



Jonas Parker

By
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Jonas Parker's ties to Colonial Massachusetts can be traced back to his ancestor Thomas Parker, who departed from London, England on March 11, 1635. Upon arrival in Massachusetts Bay Colony, Thomas initially settled in Lynn. His family later established residence in Reading. On August 3, 1664, Jonas' grandfather John Parker was born. John married twice, first to a Deliverance Dodge of Beverly and second to a woman only known as "Sarah". The first marriage produced eight children, including Jonas' father Andrew. The second marriage none. All of the children were born in Reading.

On June 25, 1712, John Parker purchased land in the southern part of Cambridge Farms from a John Cutler. The property was described as "one small Mansion house and about sixty Acres of Land more or less, and is bounded - Southerly upon sd Watertown Line."¹ He and his family subsequently settled on the property.

John Parker and his son Andrew served as the town's "fence viewers" and constables.² It appears that in the early 18th Century the family was very prominent, as the Parkers occupied the second row of pews in the town meeting house.³

¹ Charles Hudson, History of the Town of Lexington, Genealogies, Vol. II, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 507.

² In Massachusetts, the post of "fence viewer" was first established in 1693 by a statute which was amended in 1785 and again in 1836. Early Fence Viewers, armed with wall measurements, were able to arbitrate and/or prosecute such crimes by adjoining farmers. Trespassing by livestock was illegal. Boundaries and fences had to be maintained. If a farmer neglected his fence, his neighbor could do the repairs and charge his nonperforming neighbor twice the cost. If the negligent neighbor didn't come up with the money, he had to pay 12% interest until payment was made.

On August 2, 1720, Jonas' father married Sarah Whitney, the daughter of Isaiah and Sarah Whitney. Jonas Parker was born in Lexington on February 6, 1721 along with his twin sister Sarah. The twins were the oldest of twelve children. In total, he had seven sisters and four brothers. On June 30, 1745, the Parker and Munroe families united when Jonas married Lucy Munroe. At the time of the wedding, Lucy was already pregnant with their first child.⁴ Lucy was born on October 9, 1745. Sadly, she was born "deaf and dumb". By 1761, Jonas and Lucy had nine more children. Four were boys, the remaining six were girls. In 1775, the oldest child was thirty years old, the youngest, Mary, was fourteen.⁵

Primary and secondary sources indicate Jonas and his family resided on Bedford Road north of the Lexington Common and immediately next door to the Reverend Jonas Clarke. A review of Jonas' estate inventory supports the proposition he was both a woodworker and yeoman by trade. Some of the tools and materials owned by him on the eve of the Battle of Lexington included "Ruff timber in the shop, 5 hubs and spokes for woollen wheels, Timber for foot wheels, turned timber for wheels, 54 feet of joyce, 2 new screws, 2 lathes, New beadstead, Screw bench [and] wooden vice."⁶ Parker appears to also be an avid reader as he owned a "Psalm book, old bible [and a] number of other books."⁷ Jonas, like his younger brother Amos, was described as a tall man with great strength. He was considered the best wrestler in the town.⁸

Unfortunately for Jonas, his financial status in Lexington was significantly lower than that of his father and grandfather. Although Parker was not poor, he was not wealthy either. A review of Lexington's tax valuations of 1774 reveals Jonas' personal and real property was taxed at a rate of two shillings, eleven pence.⁹ By comparison, the wealthiest resident of Lexington, William Reed, Esq., was assessed 16 shillings, one pence. The town's poorest resident, Ephraim Winship, was assessed a mere ten pence.¹⁰ In 1771, Parker owned one house, at least twelve acres of land, three cows and two pigs. His farm produced approximately one ton of "fresh meadow hay" and one ton of "English hay" per year.¹¹

Although there are no records of Jonas Parker serving at the Siege of Louisbourg or the French and Indian Wars, he was certainly a member of the town's militia company.

³ Ibid. Other prominent families that were seated near the Parkers included the Masons and Meads

⁴ According to Robert Gross, on the eve of the American Revolution one out of three first born children were conceived out of wedlock. From the 1740's onward, births less than nine months after marriage steadily increased. In the 1740's, nineteen percent of all first births were prenuptial conceptions. By 1774, forty-one percent of all first borns were conceived out of wedlock. Robert Gross, The Minutemen and Their World, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), 100. See also note 59.

