

DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW ENGLAND COLONIAL
MILITIA: 1620 - 1675

by

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I INTRODUCTION

Many Americans still cling to the notion that the citizen soldier is part of the heritage of the Revolutionary War. The origina of this concept, however, lie much deeper in the past. The first colonists recognized the need for self-defense and organized an armed militia upon their arrival. All able-bodied men were required to be armed, trained, and prepared, if called upon, to defend their community. As new towns were formed, each created its own militia unit for local defense.

The early colonists could not afford the luxury of a separate standing army, however small, to provide for their defense. The harsh New England conditions required every person to be employed fully in useful labor if the colony were to survive. For the colonists, the militia system, with its roots in their English heritage, answered their immediate need for protection. Starting from small, hastily formed companies organized for local defense, the militia system grew with the expanding colonies. By the start of King Philip's War, in 1675, it had become firmly established in the colonial social organization. The loosely organized and disciplined system, however, contained basic weaknesses which would become apparent only when called upon to repel a determined opponent.

The New England colonists arrived in the New World well prepared to defend themselves. They were aware of the dangers of Indian attacks through books written by early North American explorers, and could, in addition, expect possible interference from other Europeans contesting their right to settle in New England.¹ Prior to departure, the colonists purchased weapons and military supplies, and insured that all prospective settlers who owned personal weapons brought them along.² In addition, the colonial leaders hired experienced soldiers who could provide military training and organize a system of defense to accompany them. Upon arrival, colonial leaders immediately decreed that all able-bodied men would be required to perform military service in defense of the settlement.³ As a result of sound planning, the colonies quickly established a workable system for their protection.

The colonists never questioned this obligation to defend themselves. Henry II's Assize of Arms, published in 1181, required all able-bodied freemen to have weapons in their possession and be trained in their use. Modified and expanded by the Statute of Westminster (1285) and the Instructions for General Muster (1572), the concept that freemen were obligated to defend their homes was a part of the English heritage of the first colonists.⁴ In America, with no other means of protection, the militia

system seemed admirably suited to colonial defense needs. It provided a trained body of armed men who could be rapidly assembled when danger arose, yet who would not provide an economic drain on the colony. The militia system which developed was intended for local defense, in response to an immediate threat, rather than to conduct large scale active operations.

II. ORGANIZATION & TRAINING

In Plymouth Colony, the colonial militia initially consisted of a single company, commanded by Miles Standish. With the majority of settlers located in Plymouth village itself, or close enough to be able to quickly get within its fortifications, a single large militia company provided adequate protection. Formal drill was held six times a year and was designed primarily to insure that each man still had his weapon and was familiar with its use. Naturally, the numerous alarms and dangers which caused the militia to be assembled hastily provided additional training. Eventually the militia was reorganized into four companies, each with its own militia captain, while Standish retained overall control. He could now establish a more flexible defense by assigning different missions to each company. As an example, one company was assigned to act as fireguard within the town. If a fire should occur, its duties were to surround the area, gun in

hand, to prevent Indians from taking advantage of the confusion.⁵

The establishment of new towns some distance from Plymouth village forced the colony to adopt a new militia organization. Under the earlier system, Plymouth remained the center of all defense, and the militia companies assembled there. The new system implemented in 1632, extended the militia program throughout the colony by requiring each new town to raise a militia company and conduct training. Overall command of the companies remained in Plymouth under authority of the General Court. The new companies trained and functioned independently of one another. They selected their own officers, subject to approval from Plymouth, and decided dates for their training days. By 1633, laws required each adult male to possess a musket and ten pounds of lead, thus insuring that the new militia companies would have a pool of armed men on which to draw.

When the Puritans established the Massachusetts Bay Colony, they, too, immediately organized a militia system. In 1631, the Massachusetts General Court required each town to raise a militia company and to insure that all persons between the age of 16 and 60, whether freeman or servant, possessed weapons and attended training. Men who did not already own arms or who were unable to afford them were advanced the required purchase sum by the town

with the stipulation that it would be repaid within the year. Militia companies were directed to conduct training every Saturday, a difficult and demanding requirement.⁶ By late 1637, as the immediate Indian danger faded after the Pequot War, training was reduced to eight days a year.⁷

The militia companies established by Massachusetts Bay numbered between 65 and 200 men. When a single town could not provide the full 65 men, several towns banded together to form one company. Towns with more than 200 men formed several companies. Each company was commanded by a captain with a lieutenant and an ensign as assistants, and several sergeants and corporals as non-commissioned officers.⁸ A company clerk kept the company roster and records. Records indicated that at least one or two musicians were also included to help keep the company in step.

The Bay Colony, expanding more rapidly than Plymouth, soon found that the existing loose militia command system was too unwieldy. As new towns were created, each raised its own militia company, which came under the direct control of the General Court in Boston. To simplify the command structure, the government reorganized its militia into regiments. The Act of 1636 created three regiments, the North, East, and Boston (or South) regiments, composed respectively of the militia companies from the town to the North of Boston, those to

the Northeast, and the towns immediately surrounding Boston itself. Each regiment was commanded by a colonel, who monitored the activities of all companies in his regiment and held a yearly regimental muster.⁹ Eventually the regimental system expanded to include all militia units within a particular county, and additional regiments were formed as new counties were created.

