Conflict and Community in Colonial New England: A Genealogist's Guide

Class 1: Colonial Communities at War: Towns, Militias, and Conflicts

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History



From the founding of each colony, early New England settlers needed a local militia for protection. Each colony faced the challenge of maintaining a permanent settlement without England's military support, so in the absence of a standing army, the local militia served as the colony's defense. Colonists contended with disease, food shortages, severe winters, and uncertain relations with Indigenous peoples. They depended not only on agriculture and trade but also on their ability to defend themselves. By the 1630s, each New England colony had authorized the creation and maintenance of local or regional militia.

Origins of Local Militia in New England

- The idea of a local militia was tradition in England existing back centuries before.
- Because New England was so far from England, help could not arrive quickly, so colonists had to be ready to respond to threats themselves.
- Colonies adapted the English military training and traditions in North America.

Why did towns form local militia?

Each town had to create a way to provide local defense while also cooperating with neighboring communities when the need arose. Town officials had to identify able-bodied men, organize the military companies, pass along orders for training, and confirm that the militia was adequately supplied. Powder houses were often created to store the black powder and ammunition for a community.

- Mutual cooperation and assisting with neighboring communities when the need arose
- The more isolated and inland a community was, the more likely it was to face attack.
- Coastal towns were also at risk from seafaring invasion
- Defense was a shared community responsibility, regulated by colonial laws that required a militia.

Skills of the Citizen Militia

The average militia man would have typically been a farmer. However, the specialized skills of certain town residents were often able to assist the local militia.

- A **carpenter** in turn could be utilized to build defensive works or a Garrison house. Later on these men would be given the title of artificer.
- A **blacksmith** may be utilized to maintain military hardware.
- A **gunsmith** may be utilized to maintain that muskets are in functioning condition.

Local Militia & "Training Band"

In town records, the term "training band" often refers to the local town militia. The "training field," typically a town green or town common, was where the militia trained. Some communities' elite veterans were part of their "training band" because of their ability and readiness. These elite veterans were later called "Minutemen" in the era of the Revolutionary War. "Training band" members might receive additional training compared with the less experienced members of the militia.

Officers of the Local Militia

Within the average local town militia, the chain of command was as follows: The captain would be in overall command of each company. A lieutenant would assist the captain and could take over for a command role when needed. The ensign would carry the company flag or regimental colors. Sergeants and corporals would assist in maintaining the order of the unit. They would assist in organizing the marching and discipline of the other men and carried out instructions from their higher officers. Larger organizations could include field officers such as colonels, lieutenant colonels, and majors.

Training Day of the Local Militia

How often the militia trained differed over the 17th and 18th centuries. Training day was often required six times a year, or even monthly. On training day, arms were inspected and every musket was checked to make sure it was in working order. Illness or physical injury was typically the only excuse a militia man could give for missing training, and an unexcused absence could lead to a fine or jail. Some men were exempt from militia service altogether, based on occupation or even race; those exemptions are listed below.

Some exemptions from militia duty

- Political leaders of the community
- Judges
- "President, Fellows, Students, and Servants of Harvard College"
- Ministers/Elders/Deacons of churches

- Sheriffs
- Physicians or surgeons
- Schoolmasters
- Coroners
- Deputy Sheriffs
- Clerks of courts
- Constables
- Constant ferrymen
- One Miller to each Gristmill
- Masters of vessels of 30+ tons
- Constant herdsmen
- Persons who are lame or otherwise disabled (needed a certificate from two surgeons)
- Those of Indigenous and/or African descent

Weapons and Equipment of the Militia

Most local militia regulations would require men to provide their own arms and a suitable supply of ammunition for training that day. Equipment requirements would alter with the various colonies. Some communities had a stockpile of extra weapons in case of emergency.

- Matchlock vs. Flintlock muskets
- Swords
- Pikes and hatchets
- Gunpowder and musket balls
- Bayonets

Early history of the militias of the New England Colonies

Plymouth Colony

The settlers of Plymouth colony wished to prepare for defense in case of attack. A local militia was formed on February 17, 1621. The militia consisted of "all able-bodied men" of the colony. They elected Myles Standish to be Captain of their local militia.

Massachusetts Bay Colony (and Maine)

Massachusetts Bay Colony's General Court authorized universal firearm ownership for local defense readiness. On March 22, 1631, the General Court ordered all adult males to possess weapons and prepare for military service. The following month on April 12, 1631, the General Court ordered the organization of a militia company or trainband in every town. On December 13, 1636, the General Court of Massachusetts Bay Colony ordered the creation of the Colony's militia. The organization of the Colony's militia companies were originally divided into three regiments: North, South, and East.

- **North Regiment**: Companies located in northern and western towns, including Charlestown, Cambridge, Watertown, Medford, and Concord.
- **South Regiment**: Companies located in Boston, Dorchester, Roxbury, Weymouth, and Hingham.

- **East Regiment**: Companies located in northeastern towns, including Salem, Saugus, Ipswich, and Newbury.
- **Hampshire Regiment**: In 1639 this fourth regiment was raised in the town of Springfield.

Connecticut

The Pequot War (1636-1638) reinforced the need for a permanent existing network for military readiness. Assistance from both militias from Massachusetts and Plymouth colonies were called upon to fight. By 1643, Plymouth, Massachusetts Bay, Connecticut, and New Haven formed the New England Confederation. In May 1665, the separate colonies of New Haven and Connecticut joined to form the colony that later became the State of Connecticut. Like Massachusetts all men between 16 to 60 had to actively participate in regular training exercises and to bear arms. By 1774, the age range for mandatory militia participation had narrowed to 16 through 45.

New Hampshire

The Militia was first organized within the Province of New Hampshire in 1631. That militia lasted until 1641, when the area came under the jurisdiction of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. New Hampshire became a separate colony again in 1679. Reorganization of New Hampshire regiments occurred under Gov. John Cutt in 1680. This consisted of militias in the four major settlements: Portsmouth, Dover, Exeter, and Hampton, and an artillery and cavalry company in Portsmouth.

Rhode Island

The Rhode Island colonial militia began on May 13, 1638, when a trainee band was formed in Portsmouth for local defense. Rhode Island's militia evolved from local "train bands" into chartered independent units, an Army of Observation, and which would be the foundation of the later Continental Army regiments.

Timeline of Conflicts in Colonial New England

The following conflicts involved the colonial militias of New England. Each entry gives the years of the conflict and, in brackets, the region or regions where it was fought or affected.

- The Wessagusset Conflict: 1622-1623 [*Massachusetts*]
- The Pequot War: 1636-1638 [*Connecticut*]
- King Philip's War: 1675-1676 [*Massachusetts and Rhode Island*]
- Gove's Rebellion: 1683 [*New Hampshire*]
- Boston Revolt: 1689 [*Boston, Massachusetts*]
- King William's War: 1689-1697 [*Modern day Maine, New Hampshire, Canada*]
- Queen Anne's War: 1702-1713 [*Massachusetts, Canada, and outside New England*]
- Dummer's War: 1722-1725 [Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and modern day Vermont]

- War of Jenkins' Ear: 1739-1742 [*New England*]
- King George's War: 1744-1748 [*Canada*]
- French and Indian War: 1754-1763 [*Canada, outside of New England*]

Review & Tips

- Learn as much as you can about your colonial New England ancestor
- Learn as much as you can about your colonial ancestor's community
- What conflicts occurred during their lifetime?
- Does the geography align?
- Start to build a timeline of your ancestor's community and situate their life events in that timeline.

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