First blood shed in the revolution: The tale of Josiah Nelson on April 19, 1775

Author: Donald Hafner

Persistent link: http://hdl.handle.net/2345/bc-ir:103654

This work is posted on eScholarship@BC, Boston College University Libraries.

2015

These materials are made available for use in research, teaching and private study, pursuant to U.S. Copyright Law. The user must assume full responsibility for any use of the materials, including but not limited to, infringement of copyright and publication rights of reproduced materials. Any materials used for academic research or otherwise should be fully credited with the source. The publisher or original authors may retain copyright to the materials.
He ran among the horsemen before he looked up to make sure who they were, and called out 'Have you heard anything about when the Regulars are coming out?' One of the [British] officers drew his sword, and crying, ‘We will let you know when they are coming!' struck him on the crown of his head, cutting a long gash. As [Josiah] Nelson sprang back, the warm blood trickled over his face and dripped to the ground. It was the first blood shed in the Revolution. This blood was to be dearly paid for on this very spot the next day.

Frank W. C. Hersey, Heroes of the Battle Road (1930)

Perhaps what happened that April night in Lincoln, Massachusetts, was pretty much as Nelson family tradition tells it. What puzzles me are discrepancies in the details, for in those inconsistencies lie provocative questions about how well we have understood the significance of Josiah Nelson’s tale.

The night in question was April 18-19, 1775. In Boston, some 800 British Regulars were assembling, under orders to march to Concord and “seize and destroy … all Military Stores whatever.” In anticipation, the commander of the expedition was told, “a small party on horseback is ordered out to stop all advice of your march getting to Concord before you.” Sometime after nine o’clock that evening, a portion of that mounted British patrol arrived near

---

1 I am indebted to both D. Michael Ryan, Associate Dean for Student Development at Boston College, and Justine Gengras of Alton, NH, for their careful reading of earlier drafts of this manuscript, for cross-checking facts and sources in a generous effort to save me from error, and for setting high standards of scholarship for all of us who try to illuminate an important era in our nation’s history. An earlier and shorter version of this manuscript appeared in The Lincoln Review (Lincoln, Massachusetts), July-August 2006. This manuscript adds new evidence and revised conclusions, and also corrects minor errors in that earlier version.

the house of Josiah Nelson, along the Great North Road in Lincoln.\(^3\) The historical accounts of what happened next are murky and contradictory. Here is the gist of the story, as told in what appears to be the first published version, a history of Lincoln by William F. Wheeler in 1890:

In the northeasterly part of Lincoln, within a few rods of the Lexington line, dwelt Mr. Josiah Nelson. He was an ardent patriot, and the men of Bedford had arranged with him to give the warning in case an expedition should be sent out. Awakened in the night by the noise of horsemen riding along the road, he rushed out half-dressed to ascertain the cause of the riding, and on asking what it meant, he was struck with a sword, gashing his head, and told he was a prisoner. At the same moment, he was surrounded by several men, some of whom were British scouts, and the others, evidently Tories, acting as guides. After detaining him awhile, the scouts left him in charge of the Tories, who soon released him, telling him to go into his house, and threatening, if he gave any alarm or showed any light, to burn his house over his head. Nevertheless, after dressing himself and his wound, he started to give the alarm at Bedford. He had not two miles to go to reach some of the Bedford patriots. About the same time and near the same place, Paul Revere was captured on his midnight ride — immortalized in song.\(^4\)

Wheeler was a prominent citizen in Lincoln, born in 1812, who had served as Selectman and Town Moderator and had family roots in the town going back to the 1630s. At the time Wheeler wrote his history, Josiah Nelson’s grandson was still living on the Nelson family farm in Lincoln, so it seems likely that this grandson — George Nelson, then in his late sixties — was Wheeler’s source of a Nelson family tradition in which Josiah stands as an example of patriotic defiance, with the distinction, as Frank W. C. Hersey later put it, of shedding the first blood in the American Revolution. On Lincoln soil, along the old North Road.

Six years later, Josiah’s tale appeared again in print, in Abram E. Brown’s *Beneath Old Roof Trees* of 1896.\(^5\) Brown had written an earlier book in 1891, an authoritative *History of the Town of Bedford*, in which he remarked: “It is not certain how early the news of the movement of Regulars first reached Bedford on the night of April 18, 1775, but it is very probable that the town was warned among the first.”\(^6\) No mention of Josiah Nelson at all. But in 1896, Brown

---


included the Nelson tale in a version so similar in phrasing and structure that he must either have relied heavily on Wheeler’s account or drawn from the same source Wheeler had used. Yet despite the obvious similarities, Brown added two notable details. Where Wheeler said the British soldiers were accompanied by “others, evidently Tories,” Brown identified them definitely as Tories “who knew [Josiah] well as an honored citizen.” And Brown added a rough estimate of the time when Josiah’s encounter with the British occurred: “This alarm, sounded in the extreme south part of Bedford by Nelson, explains the readiness with which the minute-men and militia of that part of Bedford reported at Jeremiah Fitch's tavern in Bedford Centre when the alarm from Lexington was first given in the opposite part of the town.”

