

Chapter IV

"Your Distressed Brethen...."

When John Adams was an old man, he looked back across his long life and said he doubted that the history of the American Revolution could ever be written. Rebellion, he said, had been in the minds and hearts of the American people for a long time before the first shots rang out on Lexington Green in 1775. More than two centuries later we can only wonder just when it was that our friends in East Stoughton became rebels in their hearts.

When the French and Indian War ended in 1763, Americans looked forward to a welcome period of peace and prosperity. The great majority saw themselves as loyal Englishmen; only the most radical harbored thoughts of revolution, let alone visions of independence. Most colonists respected the authority of Parliament and had sincere affection for King George III, who had assumed the throne in 1761. It would take only a decade for this loyalty to erode, however, and when it did even East Stoughton would be ripe for rebellion.

The issues which would bring on such momentous events were centered on taxation and representation.¹ The close of the French and Indian Wars debtridden British government decided that the American colonies would have to assume a larger share of the costs of their own administration and defense. Consequently, the old, unwritten policy of "salutary neglect" gave way to a more vigorous program of taxation and regulation.

In 1765 Parliament passed the Stamp Act, a law which taxed all commercial and legal documents, including newspapers, birth and death certificates, wills, marriage licenses and even playing cards. Opposition to the law was swift and it cut across a wide spectrum of the population as attorneys, printers, publicans and many others found

themselves adversely affected by it. Groups calling themselves Sons of Liberty organized to protest the law, and there was rioting in Boston. Down in Braintree a young lawyer named John Adams set down his town's objections to the Stamp Act. These "Braintree Instructions," subsequently adopted by more than forty other towns, criticized the law because the colonies were not represented in the Parliament which passed it. Also, wrote Adams, the law was unconstitutional because enforcement was under the jurisdiction of the vice-admiralty courts, where there were no jury trials.²

Old Stoughton (less newly created Stoughtonham) was a town of about 2,100 people, and they, like the rest of Massachusetts, rejoiced when the Stamp Act was repealed in March 1766. Soon the issue of restitution arose when certain angry Bostonians demanded compensation for property which had been destroyed in the rioting. Generally these individuals were seen as people who had been too friendly to the colonial administration in the first place, and little sympathy was spent on them. Stoughton instructed Hezekiah Gay, its representative to the General Court, to state that his townspeople "abhor and detest all mobs in general, and that none of us had any hand in that particular (riot)..." Nevertheless, they told Gay, "We would recommend to you by no means to vote for recompense to be made of ye" Province, as a point of justice. . . . "³

The Stamp Act crisis passed, but in 1767 the British ministry proposed the Townshend Acts, which placed a tax on glass, lead, paper, paint, tea and other commodities imported from England. The colonists were furious and promised to boycott the taxable items. They also vowed to substitute homemade goods for British imports whenever possible. Homespun clothes and herb tea suddenly became fashionable in towns throughout Massachusetts, and certainly East Stoughton was no exception.

In January 1768, Samuel Adams asked the House of Representatives to

distribute a circular letter among the other colonies inviting them to join with Massachusetts in opposing the Townshend Acts. At first the House refused, but the persistent Adams re-introduced the measure and it passed on February 2, with Stoughton's representative, Hezekiah Gay, voting in favor.

The British ministry viewed the circular as traitorous and demanded that the House rescind it or face dissolution. The House remained steadfast, voting ninety-two to seventeen not to rescind. Gay was one of those voting with the majority and was among those Representatives for whom Paul Revere made a sterling silver bowl inscribed to "the memory of the Glorious Ninety-two Members."⁴

By the end of 1768 British troops had been garrisoned in Boston, ostensibly to defend the city against French attack, but actually to bolster the British administration in the city. This led to tragedy on March 5, 1770 when a squad of troopers fired into an angry mob, killing five colonists. This episode became known as the Boston Massacre, and it proved to be a treasure-trove of propaganda for the patriots, regardless of the fact that the soldiers were later tried and all but two acquitted; and even those two were convicted of a lesser crime. Unfortunately we have no record of how these alarming events were received in East Stoughton, but we can be sure that its residents kept a sharp eye on what went on in Boston.

