

The Beginning of American Liberty

When many people think of important events in United States history, they often think back to the American Revolution, specifically the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the election of George Washington as the first president, and the creation of the Constitution. These events often overshadow the equally, if not more important Battles of Lexington and Concord, the beginning of the American Revolution on April 19, 1775. On this day, Britain was, for the first time, shown the true strength and resolve of the colonists, beginning the long road towards independence. Without these critical battles, the American Revolution might never have occurred, leaving the patriotic events remembered today as what could have been, but never happened. Although many commemorate July 4, 1776 as the beginning of the American dream, April 19, 1775 was the date that the American pursuit of liberty and independence truly began.

After supporting the colonies in the expensive French and Indian War, Britain was deeply in debt. Britain imposed taxes on the colonies, calling it a fair trade. The colonists disagreed and protested their “taxation without representation” with boycotts and riots, the largest of which focused in Massachusetts, with events like the Boston Tea Party outraging the British Parliament and King George III (Hourly History). Britain responded by passing the Massachusetts Government Act, designed to make an example out of the rebellious Massachusetts colonists by taking away their legislative system and replacing their governor with British General Thomas Gage, causing tensions to be higher than ever (NPS.gov). In retaliation, Patriots created an illegal Provincial congress that began stockpiling arms and ammunition in Concord, seeking to raise an army of 15,000 men (Hourly History). With the separation between Britain and the colonies growing, it was only a matter of time before conflict broke out.

On April 18, 1775, Dr. Joseph Warren, a Bostonian physician who supported the Patriot cause, received word from an inside source that General Gage had ordered British troops to march on Concord to seize the weapons cache. Warren sent silversmith Paul Revere and tanner William Dawes to warn the Patriot leaders Samuel Adams and John Hancock, who were in Lexington and wanted by British officials, of the coming Redcoats and to ready the minutemen, Patriot militiamen known for being ready for battle at a minute's notice (History.com). They hung two lanterns from the steeple of the Old North Church, signaling Patriots in the area that the British were coming by sea, and rode off to warn the Patriot leaders (Fradin). Though Revere never actually shouted his famous line, "The British are coming!", he still delivered the same information while avoiding alerting British loyalists in the area. Both Patriot riders arrived at the residence of Adams and Hancock, recruiting a new messenger along the way, Dr. Samuel Prescott. This was a lucky endeavor, as Revere was captured by British troops and Dawes was thrown off his horse, so only Prescott made it to Concord and delivered the warning (History.com). With the minutemen ready and British troops marching towards Concord, the first fight of the American Revolution was near.

At dawn on April 19, 1775, 700 British troops arrived in the town of Lexington and came upon 70 militiamen waiting for them under the command of Captain John Parker, a veteran of the French and Indian War. (Caes). As the British marched towards the minutemen it became clear that the odds were stacked heavily against the colonists. When British troop commander Colonel Pitcairn, called out for the colonists to lay down their arms and disperse, Parker ordered his troops to do exactly that (Caes). The heavily outnumbered militiamen were obeying Parker's order when a single shot rang out, from which side it is unknown. This spurred both sides into

action, with the trained and numerous Redcoats tearing through the colonists, who were mostly running in fear, leaving 8 dead and 10 injured while only 1 Redcoat was hurt (Hourly History). The brutal beginning of the American Revolution was immortalized as the “shot heard ‘round the world” by poet Ralph Waldo Emerson. The American Revolution had begun.

A mere 90 minutes after the brief Battle of Lexington, British troops marched into Concord searching for the weapons cache. This proved difficult as most of the cache had already been moved by the Patriots (Fradin). The British lit a fire to burn any weapons they found, but this fire quickly spread to the rest of the town, inciting the fury of the minutemen that watched, who had been waiting and pondering if they should attack. The minutemen were spurred into action at the sight of the smoke rising from their home. Colonel James Barrett, the leader of the Concord militia, was pressured by his men to press forward, so the minutemen marched towards the Redcoats, though Barrett maintained the order not to fire unless fired upon (Fradin). The British troops had no such orders and a small group of Redcoats unleashed a volley of gunfire upon the minutemen, but these colonists did not run like those at Lexington (Currie). The colonists maintained their ground, even pressed forward, firing at the British troops. The overconfident Redcoats were caught off guard and began their retreat. The two sides watched each other warily, both too cautious to fire upon the other, the Patriots outnumbered and the British fearful of starting a war. The British requested reinforcements to deal with the colonist militia, but, at noon, when the reinforcements still had not arrived, British commander Lieutenant Colonel Francis Smith reluctantly gave the order to return to Boston (Currie).

News of the minuteman defeat at Lexington had spread, causing militiamen from the surrounding areas to pour in to support the Concord Patriots, causing the Patriot forces to number

in the thousands (Hourly History). The British troops were overwhelmed and severely outnumbered, with one British soldier stating that, “It seemed as if men came down from the clouds” (Atkinson). The reinforcements the British had requested at Concord finally arrived, but could not stop the determined colonist forces, as they continued to pursue the British through the entire road from Concord to Boston, which became a 20 mile long battlefield (Currie). British forces suffered the worst losses in the towns of Metonymy and Cambridge, where the largest groups of militiamen had gathered (Hourly History). When British troops finally made it back to Boston, 247 of their men had been killed or injured compared to a mere 91 killed or wounded Americans (NPS.gov).

The Battles of Lexington and Concord showed Britain for the first time that the unorganized and untrained colonists were not to be underestimated. Despite the British forces having better training and leadership, the militiamen united to form an unstoppable force, causing a Redcoat retreat, starting the American Revolution. Without the valor of the Patriotic minutemen, the British would have continually oppressed the rights and liberties of the colonists. The Battles of Lexington and Concord are among the most important events in American history because they spurred the battle for independence, setting the colonies on the path towards becoming the free nation it is today.

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