In 1904, the town of Lincoln celebrated the 150th anniversary of its founding, with festivities that included a long speech by the noted historian and Lincoln resident, Charles Francis Adams, surveying the history of Lincoln from the Ice Age to the dawn of the 20th century. The town subsequently published An Account of the Celebration in 1905 containing all the speeches, poems, and prayers from the festivities, along with photographs of some of the town’s historic buildings. Josiah Nelson’s house was among these, and in the “Notes on Illustrations,” a long account of Josiah’s tale was included, identified as “a tradition as handed down to George Nelson, the grandson of Josiah Nelson.” The author of the “Notes” is not indicated, but the recounting of Josiah’s tale is enclosed in quotation marks, implying that the source was a written document or a conversation with George Nelson, then age 82. The gist of the story is the same, but again new details appear: it was Josiah’s wife who was awakened by the commotion in the road; the time was “about two o’clock”; Josiah rushed out into the midst of “a party of fifteen or sixteen horsemen”; the gash he received on the head was “three inches long”; the American Tories in the party “were men of his acquaintance”; the British patrol had been all the way to Concord, where the Tories had shown them “where the ammunition was stored”; Josiah was turned over to the custody of three Tories in the patrol, because “he told them he couldn’t walk as fast as they rode, for he was lame”; the Tories released him “a short distance below the Hastings house”; after Josiah bandaged his wound and mounted his horse, he first “followed

---

after the soldiers toward Lexington,” and “when he reached the top of the hill just west of the town, he heard them firing on the Common. He knew then that the Regulars had surely come, so he took the road to the left and rode to Bedford to notify that town, as he was appointed to do.”

The most significant additional detail in this 1905 Account was this: “It is said that Paul Revere was a prisoner with this party” of horsemen. William Wheeler’s history had noted that Paul Revere was taken prisoner by a British patrol along the old North Road that night, bringing Revere’s “midnight ride” toward Concord to a premature end in Lincoln, just west of Josiah Nelson’s house. But Wheeler simply noted the two separate events: Josiah’s encounter and Revere’s capture. The Account version of the Nelson family tradition brought the two together and put Josiah in the midst of American history, alongside Paul Revere.

In 1930, two more versions of Josiah Nelson’s adventure appeared in print. The first was an article by Lucy C. Small in Lexington’s local newspaper, The Times-Minute Man, and the second was a booklet of Lincoln history, Heroes of the Battle Road 1775, by Frank W. C. Hersey, a Harvard tutor of English who had spent his boyhood in Lincoln. Hersey cited Small as one of his sources, so his was the later of the two versions in 1930. Both said they were drawing on the Nelson family tradition, although neither states who served as the source.

---

8 An Account of the Celebration by the Town of Lincoln, Massachusetts, April 23, 1904, of the 150th Anniversary of its Incorporation 1754-1904 (Boston, 1905). This source will be referred to subsequently as the 1905 Account.

The Hastings house mentioned in the 1905 Account is identified on a map, “Route of the British, April 19, 1775,” drawn by Frances Wheaton in 1894, and on a map of the same area drawn in 1902 by George Alfred Nelson, who was a surveyor and Josiah’s great-grandson. The Hastings’ house is shown to the east of Josiah Nelson’s house, along the road toward Lexington and near the Lexington-Lincoln town line. The house had been built around 1754 by Josiah’s father, Thomas Sr., and it originally stood about 300 feet on the Lexington side of the Lincoln-Lexington town line. The house passed to Josiah’s unmarried sister Tabitha when Thomas Sr. died in 1770, and she lived there until her death in 1778. At some point, the house was moved to the Lincoln side of the town line, about 400 feet east of Josiah Nelson’s house, and it became the residence of Lydia Nelson (Josiah’s brother Thomas Jr.’s only daughter) and her husband Samuel Hastings. See Joyce Lee Malcolm, The Scene of Battle, 1775: Historic Grounds Report, Minute Man National Historical Park (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of the Interior, 1985), pp. 28-30.

Photographs of the Nelson houses can be found in the Lincoln Historical Society’s Images of America: Lincoln (Charlestown, SC: Arcadia Press, 2003), pp. 22-23. The map drawn by Frances Wheaton is reproduced in Frank Wilson Cheney Hersey, Heroes of the Battle Road 1775 (Boston: Perry Walton, 1930), pp. 16-17. A photograph of the Nelson/Hastings house, the map drawn by George A. Nelson, and the Park Service’s own map of the area can be found in Malcolm, The Scene of Battle, pp. 4 and 25-26. The original of George A. Nelson’s sketch map is in the Nelson Family Papers, Box One, Document 2002.006.1.45, Lincoln Public Library, Massachusetts.

See Appendix below for the full passage about Josiah Nelson in An Account of the Celebration by the Town of Lincoln, 1905.


George Nelson was living on his farm in Lincoln, at age 87, when the 1910 U.S. census was conducted, but he does not appear in the 1920 U.S. Census. So although he could have been the direct source for William F.
tale in both accounts is broadly the same as Wheeler, Brown, and the 1905 Account had told it. Some of the phrasing is exactly the same as the passage quoted from George Nelson in the 1905 Account. And yet again, new details are added: Paul Revere’s presence in the British party is stated as fact — once taken prisoner, Josiah Nelson “discovered that the horsemen were escorting Paul Revere back to Lexington, having captured him a short time before”; four other prisoners in the party are specifically identified as “Solomon Brown, Jonathan Loring, Elijah Sanderson, and a peddler who had also been detained”; the commander of the British patrol is identified by Revere as a Major Edward Mitchell of the 5th Regiment of Foot. And in his own poetic contribution, Hersey makes the claim that Josiah’s gash on the head was “the first blood shed in the Revolution.”

At first glance, these accounts all seem to tell a compatible tale and to share a common source in Nelson family tradition. So what is puzzling about the story?

