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The Battle of Lexington

By REV. JONAS CLARKE





REV. JONAS CLARKE

Born 1730,— graduated from Harvard College 1752,— third pastor in Lexington (formerly Cambridge Farms) 1755 to 1805. He married Lucy Bowes, daughter of Rev. Nicholas Bowes of Bedford and granddaughter of Rev. John Hancock, the second minister in Lexington. Gov. John Hancock, the signer of the Declaration, was cousin to Mrs. Clarke and grandson of Rev. John Hancock.



OPENING OF THE WAR OF THE REVOLUTION

19th of April 1775.

A BRIEF NARRATIVE

OF THE

PRINCIPAL TRANSACTIONS OF THAT DAY

BY

JONAS CLARKE,

³³
PASTOR OF THE CHURCH IN LEXINGTON.

Appended to a sermon preached by him in Lexington, April 19, 1776,

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A NARRATIVE, &c.

As it was not consistent with the limits of a single discourse, to give a full account of the particulars of this most savage and murderous affair; the following plain and faithful narrative of facts, as they appeared to us in this place, may be matter of satisfaction.

On the evening of the eighteenth of April, 1775, we received two messages; the first verbal, the other by express, in writing, from the committee of safety, who were then sitting in the westerly part of Cambridge, directed to the Honorable John Hancock, Esq; (who, with the Honorable Samuel Adams, Esq; was then providentially with us) informing, "that eight or nine officers of the king's troops were seen, just before night, passing the road towards Lexington, in a musing, contemplative posture; and it was suspected they were out upon some evil design."

As both these gentlemen had been frequently and even publicly, threatened, by the enemies of this people, both in England and America, with the

vengeance of the British administration:— And as Mr. Hancock in particular had been, more than once, personally insulted, by some officers of the troops, in Boston; it was not without some just grounds supposed, that under cover of the darkness, sudden arrest, if not assassination might be attempted, by these instruments of tyranny!

To prevent any thing of this kind, ten or twelve men were immediately collected, in arms, to guard my house, through the night.

In the mean time, said officers passed through this town, on the road towards Concord: It was therefore thought expedient to watch their motions, and if possible make some discovery of their intentions. Accordingly, about 10 o'clock in the evening, three men, on horses, were dispatched for this purpose. As they were peaceably passing the road towards Concord, in the borders of Lincoln, they were suddenly stopped by said officers, who rode up to them, and putting pistols to their breasts and seizing their horses bridles, swore, if they stirred another step, they should be all dead men!— The officers detained them several hours, as prisoners, examined, searched, abused and insulted them; and in their hasty return (supposing themselves discovered) they left them in Lexington.— Said officers also took into custody, abused and threatened with their lives several other persons; some of whom they met peaceably passing on the road, others even

at the doors of their dwellings, without the least provocation, on the part of the inhabitants, or so much as a question asked by them.

Between the hours of twelve and one, on the morning of the nineteenth of April, we received intelligence, by express, from the Honorable Joseph Warren, Esq. ; at Boston, "that a large body of the king's troops (supposed to be a brigade of about 12, or 1500) were embarked in boats from Boston, and gone over to land on Lechmere's Point (so called) in Cambridge : And that it was shrewdly suspected, that they were ordered to seize and destroy the stores, belonging to the colony, then deposited at Concord," in consequence of General Gage's unjustifiable seizure of the provincial magazine of powder at Medford, and other colony stores in several other places.

Upon this intelligence, as also upon information of the conduct of the officers as above-mentioned, the militia of this town were alarmed, and ordered to meet on the usual place of parade ; not with any design of commencing hostilities upon the king's troops, but to consult what might be done for our own and the people's safety : And also to be ready for whatever service providence might call us out to, upon this alarming occasion, in case overt acts of violence, or open hostilities should be committed by this mercenary band of armed and blood-thirsty oppressors.

About the same time, two persons were sent express to Cambridge, if possible, to gain intelligence of the motions of the troops, and what rout they took.

