

Joseph Estabrook
A Brief Biography
By Bill Poole

The first Joseph Estabrook, the great, great grandfather of Joseph Estabrook, the subject of this biography, came to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1660 from Enfield, Middlesex, England. He graduated from Harvard College in 1664 with a divinity degree and became a “colleague” or co-pastor at Concord, MA. He lived there until his death on September 17, 1711. He married in Watertown, MA on May 28, 1668, Mary Mason, daughter of Captain Hugh and Esther Mason. They had six children the first of whom was **Captain or Deacon Joseph, the great grandfather of Joseph the subject of this biography,** born May 6, 1669, was the first.¹

Captain or Deacon Joseph Estabrook, married in Concord on December 31, 1689, Millicent Woods or Woodis, daughter of Henry and Elenne, born in Concord April 4, 1660. Charles Hudson, in his *History of Lexington*, stated that the couple settled first in Hingham, Plymouth County, MA before being dismissed to the Lexington church in 1710, where he was elected Deacon in 1716. **However, the Vital Records of both Concord and Lexington, then Cambridge Farms, list the birth of their son, Deacon Joseph, the grandfather of Joseph, the subject of this biography,** on October 10, 1690. Millicent died on March 20, 1692/93 and Joseph would be their only child.²

On August 25, 1693, Captain Joseph married Mrs. Hannah (Leavitt) Loring, widow of Joseph Loring. She and Joseph Loring had four children, all born in Hingham: 1. **Joseph**, born, September 29, 1684; 2. **Nehemiah**, born June 17, 1686; 3. **Joshua**, born September 22, 1688; and 4. **Submit**, born August 11, 1691.³ Charles Hudson says of Captain or Deacon Joseph Estabrook:

He commanded a military company, filled the offices of town clerk, treasurer assessor, selectman, and representative to the General Court; was often employed as a surveyor, and was engaged to teach the first man’s school in town.⁴

The Joseph Estabrook Elementary School in Lexington was named in honor of Captain Joseph

Deacon Joseph Estabrook, like his father, served Lexington in a number of capacities. He was captain of a militia company, deacon of the church, assessor, town treasurer, town clerk and selectman.⁵ He married his step-sister, **Submit Loring**, in Lexington on July 8, 1713. Their marriage was a tragic one. On June 27, 1714, Submit gave birth to twins, Joseph Jr. and Job. Joseph Jr. died twenty days later on July 17, 1714. Job died on July 17, 1715 at age thirteen months. Their third child, also named Joseph was born on March 16, 1717/18 and died two days later on March 18th. Submit, herself, died less than two weeks later on March 31, 1717/18 at age twenty-seven.⁶

Deacon Joseph then married on March 26, 1719, Hannah Bowman, born November 11, 1699, daughter of Joseph and Phebe Barnard Bowman. They would have nine children. Three would die before their first birthday, another at age three, and one who had entered Harvard, but died at age 19. The other four would reach adulthood, among whom was **Benjamin, the father of Joseph, the subject of this biography,** born December 20, 1729.⁷ Deacon Joseph is buried in Lexington’s Old Burying Ground as are Hannah Bowman Estabrook and Submit Loring Estabrook with two of her young children.⁸

Benjamin Estabrook, held the offices of coroner, and justice of the peace. According to Charles Hudson he served “in the campaign of Ticonderoga in 1776.”⁹ But, in his Chapter on “Military Affairs” in Volume I *History of Lexington*, he described the service as the Fourth Campaign, July 1775 Five Months to Ticonderoga.¹⁰ Benjamin married in Concord on May 19, 1757, Hannah Hubbard, born in Concord on January 18, 1735/36, daughter of Lieutenant Joseph and Rebecca Bulkley. Benjamin and Rebecca had nine children, the first of whom was **Joseph, the subject of this biography,** born in Lexington on March 4, 1758/59.¹¹ Hannah died on January 12, 1803, and Benjamin on March 8, 1803. They are buried in Lexington’s Old Burying Ground.¹²

Joseph Estabrook was thus just past his 16th or 17th birthday when he stood on Lexington Common on the morning of April 19, 1775. He left the common in response to Captain Parker's order to disperse and was uninjured. Also in the household of Benjamin Estabrook, was Prince Estabrook, a black slave, who would stand on Lexington Common on April 19th, 1775. Prince, however, received a wound in the arm. [See his biography on this site.]

