

Background Reading on Colonial Militias

During the colonial era, when there was no national army and few local police, militias were a central part of American life. Militias were groups of local men who organized themselves to defend their communities against threats—they suppressed slave rebellions and other local uprisings, fought for territory against Indians, and participated in the French and Indian War. All able-bodied white men were required to participate in their local militia company and to provide their own guns. The following describes a muster, or gathering, of the militia in Concord, Massachusetts, in March 1775, one month before the battle of Lexington and Concord that began the American Revolution.

This was a citizen army of rural neighbors, in sharp contrast to the British Regulars, whose aristocratic officers commanded “the dregs of society,” desperate men plucked from [jails] and [pubs] and other grim haunts of the English poor. The Concord militia included nearly everyone between the ages of sixteen and sixty: gentlemen, yeomen, shopkeepers, artisans, laborers, and teen-age apprentices. Only two groups were exempt—the young scholars of Harvard College (who even then had student deferments) and the town’s dozen black slaves, whom the General Court, worried about possible rebellion, had denied the obligation to bear arms.

The militiamen took their places according to their age or social rank. In the alarm list, a reserve unit assigned the lightest duties, one found the older men, mostly in their fifties and sixties. Not surprisingly, the two Minute companies, which were expected to furnish the first line of defense, were filled with vigorous young men, over half of them under twenty-five. Most Concordians, though, marched in the town’s three standing infantry companies or rode in a small volunteer troop of horse. At their head were officers drawn from the middle and upper classes, tested by years of service in peace and war. Even the lieutenants were over thirty.

The muster was almost a family reunion. Fathers and sons, uncles and nephews, brothers, cousins, and in-laws often enlisted in the same units. . . . Filial duty and family loyalty thus reinforced a soldier’s obligation to follow orders.

SOURCE | Robert A. Gross, *The Minutemen and Their World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 70-71.

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