The militia met according to order ; and waited the return of the messengers, that they might order their measures as occasion should require. Between 3 and 4 o'clock, one of the expresses returned, informing, that there was no appearance of the troops, on the roads, either from Cambridge or Charlestown ; and that it was supposed that the movements in the army the evening before, were only a feint to alarm the people. Upon this, therefore, the militia company were dismissed for the present, but with orders to be within call of the drum, — waiting the return of the other messenger, who was expected in about an hour, or sooner, if any discovery should be made of the motions of the troops. — But he was prevented by their silent and sudden arrival at the place where he was, waiting for intelligence. So that, after all this precaution, we had no notice of their approach, 'till the brigade was actually in the town, and upon a quick march within about a mile and a quarter of the meeting house and place of parade.

However, the commanding officer thought best to call the company together, — not with any design of opposing so superior a force, much less of commencing hostilities ; but only with a view to deter-

mine what to do, when and where to meet, and to dismiss and disperse.

Accordingly, about half an hour after four o'clock, alarm guns were fired, and the drums beat to arms ; and the militia were collecting together. — Some, to the number of about 50, or 60, or possibly more, were on the parade, others were coming towards it. — In the mean time, the troops having thus stolen a march upon us, and to prevent any intelligence of their approach, having seized and held prisoners several persons whom they met unarmed upon the road, seemed to come determined for murder and bloodshed ; and that whether provoked to it, or not ! — When within about half a quarter of a mile of the meeting-house, they halted, and the command was given to prime and load ; which being done, they marched on 'till they came up to the east end of said meeting-house, in sight of our militia (collecting as aforesaid) who were about 12, or 13 rods distant. — Immediately upon their appearing so suddenly, and so nigh, Capt. Parker, who commanded the militia company, ordered the men to disperse, and take care of themselves ; and not to fire. — Upon this, our men dispersed ; — but, many of them, not so speedily as they might have done, not having the most distant idea of such brutal barbarity and more than savage cruelty, from the troops of a British king, as they immediately experienced ! — ! — For, no sooner did they come in

sight of our company, but one of them, supposed to be an officer of rank, was heard to say to the troops, "Damn them ; we will have them !" — Upon which the troops shouted aloud, huzza'd, and rushed furiously towards our men. — About the same time, three officers (supposed to be Col. Smith, Major Pitcairn and another officer) advanced, on horse back, to the front of the body, and coming within 5 or 6 rods of the militia, one of them cried out, "ye villains, ye Rebels, disperse ; Damn you, disperse !" — or words to this effect. One of them (whether the same, or not, is not easily determined) said, "Lay down your arms ; Damn you, why don't you lay down your arms !" — The second of these officers, about this time, fired a pistol towards the militia, as they were dispersing. — The foremost, who was within a few yards of our men, brandishing his sword, and then pointing towards them, with a loud voice said to the troops, "Fire !—By God, fire !" — which was instantly followed by a discharge of arms from the said troops, succeeded by a very heavy and close fire upon our party, dispersing, so long as any of them were within reach.— Eight were left dead upon the ground ! Ten were wounded. — The rest of the company, through divine goodness, were (to a miracle) preserved unhurt in this murderous action ! —

As to the question, 'Who fired first ?' — if it can be a question with any ; we may observe, that

though General Gage hath been pleased to tell the world, in his account of this savage transaction, “that the troops were fired upon by the rebels out of the meeting-house, and the neighbouring houses, as well as by those that were in the field; and that the troops only returned the fire, and passed on their way to Concord;” — yet nothing can be more certain than the contrary, and nothing more false, weak or wicked, than such a representation.

To say nothing of the absurdity of the supposition, that 50, 60, or even 70 men, should, in the open field, commence hostilities with 12, or 1500, of the best troops of Britain,* nor of the known determination of this small party of Americans, upon no consideration whatever, to begin the scene of blood† — A cloud of witnesses, whose veracity cannot be justly disputed, upon oath have declared, in the most express and positive terms, that the British troops fired first:‡ — And I think, we may safely add, without the least reason or provocation. — Nor was there opportunity given, for our men to have saved themselves, either by laying down their arms, or dispersing, as directed, had they been

* 1200 or 1500, was the number we then supposed the brigade to consist of: though afterwards, by the best accounts, it appeared, that there were but about 800.

† From a most intimate acquaintance with the sentiments of the inhabitants of this town, then collected in arms, I think I may boldly assert, that it was their known determination not to commence hostilities, upon the king's troops; though they were equally determined to stand by their rights to the last.

‡ See narrative and depositions, published by authority.

disposed to ; as the command to fire upon them was given almost at the same instant, that they were ordered, by the British officers, to disperse, to lay down their arms, etc.

