



Sunday, February 26, 1775 Col. Leslie's 'Retreat' or The 'Salem Alarm'

On that date in 1775, 250 years ago, the American Revolutionary War ALMOST ~ or easily could have ~ started in Marblehead &/or Salem in exactly the same way that it did just six weeks later in Lexington and then in Concord on April 19, 1775.

In the pre-dawn hours of **Wed. April 19** in 1775, **700 British Regular Army troops** marched by land through Lexington on their way to Concord, to seize weapons that were stored and hidden at some farms in Concord. In Lexington, the Regulars were confronted by some of the town's militia who had gathered. A shot rang out. And a battle ensued, first on Lexington's common, then at Concord and its North Bridge.

But that first land battle of the American Revolution COULD have occurred in Marblehead instead:

Because **on Sunday afternoon, February 26 in 1775**, while people in most towns (including M^hd. then) were in church, almost the same scenario occurred. **British Regular Army troops landed in Marblehead** (though from the sea instead) and marched through the densely populated town, down its streets lined with closely-built homes, to Salem, where they had orders to seek and seize some brass cannon (formerly Crown possessions) that were reportedly stockpiled beyond Salem's North Bridge over its North River.

Alarms would have rung out, and alerts quickly circulated through an efficient pre-established (and probably secret) network. So, Salem and its militia were warned that Regulars were on the march.

Marbleheaders flowed out of their 3 churches, no doubt panicked. While women hurried children and families home, men rushed to grab their weapons from home or from the town militia's storage areas, then formed into their familiar militia ranks. But they actually remained in town, though at high alert.

In Salem, the column of Regulars ~ **240-strong** ~ was stopped by a drawbridge that prevented their advance to look for the cannon, as a resolute Salem militia major there refused to raise the bridge. But, with darkness looming, the British colonel finally accepted a negotiated deal which allowed him to cross the river and back, but not to actually hunt for the cannon (which had been removed to safer hiding before and during the standoff) — thereby fulfilling his orders from his superior officer, the military general who was also governor of Massachusetts. The Colonel and his troops then marched back to their ship.

So ~ on that Sunday in February, cooler heads prevailed. And the 8-year war that followed the April battles did not begin in Salem or Marblehead. A violent clash was prevented due to respectful negotiation between the two opposing sides, which ended in a suitable compromise.

It's not that the British officers thought 240 soldiers with flintlocks and bayonets could march quietly or secretly to Salem on a Sunday morning — but rather (probably) that the seaport's busy streets would be clear of the daily hustle and bustle of a weekday (which included Saturdays then), allowing them to march in formation straight through to the road to Salem. It ALSO would have been a daunting display of force in the same way large troops of soldiers march ceremonially in some countries even today — to show their strength, and to impress or frighten rivals, or to intimidate the local population.

In the mid-1700s, Marblehead was apparently the sixth most populous metropolis in British N. America, with nearly 5,000 people and approx. 950 families (living in about 525 houses, approx. 300 of which still stand).

Already in December 1774 and January 1775, most towns' defensive militias had been dividing and arming themselves, preparing for a potential war. The leader of Marblehead's militia at that time was not Colonel John Glover (who was perhaps still a Major, then a Lt. Colonel until May 10 that year), but Colonel Jeremiah Lee. Lee and Elbridge Gerry provided many of the supplies being stockpiled in areas outside of Boston. Lee was also a leader of the town's rebel ('Patriot') faction, which seems to have comprised about 90 % of Marblehead's population, and dominated its town government. And he covertly used his trade contacts in Spain to try to secure weapons for the rebellion ~ thrice treasonous.

The 'Salem Alarm' event became known as '**Leslie's Retreat**' much later ~ after British Regular Army **Lt. Col. Alexander Leslie**, a Scotsman, who had led the British troops that day. His life dates are almost exactly the same as John Glover's — whose life dates are also similar to George Washington's. Both Leslie and Glover began the war as Lt. Colonels, before being promoted to General in 1776 (Leslie) & 1777 (Glover). And each served through the entire war, and suffered from it, but continued in other service afterward.

Alexander Leslie (1731 - 1794) John Glover (1732 - 1797) George Washington (1732 - 1799)