In March 1773 the Stoughton town meeting considered a letter which had been received from the committee of correspondence in Boston summarizing that city's grievances against Parliament. The town replied to the communication by agreeing that our Rights as men, as Christians, and British Subjects are rightly stated by you, and in ye many instances produced have been Greatly infringed upon and violated by arbitrary Will and Power. We esteem them heavy grievances, and apprehensive that in future time they may prove fatal to us and our posterity, as to all that is Dear to us. Reducing us not

only to poverty, but Slavery.... ..

The town promised to instruct its representative to the General Court to use all constitutional means to see that those rights which had been "ravished" were returned to the people. The Stoughton people signed a letter "Your Distressed Brethren and oppressed fellow subjects"⁵

Constitutional means soon gave way to other means, and on December 16, 1773 Boston patriots, protesting the Tea act, dumped 342 chests of British East India Company tea into the harbor. John Adams was elated; he wrote that "the Dye is cast: The people have passed the River and cuttaway the Bridge . . . "⁶.

Parliament responded with the Boston Port Act, which closed Boston Harbor until the tea (valued at £9,000) was paid for. Other laws, equally offensive to the colonists, were passed in quick succession, and these be-came known to the Americans as the Coercive Acts. Generally, they served to strengthen royal power while limiting expressions of self-government which the colonists had long taken for granted.

On April 2, 1774 Thomas Hutchinson was replaced by General Thomas Gage as governor of Massachusetts. Throughout the colony opposition to the Coercive Acts continued to swell as economic hardship settled in on the people. Throughout the summer a series of county conventions were held at which resolutions of protest were formally, and vociferously, adopted.

One of the earliest of these were held on August 17, 1774 at Doty's tavern in Old Stoughton (now Canton), where Suffolk County delegates met to determine a course of action in response to British aggression. The patriots met again in Dedham on September 6, and Theophilus Curtis of East Stoughton was one of the delegates. This body met for the third and final time in Milton on September 9 and

passed the famous Suffolk Resolves. Although Curtis was not present there as a Stoughton delegate, he may well have been in attendance as an observer.

The Suffolk Resolves declared the Coercive Acts unconstitutional and advised the citizens of Massachusetts to form a separate government until the Acts were repealed. They also advocated economic sanctions against England and, more ominously, urged the people to arm themselves. These resolves were brought to Philadelphia by Paul Revere and presented to the First Continental Congress, then organizing its first session.

By October 1774 many Massachusetts towns were reorganizing their militia companies in order to conform more closely to guidelines set down by the General Court. One-quarter of these local companies were told to be ready to respond at a moment's notice to any emergency, and drillmasters were appointed to instruct these young "minutemen." There were three such drillmasters in Stoughton, one of whom was Nathaniel Wales, of Cincinnati Road in the eastern part of town. These citizen-soldiers drilled two and one-half days each week, and received a shilling per day for their trouble.⁷

In addition to military preparedness, Massachusetts towns took other steps to make sure that the instructions of the Continental Congress were adhered to by all citizens, regardless of where they stood on the issues of the day. Stoughton's Committee of Inspection or Correspondence took care of this, and it was vigilant in upholding the patriot viewpoint. At least two of its nineteen members, David Vinton and Theophilus Curtis, were from East Stoughton.⁸ This committee kept lines of communication open with other towns, and also distributed propaganda, enforced the boycott and guarded against profiteering by unscrupulous merchants.

On the afternoon of April 19, 1775 young Lemuel Bent found himself

pulling on the bell rope in the Stoughton meetinghouse with all the strength his small arms could muster. Word had just been received that fighting had broken out between the King's troops and militiamen at Lexington and Concord. The time had come to fight.

The sound of the bell reached down through the streets of the town, calling the merchants and tradesmen; it slipped beneath doors and through cracks in sills, straightening wives and mothers bent over washboards or hearthfires; it echoed over the fields and forests, beckoning farmers and their sons; it passed over the highways, summoning the wagoneers and teamsters. The same bell which called them to prayer on the Lord's Day now called them to war, and nobody wanted to miss it.

Israel Bailey was given a horse and told to ride throughout the town and yell out the militia. They were told to assemble at May's tavern at once for the march to Boston, and they were to be reminded that this was no drill.

