

21 February 2022

**To: Westborough Trustees of Soldiers' Memorials**  
**From: J. L. Bell, Boston1775.net**  
**Cc: Anthony Vaver, Westborough Public Library**  
**Re: Meaning of the term "minute men" in the context of Westborough's Minuteman Park**

This report analyzes the term "minute men" and how the town of Westborough used it in the months leading up to the Revolutionary War. That usage may be relevant to the question of how to memorialize the Westborough men who participated in the Lexington Alarm on April 19, 1775.

## **Summary**

The term "minute men" arose in Massachusetts in 1774 to refer to a type of company within the colony's militia forces that was supposed to be ready to march at a minute's warning. Colony law required nearly all white men between sixteen and sixty to participate in militia training and mobilization, but creating "minute companies" was an emergency measure for times of heightened danger.

When the Massachusetts Provincial Congress called for such companies in the fall of 1774, people understood that those designated militia men should be fully equipped and freshly trained. However, the provincial congress did not have authority to institute those requirements. Instead, it asked each town to decide whether to form minute companies and how. As a result, what defined "minute men" as opposed to ordinary members of the militia varied from town to town.

In Westborough, some men formed a minute company in the fall of 1774. The first official record of this company came when those men apparently asked the town meeting to be paid for the extra effort they were putting in. Westborough's citizens decided to make no distinction in pay or duties between the minute company and other militia companies. That decision was controversial enough for people to bring it up again, but the town did not record a change. Therefore, the official Westborough definition of "minute men" was that those men were no different from other members of the militia.

## Massachusetts and Its Minute Men

Colonial Massachusetts's main system of military defense was the militia. In the mid-1770s the law required almost all white males aged sixteen to sixty to belong to a militia company, equip themselves with a firearm and other weapons, drill with their company four times per year, and turn out in case of an invasion or other threat. Militia companies were organized at the town level, with men choosing their sergeants, ensigns, lieutenants, and captains from among their neighbors. Under Massachusetts's provincial charter of 1691, the royal governor was the commander-in-chief of the militia, empowered to appoint generals and colonels, charter new companies, and command the force during emergencies. That system was modeled on older laws in Britain, and other American colonies operated in much the same way.

Within the militia system, there was a tradition during emergencies of creating companies of men who could turn out, fully equipped and trained, in a short time. A 1645 regulation told company commanders to choose thirty out of a hundred men "who shall be ready at half an hour's warning." Other laws spoke of "a day's warning" and "an hour's warning," based on the proximity of the danger. In 1675, as the conflict later named King Philip's War broke out, a document spoke of militiamen "ready to march on a moment's warning."<sup>1</sup>

In August 1774 the Massachusetts Government Act arrived from London, rewriting details of the colony's constitution from above. This law provoked widespread resistance in the countryside, beyond the reach of Gov. Thomas Gage and the king's troops in Boston. Starting in the province's westernmost county, crowds of men, unarmed but grouped in militia formations, forced the courts to close and drove away royal appointees. A confrontation over militia gunpowder and artillery in Charlestown and Cambridge on September 1-2, with men from Westborough's militia companies participating, basically ended Gen. Gage's gubernatorial authority outside of Boston. Four days later, a large gathering at Worcester, including two hundred Westborough men, closed its county court.

Worcester County towns also sent delegates to a series of conventions starting in August. Stephen Maynard, designated with his militia rank of captain, represented Westborough. On September 21 that gathering issued a call for towns to reorganize their militia units to remove officers who accepted the Massachusetts Government Act. Another part of that call proposed that "each

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<sup>1</sup> John R. Galvin, *The Minute Men: The First Fight: Myths and Realities of the American Revolution* (Washington, D.C.: Brassey's, 1989), 10-14.

town of the county...enlist one third of the men of their respective towns, between sixteen and sixty years of age, to be ready to act at a minute's warning."<sup>2</sup>

On October 5, the Boston merchant John Andrews described in a letter to a relative in Philadelphia how Worcester County towns "incorporated *seven regiments* consisting of 1,000 men each" who "turn out twice a week to perfect themselves in the military art—*which* are call'd *minute men*, i.e., to be ready at a minute's warning with a fortnight's provision, and ammunition and arms."<sup>3</sup> Thus, people were starting to use the term "minute men," but it was still new enough to need explaining.

