

Lt. Silvanus Wood (1749-1840), Captor of a Grenadier

When Silvanus Wood shook President Andrew Jackson's hand in the White House, it was as if the first battle of the Revolutionary War were meeting the last battle of the War of 1812. That grand way of looking at the occasion, according to one observer, fit with Silvanus' confident, spirited personality.^{1,2} He was adamant that capturing the first prisoner of the revolution was worthy of a pension, and by gum (and by special act of Congress) he was going to get one. Others could have justifiably laid claim to the first prisoner, but they hadn't been crowing about it, nor did they have the ear of the esteemed U.S. Representative Edward Everett.³

In 1775, Silvanus was a shoemaker living in Woburn near today's Four Corners, close enough to Lexington to hear its meetinghouse bell ring an alarm.^{4,5} Responding on the morning of April 19th, Silvanus and his young friend Robert Douglass readily accepted Captain John Parker's request to 'parade' with the Lexington militia. He soon stood near the center of the militia on the common. When the British soldiers arrived, Silvanus and most of the militia dispersed from the field under Parker's orders. ... In the battle's aftermath, Silvanus set out in pursuit of the British regulars, and experienced the defining moment of his legacy:

I then proceeded to Concord with my gun, and when I came near the tavern in Lexington, now kept by Mr. Viles, I saw a British soldier seated on the bank by the road. I went to him with my gun in readiness to fire, if he should offer to resist. I took his gun, cutlass, and equipments from him...I believe that the soldier who surrendered his gun to me was the first prisoner taken by the Americans that day.⁶

This account, the first printed version of his story, was published in 1826, fifty one years after the fact. The tavern near the capture site—which Silvanus identified as Mr. Viles—in 1775 was the Bull tavern and was located in westmost Lexington just beyond the bluff that stands between Fiske Hill and today's Minute Man Park visitor center. The British soldier was a well armed grenadier, from whom Wood took: a gun, bayonet, cutlass, 22-round shoulder cartridge box, and 18-round waist box.^{7,8} Silvanus marched the prisoner toward Lexington and met Ebenezer Lock and Elkanah Welch, who then took custody. His career as a soldier having started auspiciously, Silvanus turned again for Concord.⁹

By the time Silvanus received his pension in 1830, he had lived a full life of soldiering, shoemaking, farming, and raising a family.

Silvanus was born in Woburn on 27 January 1749 to John and Esther (Johnson) Wood, the seventh of eight children. He was fatherless at age three.¹⁰ Older brother John evidently became a strong influence: His brother was a shoemaker, and so was Silvanus. His brother commanded a company in the army, and Silvanus served under him. His brother married Dorcas Smith of Lexington, and Silvanus? He married her niece.^{11,12,13}

During the siege of Boston, Silvanus was a sergeant in Capt. John Wood's company serving under Col. Samuel Gerrish, and after Gerrish was cashiered, Loammi Baldwin. In 1776, he was promoted to ensign, marched to New York, evacuated from Long Island, and was wounded in the left shoulder at the battle of Pell's Point while reconnoitering with Col. Baldwin. He was promoted to lieutenant under new colonel James Wesson in 1777, but under familial pressure soon "concluded to leave thee army but with great reluctance."¹⁴

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After a disappointing enterprise of providing shoes to the army, Silvanus settled on forty acres of land in Woburn, where his routine was to farm in the afternoon after making in the forenoon a pair of “plough-joggars.”^{15,16} He married Abigail Smith in 1778, but she may have died soon after, for in 1784 he married Deborah Bruce. Silvanus and Deborah’s children were: Benjamin, Mary (Polly), Josiah, Silvanus, and Sally.¹⁷

