

Elijah Sanderson
A Brief Biography
By Bill Poole

In the evening of April 18, 1775, young Solomon Brown was returning to his home in Lexington, from the city of Boston. He became aware of a group of riders who sometimes rode in front of him and sometimes behind, and he noticed that they were armed when their cloaks were blown aside by the wind.¹ He concluded that they were British soldiers, probably officers, and once in Lexington stopped by Munroe Tavern to tell of his encounter. William Munroe, proprietor of the tavern and sergeant in the Lexington Militia, immediately ordered a squad of militia to proceed to the parsonage of Lexington's Reverend Jonas Clarke to protect Patriot leaders John Hancock and Samuel Adams who were staying there.²

Solomon then hurried on to Lexington Center and Buckman's Tavern to retell his story. However, the British riders had preceded him and attracted the attention of a number of the citizens. Word spread rapidly in the small, close-knit community, and when Solomon reached Buckman's he found a number of the Lexington Militia already gathered there. Among them was twenty-three year old Elijah Sanderson, who in 1824 signed a sworn deposition concerning the events of April 18 and 19, 1775.³

"In the spring of 1775, I resided at Lexington, and had resided there more than a year. In the spring of that year, the officers of the British regular troops in Boston were frequently making excursions, in small parties, into the country, and often, in the early part of the day, in pleasant weather, passed through Lexington, and usually were seen returning before evening. I lived then on the main road, about three quarters of a mile east of the meeting-house.

On the evening of the 18th of April, 1775, we saw a party of officers pass up from Boston, all dressed in blue wrappers. The unusually late hour of their passing excited the attention of the citizens. I took my gun and cartridge box, and thinking something must be going on more than common, walked up to John Buckman's tavern, near the meeting-house. After some conversation among the citizens assembled there, an old gentleman advised, that some one should follow those officers, and endeavor to ascertain their object. I then observed that, if any one would let me have a horse, I would go in pursuit. Thaddeus Harrington told me, I might take his, which was there. I took his, and Solomon Brown proposed to accompany me on his own horse. Jonathan Loring also went with us. We started probably about nine o'clock; and we agreed, if we could find the officers, we would return to give information, as the fears were that their object was, to come back in the night, and seize Hancock and Adams, and carry them into Boston. It had been rumoured, that the British officers had threatened, that Hancock and Adams should not stay at Lexington. They had been boarding some time at Parson Clark's."

The three took off in pursuit of the British patrol, but when they got to Brook's Village in Lincoln, they were stopped "by nine British officers," who presented pistols and forced the three to dismount. They were then led into a field, questioned, and detained "till a quarter past two o'clock at night."

During our detention, they put many questions to us, which I evaded. They kept us separately, and treated us very civilly. They particularly inquired where Hancock and Adams were . . ."

In the meantime, Paul Revere and William Dawes had arrived at the parsonage to tell of a British expeditionary force bound for Concord to seize munitions there, and perhaps attempt to capture Hancock and Adams. Revere and Dawes then set off to warn Concord. They were joined by Doctor Samuel Prescott who had been calling upon Miss Lydia Mulliken in Lexington and was now headed home to Concord. Like the previous scouts, the three were halted by the British patrol. Revere was captured, Dawes managed to ride off a way before being unhorsed, and Samuel Prescott jumped his horse over a wall to ride to Concord and warn the citizens.

Elijah continued

“After they had taken Revere, they brought him within half a rod of me, and I heard him speak up with energy to them, ‘Gentlemen, you’ve missed your aim!’ One said rather hardly, ‘What of our aim?’ Revere replied, ‘I came out of Boston an hour after your troops had come out of Boston, and landed at Lechmere’s Point, and if I had not known people had been sent out to give information to the country, and time enough to get fifty miles, I would have ventured one shot from you before I would have suffered you to have stopped me.’

This appeared to have disconcerted the British, who ordered the captives to remount and led them back in the direction of Lexington.

