

In 2004 Gordon College received a grant from the Kimball Scholarship Fund for a study of Topsfield's role in the events leading up to the Revolutionary War. Professor Goss's students did the research and prepared an exhibit which was displayed at Masconomet Regional High School and later in the Town Library. Professor Goss summarized the findings of the students in the following paper that he presented at a Historical Society meeting.

TOPSFIELD AND “THE SHOT HEARD ROUND THE WORLD”

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If population is used as the measure of size, Topsfield in the decade before the Revolution was the third smallest town in Essex County. It had only 773 residents according to the Massachusetts colonial census, and only 733 if you accept the figures found in the Topsfield town records. Wenham was the smallest town with a total population of 638 and Salem the largest with 5,337. The entire population of Essex County amounted to a total of 50,923 persons by 1776. Despite its diminutive size, Topsfield, at the war's outbreak, raised two companies of militia under the commands of Captains Joseph Gould and Stephen Perkins. Gould's company consisted of 63 men, and Perkins's company fielded 47 soldiers for a total contribution of 110 men from Topsfield, or approximately 15% of the town's total population.

The question is, how did this enthusiastic response come about? This is the purpose of the recent exhibition undertaken by the museum studies students from Gordon College: to tell the story of how it was that Topsfield went from a loyal and conservative Anglo-American farming community to a hotbed of Revolutionary activity in a mere decade.

The following information is derived from the research of our students and has been well documented in the new exhibition which we hope you will view and study in the next few weeks.

Topsfield's pathway to Revolution begins with the end of the French and Indian War at the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763. For the

first time in three generations Massachusetts colonists could sleep peacefully without fear of a French inspired attack. The French had been successfully driven from the western frontier and Canada, and England now dominated the Atlantic seaboard from Labrador to Georgia. It was a tremendous triumph! This triumph was bought with the blood of many British and Americans and at an enormous economic expense. England's most immediate concern was paying off a vast war debt with severely limited sources of revenue.

This was the question faced by newly crowned, King George III, who had only come to the British throne in 1761. From Parliament, the strongly recommended answer was to generate new revenues from Britain's American colonies which, up to 1763, had not made a significant monetary contribution to help maintain and support the British Empire. An ill-conceived means of accomplishing this was advanced by Parliamentary leaders in 1765 whereby a stamp tax would be applied to all colonial paper goods.

The so-called Stamp Act was designed to only impact colonials who might choose voluntarily to purchase newspapers, books, stationery, wallpapers, or legal documents. Avoidance of the tax was simply accomplished by not using such products. Parliament believed that those British subjects best suited to pay such a tax would understand that this was an indirect tax on the more educated and prosperous members of American society.

This belief proved to be a naive hope on the part of Parliament and King George III as the seaport towns of North America exploded with anti-British fervor. Mobs took to the streets destroying the private property of British government officials and stamp distributors. Provincial legislatures called for a general boycott of all stamp-related goods bringing additional economic pressure to bear upon those who expected to raise revenue. The rationale for this activity was that the Stamp Act was a policy put into effect without the approval of the elected representatives of colonial legislatures. The phrase “no taxation without representation” became the war cry of these urban patriots who used both legal and extra-legal means of redress to make their position clear.

To what extent did the Stamp Act affect Topsfield? Actually, when the Stamp duties went into effect on November 1, 1765, they had very little direct impact on most rural, agricultural communities in New England including Topsfield. Those most affected by the Act were urban dwellers such as printers, booksellers, merchants and lawyers, not farmers. Consequently when Boston's Sons of Liberty took to the streets to destroy the recently arrived supplies of stamps, they did so without informing or gaining the support of the outlying towns. Topsfield was left out of these extra-legal protests entirely and not surprisingly, looked askance at such violent and unlawful behavior.