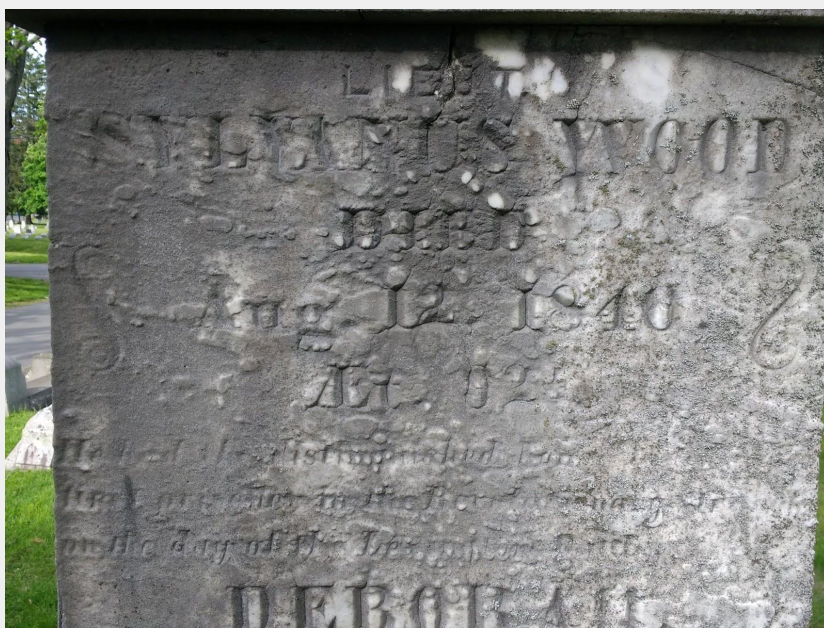
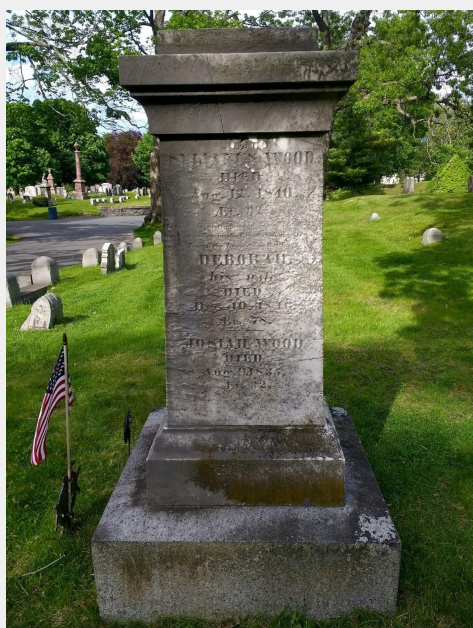
The physical toll of farm life caught up with Silvanus. In his 1828 pension application he complained:

*My lifting logs of wood, berrils of sider has caused a breech of body, which all physicians on earth cannot make me whole. this infernity I have bin troubled with about 15 years, and now I am not able to do any thing by reason of the breech...I am worth nothing but what has ben drawn, from my fingers ends.*¹⁸

In this same pension narrative, in retelling the story of the capture, the redcoat’s posture has significantly shifted: from “seated on the bank by the road” to “standing sentinel.” The pension was issued on 28 July 1830.¹⁹

Silvanus died in Woburn on 12 August 1840.²⁰ Deborah received a Revolutionary War widow’s pension until her death on 10 December 1846.²¹ Of his many descendants, posterity is particularly indebted to Silvanus Jr., who confirmed to Woburn historian Samuel Sewall, that on April 19th, 1775, his father Silvanus had captured a British soldier whom he had seen, as Sewall put it, “turn aside from the ranks upon some necessary occasion.”²²

It appears Silvanus had a predominantly truthful story that he recrafted to suit each audience.²³ Were he here today, he just might tell a version that emphasized whatever elements he believed we’d want to hear.



(Photos from Woodbrook Cemetery, Woburn, Mass. © 2019 Chris Hurley. All rights reserved.)

