

RESTORING BATTLE ROAD'S HUMAN HISTORY

By Marie Coady

Not too long ago, a visitor from Chicago arrived at our house with a list of historic sites he absolutely had to visit. One was the North Bridge where the “shot heard ‘round the world” was fired on April 19, 1775. And since Minuteman National Historic Park was close by, I volunteered to take him, in spite of the fact it would be my fourth trip there with out-of-town guests that season.

We hooked up with a wonderful Park Ranger who took our group on a tour of Battle Road Trail, stopping at various points to tell the “human story” of that day in April when so many lives were either lost or changed forever. One tourist was in awe and kept asking the Park Ranger over and over, “You mean this is the actual road where the Colonial Militia pursued the British troops?” And each time the Ranger would assure her it was, and each time she would respond, “Wow!”.

At that point, I realized what a treasure that little piece of real estate was and how we locals take it so much for granted. We’ve built our lives around its history, supplanting historical events with our “human story”, and we seem to no longer appreciate its history.

But Lexington is not the only community to lay claim to a piece of Battle Road. Woburn has a piece as well. A piece where local “human stories” are imbedded in the earth and rocks. One of those “human stories” was told by one of Woburn’s West Side residents who experienced first hand the Battle on Lexington Green and lived to tell about it.

On the morning of April 19, 1775, Sylvanus Wood was living at Deacon Kendall’s farm at the corner of Cambridge and Locust Streets when he heard the alarm bell. He rose, took up his gun, and with Robert Douglass Sr. and Robert Douglass Jr., hastened along the three miles of nearby Battle Road that would take him directly to Lexington Green.

The British were still a half mile from Lexington Green when Wood arrived, so he joined Captain Parker’s men as they lined up to stand firm against the British. Wood survived the first volley, then took cover with the rest. Once the British had moved on to Concord, he returned to help carry the dead and wounded to the meeting house, then proceeded with the others to Concord.

It was along Battle Road, Wood came across a British soldier and took him prisoner. That event allowed Wood to claim the honor of capturing the first British prisoner of the American Revolution. Later, that title earned him a lifetime pension from the newly formed government of the United States.

Samuel Thompson remembered hearing the alarm between 2 and 3 o'clock that morning and claims the Woburn complement started along Battle Road right away, arriving early enough to fire upon the enemy from Bedford Road in Concord. Although he described it as a skirmish, 3 of his company men were killed, including his brother Daniel Thompson.

Samuel Thompson and his company pursued the British and were close enough behind to shoot at them and see them set fire to houses in Lexington. The company continued onto Concord, then lay in wait for the British to return, pursuing them all the way into Charlestown.

William Tay was with Major Loammi Baldwin and 180 "well-armed townsmen" when they marched along Battle Road from Woburn to Concord. Tay claimed when they reached Lexington Green and saw the carnage, they were "deeply touched" and seeing those bodies "heightened resentment" and spurred the men to pursue the British all the way to Charlestown.

Major Loammi Baldwin was on horseback that day and recorded that he rode along Battle Road ahead of his troops. When he reached Jacob Reed's farm in West Woburn, he heard a "great firing". When he arrived at Lexington, he found 8 or 10 men lying dead and a number of wounded. Reed's farm was situated in a section of West Woburn known later as Durenville, off Russell Street about where Stonewall Drive is now and within earshot of Lexington Green.

Indeed, residents of Woburn were surrounded by the sights and sounds of war that day in April, and the History of Middlesex records that the "people were stirred by the excitement". Mothers were hard pressed to comfort their terrified children and the elderly were reported to feel helpless and full of anxiety. There were also many who experienced grief at the loss of friends and family.

It was not only soldiers who were counted among the dead. Death came as a result of the disease that followed the armies billeted in towns and fields. In fact, the months following that April day brought an epidemic of small-pox that gripped Woburn as the disease spread unchecked. Widow Jane Winn was counted among those who succumbed to small-pox, as well as the child of Benjamin Burnham, Nehemiah Wyman, a nurse and child, as well as some 20 others who were tended unsuccessfully at Joseph Wyman's house. Records of the day show that during that time, more died of disease than did in battle.

This year the Woburn Conservation Commission has included our piece of Battle Road among the locations to be targeted for clean up on Conservation Day, Saturday, May 5, 2001. Residents, in particular West Side residents, are being urged to volunteer to restore Battle Road to some vestige of its former self. The hope is that its trails will once again become a source of enjoyment and historic reflection if sufficiently cleared for hiking.

Woburn's piece of Battle Road is located just off Cambridge Road near Four Corners, almost directly across from St. Barbara's parking lot. So if you can, please join other volunteers and donate some sweat equity to restore our little piece of history. All you need are gloves, pruning shears, long or short, and a pair of willing hands.

Parking will be available at the Briscoe Street entrance to Battle Road and St. Barbara's lower parking lot between 8:30 A. M. and 2 P.M. If you're interested in preserving a few of Woburn's "human stories", call 781-932-9747 and sign on to help.

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