A case in point involved an incident when one of Boston's stamp distributors, Andrew Oliver, took possession of a supply of stamps and placed them in his warehouse for safe-keeping. The Sons of Liberty organized a protest demonstration resulting in the destruction of Oliver's warehouse and the ransacking of his home. The mob then proceeded to the residence of Lieutenant Governor, Thomas Hutchinson, attempting to tear that structure down as well, but got no further than the removal of his roof. Damage was also done to the homes of Comptroller of Customs, Benjamin Hallowell and Register of the Admiralty Court, William Story.

When Topsfield's citizens were informed of these violent and extra-legal activities, the Town Records record their complete ignorance and disapproval of such behavior. They instructed their representative to the Provincial Legislature, Captain Samuel Smith, to do what may be possible to alleviate the suffering of those loyal subjects whose property had been destroyed, observing that "if the petitioners had suffered by being actually engaged for the good of His Majesty's subjects in this Province, they ought to have a proper allowance made out of the Province treasury."

Later, when the Stamp Act was finally repealed, the Topsfield Town Records record the townsfolk's "gratitude for the benign actions of our most gracious Sovereign in granting repeal". Concerning financial reparations to the injured Royal officials: "We look upon it

as our greatest honor, as well as duty, always to copy after such wise, good and just examples--in consideration whereof -- in case the said sufferers (mob victims) shall make application for it, we are heartily willing to give them as much as our ability and low circumstances will admit of, provided we may do it either by subscription or by contribution, as in calamitous accidents by fire". So motivated was Topsfield in assisting the victims of mob violence, that a small team of laborers were dispatched by the town to Boston for the purpose of helping to repair the damage done by the Sons of Liberty. Interestingly, several months later, when the mob victims did indeed ask for compensation and the conviction of mob leaders, Topsfield's citizens alter their instructions to provincial representative Smith, warning him not to vote in favor of remuneration from the provincial treasury. This shift in sentiment is explained by Reverend James H. Fitts, an historian of Topsfield who suggests that the town's "patriot freeholders, or free farmers, now thought they understood the subject (of mob violence) better than they had previously". In other words, Topsfield citizens had done some investigating into the mob activity of Boston and the destruction of private property, and come to the conclusion that it might have been justified. To use their own words, it became evident that, their honors, Andrew Oliver and Thomas Hutchinson were not "officers serving the best interests of his Majesty's subjects" but rather enforcing a policy which violated the fundamental rights of those subjects.

Additional insight into this change of opinion is supplied by the town records of nearby Boxford which, in October, 1765 noted that:

"By the Royal Charter (of Massachusetts Bay), granted to our ancestors, the power of making laws for our internal government, and of levying taxes, is vested in the General Assembly, and, by the same Charter, the inhabitants of this Province are entitled to all the rights and privileges of natural, free-born subjects of Great Britain. The most essential rights of British subjects are those of being represented in the same body which exercises the power of levying taxes upon them, and of having their property tried by juries."

This line of reasoning could not help but influence the folks in neighboring Topsfield. It emphasizes that although outlying communities were distanced geographically from the epicenter of Revolutionary activities, the after-shocks of urban tumult eventually reached the most rural inhabitants. Despite this fact, it would be wrong to assume that Topsfield had finally made the intellectual break with England. It had taken an initial step toward revolution, but was still essentially a loyal community.

More relevant to Topsfield and Rowley was the immediate concern for the effect of recent poor harvests and a resulting sluggish economy which required rural communities to send money to foreign ports in exchange for necessary commodities leaving them barely enough cash money to “throw off the yearly load of public tax.” Hard currency was very tight in Topsfield in 1765, and any British policy calculated to drain more away, even to a limited extent, would be opposed on pragmatic if not philosophical grounds.

Not to be underestimated in its impact upon Topsfield's people were the examples of behavior being set by the Sons of Liberty in nearby Salem and Newburyport. Salem's chapter of the Sons of Liberty had met the Stamp Act in the streets, burning stamped custom papers in the area before the London Coffee House. The patriots of Newburyport burned the effigy of the local stamp collector on two occasions before they forced him “to promise that he would never make use of stamped paper again.”