⁵ Lucy, Prudence, Elizabeth and Mary still resided with Jonas and his wife in 1775.

⁶ Estate of Jonas Parker, April 11, 1788.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ https://archive.org/stream/genealogybiograp00park/genealogybiograp00park_djvu.txt

⁹ Town of Lexington Tax Valuation Rolls, 1774.

¹⁰ Ibid. The decrease in Parker's financial worth was due to an increase in Lexington's population prior to the war coupled with a fixed supply of land available to inheriting sons. As a result, many young men in Lexington were forced to seek land north or west of Lexington, purchase smaller tracts of land inside Lexington or share with their brothers a divided inheritance.

¹¹ <http://sites.fas.harvard.edu/~hsb41/masstax/masstax.cgi?state=person&person=03210502>

Despite popular belief, Lexington's militia was not known in 1775 as the "Lexington Minute Men". Instead, the militia company either retained its Puritan title and was known as the "Lexington Training Band"¹² or was called "Captain John Parker's Company". Period documents from the town suggest the unit was officially known as "Training Band" and its soldiers were called "training soldiers". However, depositions from Lexington militiamen in the aftermath of the Battle of Lexington refer to their town militia not as the Lexington Training Band, but as "Captain Parker's Company". It is possible that both unit designations were used interchangeably.

The organization consisted of one hundred and thirty men, along with four officers, seven non-commissioned officers, one clerk, one fifer and one drummer. Six of the town's families furnished a total of twenty-nine. The oldest militiaman was sixty-three, while the youngest was a mere fourteen. Fifty-five men were over the age of thirty and only twenty-eight had seen combat during the two previous French wars.¹³ At the Battle of Lexington, Jonas held the rank of private.

By 1775, Parker, like many of his neighbors, believed war with the Crown was inevitable. As Hugh Earle Percy correctly noted "things here are now drawing to a crisis every day. The people here openly oppose the New Acts. They have taken up arms in almost every part of this Province, & have drove in the Gov't & most of the Council . . . A few days ago, they mustered about 7,000 men at Worcester . . . In short, this country is now in an open state of rebellion."¹⁴ In the days leading up to the Battle of Lexington, Parker openly expressed his intent to fight if hostilities broke out. According to Elijah Sanderson, "some days before the Battle, I was conversing with Jonas Parker, who was killed, and heard him express his determination never to run from before the British troops."¹⁵

Given Jonas Parker's close proximity to both the Lexington Common and the Reverend Clarke's residence, it is likely he assembled with other elements of the Training Band after Paul Revere's arrival in Lexington. As the Reverend Clarke recalled, "upon this timely intelligence, the militia of this town were alarmed, and ordered to meet on the usual place of parade."¹⁶ According to Daniel Harrington, "the train band or Militia, and the alarm men (consisting of the aged and others exempted from turning out, excepting upon alarm) repaired in general to the common, close in with the meeting-house, the usual place of parade; and there were present

¹² In November of 1774, the selectmen of the town voted to tax itself "forty pounds for the purpose of mounting cannon, ammunition, for a pair of drums for the use of the Training Band in the town and for carriage and harness for burying the dead." Lexington Town Records, November 10 - December 27, 1774, Lexington Town Hall.

¹³ It is this author's contention that despite popular belief, Captain John Parker was not among the twenty-eight veterans of the French and Indian War. His name does not appear on any regimental muster roll and he was a landowner at the outset of the war (and thus had no reason to leave Lexington.). See Anderson, 26 -39.

¹⁴ Letter from Percy to the Duke of Northumberland, September 12, 1774.

¹⁵ Deposition of Elijah Sanderson, December 17, 1824.

¹⁶ A Brief Narrative of the Principle Transactions of That Day by Jonas Clarke, A.M., Pastor of the Church in Lexington, Massachusetts State, April 19, 1776.

when the roll was called over about one hundred and thirty of both.”¹⁷ As they gathered, Jonas’ cousin Captain John Parker addressed his men so as to “consult what might be done for our own and the people’s safety; and also, to be ready for whatever service Providence might call us out to upon this alarming occasion, in case--just in case--overt acts of violence or open hostilities should be committed by this mercenary band of armed and blood-thirsty oppressors.”¹⁸ After some discussion, it was decided to confirm the accuracy of Revere’s message by sending scouts eastward to locate and observe the movements of the British regulars. “Two persons were sent, express, to Cambridge, if possible to gain intelligence of the motions of the troops and what route they took. The militia met, according to order, and waited the return of the messengers that they might order their measures as occasion should require.”¹⁹ Whether Jonas remained at Buckman Tavern or returned home after the company was dismissed is unknown.

