

Who Fired the “shot heard ‘round the world”?

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Grade Level: Middle

Duration: Two class periods

Overview:

On April 19, 1775, the Battle of Lexington and Concord marked the first military engagement of the American Revolution. Colonists had gathered in the early morning on Lexington Green to prevent approaching British troops from destroying guns and ammunition that were stored in nearby Concord. The gathered faction of colonists was ordered by the British to disperse when “the shot heard ‘round the world” was fired and the American Revolution began. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that immortal line in his 1837 *Concord Hymn*, but what is perhaps most intriguing about that fateful shot is that no one knows for sure who fired it.

Eyewitness accounts with differing opinions about the opening shot abound. In this lesson, students will be asked to make their own decision as to who they think fired the first shot by reading and analyzing primary source documents. They will be asked to defend their opinion by citing primary source evidence.

Content Standards:

Era 3: Revolution and the New Nation (1754-1820s)

Standard 1: The causes of the American Revolution, the ideas and interests involved in forging the revolutionary movement, and the reasons for the American victory.

Standard 2: The impact of the American Revolution on politics, economy, and society.

Historical Thinking Standards:

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

B. Consider multiple perspectives.

F. Compare competing historical narratives.

· The student will use primary sources to analyze the events of April 19, 1775 in Lexington, Massachusetts.

Ralph Waldo Emerson in his poem *Concord Hymn* would name the first shot returned by the Minutemen at the bridge in Concord ‘the shot heard round the world,’ Many have debated whether it was the British or the colonists who fired that fateful opening round. We may never

really know but not because of a lack of evidence. Eye witness accounts abound. The question is which stories are true.

Colonists assembled on Lexington Green in the early morning hours of April 19th, 1775, to try to prevent British soldiers from capturing a supply of guns and ammunition stored in Concord. Accounts of the number of colonists and British soldiers that participated in the skirmish vary, but approximately 70 Massachusetts militia members, known as Minutemen, mustered on Lexington green to halt the eastward progress of as many as 1,000 British soldiers and officers. A shot fired by an unknown participant in the skirmish instigated the first battle of the American Revolutionary War. Below are some of the contemporary accounts.

British and Militia accounts of the event differ greatly. Lieutenant John Barker, a British officer at Lexington, wrote in his diary, “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.”¹

Another account from Lieutenant Edward Thoroton Gould, an officer “in his majesty’s own Regiment of Foot” states that, “under Orders of General Gage, I embarked with the Light infantry and Grenadiers of the Line, commanded by Colonel Smith, and landed on the Marshes of Cambridge, from whence we proceeded to Lexington; On our arrival at that place, we saw a Body of provincial Troops armed, to the Number of about sixty or seventy Men; on our Approach, they dispersed, and soon after firing began; but which party fired first, I cannot exactly say, as our Troops rush’d on shouting, and huzzaing, previous to the firing, which was

continued by our Troops, so long as any of the provincials were to be seen.”² Even these two official accounts given by British officers differ about the number of colonial militia members on Lexington Green and which side fired first. It is, however, apparent from Lieutenant Gould’s account that it was very loud on the Green, due to the shouting of the British troops, which may have lead to the confusion and differing accounts.

Colonial militia accounts of the action on Lexington Green paint a different picture on the events in the early morning hours of April 19th. John Robins, a member of the Lexington Militia, was in the front ranks of the Minutemen as the British approached. “There suddenly appear’d a Number of the Kings Troops, about a Thousand, as I thought, at the distance of about 60 or 70 yards from us Huzzaing, and on a quick pace towards us, with three Officers in their front on Horse Back, and on full Gallop towards us, the foremost of which cried, throw down your Arms ye Villains, ye Rebels! upon which said Company Dispersing, the foremost of the three Officers order’d their Men, saying fire, by God, fire! at which Moment we received a very heavy and close fire from them, at which Instant, being wounded, I fell, and several of our men were shot Dead by me. Captain Parker’s men I believe had not then fired a Gun,”³ Captain Parker’s account agrees stating, “Immediately said Troops made their appearance and rushed furiously, fired upon, and killed eight of our Party without receiving any Provocation therfor from us.”⁴

Both sides having fired and inflicted wounds upon the opposition, the Lexington Militia scattered and the British formed on the Common, “but with some difficulty, the Men were so wild they cou’d hear no orders; we waited a considerable time there, and at length proceeded on our way to Concord, which we learned was our destination, in order to destroy a Magazine of Stores collected there,”⁵ the diary of a British officer reported in the April 1877 issue of Atlantic Monthly. The British met little resistance as they marched into Concord. A colonel in the

Concord Militia, James Barrett, stated in his deposition “[I] ordered said Militia to march to said bridge and pass the same, but not to fire on the King’s Troops unless they were first fired upon.”⁶ As a result, the Concord Militia watched from the high ground beyond the North Bridge as British regulars searched every home, barn, and outbuilding in Concord.

