

Captain John Parker
A Brief Biography
By Bill Poole

Ancestry The first of Captain John Parker's ancestors to emigrate to Massachusetts was Thomas Parker thought to have been baptized at Little Norton, Somersetshire, England March 31, 1609.¹ He embarked from London for Boston in March of 1635 on board the *Suzan and Ellen* commanded by Edward Payne.² Thomas first settled in Lynn where he married Amy (surname unknown) and where the first two of his eleven children were born.³ He then purchased land and removed to what was then known as "Linn Village," later "Redding," and now part of Wakefield, MA. His homestead, it is thought, was located near the Old Town Hall (demolished in 1958) that stood on Main Street at the corner of Water Street in Wakefield.⁵ Thomas was active in church affairs. He was involved in the establishment of the First Parish Church⁴ in Reading built in 1644 of which he was named Deacon and then Chief Deacon. He also served as selectman and owned large tracts of land, including 200 acres on the north side of the Ipswich River. He died on August 12, 1683 and his gravestone can be seen in Wakefield's Old Burying Ground on Church Street.⁶



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Hananiah Parker Hananiah Parker was the second son of Thomas, and usually was called Lt. Hananiah. He was born in Lynn, MA in 1638, and married on September 30, 1663 Elizabeth Browne born in Reading December 10, 1647.⁷ The couple settled on land bordering his father's farm. Hananiah was a member of the Reading military company, and was chosen ensign in 1680 and lieutenant in 1684. He served as selectman, town clerk and also represented the town for seven years in the Massachusetts Great and General Court. Hananiah and Elizabeth had eight children all born in Reading, MA. She died February 27, 1697. He later married on December 12, 1700 Mary (Bursham) Bright daughter of William Bursham and widow of Deacon John Bright of Watertown, MA. Hananiah and Mary had no children. Hananiah died on March 10, 1724 at age eighty-six.⁸

John Parker John Parker was the eldest son of Hananiah. He was born in Reading on August 3, 1664, and married Deliverance Dodge of Beverly, MA on October 2, 1689.⁹ They settled on the original homestead of his grandfather, perhaps living with his grandmother Amy who died January 15, 1690. John's father, Hananiah, had been named the sole executor of Grandfather Thomas's estate and apparently inherited the original Parker homestead which he later willed to John as cited below.

FROM THE WILL OF HANNANIAH PARKER

I do give and bequeath to my son John Parker and to his heirs and assigns forever that house and land that was his Grandfather Parker's which is that housing and Lands that he now occupieth and liveth upon; as also three acres of Meadow which I bought of Edw. Taylor and those Dividends which did of right belong to the land abovesaid.¹⁰

John and Deliverance had eight children all born in Reading. John served as Constable of Reading and added to his landholdings purchasing several additional parcels including one bought from John Poole on the North end of the "Great Pond," today's Lake Quapanowit.¹¹ Their eldest son Hananiah at the age of eighteen set off on the Port Royal expedition in September, 1710. Following the capitulation of the fort in October and its renaming as Annapolis Royal, he remained there as part of the garrison. In March, 1711 he wrote a letter to his parents describing the terrible conditions within the fort:

But we hope to see you in a little time, they that are living, but if we stay here much Longer their will but few of us see New England. . . . Out of all the New England men thair is but 40 men fit for Deuty, and thair is hardly men Enough to berrey y^e dead and look after y^e sick for we berrey 2 or 3 men Everey Night: for we berrey them in Night because y^e French Should not know how many men we loos and we berrey then out of y^e burying place down by y^e water side below y^e fort and spread y^e ground leavel over them that they might not be seen. I have had a verrey Easey time this winter for I have been freed from Deuty to Look after Benjamin Johnson and I have had my health as well as ever I had in my life for Which I have caus to be thankful.¹²

He tried to reassure his parents: "I would not have you be Discouraged nor Discontented nor think y^e time Long for I hope to see you Quick, for as soon as the Governur (Samuel Vetch) coms hear Sir Charles (Hobby) sayes he will carry us home". Sadly, however, Hananiah died, probably of disease, sometime between June and October, 1711 during the time when Sir Charles Hobby mentioned in his letter was in command of the post.¹³

Whether or not the tragic death of their eldest son at the young age of nineteen had anything to do with it, the following spring of 1712 John sold his property in Reading and with his wife, Deliverance, and their three surviving sons Andrew, Josiah and John he moved to Lexington, MA then called Cambridge Farms. There, John purchased the homestead upon which his descendants would live for nearly two centuries.¹⁴ The site is on modern day Spring Street in Lexington. A sign indicates it as the location of Captain John Parker's homestead, and there is also a stone marker identifying it as the birthplace of Captain Parker's famous grandson, Theodore Parker.