Plymouth Colony adopted the regimental system in 1658.¹⁰ Militia companies scattered across the colony were organized into a single regiment, commanded by a major whose headquarters was in Plymouth. Civilian control was exercised by the Council of War, a separate council within the colonial government.

Both colonies formed cavalry units within their militia structures. With their superior mobility the cavalry companies could quickly reinforce threatened areas, scout in advance of foot companies, and provide messenger service for the militia command. However, the cost of maintaining a horse and all the military hardware required of a cavalryman limited service to the wealthy. Another reason that the well-to-do joined the cavalry companies was to enjoy the privileges granted cavalrymen by the colonial government. In the hopes of encouraging enrollment, it exempted men who volunteered for cavalry duty from training with the foot companies, forbade their impressment for other service, and allowed certain tax

tax benefits.¹¹ The prohibitive cost forced Massachusetts Bay to restrict membership to persons whose private worth was over 100 pounds sterling.¹² Plymouth Colony, unable to keep its thirty-three man company filled in the face of general resistance to buying the equipment, eventually disbanded it.¹³

The colonists brought an assortment of artillery with them from Europe. Plymouth mounted several pieces atop the blockhouse which overlooked the town and harbor, but they were too small to do much damage to hostile European ships.¹⁴ However, the guns' noise and flash would serve to frighten attacking Indians. As the colony expanded, the artillery remained in Plymouth. Massachusetts Bay formed the Ancient and Honourable Artillery Company of Boston in 1638, but it was primarily a social organization, independent of the militia, whose membership was restricted to prominent townsmen from the Boston area.¹⁵ Some artillery was transported to the Connecticut River Valley when that area was settled, where it served to impress the local Indian tribes. One reason artillery never achieved importance in the militia organizations was the expense and amount of training necessary to field a well trained artillery unit. Expecting only an Indian threat, the colonists saw no need to develop such a specialized military unit.

While developing a workable militia system, the

colonists were also struggling with the difficult decision as to whom would be liable to serve in the militia. Each colony eventually passed laws exempting certain classes of people from militia duty. Public officials, clergymen, schoolteachers, physicians and surgeons, as well as Indians and Negroes who were not authorized to be armed, were excused from duty, but each was expected to contribute his services to the community during time of crisis. Individuals with medical problems, both mental and physical, which precluded them from performing the required duties were also exempt.¹⁶ On the other hand, wealthy landowners could buy their way out of militia service by providing new firearms, along with a supply of powder and lead for each weapon, to the town armory.¹⁷ Since the majority of these individuals were also included in exempt categories, this last means of escaping from militia duty was not frequently used.

Militia officers were elected by members of the militia company. Officers were usually prominent farmers or businessmen but, by law, could be any freeman of the community. The basis for choice was local popularity and respect, not military capability, since few had any formal military training or experience in Indian warfare. Men so elected were not likely to demand discipline and obedience from their unit which might cause their popularity to suffer. On the other hand, this system insured

that the brutal discipline then found in European armies would not exist in the colonies.¹⁸

Only freemen in the militia company were allowed to vote in elections of officers. This often posed serious problems since, in many units, the indentured servants and men who elected not to become freemen of the community outnumbered the freemen. In 1643, the Plymouth militia roll revealed that only twenty five to thirty per cent of the militiamen were freemen.¹⁹ Eventually, laws were changed to allow all men in a militia unit to vote for their captain.

There were cases in which a non-freeman was chosen militia captain. In these situations, the man might be considered unacceptable by the Town Court, but if accepted, he was usually granted freemanship. If the men persisted in their choice, even after the Courts declared the chosen man unacceptable, there was little the authorities could do. This situation arose during the Hingham Militia Case when the Town and County Courts and the Bay Colony authorities refused to accept the man selected by the Hingham militia company because of his religious views. The case was finally closed when the Courts capitulated to the militia. They could do little else in the face of the determination shown by the armed men.²⁰

Colonial governments were, however, extremely careful to insure complete civilian control over their militia. Before the colonial authorities would grant a commission, elected militia officers had to be confirmed by the town, or county, council. Regimental commanders were selected by, and received their commissions from, the General Courts of both Plymouth and the Bay Colonies. In addition, the colonial legislature approved all militia expeditions and retained control of both the funds and the overall operation.²¹ During offensive operations against the Indians, civilian colonial authorities appointed the officers to lead the militia to preclude militiamen electing an officer whose loyalty to the colony might be in doubt.

New Englanders relied on current European training manuals and methods in conducting militia training. Miles Standish, like many early militia leaders a veteran of European wars, taught the young men in the ranks to fight as he had been taught. For training manuals, the officers relied on such European works as William Barriffe's Military Discipline: or the Young Artilleryman.²² These works emphasized the formal close order drill then standard in European armies. Although not well suited to warfare in the New England woods, the system of close order drill did instill confidence in the men and provide some semblance of discipline and order. With this foundation

to build on, the leaders could improvise the tactics necessary to meet the varying conditions under which they fought the Indians.

