



Chapter 9

The War Starts

**April 21, 1770,
WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA**

Jed, now 29, stood straight and tall at the head of his militia company. The trouble in Boston had brought out the citizen soldiers. The cruelty of the Townshend Acts and the Quartering Acts had been bad enough. But the shooting of unarmed civilians by British soldiers was too much to bear. Even though the British Prime Minister, Lord North, had repealed most of the taxes, Virginians were still enraged.

Jed had just been promoted by the members of his company. As the new sergeant, he would lead his men during the parade to show local support for the citizens of Boston.

The company captain handed him a halberd, an axe mounted on a long staff, a ceremonial weapon which showed his rank and position. As the drummer began his beat, four boys playing fifes struck up a spirited marching tune. Jed proudly stepped out, leading his company through the streets of Williamsburg.

The crowd cheered as the troops passed, marching in straight, even rows toward the Capitol building a few blocks away. Each soldier looked straight ahead until the company arrived at the foot of the Capitol. "At ease," Jed ordered his men. The soldiers scanned the crowd for their relatives while fiery Patrick Henry gave a short but rousing speech encouraging every Virginian to support the militia.

Afterwards, the artillery men wheeled their shiny bronze cannon into position. While Jed's infantry stood at attention, the artillery fired a volley. When the Captain

dismissed company, Jed looked for his family. He finally spotted his wife, Becky, their four-year-old daughter, Patience, and year-old son, Michael. They were standing in the front yard of William Baker, Jed's old friend from Stanley Hundred. William was a lawyer now and lived right on Duke of Gloucester Street, the most prestigious street in Williamsburg. Jed hurried over. William reached to shake his hand.

"The troops looked mighty fine today, Jed," he grinned, "and the company sergeant was especially well turned-out."

Jed looked a little embarrassed as everyone laughed. "It's hot in this getup. Has anybody got anything cool to drink?"

"I've got cider for everyone," replied William's wife, Libby. "Come on inside where it's cooler." Seeing Becky struggling to hold baby Michael, she motioned to a Black serving girl of about fourteen. "You can give the baby to Selma." Selma took Michael from Becky and carried him into the house.

Becky gave a sigh of relief, "Thank you, Libby. I love holding him, but after a while he gets pretty heavy."

Jed took some coins from his pocket and handed them to William's daughter. "Frances, you and Patience run into the store there and get yourself some cookies as a treat. Here's a penny for you both."

The girls took the money eagerly and ran away giggling.

A few minutes later, Jed and William sat in the front room of the house with their glasses of cider and some sweet biscuits. "Well, Bill, what do you think of the trouble in Boston? Will the repeal of the taxes quiet things down?"

William Baker looked troubled. "I think Lord North is trying to do the best he

can for us in America, but the colonies are very unstable right now. The massacre in Boston came at a very bad time.” William passed Jed more cider. “You know, in some ways, Jed, I think the British taxes showed us how little we need England. We’re our own country now. I know several hotheads who would like to break our ties, but personally, I think that’s going too far.

“So do I,” nodded Jed. “I’m glad to know you feel the same way. I can’t imagine Virginia prospering without the King behind us. I hope we’ve seen the last of any trouble between the colonies and the mother country.”

“Agreed. But that tax on tea still makes me mad,” signed William. “And I don’t like having so many Redcoats over here. That’s what caused the killings in Boston. If the British army wasn’t so arrogant, it wouldn’t have happened in the first place.”

“At least they’re not forcing us to let soldiers live in our houses anymore,” Jed reminded him. William nodded, “Yes, that’s true.”

Becky appeared at the door. “Jed, we need to get back to the farm soon. Do you want me to have the team brought up?”

William got to his feet. “Don’t bother, Becky. I’ll send Joseph to get your wagon.”

A few minutes later, Jed carried his sleeping daughter from the house and laid her head on a folded blanket. Michael was asleep in his mother’s arms. After Jed helped Becky up onto the seat of the wagon, he urged the horses into action with a small tap of the reins.

Jed smiled at Becky. “I’m glad we stopped in at the Bakers’, and I still feel the same way about the King.” I’m so glad you’re not trying to stir up trouble like some of the

others,” answered Becky. “The militia is important, I guess, but I’d hate to see you actually go off to fight the King’s soldiers.”

“I think the militia is our best way to prevent fighting. If we show the British we’re strong, they’ll back off and treat us with more respect.”

The last rays of the sun were streaking orange in the western sky as the horses turned the wagon onto the lane which led to their farm.

PATRICK HENRY

On March 23, 1775, delegates from every county in Virginia met at St. John’s Church in Richmond to discuss the situation with the British. They were also there to elect delegates to the coming Second Continental Congress. They did not meet in Virginia’s capital, Williamsburg, however, because they feared that the British Governor of Virginia at that time, Lord Dunmore, might arrest them and ship them back to England where they would face trial as traitors. So they met 50 miles inland. Everyone knew that the British would send reinforcements to Boston and more fighting would take place. Still there were those who opposed complete break with Great Britain.

