



A new theory on Carlisle's march to the Old North Bridge

by Parkman Howe



Carlisle Minutemen fire a volley in Estabrook Woods during the march to Concord in 2016. (File photo by Nancy Roberts)

A number of years ago I wrote in this paper that the Carlisle Minutemen enjoy the last line of march to the Old North Bridge that resembles in a rough way conditions in 1775. I was referring, of course, to the old road through Estabrook Woods first used by the contemporary Carlisle Minutemen in 1962. I have now changed my mind about this itinerary. As I have studied this episode in Carlisle history, I have encountered a number of issues that might be addressed at more length elsewhere. Nevertheless, I present below my current core findings about events in Carlisle on the 19th of April, 1775.

Two sentences by New England historian Samuel Adams Drake in his *History of Middlesex County*,

See MARCH on page 10

“Timothy Wilkins with his drum and James Kemp with his horn sounded the alarm”



Scott Evans leads the reenactment of the March to Concord.

(Photo by Nancy Roberts)

Massachusetts (1880) contain the earliest published evidence we know about the Carlisle Minutemen and their march to Concord:

“Reuben Brown and Deacon Parkman, well-mounted, were sent to alarm adjacent towns. The old Carlisle lieutenant used to tell his grandson, now living [1880], that the people of the neighborhood were summoned by Timothy Wilkins with his drum and James

Kent [sic. Kemp] with his horn; and that under an old Indian fighter, James Russell, they marched twenty-one strong to Hildreth's Corner, where they met Captain Davis and the Acton men, and accompanied them to the bridge.” pp. 387-88. *History of Middlesex County, Massachusetts. Vol. 2*, Estes and Lauriat, 1880.

A second history of the Carlisle Minutemen can be found in a sermon, recently printed by the Carlisle Historical

Society, preached on February 12, 1879 by the Rev. James J. Twiss at the First Parish Church here in town: “And from its [the Carlisle church's] portals, as tradition declares, on the morning of the 19th of April, 1775, nineteen men, called together from the neighboring hamlets by the drum of Timothy Wilkins and the horn of James Kemp, started for Concord, under the direction of Lieut. James Russell and Samuel Heald, to join in the fight at the old North Bridge, and to pursue the retreating foe back to Boston.” Clearly, both Drake and Twiss had been talking to the same person, possibly Major Benjamin Franklin Heald, who liked to recount the tale of the Minutemen muster told by his grandfather: Drake's “old Carlisle Lieutenant”—Lt. Samuel Heald.

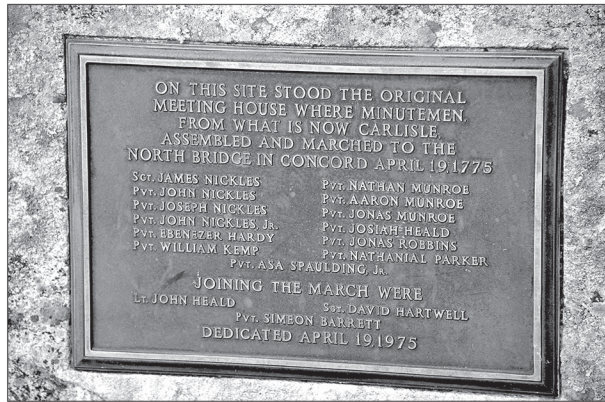
Reuben Brown, a saddler in Concord, had ridden to Lexington in the early morning of the 19th to report on British movements. He witnessed events on Lexington Green at dawn, then rode

back to Concord to report. Subsequently, Colonel Barrett in Concord instructed him to alarm towns in the direction of Hopkinton, over thirty-five miles to the southwest. We next hear of Brown in Carlisle around 7 a.m. in the company of William Parkman, who had been carrying the alarm to other towns in the area. We don't know why Brown and Parkman joined to raise the alarm; more importantly, we don't know why Brown and Parkman headed north to Carlisle first, instead of heading to Hopkinton as instructed.

Once Brown and Parkman arrived in Carlisle, however, Timothy Wilkins with his drum and James Kemp with his horn sounded the alarm. A drum had been used in Lexington the night before to call the Minutemen there to arms; that morning, an African slave in Needham used his trumpet to sound the alarm. It is a safe bet that signal shots were also fired by appointed citizens. In addition, Carlisle's meetinghouse bell might have rung, if the “rude structure... without finish either inside or outside,” according to Carlisle historian Ruth Wilkins, had a bell; she does not mention one. Nevertheless, Drake's account of events in Carlisle matches the pattern of alarm methods employed by other towns around Boston.