On the days designated as training days, the militia company would muster at a convenient location in or near the town early in the morning. The day started with a general formation, during which the roll would be taken and the officers would inspect to insure each man had his prescribed arms. Fines were imposed for failing to attend or for any irregularities during the training day. The rest of the morning was spent in close order drill and practicing the manual of arms under supervision of the militia captain. After a lunch break, the men armed with muskets practiced loading and firing their pieces. The day usually ended with firing practice and a general skirmish involving the whole company.²³

Although the training day did not prepare the militiamen for Indian warfare, it did accomplish certain objectives. First, it allowed the militia captain to verify that each man possessed the required arms and ammunition and to insure that the man's weapon was in working condition. In addition, the target practice which ended the day guaranteed that the man knew how to load, prime, and fire his weapon and proved that the weapon was in firing condition. Finally, it provided a chance for the man's family, who generally accompanied him to the

training site, to socialize with the neighbors. They would gossip, exchange news and, in general, reestablish a sense of communal unity.

Formal discipline was lax in the early militia units. When every man recognized the immediate need for an armed body of men to provide defense, peer pressure was usually sufficient to insure prompt response to orders. However, as the Indian threat waned and the number of militia units expanded to encompass newcomers to the colonies, men tended to lose that sense of urgency. Failure to attend militia training, or to maintain weapons and ammunition as prescribed by law, became common. Fines, freely imposed, helped to maintain some sense of discipline, but, since the companies made up their own regulations, and the fines were spent largely to defray militia expenses, men tended to consider the system little more than a minor harassment. Indeed, failure to show for militia training could be, and often was, paid off by the miscreant at the next training day by bringing a barrel of cider for the whole company.²⁴ Also, as could be expected, the system of electing militia officers was not conducive to strict discipline within the company.

The usual punishment for minor infractions of rules was a system of fines. Often fixed by the militia company itself, the fines were collected by the company clerk who used the money to buy drums, banners, or whatever

else the company needed. However, the individual militia-man was also subject to civil law while performing militia duties.²⁵ Violation of civil law, far more serious than the minor militia regulations, left the militiaman liable to trial by the civil courts.

By the mid 1630's, militia organization differed little between the two colonies. Both based their defense on universal military service by all able-bodied men, who were organized into militia companies and required by laws both to own weapons and attend periodic militia training.

III. ARMAMENT

It is unfortunate that our subsequent history has placed such great emphasis on the Kentucky rifle and the flintlock-armed Minuteman, since the militia in the early New England colonies differed greatly from that image. When the colonists bought their firearms in England, they included both the matchlock and the earliest types of flintlock weapons, and a quantity of pikes, ranging in length up to 15 feet.²⁶ Along with a collection of personal weapons and small artillery pieces, these weapons provided the means of defense against Indian attacks during the first fifty years.

The matchlock was the most common type of firearm brought to New England. Although cheap, it was an awkward

weapon to handle. Large and heavy, it required the use of a forked pole to support its weight during firing. The gun was fired by releasing a mechanism which pressed a long burning cord, called a slow match, into the exposed powder in the firing pan. The slow match was often four feet in length and lit at both ends. The matchlock had an extremely slow rate of fire, and its exposed slow match rendered it extremely susceptible to weather. Fifty six separate motions were required to load and fire the weapon properly. It proved satisfactory on the plains of Europe, but for the militiaman in the middle of the New England woods, facing Indians who could accurately fire their bows 12 to 15 times a minute, the matchlock was inadequate. Its greatest advantage was the initial panic it caused among the Indians and the tremendous damage inflicted by its soft lead projectile.²⁷

The flintlock weapons which the colonists owned were the earliest models and were called "snaphaunces." Although crude compared to later models, they functioned the same way. Striking a piece of flint against steel caused sparks to fall into the exposed powder in the firing pan. These weapons, lighter, faster to load, and somewhat more reliable than the matchlock, were just gaining widespread recognition in Europe and were not readily available to the early colonists. Later, as more flintlock weapons were imported from England, their

advantages in Indian fighting forced the matchlock out of the militia companies. By 1650, although some matchlock weapons remained in civilian hands as hunting pieces, flintlock firearms were considered the only acceptable firearm for militia duty.²⁸

Along with firearms, many militiamen were armed with polearms. The majority of polearms brought to the New World were pikes, long wooden poles with small, pointed heads. Pikemen played an important role in sixteenth and seventeenth century European armies, primarily helping to keep cavalry from closing with the slow-firing matchlock armed musketeers. With only their European training and experience to guide them, the colonists brought almost as many pikes as muskets to the New World. It soon became apparent, however, that a fourteen foot long pike was not the weapon needed to fight Indians. The poles were reduced to a shorter length -- seven to eight feet, and the short pikes were used by militia units until about 1675.²⁹

The colonists armed themselves with a variety of swords and knives for hand-to-hand combat. Most common at first was the long, slender rapier, used for stabbing. However, many men carried cutlasses, short, heavy-bladed sabres used for hacking or cutting. In the New England woods, the cutlass proved the more useful blade and the rapier gradually disappeared. By the end

of the period, even the cutlass had begun to give way to smaller, more easily carried, knives and short axes.³⁰ The assembled militia company, armed with matchlocks, snaphaunces, pikes, cutlasses and tomahawks, carried a mixed assortment of armament.

