Conflict and Community in Colonial New England

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

David Allen Lambert, Chief Genealogist

THE BRUE FAMILY LEARNING CENTER

American Ancestors
A National Center for Family History, Heritage & Culture

Meet today's presenter



David Allen Lambert

Chief Genealogist

OVERVIEW

- **Presentation** (60 mins.)
  - Local militia in early New England
  - Militia history by colony
  - Timeline of colonial conflicts
- **Q&A** (30 mins.)

©American Ancestors, AmericanAncestors.org

Local Militia in New England

English Military Tradition

- The concept of a local militia was a tradition in England dating back centuries
- Distance altered circumstances from England to New England in rapid response
- Colonies adapted English military training and traditions





Manual of the Musketeer (17th century)
Wikimedia Commons

Why did New England towns form local militias?

- Faced challenges of maintaining a permanent settlement without England's military support; local militia acted in the absence of a standing army
- Colonists faced disease, food shortages, severe winters, uncertain relations with Indigenous peoples
- Colonists depended not only on agriculture and trade but also on their ability to defend themselves

Why did New England towns form local militias?

- Mutual cooperation; assisting neighboring communities when the need arose
- The more isolated or inland a community, the more likely an attack
- Coastal towns at risk from invasion by sea
- Defense of the community was a shared responsibility regulated by laws and enacted by a militia

Who was expected to serve?

- All able-bodied white males
- Ages 16 to 60 (later 50)
- Representative of all socio-economic backgrounds
- (May differ slightly among colonies)

©American Ancestors, AmericanAncestors.org

Exempted 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

Tip

Those exempt from training were required to keep arms and have them inspected at least twice a year and to turn out in the case of emergency.

Skills of the Citizen Militia

- **Carpenters** may be called upon to build defensive works or a garrison house
- **Blacksmith** may maintain military hardware
- **Gunsmith** may ensure that muskets are in functioning condition

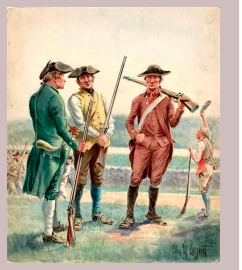


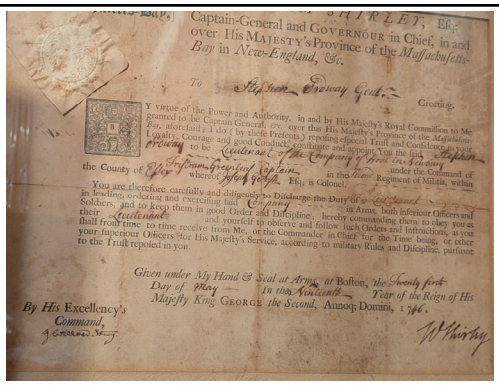


©American Ancestors, AmericanAncestors.org

Officers of the Local Militia

- Captain
- Lieutenant
- Ensign
- Non-commissioned officers (Sergeants, Corporals)
- Hierarchy of companies varied by colony and century





Captain-General and GOVERNOUR in Chief, in and over His MAJESTY's Province of the *Massachusetts-Bay* in *New-England*, &c.

To *Stephen Greenleaf Gent.* Greeting.

Y virtue of the Power and Authority, in and by His Majesty's Royal Commission to Me granted to be Captain-General, &c. over this His Majesty's Province of the *Massachusetts-Bay*, aforesaid; I do (by these Presents,) reposing especial Trust and Confidence in your Loyalty, Courage and good Conduct, constitute and appoint You the said *Stephen Greenleaf* to be *Lieutenant of the Company of Foot in Boston* whereof *Joseph Goldthwait* Esq. is Colonel. the County of *Suffolk* in the *Boston* Regiment of Militia, within

You are therefore carefully and diligently to Discharge the Duty of *Lieutenant* in leading, ordering and exercising said *Company* in Arms, both inferiour Officers and Soldiers, and to keep them in good Order and Discipline, hereby commanding them to obey you as their *Lieutenant*, and yourself to observe and follow such Orders and Instructions, as you shall from time to time receive from Me, or the Commander in Chief for the Time being, or other your Superiour Officers for His Majesty's Service, according to military Rules and Discipline, pursuant to the Trust reposed in you.