The deed of purchase described the property and also stated John's occupation.

“John Parker, Sen^r, Joiner, of Redding, purchased in Cambridge Farms” one small Mansion house and sixty acres of land, bounded southwesterly on Watertown line, Elsewhere by Daniel White, John Stone and Thomas Cutler, and of Thomas Cutler He bought “a certain messuage or Tenement lying and being scituate in Cambridge, In the Farms, containing one mansion house, barn, and about one hundred and ninety acres of land.”¹⁵

The two properties totaled 250 acres and the purchase price was £460. However, in 1728 John sold a one hundred acre farm containing one mansion house, one barn and two outhouses to Mr. Joseph Brooke of Weston for 600 pounds. The property bordered the Watertown line and was apparently a part of the property he had previously purchased from Cutler.¹⁶

John was appointed “fence viewer” in 1714, and in 1715 and 1721 held the post of “tythingman” the individual responsible for keeping order in his portion of the village. His position in the community is also suggested by his being assigned to the second row of seats in the Lexington meeting house behind only John Mason, Thomas Mead and” other distinguished members of the congregation.”¹⁷ Like most New England farmers, in addition to farming John carried on a secondary occupation. As stated previously, he also worked as a “joiner,” an occupation described variously as: “a carpenter who did interior finish work by joining pieces of wood,” “a skilled craftsman who created ornamental woodwork,” “a cabinet maker,” “one who joins floorboards of a house without the use of nails,” etc. John thus was obviously a skilled woodworker, and he taught his craft to his three surviving sons. In fact, the Parkers became noted for their expert craftsmanship. John died in Lexington on December 22, 1741 at age 78.¹⁸

Josiah Parker Josiah Parker, also known as Lt. Josiah, was the second surviving son of John Parker and Deliverance Dodge Parker.¹⁹ Born in Reading, MA April 11, 1694, he married on December 8, 1718, Anna Stone of Lexington. Upon Josiah’s marriage his father gave him 55 acres of the old homestead, land upon which Anna bore Josiah eight children, six of whom would survive to adulthood.²⁰ Charles Hudson in his History of Lexington wrote of Josiah:

“Lieutenant Parker . . . was one of the most popular men in town for a number of years. He filled almost every town office. He was an excellent penman, and was town clerk 1743-45, ’55. He was assessor nineteen years from 1726 to 1755 with occasional intermissions, and was selectman for 1743-45, 1753-55.”²¹

Josiah was also a joiner carrying out his trade in a workshop on the family farm. The variety of objects and implements he produced is suggested by the following entry in his account book for the year 1752 describing services provided to one individual.

“1752. To a harrow and axletreeing your cart — to mending your Cyder mill — to a cheese mill — to making 3 keelers and a churn — to making a coffin — to 6 pair of Bed Screws at £7 – 10s a pair of old tenor — to a beetel and how [hoe] Handle and sithe snath — to my oxen to plough in your Rie.”²²

Josiah was first the Clerk and then Lieutenant of the Lexington militia company, and apparently took his military responsibilities seriously. In his account book for the year 1738 he diligently recorded the commands for performing the manual of arms as well as those for the firing of a flintlock.²³ He was appointed Lieutenant in Colonel Phipps’ Regiment in 1744. Family tradition credits him with serving in the expedition to Louisburg in 1745. The sharp decline in production of his workshop as attested by his account books during this period is inferential evidence that he was away at war and perhaps that one or more of his sons served alongside him.²⁴ Josiah died in Lexington on October 9, 1756. His widow, Anna, survived him and died on September 1760. In her will she bequeathed a part of her estate to each of her six surviving children, naming her sons John and Joseph Parker as executors.²⁵

