No Thanks for the Memories," *New York Review of Books*, January 13, 2011, Volume LVIII, Number 1, 42