The soldiers looted the town as they searched for evidence of a weapons cache, taking the colonists valuables and food. Major Pitcairn, a strict military man known for his foul temper, was disgusted with the lack of discipline shown by his troops. Loyalist informers had told Pitcairn that the innkeeper was hiding three cannons on his property. Pitcairn had grenadiers break down the door to the Jones Inn when the innkeeper barred it shut. The Major then knocked Ephraim Jones down, put a pistol to his head, and ordered him to reveal the location of the cannons. Jones led Pitcairn to the jailhouse where three cannons and all the supplies necessary to fire them were hidden. The cannons were the only weapons remaining in Concord that the militia had been unable to relocate before the British arrived.⁷

Next, Colonel Smith ordered the burning of a large supply of wooden spoons and trenchers found in the village, presumably to feed the militiamen once they marched off to battle. However, the fire was built too close to the court house, which soon erupted into flames. The smoke column rising into the sky attracted the attention of the Concord Militia, who approached the regulars guarding the bridge to see what was going on.

At this same time, Timothy Minot Jr., a Concord resident later stated “I had heard of the regular troops firing upon Lexington men, and fearing hostilities might be Committed at Concord, thought it my Duty to Secure my family. After I had Secured my family, some time after that, returning towards my own Dwelling, and finding that the bridge on the Northern part of said Concord, were guarded by regular troops, being a Spectator of what had happened at said

Bridge, declare, that the regular troops Stationed on [said] bridge, after they saw the men that were collected on the westerly side of said bridge, marched towards said bridge, then the Troops returned towards the easterly side of said bridge, and formed themselves, as I thought, for regular fight: after that they fired one gun, then two or three more, before the men that were stationed on the westerly side of said bridge fired on them.”⁸

Indeed, there is no dispute over who fired first on the bridge to Concord. A soldier under orders from the Adjutant General of the Fourth Regiment of the Regular Troops stationed in Boston, James Marr (a British regular), stated in his deposition to the Watertown Provincial Congress, “I was ordered by an officer with about one Hundred Men, to guard a certain bridge there; while attending that service, a Number of People came along, in Order, as I suppose, to Cross said Bridge, at which time a Number of the Regular Troops first fired upon them.”⁹ The Concord Militiamen returned fire, killing four officers and five regulars.

Colonel Smith quickly reformed his troops and began marching back to Boston. Lord Percy, commander of the units sent to reinforce Smith, was marching towards Lexington at this point in the afternoon. His troops sang as they marched, but the singing stopped when Percy’s unit found the retreating Smith and his troops running low on ammunition and under near-constant fire from the militia. In a letter to Governor Gage, Percy wrote, “As it began now to grow pretty late and we had 15 miles to retire, and only 36 rounds, I ordered the grenadiers and light infantry to move off first; and covered them with my brigade sending out very strong flanking parties which were absolutely very necessary, as there was not a stone wall, or house, though before in appearance evacuated, from whence the rebels did not fire upon us. As soon as they saw us begin to retire, they pressed very much upon our rear guard, which for that reason, I relieved every now and then. In this manner we retired for 15 miles under incessant fire all round

us, till we arrived at Charlestown, between 7 and 8 in the evening and having expended almost all our ammunition. We had the misfortune of losing a good many men in the retreat.”¹⁰

Colonel Joseph Palmer of the provincial Committee of Safety, a resident of Watertown, wrote an announcement of the events in Lexington and Concord at 10 o’clock in the morning and dispatched an express rider named Israel Bissel to alert the nearby colonies of the situation unfolding in Massachusetts. Bissel traveled hundreds of miles further and alerted thousands more colonists than Paul Revere, but would later be ignored in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s popular poem, *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere*. Bissel rode to about a dozen nearby cities each time pausing only long enough for each town’s Safety committee to recopy Palmer’s original note, noting the date and time of Bissel’s arrival, and to get a fresh horse.¹¹ Bissel’s first horse collapsed and died of exhaustion just outside of Worcester, Massachusetts.