Legend has it that the patriots of East Stoughton used to meet at the boulders which still stand on the corner of Page and Pond Streets."⁹ Whether they mustered there on that day will never be known, but before long they were on the way to meet their comrades. Muskets and flints were checked on the run as hasty good-byes were called to loved ones.

Six companies of militia marched from Stoughton, and at least one of these was a minuteman company containing eight men from East Stoughton. These men and boys, now rebels, were ready to take the biggest gamble of their lives. Under the command of Captain William Briggs, these village men were: First Lieutenant Simeon Leach, Second Lieutenant Samuel Talbot, Sergeants Joseph Richards and Jacob Goldthwaite, and Privates Lemuel Blanchard, Jonathan Curtis,

Edmund Littlefield and Daniel Nightingale."10

Not far behind the minutemen came the other militia units. One of them, commanded by Peter Talbot, had at least eighteen East Stoughton men in its ranks. The villagers in this company were: Lieutenant Nathaniel Littlefield, Sergeant Joseph Porter, Corporal Amariah Harris, and Privates Jonathan Battles, William Curtis, Jr., Thomas Curtis, Theophilus Curtis, Peter Dunbar, Caleb Hayward, Bamabus Keith, Edmund Littlefield, Jr., Joseph Lovel, Thomas Mitchell, Joseph Porter, Jr., David Vinton, Jr., Nathaniel Wales, Jr" Thomas Wales and Moses Wales"11.

Although none of the other four companies which answered the alarm on April 19 appear to have contained any East Stoughton soldiers, it should be noted that at least twenty-six men from that section of town answered the call, and considering the fact that the area held only about thirty-three families, this turnout was indeed impressive

Whatever they may have expected, the men of East Stoughton who answered the alarm bell saw no battle that day. Perhaps they arrived in Boston early enough to catch a glimpse of the defeated British regulars returning from Lexington and Concord, but the fighting had ended by the time they reached the city.

Throughout the night of April 19 and over the next couple of days the militia continued to pour into Boston. It has been estimated that almost 20,000 colonists arrived ready to give battle. One man wrote that he had never in his life seen "such a confused Company as small detachments from every quarter composes."12

The year-long siege of Boston had begun as regiments were passed in areas outlying the city. The objective was to keep the British troops penned up within the capital, and to offer spirited resistance should they attempt to break out. In the days immediately following the first

bloodshed, however, it became clear that the immediate threat of further trouble had been lifted.

With no battle imminent, the militiamen were sent home after a few days. Most of the East Stoughton men were gone from one .to two weeks. In the period after Lexington and Concord it was clear that a standing army of well trained men would have to be raised and maintained, and the militia would serve as auxiliaries in times of emergency.

On Sunday, April 23, 1775 the Provincial Congress assembled and authorized Massachusetts to raise 13,600 men for a 30,000 man army. Artemas Ward served as Commander-in-Chief until June 15, when the Second Continental Congress meeting in Philadelphia named George Washington to replace him. Two days later another battle was fought, this time at Bunker Hill, with heavy British casualties. The King's forces had finally taken the hill, but the siege of Boston was unbroken. Two week after Bunker Hill (July 3, 1775) General Washington arrived in Cambridge to take command of the Continental troops, and the war was a reality.

During that first summer of the Revolution the people of eastern Massachusetts had more to worry about than the British. A smallpox epidemic swept through the area claiming many lives. While we do not know to what extent this troubled East Stoughton, the people there certainly must have felt its effects. From nearby Braintree, Abigail Adams told her husband that there had been "Four, three, and two funerals in a day, for many days . . . I have no more shocking and terrible idea of any distemper, except the plague, than this."¹³

The Stoughton people soon learned that fighting a war required more than manpower. The Continental Army, which was bivouacked at four locations around Boston, consumed enormous quantities of food and provisions, and these had to be supplied by the neighboring towns. On

December 2, 1775 the General Court told Stoughton officials that the army required fifty-eight cords of wood in a single day, and that henceforth their town would be responsible for delivering two cords each day to the camp at Roxbury. This soon proved to be insufficient, and at the end of the month Stoughton was asked to increase its share.