Gradually each colony attempted to standardize its militia armament. Massachusetts Bay directed two-thirds of each company to carry muskets and one-third to carry pikes.³¹ The Plymouth government did not mention pikes when it reorganized its militia in the 1630's. Militiamen continued to carry pikes, however, up until 1675, when men so armed were ordered to replace them with firearms.³² Officers and non-commissioned officers retained their polearms as badges of rank in both colonies, but did not often carry them on operations against the Indians.

Colonial authorities faced several problems in standardizing militia armament. Firearms were expensive, and many militiamen could not afford to buy a new, or different, type weapon. They continued to carry what they owned until, under threat of punishment, they were forced to buy a new weapon. Even then, many would borrow an acceptable firearm to attend militia training.³³ In addition, there were not many firearms in the colonies available for purchase. Besides the problem of cost, another very basic reason for retention of the pike as a

militia weapon was that training in its use was much simpler than for the matchlock or snaphaunce. Compared to the fifty-six movements necessary to load and fire the matchlock, the pike manual of arms consisted of only eleven movements.³⁴ This undoubtedly made it popular among the militiamen.

The type of weapons available to the early colonial militia dictated their tactics in woodland fighting. It was obviously impossible to ambush Indians at night if the matchlock armed musketeer had to carry a lighted slow match because the glow given off by several of these matches in one location was bright enough to warn the Indians. Until sufficient flintlock weapons became available, militia tactics consisted of daylight ambushes, or early morning attacks on sleeping Indian villages, such as the Connecticut militia did early in the Pequot War. Another militia tactic was to surround the Indians and force them to attack into the waiting muskets. Rainy or windy weather forced cancellation of many attacks since the matchlocks' slow matches could not be kept lighted.

In this vein it is worth noting that the half-pike, some 6 to 8 feet in length, proved valuable in early Indian fighting. If for any reason the musketeers could not fire their matchlocks or were involved in the time consuming process of reloading, they were extremely

vulnerable to Indian attack. In these situations the pikemen, and men armed with cutlasses, could hold the Indians at bay until the whole party could withdraw or the musketeers could reload their weapons.³⁵ This was an added reason for travelling and fighting in massed organizations. The early colonial militiamen recognized that their one advantage lay in massed firepower. Since their weapons were so slow to reload, it was fatal to break up into small groups, as did the later frontier Indian fighters. When flintlock weapons became plentiful in the colonies, militiamen were forbidden to carry matchlock weapons. The pike then lost its value and was also discarded.

The New England Indian's bow and arrow proved to be of little value against the massed militia. Even though Indians could fire at a rapid rate, their weak arrows were incapable of doing much damage. Early militiamen wore metal corselets and helmets, which provided good protection, but were heavy and cumbersome. Eventually the colonists discarded metal armor for padded leather coats, which were able to turn the arrows, or at least prevent them from penetrating deeply. However, by the end of the period, the majority of militiamen wore very little formal protective clothing. To impose casualties on the militia, the Indians were forced into hand-to-hand combat. Because of their healthy respect

for firearms, though, militiamen armed with the cumbersome matchlock were generally able to hold them at bay.³⁶

IV. EMPLOYMENT

Thus armed and trained, the militia was employed to provide local protection during peacetime, and to conduct defensive and offensive operations during hostilities. The method employed for providing protection during times of peace was an adaptation of the medieval system known as "watch and ward." Watch was the process of standing guard over the town itself, while ward included the function of civil police within the town.³⁷ The watch system required towns to post militia watches and maintain a watchhouse for the militiamen. Since most villages and towns were not surrounded by walls, the nightly militia guard stood sentry duty along roads leading into the town, sometimes conducting roving patrols among the outlying buildings. This was an additional duty for the militiamen and it was obvious that they did not like it. The local courts were quick to levy fines on men who were late or failed to show when assigned watch duty.³⁸

The function of civil police, or ward, in New England towns was handled by a system of locally appointed constables. These officials maintained a constable's watch composed of armed militiamen who patrolled the town at night arresting "such as are overtaken with drink,

swearing, Sabbath-breaking, lying, vagrant persons, night-walkers, or any other that shall offend in any of these"³⁹ Like the guard duty mentioned above, constable's watch was considered an additional duty for the militiamen. As citizens of the town, they were expected to give freely of their time to insure its safety.

Militia companies rarely fought as a single unit. In times of crisis militiamen performed guard duty around their town under the command of their captain, and fought if the town itself were attacked.⁴⁰ Normally these attacks consisted of a series of individual engagements within the town in which the militia attempted to defend isolated garrison houses, which were designed and constructed as small fortresses.⁴¹ As the frontier moved further westward, taking with it the immediate threat of Indian attack, the town militia's primary function became that of providing a body of trained and equipped men who could be drawn upon to conduct offensive operations against the Indian.