After his departure from nearby towns, he went to Boston and then to New York. Israel Bissel’s arrival in New York City on Sunday, April 23rd, 1775, four days after the battles of Lexington and Concord, was met with cheers and revelry from the New York Sons of Liberty. Riots broke out in the streets, as patriots and loyalists alike poured out of the town’s churches to hear Bissel.¹² Bissel met a far cooler reception in Philadelphia when he arrived a day later. The largely loyalist population of Philadelphia was dismayed at this violent turn of events, though some patriot celebrations did breakout.

The next battle would be the battle to get the tale of Lexington and Concord to England. General Gage demanded reports from his officers documenting the events of the 18th and 19th of April, so that he could send a letter and their reports to England. Dr. Joseph Warren, president pro tem of the unofficial patriot assembly in Waterford, was also gathering reports of the battle. The Waterford Provincial Congress, under Warren’s direction, ordered that depositions be taken

from every citizen that had personally witnessed the actions. Over the next few days, justices of the peace took depositions from 127 participants and observers that had been in Lexington and Concord on the 18th and 19th. Included in these depositions, were two accounts from British troops who had been wounded in battle. The first was a British regular, James Marr, who admitted the British fired first at Concord, even after the militia had let British search parties pass by them unharmed to cross the bridge and rejoin the rest of Smith's forces. The second and more sensational account came from Lt. Edward Thoroton Gould, a member of the King's own Regiment of the Foot. Lord Percy reported an exaggerated, second hand account of Gould's injury saying that, "the rebels... scalped and cut off the ears of some of the wounded men who fell into their hands."¹³ In the lieutenant's own account of his injuries he would merely say, "I, myself, was wounded at the Attack of the Bridge, and am now treated with the greatest Humanity, and taken all possible Care of by the provincials at Medford."¹⁴

In the end, Warren's depositions would arrive first to the Second Continental Congress and Gage's reports would arrive first to England, each accompanied by a propaganda-filled letter exaggerating the conduct of the opposing side. Percy's report of Gould's supposed scalping would enflame England's desire to put down the rebellious colonial upstarts. Likewise, Warren's elaborate description of how "Women in child bed were driven, by the Soldiery, naked into the streets,"¹⁵ (an inaccurate description of Hannah Brandish's fright at hearing shots fired outside her home eight days after the birth of her child) would ignite colonial assemblies and the Second Continental Congress into raising and funding the Continental Army. For better or for worse, the American Revolutionary War had begun.

End Notes:

- ¹ Entry for April 19th 1775, from the diary of Lieutenant John Barker, an officer in the British army. [accessed July 13, 2007]
http://www.wm.edu/hsi/cases/lexington/lexington_documents.html#d
- ² Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789. Volume II. ed. W.C. Ford, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904-1937), 41.
- ³ Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789. Volume II. ed. W.C. Ford, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904-1937), 31.
- ⁴ Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789. Volume II. ed. W.C. Ford, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904-1937), 31.
- ⁵ A British Officer at Lexington and Concord, April 19, 1775. [accessed July 12, 2007]
<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/timeline/amrev/shots/concord.html>
- ⁶ Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789. Volume II. ed. W.C. Ford, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904-1937), 39.
- ⁷ Hallahan, William H. The Day the American Revolution Began. (New York: William Morrow and Company, 2000), 106-107.
- ⁸ Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789. Volume II. ed. W.C. Ford, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904-1937), 38.
- ⁹ Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789. Volume II. ed. W.C. Ford, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904-1937), 40.
- ¹⁰ Report to General Gage on the Retreat of the American Colonists from Lexington and Concord. [accessed July 13, 2007]
<http://www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=866>
- ¹¹ New York, Sunday 23d April, 1775. [accessed July 12, 2007]
[http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbpe:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(rbpe10800500\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/rbpe:@field(DOCID+@lit(rbpe10800500)))
- ¹² Hallahan, William H. The Day the American Revolution Began. (New York: William Morrow and Company, 2000), 106-107.
- ¹³ Report to General Gage on the Retreat of the American Colonists from Lexington and Concord. [accessed July 13, 2007]
<http://www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=866>
- ¹⁴ Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789. Volume II. ed. W.C. Ford, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904-1937), 41.

