

**"He Was Caught In A Conflict, Not Of His Choosing."**

**By Marie Coady**

***Asahel Porter was captured by British Troops on April 19, 1775 on his way home to Woburn from selling eggs in Boston. He was released, then later shot in the back. The graves of many of the 180 Woburn men who fought in the Battle of Lexington and Concord are in the First Burial Ground on Park Street.***

**When 180 Woburn men mustered at Fowle Tavern in Woburn Center in the gray dawn of an April morning in 1775, they did not appear miraculously out of the mist armed with pitchforks and shovels.**

**Those 180 men were members of a trained town militia that held a long tradition of mustering for emergencies. By 1775, the Woburn Militia had been training on Woburn Common for 135 years, and no able-bodied male between the ages of 16 and 60 were exempt.**

**The tradition of the Train-Band was a long and glorious one, and it's men were expected to perform "arduous duty" to accomplish important military feats. Training day was not a matter of "playing soldier," because in the absence of a standing army public police force, the town depended on the militia for the public defense.**

**Their mission was to defend the safety and peace of the Commonwealth, and the Commonwealth believed that could not be accomplished without military order and the discipline provided by the officers of each company. It was also considered a matter of obligation and honor to serve. So it came as no surprise that of the 311 men listed on Woburn's tax rolls of 1775, more than half of them answered the call to arms on April 19, 1775.**

**Militiamen were not confined to the limits of their hometowns either. Woburn men were scattered throughout settlements all over the colonies. They were impressed from the local militia and placed in garrisons as members of expeditions under officers appointed by the General Council of the Commonwealth. It was there they put their training into practice and worked their way up through the ranks.**

**In those early Colonial days, there was no scarcity of conflicts where an adventurous young man could gain seasoning and taste the excitement and adventure of traveling to hostile lands in the wilderness far from home.**

**In the 135-year history of Woburn Militia, Woburn men fought and died in King William's War, Queen Anne's War, King Phillip's War and the French and Indian War. In fact, Woburn's Militia played a key role in protecting the safety of all the colonies as well as the Commonwealth. That wartime experience provided the seasoning any fighting force needs to be effective in battle. So it was with this rich historical and practical experience, the Woburn Militia**

**mustered for one of the most important adventures of their lives --- the Battle of Lexington and Concord.**

**Daniel Thompson and Asahel Porter were two of Woburn's Militia who were destined that day to become the stuff of legend, although they came to their fate from different circumstances.**

**Asahel Porter had married Abigail Brooks of Woburn just two years earlier, and was working hard to provide his new family with a decent living. On April 18, 1775, Porter and a friend, Josiah Richardson of Woburn, set out for Boston Market to sell eggs. They were making their way home late that night to join their families for breakfast. Their journey took them through Arlington, and there they ran into the British regiment making its way to Lexington and Concord.**

**The British had orders to detain anyone who could give away their approach as they still believed their advance on Lexington and Concord was unexpected. They were determined not to give opportunity to Porter and Richardson to spread the alarm, so they commandeered their horses, took them into custody and marched them alongside all the way to Lexington. So it was that Porter and Richardson came to be on Lexington Green that day, in the thick of battle, unarmed and unprepared.**

**Upon reaching Lexington, the British had no further use for their two captives and released them with the warning they were not to call any attention to the British troops and thereby giving away their approach. Porter and Richardson were ordered to make their way across the fields "at a pace no faster than a walk." But Asahel Porter, being the young of the two, became anxious and set out in a run.**

**A shot rang out and Porter fell dead. He was shot clear through the body and died instantly. His body was found by a stone wall below a plot of land once called Rufus Merriam's garden just east of the meeting house on Lexington Green. It appeared he was headed for the cover of the wall when he was shot, but he didn't make it. He may also have been determined to warn the men on the Green of the British approach.**

**Daniel Thompson was one of the 180 men who mustered at Fowle Tavern. Thompson rallied that day because he believed strongly in freedom. He was the ideal patriot coming from a family with a long and honored tradition of service to Woburn's defense.**

**Thompson marched with the Woburn Militia to Concord. They arrived early and placed themselves, along with other Militia units from the vicinity, on either side of Bedford Road in Lincoln just a few miles from Concord. Hidden behind trees and stone walls, they awaited the approach of the British. When the enemy came in sight, they "poured upon the general gunfire." which the British returned in kind.**

Thompson took cover behind a barn and continued firing with deadly results. Such deadly results, that a British regular was ordered to come up behind him and take him out. But no sooner did the regular's shot find its target than he was in turn shot by a fellow militiamen who had come up behind the regular. But it was not in time to save Thompson, who at age 40, lay dead at the Battle of Bloody Angle. It became the sad duty of a brother, Abijah Thompson, to bear the bad news to his brother's wife and children, the oldest of which at age 14, took the news badly and remained in a state of shock for several days.

On Friday, April 21, 1775, the remains of Asahel Porter and Daniel Thompson were interred in Woburn's First Burial Ground while the Woburn Militia's coronet or flag bearer, lowered the militia's flag and dragged it behind in honor of the dead heroes. Reverend Josiah Sherman made a speech fitting the occasion and when he was finished, the coronet raised the flag to symbolize Porter's and Thompson's rebirth in heaven. A large crowd traveling from neighboring towns came to pay their respects and crowded into the burial ground.

In the early part of May 1775, following their interment, an elegy to Porter and Thompson's sacrifice and the 38 others killed on April 19, 1775, was printed in the form of a broadside by Ezekiel Russell of Salem. The unusually large-sized broadside gave an account of the Battle of Lexington and Concord through the accounts printed in various newspapers. It also memorialized the deaths of the 40 valiant men who died there by adorning the top of the broadside with 40 coffins each with the name of the 40 men who died that day.

The broadside entitled, "Bloody Butchery, by the British Troops" was distributed throughout all 13 colonies. People were encouraged to frame and display it prominently as a memorial to the valiant heroes of Lexington and Concord who lost their lives that day. And this coming Monday, Woburn will once again display an early 19th-century reproduction of that memorial in the City Hall rotunda from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., and all are invited to view it.

Although Asahel Porter did not have a tombstone in place for his official burial in 1775, one was finally put in place for him on April 21, 1875, by Post 33 of Woburn's G.A.R. and "suitably inscribed."

This Monday, April 19, 1999, Woburn will once again have an opportunity to pay their respects to Asahel Porter and Daniel Thompson. At 9:30 a.m., a new generation of Woburnites will gather at the First Burial Ground on Park Street to demonstrate they have not be forgotten or the sacrifice made by them.

This time, wreaths, supplied by the Veteran's Services, will be placed at the gravesites of Asahel Porter and Daniel Thompson and flags on the gravesites of the other 13 Revolutionary soldiers buried while their names are read aloud in remembrance. At the end of the ceremony taps will be played by John

**Labbe, a member of the Woburn High School Band.**

**The sources for this article are "The History of Woburn, 1785-1868," by Samuel Sewell, "The History of Woburn, " by William Richard Cutter and "Massachusetts Broad­sides of the Revolution," (1976) published by the University of Massachusetts Press.**

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