“They kept us in the middle of the road, and rode on each side of us . . . They took all of us, (Revere, Loring, Brown, and myself.) My horse not being swift, and they riding at considerable speed, one of the officers pressed my horse forward by striking him with his hanger. When we had arrived within fifty or one hundred rods of the meeting-house, Loring (as he afterwards informed me) told them, ‘The bell’s a ringing the town’s alarmed, and your all dead men.’ They then stopped, conferred together. One then dismounted, and ordered me to dismount, and said to me, ‘I must do you an injury.’ I asked what he was going to do to me now? He made no reply, but with his hanger cut my bridle and girth, and then mounted, and they rode on in a good smart trot toward Boston. We then turned off to pass through the swamp, through the mud and water, intending to arrive at the meeting-house before they could pass. Just before they got to the meeting-house, they had halted, which led us to hope, we should get there first, but they soon started off again at full speed and we saw no more of them.

I went to the tavern. The citizens were coming and going; some went down to find out whether the British were coming; some came back, and said there was no truth in it. I went into the tavern, and, after a while, went to sleep in my chair by the fire.”

Elijah was probably still in his chair, when shortly afterward the drum beat and he ran to the Common “where the militia were parading.”

The captain ordered them to fall in. I then fell in. ‘Twas all in the utmost haste. I had no musket having sent it home, the night previous by my brother, before I started for Concord; and, reflecting I was of no use, I stepped out again from the company about

two rods, and was gazing at the British, coming on in full career. Several mounted British officers were forward; I think, five. The commander rode up with his pistol in his hand, on a canter, the others following, to about eight to ten rods from the company, perhaps, nearer, and ordered them to disperse. The words he used were harsh. I cannot remember them exactly. He then said, ‘Fire!’ and he fired his own pistol, and the other officers soon fired, and with that the main body came up and fired, but did not take sight. They loaded again as soon as possible. All was smoke when the foot fired. I heard no particular orders after what the commander first said. I looked, and, seeing nobody fall, thought to be sure they couldn’t be firing balls, and I didn’t move off. After our militia had dispersed, I saw them firing at one man, (Solomon Brown,) who was stationed behind a wall. I saw the wall smoke with the bullets hitting it. I then saw they were firing balls.

When the British troops marched off, Elijah went home to retrieve his musket, but found his brother was using it. He returned to the meeting-house “and saw to the dead.” “I assisted in carrying some of the dead into the meeting-house.”

“In the afternoon I saw the reinforcements come up under Lord Percy. I then had no musket, and retired to Estabrook’s Hill, whence I saw the reinforcements meet the troops retreating from Concord. When they met, they halted some time. After this, they set fire to Deacon Loring’s barn; then to his house; then to Widow Mulliken’s house; then to the shop of Nathaniel Mulliken, a watch and clock maker; and to the house and shop of Joshua Bond. All these were near the place where the reinforcements took refreshment. They hove fire into several other buildings. It was extinguished after their retreat.

During the day, the women and children had been so scattered and dispersed that most of them were out of the way when the reinforcement arrived.”

“ I now own the musket, which I then owned, and which my brother had that day, and told me he fired at the British with it.”

Elijah Sanderson”

Elijah served as a private in a detachment commanded by Captain John Parker with service for 5 days at Cambridge from May 6 to May 10, 1775 during the initial stage of the siege of Boston. He also served as a corporal in Captain John Bridge’s company of Colonel Eleazer Brook’s regiment at Roxbury, MA from March 4 to March 8, 1776. This duty was to fortify Dorchester Heights with the cannon brought from Fort Ticonderoga by then Colonel Henry Knox. This would force the British to evacuate Boston a week later on March 17, 1776. Previous to this, he had helped guard the cannon at Lexington, which was not acknowledged with payment until April 20, 1776.⁴

There is another entry for service as a private in Captain Charles Miles’s company, Colonel Jonathan Reed’s regiment for travel pay from Ticonderoga of 160 miles for service with the Northern Army. The listing was for an Elijah Sanderson from Concord, but this happened a number of times with men from Lexington being listed from Concord, so this might have been Elijah.⁵