¹⁵ Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789. Volume II. ed. W.C. Ford, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1904-1937). 43.

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Entry for April 19th 1775, from the diary of Lieutenant John Barker, an officer in the British army. [accessed July 13, 2007]
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<http://www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=866>

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<http://www.teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=874>

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- Patriots:** One who loves, supports, and defends one's country.
- Express rider:** Transportation was bounded by the power provided by wind, sail and oar on river and sea, and by horses and oxen on land. These same slow means controlled communication, the most urgent wartime dispatches being limited in delivery to the speed of an "express rider" on horseback.
- Militia:** a body of citizens enrolled for military service, and called out periodically for drill but serving full time only in emergencies.
- Disperse:** to drive or send off in various directions; scatter
- Grenadier:** (in the British army) a member of the first regiment of household infantry.
- Light infantry:** foot soldiers with lightweight weapons and minimal field equipment.

Motivation:

- 1) Tell the students that they are going to be "history detectives" and their first case is the mystery of the Battle of Lexington and Concord.
- 2) Review the situation in Massachusetts prior to April of 1775 (e.g. the quartering of British soldiers in citizens' homes, the restrictions placed on Bostonians after the Boston Tea Party, General Gage being made royal governor by the king and disbanding the Massachusetts Assembly, etc.) with the class to activate prior knowledge and build background for students.

Procedures:

- 1) Give students the graphic organizer entitled The Case of the "Shot Heard 'Round the World (RS #7)." Tell students they will be getting a document packet with 6 primary source documents in order to complete the organizer.
- 2) Explain that before the end of class students will have to take a position and defend it by deciding for themselves who they believe fired the first shot at the battle and citing support from the primary sources (to give the students' reading a purpose).
- 3) Assign students to groups by having them count off, trying to make each group have six members. Hand out to each group a document packet (RS #1-#6). Instruct the groups that each member of the group is responsible for reading one primary source document and filling out the corresponding boxes on the organizer. If groups have more than six members, two students can work on one document together. Each student is then to report to his or her findings to the group in order for each student to complete their organizer.

- 4) Circulate throughout the room, monitoring group progress, work habits, and trouble shooting any difficulties the student might have with the documents. Have a presenter for each group report on their group's answers for one of the documents (if there is time, the presenter can report on the group's entire graphic organizer).
- 5) Discuss the documents once all groups have reported using the discussion questions below:
 - A: Are there any events on which the documents agree?
Are there any events on which the documents disagree?
 - B: Why is it important to know who wrote the document, when the document was written, and why the document was written?
 - C: Which of these documents is the most reliable in telling what actually happened at Lexington? Why do you believe this document?
 - D: Why would it be difficult to write an accurate account of the Battle of Lexington and Concord based on all five of these documents?
- 6) Pass out the BCR assessment (RS #8). The BCR question asks students who they believe fired the first shot in Lexington on April 19th, 1775 and why. Allow the students seven to ten minutes to complete the BCR. Collect BCR before moving on to the closure activity.

Closure:

- 1) Conclude the lesson by asking students to share their answer to the BCR and defend their belief of who fired the first shot. There is no right or wrong answer to this question, as long as the student provides their reasoning and supports their answer with evidence from the documents.
- 2) Review the lesson objective by asking students to give a "thumbs up/thumbs down" on whether or not they analyzed primary sources to determine the events of April 19th, 1775 in Lexington.

Assessment:

- 1) BCR assessment (RS #8) will serve as a formal formative assessment for the lesson. The Library of Congress. American Memory. The Learning Page. The American Revolution, 1763-1783. First Shots of War. Depositions Concerning Lexington and Concord, 1775. Deposition of John Parker, 25 April, 1775. Retrieved (February 22, 2008) from <http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/timeline/amrev/shots/concern.html>

John Parker was the captain of the Lexington militia and as such was the commander of the patriots that gathered on Lexington green on the evening of April 18th and the morning of April

19th, 1775. He gave this deposition by order of the Waterford Congress, the illegal Massachusetts colonial assembly that formed after King George III disbanded the Massachusetts assembly. The Waterford Congress had judges take depositions from every Massachusetts resident who had the least amount of information to contribute to what occurred in the battles of Lexington and Concord and delivered these depositions to the Second Continental Congress for their review. In his deposition, Captain Parker swears that he did not order his men to fire, but rather to disperse. He also states that while his men were leaving the green his men were fired upon by the British.