Not surprisingly, therefore, the people of Topsfield were greatly relieved when news of the repeal of the Stamp Act reached them in 1766. But news of another crisis would follow in 1767, the infamous Townsend Act which required taxes to be paid on paper, paint, lead and tea. Once again, this was an indirect tax which was calculated to be collected from wealthy merchants who imported such goods. Beyond this were added new policies which provided for cargo inspections and the stricter enforcement of trade regulations, especially against smuggling. It was another example of faulty reasoning on the part of British officials who misunderstood the fundamental fear of American colonials not to have their rights to

representation undermined by Parliamentary legislation calculated to generate revenue from Anglo-American colonies. In addition, British Custom officials frequently used Writs of Assistance to conduct thorough examinations of vessels inside and out, a policy calculated to stop a one hundred-year-old practice of circumventing English trade regulations by American merchants.

Topsfield and Boxford colonists knew well that such a tightening of the British trade regulations and enforcement of duties would result in the increase of prices to the consumer, and joined the rest of the colony in a general boycott, not only of paper, paint, lead and tea, but of all English goods. This policy of non-importation and boycott prompted Topsfield and Boxford residents to domestically manufacture many of the goods normally brought into America from England. This led to a growing sense of the patriotism of self-sufficiency, lessening colonial dependence upon British imports. At a Boxford town meeting in 1768 these sentiments were expressed in response to an anti-importation agreement then being circulated among North Shore communities:

“And, although our town is but small, it would do everything in its power towards promoting every public good, and discountenancing all vice. Because of the poverty of the town and its situation, the inhabitants have never been able to go into the use of many articles mentioned, yet they cannot wholly excuse themselves from the use of some of the articles mentioned, yet they cannot wholly excuse themselves from the use of some of the superfluities mentioned in said votes. Therefore the Town would strongly recommend to every householder to lessen in their families the use of all foreign superfluities, and to use such things in the room thereof as shall be of their own manufacture, and to do everything they can to promote industry, economy and frugality, and to discountenance all sorts of vice and immorality.”

For Topsfield, too, the Townsend Act prompted frugality and domestic economy through social activities as weaving and spinning bees which facilitated the production of homespun cloth instead of the purchase of British textiles. And yet, the town was hardly a

bastion of radical political activity. When a convention of North Shore towns was convened to protest the quartering of two British regiments in Boston, Topsfield did not bother to send a representative. This is somewhat surprising in light of the participation of Boxford, Rowley, Wenham, Ipswich, Beverly, Danvers and Newbury, neighboring towns which shared many of Topsfield's concerns and characteristics.

As a community, Topsfield actively supported the non-importation agreement when the town voted in favor of a boycott of British goods on June 11, 1768. But this was, at best a conservative and non-violent form of protest, which saved townsfolk money while it announced their patriotic sympathies with their Boston and Salem brethren.

By 1770, the situation in rural North Shore communities was becoming less tolerable as the clash between urban colonists and British policies had a ripple effect in the surrounding area. On May 1 and again on June 11, 1770 the voters of Topsfield expressed their sentiments that the Townsend duties were unconstitutional and unjust, taxes imposed upon the citizens of a colony without their consent. They further declared their displeasure with the presence of a permanent military force in Boston, and the resulting Boston Massacre which had taken place on March 5, 1770 between British troops and civilians resulting in "the murder of unarmed men." Topsfield also reaffirms in its town records that it will not countenance the purchase or consumption of British-made goods. By 1770, the town was beginning to express serious opposition to the British policies which had plagued the colonies for the previous five years.