Not long after this, in January 1776, Stoughton and Stoughtonham (present-day Sharon and Foxboro) were told to deliver three tons of hay and twenty-two blankets to the army."¹⁴ While we have no records to give us exact quantities, without doubt the East Stoughton people were required to contribute toward each of these quotas.

Most men during the Revolution fulfilled their military commitment either as members of the local militia companies or of the Continental Army; a few served in both. Stoughton can be credited with sending approximately 200 men to serve under George Washington in the Continental forces. Some enlisted for three years, others signed up for shorter periods, and a few were drafted. Most were given small bounties when they left home, and while they were away the town discounted part of their taxes. If a soldier's family was needy the town granted small allotments to help buy food and pay the rent".¹⁵

We have what is probably an incomplete list of East Stoughton men who served in the Continental Army. William Blanchard heads it because it is likely that he saw more service than any other villager. Born in Braintree in 1747, he enlisted for three years and fought first at Saratoga. He suffered through the winter of 1777-78 at Valley Forge and later saw action at the Battle of Monmouth, where his cousin John died at his side. Before being discharged in February 1780, Blanchard fought once more, at Stony Point, New York. He returned home to Massachusetts and four years later founded Blanchard's Tavern, still a landmark on North Main Street in Avon."¹⁶

Nathaniel Littlefield also marched from East Stoughton to join the

Continentalists. Just 18 years-old, he was a dark complexioned young farmer who stood five feet, ten inches tall. He went to camp in July 1780 and served for six months.

Two other East Stoughton men who served under General Washington were Edmund Littlefield and John Wales. Littlefield enlisted for an unknown period in 1781, and Wales spent three years, from 1776-79, with the Continental forces. Unfortunately we know little about their army experiences".¹⁷

It was not always easy to find men willing to leave home and family to serve in the war, however noble the cause. Jedediah Southworth of Stoughton had been asked by Colonel Thomas Marshall to try to raise a company of local men for Continental service under Marshall's command. Southworth's reply, delivered in June 1776, was not encouraging. "I find plenty of men to engage with a good Bounty," he wrote, "but not otherwise, for the Farmers give higher wage than a Soldiers pay is."¹⁸

It was as part-time soldiers - militiamen - that the majority of East Stoughton men served during the war. Most were troopers in the East Company of Stoughton's Second Parish, commanded by Captain Simeon Leach as part of Colonel Benjamin Gill's Third Suffolk County Regiment.

Captain Leach presents a good example of a local militia commander. A veteran of the French and Indian War, Leach had returned to East Stoughton in 1758 after several months of service in an expedition to invade Canada. After the war he married Elizabeth, the daughter of Theophilus Curtis, and settled down on his small farm. He and his wife began their family and Leach continued as a member of the Stoughton militia. ".¹⁹

Leach marched on the Lexington alarm as a lieutenant in William

Briggs' company, and when the militia was reorganized in March 1776, he assumed the captaincy of the East Company. This was a well-deserved promotion because Leach was a solid, respectable citizen. A tax return for that period now in the Massachusetts State Archives shows that he was far from the wealthiest man in town, but he certainly enjoyed the trust and confidence of his neighbors."²⁰

The East Company was never called upon to fight a pitched battle against the Redcoats, but it was on duty during one of the most exciting nights of the war. Captain Leach's men played a supporting role in the fortification of Dorchester Heights, an action that served to drive the British out of Boston.

In the winter of 1776 Colonel Henry Knox had traveled overland from Fort Ticonderoga to Boston, bringing with him fifty-eight pieces of captured British artillery. He presented the guns to a grateful General Washington, who posted them on the outskirts of the city at Lechmere Point, Cobble Hill and Roxbury. On the night of March 2, a Saturday, these guns began a desultory but persistent shelling of Boston. The Americans resumed the bombardment on Sunday night and again on Monday night, while the British answered with their own artillery on Bunker Hill.