Captain John Parker John Parker was born on July 13, 1729 on the family homestead where he spent his early life farming and learning woodworking skills under the tutelage of his father, Josiah. On May 25, 1755 he married Lydia Moore daughter of Thomas and Mary Moore of Lexington.²⁶ She died December 15, 1822. Captain Parker was described “as a stout, large framed man of medium height, somewhat like his illustrious grandson, Theodore Parker, in

personal appearance, but had a much longer face.” It is said he was fond of learning and reading and was a frequent borrower of books from the Reverend Jonas Clarke, the Lexington minister.²⁷

Family tradition credits John Parker with considerable military experience prior to the Revolution. It is claimed that he served during the Seven Years’ or French and Indian War, was at the capture of Louisburg in 1758, Quebec in 1759, and served with Roger’s Rangers.²⁸ Unfortunately, no records have surfaced to support this contention. However, to be chosen as Captain of the Lexington militia instead of several others whose military experience was both extensive and well documented, he must have had the confidence of and been held in high esteem by his fellow townsmen and fellow militia members.

Certainly, he was descended from a long line of individuals who had performed such service, and in assuming command of the Lexington militia company he was following in the long tradition of military service within his family. As already mentioned, his great grandfather, Hananiah Parker, served as first Ensign and then Lieutenant in the military company of Reading. His uncle, Hananiah, Jr., died in 1711 while on the Port Royal Expedition during Queen Anne’s War. His father, Josiah, had been Clerk and Lieutenant in the Lexington Militia Company and even his maternal grandfather, John Stone, had been a corporal in the Lexington militia. His older brother Josiah was a lieutenant in the Woburn militia, and his younger brother, Thaddeus, a member of the Lexington militia who, according to Charles Hudson, served “in the Eighth Campaign, three months to the Jerseys.”²⁹



This statue in Lexington was originally intended to represent an idealized Minute Man, but has come to be identified as a depiction of Captain Parker. It hardly conforms to the description of him as stout and of medium height. Instead, the statue portrays a slim and quite tall individual, and Medford resident Arthur Mather, among others, was used as a model.

The Engagement on Lexington Common According to a member of his family, Captain Parker was ill when he retired on the night of April 18 and he did not sleep well, if at all.³⁰ He was already in the terminal stage of consumption [tuberculosis] which was endemic in his family. [See the chart below.] Perhaps he was thus already awake when a messenger arrived at about “one of the clock” to inform him that the Regulars were on their way to Concord. Parker was concerned that the troops might also attempt to seize John Hancock and Samuel Adams who were staying in Lexington at the home of Reverend Jonas Clarke not far from the Common.

Captain Parker probably reached Lexington Common sometime around one thirty in the morning of April 19. There, he found some of the Lexington militia already mustering, and he consulted with them concerning what was to be done. Scouts had already been sent out to determine the whereabouts of the Regulars. However, when one of them returned about three or four a. m. to say that he had not seen any troops on the roads to Boston, Parker dismissed the men but warned them to

remain nearby “within call of the drum.” Some militia men who lived nearby took advantage of the opportunity to start for home, while others retired to John Buckman’s Tavern to enjoy the warmth of its hearth.³¹

Then, around 5:30 a.m. one of the Lexington scouts, Thaddeus Bowman, rode up shouting that not only were the Regulars on the march, they were already within the bounds of the town. Captain Parker ordered young William Diamond to sound his drum to summon the men of Lexington. Those in Buckman’s Tavern abandoned its warmth, and quickly formed up on the Common. There they were joined by others who might have started for home and by some just now arriving on the scene. Some sixty to seventy men gathered in two ranks and were addressed by their captain. “Let the troops pass by.” “Don’t molest them without they being first.”³²

As the long lines of Regulars came into sight, the militiamen were still in a state of disorder with some hurrying to join the formation and others just coming onto the Common. They were undoubtedly nervous and one man turned to Captain Parker saying, “There are so few of us, it is folly to stand here.” In response, Parker stated emphatically, “The first man who offers to run shall be shot down.” Many years later one individual remembered him as saying, “Stand your ground! Don’t fire unless fired upon! But if they mean to have a war let it begin here!”³³ Many historians doubt the accuracy of this recollection.