Joseph served under Captain Parker for 5 days, from May 6 to May 10, 1775 at Cambridge. He was also of Captain John Bridge's company on service at Roxbury for 5 days from March 4 to March 8, 1776. Both of these were during the siege of Boston. His second service involved the fortification of Dorchester Heights that led to the British evacuation of Boston on March 17, 1776.¹³

I have not determined what Joseph was doing between 1775 and his entrance to Harvard College from which he graduated in 1782.¹⁴ Following graduation, he then studied or the ministry under the tutelage of Reverend Jonas Clark of Lexington, and was chosen to be the pastor of the First Congregational Church of Athol, Massachusetts. That church had been experiencing divisive controversy for some time. This was not unusual in New England, and in fact had become a characteristic of nearly every church. The former pastor of Athol had been dismissed, and after five years a new one had not been chosen.¹⁵

Probably with the warm recommendation of Reverend Jonas Clarke, the Athol parish council agreed to choose Joseph Estabrook as their second pastor to replace his controversial predecessor Reverend James Humphrey. Invitations were sent out to the ministers of seven churches to form an ecclesiastical council to ordain the new minister. Reverend Jonas Clark was one of these, and he was chosen moderator. Reverend Samuel Kendall of Weston stated the qualifications and religious beliefs of the candidate. It was then unanimously voted that "The Council are so far satisfied with the moral character, ministerial qualifications, and religious sentiments of the candidate as to proceed with his ordination."¹⁶ pp. 103-04

Joseph was ordained on November 21, 1787 and served the community for 43 years. "It is said that he never spoke ill of anyone, always thinking of something kindly to say." Reverend Estabrook served as the town's first postmaster and as delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1820.¹⁷

"For forty-three years this man ministered to Athol in a most acceptable way, and during all that time very little dissention appeared. Methodism, Universalism, and finally Unitarianism were rife in other communities but they acquired very little foothold here. As a matter of fact an attempt was made on November 23, 1829 to organize a First Universalist Society here but it was ineffectual."¹⁸

Reverend Joseph married Lucy Cushing on September 3, 1788, in Pembroke, MA, born there on June 23, 1764, died August 9, 1828 in Athol, MA, daughter of Nathaniel and Lucy Turner Cushing. Lucy and Joseph had seven children: 1. **Turner**, born April 18, 1790; 2. **Lucy**, born January 19, 1793; 3. **Nathaniel Cushing**, born April 9, 1795; 4. **Joseph Hubbard**, born October 15, 1797; 5. **Marcia**, born May 8, 1799; 6. **Fidelia**, born May 8, 1801; and 7. **Benjamin**, born November 23, 1803.¹⁹

Joseph was pastor when the meeting house that had served he community for many years was replaced. The new meeting house, that still stands today, was dedicated on December 3, 1828. The second story initially accommodated the Athol Town Hall. Sixteen months later on April 18, 1830 Reverence Estabrook died and was buried in a plot in the old Pleasant Street Burying Ground. Later, his remains were removed to the Highland Cemetery in Athol.²⁰