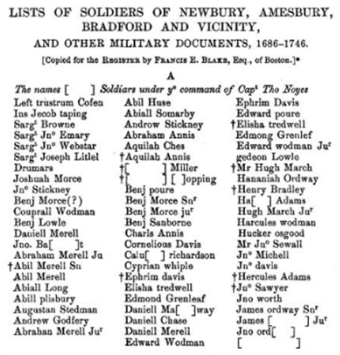
Given under My Hand & Seal at Arms, at Boston, the *Twenty first* Day of *May* in the *Nineteenth* Year of the Reign of His Majesty King GEORGE the Second, Annoq; Domini, 1746.

By His Excellency's Command,

Lieutenant Commission (1746)
David Allen Lambert collection



Muster Roll King Philips War



LISTS OF SOLDIERS OF NEWBURY, AMESBURY, BRADFORD AND VICINITY,

AND OTHER MILITARY DOCUMENTS, 1686–1746.

[Copied for the Register by Francis E. Blake, Esq., of Boston.]*

A

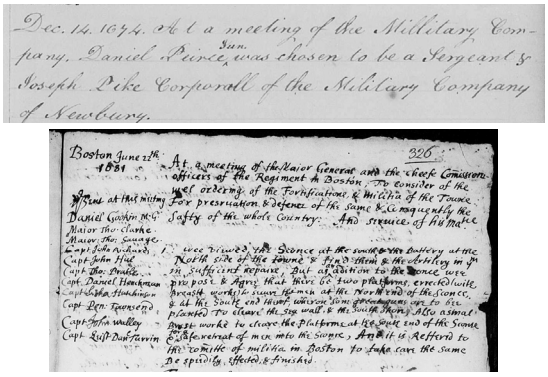
The names [ ] Soldiars under y^e^ command of Capt Tho Noyes

Left trustrum Cofen	Abil Huse	Ephrim Davis
Ins Jecob taping	Abiall Somarby	Edward poure
Sarg^t^ Browne	Andrew Stickney	†Elisha tredwell
Sarg^t^ Jn^o^ Emary	Abraham Annis	Edmong Grenlef
Sarg^t^ Jn^o^ Webstar	Aquilah Ches	Edward wodman Ju^r^
Sarg^t^ Joseph Litlel	†Aquilah Annis	gedeon Lowle
Drumars	†[ ] Miller	†Mr Hugh March
Joshuah Morce	†[ ] [ ]opping	Hananiah Ordway
Jn^o^ Stickney	Benj poure	†Henry Bradley
Benj Morce(?)	Benj Morce Sn^r^	Ha[ ] Adams
Couprall Wodman	Benj Morce ju^r^	Hugh March Ju^r^
Benj Lowle	Benj Sanborne	Harcules wodman
Daniell Merell	Charls Annis	Hucker osgood
Jno. Ba[ ]t	Cornelious Davis	Mr Jn^o^ Sewall
Abraham Merell Ju	Ca\u[ ] richardson	Jn^o^ Michell
†Abil Merell Sn	Cyprian whiple	Jn^o^ davis
Abil Merell	†Ephrim davis	†Hercules Adams
Abiall Long	Elisha tredwell	†Ju^o^ Sawyer
Abill plisbury	Edmond Grenleaf	Jno worth
Augustan Stedman	Daniell Ma[ ]way	James ordway So^r^
Andrew Godfery	Daniell Chase	James [ ] Ju^r^
Abrahan Merell Ju^r^	Daniell Merell	Jno ord[ ]
	Edward Wodman	[ ]

NEHGR (July 1896), 50:338

Local Militia "Training Band"

- *Training band* or *trainband* - refers to the local militia in town records
- *Training field* - a town green or town common where the local militia trained
- Some elite veterans of a community were part of the training band; later referred to as "Minutemen" in the Revolutionary War era
- A training band may receive additional training (versus less experienced members of the militia)



Dec. 14. 1674. At a meeting of the Military Company. Daniel Peirce, Sen. was chosen to be a Sergeant & Joseph Pike Corporall of the Military Company of Newbury.