The Library of Congress. American Memory. The Learning Page. The American Revolution, 1763-1783. First Shots of War. Depositions Concerning Lexington and Concord, 1775. Diary of an unknown British Officer, 19 April, 1775. Retrieved (February 22, 2008) from

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/timeline/amrev/shots/concord.html>

This diary from an unnamed British officer states that the British marched onto Lexington green and only engaged the Lexington militia after one or two shots were fired by someone he believed to be a militiaman. The officer also states that the British troops were not ordered to engage the patriots, but rather that the British officers lost control of their soldiers once the first fateful shots were fired. The first paragraph contains all the information about the incident at Lexington green, however the last paragraph offers an interesting insight into what the British officer thought about his mission. He thought it was ill-conceived and poorly executed.

The Library of Congress. American Memory. The Learning Page. The American Revolution, 1763-1783. First Shots of War. Depositions Concerning Lexington and Concord, 1775. Deposition of Solomon Brown, Jonathan Loring, Elijah Sanderson, 25 April, 1775. Retrieved (February 22, 2008) from

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/timeline/amrev/shots/concern.html>

The Deposition of Solomon Brown, Jonathan Loring, Elijah Sanderson is an account of militiamen that were detained by the British army. They were held against their will for no known crime for four hours on the night of April 18th and questioned about the location of the militia weapons stores in Concord. This particular account does not describe the action at Lexington, but gives students background information on what was going on in and around the route from Boston to Lexington.

The Library of Congress. American Memory. The Learning Page. The American Revolution, 1763-1783. First Shots of War. Depositions Concerning Lexington and Concord, 1775. Deposition of Elijah Saunderson, 25 April, 1775. Retrieved (February 22, 2008) from

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/timeline/amrev/shots/concern.html>

The Deposition of Elijah Saunderson is the conclusion to the previous deposition. Elijah Saunderson had previously been detained by British regulars and arrived in Lexington shortly before the action began. He describes a British soldier yelling, "Damn them, we will have them." This statement is described as causing the British troops to run at the militia and give fire. Elijah Saunderson was a by-stander and not involved in the fighting, but he was a resident of Massachusetts, a colony with a long history of dislike for British soldiers.

The Library of Congress. American Memory. The Learning Page. The American Revolution, 1763-1783. First Shots of War. Depositions Concerning Lexington and Concord, 1775. Deposition of Edward Thoroton Gould, Lieutenant in the King's own Regiment of Foot, 25 April, 1775. Retrieved (February 22, 2008) from

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/timeline/amrev/shots/concern.html>

Edward Thoroton Gould was a British soldier wounded in the fighting at Concord. He was left for dead by the British and nursed back to health by the families of Concord, whose homes his soldiers had just burned down. Edward Thoroton Gould also gave his deposition by order of the Waterford Congress and is the only British account of the events in Lexington that does not say the patriots fired first, but rather that the British troops rushed towards the militia shouting and huzzaiing prior to the shots being fired and that he was uncertain of who actually fired first. As an interesting detail to increase student interest, it is worth mentioning that Lt. Gould was shot in the foot at Concord and knocked unconscious by a member of the Concord militia to put him out of his screaming agony. The British would report an exaggerated version of this detail to the people of England in the London Gazette, saying that the patriots had scalped Lt. Gould.

The Library of Congress. American Memory. The Learning Page. The American Revolution, 1763-1783. First Shots of War. Depositions Concerning Lexington and Concord, 1775. Deposition of Hannah Bradish, 26 April, 1775. Retrieved (February 22, 2008) from

<http://memory.loc.gov/learn/features/timeline/amrev/shots/concern.html>

Hannah Bradish was a resident of Menotomy, a town on the road from Boston to Concord. She had given birth to a child the week before and was in bed sleeping in the early morning hours of April 19th, 1775. She did not witness the fighting at Lexington or Concord, but heard the British army and minutemen fighting as the British marched back to Boston. Mrs. Brandish and her children hid in their kitchen as her home was hit by stray bullets from the fighting outside. In her deposition, Mrs. Brandish stated that her home was hit by no fewer than 70 bullets and that the British army looted her home, stealing her clothing and nightgowns. The patriots would exaggerate this questionable deposition and the Boston Gazette would later report that the British soldiers drove women in childbirth from their beds.