By November, 1772, the Boston Sons of Liberty had organized a Committee of Correspondence which devoted itself to communicating news of the infringements of the rights of British subjects in occupied Boston. This patriotic propaganda was disseminated throughout all surrounding towns including Topsfield. On November 20, a letter was received from Boston entitled: "The Rights of Men, Christians and Subjects" with an attached "List of the Infringements

and Violations of these Rights.” The letters caused quite a stir in the town, and was hotly debated by the residents all through the winter of 1772-1773. Finally, in the spring, the pro-patriot faction in Topsfield asked for the town to respond in support of the Sons of Liberty and their list of grievances.

Topsfield sent back to Boston a response in June, 1773 thanking the citizens of Boston for their early vigilance on behalf of all colonists and heartily endorsing the sentiments advanced by the Sons of Liberty. Here the townsfolk express the conviction that their rights and those of all Americans are being violated by the presence of an army of British soldiers stationed in Boston. It concludes with the observation that America's British subjects are forever entitled to their rights “unless by their own act they forfeit them.” The implication here is that Topsfield still holds to the view that the only acceptable means of redress is within the bounds of lawful behavior. They conclude by stating simply that “if these violations and infringements are still continued it will prove the ruin of this province, if not the whole continent of America, and we fear the Kingdom of Great Britain, too.” No explanation is offered as to exactly what rights of native British subjects were being threatened, only that Topsfield feared for the future safety of the Mother Country as well. Clearly, the townsfolk still had a profound fear of positioning themselves in the same anti-British posture of their more radical, and violent Boston counterparts.

Not to isolate themselves from their sister communities, the town meeting in 1773, concluded with a statement pledging its support for the defense of the province against a hostile foe: “... it is affirmed that this town in particular will be ready, at all times, to join with their brethren, in any legal way, and manner to defend the life and person of his Majesty, and the lives of our brethren-his Majesty's loyal subjects, and in the same way to preserve and defend our own lawful rights, liberties and property, even to the last extremity.”

The wording of this quotation infers that the community of Topsfield was torn between taking too radical a stand against the English government and its policies, of being labeled by patriotic neighbors

as too conservative. That they were willing to protect and defend the life of George III, while an admirable goal, hardly seems appropriate in light of the issues under discussion. Nonetheless, it illustrates clearly the ambivalence being felt by these country farmers who perhaps did not feel the full impact of the Townsend duties as sharply as their counterparts in Salem and Boston.

In any case, the above measure was passed by Topsfield's voters "by a great majority", which then proceeded to create its own Topsfield "Committee of Correspondence", responsible for communicating the town's statement of support to the Boston Committee of Correspondence. One can only speculate at the response of the Boston Sons of Liberty to Topsfield's desire to protect the life of the king and avoid all forms of illegal protest while defending their liberties "to the last extremity."

On December 16, 1773, these same Sons of Liberty boarded merchant vessels of the East India Trading Company in Boston Harbor and proceeded to empty them of their cargoes of tea. Three-hundred and forty-two chests of tea were thrown into Boston Harbor, destroying the private property of London merchants attempting to take advantage of the recent passage of the Tea Act which had been passed by Parliament in May of that year. It was the lit match that ignited the British powder keg, prompting a series of repressive pieces of legislation called by Boston's radical Whigs "the intolerable acts."

Topsfield's reaction to this crisis was to compose a strongly worded letter on January 20, 1774, saying that they had voted as a community not to buy or sell any tea that has, or may be exported from Great Britain. They quickly add that they "approved every Legal Method the Town of Boston and Others have taken to prevent the said Company's tea from being landed, and that they would consider any merchant continuing to import tea from Great Britain Enemies to all the American Colonies." Their endorsement of all legal means of redress still belies a generally uncomfortable attitude concerning the wanton destruction of private property by mob violence. For the citizens of Topsfield, even at this late date,

boycotts of tea were an acceptable and legitimate means of redress, while, the destruction of private property, even in protest, was still to violate the King's Law! What is interesting is that while many other Essex County towns issued statements approving of the action of the Sons of Liberty, Topsfield did not.