Boston June 27th 1684 — At a meeting of the Maior Generall and the cheefe Comissio[ners] officers of the Regiment in Boston. To consider of the Present at this meeting: Maior Gookin M^r^ Maior Tho: Clarke Maior Tho: Savage Capt John Richard[s] Capt John Hull Capt Tho: Pratle Capt Daniel Henchman Capt Elisha Hutchinson Capt Ben: Townsend Capt Jos[h]a walley Capt Lieu^t^ Dan[iel] Fairwin

best ordering of the Fortifications & Militia of the Towne For presrvation & defence of its Inane & Consequently the Safety of the whole Country. And Service of his Ma[tie]

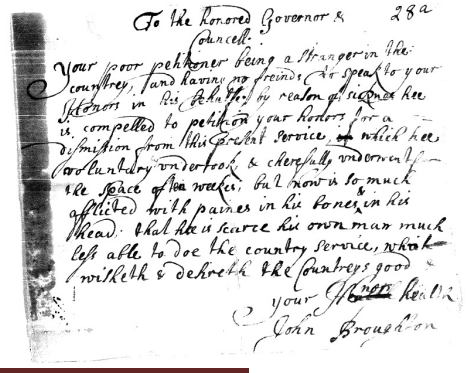
326

were Viewed the Scence at the south sea Battery at the North side of the Towne & find them & the Battery in Sufficient Repaire But as addition to the Scence were pro post & Agre[e] that there be two platforms erected with Breastth works to mount 6 peices in at the North end of the Scence, & at the South end Mount uppon some Convenient place to be planted To cleare the Sea wall & the South shore Also a small Platt worke to cleare the Platforme at the South end of the Scence Enlargement of men into the Service, And it is Referred to the Comitte of militia in Boston to take care the Same be speedily effected & finished

Newbury & Boston, Mass. Town Records FamilySearch

Training Day

- Frequency of training differed in the 17th and 18th centuries
- Often six times a year or monthly training was required
- All arms inspected and muskets checked for working order
- Manual of arms and drilling would occur
- Illness or physical injury would typically be the only excuse from training; unexcused absences could lead to a fine or jail



To the Honored Governor & 28a
Councell:
Your poor petitioner being a Stranger in the
countrey, and having no freinds to speak to your
Honors in his behalfe, by reason of sickness hee
is compelled to petition your Honors for a
dismission from this present Service, in which hee
voluntary undertook & chearfully undertook
the space of ten weeks, but now is so much
afflicted with paines in his bones, in his
head: that he is scarce his own man much
lesse able to doe the country service, which
he wisheth & desireth the countreys good
your Honrs Redy
John Broughton

Mass. State Archives Series

Weapons and Equipment

- Most local militia regulations required men provide their own arms and a suitable supply of ammunition for training
- Equipment requirements differed among colonies
- Some communities had a stockpile of extra weapons in case of emergency

17th & 18th century weapons



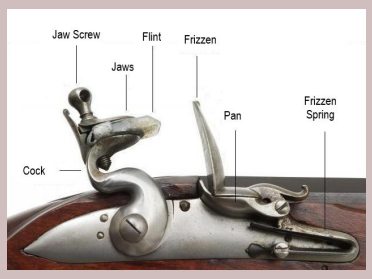
- Swords
- Pikes and hatchets
- Gunpowder and musket balls
- Matchlock vs. Flintlock muskets
- Bayonets

Matchlock Musket





Flintlock Musket



©American Ancestors, AmericanAncestors.org



Militias by New England Colony

Plymouth Colony

- Settlers of Plymouth colony wished to prepare for defense in case of attack
- Militia formed on February 17, 1621
- Militia consisted of "all able-bodied men"
- Elected Myles Standish to be Captain of their local militia

©American Ancestors, AmericanAncestors.org

Capt. Myles Standish



- Previous military experience
- Assisted in organizing Plymouth Colony's defenses.
- Supervised military activities and establish security for the settlement
- As captain of the militia, he regularly drilled his men in the use of pikes and muskets



"The First Muster" by Don Troiani (Wikimedia Commons)

