

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 origins 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