On September 6, 1774 the towns of Essex County, Massachusetts, called for a Congress to meet in Ipswich for the purpose of devising a strategy to resist British oppression. Topsfield sent Samuel Smith, Enos Knight, and John Gould as its representatives. At this meeting a platform of protest was created objecting strenuously to the recent oppressive acts of Parliament as well as the arbitrary conduct of ministers and the hostile operations of Governor General Gage. This document was then dispatched to the "Grand American Congress" then meeting in Philadelphia.

During the following month, the Provincial Congress met in Cambridge on October 11th. It was presided over by patriot firebrand, John Hancock and was called to keep the local communities firmly on track towards confrontation with Britain. Topsfield again sent Samuel Smith as its representative with instructions that he should:

- (1) Acknowledge George III as his town's rightful sovereign;
- (2) support and maintain all constitutional and chartered rights;
- (3) and resist all the oppressive acts of Parliament, but be mindful of the recent resolutions of the Continental Congress. (This was a reference to the so-called "Olive Branch Petition" issued by the 1774 Continental Congress begging George III to resolve differences with the colonies.)

At Cambridge, on October 26, 1774, the Provincial Congress adopted a plan for all Massachusetts towns to enroll and train militia. The same legislation designated certain locations, Worcester, Concord, Salem and others, as repositories for weapons, powder and ammunition. Since this new policy applied to Topsfield, within weeks of its passage, Topsfield began enrolling its farmers as citizen-soldiers.

Within this overall category of militia, there were three distinct groups of soldier-types:

- (1) The Trained Band consisting of all able-bodied Topsfield men between the ages of 16 and 50.
- (2) The Alarm List including all other able-bodied men up to the age of 70.
- (3) Minutemen, one quarter of the Trained Band, who agreed to hold themselves in a constant state of readiness to march at a minute's notice.

Each soldier, from officer to private, was to equip himself with a musket, cartridge box and knapsack. The “minutemen” were required further to drill twice on a weekly basis. Following each drill session, they would repair either to the meeting house to hear a patriotic sermon, or to the local public house for refreshment at the town's expense. Far from being a burden, Reverend Fitt's of Topsfield remarks that “To be a private was regarded as an honor: but to be chosen an officer was a mark of distinction.”

On Monday, December 5, 1774, in obedience to the instruction of the Provincial Congress, the men of Topsfield of military age, assembled on common land and formed themselves into the Topsfield militia. By election they chose Joseph Gould as their first captain, then adjourned until the following day. On Tuesday, December 6, they elected Stephen Perkins as their second captain. They next formed two companies. Captain Gould's Company consisted of fifty-nine privates and non-commissioned officers. Captain Perkins' Company consisted of forty-seven privates and non-commissioned officers. This group of one hundred and six citizen-soldiers were collectively known as the “Topsfield Alarm List and Training Band”. Gould's Company then elected Samuel Cummings as Lieutenant and Thomas Moore as ensign. Perkins' Company elected Solomon Dodge as Lieutenant and David Perkins as ensign. All that remained was to establish which individuals would be set apart as minuteman.

On January 19, 1775, Topsfield as a town voted to comply with the recommendation of the Provincial Congress respecting the

enlistment of minutemen. The town then proceeded to designate a time and place each week for the minuteman to drill. The issue was renewed again on March 7 and again on April 11, 1775 to provide for the enlistment of minutemen and their schedule of weekly drills, as well as their monthly pay for two half-days per week of one shilling per man per half day, drawn from the town treasury. Each Topsfield minuteman therefore earned a salary of two shillings for special drill service of two-half-days per week.