Well, consider this. There are three more accounts of the events along the old North Road in Lincoln that night. One comes from a brief deposition on April 25, 1775, by Solomon Brown, Jonathan Loring, and Elijah Sanderson of Lexington. These three were captured by the British patrol at about ten o’clock that night just west of Josiah Nelson’s house in Lincoln — prior to the capture of Paul Revere — and were released along with Revere near Lexington sometime after two o’clock. Their deposition contains no mention of an encounter with Josiah Nelson.\(^\text{10}\)

A second account comes from a more elaborate deposition by Elijah Sanderson alone, given on December 17, 1824. Sanderson notes that after he, Loring, and Brown were captured, two more prisoners were taken by the British — Paul Revere and a one-handed peddler named Allen — and Sanderson traces what happened as they were all led back toward Lexington and then released. Again, no mention of an encounter with Josiah Nelson.\(^\text{11}\)

---

\(^\text{10}\) The entire text of the Brown, Loring, Sanderson deposition is in Hersey, Heroes of the Battle Road, p. 39.

\(^\text{11}\) The full text of Elijah Sanderson’s 1824 deposition can be found in Elijah Phinney, History of the Battle of Lexington (Boston: Phelps and Farnham, 1825), and in Vincent J. R. Kehoe’s compilation of documents, We Were There! The American Rebels (Kehoe, 1974), pp. 233-236.
The third account (in three versions) comes from Paul Revere himself. Revere drafted two depositions soon after the events in 1775, the second version apparently edited at the suggestion of others to remove words implying that Revere and his companions, Dr. Samuel Prescott and Williams Dawes, had initiated an attack on the British officers. Revere’s third version was a letter written in January, 1798, to Jeremy Belknap, a historian and one of the founders of the Massachusetts Historical Society. In the 1775 depositions, Revere doesn’t name the other prisoners, but states there were only four of them (i.e., Brown, Loring, Sanderson, and Allen), and he details their ride back to Lexington and their release by the British. Revere’s 1798 letter to Belknap is consistent with the two depositions but less detailed about the capture itself. Nowhere does Revere describe anything resembling an encounter with Josiah Nelson.12

These silences are noteworthy, because one purpose of the depositions in 1775 was to document what Patriots regarded as outrages committed by the British soldiers on April 19th. So an unprovoked assault by a British officer on an unarmed old man in the dead of night would have been ripe material.

And then there are small points. Josiah supposedly couldn’t keep up with the British patrol because he was lame. Yet it is claimed that Josiah was a minute man who subsequently served as a soldier in the siege of Boston in 1775 and in the campaigns at Ticonderoga in 1776 and

12 The full text and photographic reproductions of Paul Revere’s two depositions in 1775 and his letter to Belknap in 1798 can be found in Edmund S. Morgan, ed., *Paul Revere’s Three Accounts of His Famous Ride* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1967), and in Kehoe, *We Were There!*, pp. 185-196.

David Hackett Fischer puts the location of Revere’s capture roughly where the modern monument commemorating the event now stands in the Minute Man National Historical Park, about a half-mile to the west of Josiah Nelson’s house. See Fischer, *Paul Revere’s Ride* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 391, note #9.

I have heard speculation that the modern monument might be on the wrong side of the road. In an early book of photographs of the area, the pasture where Revere and the others were held captive is shown on the north side of the road (evident from the shadows cast by the trees). This is where the modern monument now stands. See Samuel A. Drake, *Historic Mansions and Highways Around Boston* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1899), p. 371. In his letter to Belknap in 1798, Revere stated that the British soldiers who captured him, Dr. Samuel Prescott, and William Dawes “had placed themselves in a straight road, that inclined each way; they had taken down a pair of [fence] bars on the north side of the road, and two of them were under a tree in the pasture. … we tried to get past them; but they being armed with pistols and swords, they forced us in to the pasture.” In his 1775 depositions, Revere did not state explicitly which side of the road the pasture was on. However, he did state that the British horsemen were positioned under a tree and that when he, Prescott, and Dawes attempted to force their way past and continue west toward Concord, the soldiers “kept before us and swore that if we did not turn in to that pasture, they would blow our brains out (they had placed themselves opposite to a pair of bars and had taken the bars down) they forced us in.” Then, when the three made their escape attempt, Prescott spurred his horse to the left and over a stone wall, Dawes turned back and headed for the road, while Revere “turned to the right … towards a wood at the bottom of the pasture.” We know from their own accounts that Prescott made his escape to the left and rode broadly to the north and west, while Dawes went back toward the road, so the three of them must have been facing roughly north when they tried their escape — consistent with being led into a pasture on the north side of the road.
Saratoga in 1777. Josiah was supposedly released to the custody of Tories accompanying the British patrol, yet the accounts by Sanderson and Revere contain no mention of any American Tories, only of British officers. Josiah Nelson supposedly headed first toward Lexington Center after he was released, but then heard shooting, concluded the British were in Lexington, and rode instead to Bedford. But why did Josiah head toward Lexington Center at all, if his orders were to alert Bedford?

These puzzling inconsistencies in details may tell us more than we have previously noticed in Josiah Nelson’s tale and Lincoln’s colonial history.