The shelling of Boston was intended to mask Washington's plan to fortify Dorchester Heights, a commanding spot which overlooked the harbor and parts of the city. On Monday, March 4, a call went out for the militia to join the Continentals in Dorchester. The alarm was sounded in Stoughton and immediately the East Company mustered. The men who went to Dorchester from the village were: Captain Simeon Leach, First Lieutenant Samuel Talbot, Second Lieutenant Joseph Richards, and Privates Jonathan Battles, William Curtis, Jr., Peter Dunbar, Caleb Howard, Amariah Harris, Nathaniel Littlefield, David Vinton, Moses Wales, and Nathaniel Wales, Jr."²⁰

It must have been a harrowing scene that greeted the East Stoughton men when they reached their destination. In addition to 1,500 militiamen, Washington had sent for 300 carts and 360 teams of oxen, plus teamsters and artillerymen. Under the cover of darkness and in the midst of the heaviest American cannonade yet, the militia prepared to support the Continentals in the event of a sudden British attack.

All night the colonists worked; axemen felled trees to make abattis, while others filled barrels with dirt to roll down the hill on any British attacking parties. Meanwhile the carts made several trips up the heights carrying fascines, bundles of sticks held in wooden frames called chandeliers.

We do not know just where Captain Leach had been ordered to post his men, but they certainly must have had a fine vantage point from which to watch the activity. The night was perfect: clear and mild, with a bright moon lighting the hills.

The attention of the British forces in Boston was kept from Dorchester Heights by the incessant shelling of the American guns. Abigail Adams could hear the gunfire all the way to Braintree (Quincy), and given the ideal weather conditions it is likely that the East Stoughton people heard it too.

By dawn of March 5 the work was completed; American artillery was atop the heights and it was extremely well positioned. The colonists, no doubt aware that this was the sixth anniversary of the Boston Massacre, waited to see what the British would do.

Daylight served to notify the Redcoats that they had been outmaneuvered, but they were determined to destroy the fortifications quickly. British artillery opened up on Dorchester Heights, but the muzzles of the guns could not be elevated enough to reach their targets.

British General William Howe ordered an attack, and had this been

carried out it would have brought the militia into action. However on the night of March 5, as the final preparations for the assault were being made, the unexpected happened. A violent three-day storm, a "Hurricane" as one soldier called it, swept up the coast and frustrated Howe's plan for quick action. With the opportunity for a sudden, full-scale attack lost, the British commander abandoned the plan and the Redcoats evacuated Boston on March 17, 1776."²¹

General Washington, realizing that the British attack would not be forthcoming, had released the militia on March 7. He was pleased with their performance, writing that "they came in at the appointed time, and manifested the greatest alertness, and determined resolution to act like men engaged in the cause of freedom."²³

Two weeks later Captain Leach and most of his company were called out again, this time when British ships appeared in Boston Harbor. The alarm proved to be groundless, however, and they were home in two days."²³

In 1777 and again in 1779 some members of the Stoughton militia traveled to Rhode Island to answer calls for assistance, but as far as can be determined they saw no combat."²⁴

One searches in vain for any reference to Captain Simeon Leach after the alarm which called him and his men to the shores of Boston Harbor in March 1776. Muster roll returns for the period after that show that Joseph Richards assumed a militia captaincy, but Simeon Leach is nowhere to be found.

The mystery is solved by a walk through the Avon Cemetery on Memorial Drive. There, at the top of a slight rise, lies Captain Simeon Leach, his marker dated 1777, a date long before the end of the American Revolution. Forty-three years old at the time of his death, he

left a wife and three young children to mourn him.

In addition to worrying about their soldiers who were away from home, the people of Old Stoughton and its village to the east had to attend to the more mundane problems which always trouble a nation at war. Inflation and a shortage of hard money plagued them, and they were always watchful for suspected profiteering. On March 14, 1776 the Committees of Safety and Inspection from Stoughton and other towns complained about the high prices being charged for certain English goods, such as wood, flax, shoe leather and grain. They asked the House of Representatives to institute a scheme for fixing prices of certain staple commodities.²⁵ Throughout the war Theophilus Curtis and Joseph Richards, both of East Stoughton, were active in supporting the patriot cause on the homefront.

On Sunday, August 18, 1776 the newly adopted Declaration of Independence was read publicly in Stoughton from the pulpit of the old meetinghouse and a sermon was preached in praise of it.²⁶ Judging from the way they had responded to past crises, however, it is likely that most of the Stoughton people were well ahead of the Second Continental Congress in desiring independence.

