

EVERY FREEMAN AND EVERY FREEHOLDER SHOULD BE A SOLDIER:

Some Perspectives on the Colonial Militia.

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“Every Man therefore that wishes to secure his own Freedom, and thinks it his Duty to defend that of his Country, should, as he prides himself in being a Free Citizen, think it his truest Honour to be a Soldier Citizen.”

-The Exercise for the Militia of the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay (Boston, 1758), quoted in Douglas Leach, Arms for Empire, pp.8-9.

The concept of the citizen soldier has been a major part of the American military tradition at least since the famed Minutemen of the Revolution. They had continued the colonial tradition on militia service and won our independence - at least that is how one version of the legend goes. But almost thirty years ago in a seminal essay, John Shy urged historians to take “A New Look at the Colonial Militia.” It was time, he suggested, to move beyond simply criticizing or defending the militia and to look at it in a broader context. It needed to be evaluated as a military institution in its own right rather than as a predecessor of the Minutemen. Furthermore, it was not a static institution of the colonial period, but a very dynamic and complex one which changed significantly during the 168 years between Jamestown and Lexington. Those evolutionary changes reflect the geographical differences of the various colonies, the changing military situations, and the political, social, economic, and religious structure of colonial America. Historians who have examined the militia in individual colonies have found considerable support for the basic premise of Shy's thesis. The emerging picture is varied and colorful. The differences in the colonial militias portray the diversity of life in British North America and the similarities are sufficient to indicate the common heritage, military and otherwise, of the colonists.

·It is not surprising that military concerns were a top priority for the English settlements. There was a potentially dangerous situation in a new world with peoples whose ways were very different from their own. Fourteen major wars and numerous minor ones against different Native American tribes or against colonists of other European powers in America would demonstrate a need for military action. Douglas Leach, whose *Arms for Empire* remains the most extensive general study of the colonial wars, estimated that “of the 156 years between the founding of Jamestown and the Treaty of Paris [ending

the Great War for the Empire], more than one-third were years of warfare somewhere in the colonies.” (pp. xi-xii) Since colonization was a private venture and the crown was often busy with either internal political struggles or external conflicts with continental powers (and often with both simultaneously), the colonists were on their own to solve their military problems. The obvious solution to this defense need was to require every able-bodied man to provide for the defense of the colony. This idea of a universal military obligation was at the heart of the old English militia system, and it formed the basis of the militias established in all the colonies.

Though not the first colony, Massachusetts Bay passed the first law for compulsory militia service in 1631. The Puritans learned from the experiences of earlier colonists, and the peril they faced may be surmised from the requirements for weekly drill and the prohibition against travelling in the colony without a gun. Virginia, which had experienced military problems from its beginnings, followed suit in 1632; and Plymouth provided for compulsory service in 1634. Later colonies also established compulsory militia service among their first acts. These militia laws changed as the population of the colonies grew, the settlements expanded, and the potential threats moved west. By 1754, there were 777 militia laws throughout the colonies of British North America. Only Pennsylvania, with its Quaker heritage, did not require militia service. Even here, however, the dangers faced by the colony in that year enabled some citizens, led by Benjamin Franklin, to put aside Quaker control of colonial defenses and institute voluntary militia service. While the militia laws obviously varied from colony to colony, the essential features were much the same. (1) Service was compulsory, with the exception of Pennsylvania as noted. (2) Officers came from the upper echelons of colonial society whether they were elected, as in early New England, or appointed. (Eventually, even the New England colonies provided for governmental appointment of high ranking militia officers, particularly for special expeditions. In addition, officers often had to meet additional requirements from the normal militia man, such as religious orthodoxy in Massachusetts Bay or property ownership in South Carolina) (3) There were also limits on the term of service, usually three months, and on service outside the borders of the colony.

The basic unit of the militia was the infantry company, between sixty and one hundred men. Some colonies later formed cavalry or artillery units, but many of these, such as the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Boston, were volunteer units outside the militia structure. The requirements for militia men to own and maintain their arms and equipment made cavalry a unit only the wealthy could form. In the seventeenth century, two-thirds of an infantry company was armed with matchlock muskets and one-third with pikes. Extensive drill was necessary since a matchlock required fifty-six movements to load, fire, and prepare for the next shot. Discipline and firepower were important in facing an Indian attack; but the easier mastery and maintenance of the pike, which required only

eleven movements, made it a preferred weapon of many militiamen, as John Dutton testified in 1681:

I thought a pike was best for a young soldier and so I carried a pike, and between you and I reader, there was another reason for it too, and that was, I knew not how to shoot off a musket. But t'was the first time I ever was in arms; which tho' I tell thee, Reader, I had no need to tell my fellow soldiers, for they knew it well enough by my awkward handling of them. (quoted by Radabaugh, p. 3). ..

