

## Minute Men

“ ... to march at a Minute's Warning, to the Relief of any Place that may be attacked, or to the Support of our Army ...”

Since its founding in the early 17th Century, the Massachusetts Bay Colony had found itself almost continually embroiled in war, from conflicts with indigenous peoples to extensions of hostilities between England and France that had spread across the Atlantic from Europe.

For many generations, every town in Massachusetts organized and maintained its own “training band”; military or militia units, comprised of local inhabitants who would turn out in times of emergency, often acting as an auxiliary to the regular military forces of Great Britain. When the danger had passed, the militia would return to their homes and private lives.

Though there were exceptions, generally all able-bodied men between the ages of 16 and 60 were required to serve in the militia companies. These companies would muster at or near their towns at certain times of the year for drilling. (American Battlefield Trust, Wilcox)

The American militias established in the colony of Massachusetts were based on an English militia model - every man over age sixteen was required to join and bring his own weapon to the mandatory musters (training meetings).

The governor had authority over the groups. As European settlers spread into Native American territories, conflicts increased. To increase the colonial fighting units' flexibility, power was decentralized.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1631 ordered that,

“every man with a musket shall have ready one pound of powder, twenty bullets and two fathome of match, and that every captain shall traine (drill) his company on Saturday in every week. General training days once a month at one o'clock in the afternoon.”

In 1637, general training days were reduced to eight times in a year. In 1636, the General Court held at Boston, ordered that the military companies be divided into three regiments and that all freeman be allowed to vote for officers of a trained band.

In 1645, company commanders were ordered,

“to appoint out and to make choice of thirty soldiers of their companies in ye hundred, who shall be ready at half an hour's warning upon any service they shall be put upon by their chief military officers.”

The organization of these emergency men was continued for generations, and later they became the famous minute men of the Revolutionary War. (The Connecticut Magazine, 1906)

By the mid-17th Century, militia commanders began organizing smaller companies of men, taken from the ranks of the town militias, who could act as first responders in times of danger. Commanders were ordered, “to make a choice of thirty soldiers of their companies in ye hundred, who shall be ready at half an hour's warning.”

Later, on the verge of hostilities with the Wampanoag people led by King Phillip, militia regiments were ordered to “be ready to march on a moment’s warning, to prevent such danger as may seem to threaten us.” Eventually, these smaller units would come to be known as “minute companies.”

Generally, minute companies were comprised of young citizen-soldiers, 30 years of age or younger, who were quick, agile, and kept ready for deployment “in a minute’s notice.” Like most militia forces, they were armed and equipped at their own expense.

By the 1750s during the French and Indian War, some companies began calling themselves “minute men.” While all minute men were part of the militia, not all militia troops were minute men.



Despite their designation, local troops were never held in high esteem by most regular officers of the British Army or political statesmen, who considered them at best, ill-trained amateurs and at worst, country bumpkins.

In a letter written in 1754, by Lord William Anne Keppel, Earl of Albemarle, colonial troops “may have courage & resolution, but they have no Knowledge or Experience in our profession.” This would continue as an ongoing opinion among the British military until the time of the American Revolution.

By 1756, the designation “minute men” appears on a payroll document, but it was not until 1774 and the establishment of the Provincial Congress that the minute men were formed. (PBS)

Starting in the fall of 1774, the Massachusetts legislature, meeting in defiance of the Royal Governor, General Thomas Gage, assumed control of the province's militia forces.

On October 26, 1774 they recommended that towns recruit volunteers and

that the field officers, so elected, forthwith endeavor to enlist one quarter, at least, of the number of the respective Companies, and form them into companies of fifty Privates, at the least who shall equip and hold themselves in readiness to march at the shortest notice; and that each and every company, so formed, choose a captain and two lieutenants to command them on any necessary and emergent service ...

form them into Companies of fifty Privates at the least, who shall equip and hold themselves in Readiness to march at the shortest Notice. (LOC)

Minutes of the Provincial Congress, Watertown, June 17, 1775 notes it was "recommended to the Militia in all Parts of this Colony, to hold themselves in Readiness to march at a Minute's Warning, to the Relief of any Place that may be attacked, or to the Support of our Army ...." (LOC) Because they were expected to be ready quickly, "at a minute's warning..." they became known as "minute men." (NPS)

In December 1774, the town created a company of minute men who were instructed to "hold themselves in readiness at a minute's warning, complete in arms and ammunition; that is to say a good and sufficient firelock, bayonet, thirty rounds of powder and ball, pouch and knapsack."

While each town's process for establishing minute companies could certainly differ from others, most towns within the colony complied with the request of the Provincial Congress. Minute companies would, however, comprise only about a quarter of each town's militia force.

Overall, these elite, highly mobile companies were very well trained in the art of maneuver, usually the first to arrive at the scene of action, and in the use of their flintlock weapons, mainly smoothbore muskets, and fowling pieces.

On the morning of April 19, 1775, despite the myths and fireside stories that would be passed from one generation of Americans to the next, some suggest that the truth is that there were no Lexington minute men standing on the Village Green to witness the first shots of the American Revolution.

Rather, standing on the Green with Captain Parker that fateful morning were men who made up, not a minute company, but a traditional New England training band. They were friends, neighbors, and kinsmen; they were the militia and brave men, all. (American Battlefield Trust, Wilcox)

Information here is from American Battlefield Trust, Wilcox; LOC; NPS; Britannica; Connecticut Magazine; PBS (Note: Spelling of Minute Men (2-words) is based on how they spelled that name in the mid-1770s.)

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young