

NATHANIEL FARMER CORDWAINER

Researched and written by James Lee

In 1775 Nathaniel Farmer lived in Lexington, Massachusetts, and was enlisted in Captain John Parker's militia. He was present on Lexington Common on April 19, 1775, and was wounded during the encounter with the King's troops.

Nathaniel Farmer was born to John Farmer, Jr. and Hannah Wood Farmer in Billerica, Mass. on January 29, 1726. His father's grandfather, Edward Farmer had come to the American colonies as early as 1672 and settled in Billerica with his wife Mary.¹

The earliest public record indicating that Nathaniel Farmer was living in Lexington is a deed dated August 6, 1748, which transferred 29 and 3/4 acres of land in Groton owned by Farmer to Patrick White.² That deed noted that Nathaniel was a cordwainer living in the town of Lexington. In 1748 he also paid poll taxes and personal taxes in Lexington, but did not pay taxes on real estate.³ Farmer's residence and work place at that time is not known.

Charles Hudson's "History of the Town of Lexington" indicate that Nathaniel Farmer was married at least three times.⁴ He was first married to Ruth Fiske in Bedford, Mass. on September 20, 1751. Nathaniel and Ruth Farmer apparently lived in Lexington at the time, but two years into the marriage Ruth suffered an untimely death in July 1753. Hudson recorded that Nathaniel was secondly married to Nabby (maiden name unknown), who died in August 1754. His third marriage was more successful and fruitful. He was married to Hannah Fessenden daughter of Thomas and Hannah (Prentice) Fessenden of Lexington, which further established his ties to Lexington.

The State of Massachusetts Middlesex County Land Records recorded that Nathaniel Farmer first purchased land in Lexington on the 19th of November 1754. The deed granted Farmer two parcels of land in Lexington containing a total three and a half acres of land with a house and barn. The deed reads in part:

1 Charles Hudson, *Genealogical Register of Lexington Families from the First Settlement of the Town*. (Boston, MA: Wiggin & Lunt, Publishers, 1868) 65.

2 State of Massachusetts, Middlesex County Registry of Deeds, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Book 49, Page 515-516.

3 Town of Lexington, Massachusetts Tax Records, 1729-1818; electronic copies from the Lexington Minute Men.

4 Charles Hudson, *History of the Town of Lexington, Middlesex County Massachusetts*. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913) 198.

...I Benjamin Wheeler with Lucy my wife of Concord in the County of Middlesex in the Province of Massachusetts Bay in New England, Yeoman, For and in consideration of one hundred and six pounds, thirteen shillings, and four pence lawful money of New England to me in hand well and truly paid by Nathaniel Farmer of Lexington in the County of Middlesex in said Province, Cordwainer... convey and confirm to said Nathaniel Farmer a certain Messuage⁵ lying in Lexington aforesaid containing one Mansion house and Barn and two acres and an half of land more or less bounded Southwesterly by Concord Road, westerly by Samuel Fessenden, northeasterly and easterly by James Robinson, also one acre of land more or less lying in Lexington aforesaid on the South side of Concord Road bounded easterly by the road to Watertown, westerly by Thomas Fessenden & Samuel Winship, Southerly by Richard Winship. To have and to hold said parcels of land with all the fences edifices and all of the profits privileges and conveniences to the same belonging to him the said Nathaniel Farmer...⁶

The deed was signed by Benjamin and Lucy Wheeler on November 19, 1754, witnessed on November 21, 1754, and recorded May 12, 1755. Tax records after that date show that Nathaniel Farmer was paying poll, personal, and real estate taxes in the town of Lexington.

Having established a legal residence in Lexington, Nathaniel Farmer married Hannah Fessenden on May 20, 1755 in Arlington, Mass.⁷ The two parcels of land as described in the deed indicate that the Farmers lived on Concord Road in Lexington, and had one acre on the corner of Concord Road and Watertown Street (present day Massachusetts Ave. and Waltham Street). Since Nathaniel's trade as a cordwainer is referenced in several records, it seems likely that he had a shop near the center of Lexington. In the eighteenth century, and indeed since the beginning of the trade, a cordwainer was a shoemaker who made new shoes from new leather. The cordwainer's trade can be contrasted with the cobbler's trade, according to a tradition in Britain that restricted cobblers to repairing shoes. The presence of a shop is also documented in a subsequent deed in which Nathaniel Farmer describes the same property he bought from Wheeler as having "one Mansion House & Barn & Shop."⁸ Farmer had apparently added the shop, or at least added it to the description of the property, and he also reserved for himself "the large window

5 Messuage: a dwelling house with the adjacent buildings and curtilage and other adjoining lands used in connection with the household (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/messuage>).