Personal Details

You will find Elijah’s place of birth given variously as Watertown, Lexington, or Salem, MA because his family first settled in Watertown, he lived in Lexington for a time and eventually moved to Salem. However, he, along with his nine siblings, was actually born in Waltham, MA that had been set off as a separate town from Watertown in 1738. His parents were Jonathan Sanderson (1714-1780) and Mary Bemis (1722-1802) who married in Watertown on February 21, 1744/45. The Waltham, MA Vital Records contain the following entries for the ten children of Jonathan and Mary Bemis Sanderson: 1. Mary, born February 19, 1746; 2. Esther, born February 24, 1747; 3. Samuel, born September 8, 1748; 4. Sarah, born February 11, 1750; 5. **Elijah**, born October 10, 1751; 6. David, born November 19, 1753; 7. Nathan, born April 9, 1755; 8. **Jacob**, born October 20, 1757; 9. Jonathan, born March 31, 1760 and 10. Anna Born April 12, 1762.⁶

Elijah left a few clues in his deposition that allow for some conjecture as to his stay in Lexington. He stated that by the spring of 1775, he had resided in Lexington for more than a year which meant he had moved there perhaps sometime in late 1773. He also mentioned that he lived on the main road about three quarters of a mile east of the meeting-house. That would be today’s Massachusetts Avenue and three quarters of a mile would have been between the junction of Woburn Street and Munroe Tavern. He must have been boarding with someone, and since he mentioned living with his brother (most likely his younger brother, Jacob), the two may have been sharing a room.

There may be other clues as to where he might have been living and what he was doing. He moved to Salem, MA about 1780 and he and Jacob became the city’s most prominent cabinet makers.⁷ It is said that he did his

apprenticeship in Watertown, but given the errors concerning his place of birth that may have taken place in Waltham.⁸ On January 2, 1781 he married Mary Mulliken, daughter of Nathaniel Mulliken, a famous Lexington watch and clock maker.⁹

Mary Mulliken lived with her widowed mother, Lydia, and four brothers and two sisters in a home located across the road and not far from Munroe Tavern. Mary was born on December 4, 1757 and would have been about sixteen when Elijah first met her.¹⁰ Nearby was the clock shop, at the time run by Nathaniel Mulliken Jr. Perhaps, as cabinet makers or apprentice cabinet makers, Elijah and Jacob might have been associated in some way with Nathaniel Mulliken Jr., maybe constructing the wooden cabinets in which the clock works were installed.

On April 19th, the Mulliken home and clock shop were first looted and then burned. The family was forced to move down the road to the old Raymond Tavern before building a new home across the street. Elijah and Jacob might have helped out at this time of almost overwhelming distress for the Mulliken family. To compound the pain, Nathaniel Jr. died the next winter on February 6, 1776 at just age twenty-four. A brother, John, who was a cabinet maker, established a shop “nearly across from his brother’s shop where he made the cases for the clocks.¹¹ Elijah and Jacob may have worked with him or enhanced their craft under John’s tutelage. Following Elijah and Jacob’s move to Salem about 1780 and the establishment of a thriving cabinetry business there, Elijah was able to marry Mary Mulliken, with whom he had fallen in love perhaps when she was just a teenager.

The success of Elijah and Jacob’s cabinetry business is suggested by the variety of items manufactured in their workshop where they employed a large number of craftsmen and apprentices.

Kinds of furniture sold by the Sandersons including but not limited to:

Bedsteads, bookcases, bureaus, candle stands, card tables, coffins, commode bureaus, cradles, curtain rods, chairs, bamboo chairs (gold leaf), back chairs; flag bottom chairs with rockers, easy chairs, chair stools, desks (walnut, mahogany, cherry, etc.), dining tables, night tables and washstands, pine tabletops, sideboards.¹²

They produced not only for the local market, but also exported their furniture to several southern states, the Caribbean and South America. Some of the destinations of their products were:

Baltimore; Georgia; New Orleans; North Carolina; South Carolina; Virginia; East Indies; West Indies; Surinam; Batavia, Dutch East Indies; River De Plate, Uruguay; South America, Havana, Cuba; Matanzas, Cuba; Brazil; and Tunis, Tunisia.¹³

Thomas Hamilton Ormsbee, in an article written for *Collector’s Weekly*, discussed the similarities of design in Salem furniture of the early 1800’s

A careful study of them all shows characteristics typical of Salem provenance and these are repeated so consistently as to raise the question of who was the guiding genius in this town. Who dictated style and design and made both so individual that Salem pieces can readily be distinguished from those made at the same period in other Massachusetts towns where cabinetmaking was one of the important occupations?

