

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

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 militiaman 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