6 Middlesex County Registry of Deeds, Book 53, Page 153-154.

7 Hudson, *History of the Town of Lexington*, 198.

8 Middlesex County Registry of Deeds, Book 84, Page 53-54.



Eighteenth century shoemaker's shop showing a cordwainer and his apprentices. The cordwainer's products are shown in the shop window. Nathaniel Farmer would have established a similar shop in Lexington center. (accessed 08/16/2019, <http://www.revolutionarywarjournal.com/cordwainers/>)

in the front of my shop..."⁹ In addition, he claimed for damage done to his "house and shop windows" by British troops on April 19, 1775 (see below). All of which supports the existence of the cordwainer shop of Nathaniel Farmer in the center of Lexington at that time.

Nathaniel Farmer's Lexington tax assessment in 1775 was limited to 1 poll and 1 cow.¹⁰ He did not own any other livestock, but continued to pay taxes on his personal and real estate. As a cordwainer, he would not necessarily have owned livestock and probably relied on barter and markets to provide for his growing family.

While residing in Lexington, Nathaniel and Hannah Farmer had nine children. Their births were recorded in Hudson's History of Lexington:¹¹

- i. John, born July 18, 1757; married Lucy Reed of Cambridge on March 27, 1783, and served as a soldier in the American Revolution.
- ii. Hannah, born January 28, 1760; married Jacob Kilburn of Lancaster on May 6, 1777.
- iii. Isaac, born October 8, 1762; died April 7, 1779.
- iv. Ruth, born August 15, 1765.
- v. Abigail, born November 6, 1768.

9 Ibid.

10 Town of Lexington, Massachusetts Tax Records, 1729-1818.

11 Hudson, *Genealogical Register of Lexington Families*, 65.

- vi. Sally and Rebecca (twins), born December 19, 1771.
- vii. Thomas Shattuck, baptized September 10, 1775.
- viii. Isaac, born December 31, 1778, baptized June 27, 1779.

Records show that Nathaniel, Hannah, and their family were members of the First Parish Church of Lexington, and many of their children were baptized there. The presence of Farmer's shop in the center of town further indicates that he was an active craftsman in Lexington. Beyond his service in the Lexington militia, there were no other records found of his involvement in town politics or activities.

On the night of April 18th 1775, Nathaniel Farmer being a member of Capt. John Parker's militia, would have answered the alarm of the belfry and gathered with fellow militia men on Lexington's common or perhaps at the Buckman Tavern. Since he lived near the center of town, he most likely returned to his home after the initial alarm, and would have promptly responded when the alarm was again sounded on the morning of April 19th 1775. When confronted by the British Regular Army, Nathaniel Farmer stood firm with the rest of the Lexington militia awaiting Captain Parker's orders to engage or quit the field. Having stood his ground, Nathaniel was wounded in his right arm when the Regulars fired upon the militia. Since he was wounded, that might indicate that he was in the front line of the Lexington formation, but his exact position on the common is not known.

Nathaniel Farmer did not give a deposition on the events of April 19, 1775. However, accounts of the day including broadsides announcing "A Bloody Butchery by the British Troops," and the sermon of the Reverend Jonas Clark, confirm that Nathaniel Farmer was among the wounded on April 19th. A year later Farmer filed a petition to recover some of his costs associated with his wound.

