

The Construction of Historical Knowledge Integrating TOK

An investigation into how we learn about a historical event:

Problem: What happened on Lexington Green on the morning of April 19, 1775?

Process:

1) Read the five documents about Lexington; 2) In a small group appoint a recorder to summarize the conclusions of the group; 3) In reconstructing what happened, think about – a) Who fired the first shot? b) whether the colonists stood their ground; c) whether the events unfolded as they were intended; d) who was the most responsible for what happened; e) any other information you think is relevant

*Each group should come to a unanimous consensus about what happened.

Once you have figured out what happened, rank each of the five documents according to its trustworthiness as a historical source. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each document? What critical questions did you ask about each document as you considered its reliability? Why did you rank the documents as you did?

Document #1:

Nathaniel Milliken, 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 in the County of Middlesex...do testify and declare, that on the nineteenth of April instant, about one or two o'clock in the morning, being informed that...a body of regulars were marching from Boston toward Concord...we were alarmed and having met at the place of our company's parade [Lexington Green] were dismissed by our Captain, John Parker, for the present, with order to be ready to attend at the beat of the drum, we further testify and declare, that about five o'clock in the morning, hearing our drum beat, we proceeded towards the parade, and soon found that a large body of troops were marching towards us, some of our company were coming up to the parade, and others had reached it, at which time the company began to disperse, whist our backs were turned on the troops, we were fired on by them, and a number of our men were instantly killed and wounded, not a gun was fired by any person in our company on the regulars to our knowledge before they fired on us, and they continued firing until we had all made our escape.

Lexington, April 25, 1775. Nathaniel Milliken, Phillip Russell, [and the other 32 men]. [Duly sworn to by 34 minutemen on April 25 before three justices of the peace] (Document reprinted in Sawtell, 1968)

Document #2:

Major Pitcairn screamed at us: "Lay down your arms you lousy bastards! Disperse, you lousy peasant scum!" ...At least, those were the words that I seem to remember. Others remembered differently but the way he screamed, in his strange London accent, with the motion and excitement, with his horse rearing and kicking...with the drums beating again and the fixed bayonets glittering in the sunshine, it's a wonder that any of his words remain with us... We still stood in our two lines, our guns butt end on the ground or held loosely in our hands. Major Pitcairn spurred his horse and raced between the lines. Somewhere, away from us, a shot sounded. A redcoat soldier raised his musket, leveled it at Father, and fired. My father clutched his breast, then crumpled to the ground like an empty sack... Then the whole British front burst into a roar of sound and flame and smoke.

Excerpt from the novel April Morning by Howard Fast, published in 1961.

<p>Document #3: 19th. At 2 o'clock we began our march by wading through a very long ford up to our middles; after going a few miles we took three or four people who were going off to give intelligence about five miles on this side of a town called Lexington, which lay in our road, we heard there were some hundreds of people collected together intending to oppose us and stop our going on; 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 town; we still continued advancing, keeping prepared against an attack though without intending to attack them; but on our coming near them they fired one or two shots, upon which our men without any orders, rushed in upon them, fired and put them to flight; several of them were killed, we could not tell how many, because they were got behind walls and into the woods; We had a man of the 10th light infantry wounded, nobody else hurt. We then formed on the Common, but with some difficulty, the men were so wild they could hear no orders; we waited considerable time there, and at length proceeded on our way to Concord.</p> <p><i>Entry for April 19, 1775, from the diary of lieutenant John Barker, an officer in the British army. (Document reprinted in Dana, 1877)</i></p>	<p>Document #4: There is a certain sliding over and indeterminateness in describing the beginning of the firing. Major Pitcairn who was a good man in a bad cause, insisted upon it to the day of his death, that the colonists fired first...He does not say that he saw the colonists fire first. Had he said it, I would have believed him, being a man of integrity and honor. He expressly says he did not see who fired first; and yet believed the peasants began. His account is this – that riding up to them he ordered them to disperse; which they not doing instantly, he turned about to order his troops so as to draw out to surround and disarm them. As he turned he saw a gun in a peasant's hand from behind a wall, flash in the pan without going off and instantly or very soon two or three guns went off by which he found his horse wounded and also a man near him wounded. These guns he did not see, but believing they could not come from his own people, and that thus they began the attack. The impetuosity of the King's troops were such that a promiscuous, uncommanded but general fire took place, which Pitcairn could not prevent; though he struck his staff or sword downwards with all earnestness as a signal to forbear or cease firing. This account Major Pitcairn himself gave Mr. Brown of Providence who was seized with flour and carried to Boston a few days after the battle; and Gov. Sessions told it to me.</p> <p><i>From the diary of Ezra Stiles, president of York College, entry for August 21, 1775. (Document reprinted Dexter, 1901)</i></p>
<p>Document #5: In April 1775, General Gage, the military governor of Massachusetts, sent out a body of troops to take possession of military stores at Concord, a short distance from Boston. At Lexington, a handful of "embattled farmers" who had been tipped off by Paul Revere, barred the way. The "rebels" were ordered to disperse. They stood their ground. The English fired a volley of shots that killed eight patriots. It was not long before the swift-riding Paul Revere spread the news of this new atrocity to the neighboring colonies. The patriots of all of New England, although still a handful, were not ready to fight the English.</p> <p><i>From <u>The United States: Story of a Free People</u>, a high school textbook by Samuel Steinberg, Allyn and Bacon, publishers 1963.</i></p>	