Acceptance of the patriot viewpoint was not universal. Some citizens rejected the notion of revolution and independence. They saw the war as nothing but the traitorous action of a few radicals who had managed to win the favor of the less-informed element of society. Although history has proved them incorrect, it is inaccurate to assume that all of the conservatives loved America less than their neighbors who were bearing arms against the King.

In 1777 an Act of the General Court ordered local selectmen to identify those persons who were unfriendly to the "common cause, and had endeavored since the nineteenth of April 1775, to counteract the united struggles of this and the United States ..." Six Stoughton men were

named, including William Curtis of East Stoughton. After an investigation it was decided to press the issue no further.²⁷ That tension and anxiety this must have brought to the Curtis family, which had several members fighting for the American cause, we can only surmise.

When British General Cornwallis surrendered his army to George Washington in Yorktown in the fall of 1781, American independence was assured and the war was over. For a while at least there would be no militia alarms in the night, and the men of East Stoughton could be safe at home with their families. Their experiences as soldiers of the Revolution, the hardship, sacrifice and fear would mellow with the passage of time, to be replaced by memories of comradeship and shared dedication to one of the great movements in history.

NOTES

1. Brown, pp. 73-74
2. Huntoon, p. 332,
3. House Journals, Vol. 44, 1767-1768,-pp xi, 236-39
4. Huntoon, pp. 334-35
5. Brown, p. 88.
6. Huntoon, p. 347
7. Huntoon, p. 346
8. Lorch Scrapbooks, Avon Historical Society
9. Mass. State Archives, Vol. II, p. 212. A man has been identified as a villager only if there is compelling evidence which places him in East Stoughton at the time of the Revolution. The Newton Talbot 1775 map has been consulted for this purpose, and so have fragments of town records and grave registrations. It is this writer's fear that he has underestimated the number of East Stoughton men who served, but unfortunately there is no definitive list to guide us

10. Mass. State Archives, Vol. 13, pp. 134, 134-A.
11. Alien French, *The First Year of the American Revolution* (1934; rpt. New York: OctagonBooks, 1968), p. 48.
12. French, p. 465.
13. House Journals, Vol. 51, Pt. II, 1775-1776, pp. 9, II, 77; 50; 115
14. Stoughton Avarage Settement about Hireing Men 1778 is a manuscript in the collection of the Stoughton Historical Society which lists men from the town who served with the Continental forces beginning in 1775 and ending in 1778. It appears that this may have been one of a series of such lists; if so, the others are lost to history. Other Stoughton Continentals are listed, again incompletely, in Mass. State Archives, Vol. 27, pp. 81-108, and Vol. 29, pp. 64-65.
15. Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War (Boston: Wright & Potter Co., Inc., 1896), II, 156: hereinafter cited as Mass. Soldiers and Sailors, Revolutionary War. A helpful biographical sketch of Blanchard is also found in "The Story of Blanchard's Tavern"(Avon, Mass.: n.p., 1982), n.p
16. Nathaniel Littlefield is found in Mass. Soldiers and Sailors, Revolutionary War, IX, 881; Edmund Littlefield, IX, 887; and John Wales, XVI, 424
17. Jedediah Southworth to Colonel Thomas Marshall, June 5, 1776, Edes Collection, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Mass
18. Mitchell, p. 241., no. 24
19. A List of the Polls and of the Estates, Real and Personal of the Several Proprietors and Inhabitants of the Town of Stoughton 1771], Mass. State Archives, Microfilm, Vol. 134, pp.164-76.
20. Mass. State Archives, Vol. 20, p. 186.
21. Donald Barr Chidsey, *The Siege of Boston* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1966), pp. 151-52; Alien French, pp. 656-663.
22. French, p. 658.
23. Mass. State Archives, Vol. 21, p. 30
24. Annual Report of the Town of Stoughton for the Year 1889 (Stoughton, Mass.: The Stoughton Sentinel, 1890), pp. 90-91
25. House Journals, Vol. 51, Pt. Ill, 1776, p. 6.

26. Huntoon, p. 390.

27. Huntoon, pp. 401-02.