The answer is the firm of Elijah & Jacob Sanderson. It was a very important shipper of Salem furniture both in the coastwise and foreign trades. This partnership consisted of three men — Elijah and Jacob Sanderson and their partner, Josiah Austin. All were cabinetmakers by trade. What could be more natural than that the other Salem cabinetmakers, from whom this firm is known to have bought liberally for export, should have conformed to styles and designs that the partners liked and knew they could sell profitably in distant ports?

In short, Salem furniture of the Hepplewhite and Sheraton periods has recognizable characteristics because it was made to suit the taste of Elijah & Jacob Sanderson.¹⁴

Elijah frequently traveled on board the ships carrying his and other furniture maker's products as the supercargo, responsible for overseeing the cargo and its sale.¹⁵

Elijah and Mary had five children: 1. Mary (Polly?); 2. Eliza; 3. Sally; 4. John and 5. Lydia.

Elijah died of pneumonia in Salem on February 13, 1825 at age 73. Mary died in Salem on October 23, 1843 at age 86. Her cause of death was stated as "dropsy," which is oedema or swelling that is frequently associated with heart or liver failure. Elijah's estate was valued at \$5,321.59.¹⁶

It is intriguing how persistently the name Lydia occurred within the Sanderson-Mulliken family. Nathaniel Mulliken Sr. married Lydia Stone; his son, John, Married Lydia Hagar; their son Nathaniel married Lydia Sanderson, daughter of Elijah and Mary; and he and Lydia had a child Lydia.¹⁷

Footnotes

¹ Phinney, Elias, *History of the Battle at Lexington on the Morning of 19th April, 1775*, Boston, Printed by Phelps and Farnham, 1825, pp. 35-36; *also*, Vincent J.R. Kehoe, "We Were There April 19, 1775 The American Rebels," Self-Published, January 1, 1975, Deposition of William Munroe, March 7, 1825, p. 237.

²*Ibid.*

³Phinney, Deposition of Elijah Sanderson, pp. 31-33; Kehoe, pp. 233-236.

⁴ *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 13, p. 791.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶*Vital Records of Waltham, MA to the End of the Year 1850*, Births, at <https://ma-vitalrecords.org/MA/Middlesex/Waltham/aBirthsS.shtml>

⁷"Elijah and Jacob Sanderson Papers, 1780-1827," Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Rowley, MA.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Proceedings of the Lexington Historical Society and Papers Relating to the History of the Town Presented at some of Its Meetings*, Volume III, Lexington, Massachusetts, Published by the Lexington Historical Society, 1905, "Clock-Making in Lexington," read by Miss Elizabeth W. Harrington, February 10, 1903, pp. 134-137; Charles Hudson, *History of the Town of Lexington, Middlesex County, Massachusetts from Its First Settlement to 1868, Revised and Continued to 1912*, Two Volumes, Lexington Historical Society, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston and New York, 1913, Volume II, *Genealogies*, p. 443; *Vital Records of Lexington, MA to the End of the Year 1897*, Births, at <https://ma-vitalrecords.org/MA/Middlesex/Lexington/births>.

¹⁰Hudson, p. 443; *Lexington Vital Records*, Marriages.

¹¹Harrington, Elizabeth, "Clock-Making in Lexington," *op. cit.* p. 135-136.

¹²"Elijah and Jacob Sanderson Papers, *op. cit.*

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Ormsbee, Thomas Hamilton, "Flashback: The Sandersons and Salem Furniture," *Collectors Weekly*, March 28, 2009.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Vital Records of Salem, MA; Essex County Probate Records 1638-1831*, Volume Cases 24000-25999, pages 24567.1-17

¹⁷*Vital Records of Salem, MA; Vital Records of Lexington, MA.*