Prior to that April night on the old North Road, Josiah Nelson appears to have been an energetic farmer and a substantial land-owner, although perhaps an undistinguished citizen. He seems never to have held any position of note in town government, the church, or the militia. Josiah’s father, Thomas Sr., was baptized in Rowley, Massachusetts, north of Boston, on August 19, 1688. In 1715, at the age of 27, Thomas Sr. married Tabitha Hobbs of Lexington, who was eleven years his junior. They had three children: twins Thomas Jr. and Tabitha, born on December 19, 1721; and Josiah, born on September 13, 1726. In 1724, Thomas Sr. bought 50 acres and a house on the old North Road in the section of Lexington that would later become part of Lincoln. His son Josiah was born there. Josiah began accumulating his own farm land as early as 1748, when he was only 22 years old. At the age of 25, Josiah married Elizabeth, age 23, on May 23, 1751. Soon afterward, he built a house a short distance to the west of his

---

13 See Hersey, *Heroes of the Battle Road*, p. 20, footnote: “The story of Josiah Nelson is the tradition handed down to his grandson, George Nelson. Josiah Nelson was in service at Cambridge, 1775, at Ticonderoga, 1776, and at Saratoga, 1777.” Malcolm repeats this claim about Josiah’s service, citing Hersey as her source (*The Scene of Battle*, p. 33). The 1905 Account identifies Josiah Nelson as a “minute man,” and Frank Hersey repeats this claim.

14 *Vital Records of Rowley, Massachusetts, Through 1849*, p. 144, has a record of the baptism of Josiah’s father, Thomas, on August 19, 1688. Lucy Small, “The Nelson House,” says that Josiah’s father was an immigrant from England. This appears to be an error caused by a confusion of Thomases. Josiah’s great-grandfather, Thomas, was born on July 14, 1636, in Cottingham, Yorkshire, England. He emigrated to Massachusetts at some point prior to his marriage to Ann Lambert of Rowley, MA, in 1659, and he died in Rowley on April 5, 1712. Josiah’s grandfather, Thomas, was born in Rowley to Thomas and Ann on March 10, 1660, he married Hannah French in 1690, and he died in Rowley on May 20, 1719. Josiah’s father, Thomas, was the child of Thomas and Hannah; he died November 3, 1770 in Lexington. See also Joyce Lee Malcolm, *The Scene of Battle*, p. 27.

15 The marriage record for Josiah and Elizabeth in 1751 does not give any surname for Josiah’s spouse, and the death record and cemetery headstone identifies her only as Elizabeth. See *Lexington, Massachusetts, Record of Births, Marriages, and Deaths to 1898* (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing, 1898), and *The Vital Records of the Town of Lincoln, Massachusetts, to 1850*, p. 169.
father’s, along the North Road. By 1775, Josiah’s total land holdings may have been 130 acres — some of it inherited from his father but most purchased on his own, a third of it in pasture and meadow, the rest in woodland or unimproved waste land. Josiah was also part-owner with his brother of a hop house where they brewed beer for nearby taverns.\(^\text{16}\)

Josiah and Elizabeth were together until March 20, 1776, when she died, at the age of 48.\(^\text{17}\) Through their 25 years of marriage, they had remained childless. Making a success of their farm without the help of sons and daughters must have been a challenge and a heartache for Josiah and Elizabeth.\(^\text{18}\) It was Elizabeth who, according to family tradition, heard the commotion in the road on that historic night in April 1775 and later helped bind up Josiah’s wound on the head.

Elizabeth is identified by the surname name of Abrams in Charles Hudson, *History of the Town of Lexington, Massachusetts* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), Vol. II, p. 491, and in the Lincoln Historical Society’s *Images of America: Lincoln*, p. 22. But I have been unable to find any other record for Elizabeth under the variations of Abrams, Abram, Abrahams, or Abraham. It seems more likely that her name was Elizabeth Flagg, one of twin daughters of Eleazer Flagg and Deborah Tompkins, born January 25, 1728/29 in Concord. The vital records of Grafton, Massachusetts, contain an intention of marriage entry on February 15, 1750 for “Flagg, Elizabeth and Josiah Nelson of Lexington.” (Before the town of Lincoln was formed in 1754 from portions of Concord, Weston, and Lexington, the Nelson family properties were located in Lexington, just east of the original Concord-Lexington town line.) In other records for the children of Eleazer and Deborah Flagg, Elisabeth is identified as Elizabeth Nelson, so the intention of marriage was apparently followed by marriage. If the Grafton clerk in fact meant February of the winter of 1750/51 (a common way of noting the winter months at the time), then it would be compatible with the record of marriage in Lexington of Josiah and Elizabeth in May, 1751. Moreover, there is no other appropriate “Josiah Nelson of Lexington” in the Lexington records for these years. Although Eleazer Flagg once owned land in Grafton, he and his wife Deborah resided in Concord. Eleazer sold his land in Grafton to his sons, and at some point after Eleazer’s death in March 1745 in Concord, it appears that his widow Deborah moved to Grafton, where her death in December 1753 is noted in Grafton’s vital records. If the daughter Elizabeth Flagg was born and lived in Concord until she moved to Grafton with her mother at the age of 16 or so, then the subsequent marriage of a Grafton miss to a young Lexington farmer seems quite plausible. I am especially grateful to Justine Gengras for this ingenious bit of genealogical sleuthing. See *Vital Records of Grafton, Massachusetts, To the End of the Year 1849* (Worcester, MA: Franklin Rice, 1906), pp. 204, and Charles A. Flagg, *The Descendants of Eleazer Flagg and His Wife Huldah Chandler of Grafton, Mass.* (Boston: D. Clapp & Co., 1903), pp. 11 and 177-178.

\(^\text{16}\) On Josiah Nelson’s land holdings and the hop house he owned with his brother Thomas, see Joyce Lee Malcolm, *The Scene of The Battle, 1775*, pp. 30-35.