Then, three companies of Regulars burst onto the road between the Buckman Tavern outbuildings and the Lexington Meeting House. The first two companies, the light infantry of the 4th and 10th Foot, deployed into line of battle and shouting their “Huzzahs” advanced directly toward the wavering militia. Major John Pitcairn, in command of this advance force of the Regulars and accompanied by other mounted officers, rode out in front of his troops to demand the dispersal of the militia. Some thought Pitcairn shouted “Disperse, you damned rebels! you dogs.” Another thought he said, “Throw down your arms, ye villains, ye rebels.”³⁴

John Parker knew the situation was getting out of hand and would only continue to further deteriorate by the moment. He turned to his men and ordered them “to disperse and not to fire.” With the “huzzahs” of the Regulars echoing in their ears and in the confusion of the moment, some militiamen did not hear the order while others were simply slow or reluctant to disperse. Then a shot rang out, the source of which remains in dispute. The Regulars responded with at first a scattered fire and then a crushing volley wounding and killing several of the militia. Now, completely out of control, they continued an indiscriminate fire, rushed upon the fleeing militia and were on the verge of breaking into the houses around the Common, when the commander of the expeditionary force, Colonel Francis Smith, arrived on the scene to restore order.

Smith got his troops back into line, and after allowing them to fire a victory salute and shout their huzzahs for the King, the force moved on in the direction of Concord. They left behind seven Lexington men dead and nine wounded. [A Woburn man, Asahel Porter who had been captured earlier, was also killed at this time.] It was an unimaginable tragedy for Lexington, a very close-knit town of extended families. Everyone knew or was related to one or more of the victims. Of eight father and son combinations that had rallied to the Lexington Common, five were broken by death.

With their friends and relatives lying wounded, bleeding, and dead or dying, and with the smoke of the British victory salute still eddying in the air, the men of Lexington returned to the Common to assist the wounded and grieve over the fallen. The dead were hastily buried with the prayers and under the supervision of the Reverend Jonas Clarke, religious shepherd of the Lexington community. Their grave was covered over with branches to disguise its location should the British on their expected return through the town attempt to desecrate the dead.

“Parker’s Revenge” It was then that Captain Parker and the men of Lexington exhibited their finest moments. Despite the terrible tragedy they had experienced that morning, with perhaps the sulfurous odor of the smoke of the British muskets still in the air, the Lexington Militia formed ranks to set off in pursuit of the enemy. Somehow, John Parker and Jonas Clarke had lifted the spirits of the men and inspired them with the determination to avenge their dead and gain revenge for the violation visited upon their town. Of all the militia companies that marched that morning to confront the Regulars only that of Lexington had experienced and knew what war was really like. Yet, the company, some of its members wearing bloody bandages, marched resolutely off to battle to the tap of William Diamond’s drum and the sharp, piercing cry of the fife sounding the notes of a popular tune, the White Cockade.

Perhaps not wishing to leave the limits of Lexington, Captain Parker found a good ambush spot just within the bounds of the town. This rocky outcrop, which would later be called “Parker’s Revenge,” was an extension of the higher elevation known as Pine Hill on the border of Lexington and Lincoln. Captain Parker distributed his men along the hillside and perhaps also in the rock-strewn pasture to the west to await the expected return of the Regulars from Concord.³⁵

The site chosen was excellent for the purpose of confronting the marching British column. The rock-strewn hillside rose abruptly to the left of the approach of the Regulars, and its boulders, trees and brush offered both concealment and protection for the men of Lexington. A marshy area to its front not only brought the road to the foot of the hill and within close range of the waiting militia, but also limited the ability of the British troops to maneuver. The approach to the right of the hill has been described as a rock-strewn pasture, but may also have been somewhat low and marshy. It was crisscrossed by irrigation ditches then, and today the land is still low-lying and quite wet each year in April. This meant that the Regulars would either have to launch a frontal attack or send flanking forces far to the left or right to clear the militia from the hill. In the meantime the column would be subjected to a galling fire from the high ground.

As Captain Parker and his men waited, they could trace the movement of the British column by the clouds of musket smoke and the ever-nearing sound of gunfire. Finally, the vanguard of the Regulars appeared, led by Colonel Smith himself. Parker could see that the Red-coated flanking party to the left of the column was being held up by Lincoln militiamen, perhaps reinforced by some of the men from Lexington, who were firing from the cover of the boulders and drainage ditches in the pasture to the right of the hill. The British right flank guard was forced to take a wide detour and slish through the brook and marshy ground to Parker’s front in order to threaten the left flank of Lexington’s position. This left Colonel Smith’s vanguard without the flank support as they neared the ambush site.