The Massachusetts Provincial Congress convened on October 7. Comprised of delegates from nearly every town in the colony, this was a shadow legislature stepping into the vacuum of government outside Boston. It issued formal protests against Gen. Gage's acts as royal governor, promoted boycotts of British goods, and asked towns to send their collected taxes to its receiver general rather than the royal treasurer. Capt. Maynard and Dr. James Hawse represented Westborough.

On October 26 this provincial congress started to organize a military force, to be directed by its committee of safety. As one of the first steps, the congress recommended that militia companies elect officers whom the men trusted, purging Loyalists from positions of authority. It also recommended those officers "enlist one quarter, at the 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, on the shortest notice from the said committee of safety, to march to the place of rendezvous." By the next month, the congress was using the term "minute men."<sup>4</sup> But it was up to each town militia organization to decide whether to follow the congress's recommendations and how.

## Westborough's Decisions

Massachusetts towns varied in how they responded to the provincial congress's suggestion. Almost all held new officer elections. Some formed minute companies quickly, others only in the winter of 1775; Lexington never created a

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2 William Lincoln, editor, *Journals of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts in 1774 and 1775* (Boston: Dutton & Wentworth, 1838), 643.

3 "Letters of John Andrews, Esq., of Boston, 1772-1776," Winthrop Sargent, editor, *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings*, 8 (1864-65), 373. Andrews's numbers were far less reliable than his other details; in this case, he correctly reported that the Worcester Convention voted to organize the county's militia companies into seven regiments but wrote that *all* the men, not one-third, were being trained to turn out in a minute.

4 Lincoln, *Journals of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts*, 33, 50.

minute company at all. One sticking-point in the process was that perennial concern of local government, money. If a town asked certain men to spend extra time practicing their military skills, should it pay them? Should a town pay its “minute company” more than ordinary militia men who were also drilling? Braintree ended up paying all members of the militia the same hourly rate for drills, but it asked ordinary companies to train for three hours every week and the minute company to train for four hours.

In Westborough, the Rev. Ebenezer Parkman’s diary shows that there was a minute company operating by the end of November. On 28 November the minister wrote about a “Training of the Company of Minute Men, and Capt. [Seth] Morse’s Company.” Other entries identified the captain of the minute company as Edmund Brigham. The Parkman diary also mentions other companies training in auxiliary roles, including “two artillery companys” active by August, “a Number of Boys under their Capt. Moses Warrin,” and “the (more Elderly) Alarm Men.”<sup>5</sup>

Westborough’s official town meeting records do not show the town authorizing this minute company, however. As early as June 13 the town had started to beef up its military defenses, approving the purchase of a cannon and the equipment to use it, plus the training of a squad of artillerymen. But there was no mention of a minute company that summer or fall. It appears that some members of the militia formed that “Company of Minute Men” on their own, expecting the town would come to support it.<sup>6</sup>

The first time the Westborough records explicitly mentioned the minute company came on December 30. A town meeting on that date addressed the question: “To see if ye Town will grant any money to yncorage ye minit men so called to Train & Exercise themselves so that they may be fit & Quallified for Public Service if called there unto.” Everyone probably understood that “yncorage” meant to pay “ye minit men so called” in some way. That proposal “past in the Negative”—i.e., the voters chose *not* to pay the minute men.

Someone at the meeting, presumably the commander of the minute company or another man involved in it, then asked “if the Town expected any

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5 The Rev. Ebenezer Parkman’s diary has been handily transcribed at <http://diary.ebenezerparkman.org/>. Quotations come from his entries for November 28, 1774; August 26, 1774; September 26, 1774; and April 3, 1775. In early 1775 Parkman was in a simmering dispute over a church matter with Capt. Brigham. The leader of the boys’ company appears to have been Moses Warren (1760-1851), who was not yet of militia age; these boys were thus not an official militia company but imitated one. In contrast, the “alarm list” was an established part of the Massachusetts system; made up of men over age fifty, this type of militia unit was generally assigned lighter duties close to home.

