

1. Conflicting Versions of the Outbreak (1775)

British troops from Boston, seeking secret military stores and presumably rebel leaders, clashed with the colonists at Lexington and then at Concord, on April 19, 1775, in the first bloodshed of the American Revolution. Among the numerous conflicting accounts that exist, these two excerpts, representing an American version and an official British version, are noteworthy. To this day scholars have not proved who fired the first shot. What undisputed and what probable facts emerge from these accounts? How can historians extract truth from conflicting contemporary testimony?

American Version

At Lexington... a company of militia... mustered near the meeting house. The [British] troops came in sight of them just before sunrise; and running within a few rods of them, the Commanding Officer [Pitcairn] accosted the militia in words to this effect: "Disperse, you rebels—damn you, throw down your arms and disperse"; upon which the troops huzzaed, and immediately one or two officers discharged their pistols, which were instantaneously followed by the firing of four or five of the soldiers, and then there seemed to be a general discharge from the whole body. Eight of our men were killed and nine wounded....

In Lexington [the British]... also set fire to several other houses... They pillaged almost every house they passed... But the savage barbarity exercised upon the bodies of our unfortunate brethren who fell is almost incredible. Not contented with shooting down the unarmed, aged, and infirm, they disregarded the cries of the wounded, killing them without mercy, and mangling their bodies in the most shocking manner.

British Version

... Six companies of [British] light infantry... at Lexington found a body of the country people under arms, on a green close to the road. And upon the King's troops marching up to them, in order to inquire the reason of their being so assembled, they went off in great confusion. And several guns were fired upon the King's troops from behind a stone wall, and also from the meetinghouse and other houses, by which one man was wounded, and Major Pitcairn's horse shot in two places. In consequence of this attack by the rebels, the troops returned the fire and killed several of them....

On the return of the troops from Concord, they [the rebels]... began to fire upon them from behind stone walls and houses, and kept up in that manner a scattering fire during the whole of their march, of fifteen miles, by which means several were killed and wounded. And such was the cruelty and barbarity of the rebels that they scalped and cut off the ears of some of the wounded men who fell into their hands.

¹The American version is from the Salem (Massachusetts) *Gazette* of April 25, 1775; the British, from the London *Gazette* of June 10, 1775. Reprinted in Peter Force, ed., *American Archives*, Fourth Series (1839), vol. 2, pp. 391-392, 945-946. For numerous other versions, see A. C. McLaughlin et al., *Source Problems in United States History* (1918), pp. 3-53.