When the Training Band reassembled hours later for the Battle of Lexington, Jonas Parker was present. Also on the Common with him was his son Jonas, Jr., his first cousins John and Thaddeus Parker and his nephew Ebenezer Parker. Other relatives in the ranks included Ensign Robert Munroe, Samuel Munroe, Jedediah Munroe, John Munroe, Stephen Munroe, Stephen Munroe Jr., Ebenezer Munroe, Nathan Munroe, Edmund Munroe and Sergeant William Munroe.

According to Jonas’ son, “on the Morning of the Nineteenth of April Instant, about one or two o’clock, being informed, that a Number of Regular Officers had been Riding up and down the Road the evening and night preceding, and that some of the Inhabitants, as they were passing, had been Insulted by the Officers, and stopped by them; and being also Informed, that the Regular Troops were on their March from Boston, in order (as it was said) to take the Colony Stores, then Deposited at Concord, we met on the Parade of our Company in this town; After the Company had Collected, we were Ordered, by Captain Parker, (who Commanded us) to Disperse for the Present, and to be Ready to attend the beat of the Drum, and Accordingly the Company went into houses near the place of Parade. We further Testify and Say, that, about five o’Clock in the morning, we attended the beat of our Drum, and were formed on the Parade; we were faced towards the Regulars then marching up to us, and some of our Company were coming to the parade with their backs towards the Troops, and Others on the parade, began to Disperse when the Regulars fired on the Company, before a Gun was fired by any of our company on them. They killed eight of our company, and wounded several, and continued their fire, until we had all made our escape.”

True to his earlier pledge to Elijah Sanderson, Jonas Parker stood his ground when hostilities erupted on the Lexington Common. After the British light infantry opened fire, they

¹⁷ An account of the commencement of Hostilities between Great Britain and America, in the Province of the Massachusetts-Bay. By the Reverend Mr. William Gordon of Roxbury, in a Letter to a Gentlemen in England, May 17, 1775.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

“made a huzza” and ran furiously towards the retiring militia.²⁰ As the soldiers surged forward, Ebenezer Munroe remembered Jonas Parker “standing . . .with his balls and flints in his hat, on the ground between his feet, and heard him declare he would never run. He was shot down at the second fire . . . I saw him struggling on the ground, attempting to load his gun . . .As he lay on the ground, they [ran] him through with the bayonet.”²¹

As the regulars left the onslaught behind them, wives, children and the spectators emerged from hiding and made their way onto the common. Many were overcome with emotion and grief at the sight of husbands, sons, brothers, cousins and neighbors lying dead or wounded on the field. As they began to tend to the wounded, over two hundred men from Woburn’s militia and minuteman companies arrived in Lexington. Disturbed at what they saw, the men halted and assisted the Lexington residents in treating the wounded and carrying the dead into the meetinghouse. Afterwards, the Woburn men reassembled and resumed their march toward Concord.²²

The Reverend Clarke’s daughter, Elizabeth, described the original burial of Jonas Parker and the seven other men killed at the Battle of Lexington. “Father sent Jonas down to Grandfather Cook's to see who was killed and what their condition was and, in the afternoon, Father, Mother with me and the baby went to the Meeting House. There was the eight men that was killed, seven of them my Father's parishioners, one from Woburn, all in Boxes made of four large boards nailed up and, after Pa had prayed, they were put into two horse carts and took into the grave yard where some of the neighbors had made a large trench, as near the woods as possible and there we followed the bodies of those first slain, Father, Mother, I and the baby, there I stood and there I saw them let down into the ground, it was a little rainy but we waited to see them covered up with clods and then for fear the British should find them, my Father thought some of the men had best cut some pine or oak bows and spread them on their place of burial so that it looked like a heap of brush.”²³

Following Jonas’ death, the remaining members of the Parker family who lived in Lexington struggled to stay intact. It is possible that Jonas’ wife either passed away in 1778 or became incapable of caring for Lucy and the two youngest Parker girls, Elizabeth and Mary. That same year, guardians were appointed to care for the three young women. Lucy and Elizabeth left Lexington to live with their guardians in Princeton (MA) and Billerica respectively. Dr. Joseph Fiske was appointed guardian of Mary. She remained in Lexington

²⁰ Deposition of Captain John Parker, April 25, 1775; Deposition of William Draper, April 25, 1775. “The balls flew so thick, I thought there was no chance for escape.” Deposition of Ebenezer Munroe, April 2, 1825.