Massachusetts Bay Militia Law of 1631

- Massachusetts Bay Colony's General Court authorized universal firearm ownership for local defense readiness
- **March 22, 1631:** Ordered all adult males to possess weapons and prepare for military service
- **April 12, 1631:** Ordered for the organization of a militia company or trainband in every town

©American Ancestors, AmericanAncestors.org

Massachusetts Bay Militia

- All men between the ages of 16 and 60 were required to serve, keep arms, and train in the town militia
- On December 13, 1636, the General Court of Massachusetts Bay Colony ordered the creation of the Colony's militia
- Militia companies divided in three regiments:
  - The North Regiment
  - The South Regiment
  - The East Regiment

Massachusetts Bay Regiments

- **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 Springfield.

Details of a Militia Company

- Every town was expected to maintain at least one company (approximately 60 men) commanded by a captain
- Men that were trained would often lead the individual companies
- In times of war, the local militia served as the immediate defense during an attack, or as an extended unit of available soldiers to be utilized for extended service

©American Ancestors, AmericanAncestors.org

Connecticut Militia

- Pequot War (1636-1638) reinforced need for a permanent military network; 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
- This union was intended to promote cooperation among the colonies; also recognized that threats could extend beyond the boundaries of any single town or colony

Connecticut Militia

- In May 1665, the separate colonies of New Haven and Connecticut joined to form the colony that later became the State of Connecticut
- Each colony had separate laws requiring military training
- Similar to 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 to 45

New Hampshire Militia

- Militia first organized within the Province of New Hampshire in 1631 (lasted until 1641, when the area came under the jurisdiction of the Massachusetts Bay Colony); New Hampshire became a separate colony again in 1679
- Governor John Cutt reorganized the militia on March 16, 1680, with a foot-company for each of the four major settlements: Portsmouth, Dover, Exeter, and Hampton, and an artillery and cavalry company in Portsmouth
- In a massive re-organization in 1682 under Edward Cranfield, the militia reported directly to the governor; the entire militia was activated to suppress Gove's Rebellion in 1683

©American Ancestors, AmericanAncestors.org

Rhode Island Militia

- Began on May 13, 1638, when a trainband was formed in Portsmouth for local defense
- Evolved from local "train bands" to chartered independent units, an Army of Observation, and the foundation of Continental Army regiments

That there is free liberty granted to the Free Inhabitants of the Province (if they will) to erect an Artillery Garden, and those that are desirous to advance the art Military, shall have freedom to exercise them selves therein, and to agree to their form, and Choose their officers, and they shall agree among them selves. That all ye Inhabitants in each Towne shall choose their Military officers from among themselves on the first Tuesday after the 12th of March. And that eight several times in the yeare the Bands of each Plantation or Towne shall openlie in the field, be exercised and disciplined by their Commanders and officers; the months of May, August, January, and February, excepted, and on the 1st Monday of ye other Months to make their personal appearance armed, to attend their colors by 8 o'clock in the Morning at the Second beat of the Drum."

"1649. That should one chosen Captain of the Train Band refuse the place, and accepting the place, neglect to train the Band upon the Days appointed, he shall forfeit five pounds, and the Lieftenant, in like manner, fifty shillings.

Civil and Military Lists of RI, 1647-1800

Rhode Island Militia

"*The commanding officers of the colony, and of the regiments of the Island and the Main Land, were given as early as 1675, but until May, 1714, scarcely an mention of the different company officers of militia appears upon the records.*"

—Joseph Jencks Smith, *Civil and Military Lists of Rhode Island, 1647-1800* (1900)

©American Ancestors, AmericanAncestors.org

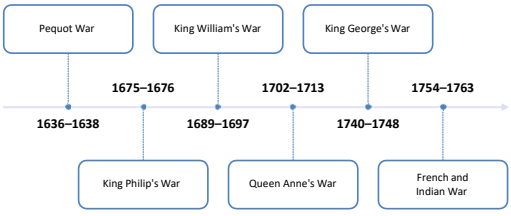
Historic Overview

Determining the Military Service of your Ancestor before the Revolution



- Determine the Wars during his lifetime
- Is there a realistic age during his service dates?
- Does the geography align?
- Do you have the correct soldier?

