

# The Battle of Lexington

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## CONCEPT

## 1

# The Battle of Lexington

After the passage of the Stamp Act, tensions between the colonists and the British government continued to rise, and the colonists began to organize militias. On April 19, 1775, British troops marched from Boston to the nearby towns Lexington and Concord to arrest the militia's leaders, John Hancock and Sam Adams, and to confiscate their weapons. The militias learned in advanced that the British were coming, and about 70 militiamen, also called minutemen, assembled before dawn on the central green of the town of Lexington. As dawn was breaking, a shot rang out which set off the first battle of the American Revolution. But who fired the shot? The historical sources disagree. Read the documents below and attempt to determine which side fired first. Then analyze the two paintings of the battle and decide which is a more accurate representation of the battle.

A sample exploration of these documents can be viewed in the video at <http://historicalthinkingmatters.org/why/>

## Diary of John Barker

*Source: Entry for April 19th, 1775, from the diary of Lieutenant John Barker, an officer in the British army.*

19th. At 2 o'clock we began our march by wading through a very long stream up to our middles. About 5 miles away from a town called Lexington, we heard there were some hundreds of people collected together intending to oppose us. At 5 o'clock we arrived there and saw a number of people, I believe between 200 and 300, formed in a common in the middle of the town. We still continued advancing, prepared for an attack though without intending to attack them. As we came near them, they fired one or two shots, upon which our men without any orders, fired and put them to flight. We then formed on the Common, but with some difficulty, the men were so wild they could hear no orders; we waited a considerable time there, and at length proceeded on our way to Concord.

### Questions:

1. **Sourcing:** What kind of document is this? When was it written?
2. **Contextualization:** Imagine the scene. What might the soldiers have been thinking?
3. **Close Reading:** According to this document, which side fired first?

## Account of the Battle of Lexington – Nathaniel Mullikan

*Source: Sworn by 34 minutemen on April 25 before three Justices of the Peace.*

We Nathaniel Mulliken, Philip Russell, (Followed by the names of 32 other men present on Lexington Green on April 19, 1775)... All of lawful age, and inhabitants of Lexington... do testify and declare, that on the nineteenth of April, about five o'clock in the morning, we proceeded towards the Green, and saw a large body of troops marching towards us. Some of our men were coming to the Green, and others had reached it, at which time, they began to disperse. While our backs were turned on the British troops, they fired on us, and a number of our men were instantly killed and wounded, not a gun was fired by any person in our company on the British soldiers to our knowledge before they fired on us, and continued firing until we had all made our escape.

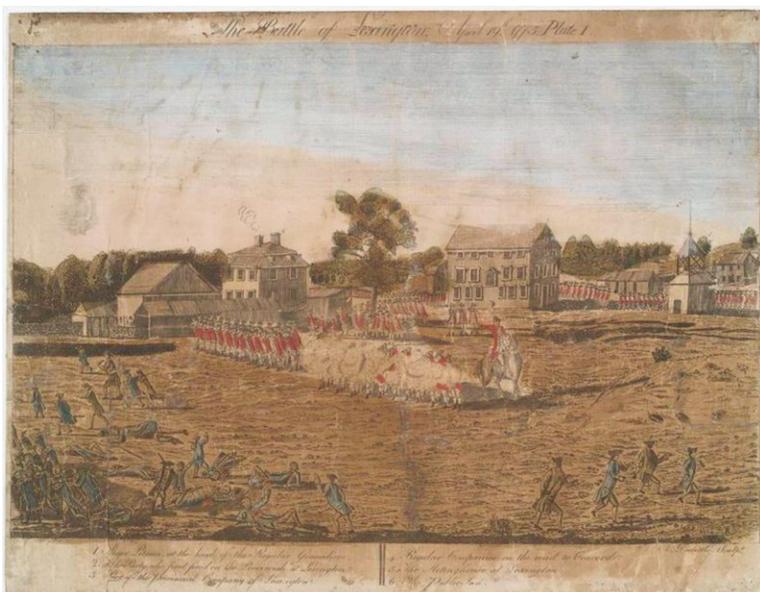
Lexington, April 25, 1775.

**Questions:**

1. **Sourcing:** What kind of document is this? Do you trust it more or less than a diary entry? When was this written? Whose side does this document represent?
2. **Close reading:** What is the significance of the phrase “to our knowledge?”
3. **Corroboration:** Where do Barker’s and Mullikan’s accounts disagree? Are there any facts that both accounts agree on?

**Battle of Lexington Engraving - Amos Doolittle**

Source: One of four engravings made by Amos Doolittle in 1775. Doolittle was an engraver and silversmith from Connecticut who visited the site of the battle and interviewed participants and witnesses. (Figure 1.1.)

**FIGURE 1.1**

One of four engravings made by Amos Doolittle in 1775

**Questions:**

1. **Sourcing:** When was this document created? By whom? For what purpose?
2. Which figures in this image are British? Which figures are American? How can you tell?
3. Look closely at the image. Which side appears to be firing first?

**Terrence Blachaux Painting**

Source: A painting made by Terrence Blachaux in 1859, which was used in a 19<sup>th</sup> Century American postage stamp. (Figure 1.2)

**FIGURE 1.2**

Century American postage stamp.

**Questions:**

1. **Sourcing:** When was this image created? By whom? For what purpose?
2. According to this image, who fired first?

**Section Questions:**

1. **Corroboration:** Which of the first two texts seems more reliable—Mullikan or Barker? Why might they differ?
2. **Corroboration:** Which of the images probably presents a more accurate representation of the Battle of Lexington?
3. Why might the creator of the other image have wanted to portray the battle differently?