Patrick Henry, aged 38, disagreed. Henry knew that the British would eventually be able to overwhelm the Massachusetts patriots unless other colonies helped them. In what became one of the most famous speeches in American history, he presented resolutions for equipping the Virginia militia to go to the aid of Massachusetts. Both 43-year-old

George Washington and 31-year-old Thomas Jefferson were thrilled by Henry's fiery speech. It ended with the following plea for action:

Gentlemen may cry peace, peace.
But there is no peace. The war is actually begun! The next gale that sweeps from the north will bring to our ears the clash of resounding arms! Our brethren are already in the field! Why stand we here idle? What is it that gentlemen wish? What would they have Is life so dear, or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of chains and slavery?

Henry's attitude was that of a condemned galley slave. His back was bent as though under the weight of his approaching death. After a solemn pause, he raised his eyes slowly up toward Heaven. Before his stunned audience, Henry held up his crossed wrists, bound by imaginary chains nearly visible. Then, he slowly prayed in words rising to a fever pitch. Henry bent his body backward, his chained hands raised over his hear. Every muscle and tendon strained.

Forbid it, Almighty God! I know not what course others may take...

Henry clinched his right fist as though holding a dagger pointed at his heart. As he drove the imaginary dagger into his chest, he thundered triumphantly:

...but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!

As he spoke the word "liberty," his imaginary chains were broken. His arms hurled apart, his hands open. He stood erect and defiant, his face radiant. He paused while the sound of the word "liberty" echoed throughout the church.

As one witness later reported, "His attitude made him appear a magnificent incarnation of Freedom." Another listener was so overcome by Henry's powerful speech that he exclaimed, "Let me be buried on this spot!"

The resolution passed, and Henry was appointed commander of the Virginia forces. The next year, 1776, he became Virginia's first elected governor.

LEXINGTON AND CONCORD

Throughout the winter of 1774-75, the colonists waited to see if the British would withdraw the Intolerable Acts and unblock Boston harbor. Many believed the British would back down. But with Henry's resolution in Virginia, an increasing number of colonists came to believe that war was inevitable and continued to train local militias and stockpile arms. As one traveler to Virginia wrote in his diary:

Dined at Colonel Harrison's. Nothing talked of but the blockade of Boston harbor. The people...talk as if they were determined to dispute the matter with the sword.

Even King George foresaw war with the colonies:

The New England governments are in a state of rebellion. Blows must decide whether they are to be subject to this county or independent.

The King told the British commander in Boston, General Thomas Gage, to teach the colonies a lesson. General Gage had heard that the New Englanders were collecting guns and ammunition, so he sent out spies into the corresponding countryside to find out the truth. One of those spies was Private John Howe. Howe had been stationed in Boston long enough to learn how they thought. He blended in with the common folk around Boston with ease.

"The King is openly cursed," Howe reported back to General Gage. He told him that the rebellious colonists – now called Patriots – were no longer hoping for a peaceful settlement with Great Britain. The Yankees were ready to fight. They were seen everywhere cleaning guns and drilling openly on village greens. Lists of those few who still remained loyal to the King were posted in taverns. In some places, Loyalists had even been tarred and feathered, and some had their houses burned just because they had dared to defend the British point of view.

But Private Howe had learned another very important piece of information. He had discovered the location of a colonial weapons depot at Concord, Massachusetts, a few miles northwest of Boston.

General Gage decided to move. On the evening of April 18, 1775, soldiers from the British Army in Boston began boarding small boats. They were going to cross the Charles River to raid the colonial arms depot. But General Gage could not hide his troops' movements any better than the colonists could hide their activities from the British spies. The patriots in Boston were watching the British closely. It was to be a fateful night in American history.

PAUL REVERE'S MIDNIGHT RIDE

As the British troops prepared to cross the Charles River to march to Concord, patriots began warning the countryside. Paul Revere, a Boston silversmith and patriot leader, instructed his friends John Pulling and Robert Newman to climb the steeple of the Old North Church – the highest building in Boston – and shine two lanterns in the window facing Charlestown. Patriots on the other side of the river knew that this was a signal that the British were about to cross the river.

Revere himself crossed the river in a small boat under cover of darkness. Patriots in Charlestown gave him a horse named "Brown Beauty," and he rode off at about eleven o'clock toward Lexington. At about midnight he warned patriot leaders Samuel Adams and John Hancock that the British troops were on their way. At Lexington Revere met a second rider, William Dawes. Together they rode on to warn the people of the small towns and farms along the road to Concord that the British Regulars were coming. They were soon joined by a third person, Dr. Samuel Prescott.

