

Summer History & Heritage -- #4 (July 2)

This week, in honor of Independence Day, a lesson on how our Revolutionary War began from longtime historian & professor, Roger McGrath:

Lexington & Concord --- (Roger McGrath; *Chronicles*, June 2012)

These Massachusetts towns, on April 19, 1775, witnessed the dramatic first skirmishes of the Revolutionary War? Suffering 300 casualties in their retreat to Boston, British Brig. Gen. Hugh Percy said “The rebels attacked us in a very scattered, irregular manner, but with perseverance and resolution. . .” Percy knew, observes Roger McGrath, that he was facing “something far more dangerous” than a regular army: “well-armed Americans fighting to protect hearth and home, and their liberty.”

The Shot Heard Round the World --- (Roger McGrath; *Chronicles*, June 2012)

Roger McGrath, in the following excerpt, takes us through the key events that led up to Lexington and Concord in the spring of 1775. It’s a story few of his UCLA students knew, and the same could surely be said for Americans generally:

“While nearly all my college students had heard of Lexington and Concord and the first battle of our Revolutionary War, only rarely did any of them know why the British were marching on the small Massachusetts towns.

“During the summer of 1774, Gen. Thomas Gage, supported by a squadron of the Royal Navy and five regiments of soldiers, was appointed governor and captain-general of Massachusetts, and the Massachusetts legislature was dissolved.

“But Americans were ornery and independent back then, and resistance was immediate and widespread. The colonists even elected another legislature, which was declared illegal by Gage. Nonetheless, the legislature, led by John Hancock and Sam Adams, met in Concord and openly defied the British general. By October, Massachusetts, outside of Boston, was virtually independent.

“Through the fall and winter and into the spring of 1775, the rebel government in Concord collected arms and ammunition, and throughout Massachusetts militia drilled. Most militiamen were farmers, but there were also hunters and trappers, craftsmen, mechanics, teamsters, sailors, and shopkeepers.

“Early in April 1775, Gage dispatched several spies to gather intelligence, including Ensign Henry DeBerniere and Sergeant John Howe. . .[Such reports inspired him to act.] He issued orders to march on Concord, capture the rebel leaders, and, most importantly, confiscate all arms and ammunition. The bloody colonists must be disarmed! By the time that nearly 800 British troops, under Lt. Col. Francis Smith, were on the road to Concord, Americans all along the route had been alerted by Paul Revere, Will Dawes, and Sam Prescott.

“When the British reached Lexington, they found militia captain John Parker and 70 of his Minutemen---so named because they must be ready with rifle and shot in one minute---assembled on the village green. In the van of the British advance was Maj. John Pitcairn and his 400 light infantrymen, their scarlet coats and white breeches, and muskets and bayonets, catching the first rays of the rising sun. In the face of this impressive sight, Captain Parker ordered his Minutemen, ‘Stand your ground, boys. Don’t fire unless fired upon, but if they mean to have a war, let it begin here.’

“Major Pitcairn and three other British officers rode to within a hundred feet of the assembled militiamen and shouted, ‘Lay down your arms, you damned rebels, and disperse.’ Parker looked at Pitcairn’s overwhelming numbers and decided a pitched battle would be suicidal. He ordered his men to fall out. They did so, but not one man would surrender his rifle. ‘Damn you!’ shouted Pitcairn. ‘Why don’t you lay down your arms?’ Another British officer shouted, ‘Damn them! We will have them!’

“A shot rang out. American militiamen said a British officer fired. The British claimed an American fired. What is known for certain is that hundreds of British guns belched smoke, eight Americans were killed, and ten more wounded. The British then hurried on to Concord, encountering no opposition along the way but hearing guns fired and bells rung in the distance, signals that militiamen were being called to duty. By the time the British reached Concord, hundreds of Minutemen in small scattered groups were there to meet them.

“At Old North Bridge, the British troops opened fire on Minutemen, killing two and wounding four, but the Minutemen returned fire and advanced, killing and wounding 15 British officers and men. Outmaneuvered and stunned by the accuracy of the Minutemen’s fire, the British abandoned their wounded and fled. Fleeing British soldiers collided with reinforcements trying to move to the front. It was some time before Lieutenant Colonel Smith could reorganize his forces. Even then Minutemen sharpshooters continued to drop British troops wherever they were. By early afternoon Smith had begun a retreat to Boston.”

*You know the rest. In the books you have read
How the British Regulars fired and fled,---
How the farmers gave them ball for ball,
From behind each fence and farmyard wall,
Chasing the redcoats down the lane,
Then crossing the fields to emerge again
Under the trees at the turn of the road,
And pausing only to fire and load.
(from Longfellow’s “Paul Revere’s Ride”)*