Petition of Nathaniel Farmer of Lexington in the County of Middlesex, Cordwainer, humbly sheweth, that on the morning of the 19th of April last, (he being one of the Minute-Men) was fired upon by the Ministerial troops at Lexington, and was wounded in his right arm, which fractured the bone to that degree that sundry pieces of the same have been taken out, by which means your petitioner hath suffered much pain as well as loss of time, and charge to the doctors, whose bills are herewith presented, and, in fine, is totally disabled from carrying on his business, by which he chiefly supported himself and family; wherefore he prays your Honours would take his distressed case under your wise consideration, and grant him such relief as in your wisdom shall seem meet; and your petitioner, as in duty bound, shall ever pray.

In the House of Representatives: Resolved, that there be paid out of the Publick Treasury of this Colony, to Deacon Stone, for the use of Nathaniel Farmer, the sum of thirteen Pounds fifteen shillings, in full, for his doctoring, nursing, and loss of time, while confined with his wounds.

In Council: Read, and concurred.¹²

In addition to his wounded arm, Nathaniel Farmer also suffered damage to his property by the British Troops. Since his property was located along the main thoroughfare in Lexington, it sustained damage during the “wanton destruction of property” by the King’s troops.¹³ In his case that amounted to £46.10s of the estimated £1,761.2s.3d. in property damage by the troops on April 19, 1775.¹⁴ The items Farmer claimed were listed as such:

To the wearing apparel of my family, consisting of seven persons, together with my bedding	£26 0 0
To the furniture of three rooms, much damaged and carried off	16 0 0
To damage done to my house and shop windows,	<u>4 10 0</u>
	£46 10 0 ¹⁵

Nathaniel Farmer probably returned to his trade once his wound had healed, and his property was repaired. How active he was as a cordwainer after April 19th 1775 is hard to know, but records continued to refer to him by that trade. Lexington town records indicate that he paid taxes through 1779, but he was not on the tax rolls in subsequent years. Nathaniel Farmer most likely supported the war effort by supplying shoes for soldiers from Lexington. On March 10, 1778 the town of Lexington “passed the following vote: ‘That our brethren of this town in the Continental army be forthwith supplied, each of them, with one good pair of shoes, made of neat’s leather, one good pair of stockings, and a good shirt made of cotton and linen, to be given to them free of charge, and paid for by the town.’”¹⁶ In his trade as a cordwainer, Farmer would have benefitted from the towns decree, and was most likely supplying at least some of the shoes for the Continental soldiers from Lexington.

12 Petition of Nathaniel Farmer, *Acts and Resolves of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay, Volume XIX* (Boston, MA: Wright & Potter Printing Co., 1918) 165-66.

13 Hudson, *History of the Town of Lexington*, 202.

14 Ibid.

15 *The Journals of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts in 1774 and 1775* (Boston, MA: Dutton and Wentworth, Printers, 1838) 688; accessed 11/7/2019, <https://archive.org/details/journalsofeachprma00mass/page/688>.

16 Hudson, *History of the Town of Lexington*, 261.

In February of 1782 Nathaniel Farmer sold his property in Lexington to Samuel Bemis. The deed records the same parcels of land Farmer purchased from Wheeler in 1755 with minor changes. The property is described as “a certain Messuage or tenement lying in Lexington and containing one Mansion House & Barn & Shop & two acres & a Half of land...to have and to hold said pieces or parcels of land with the buildings there on. Excepting I reserve to myself the large window in the front of my shop...” signed by Nathaniel and Hannah Farmer February 25, 1782; recorded March 20, 1782.¹⁷

As previously discussed, the addition of the shop and Farmer’s intention to reserve the use of the large front window, suggest that he continued to practice his trade in Lexington. In the 1782 deed and later deeds and records, Nathaniel Farmer continues to be referred to by his trade as a cordwainer.

Hudson’s history noted that Nathaniel Farmer died in 1778. However, there is no record of his death, no grave in Lexington, and the 1782 deed clearly suggests that he was alive and well in that year. The history of Nathaniel Farmer’s life becomes more speculative at this point, but the vital records for Massachusetts indicate that he had moved from Lexington to Littleton, where he spent the rest of his life.

According to the records of the First Parish Church of Lexington, Hannah (Fessenden) Farmer, wife of Nathaniel died on December 30, 1782.¹⁸ The vital records for Littleton, Massachusetts indicate that Nathaniel Farmer of Lexington married Hannah Stone of Littleton on March 7, 1786.¹⁹ Thus Hannah Stone became Nathaniel Farmer’s fourth wife.