\(^\text{17}\) The grave marker for Elizabeth in the Old Burying Ground of Lexington states: “Here lies the body of Mrs. Elizabeth Nelson (wife of Mr. Josiah Nelson), who departed this life March 20, 1776, in the 48th year of her age.” If Elizabeth was Elizabeth Flagg of Grafton, born in Concord in 1728/29, then she would indeed have been in her 48th year in 1776.

\(^\text{18}\) On January 29, 1765, Josiah and Elizabeth paid £4 to their neighbors, Joshua and Mary Brooks, in exchange for “a certain Negro boy named Peter about one year and seven months old.” See Nelson Family Papers, Box One, Document 2002.006.1.1, Lincoln Public Library, Massachusetts. Deacon Joshua Brooks resided along the North Road about a half-mile to the west of Josiah Nelson, at the Concord town line. In 1775, Brooks owned both a tannery and a slaughter house sited just across the road from his house. See Malcolm, *The Scene of The Battle*, pp. 67-73. John C. MacLean speculates that Peter was the child of Joshua Brooks’ slave, Jupiter, who had been allowed to marry a slave woman named Peg, owned by William Reed.
A year after Elizabeth’s death, Lexington town records note an intention of marriage between Josiah and “Mrs. Mellacent Bond of Lexington.” On April 24, 1777, they were married. Josiah was 51 years old; Millicent was 30. Their first child, Josiah, Jr., was born on January 23, 1778. Over the next fifteen years, Millicent bore six more children, the last a daughter named Mary in 1792. The last son, John, was born on March 1, 1789, when Josiah was 63 years old. John and his oldest brother, Josiah, Jr., distinguished themselves as house-wrights in later years, and their handiwork still survives in several historic houses in Lincoln. John married Lucy Viles of Lexington on May 16, 1820, and in turn, they were the parents of George Nelson, Josiah’s grandson, born June 13, 1822.

of Lexington. MacLean also notes that £4 was roughly the purchase price at the time of a cow and her calf, or of an acre of good land in Lincoln. See MacLean, A Rich Harvest (Lincoln, MA: Lincoln Historical Society, 1987), p. 217. See also the entry on February 4, 1756, of the intention of marriage of “Jupiter servant to Mr. Joshua Brooks, and Peg servant to William Reed, Esqr. of Lexington, with consent of their masters,” in The Vital Records of the Town of Lincoln, p. 148, and the later entry for “Jupiter, servant of Joshua Brooks of Lincoln, married Peggy, servant of Wm. Reed, Esq., of Lexington, August 2, 1756.” in Lexington, Massachusetts, Record of Births, Marriages, and Deaths to 1898, p. 162. There appears to be no record of the birth of a son to Jupiter and Peg. If the account of Peter’s age in the deed of sale is accurate, he would have been born around March, 1763.

William Reed was a lawyer of some prominence in Lexington. In his role as Justice of the Peace, Reed recorded the deposition by Sanderson, Loring, and Brown, describing their capture by the British patrol on April 19, 1775. Reed and Josiah Nelson were both members of the First Parish Church of Lexington.

There has been speculation that this child Peter, son of Jupiter and Peg, may have had a twin sister, baptized as Peggy, who remained with William Reed in Lexington. See Joyce Malcolm, Peter’s War: A New England Slave Boy and the American Revolution (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 5-6. Malcolm relies upon two entries in the Lexington vital records, reading “Peter, s. of Robbin & Peggy, bp. Oct 2, 1763” and “Peggy, d. of Robbin & Peggy, bp. Nov. 6, 1763.” But Rick Wiggin notes that other vital records identify Robbin (or Robin) as the slave of John Bridge and his wife as Margaret Tulop (or Tulip). There may be other confusions about which slave Peter is being referred to in Malcolm’s account. See Wiggin, Embattled Farmers, pg. 353, note 3.

Slaveholdings in New England households were usually small, so it could be difficult for slaves to find marriage partners within the household, and slave-owners were sometimes reluctant to take on the burden of raising the slave children that resulted from such marriages. See Carol Berkin, First Generations: Women in Colonial America (New York: Hill & Wang, 1996), p. 125.

The legal basis for slavery in Massachusetts was effectively ended in a series of court cases in 1781 that produced a state Supreme Judicial Court ruling that slavery was incompatible with the “Declaration of the Rights of the Inhabitants” contained in the Massachusetts constitution of 1780 and that therefore there were no grounds upon which slave-owners could assert ownership rights to their slaves. Yet because the Massachusetts legislature failed to outlaw slavery explicitly, the institution vanished only gradually in the state. By the time of the first federal census of 1790, there were no slaves recorded in Massachusetts.