Timeline of Wars involving New England Soldiers



©American Ancestors, AmericanAncestors.org

New England Battlefield Geography

1636-1638: Pequot War, Connecticut

1675-1676: King Philip's War, Massachusetts & RI

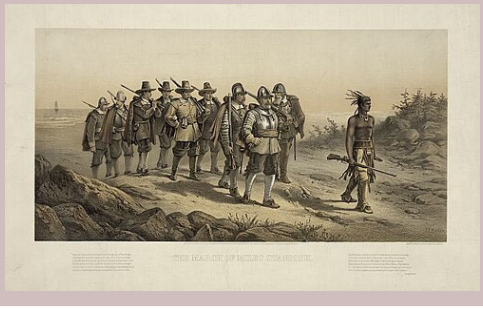
1689-1697: King William's War, New England

1702-1713: Queen Anne's War, Massachusetts

1740-1748: King George's War – Northern New England

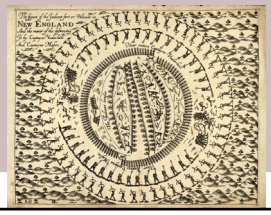
1754-1763: French and Indian War – Northern Colonies

The Wessagusset Conflict: 1622-1623



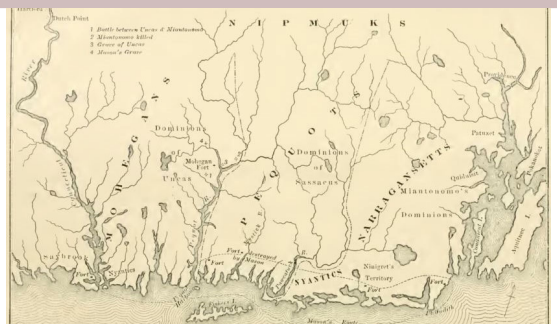
Pequot War: 1636-1638

- Expansion into Connecticut
- New England settlers and Pequot Indians
- Major battle: Fort Mystic May 26, 1637



©American Ancestors, AmericanAncestors.org

Pequot War



King Philip's War: 1675-1676

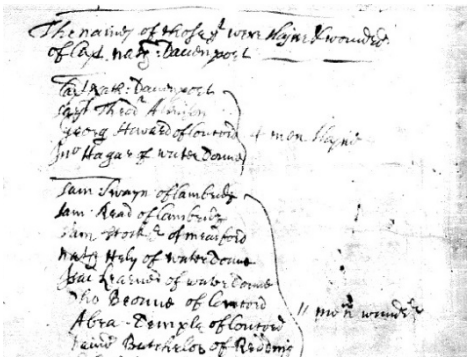
- First full-scale New England war in the 17th c.
- Metacom (aka) King Philip and the Wampanoag Indians
- Plymouth Colony, Rhode Island, Western Mass., and beyond



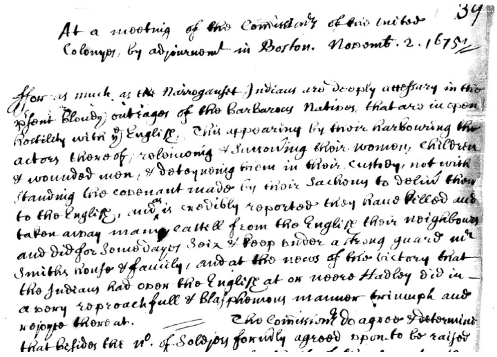
King Philip's War

- **June 1675: Swansea, Mass:** One of the opening episodes of widespread violence between the colonists and King Philip's forces.
- **December 1675: The Great Swamp Fight.** New England forces attacked a large Narragansett settlement in present-day Rhode Island.
- **April 1676: The attack on Sudbury:** Indigenous forces struck the Massachusetts town, inflicting heavy losses.
- **August 1676: Death of Metacom's death, August 1676:** Metacom was killed in present-day Bristol County, Massachusetts, effectively ending the main phase of the war in southern New England.