6 Westborough’s town meeting records are digitized, and relevant entries start at <https://archive.org/details/townrecords01west/page/294/mode/2up>.

thing more of the Minit men than they did of other men.” That, too, “past in ye negative.” Westborough officially decided to make no distinction between the minute company and its other militia companies aside from the name that the minute men had apparently taken for themselves.

Some citizens brought up the question of special duties or pay for Westborough’s minute men again at a meeting that stretched over February 7-8, 1775. Ultimately the town “Voted at that all the Soldiers both minit men and others Train once a Fortnit four hours in a Day without pay.” But then there was further debate. The town voted to reconsider and went home for the night.

Official town records do not describe any other meeting or votes until March. However, on February 20, the Rev. Mr. Parkman wrote in his diary about an imminent “Town Meeting on many Accounts, viz. whether they shall pay Minute Men; Contribution to Relief of Boston etc.” Both those issues involved spending public money. Parkman attended that “Town Meeting and Training” the following afternoon, speaking in favor of donating to the poor of Boston. He also told his congregants “exerting themselves to obtain Military skill, Arms, Ammunition etc., to improve their Time Well when they have T[own]. Meetings and Trainings — to endeavour after Unity and Harmony (for I perceived there were Jarrs).”

Thus, there was further discussion in Westborough of paying the minute men on February 21, 1775. That issue appears to have been producing controversy (“Jarrs”). But there is still no record of Westborough deciding to treat the minute company differently from its ordinary militia companies.

The minute company’s status did not come up at Westborough’s busy meeting on March 6, when the town chose its officeholders for the upcoming year and handled other annual business. That long gathering did decide to make the men training on the town cannon part of the minute company within the chain of command. Then the war broke out on April 19, and three Westborough militia companies mobilized, as David A. Nourse’s thorough research shows.

Herman Packard DeForest and Edward Craig Bates’s *History of Westborough* (1891) reported on the citizens’ decision about its minute company: “The town refused to grant any extra bounty to minute-men, on the grounds that no more was expected of them than of other men; every man was to be a minute man, and to do his utmost in the common peril,—they refused to make invidious distinctions.”<sup>7</sup> However, as Nourse noted, that book listed the members of only one company. Based on the official record of their discussions in 1774-75, the men of Westborough would not have approved of singling out that one company for special treatment.

7 DeForest and Bates, *The History of Westborough, Massachusetts* (Westborough: The Town, 1891), 162.

## Postscript: A Note on “George Baker”

Before any more names are set in stone or metal, I want to raise a question about the name of “George Baker” on the December 1775 muster roll labeled “Exhibit C” in David A. Nourse’s report, headed “A Muster Roll of the Militia under Capn. Baker...”

There is no question that at the top of the column of names on that document is “George Baker Capn.” However, that muster roll was signed and attested to by Joseph Baker.

Joseph Baker (1736-1811) makes many appearances in the Rev. Ebenezer Parkman’s diary and in Westborough town records. He was on the committee of correspondence and held town offices. In March 1775 the town voted to have him enlist men for an artillery company. Before the war Parkman referred to him as “Lt. Baker,” but on January 21, 1776, the minister wrote of “Lieutenant or Capt. Joseph Baker,” showing how the man had received a promotion. In records of the Sons of the American Revolution, the descendants of Phineas Haskell, whose name appears on this muster roll, reported him as serving in the company of Capt. Joseph Baker during the Lexington Alarm.

In contrast, Parkman’s diary never mentions “George Baker.” That name does not appear in DeForest and Bates’s town history. It does not appear in the vital records of Westborough as digitized here:

<https://ma-vitalrecords.org/MA/Worcester/Westborough/>. Usually a man with enough local respect to become a militia captain would also hold town or church offices, own substantial property, head a family, and be visible in other ways. The only sources on “George Baker” of Westborough that I have found are this muster roll and compilations based on it, such as *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors in the War of the Revolution*.

I therefore want to raise the possibility that the “Capn. Baker” of that muster roll was the Joseph Baker who signed it. Where did the name “George Baker” come from? The second name in the column is “George Andrews, 1st Lt.” A company clerk writing out this document may have absent-mindedly started with the lieutenant’s first name, then completed that line with the captain’s last name, and no one corrected the error, thus creating “George Baker Capn.”