As technology changed, so did the weapons of the militia. The introduction of the flintlock musket brought a simpler, more reliable weapon which, with a bayonet, replaced both the matchlock and the pike by the end of the seventeenth century. It was also cheaper to procure and to maintain. Although many colonies began to provide limited numbers of weapons, military stores, and gunpowder in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, most continued to expect each citizen to provide his own weapon and maintain it in good condition.

A change in weaponry was not the only one for the colonial militias by the end of the seventeenth century. These early units met basic needs for frontier defense and weekly drills emphasized the need for military preparedness. New England seems to have been better able to maintain drill attendance and to answer emergencies because of its pattern of town settlement. Men were relatively close together and were willing to come together to defend farms and towns when to do so did not leave one's own family and farm in jeopardy. In the tidewater of the south, where settlements were more scattered and individuals separated by greater distances, to answer a militia call might leave one's home and family unprotected. A system of fines for missing militia service was in place in all the colonies by the middle of the seventeenth century, a testimony that all aspects of militia service were not that pleasant. But even with fines and other punishments, it became increasingly difficult to enforce compulsory militia service. As the early settlements became more secure, the frequency of drills declined from weekly to only four or six times per year. Furthermore, as colonial societies became more populous and more complex socially, economically, and politically, the idea of universal service changed.

By the late seventeenth century, most colonies recognized some citizens might reasonably be exempted from militia service. Again, specific provisions varied with each colony, but in general, age, mental infirmity or physical infirmity excused one from service. Colonial legislators, county or town officials, servants for some magistrates or officials, clergy and church officials, college professors and students, school teachers, physicians and surgeons received exemptions in one or more colonies. Massachusetts exempted masters of ships over twenty tons, fisherman employed all year, constant herdsmen, ship carpenters, millers, and ferry men. Southern colonies granted exemptions to

owners or overseers of four or more slaves. The distance one lived from the militia drill might also provide an excuse. Finally, those called could also choose to pay a fine or hire a substitute. This last provision became common throughout the colonies and helped to fund some of the militia company's social activities. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, few colonies had true universal militia service. In addition, drills, as infrequent as they were, often took on the atmosphere of a family holiday. Units larger than companies (Massachusetts had formed the first regiments in 1636; other colonies formed regiments later) seldom drilled more than once a year, if that often.

Part of this changing nature of the militia was a result of changes in the defensive needs of the colonies. Early Indian wars were often colonial responses to raids and were of short duration. These could usually be handled within the limitations of militia manpower and terms of service. Extensive campaigns, however, taxed the militia system to its limits and taxed the colonists to pay for them. They also required colonial authorities to take extra measures. The Pequot War (1636-1637) in New England brought rare inter-colonial cooperation. A combined expedition led by Captain John Mason of Connecticut and Captain John Underhill of Massachusetts finally defeated the Pequots and brought security to the northern frontier. In 1643, Massachusetts Bay and Connecticut joined Plymouth and New Haven to form the New England Confederation to provide for the mutual defense of the four colonies. Parochial colonial interests, especially an unwillingness to serve outside the borders of one's own colony or under a commander from another colony, hampered the effectiveness of the Confederation until the outbreak of King Philip's War in 1675. Nevertheless, it existed in one form or other until 1685. Other colonies also reached their economic and military limits with major Indian uprisings. Kieft's War (1642-45) in New York nearly exhausted the Dutch colonists before they made peace. The Second Tidewater War in Virginia (1644-46) required extensive efforts to secure a victory; and only a force of rangers patrolling between forts along the frontier provided some sense of security in the years following. These rangers and other garrison or volunteer troops in Virginia, New England, and elsewhere were outside the normal peacetime militia system. The absence of major threats after the mid-seventeenth century brought further changes to the importance of the militia and the enforcement of militia laws. In some colonies, the militia became a quasi-police force. This was especially true in the southern colonies where militia units assumed the duties of slave patrols.

The peace between Native Americans and English colonists was broken by King Philip's War (1675-1676) in New England and Bacon's Rebellion (1676) in Virginia. Both involved long, trouble-some campaigns. The New England colonies enforced the militia laws, including reinstating week drills; raised large armies of volunteers to supplement the militia forces; and finally enlisted Indian allies and adopted a total war philosophy to end the uprising. New England was secure for white settlement, but at a fearful cost in lives and treasure. In Virginia, the tidewater and the frontier disagreed over the extent and the

expense of campaigns to be taken against the Indians. A number of “volunteers” under Nathaniel Bacon waged their own war against the Indians and eventually turned against the government itself. Bacon's death from dysentery helped bring an end to the rebellion but also caused Virginia to reconsider arming large numbers of landless men for militia duty. Events in other colonies also changed the concept of universal military service in the militia. During the Yamassee War in 1715, South Carolina gave Colonel John Barnwell a force of 600 whites and 400 slaves to subdue the Indians. But here, too, was a problem. As the slave population grew, arming slaves seemed more dangerous to South Carolinians than any manpower shortage in the militia, and blacks were barred from further militia service. Most other southern colonies imposed similar restrictions. These final Indian Wars secured the colonial frontiers; but they also changed the nature of militia service.