In Plymouth Colony the first armed encounters were conducted by "pick up" teams of men who could be spared from the colony's labors. Standish determined how many men he needed, and the Governor asked for volunteers. Since the Pilgrims had reduced the immediate Indian threat by clever diplomacy, this loose system worked for

a time. Eventually, the Plymouth assembly devised a system of quotas wherein each town provided a certain number of militiamen for offensive operations, based on population. Local officials asked for volunteers to fill the quota and usually received sufficient applicants to meet their requirements. In some cases New England town selectmen arbitrarily chose the militiamen from their unit, a procedure which could have been unfair but which seemed to work.⁴²

Local officials were empowered to draft, or impress, men if sufficient volunteers were not readily forthcoming, and could also impress whatever arms and equipment they considered necessary to outfit their militia contingent.⁴³ Militiamen thus selected were paid wages out of the town treasury, received food and gunpowder from central supplies, and were recompensed for loss of personal clothing and equipment, or if wounded during the operation. The quota system certainly precluded denuding a town of its defenses, but created an additional problem in that the men and their commanders went into combat without having trained together or having time to become acquainted with one another. The lack of mutual trust often led to failure of the operation.

Militia units assembled for active operations differed in many ways from the town militia. Officers were not elected but rather appointed by the colonial

legislature. Discipline was more strict, and new militia laws, including some carrying the death penalty, specifically applied to militia units on active operations.⁴⁴ Unit size and armament varied, depending on the mission and what each militiaman carried as armament. In 1637, during the Pequot War, one militia captain was armed with a pike with which he killed several Indians in hand-to-hand fighting. Usually, though, the county or colonial legislature specified what arms would be carried in their quotas. There was a gradual change from mixed armament to all firearms, at least as carried by the ordinary foot-soldier. Officers still carried a pike, or rapier, as a badge of rank.

In 1637, latent Indian hostility to colonial expansion erupted in the Pequot War.⁴⁵ Connecticut declared war on the Pequot Indians and asked Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth for support. Neither colony was eager to join the fight for fear of disrupting its own peaceful relations with neighboring tribes so help was only grudgingly offered and arrived late in the war zone. Fortunately, within three weeks of declaring war, a militia company assembled by Connecticut and assisted by friendly Indians was able to crush the Pequot tribe in a daring early morning attack. The war pointed out certain weaknesses in the existing militia system. First it was unresponsive in emergencies. Neither the Bay Colony

nor Plymouth were to assemble militia units quickly enough to participate in the early phase of the fighting. Further, Plymouth authorities found that the militia were generally not willing to volunteer for service outside their colony. Finally, the total lack of coordination made it obvious to the colonial leaders that some central military authority was essential to coordinate inter-colonial militia activities.⁴⁶

In an attempt to remedy these weaknesses, in May, 1643, Massachusetts Bay, Plymouth, Connecticut, and New Haven Colonies formed a loose confederation for military and diplomatic purposes. Each member was expected to provide troops, supplies and funds in case of war. Confederation commissioners established troop quotas based on colonial population size, and selected commanders from each colony to lead joint expeditions.⁴⁷ The New England Confederation decided on an overall strategy and the volunteer troops were expected to fight in any colony. Although the confederation eventually foundered on inter-colonial bickering and jealousy, while it lasted it did reduce the impact of these weaknesses and left its impression on the militia system within the colonies.

To fill troop quotas levied by the confederation, each colony required its towns to maintain a list of men who would volunteer if the confederation declared war. These men, members of the local militia company, received

no special privileges for volunteering for this duty. In fact, it often meant additional hardship for many. Massachusetts Bay, for instance, required them to be ready to leave their home town for the designated muster location within one-half hour.⁴⁸ The system never fully functioned as originally conceived primarily because, when the need to muster troops arose during King Philip's War, it was completely unable to cope with a disaster of that magnitude. It did, however, instill in the militia system the idea of a ready force, able to assemble and move within a short period of time. One hundred years later the idea surfaced again as the Minutemen.

Volunteer militia unit employment was usually restricted to the home colony.⁴⁹ By 1643, though, the confederation had raised the possibility of committing militia outside the home colony. Both Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth passed laws requiring militia service beyond the colonial boundaries for six months, with or without the individual's consent.⁵⁰ Inter-colonial jealousies precluded conducting many such operations, since they were usually viewed as an attempt to lay claim to new territory. Also, the militia resented being sent. Few of the colonists could see why they should go off to fight in another colony when they were needed to protect their own homes and farms, and they were not inclined to pay taxes to support these expeditions. Each colony, therefore,

was forced to conduct its own operations for defense.

Volunteer militiamen were expected to outfit themselves at their own expense for active operations.⁵¹ Since no specific uniform was prescribed, the militiamen wore their everyday clothes. What they did not have, they borrowed from a neighbor. The militia system did not supply militiamen with their basic needs except during active campaigns. Then, such items as powder, lead and foodstaples were provided at community expense, after the militiamen used up what they had carried with them from home.