²¹ Deposition of Ebenezer Munroe, April 2, 1825. If this deposition is assumed to be accurate, then the reference to “balls and flint in his hat” suggests it is likely that Jonas Parker may have fielded at the Battle of Lexington with a shot pouch and horn instead of a cartridge pouch.

²² According to Major Loammi Baldwin of Woburn, “We mustered as fast as possible. The Town turned out extraordinary, and proceeded toward Lexington . . . I rode along a little before the main body, and when I was nigh Jacob Reed’s I heard a great firing; proceeded on, soon heard that the Regulars had fired upon Lexington people and killed a large number of them. We proceeded on as fast as possible and came to Lexington and saw about eight or ten dead and numbers wounded.”

²³ Elizabeth Clarke to Lucy Allen, April 20, 1835. Elizabeth was twelve years old at the Battle of Lexington.

until her marriage in 1782.²⁴

For unknown reasons, Jonas's estate was not probated in the Middlesex Courts until 1788. A partial review of his estate reveals the following items and their respective value:

Ruff timber in the shop, kitchen chamber 0 4 7 0
small sugar box, 2 great buttry, toster 0 2 0 0
5 hubs and spokes for woollen wheels 0 4 7 3
Timber for foot wheels, part wrought 0 10 4 3
turned timber for wheels, foot wheel ___?___ 0 14 8 0
54 feet of joyce, 2 new screws in the shop 0 7 8 3
New beadstead in the shop ___?___ 0 7 0 0
Blue great coat, blue strait bodied coat 2 15 4 0
Camblet coat, pair of knit breeches 1 3 4 0
Green jacket, white jacket, dark sustion coat 0 9 2 0
Gray wooling coat, stript lining, wooll jacket 0 7 4 0
Leather breeches, fine shirt 0 10 0 0
Silk handkerchief, lowered pocket handkerchief 0 3 0 1
Cheked handkerchief, bewer hat, wigglet 0 12 4 0
Pr calf skin shoes 0 7 4 0
Blue tow stockings, blue grey stockings 0 3 8 0
Pr of leggings, read cap, pr of new gloves 0 3 0 1
Yearling calf, burrow, a sow 3 8 0 0
2 woollen spinning wheels, foot wheel 0 16 8 0
5 earthen plates and 2 earthen bowls 0 1 4 3
Psalm book, old bible, number of other books 0 2 7 3
Small hollow plain, 2 lathes 0 9 8 0
Screw bench, wooden vice 0 7 10 1
Barrel tub, 2 washing tubs 0 2 1 2²⁵

On the 60th Anniversary of the Battle of Lexington, Jonas Parker and the other seven men killed at the engagement were removed from the town's burial ground and reinterred in a ceremonial vault located underneath the oldest monument on the Lexington Common.²⁶ During the ceremony it was the famed statesmen Edward Everett who highlighted the sacrifice and courage of Jonas Parker. At the height of his speech, he simply declared "History, — Roman

²⁴ Charles Hudson, History of the Town of Lexington, 509.

²⁵ Estate of Jonas Parker, April 11, 1788

²⁶ The monument itself was dedicated in 1799. The powerful inscription on the monument was written by Parker's neighbor, the Reverend Clarke. The inscription reads: "*The Blood of these Martyr's In the cause of God & their Country, Was the Cement of the Union of these States, then Colonies; & gave the spring to the spirit. Firmness And resolution of their Fellow Citizens. They rose as one man to revenge their brethren's Blood and at the point of the sword to assert; Defend their native Rights. They nobly dar'd to be free!!*"

history, — does not furnish an example of bravery that out shines that of Jonas Parker. A truer heart did not bleed at Thermopylae.”²⁷

²⁷ Edward Everett, An Address Delivered at Lexington on the 19th (20th) of April, 1835, (Charlestown, 1835), 22.