Colonel Smith was desperate to keep the column moving in order to relieve the pressure on the rear guard, which by this time was hard-pressed to keep the swarming militia at bay. If the vanguard faltered, holding up the rest of the column, the rear guard might be overwhelmed. Thus, the Redcoats approached Captain Parker’s position at a half run. Captain Lawrence Parsons was in the lead with the remnants of his company of the 10th Regiment of Foot. After the previous action at “bloody curve” he was the only remaining unwounded officer of the company. The men of Lexington held their fire allowing the first few Regulars to come right up to their position and begin to pass. Then as Colonel Smith appeared, Captain Parker gave the order to fire. The volley struck the first three or four companies with a sweeping fire that unhorsed Colonel Smith with a wound in the thigh, wounded Captain Parsons in the arm, inflicted a number of casualties within the leading companies and stopped the column cold.



Modern Day View of Site of “Parker’s Revenge”

At this point Major Pitcairn rode up. He dispatched some of the grenadiers to attempt a wide sweep around the right of Captain Parker’s position, while at the same time the British flankers on the left managed to drive the militiamen from the rocky field so as to bring pressure on the Lexington left flank. Pitcairn then urged the Red-coated infantry to charge directly up the hill to push Captain Parker’s men from their position. But all this took time, and the men from Lexington continued to fire as fast as they could at the light infantry and grenadiers attempting to drive them from the ambush site.

Then, the Lexington Company began to take casualties. Jedediah Munroe, who had been wounded earlier in the morning, was struck again and died on the hillside. Nathaniel Wyman also may have been killed in this area, and Sgt. Francis Brown was seriously wounded. The Regulars finally drove Captain Parker and his men up to the top of the hill and then down its eastern slope. There, threatened from in front and on both flanks, the men of Lexington were forced to scatter into the nearby woods. They did not abandon the battle, however, and continued to pursue the Redcoats back through Lexington until Colonel Smith’s exhausted and demoralized troops were rescued by a relief force commanded by General Hugh the Earl Percy.³⁶

Earl Percy led the combined force on a harried but successful retreat from Lexington to Charlestown where the men lay on their arms through the night while the wounded were ferried to Boston. Meanwhile, a force of New England militia numbered by some at close to twenty thousand surrounded Charlestown and Boston. General Gage’s army would never venture from the city again until their pyrrhic victory at Bunker Hill (actually Breed’s Hill) in June, 1775. Thereafter, they were a besieged army isolated in Boston until they evacuated the city in March, 1776.

Aftermath Six days after the engagement on Lexington Common Captain Parker gave the following brief deposition, his only recorded report or comment on the events of April 19, 1775.

Lexington, April 25, 1775.

I, John Parker, of lawful age, and commander of the Militia in Lexington, do testify and declare, that on the nineteenth instant, in the morning, about one of the clock, being informed that there were a number of Regular Officers riding up and down the road, stopping and insulting people as they passed the road, and was also informed that a number of Regular Troops were on their march from Boston, in order to take the Province Stores at Concord, ordered our Militia to meet on the common in said Lexington, to consult what to do, and concluded not to be discovered, nor meddle or make with said Regular Troops (if they should approach) unless they should insult us; and upon their sudden approach, I immediately ordered our Militia to disperse and not to fire. Immediately said Troops made their appearance, and rushed furiously, fired upon and killed eight of our party, without receiving any provocation therefor from us.