If local uprisings and conditions brought a change in the colonial governments' thoughts on the militia, so, too, did the changing nature of international politics. As the American colonies became involved with the European rivalries and wars for empire from 1689-1763, military expeditions became large scale operations, requiring more extensive logistical and strategic planning than the militia forces could provide. Manpower needs were also more extensive, both in numbers and in length of service. It was one thing to fight to defend one's home. It was another to invade Canada or New Spain. To meet military requirements from King William's War (1689-1697) onward, colonial legislatures and governors had to modify the militia system or go to a different type of force. Some soldiers in New England were recruited for service with British forces by a militia draft. Towns and counties were assigned quotas and had to deliver a certain number of men. However drafted men could still hire a substitute or arrange some other form of replacement. Other men were recruited for long terms of service with the promise of bounties or booty - or both. The officers excepted, most of those who filled the ranks for these expeditions of the European colonial wars did not fit the earlier militia pattern. They were transients or those with seasonal employment, or those who saw this as a way to earn a living. They wanted to fight for the promised rewards if not for the sheer excitement of battle. They were, in effect, American mercenaries. Their lack of social involvement and status, and their erratic military performance contributed to the hostility and contempt British regulars came to feel toward them and, by implication, the American militia. Indeed, contemporaries, both British and American, used the term militia to describe any colonial troops whether or not they came from the militia muster. This accounts for many of the negative comments about the American militia during the eighteenth century. It is only fair to note, however, that the ill feelings were returned in kind. The expeditions against Canada in King William's War, against St. Augustine (1702) and Canada (1709 and 1711) during Queen Anne's War, and against Cartagena (1740) during King George's War can only be described as disasters and did little to endear the status and reputations of professional soldiers to Americans. The notable success of Massachusetts troops, both militia and volunteers, in taking the French fortress at Louisburg in 1745 seemed to justify

the American confidence in the merits of the citizen soldier. It infuriated the Americans when Great Britain returned the fortress to France at the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1748.

The French and Indian War, or the Great War For the Empire, was the final military crisis for the colonies before the Revolution. Unlike the other imperial wars, this one began in the colonies. To enforce its claim to the Ohio Valley, Virginia sent an expedition under Lieutenant Colonel George Washington in 1754 to force the French out. The failure of Washington's mission and some astute French propaganda brought Britain and France to war once again in North America. The defeat of Edward Braddock's force of British regulars, colonial troops, and Indian allies a year later marked the beginning of a long nine year struggle for control of the continent. Although British troops bore the brunt of the fighting, colonial militia and volunteer units, along with their Indian allies, contributed to the final defeat of France and Spain and secured the Atlantic coast of North America for the British Empire.

This victory eventually altered many of the political relationships between Britain and her colonies, and it continued the strained relations and hard feelings of military men on both sides. British officers lavishly criticized colonial troops, whom they called militia. They were the dregs of colonial society; officers often inflated the number of troops present; they often deserted before a battle; they lacked discipline; they were ignorant of basic military procedures and camp sanitation. What British officers described was accurate in many cases; but they were describing volunteers and not the militia. Militia soldiers had always been the citizens of towns or counties who were responsible for local defenses. They composed a force to react on short notice to a short term emergency. Colonial legislatures and governors hesitated to draft or levy their citizen soldiers for long campaigns, especially if they would have little control over them or if they did not consider the campaign in the colony's best interests. These European wars were, after all, wars of conquest and empire. They needed a different source of manpower and they got it from a source which did not threaten either the local defense or the social and economic structure of the community. One British officer, Lord Loudon, noted the difference, "The Militia are the real Inhabitants; Stout able Men, and for a brush, much better than their Provincial Troops, whom they hire whenever they can get them, and at any price." (quoted in Millett and Maslowski, p. 42) This distinction was lost upon most other British observers and many Americans as well. George Washington's criticism and contempt for "militia" troops remained strong throughout the Revolution. Other Americans, particularly those who led colonial troops, praised the militia. They resented British arrogance and noted that the professionals had not done that well at Cartagena in 1740 or with Braddock in 1755. These attitudes of mutual distrust and contempt carried over into the revolutionary years and influenced the attitudes and policies of both the British and the Americans during the War for Independence.

From that war, as well as from these colonial wars, Americans gained a strong feeling of their military competence, ably displayed, as they saw it, by the citizen soldiers of the militia. The ideal of the militia became a perfect example of republicanism: the individual citizen responded to an emergency and fought to defend his family and home and to maintain his and his neighbor's freedom. Such a summary is sublime in its simplicity; but it omits both the complex nature of militia service and the long evolutionary process through which it developed. It is a good thing that historians continue to respond to John Shy's challenge and investigate the truth and the myth behind the colonial militia. Only then may we fully appreciate and understand our rich colonial heritage in both peace and war and effectively consider its potential application for the present.

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NOTE: An example of Musket Commands appears at the end of the article on Fort Necessity in the second Colonial Trilogy.

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