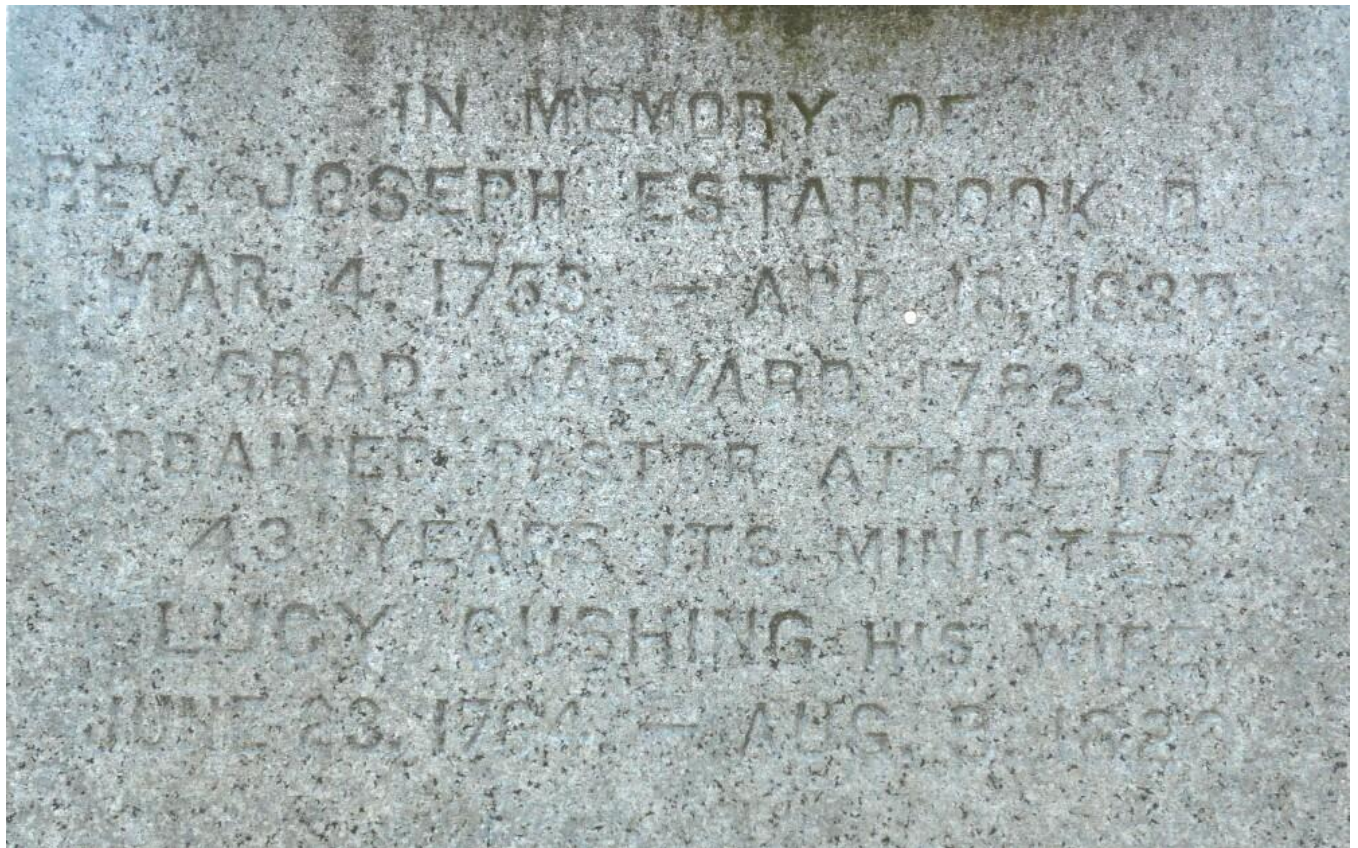
Athol, MA Congregational Church, Dedicated December 3, 1828



Rev. Joseph Estabrook
1758-1830
Athol's Pastor for 43 Years²¹



Memorial Marker Reverend Joseph and Lucy Cushing Estabrook, Old Pleasant Street Cemetery, Athol, MA²²



Gravesite of Reverend Joseph and Lucy Cushing Estabrook, Highland Cemetery, Athol, MA

IN MEMORY OF
 REV. JOSEPH ESTABROOK D.D.
 MAR. 4, 1758 – APR. 18, 1830
 GRAD. HARVARD 1782
 ORDAINED PASTOR AT ATHOL 1787
 43 YEARS ITS MINISTER
 LUCY CUSHING HIS WIFE
 JUNE 23, 1764 – AUG. 9, 1828²³

Reverend Estabrook and the Lexington-Concord Rivalry

There had been a long-standing rivalry between the towns of Lexington and Concord, MA concerning where the ‘first shot’ of the American Revolution was fired. Almost immediately after the Battle of April 19, 1775, there were depositions taken of the Colonial participants and witnesses. Having learned the importance of getting the news to England first after they lost the publicity battle over the Boston Tea Party, the Massachusetts officials were determined to get their version of the events of April 19th to London before General Gage’s ‘official’ report reached there. Thus the hurry to obtain depositions. Secondly, it was important to portray the British Regulars as the initiators of the bloodshed at Lexington. Therefore, it was important to place the onus on the Regulars for firing first. A few men of Lexington did state they returned fire, but certainly not until they had been fired upon.

When the Lexington-Concord rivalry actually began, I am not sure, but the publication in 1825 of Elias Finney’s, *History of the Battle at Lexington on the Morning of the 19th of April, 1775* raised the intensity of the discussion. Finney was from Lexington, and wished to rescue the reputation of the men from Lexington with respect to their response to the attack of the Regulars. In particular, he wished to prove that there was return fire on the part of the Lexington Militia and that British blood was drawn. In 1824-25, he collected and included in his book, the sworn depositions of ten April 19th participants affirming his contention.²⁴

The fact that Lexington now appeared to be claiming that their militia fired the first shots of the American Revolution, and what is more drew blood, proved too much for Reverend Ezra Ripley of Concord. How dare Lexington attempt to challenge Concord’s honor of being the site of the ‘first organized resistance’ to British oppression and where ‘the first *British* blood was shed.’