The Vital Records of Lexington, Massachusetts, Through 1898, p. 127. In town records, the name of Josiah’s second wife is spelled variously as Mellacent, Melisent, Meliscent, Milesant, and Millicent. Her grave marker in the Old Burying Ground of Lexington spells it as Millicent. She was the daughter of Joshua Bond and Millicent Russell of Lexington, born July 12, 1747. Despite being labeled as “Mrs.” in the intention-of-marriage record, Millicent does not appear to have been married previously. It is likely the label simply meant “mistress,” used at the time in a manner similar to the modern “Miss.”
Neither Josiah nor Millicent were alive to celebrate George’s birth. Millicent had died on November 15, 1799, at the age of 52, and Josiah had died on February 26, 1810, at the age of 84.\footnote{Josiah is buried in the Old Burying Ground of Lexington, adjacent to the First Parish Church near the Lexington Common, as are his first wife Elizabeth, his second wife Millicent, and his parents. To judge from an obituary for Josiah, he was frail in body in his final years, but “he retained the use of his rational powers in a remarkable degree even to the last hour of his life.” The obituary is in the Nelson Family Papers and is identified in a penciled note on the document as “probably written by Rev. Avery Williams of Lexington; See Hudson's History, p. 266.” See Nelson Family Papers, Box One, Documents 2002.006.1.49-50, Lincoln Public Library, Massachusetts. The Reverend Avery Williams was pastor of the First Parish of Lexington from 1807 to 1819. See Charles Hudson, History of the Town of Lexington (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), p. 333. Malcolm erroneously states that Josiah “was declared an ‘insane person’ in old age and needed a guardian in his final years.” See Joyce Lee Malcolm, The Scene of Battle 1775, p. 35. In the Nelson family papers, there is an administrator’s deed selling a piece of land to pay debts, dated March 31, 1827, and granted by Stephen Patch, “guardian to Josiah Nelson of Lincoln, an insane person.” However, it is clear from the deed that this was Josiah Nelson, Jr., the oldest child of Josiah and Millicent Bond, born in 1778 and married to Anna Hoar in 1809. Anna is identified in the document as his wife, and she also signed this deed of sale. See Nelson Family Papers, Box Two, Document 2002.006.1.54, Lincoln Public Library, Massachusetts. Josiah Nelson, Jr. died in Lincoln on January 12, 1835, at the age of 57.\footnote{Lucy C. Small, “The Nelson House,” Lexington Times-Minute Man, April 11, 1930.} Everything that grandson George Nelson shared with later historians about Josiah’s adventure on April 19, 1775, he must have heard second-hand as stories told by his parents, aunts, and uncles, none of whom were yet born when the events took place.

When the town of Lincoln celebrated its 150th anniversary in 1904, and included George Nelson’s account of the family tradition, the house of Josiah Nelson still stood along the old North Road. It had been vacant for about 50 years, used as storage space on the Nelson family farm. Then on the night of July 4, 1908, some youths set it afire, and it was destroyed.\footnote{Lucy C. Small, “The Nelson House,” Lexington Times-Minute Man, April 11, 1930.} The foundation of bricks and stones is still visible in the Minute Man National Historical Park in Lincoln, about eighty feet from the historic Battle Road, just as it was then.

What also survives are the puzzles about how we are to reconcile the conflicting accounts of what happened outside Josiah Nelson’s house on that April night in 1775.

All the puzzles would go away if we simply assume that Josiah Nelson made up the whole story about his encounter with the British soldiers. After all, the only person in the town who could contradict him was his wife, Elizabeth, and she died less than a year later. (And perhaps their twelve-year-old slave, Peter.) Certainly the British patrol was not likely to show up again in Lincoln, to deny Josiah’s version of events.

But there are other ways to reconcile the details, without labeling Josiah as a fanciful liar. Let’s take some of the lesser details first. If Josiah had been tasked with carrying the alarm to
south Bedford, why did he initially ride east toward Lexington Center rather than going straight north to Bedford? If he had already been warned by a British patrol not to spread any alarm, wasn’t that enough to tell him that he should promptly spread the alarm to Bedford?

The oldest versions of Josiah’s story, in Wheeler’s history of 1890 and Brown’s of 1896, actually have him going directly to Bedford. It is the 1905 Account that complicates matters when it says Josiah went “toward Lexington,” heard musket fire as he reached the top of a nearby hill, and then “took the road to the left and rode to Bedford.” The two accounts from 1930 have Josiah heading toward Lexington, but then cutting “across country” or turning toward the left “on a back road” toward Bedford. In fact, all of these may be correct. According to a Park Service survey of the area, there was once a bridleway that ran along the boundary between the Nelson family properties and their neighbor to the southeast, James Whittemore. This bridle path ran through the fields from what is now Mill Street to Wood Street, cutting across the old North Road several hundred yards to the east of Josiah’s house. If Josiah took that bridleway (“across country” and “on a back road”), he would have first headed on the old North Road east toward Lexington, cut to the left and north onto the bridleway where it crossed the North Road, and then reached Wood Street into south Bedford. There was indeed musket fire in the countryside at that hour, not from the British column (which would not arrive in Lexington until sunrise) but from the local militias, clearing their muskets and signaling the alarm. In the stillness of an 18th century night, musket fire might be heard from a great distance.

On another small detail, how are the statements that Josiah was lame to be reconciled with the robustness of his life and with claims that he was a minute man and later did military service at Cambridge, Ticonderoga, and Saratoga?

Again, if we read the accounts carefully, they don’t say Josiah was permanently lame, only that he told his captors that he was lame as an excuse for why he could not keep up with them.

---

22 The bridleway as Josiah’s route is suggested by Joyce Lee Malcolm, The Scene of The Battle, 1775, pp. 1-2. An accompanying map indicates where the bridleway once was. Malcolm notes that present-day Wood Street was known in the 18th century as Clay Road, Cutler Road, and Bedford Road.