While the evidence that Nathaniel married a second woman named Hannah may be confusing, records do show that these were two different women. Firstly, their maiden names are recorded in the vital records as Hannah Fessenden and Hannah Stone. Secondly, Hannah Fessenden was born in 1736, whereas when Hannah Stone Farmer died in 1794 her age was recorded as 70, indicating she was born in 1724. It appears that Nathaniel Farmer and his fourth wife, Hannah Stone Farmer lived in Littleton, Massachusetts.

Massachusetts records further suggest that Nathaniel Farmer moved to Littleton around the time he married Hannah Stone. In March of 1791 Nathaniel and Hannah Farmer of Littleton, Massachusetts sold some additional property he owned in Lexington to Thomas Fessenden. That

17 Middlesex County Registry of Deeds, Book 84, Page 53-54.

18 Hudson, *History of the Town of Lexington*, 198; First Parish Church of Lexington Record Book, Lexington Historical Society Archives, accessed 1/18/2019; <https://www.lexingtonhistory.orgfirst-congregational-society-of-lexington-record-book-1696-1845.html>.

19 *Records of Littleton, Massachusetts, Births and Deaths* (Littleton, MA: 1900) 159; accessed 08/24/2019, [archive.org](https://archive.org/details/recordslittleto00smitgoog_0240); https://archive.org/details/recordslittleto00smitgoog_0240.

deed showed that by 1791 Farmer was living in Littleton with his then wife Hannah Stone Farmer, and still plying his trade as a cordwainer.²⁰

Vital records for the town of Littleton record that Hannah (Stone) Farmer died on August 26, 1794.²¹ The records also show that Nathaniel was remarried to Abigail Blodget on May 15, 1795, which would have been his fifth marriage.²² Again, there was some question as to whether this was indeed Nathaniel Farmer formerly of Lexington. However, historical records appear to confirm that he was one-in-the-same. In addition to the land records, Nathaniel's last will and testament, and probate document that he had moved from Lexington to Littleton.

Nathaniel Farmer died in Littleton on April 18, 1802 at the age of 78.²³ In his will he bequeaths a third of his estate to his then wife Abigail.²⁴ He also made bequests to his children John, Hannah, Ruth, Abigail, Sally, Isaac and Thomas all of whom were listed in vital records as being the offspring of Nathaniel and Hannah Fessenden Farmer of Lexington.

Thomas Farmer was the executor of his father's estate and witnessed the probate records. Nathaniel's inventory of personal goods includes a number of common items. His clothing items included: coat & waist coat; pair of small clothes; a hat; sundry coats, waist coats, & stockings; shirts; knee britches; and shoe buckles. Among other items were "Shoe makers seat & tools," which again seems to confirm that he had been a cordwainer. The final tally of Nathaniel Farmer's inventory including a house, land, a wood lot and some livestock was £751.92s.

Nathaniel Farmer's will and probate including the names of his heirs leave no doubt that this was the same Nathaniel Farmer who served in Captain Parker's militia on Lexington Common on April 19th 1775. Having lived in Lexington practicing his craft as a cordwainer before and during the Revolutionary War, he moved to Littleton, Massachusetts where he resided until his death in 1802.

20 Middlesex County Registry of Deeds, Book 105, Page 380.

21 *Records of Littleton, Massachusetts, Births and Deaths* (Littleton, MA: 1900) 159; accessed 08/24/2019, archives.org; https://archive.org/details/recordslittleto00smitgoog_0170.

22 Ibid. accessed 08/24/2019; https://archive.org/details/recordslittleto00smitgoog_0287.

23 *Records of Littleton, Massachusetts, Births and Deaths* (Littleton, MA: 1900) 159; accessed 08/24/2019, archives.org; https://archive.org/details/recordslittleto00smitgoog_0170.

24 Massachusetts, Middlesex County Probate Records, No. 7201, Nathaniel Farmer, 1802; Last will and testament, April 15, 1802; Probate of Wills, June 8, 1802; Inventory of the Real & Personal Estate of Nathaniel Farmer late of Littleton in the County of Middlesex, August 26, 1802.