Reverend Ripley published his response in 1832 in a book entitled *History of the Fight at Concord 19th of April, 1775. With a Particular Account of the Military Operations and Interesting Events of That Ever Memorable Day; Showing that Then and There the First Regular and Forcible Resistance Was Made to the British Soldiers, and the First British Blood Was Shed by Armed Americans, and the Revolutionary War Commenced.*²⁵ The lengthy title says it all. Ripley was determined to restore Concord’s reputation.

He set out his premise in his introduction:

“During nearly half a century, it was as we supposed, the universal belief that the *first* and forcible resistance to the invading *British* soldiers was made at *Concord North Bridge*; – that *there* the fire of the *British* was *first* returned by the *Americans*; – that *there* the *first British* blood was shed: and of course that *there* commenced the war that terminated in the Independence of the United States. We had no idea that any persons ever would or could *seriously* entertain a different opinion.”

“We have no objections to the historical account of Major Phinney of the march of the *British* troops from Boston to Lexington, their outrageous behavior while there, etc., except so far as relates to the returning of the fire of the *British*. This we mean to controvert, and to show by testimony and evidence that cannot be resisted nor rationally disputed, that the inhabitants of Lexington, very recently have made an unjust claim upon the public faith; – that they have ap[propriated] to themselves facts and honors to which they had no right, and have thereby attempted to wrest from the inhabitants of Concord and adjacent towns, the legitimate honors which their brave and patriotic fathers achieved and bequeathed to them.”²⁶

Ripley went on to express his ‘full belief, that the inhabitants of Lexington, on that morning of alarm and novel excitement, conducted as honorably and bravely as any people would in like circumstances.’ As for Captain Parker and his company, they ‘were prompt, patriotic, and courageous to admiration.’²⁷

“But while we cheerfully give them the highest praise for their courage and love of country and love of liberty, *we deny that they returned the fire of the British at the time.*”²⁸

Ripley conceded that some shots were fired by the militia, “in a state of high excitement and confusion, *but after the British had gone on their way . . . or that they were confusing the morning event with the “firing on the British on the retreat from Concord.”* And, any blood “said to have been seen in the street and adduced as evidence that a Briton was wounded by the fire of an American; if blood really was seen, it was probably the blood of the dead and wounded of Captain Parker’s company carried over that spot of ground into the meeting-house or tavern immediately after the British troops had marched toward Concord.”²⁹

Like Finney, Ripley collected a number of depositions from participants to support his contention that no one fired in response to the British. However, Reverend Joseph Estabrook, whom he probably knew as a fellow clergyman was asked to state his recollections.

The Rev. Joseph Estabrook of Athol, a native of Lexington, in a letter to the minister of Concord, under date of March 29th, 1826, writes as follows,—“After more than half a century, to the best of my recollection, I would inform you and others, that I stood in the ranks, on the parade, till Captain Parker ordered us to disperse, and till the British came nigh to us, and began to fire upon us, when I left the ranks. At that time all was confusion and distress. I did not see any one of the Lexington company fire upon the British, nor was there any order for it, that I recollect, from our Captain. But from the statements of the Committee and the testimony of some worthy individuals. I believe a few guns did return the fire upon the British troops, before they left the parade, where the company was placed, on that never to be forgotten morning.”³⁰

Not having his opinion confirmed by Reverend Estabrook, Ripley set out to belittle the offender and undermine his testimony.

Here it is evident, the Reverend gentleman rests his belief of the firing of the militia *wholly* on the statements and testimonies of other persons, and these lately made, which we believe are not just. He neither saw nor heard of any firing on the British that morning by any of the company of which he was one, nor any order for it. But he did hear his Captain order to disperse, and did see the British fire upon them. Gentlemen who were at College with him, and often heard him tell the story, are ready to testify that he never gave them the idea of returning the British fire.³¹

Some still carry on the rivalry, and it resurfaces again and again. Most accept that the first shots were fired at Lexington and the first “British” blood shed there, but the first organized resistance was made at Concord.

Reverend Estabrook appears not to have written anything else concerning the events of April 19th, but as Ripley stated, he may have often spoken about the day. Those conversations might have been the source of the information contained in Reverend S. F. Clarke’s *Centennial Discourse*, published in Athol, MA in 1850.

“Rev. Joseph Estabrook was born at Lexington, March 4, 1759. His early education seems to have been directed by respectable and judicious parents. Though but a boy, on the memorable morning of the Lexington fight, April 19, 1775, upon receiving the alarm of the approach of the British Regulars, after having assisted his father before light in carrying his mother, with a young infant, in an arm-chair about a mile back from the scene of danger, seizing his musket, he joined those citizens who braved the English troops at Lexington on that eventful morning. The bloody bodies of several who fell on that occasion in defense of provincial rights were carried lifeless to his father’s house by the assistance of the boy who afterwards was for so many years the devoted pastor of this people.”³²

In 1891, William Booth Estabrook, in his *Genealogy of the Estabrook Family*, repeated the story almost verbatim, but added a few other details.