23 Paul Revere noted in his 1775 depositions, for instance, that as the party of British officers and their prisoners “got within about a half-mile of Lexington meeting-house, we heard a gun fired. The Major asked what it was for. I told him [it was] to alarm the country.” In his 1798 letter to Belknap, Revere states that as they were approaching Lexington, “the militia fired a volley of guns.” Clearing muskets was a common practice that involved firing a blank charge of gunpowder to dry out any moisture that might have accumulated in the barrel. The noise this makes is almost as loud as firing a musket ball.
This leaves open whether Josiah was permanently disabled, was feigning lameness as a form of resistance, or had temporarily injured himself when the soldiers on horseback prodded him into running (shoeless?) alongside on foot. At the end of Josiah’s life, his obituary noted that “he was long oppressed with numerous bodily infirmities, but supported these with uncommon patience and resignation.” Yet by itself, this does not confirm that Josiah was lame; he died at the age of 84, and old age brings many infirmities. The record of Josiah’s later military service might resolve the matter. At age 49 and married, Josiah would hardly have been a candidate for a long-term enlistment in the Continental Army in 1775 — and certainly not if he was lame. But at the beginning of the Revolution, the New England militias were the only army, and even after the Continental Army was formed, the militias provided reinforcement during campaigns throughout the War.

So did Josiah serve in the militia during the siege of Boston (April 1775-March 1776), leaving Elizabeth alone on the farm? Or in the reinforcement of Ticonderoga (July 1776), just three months after Elizabeth died? Or in the Saratoga campaign (July-October 1777), at the ripe age of 51, leaving his new, and newly-pregnant wife Millicent by herself? All male citizens in Lincoln above the age of 16 were supposed to be in the town’s militia. But only a portion of the militia were designated specifically as minute men, and Josiah would have been an unlikely recruit at age 49. Most members of the Lincoln minute company were in their 20’s and 30’s, and the oldest (Sergeant David Fisk) was 43. The earliest printed versions of Josiah’s tale, in Wheeler and Brown, do not in fact claim that Josiah was a minute man — only that he had been tasked to carry the alarm to Bedford. And indeed, Josiah is not listed on the roster of Lincoln’s minute men for April 19, 1775, nor is there any record of Josiah in the few town militia rosters for later years that have been located. (No roster for Lincoln’s militia company on April 19th has been found.)

As for Josiah’s supposed service at Cambridge, Ticonderoga, or Saratoga, the records are ambiguous. There are four Josiah Nelson’s listed in the compilation of Massachusetts Soldiers

---

24 The 1905 Account states that Josiah “arose, slipped on his breeches and hurried out without shoes or hat.”

25 See obituary, Nelson Family Papers, Box One, Documents 2002.006.1.49-50, Lincoln Public Library, Massachusetts.
and Sailors of the Revolutionary War. None are the Josiah Nelson of Lincoln. This cannot be decisive; the compilation is from official rosters, and surely some soldiers got missed in this roster or that. In a section of the Lincoln Treasurer’s records, dated March 9, 1779, and entitled “Here follows the town expenses in a war with Great Britain which commenced April 9th 1775,” there is an entry reading: “By twelve pounds ten shillings paid Mr Josiah Nelson for his service at Cambridge in the year 1776 and for service at Ticonderoga in the year 1776 and for service at Saratoga in the year 1777.” It may be significant that the town record notes “his service” for Josiah at Cambridge, but only “service” at Ticonderoga and Saratoga. In the case of Saratoga in 1777, there is other evidence that the service was performed not by Josiah but by Peter, the slave bought as an infant by Josiah and his first wife, Elizabeth. Peter was only 14 years old when he served at Saratoga, but if he was sturdy enough for that campaign, he might have been robust enough at age 13 to serve at Ticonderoga in 1776. Peter may have wanted the adventure, and Josiah may have had use for the town’s payment. As for “his service” at Cambridge in 1776,

26 The four Josiah Nelsons listed in Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors are: Josiah Nelson of Mendon, who enlisted in October, 1778 and served as a private in Capt. Nathan Sparhawk’s regiment; Josiah Nelson of Mendon, Massachusetts, who served as a lieutenant with Capt. Gershom’s Company; Josiah Nelson of Upton, listed with six men who mustered and marched from Upton to West Point in 1780; and Josiah Nelson who served as a sergeant in Lt. Seth Thayer’s Company of the 3rd Worcester regiment, enlisted in 1776 and discharged in November 1777. Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors of the Revolutionary War, (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1896-1908), Vol. XI, pp. 318-319.

At a point in the Revolution when towns had quotas of recruits they were to provide each year, it was not uncommon for men of one town to enlist in another, in exchange for payment of a bounty. However, it is improbable that Josiah Nelson of Lincoln would have traveled 35 miles from Lincoln to Mendon, Upton, or Worcester in pursuit of a bounty — and even more unlikely that with no apparent prior military experience, he could have enlisted as a sergeant or a lieutenant. Moreover, vital records for these towns contain other and younger Josiah Nelsons who are more likely candidates.

27 An Account of the Celebration of the Town of Lincoln, includes lists of town residents who served in the country’s wars up to 1905. For the Revolutionary War, Josiah Nelson is included in a “List of men who served at other times in the war for a longer or shorter period.” However, no source for this list is given. See 1905 Account, p. 238-239.

28 Massachusetts Soldiers and Sailors on the Revolutionary War contains this entry: “NELSON, PETER. Private, Capt. Samuel Farrar’s co., Col. Reed’s regt.; enlisted Sept. 29, 1777; discharged Nov. 7, 1777; service, 1 mo. 10 days; company detached from Col. Eleazer Brooks’s regt. to reinforce army under Gen. Gates at the Northward; also, Capt. Edward Richardson’s co., Col. Thomas Poor’s regt.; enlisted June 14, 1778, 3 days preceding march; discharged Feb. 24, 1779; service, 8 mos. 21 days, at North River, N. Y., including 11 days (220 miles) travel home; roll dated Watertown; also, same co. and regt.; payroll for Sept., 1778, dated West Point; also, same co. and regt.; pay roll for Nov., 1778, dated King’s Ferry.” Samuel Farrar and Eleazer Brooks were residents of Lincoln, and Farrar’s company was one of Lincoln’s militia units.