Despite this generous bounty, there seems to have been some difficulty in encouraging enlistments for this elite group. The Topsfield Town Records note on March 7, 1775 that:

“Voted to give encouragement to such minuteman as shall enlist themselves agreeable to ye recommendation of Provincial Congress, that encouragement shall be the same as was reported to be by a former Town meeting which is as follows: That when so many able-bodied men have enlisted themselves as amounts to the number of one quarter part of the Training Band, to do Duty agreeable to said recommendation; and every man that enlists himself shall be enjoined to equip himself with arms and all other things agreeable to said recommendation and shall be enjoined to attend military duty two half days per week, every week. During the Town's pleasure-and shall be paid one shilling for each half-day the Town continues them in said service-the pay not to exceed two half-days in each week; and the Captain who shall have command of these men as enlist themselves in said service, shall at the end of every month, give certificate to the Selectmen of how many half-days each soldier has attended duty aforesaid, and the Selectmen shall give orders for the Town Treasurer to pay each of them one shilling for every half-day they have spent as afore-said.”

In other words, the town of Topsfield would not issue any payments until every one of the minutemen, amounting to between 26 and 27 individuals, (one quarter of the 106 members of the Alarm List and Training Band) had voluntarily signed up and met the requirements of having provided themselves with all the necessary military equipment. The somewhat embarrassing fact was that in March, 1775, town treasurer, Jeremiah Averill, had been presented with a

bill for a total of seven minutemen who had already begun drilling, and were asking for compensation in the amount of 19 shillings, or five half days of drill during the month of March per man. To the pragmatic town selectmen, the cost hardly seemed worth the effort. The purpose of the expenditure was to prepare a formidable and well drilled military force. No one would be paid by Topsfield until there was a full complement of volunteers drilling on a regular basis.

The enthusiastic Topsfield minutemen who were already enlisted, drilling and requesting payment were: Henry Bradstreet, Joshua Towne, Jr., Benjamin Gould, Dudley Bixby, Joseph Symonds and Ezra Perkins. But fortunately more than these seven individuals would respond on the morning of April 19, 1775, when a post-rider arrived in Topsfield at about 10:00 am. with news of the Lexington engagement.

On that occasion, Topsfield's farmers were already hard at work with their spring planting. The Reverend John Cleaveland of Topsfield, later recounted that for these newly recruited citizen soldiers, "there was no hesitation. The plow stayed in mid- furrow" and within the hour many Topsfield men were on their way to the scene of the conflict. According to one account a number of them left immediately on horseback--- not willing to wait to march with the rest of the militia.

Reverend Cleaveland, in his first-hand account, describes the scene in the early afternoon as the Topsfield troops reached the British retreat along Battle Road:

"Joseph Gould commanded one of the Topsfield companies. When and where, exactly, they came up with the retreating enemy, I do not know. Somewhere they found them, and from behind a low wall or dyke, they began their murderous fire. But their heroic captain disdained such shelter. He thought it perhaps undignified for an officer to lie down. So he stood bolt upright and gave his orders to the company-faced the enemy and the bullets and as good luck would have it, came off unhurt."

On that fateful day, Topsfield had managed to muster fifty-nine privates and non-commissioned officers in Gould's Company which included Captain Joseph Gould, Lieutenant Samuel Cummings, Ensign Thomas Moore, Sergeants Nehemiah Herrick, John Peabody, David Town, Jr., Thomas Porter, Corporals Cornelius Balch, Ebenezer King, Benjamin Gould and drummer, Elijah Perkins. During the Lexington-Concord Campaign, they saw five days of service and marched sixty miles. Captain Gould received one pound, six shillings and five pence for his services and each private was paid twelve shillings and one and three-quarters pence.

Topsfield's Second Company under Captain Stephen Perkins mustered forty-seven men including privates and officers. Those in positions of leadership included: Captain Stephen Perkins, Lieutenant Solomon Dodge, 2nd Lieutenant David Perkins, Sergeants Jacob Kimball, Nathaniel Dorman, Thomas Cummings and Corporals Benjamin Hobbs, Ezra Perkins and Josiah Lamson. Their service lasted two-and-one-half days, yet marched the same sixty miles as Gould's Company.