To insure adequate supplies were available, each town was required by law to construct a magazine for storage of extra powder, lead, and weapons.⁵² Individual militiamen could buy what they needed from the town or, in the case of the poor, be issued their allotment and required to work off the cost. In addition to military supplies, the magazines stored emergency food rations. A town appointed official supervised the magazine's operation and insured the required supplies were on hand. He, in turn, was supervised by the surveyor-general, an appointed colonial official responsible for overall colonial militia readiness.

New England towns raised the necessary funds to pay both militia officers and town officials, as well as to buy military supplies, through a system of taxation.

Personal property taxes formed the primary sources of income. Other methods included taxing livestock, collecting fines and import duties, and accepting donations from private individuals. When additional funds were necessary, the town could arbitrarily raise the personal property tax or levy a special tax on all households. Townspeople naturally resented such highhandedness, and these measures were undertaken only in times of extreme crisis and after the most serious deliberation.⁵³

V. CONCLUSION

By the start of King Philip's War in 1675, the New England colonies had created and sustained a militia system designed to provide local protection against attacks and a limited means of initiating offensive action. The system met their basic requirements and was formalized in their laws. Yet the system contained weaknesses of which the colonists were unaware. Probably the most serious weakness was the inability to reinforce a town militia rapidly when the town was attacked. The nearby towns, which would be the first to know of the attack, were unlikely to send reinforcements from their militia units since they might be attacked next. When the county or colonial authorities received notification of the attack, they were forced to rely on the cumbersome system of assembling a relief unit through quotas. By the time

this unit arrived at the scene the attackers were usually gone. The colonies needed a unit which was always on call, could respond rapidly to the attack, and be free of local defense responsibilities. Cavalry units possessed all these attributes, but the New Englanders failed to capitalize on them. With membership restricted to the wealthy, the cavalry were elite units, more useful for social purposes than for warfare. The town thus faced the prospect in a major war of being overwhelmed one by one, or of being abandoned and the people and militia concentrated in a more easily defended location.

A second weakness in the colonial militia system was the inability to sustain militia units in the field while conducting active operations. Under existing laws militiamen provided their own basic supplies, which included as much food and ammunition as they could carry. Once this was gone, the colonial authorities either had to supply them with more or allow them to return home to get more. The latter method was unsatisfactory since the unit would simply dissolve should the men decide to stay home. Therefore, the colonial governments developed a rudimentary supply system under which the necessary food and munitions were collected for the expedition.

Each town was required to maintain a supply of food and powder for its own emergency use, which could be appropriated, when needed, by the colonial authorities.

Officers, called commissaries, were also appointed to collect provisions through purchase from the local population. However, neither system worked very well. The towns resented having their emergency supplies taken away, and the price of food in the backcountry was apt to be quite high. Also, the colonists did not have an adequate means of transporting supplies to the men in the field. On extended operations the militia lived off the towns in their area of operations. Until an effective means of supplying these forces could be developed, the militia was limited to raids of short duration.

A third weakness, which did not become immediately apparent, was the almost total lack of experience in fighting Indians. The only major Indian War during the period under consideration, the Pequot War, was of short duration and was won by surrounding a large part of the tribe in its fortified village and destroying it. The few encounters between colonists and Indians in the forest proved colonial superiority rested on the whites' possession of firearms and the Indians' inability to inflict casualties with their bow and arrows. Colonial tactics which involved moving in massed columns of men through the woods in order to assure massed firepower, were thus believed to be correct. The colonists failed to envision the results of an ambush in which the Indians were also armed with firearms.

In addition, colonists had always had the assistance of Indian allies during the early conflicts. These friendly Indians could lead them directly to the tribe which the colonists wanted to attack, and warn them of hostile Indian ambushes along the way. Once they were deprived of this assistance, they were helpless. Men who were at home in the woods and knew the Indians' ways, such as Rogers Rangers, were still in the future. The early New England colonists had neither the time nor the inclination to live in such fashion as to develop these forest skills nor did the Puritan system encourage it. Militia training, based on European tactics, failed to teach men the tactics needed to survive in Indian fighting, primarily because no one knew what was required.

During King Philip's War, which commenced in 1675, these weaknesses became quickly apparent to the colonists. Through a series of improvisations, and with a little luck, the colonists were able to weather the first Indian onslaught and to eventually destroy the hostile Indian tribes. However, it was more through sheer perseverance than because of the elaborate militia structure that the New Englanders finally won. The system that the early colonist created did show that it possessed flexibility. Although later conflicts would bring many changes to the system, it was basically sound. Protected from external attack by England, the colonial New England militia

system proved capable of protecting the expanding New England frontier during the subsequent wars with France.