Next, the Minutemen, possibly nineteen or twenty-one in number, set off under the command of Lt. James Russell Jr., or the joint command of Russell and Samuel Heald, depending on which source you favor. Russell had four daughters, and his wife was pregnant with a son who would be born in a month. His companion Samuel Heald would be commissioned a lieutenant nearly a year later, but this morning he was a citizen volunteer. In any case, the minutemen set off for the Concord Bridge, probably between 7:15 and 7:30am.

In her history of Carlisle, Ruth Wilkins notes that the list of Minutemen on the plaque by the First Religious Society does not include either James Kemp or Timothy Wilkins. It also does not list Samuel Heald, named in the Twiss sermon. More egregiously, it does not name James Russell Jr., the leader of the Minutemen cited in both of the earliest sources. A more complete and accurate



The commemorative plaque at the First Religious Society. (Photo by Priscilla Stevens)



Hildreth's Corner in Concord was the Carlisle Minutemen's destination. (Photo by Parkman Howe)

“Conditions on Estabrook Road...[were] not conducive to a “march” formation”

listing of the original Minutemen remains to be assembled.

The March to Concord

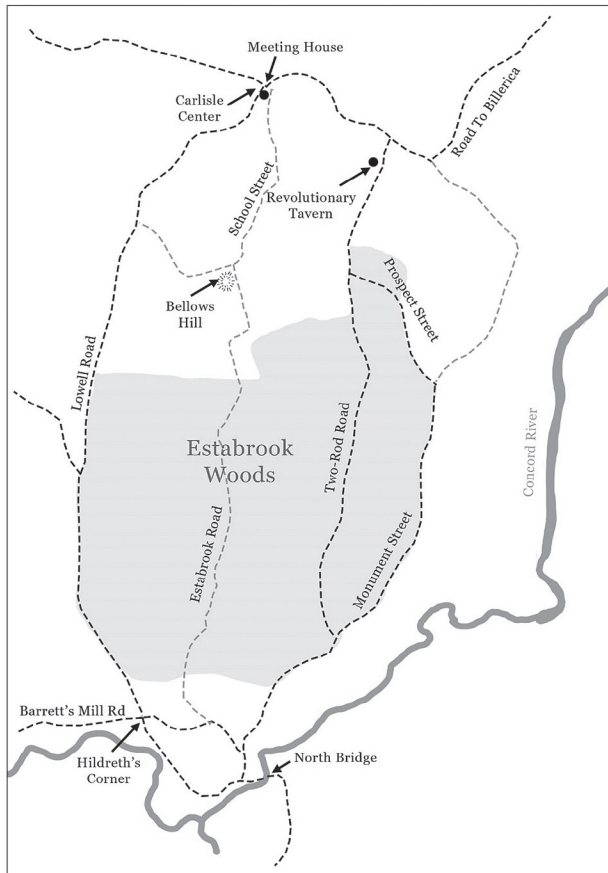
Since we have no other account at present of the destination of the Carlisle march, we are left to assume that Hildreth's Corner was their immediate objective. An early map of the District of Carlisle from 1779 shows four roads near the center of Carlisle heading south to the North Bridge. Although they go by different names on these maps, they are today's Westford Road, Lowell Road, Two-Rod Road and Monument Street. Two-Rod Road, laid out by the town of Concord in 1745, led south through the eastern sector of Estabrook Woods to Punkatasset Hill where it joined Monument Street (see map). Today, a portion of this mostly abandoned road includes Stearns Street at the Carlisle end.

A possible fifth way to Concord might have run through Estabrook Woods. We simply don't know much about Estabrook Road in 1775. No Concord records testify to it being laid out and accepted as a public way, and it doesn't show up on maps until 1830. Concord town records in 1877 mention its use for logging. Another Concord town record from 1891 called it "little better than ruts through a piece of woodland." Other cart paths and trails crisscrossed these woods, according to historian Stephen Ells. Thoreau, in an 1859 entry in his journal, observed, "no jockey, no wheelright in his right mind drives over" what he called "the old Carlisle road."

These, then, comprise the options for our group of Minutemen as they marched for, presumably, Hildreth's Corner. Traveling at approximately three miles per hour, a steady pace, the Minutemen would need at least two hours to complete their journey to the vicinity of the Bridge, form up with other companies, and then descend on the Bridge itself by approximately 9:30 a.m.

Why was it so important to reach Hildreth's Corner? We know that the planning for mobilizing the citizenry of the Middlesex County countryside was extremely sophisticated, complex, and well-planned. Brown and Parkman had no trouble raising the alarm, for example, with Wilkins and Kemp to aid them. When James Russell arrived in the center of town, he took charge and set off for Hildreth's Corner in order to meet Captain Davis and the Acton Minutemen marching down today's Strawberry Hill and Barrett's Mill Roads. They may well have agreed on this in strategy sessions during the fall and winter. We just don't know.

