

Three Days of April *by Ellen Onorato*

April 19th is a date which has thrice shaped our Nation and modeled us as a people. “Without the first, neither the second or third could have existed.” What are these compelling days and how have they shaped our Nation?

From almost the very beginning of the early colonies in New England, the arduous toil of the farmers, working on a very difficult soil, paralleled the courageous and vigorous assertion of his rights, gradually resisting the long arm of the King.

April 19, 1689

When the Mayflower set out for voyage from England, King James the First was on the throne. Known as the “wisest fool in Europe,” the King’s son was on the throne by the time they arrived in the new world. The new colony sought and was granted a Charter that allowed them almost total self-government, being able to elect their own Governor, Deputy Governor, and assistants to make their own laws.

These daring voyagers had not left England to escape a failing economy as England was very prosperous at the time. Instead, they left for religious freedom with the intent to own land for farms as many had in England. As time went on, the Crown realized that it had granted too much freedom to the colonists. Ongoing attempts to add more controls were attempted and in 1635, colonists set up a tower on Beacon Hill should the Crown insist that a Royal Governor arrive. But other diversions kept England’s King Charles busy as Cromwell’s Parliament eventually took over the Crown. Even during these tumultuous times in England, attempts to return the original Charter from the colonies were made by both the King and Cromwell’s Parliament. The Parliament’s request in 1651 for the return of the Charter led colonists to take the caution of a whole year to respond, which still resisted England’s efforts.

When the “Merry Monarch,” King Charles II came to power, he lightened up on the demands and allowed the original Charter to stand, except added one demand, that the colonists should pledge their allegiance and transact all justice in the Crown’s name. But by 1665, the King granted the territory between Connecticut and Delaware to his brother, the Duke of York. Realizing the growing discontent of the colonists towards the Crown, he also vacated the Charter in 1684. By 1686, Massachusetts’ son, Joseph Dudley was named President of the new territories by the Crown and within two years, the most hated man with absolute power from the Crown, Andros, arrived at Long Wharf in Boston. Andros was escorted by 60 Red Coats and life in the colonies changed drastically. Dudley was named judge of the Superior Court and heavy taxes and rules were set forth. Though most of the colonies outside of Massachusetts fell in line with tolerable resignation, Massachusetts never fell in line completely, even with heavy fines and continuing redress with personal losses.

Finally, Increase Mather traveled to England to plead to the King to lessen the burdensome and heavy-handed controls. The King showed some sympathy but made no changes at all. However, within a few months,

April 19, 1775

Once again, the heavy handed British control and arrogance demanded payment of exorbitant fees and taxes which were being used to pay the expenses of England's home government. Though the most dramatic story of the patriots of Worcester County will be told in the next issue of Journeys, a confrontation was imminent as Spring of 1775 approached. General Gage ordered British troops to Concord to destroy stores and arrest the "Arch-traitors," John Hancock and Samuel Adams.

The famous ride of Paul Revere woke farmer patriots who had already prepared and expected a battle, fully knowing the sacrifice. About half past four in the morning of April 19, 1775, the Red Coats entered Lexington. The militia's Major Pitcairn commanded his men to lay down their arms, yet the Red Coats were commanded to fire, killing eight patriots. Soon, the Red Coats marched on to Concord while church bells rang and chaos erupted amidst an exceptionally warm Spring, filled with blossoming fruit trees and early grains growing in the fields. "The sun shone with peculiar splendor. The morning was a glorious one." For 2-3 hours, gun fire rang out. Patriots were arriving from neighboring towns and the Brits were eventually flanked at the rear as well as from the front. Lord Percy arrived to save Colonel Smith and his Red Coats from annihilation, but patriots from 31 towns had gathered to fight.

The Red Coats had been confronted and though losses had been suffered by the patriots, victory was sweet knowing the patriots' boldness, sacrifice and courage confirmed their destiny towards independence.

"By the rude bridge that arched the flood
Their flag to April breeze unfurled
Here once the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world." *Emerson*

April 19, 1861

Though the Declaration of Independence had long been written, freedom for only the white population had been assured. By the mid 19th century, Worcester County's own had been at the forefront of some major anti-abolition efforts. For years, Massachusetts orators had been rotten egged and disrespected for their strong anti-abolition words. Eli Thayer, the Liberty Farm and other Underground Railroad sites, Adin Ballou, Rev. Thomas W. Higginson and the Butman Riot underscored the majority anti-slavery sentiment which almost foretold of the first blood of the Civil War to Massachusetts' own. Massachusetts citizens had witnessed U.S. soldiers march escaped slave, Anthony Burns,

through the streets towards his harsh return to his owner. Feelings were strong and reaction to a muster called in Boston on April 15, 1861 rivaled that of April 19, 1775.

The 6th Regiment marched to the State House to be addressed by the Governor before heading off to the Boston and Albany station towards war. Upon marching through New York, one Massachusetts soldier was asked if there was anything that could be done for him. He hesitated a moment, held up his foot showing a boot with his toe sticking out. "How come you came here with such a boot as that, my friend?" asked the New Yorker. "When the order came for me to join my company, sir, I was ploughing in the same field my grandfather was ploughing when the British fired on the Massachusetts men at Lexington," replied the soldier. "He did not wait a moment and I did not, sir."

On April 19, 1861 as the Massachusetts 6th reached Baltimore, recognizing that its citizens had threatened the assassination of President elect Lincoln and certainly opposed to abolitionist soldiers marching through its borders, Colonel Jones ordered his men to load their guns, but not to fire unless fired upon. Seven companies passed without interruption, but the final four companies faced insults and finally gunfire erupted, killing one MA soldier. "Fire" commanded Colonel Jones to his militia as crossfire shot four more of the Massachusetts regiment dead.

"The sons of Massachusetts lay dead in the streets of Baltimore, before a single regiment of New York and other northern states had crossed the border between the slave and free states. Massachusetts soldiers had seized a steamboat, reached Annapolis and opened a road to Washington before anyone else had even entered the fray. R.I. and Massachusetts troops also commanded Norfolk before the authorities in Albany were still debating the official steps to be taken long after April 19, 1861 when Massachusetts patriots once again led our country to fairness, justice and independence.