Revere was captured by a British patrol. Dawes escaped but lost his horse. Prescott made it through to Concord.

As oil lamps were lit in kitchens along their routes, worried wives hastily prepared food while their menfolk quickly pulled on their clothes and grabbed their muskets and powder horns. Soon, they set off to join their neighbors at prearranged meeting places to oppose the British. These were the “Minutemen,” members of the militia who had promised to be ready for action at a minute’s notice.

LEXINGTON: THE FIRST CLASH

The British troops reached Lexington, about ten miles from Boston, around dawn on April 19. There they were met by Captain John Parker. Parker drew his eight men up in a ragged line, right in the center of Lexington’s village green. But he soon saw that he was badly outnumbered.

The British commander ordered Parker and his minutemen to lay down their arms. Parker realized that to resist against such a large number of soldiers would be useless. He ordered his men to disperse but refused to have them lay down their arms. No one is sure who fired the first shot, but shortly after Parker gave his order, a shot rang out. Soon, the British line poured fire into Parker’s men.

A few of the militia tried to return fire, but the British light infantry soon scattered them from the field. As the smoke cleared, eight American lay dead on Lexington’s green, and another nine were wounded.

ON TO CONCORD

Following the fighting, British officers moved their men back into column formation and continued the march toward Concord. Before they could reach the quiet Massachusetts village, however, the townspeople had moved the powder stores to safety and gathered their militia for another attempt at stopping the British. Word of the skirmish at Lexington had spread rapidly ahead of the British. Outside Concord, militia units from all over New England gathered. Over four hundred men turned out to oppose the British.

British soldiers entered Concord unopposed but found little there of military significance. They burned a few gun carriages but conducted themselves properly toward the townspeople. To the militia outside the town, however, the smoke rising from among the distant houses made it look like the British were burning the town. The commanders ordered their men forward in an effort to stop the British and give townspeople a chance to put out the fires.

At the north bridge outside of Concord, the two sides finally came face to face with one another. For the British, their mission was already complete. All their officers wanted to do was withdraw their soldiers to Boston. The New Englanders had other ideas.

Unlike Lexington, there was the question about who fired the first shots. Here, British soldiers fired first.

“My god, they are firing ball!” screamed the startled commander. He thought the British would only fire just to

scare the Americans, with no actual bullets in their muskets.

“Fire for god’s sake – Fire!” he shouted again. In an instant, both ends of the bridge disappeared in clouds of gun smoke as the militia returned fire and held their ground. Three British soldiers and two Americans died in the exchange.

The British commanders decided to retreat. They began to withdraw to Boston, a long 16 miles away. For a mile or two, everything was peaceful, then suddenly the woods on either side of the road exploded in musket fire. Militia units that had arrived too late to help their friends at Lexington and Concord were able to position themselves along the tree-lined road to Boston where they could ambush the British as they marched. A 14-mile, running battle developed. British light infantry tried to keep the woods clear of the militia, but the British soldiers had been marching and fighting nearly twenty-four hours and were exhausted. The militia, however, were fresh. Only the arrival of British reinforcements saved what was left of the original British force.

Compared to other battles that followed, the engagements at Lexington and Concord were only small skirmishes. Yet they were vitally important to the American Revolution. Only 146 Americans were killed or wounded compared to the loss of 264 British soldiers. That evening, as the British soldiers hobbled back into Boston, the curious citizens saw bloody bandages and men in tattered uniforms. The American victory encouraged the colonists. From villages and farms across New England, militia units marched toward Boston bent

on driving the British army into the sea. That night, the hills around the city twinkled with hundreds of campfires built by thousands of patriots from the surrounding countryside.

The significance of the battle was that Britain and America were no longer talking about their differences. Shots had been fired and lives lost. Although the Americans had not yet declared their independence, the Revolutionary War had begun.

FORT TICONDEROGA SEIZED

Within three weeks of the Battle of Lexington and Concord, another colonial force struck the British far to the west. Patriots under the joint command of Benedict Arnold and Ethan Allen captured British-held Fort Ticonderoga and Fort Crown Point on Lake Champlain.

On the night of May 9, 1775, Ethan Allen, with sword in hand, led his men to the gangway of Fort Ticonderoga. Known as the “Green Mountain Boys,” because they were volunteers from the Green Mountains of what is now Vermont, Allen and his men surprised the guard and forced their way into the fort. Yelling at the top of his lungs, Allen ordered the commander and his garrison to surrender. The British were so surprised that they gave up without a fight.

With the capture of that great fortress, Americans gained a large number of powerful cannons which they dragged over the mountains to Boston. But the Americans still lacked the strength and the organization to attack. The British, on the other hand, found themselves unable to except by sea. Both sides watched and waited.

LEXINGTON GREEN





PATRICK HENRY