In short, so far from firing first upon the king's troops ; upon the most careful enquiry, it appears, that but very few of our people fired at all ; and even they did not fire till after being fired upon by the troops, they were wounded themselves, or saw others killed, or wounded by them, and looked upon it next to impossible for them to escape.

As to any firing from the meeting-house, as Gage represents ; it is certain, that there were but four men in the meeting house, when the troops came up : and they were then getting some ammunition, from the town stock, and had not so much as loaded their guns (except one, who never discharged it) when the troops fired upon the militia. And as to the neighbouring houses, it is equally certain, that there was no firing from them, unless after the dispersion of our men, some, who had fled to them for shelter, might fire from them upon the troops.

One circumstance more, before the brigade quitted Lexington, I beg leave to mention, as what may give a further specimen of the spirit and character, of the officers and men, of this body of troops.— After the militia company were dispersed and the firing ceased, the troops drew up and

formed in a body, on the common, fired a volley and gave three huzzas, by way of triumph, and as expressive of the joy of victory and glory of conquest!—!— Of this transaction, I was a witness, having, at that time, a fair view of their motions, and being at the distance of not more than 70 or 80 rods from them.

Whether this step was honorary to the detachment, or agreeable to the rules of war— or how far it was expressive of bravery, heroism and true military glory, for 800 disciplined troops of Great Britain, without notice or provocation, to fall upon 60, or 70, undisciplined Americans, who neither opposed nor molested them, and murder some and disperse the rest, and then to give the shout and make the triumph of victory, is not for me to determine; but must be submitted to the impartial world to judge.— That “there is a God with whom is the power, and the glory, and the victory,” is certain: but whether he will set his seal to the triumph, made upon this most peculiar occasion, by following it with further successes, and finally giving up this people into the hands of those, that have thus cruelly commenced hostilities against them, must be left to time to discover.— But to return from this digression, if it may be called a digression.

Having thus vanquished the party in Lexington, the troops marched on for Concord, to execute their orders, in destroying the stores belonging to

the colony, deposited there.— They met with no interruption in their march to Concord.— But by some means or other, the people of Concord had notice of their approach and designs, and were alarmed about break of day ; and collecting as soon, and as many as possible, improved the time they had before the troops came upon them, to the best advantage, both for concealing and securing as many of the public stores as they could, and in preparing for defence.— By the stop of the troops at Lexington, many thousands were saved to the colony, and they were, in a great measure, frustrated in their design.

When the troops made their approach to the easterly part of the town, the provincials of Concord and some neighbouring towns, were collected and collecting in an advantageous post, on a hill, a little distance from the meeting-house, north of the road, to the number of about 150, or 200 : but finding the troops to be more than three times as many, they wisely retreated, first to a hill about 80 rods further north, and then over the north-bridge (so-called) about a mile from the town : and there they waited the coming of the militia of the towns adjacent, to their assistance.

In the mean time, the British detachment marched into the center of the town. A party of about 200, was ordered to take possession of said bridge, other parties were dispatched to various

parts of the town, in search of public stores, while the remainder were employed in seizing and destroying, whatever they could find in the town-house, and other places, where stores had been lodged. — But before they had accomplished their design, they were interrupted by a discharge of arms, at said bridge.

It seems, that of the party above-mentioned, as ordered to take possession of the bridge, one half were marched on about two miles, in search of stores, at Col. Barret's and that part of the town : while the other half, consisting of towards 100 men, under Capt. Lawrie, were left to guard the bridge. The provincials, who were in sight of the bridge, observing the troops attempting to take up the planks of said bridge, thought it necessary to dislodge them, and gain possession of the bridge. — They accordingly marched, but with express orders not to fire, unless first fired upon by the king's troops. Upon their approach towards the bridge, Capt. Lawrie's party fired upon them, killed Capt. Davis and another man dead upon the spot, and wounded several others. Upon this our militia rushed on, with a spirit becoming free-born Americans, returned the fire upon the enemy, killed 2, wounded several and drove them from the bridge, and pursued them towards the town, 'till they were covered by a reinforcement from the main body. The provincials then took post on a hill, at some

distance, north of the town : and as their numbers were continually increasing, they were preparing to give the troops a proper discharge, on their departure from the town.