John Parker³⁷

This was all he said, and historians and others have continued to wonder and debate concerning the motivations for his decision to place his men not merely in a dangerous but a deadly situation on that fateful morning. Professor David Hackett Fischer in his book, *Paul Revere's Ride*, summarized the various theories and concluded that Captain Parker did not wish to start a fight, but was unwilling to run away from one. "If they want to have a war let it begin here!" Also, "Not knowing if Hancock and Adams had left the parsonage, and thinking that their arrest was one of the objects of the expedition, he mustered his men at the north corner of the Green, very near the Bedford Road, either to block the British troops or to turn them in another direction." However, just as we shall probably never know who fired the first shot, we will continue to conjecture but may never know what the captain's motivations for his actions were.³⁸

During the almost year-long siege of Boston, men from the Lexington Militia were called upon to support the besieging army on several occasions. Captain Parker led detachments of men of the Lexington Militia to Cambridge, Massachusetts for a five day period from May 6 through 10 and again on June 17 and 18 following the Battle of Bunker's Hill. However, these were his last military activities. Already gravely ill from consumption on April 19, he succumbed to the disease on September 17, 1775 at the age of forty-six.³⁹

FOOTNOTES

¹Parker, Theodore. *Genealogy and Biographical Study of John Parker of Lexington and His Descendants Showing the Earlier Ancestry in America from Deacon Thomas Parker of Reading, Mass. From 1635 to 1893*. Worcester, Mass. Press of Charles Hamilton, 1893, p.9.

²Ibid., pp. 18-19.

³Ibid., p. 29.

⁴Ibid., p. 23.

⁵Ibid., p. 25.

⁶Ibid., pp. 24-31. Photo credit unknown.

⁷Ibid., p. 29.

⁸Ibid., pp. 31-5.

⁹Ibid., p. 35.

- ¹⁰Ibid. p. 33.
- ¹¹Ibid., pp. 35-6.
- ¹²Ibid., p. 40.
- ¹³Ibid.
- ¹⁴According to the 1900 and 1910 United States Censuses, Charles M. Parker the great grandson of Captain Parker was living on the farm in 1900, but by 1910 he was boarding in the home of Byron C. and Estelle R Earle at 19 Muzzey Street in Lexington.
- ¹⁵Parker, p. 37-8.
- ¹⁶Ibid., footnote p. 38.
- ¹⁷Ibid., p. 37.
- ¹⁸Ibid., p. 39.
- ¹⁹Ibid., p. 43.
- ²⁰Ibid., p. 45.
- ²¹Hudson, Charles. *History of the Town of Lexington Middlesex County Massachusetts from Its Settlement to 1868, Revised and Continued to 1912*, by the Lexington Historical Society, in Two Volumes, Volume II – Genealogies. Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913, p. 508.
- ²²Parker, p. 47. A “beetel” was a heavy hammering or ramming instrument usually made of wood and used to drive wedges or force down paving stones, and a “snath” is the shaft or handle of a scythe.
- ²³Parker, p. 46.
- ²⁴Fuhrer, Mary Babson, unpublished work entitled, “Reckoning with the Parkers: Three Generations of Artisan Trade in Colonial and Early Republican Lexington.”
- ²⁵Parker, p. 47.
- ²⁶Ibid., p. 79.
- ²⁷Ibid., p. 81.
- ²⁸Ibid., p. 80.
- ²⁹Hudson, Volume I, p. 428.
- ³⁰Parker, Elizabeth S., “John Parker,” in Lexington Historical Society *Proceedings* I (1866-89) p.47.
- ³¹Depositions of William Munroe, John Munroe, Ebenezer Munroe in Vincent Kehoe, compiler, manuscript copy of the two volume collection of documents entitled, “We Were There,” volume II, “The American Rebels,” pp. 240, 244, 246.
- ³²Account of Paul Revere in Kehoe, volume II, p. 187.
- ³³Deposition of Joseph Underwood and Robert Douglass, Kehoe, volume II, pp.249, 258. Sworn to by William Munroe in Report of the Committee on Historical Monuments and Tablets, 1884.
- ³⁴Deposition of John Robbins and Ebenezer Munroe in Kehoe, volume II, pp. 85, 244
- ³⁵If, as has been suggested, some of Parker’s men did take position to the west of the rocky hillside within the pasture, taking cover behind the boulders and within the drainage ditches, they might have been over the border in Lincoln, See Fischer, p. 410, footnotes 81 and 83.
- ³⁶The action at Parker’s Revenge is abstracted from Fischer, pp. 228-29 and Galvin, 178-84.
- ³⁷Kehoe, volume II, p.84.
- ³⁸Fischer, p. 400-401.
- ³⁹Hudson, volume I, pp. 424-5.

The Parker Family and Consumption