“Although but a boy on the memorable morning of the Lexington Fight, April 19, 1775, upon receiving the news of the approach of the British troops (Regulars,) and before light in the morning having assisted his father in carrying his mother with a young infant (Solomon) in her arms, in an arm chair, about a mile back from the scene of danger, he seized his father’s musket and joined the citizens who braved the English troops on that day. The bloody bodies of several who fell on that occasion in defense of provincial rights, were carried to his father’s house by the assistance of the boy who would become for so many years the devoted pastor of his people. His experience was a sad one. In the battle, two of his comrades were killed, one each side of him, and there were two bullets went through the skirts of his coat and one through his hat.”³³

How much of this is actually based upon his recounting is unknown. The use of the Estabrook home as a hospital is perhaps not accurate, but the early morning evacuation was probably very likely. The details of his comrades being killed on either side of him and the bullet holes through coat and hat could be true or have been added later by admirers.

Footnotes

¹Hudson, Charles, *Bi-centenary Edition History of the Town of Lexington Massachusetts in Two Volumes*, Volume II, *Genealogies*, Lexington Historical Society, Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company, The Riverside Press, 1913, p. 189.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 189-90.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 381-82.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 190

⁶*Ibid.*, 190-91; *Vital Records of Lexington, MA to the Year 1897*.

⁷Hudson, *Genealogies*, p. 191;

⁷Hudson, *Genealogies*, p. 191; *Vital Records of Lexington, MA to the Year 1897*.

⁸Brown, Francis H., M.D., *A Copy of Epitaphs in the Old Burying Ground of Lexington, Massachusetts*, The Lexington Historical Society, 1905, pp. 33-34. Hereinafter cited as *Lexington Epitaphs*.

⁹Hudson, *Genealogies*, p. 191.

¹⁰Hudson, Volume II, *History*, pp. 427-28.

¹¹Hudson, *Genealogies*, p. 192.

¹²Brown, *Lexington Epitaphs*, p. 33

¹³ *Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War, A compilation from the Archives Prepared and Published by the Secretary of the Commonwealth in Accordance with Chapter 100, Resolves of 1891*, Boston, Wright & Potter, 1896-1908, volume 5, p. 389; Hudson, *History*, p. 426.

¹⁴ Harvard University, *Quinquennial Catalogue of the Officers and Graduates 1636-1920*, Cambridge Massachusetts, Published by the University, in the Two Hundred and Eighty-fourth Year of the college, 1920, p. 170.

¹⁵ Lord, William G. , Compiler and Publisher *A History of Athol, Massachusetts*, Athol, Massachusetts, 1952, pp . 102-03.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 103-04.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Vital Records of Athol, MA to the End of the Year 1849*.

²⁰Lord, pp. 106-11.

²¹*Ibid.* p. 104.

²²Pleasant Street Cemetery, Athol, MA, at <https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/2263202/old-pleasant-street-cemetery>

²³Highland Cemetery, Athol, MA at <https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/91078/highland-cemetery>

²⁴Finney, Elias

²⁵Ripley, Ezra, Rev. D.D. with other citizens of Concord, *History of the Fight at Concord 19th of April, 1775. With a Particular Account of the Military Operations and Interesting Events of That Ever Memorable Day; Showing that Then and There the First Regular and Forcible Resistance Was Made to the British Soldiers, and the First British Blood Was Shed by Armed Americans, and the Revolutionary War Commenced*, Second Edition, Concord, Published by Herman Atwill, 1832, p.30.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 11.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p.38.

²⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 38-39.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 40.

³⁰*Ibid.*, p. 44 ; Vincent J. R. Kehoe, Kehoe, "We Were There April 19, 1775 The American Rebels," Self-Published, January 1, 1975, "Letter of Rev. Joseph Estabrook," p. 257.

³¹Finney, pp. 44-45.

³²Clarke, S.F. Rev., *Centennial Discourses Delivered at the One-Hundredth Anniversary of the Organization of the First Church and Society in Athol, Mass., by the Reverend Samuel F. Clarke, Pastor, September 9th, 1850*, Published by Crosby and Nichols, Boston, 185, pp. 43-44.

³³Estabrook, William Booth, *Genealogy of the Estabrook Family Including the Esterbrook and Easterbrooks in the United States*, Andrus and Church, Ithaca N.Y., 1891, p. 37.