In the mean time, the king's troops collected ; and having dressed their wounded, destroyed what stores they could find, and insulted and plundered a number of the inhabitants, prepared for a retreat.

“ While at Concord, the troops disabled two 24 pounders ; destroyed their 2 carriages, and seven wheels for the same, with their limbers. Sixteen wheels for brass 3 pounders, and 2 carriages with limber and wheels for two 4 pounders. They threw into the river, wells, &c. about 500 weight of ball : and stove about 60 barrels of flour ; but not having time to perfect their work, one half of the flour was afterwards saved.” *

The troops began a hasty retreat about the middle of the day : and were no sooner out of the town, but they began to meet the effects of the just resentments of this injured people. The provincials fired upon them from various quarters, and pursued them (though without any military order) with a firmness and intrepidity, beyond what could have been expected, on the first onset, and in such a day of confusion and distress !— The fire was returned, for a time, with great fury, by the troops as they retreated, though (through divine goodness) with

* See Rev. Mr. Gordon's account.

but little execution.— This scene continued, with but little intermission, till they returned to Lexington ; when it was evident, that, having lost numbers in killed, wounded, and prisoners that fell into our hands, they began to be, not only fatigued, but greatly disheartened. And it is supposed they must have soon surrendered at discretion, had they not been reinforced.— But Lord Percy's arrival with another brigade, of about 1000 men, and 2 field pieces, about half a mile from Lexington meeting-house, towards Cambridge, gave them a seasonable respite.

The coming of the reinforcement, with the cannon, (which our people were not so well acquainted with then, as they have been since) put the provincials also to a pause, for a time.— But no sooner were the king's troops in motion, but our men renewed the pursuit with equal, and even greater ardor and intrepidity than before, and the firing on both sides continued, with but little intermission, to the close of the day, when the troops entered Charlestown, where the provincials could not follow them, without exposing the worthy inhabitants of that truly patriotic town, to their rage and revenge.— That night and the next day, they were conveyed in boats, over Charles-River to Boston, glad to secure themselves, under the cover of the shipping, and by strengthening and perfecting the fortifications, at every part, against the further

attacks of a justly incensed people, who, upon intelligence of the murderous transactions of this fatal day, were collecting in arms, round the town, in great numbers, and from every quarter.

In the retreat of the king's troops from Concord to Lexington, they ravaged and plundered, as they had opportunity, more or less, in most of the houses that were upon the road. — But after they were joined by Piercy's brigade, in Lexington, it seemed as if all the little remains of humanity had left them; and rage and revenge had taken the reins, and knew no bounds! — Clothing, furniture, provisions, goods, plundered, broken, carried off, or destroyed! — Buildings (especially dwelling-houses) abused, defaced, battered, shattered, and almost ruined! — And as if this had not been enough, numbers of them doomed to the flames! — Three dwelling houses, two shops and a barn, were laid in ashes, in Lexington*! — Many others were set on fire, in this town, in Cambridge, &c. and must have shared the same fate, had not the close pursuit of the provincials prevented, and the flames been seasonably quenched! — Add to all this; the unarmed, the aged and infirm, who were unable to flee, are inhumanly stabbed and murdered in their habitations! — Yea, even women in child-bed, with their helpless babes in their arms, do not escape the hor-

* Deacon Loring's house and barn, Mrs. Lydia Mulliken's house, and her son's shop, and Mr. Joshua Bond's house and shop.

rid alternative, of being either cruelly murdered in their beds, burnt in their habitations, or turned into the streets to perish with cold, nakedness and distress! — But I forbear — words are too insignificant to express, the horrid barbarities of that distressing day! — ! — ! †

Our loss, in the several actions of that day, was 49 killed, 34 wounded and 5 missing, who were taken prisoners, and have since been exchanged. The enemy's loss, according to the best accounts, in killed, wounded and missing, about 300.

As the war was thus began with savage cruelty, in the aggressors; so it has been carried on with the same temper and spirit, by the enemy in but too many instances. Witness the wanton cruelty, discovered in burning Charlestown, Norfolk, Falmouth, &c. But as events which have taken place since the ever memorable nineteenth of April, 1775, do not properly come within the compass of this narrative, they must be left for some abler pen to relate.

† "Quorum pars magna fui." VIRG.

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