©American Ancestors, AmericanAncestors.org



Massachusetts Archives Series



Massachusetts Archives Series

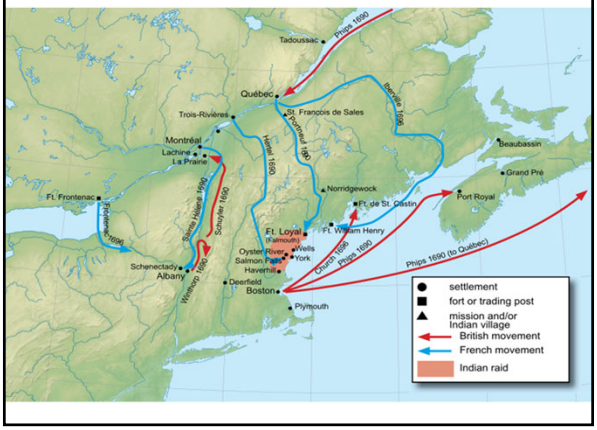
Gove's Rebellion (1683)

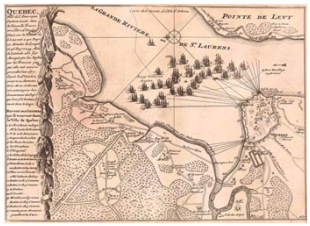
Boston Revolt (1689)



King William's War

- **1689: The raid on Dover, New Hampshire**. This surprise invasion of the settlement resulted in the deaths and capture of numerous colonists.
- **1690: The raid on Schenectady, New York**. Both French and Indigenous forces attacked the English settlement extending this out of the range of New England.
- **1690: English expedition against Quebec.** New England forces participated in an attempt to capture the principal French settlement in Canada by naval and land forces.





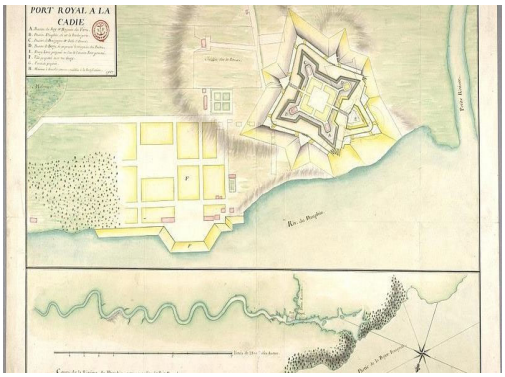




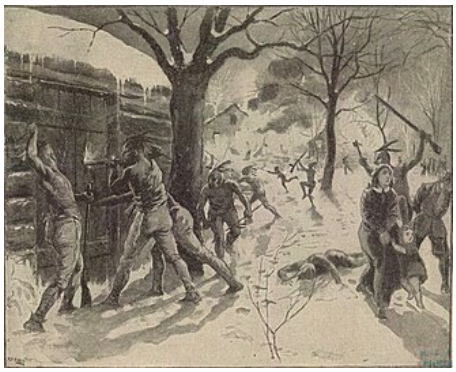
Queen Anne's War: 1702-1713

- England at war with France
- Raids by French and allied Indians from Canada into Northern New England communities. Attack on Deerfield, 1704
- St. Augustine attacked 1702 and 1704
- French naval action Charleston in 1706