Besides these two Topsfield companies, there were Topsfield men whose farms bordered near other surrounding towns who marched to Lexington and Concord with their neighboring units of militia from Boxford and Wenham. Among these notable exceptions was Jacob Gould, a Topsfield farmer whose farm lay along the Boxford line. He found himself in command of a fifty-seven man company of Boxford militia at the Concord engagement. Captain William Perley, commander of the fifty-two man, Second Boxford Company mentions that he had a number of Topsfield men in his ranks as well.

Other anecdotes of the day emphasize the patriotic and immediate response of many Topsfield citizens to the crisis. Richard Hood, recalled years later that he was plowing in a field with his father, John and brother, Samuel, and-upon hearing the alarm--- left them standing there as he ran to the militia muster. Asa Gould later recalled that he dropped his hoe and marched to Lexington in his shirt-sleeves, while Corporal Benjamin Gould returned to Topsfield proudly bearing a bullet scar from the Battle Road engagement. And

there was no doubt that the Topsfield troops saw some heavy action on April 19, 1775 and remained longer than many other militia companies following the fight.

Captain Perkins's Company returned to Topsfield on April 21, while Gould's Company returned on April 23, 1775. Fortunately for Topsfield only a few soldiers were wounded, but none were killed. On the following day, it was decided that a New England army of 30,000 men was needed and that Massachusetts should supply 13,600 of that number to maintain a siege around Boston. To aid in the siege, a new company was raised in the Topsfield area consisting of soldiers from several surrounding towns. This new company included twenty-eight Topsfield men, seventeen from Ipswich, six from Beverly, two from Wenham, and one each from Danvers and Middleton.

The new company returned immediately to military service and were stationed in the town of Menotomy (later Arlington), near the Black Horse Tavern. It was from this camp that Corporal Ezra Perkins would write to his father in Topsfield on June 14, 1775:

Sir,

I take this opportunity to inform you that I am in good Health and all the rest of our Company, and I hope that these lines find you so too. And I would be glad if you would dye my third stokins (sic) a light blue and send them when you send my shirts and fetch me a fork. And I have no nuse (sic) down here as there is with you. And I would be glad if you would send me three pound and a half of sugar and fetch it down when you come down.

Ezra Perkins

Later in June, the Topsfield Company, under the command of Captain John Baker, was engaged at the Battle of Bunker Hill as part of Colonel Moses Little's Regiment. It had a total strength of four hundred men in nine companies. On the morning of June 17, they were marched from Monotomy and instructed to guard Lechmere Point in east Cambridge near Charlestown. They arrived at their station near the latter part of the Bunker Hill engagement. By this

time Colonel Prescott had already been killed and his men, now out of ammunition, had been driven from their redoubts on the crest of the hill. Captain Baker's Topsfield Company along with the company of Captain Ezra Lunt, were given the task of covering the retreating colonial troops. A contemporary eyewitness described their action:

“This rear guard did good service by their brave and well directed fire. They effectively kept the Enemy at bay until the Neck was crossed and the retreat accomplished.”

Sergeant Ezra Gould's account of the day provides a little more detail of the Topsfield men in the latter stages of the Bunker Hill engagement:

“On the 17th of June was ordered on guard at Lechmere's Point, Colonel Asa Whitcomb commanding the guard. After the battle had commenced for some time, our guard was ordered to reinforce the troops on the hill; but when we got on the Neck, we met them retreating, yet kept on till we met General (Israel) Putnam, who spoke to Col. Whitcomb and he retreated. While on the Neck, the enemy fired on us from the ship that was in the Charles River, and the floating batteries came up the Mystic River within small gun shot of us. Colonel Whitcomb took me in front of him, a little to the left. He placed me in a situation for them to take aim at. The first shot struck the ground a little before me and rebounded --- and as it passed--- struck my musket in my left hand. The second (shot) struck the ground directly in front of my feet. The third struck in the same hole, and made it deeper. I turned my eye's to the guard and found them retreating. I was the last man on the Neck. As I returned, I got through a fence on my right, seeing the ground more favorable to cover me-and when I had gone about a rod, I saw the flash of their guns, and dropped to the ground. The balls passed over my back and struck a little beyond me. I returned to the guard and found them all safe.”