FOOTNOTES

1. Douglas Edward Leach, "The Military System of Plymouth Colony," New England Quarterly 24 (September 1951): 343; William Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), p. 26.
2. Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England, 5 vol. (Boston: William White, 1853-1854), I:26, lists the weapons brought over by the Puritans in 1630. A list of weapons brought by the Pilgrims in 1620 is not available, but Bradford mentions firearms being used in their first skirmish with Indians in December 1620. See Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation, p. 69.
3. Leach, "The Military System of Plymouth Colony," p. 347.
4. Russell F. Weigley, History of the United States Army (New York: Macmillan Company, 1967), p. 3.
5. A complete discussion of the Plymouth militia system is found in Leach, "The Military System of Plymouth Colony."
6. Shurtleff, Records, I:84-85.
7. Ibid., p. 210.
8. Louis Morton, "The Origins of American Military Policy," Military Affairs 22 (Summer 1958), 75-82. (Reprinted in Raymond G. O'Connor, ed. American Defense Policy in Perspective: from Colonial Times to the Present New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1965, p. 11. See also Shurtleff, Records, II:42-43.
9. Shurtleff, Records, I:186-187. The North and East regiments still exist as units; the East regiment is now the 101st Engineer Battalion and the North regiment is the 182d Infantry Regiment (5th Massachusetts). See Weigley, History of the US Army, p. 7.
10. Leach, "The Military System of Plymouth Colony," p. 355.
11. Morton, "Origins of American Military Policy," p. 13.

12. Ibid.
13. Leach, "The Military System of Plymouth Colony," p. 356.
14. Ibid., p. 347; Douglas Edward Leach, Arms for Empire: A Military History of the British Colonies in North America, 1607-1763 (New York: Macmillan Company, 1973), p. 6-7.
15. Darrett B. Rutman, Winthrop's Boston: A Portrait of a Puritan Town, 1630-1649 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), p. 216.
16. Morton, "Origins of American Military Policy," p. 11; Leach, Arms for Empire, p. 14; Morrison Sharp, "Leadership and Democracy in the Early New England System of Defense," American Historical Review 50 (1945), p. 252.
17. Douglas Edward Leach, Flintlock and Tomahawk: New England in King Philip's War (New York: The Norton Library, 1966), p. 106.
18. Daniel J. Boorstin, The Americans: The Colonial Experience (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), p. 355.
19. George D. Langdon, Jr., Pilgrim Colony: A History of New Plymouth, 1620-1691 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 83.
20. Sharp, "Early New England System of Defense," pp. 256-259, contains a good discussion on militia officer elections. See also Langdon, Pilgrim Colony, pp. 79-99, for an understanding of the status and responsibilities of freemen within the community.
21. Morton, "Origins of American Military Policy," p. 14.
22. Leach, Arms for Empire, p. 26.
23. Ibid., pp. 24-37; H. Telfer Mook, "Training Days in New England," New England Quarterly 11 (December 1938): 675-697, provides an excellent description of the typical training day, but of a later period. However, conditions had not changed much, and his description of training fits the general activities of the early colonial training days.
24. Leach, Arms for Empire, p. 21.
25. Ibid., p. 24.

26. Shurtleff, Records, I:26.
27. For a complete discussion of weapons and firearms used in Colonial America, see Harold L. Peterson, Arms and Armor in Colonial America 1526-1783 (Harrisburg, Pa.: The Stackpole Company, 1956) and his article, "The Military Equipment of the Plymouth and Bay Colonies, 1620-1690," New England Quarterly 20 (June 1947), 197-208. See also Leach, Arms for Empire, pp. 4-7; Louis Morton, "The End of Formalized Warfare," American Heritage, August 1955, 12-19, 95.
28. Peterson, "Military Equipment of the Plymouth and Bay Colonies," p. 204; Peterson, Arms and Armor, pp. 44-45.
29. Peterson, Arms and Armor, pp. 96-99.
30. Ibid., pp. 78-82, 87; Peterson, "Military Equipment of the Plymouth and Bay Colonies," pp. 199-200.
31. Morton, "The Origins of American Military Policy," p. 11; Shurtleff, Records, II:119.
32. Peterson, Arms and Armor, p. 99.
33. Leach, Arms for Empire, pp. 13-14.
34. Morton, "The Origins of American Military Policy," p. 13; Peterson, Arms for Empire, pp. 15-17.
35. Morton, "The End of Formalized Warfare," p. 15.
36. The early colonists were generally contemptuous of the Indian bow and arrow. Although the bow was strongly made, the arrow was fashioned out of reeds or slender pieces of wood, which shattered when striking the colonists' armor. Literature on the early Indian wars is full of accounts of militiamen being struck by numerous arrows and emerging unwounded. In fact, in 1637, Lt. Gardiner, commander of Ft. Saybrook at the mouth of the Connecticut River, sent to Boston an arrow which had killed a settler with the intent of proving to the Bay colony militia that the Indians could kill them. John W. DeForest, History of the Indians of Connecticut (Hartford: William Jas. Hammersley, 1851; reprint ed., Hamden, Conn.: The Shoe String Press, Inc., 1964); William Hubbard, The History of the Indian Wars in New England, edited by Samuel G. Drake (Roxbury, Mass.: 1865; reprint ed. New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1964); Alden T. Vaughan, New England Frontier: Puritans and Indians, 1620-1675 (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1965); Peterson, Arms and Armor, pp. 142-143.