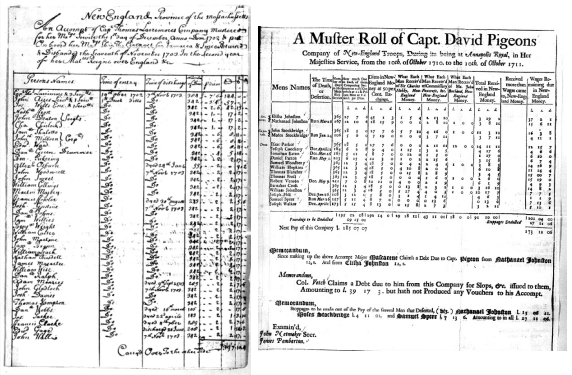




Port Royal, Acadia

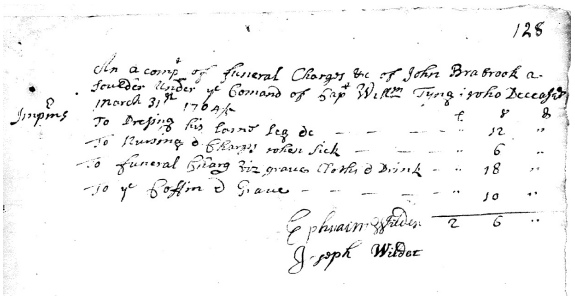


Depiction on the Raid on Deerfield (1704)
Wikimedia Commons



A Muster Roll of Capt. David Pigeons

Massachusetts Archives Series



Massachusetts Archives Series

Dummer's War: 1722-1725



War of Jenkins' Ear: 1739-1742



King George's War: 1744-1748



©American Ancestors, AmericanAncestors.org

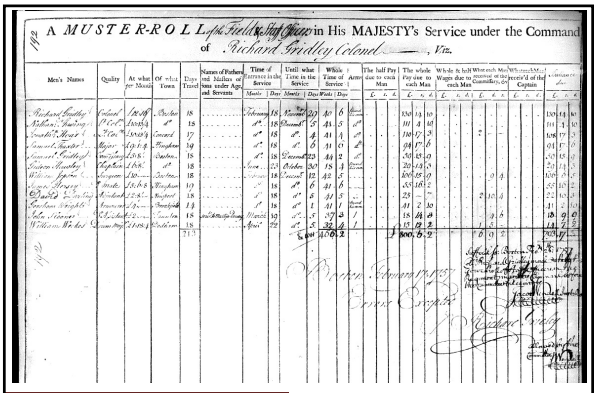
French and Indian War: 1754-1763



French and Indian War

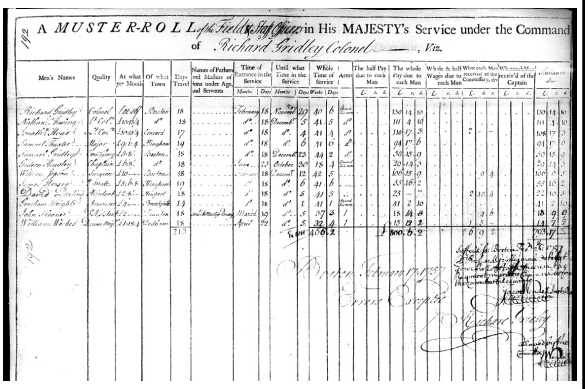
- **1757: The Battle of Fort William Henry.** A large scale British defeat in northern New York that contributed to fears of further French and Indigenous attacks.
- **1758: The Battle of Carillon (Ticonderoga)**. British forces suffered a costly defeat while attempting to capture the French fort.
- **1758: The capture of Louisbourg (Cape Breton)** British forces recaptured the fortress, opening the way for further operations against French Canada.
- **1759: The Battle of the Plains of Abraham**. British forces defeated the French outside Quebec, a decisive step toward the conquest of New France.





A MUSTER-ROLL of the Field & Staff Officers in His MAJESTY's Service under the Command of Richard Gridley Colonel —, Viz.

Massachusetts Archives Series



A MUSTER-ROLL of the Field & Staff Officers in His MAJESTY's Service under the Command of Richard Gridley Colonel —, Viz.

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.

©American Ancestors, AmericanAncestors.org

QUESTIONS?

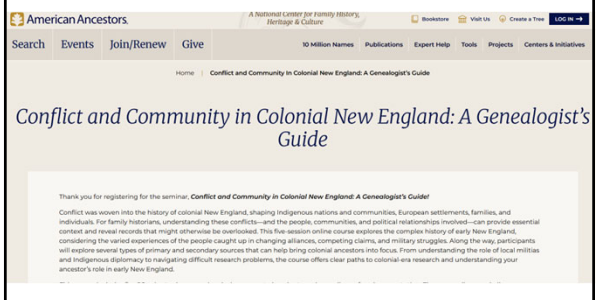
Schedule a consultation
consultations@nehgs.org

Hire Research Services
research@nehgs.org

Consultations

Book a one-on-one consultation with a genealogist and receive help with your family history research!
AmericanAncestors.org/Expert-Help/Consultations

SCAN ME



Americanancestors.org/conflict-and-community-colonial-new-england-genealogists-guide



American Ancestors
A National Center for Family History, Heritage & Culture

Copyright © 2026