Three routes can be ruled out immediately: Westford Road, Two-Rod



Map showing the choices the Carlisle Minutemen had to get to Hildreth's Corner. (Map courtesy of Estabrook Council.org)

Road and Monument Street. It would take much too long to march to Westford Road, then turn south, only to join Lowell Road halfway to Concord (see map). Both Two-Rod Road and Monument Street lead to the North Bridge, but they approach the Bridge from the northeast, on the side opposite from Hildreth's Corner. The distance from the Carlisle Meetinghouse to the North Bridge is 5.75 miles via Monument Street, and approximately the same for Two-Rod Road; add almost half a mile if they carried on past the bridge to Hildreth's Corner. There are markedly shorter and faster routes to Hildreth's Corner.

This leaves us with a choice between Lowell and Estabrook Roads. In her 1976 version of the march to Concord, Ruth Wilkins follows Drake closely. But at the conclusion of her account, she writes,

route does open onto the paved section of what is now formally called Estabrook Road; it is closer to the Bridge than to Hildreth's Corner. But the objective of the Carlisle Minutemen, according to Drake, was not the Bridge; it was Hildreth's Corner and the rendezvous with the Acton Minutemen where they would be incorporated into Captain Davis's larger force. Further, the conditions on Estabrook Road in 1775, as today, are not conducive to a "march" formation. A group of nineteen or twenty-one militiamen, carrying rifles and perhaps a drum and trumpet, would be strung out in a line, slowed by the impediments of a forest path. They would make faster time to Hildreth's Corner, and in a more orderly fashion, on the well-established and wider Lowell Road that was also the shortest route.

Finally, the numerous houses along Lowell Road would afford refreshment during their two-hour march as well as the possibility of gaining more recruits. The plaque adjacent to the First Religious Society in Carlisle Center lists three minutemen as "Joining the March": Lieutenant John Heald, Sergeant David Hartwell, and Private Simeon Barrett. Simeon Barrett lived in his father's house near where today's Curve Street meets Lowell Street. He would have had an extra couple of miles to walk south before reaching Carlisle Center. We don't know why he joined the march already in progress; perhaps the group had left by the time he reached the Center, and he had to catch up with the others along the road to Hildreth's Corner.

David Hartwell lived on Lowell Road just over today's town line into Carlisle. The Lowell Road march would have passed right by his house. John Heald lived in the old Red Lion Inn on what was then known as the "Road to Groton," or today's West Street in Carlisle. He would have simply walked down West Street to its junction with the present Westford Road in Concord, and continued on to its junction with Lowell Road where he would have met the Carlisle men on their way to Hildreth's Corner (see map).

All three men either lived on Lowell Road, adjacent to it, or on a road that connected to it. From the evidence of historic maps, it would be extremely improbable that these three marchers would have joined a march on Estabrook Road since no road connected Lowell Road to Estabrook Road in 1775.

One more note: in 1901 George Tolman gave an address to the

Concord Antiquarian Society stating that "Lieutenant John Heald with the Carlisle contingent of sixteen men" joined Acton's Captain Isaac Davis. Did Russell commence the march as leader, but cede command to Heald when the lieutenant joined the company at the junction of Lowell and Westford Roads? More research remains to be done.

Afterword

So, should the Carlisle Minutemen march along Lowell Road to Barrett's Mill Road in Concord to preserve historical authenticity? Absolutely not, in my view. The road through Estabrook Woods makes the march pleasurable, even in bad weather and lends it an authentic feel that no other line of march can rival. A re-enactor's dream, the old road passes along stonewalls in deep woods, by ponds and an old cellar hole before it emerges onto lovely, rolling fields by colonial farmhouses just before the approach to the Bridge. A march down Lowell Road, by contrast, would be much more dangerous for a large group of people and not nearly as much fun.

We can never be sure what exactly happened in Carlisle on the morning of April 19, 1775. Despite the excitement and bloodshed in Lexington, Concord, and the return to Boston, the Carlisle participants did not deem it worthy, alas, to set pen to paper to preserve their experiences. Certainly, stories circulated for several generations after the events of those 24 hours, but they were gradually lost, except for those fortunate few sentences set down by a clergyman and a regional historian one hundred and forty years ago.

I would like to thank Captain Scott Evans of the Carlisle Colonial Minutemen for patiently reading this article and commenting wisely upon it.

I would also like to thank CCHS Senior and Carlisle resident John Troast for showing me the Carlisle Historical Society's collection of manuscripts and artifacts. He also read several drafts of this article, making wise, learned and invaluable contributions each time. Δ