37. Leach, "Military System of Plymouth Colony," p. 354.
38. Shurtleff, Records, I:85, 99, 120, 190; see also II:120.
39. Rutman, Winthrop's Boston, p. 225. See also footnote on same page; Shurtleff, Records, I:120, 137; II:121-122.
40. Shurtleff, Records, I:293.
41. Boorstin, The Americans: The Colonial Experience, p. 349; Leach, Arms for Empire, pp. 48-50.
42. Leach, Arms for Empire, pp. 21-23; Leach, "Military System of Plymouth Colony," pp. 349-351.
43. Morton, "The Origins of American Military Policy," p. 13; Shurtleff, Records, II:123.
44. Leach, "Military System of Plymouth Colony," o. 357, discusses these laws as they applied to the Plymouth Militia. At about the same time, Massachusetts Bay was passing similar laws. See also Morton, "The Origins of American Military Policy," p. 12.
45. Alden T. Vaughan, "Pequots and Puritans: The Causes of the War of 1637," William and Mary Quarterly 21 (April 1964):256-269, provides a provocative rationale as to the underlying causes of the war. See also G.E. Thomas, "Puritans, Indians, and the Concept of Race," New England Quarterly 48 (March 1975):3-27.
46. J.A. Doyle, The English in America, vol. 1: The Puritan Colonies, Part 1 (London: 1887; reprint ed. New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1969) pp. 294-316 provides an excellent description of the background causes and establishment of the New England Confederation. See also Harry M. Ward, The United Colonies of New England: 1643-1690 (New York: Vantage Press, 1961) for a complete history of the confederation.
47. See Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation, pp. 430-437, for the complete text of the 1643 version of the Confederation's constitution.
48. Weigley, History of the United States Army, p. 8; Leach, "Military System of Plymouth Colony," pp. 350-351; Shurtleff, Records, II:122.

49. Boorstin, The Americans: The Colonial Experience, pp. 357-362 provides an interesting essay on colonial "isolationism."
50. Morton, "The Origins of American Military Policy," pp. 13-14.
51. Shurtleff, Records, II:122.
52. Shurtleff, Records, I:138; Morton, "The Origins of American Military Policy," p. 15.
53. Leach, Flintlock and Tomahawk, pp. 109-111. In addition, Shurtleff, Records, all volumes, contain numerous references to town levies and taxes for militia support.

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DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW ENGLAND COLONIAL
MILITIA: 1620 - 1675

by

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B.S., United States Military Academy, 1959

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

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The purpose of this report is to examine the development of colonial militia in the New England colonies prior to 1675. The colonists adopted the militia system, based on early English laws requiring all able-bodied men to be armed and ready to defend their community, as the only practical means for defense against Indian attacks. Volunteers, assembled from the various militia units, conducted active operations into the wilderness. By the end of the period this concept, modified to encompass the expanding population, was firmly established in New England colonial society.

Prior to leaving Europe the colonists hired experienced soldiers who could provide military training and leadership, and included weapons and military stores in their ships' cargo. Militia companies were organized in the new settlements upon arrival in New England. As new towns were established, each was required to form its own militia company. By 1634, the Massachusetts Bay Colony organized its militia companies into regiments to improve centralized control, while Plymouth Colony, expanding at a slower rate, did not adopt the regimental system until 1658.

The militia assembled for training six to eight times per year, under their elected officers. This training, based on the current European battle drill, instilled discipline and basic firearms training in the militiaman but failed to prepare him for fighting Indians. As the threat of Indian

attack faded, militia training lost its urgency and sense of purpose.

Early militia companies armed one-third of their men with pikes and two-thirds with firearms. Since matchlock firearms were cumbersome and very slow to load, pikes and cutlasses were necessary to keep the Indians at bay while the men reloaded. Once the faster firing and more reliable flintlock firearm appeared, the pike was dropped from the militia companies armament. Surprisingly the Indian's weak bow and arrow did not inflict many casualties, leading to a contempt for Indians as fighters which had unfortunate results once the Indians acquired firearms.

Colonial governments persisted in using hastily gathered forces levied in small groups from the various towns to conduct all offensive operations. Although this system did prevent stripping any one town of its entire defense force, a unit thus assembled lacked cohesion. The colonial government appointed officers to conduct offensive operations rather than allowing the levied militia companies to elect them, a procedure which helped guarantee civilian control of the assembled body of armed men.

Unfortunately, the militia system contained several major problem areas. The colonial governments had no standing body of troops with which they could respond to sudden emergencies. The system of levying each town for a few men, in order to create a body of troops, proved slow

and cumbersome. When the government did gather men for offensive operations, it had few means of keeping them supplied. As the men used up their own supply of food and gunpowder, they were forced to obtain more from the emergency supplies of the endangered towns which they were sent to defend. Finally, the colonists were untrained in Indian warfare. The Puritans discouraged people from living the type of life that would have developed the necessary forest skills with which to combat Indians. When forced to fight without Indian allies to act as scouts and guides, the colonial militia suffered severe losses.

The early New England colonies adapted the English militia system to meet their immediate requirements for local protection. They failed, however, to modify and expand the system to meet the changing conditions in the colonies. King Philip's War, which began in 1675, exposed the weaknesses inherent in the system.