Notes and Bibliography Follow

** Notes **

1. Some spell Mr. Wood's first name with a 'y.' He used an 'i,' as does the King James Bible.
2. Edward Everett's diary gives the date of the meeting as 23 December 1829. Everett's *Mount Vernon Papers* [no. 47] describes the Presidential meeting. Everett devoted three pages to his memories of Silvanus Wood, presenting him as quite a lively character, everready to tell his story. The Journal of the U.S. House of Representatives shows that Rep. Everett (re)submitted Silvanus' pension petition two days before the presidential meeting. (It seems Wood was in Washington in part as his own lobbyist.) His petition and others were bundled into a bill signed by Pres. Jackson, becoming the Pension Act of 20 May 1830. In July, Everett requested to personally deliver the certificate to Wood [Pension file W19657 image 43] and received it from the Pension Office on 05 August 1830.
3. Historian John L. Bell has identified a number of straggling British soldiers who were taken prisoner soon after the battle. One late nineteenth century tale in A. E. Brown's book [p. 34] has Joshua Simmonds taking the first prisoner right after the British army left Lexington for Concord. Some prisoners were very likely taken during the time Silvanus was busy with: 1) visiting Jonas Clark; 2) carrying the battle's dead into the meetinghouse; and 3) travelling west on the Concord road [Pension 17].
4. Being a shoemaker and hearing Lexington's meetinghouse bell ring the alarm are consistent elements in Wood's various retellings of his activities on April 19th, 1775.
5. Wood's 1826 affidavit in Ezra Ripley's book [p. 53] has him living at Obadiah Kendall's. Kendall land deeds place that location near Four Corners (Cambridge Rd, Lexington St., and Russell St.)
6. The quotation, and details in the preceding paragraph, are taken from Wood's 1826 affidavit.
7. Pension 10, for the list of armaments. Also listed is a brass "fender," by 1775 an outdated ornament from the days when grenadiers actually threw grenades and kept a lit 'slow match' inside the fender to light fuses.
8. Historian Steven M. Baule identifies the grenadier as Samuel Lee, a hard-of-hearing regimental tailor. After his capture, Lee married a local woman and settled in Concord Mass.
9. Pension 17.
10. Woburn Vital Records. The father's 1752 will [Middlesex probate #25463] indicates his declining health.
11. Older brother John was described as a cordwainer (shoemaker) in his father's probate papers in 1770.
12. Silvanus and John Wood are listed among Col. Loammi Baldwin's officers on 08 January 1776.
13. Hudson's Lexington genealogy of the Smiths shows the aunt/niece relationship and marriages.
14. Baldwin led the regiment as a Lt. Col. until promotion in 1776. Wood's career in the military is narrated in his pension file and documented by Commonwealth of Massachusetts Records. Baldwin wrote to his wife [23 October 1776] and mentioned how Ensign Wood obtained his wound. Wood wrote in pension statements that his parents convinced him to leave the army [Pension 9, 14, 33], which indicates that perhaps his mother had remarried or that he was adopted.
15. Wood's pension narrative has him claiming that payments in "depreciated paper" made his army shoe contract unprofitable [Pension 14]. The farm purchase is mentioned in the pension [Pension 9]. By context, 'plough-joggars' appear to be leg or foot wear for farmers.
16. The forty acre farm purchase is corroborated in Middlesex County deed records [22 Feb 1777]. The deed indices show Wood became a very active buyer and seller of land.
17. Births and Sally's marriage to Joseph Steel are in Woburn Vital Records. Polly's marriage intention to James Pierce is in Massachusetts Town Clerk Vital and Town Records [25 Mar 1813.]
18. Pension 9.
19. Pension 10, 3.
20. Woburn Vital Records. The heirs fell out over missing promissory notes [probate #45097].
21. The pension file shows the bureaucratic hoops widows had to jump through. Deborah's pension, based only on his service, was \$175/year [Pension 2], down a bit from Silvanus' special \$240/year [Pension 3].
22. Sewall's History of Woburn [p. 363] includes this generation-to-generation oral tradition.
23. To square the three versions of the capture, imagine Wood, from the vicinity of Fiske Hill in Lexington observing a soldier in the distance who is not in the ranks with others. The soldier looks left and right (the pension version of 'standing sentinel'). Wood advances quickly and sees the soldier is then distracted by more pressing matters (Sewall's oral history version). By the time Wood reaches the soldier, it can fairly be said in a book written for the general public that the soldier was seated by the road (1826 affidavit version).

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