Among the many Topsfield men who saw action at Bunker Hill were John Hood, Israel Herrick and the former captain of Topsfield's

Second Company, Captain Stephen Perkins. By June, 1775, however, Perkins was in command of an infantry company primarily raised in the area of Newburyport. For all these men, as well as for the population of Topsfield, the decision for revolution had already been made. Necessity had forced the hands of Topsfield's reluctant patriots into endorsing a war against their former monarch and mother country. There would be no turning back.

It would still take another year for the thirteen colonies to come to grips with this reality, however. During the interim, the towns of Massachusetts had been asked by the Massachusetts House of Representatives to “express their minds with respect to American Independence of the Kingdom of Great Britain”. In response to this inquiry, on June 14, 1776, Topsfield's citizens instructed their representative, John Gould, in a statement that summed up the community's sentiment:

“A few years ago, Sir, such a question would have put us in a great surprise, and we apprehend, would have been treated with the utmost contempt. We, this Town, then thought ourselves happy in being the subjects of the King of Great Britain, it being our parent state; and always looked upon it as our duty as well as Interest to defend and support the honor and dignity of the Crown of Great Britain. But the scene is now changed, our minds and our sentiments are now altered. She that we called our Mother Country and Parent State is now, without any just Cause or Injury done by these colonies, become their greatest enemy. The unprovoked Injuries these colonies have received; the unjustifiable and unconstitutional claims that have been made on these colonies by the Courts of Great Britain to tax us and take away our Substance from us, have been cruel and unjust to the highest degree. For these reasons, Sir, as well as many others that might be mentioned, we are Confirmed in the opinion that the United Colonies will be greatly wanting in their Duty, both to the Great Governor of the Universe, to themselves and posterity, if Independence of the Kingdom of Great Britain is not declared as soon as may be. These being our Sentiments.

Having thus freely spoken Our Sentiments in respect to Independence, we now instruct you, Sir, to provide to the Honorable Continental Congress the strongest assurances that if, for the safety of the United Colonies, they shall declare America to be independent of the Kingdom of Great Britain, your Constituents will support and defend the measure with their lives and fortunes to the utmost of their power.”

Captain Stephen Perkins

Solomon Dodge Israel Clarke, Jr.

A Committee appointed by the Topsfield Town Meeting,

June 14, 1776

From this point onward, Topsfield would join the ranks of the American Revolution and invest their men and money in an eight year long struggle to win independence from Great Britain. The legacy of the 110 Topsfield citizen soldiers who served is reflected in the documents and collections of the Topsfield Historical Society and Topsfield Town Records which still preserve the materials that tell their story. This is the story which our exhibition tells. It is our hope that it be remembered by future generations of Topsfield residents.

Editor's Note:

The Topsfield Town Clerk has a number of documents dating from the Revolutionary War period among which are the town record books dating from those years. When the Continental Congress voted the Declaration of Independence, copies were distributed to all the colonies. In Massachusetts copies were printed in Salem for all the towns with the suggestion that the Declaration be copied in the town clerk record books. This was done by Town Clerk Samuel Smith. Shown below is a photograph of part of a page in the Topsfield Record Book showing the beginning of the Declaration of Independence. The text is readable.

The following is the Declaration of Independence of
the American Colonies of the Kingdom of Great Britain
In Congress July 4th 1776

A Declaration of the Representatives of the United States of
America, In general Congress Assembled
When in the Course of humane events, it becomes necessary
for one people to dissolve the political bands which connected
them with another, and to assume among the powers of the
Earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of
Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect
to the Opinions of Mankind requires that they should declare
the Causes which impell to the Separation, We hold these Truths
to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; we are aware
that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable
rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of
happiness:— That to secure these rights, governments are
instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the
Consent of the governed, That whenever any form of government
becoms destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to