See also MacLean, who cites specific instances in which Lincoln town records of payment for service went to men who had in fact found substitutes who actually performed the service. See A Rich Harvest, p. 295.

Curiously, in the survey of property done by the Lincoln town assessors in 1774, the entry for Josiah Nelson indicates two male residents in his household for whom poll taxes were due, and no slaves. (Lincoln Public Library, Archives, Town of Lincoln Assessors Records, Valuation Book, 1774, 2003.021.1.4) Commonly, male sons sixteen
this might be Josiah’s own, volunteered close to home. Yet it is unclear what manner of service this might have been — perhaps in a supply or adjutant role that did not require a lame man to carry a musket. In sum, the historical record is clear that Josiah was not a minute man; it is ambiguous about whether he was lame or was ever a soldier in arms.29

A more significant puzzle lies in the fact that others on the old North Road that April night — Brown, Loring, Sanderson, and Paul Revere — make no mention of Josiah Nelson.30 Yet there is a plausible explanation that is consistent with their accounts. According to various sources, the British patrol was on the road east of Lexington “just before night,” and appears to have passed through Lexington soon afterward. Sunset that evening was just before 7 o’clock local time, and twilight would have given way to darkness about a half-hour later. The moon would be bright that night, but it did not rise until almost 10 o’clock, local time. Sanderson said that when he spotted the patrol passing his house, less than a mile east of the Lexington common, he took his musket and cartridge box and headed to the Buckman Tavern, “thinking something must be going on more than common.” After consulting with others and securing horses, Sanderson, Brown, and Loring mounted up at about nine o’clock, to follow the British patrol on the road to Lincoln.

Roughly an hour later, somewhere on the old North Road to the west of Josiah Nelson’s house, these three were taken captive by the British patrol, led into a nearby pasture, ordered to

29 For a contrary view on whether Josiah Nelson was ever a soldier, see Rick Wiggin, Embattled Farmers (Lincoln, MA: Lincoln Historical Society, 2013), pp. 351-352.

30 A long narrative written by one of the officers in the British column that day, Lt. William Sutherland of the 38th Regiment of Foot, contains a brief passage describing the reunion of Major Edward Mitchell’s patrol with the advancing column at “between 3 and 4 in the morning” to the east of Lexington Center. Mitchell’s party “told us the whole country was alarmed and [they] had galloped for their lives, or words to that purpose, that they had taken Paul Revere, but was obliged to let him go after having cut his girths and stirrups.” Sutherland’s recollection also makes no mention of Josiah Nelson, but given that Revere was a far bigger prize than the likes of a middle-aged Lincoln farmer, it would be no surprise if Josiah was not mentioned in Mitchell’s hasty report. See French, General Gage’s Informers, p. 44.
dismount, and subjected to questioning. Sanderson said they were held captive there until after two o’clock. In the meantime, as Sanderson and Revere’s accounts make clear, the British had split into detachments, some guarding the captives, some standing watch over the road nearby, while others apparently continued patrolling under the command of Major Mitchell.\(^{31}\) All of this allows for the possibility that Josiah Nelson’s encounter was with Major Mitchell’s detachment, and that it took place after Brown, Loring, and Sanderson were captured and before Paul Revere was seized. If this sequence is right, none of the others had anything to say about Josiah Nelson because they never saw him.\(^{32}\)

---

\(^{31}\) It is difficult to tease out of the witnesses’ accounts exactly how many soldiers were in the British patrol, although the most likely number is nine or ten. In their deposition of April 25, 1775, Sanderson, Loring, and Brown said they were intercepted by nine British officers at “about ten of the clock,” and they make no mention of additional soldiers joining them later. In his deposition of 1824, Sanderson said that he, Brown, and Loring were captured by nine British officers, and that “two of them stayed in the road, and the other seven with us, relieving each other from time to time.” Revere in his 1775 depositions and his 1798 letter to Belknap said that he saw two officers in the road ahead of him, that he called to his companions, Dr. Samuel Prescott and William Dawes, to come join him, and that in the next instant, there were four officers surrounding him. Revere’s accounts are ambiguous about whether these four officers were in addition to the two in the road, or included the two, although the most likely meaning is that there were four in all. Revere is clear, however, that some minutes later when he, Prescott, and Dawes spurred their horses to try an escape, Revere was intercepted by yet another six officers who emerged from the wooded edge of the pasture. It is possible — perhaps even likely — that these six officers were from among the seven officers that Sanderson said took turns standing guard over the prisoners. This does not rule out the possibility that during the four hours in which Sanderson and the others were held prisoner, Major Mitchell left the captives under the guard of a few soldiers and continued patrolling the road with the rest, returning from time to time to the pasture. Indeed, in all three of his accounts, Revere says that after his escape was thwarted by the six British officers, Major Mitchell left him to be interrogated by others while Mitchell and four soldiers promptly resumed patrolling the road. See Morgan, *Paul Revere’s Three Accounts of his Famous Ride.*

Fischer provides the names of six members of Mitchell’s patrol, which he says numbered at least nine officers and sergeants when it reached Lincoln, but he also notes that “there may have been as many as seven additional members of Mitchell’s party.” See *Paul Revere’s Ride,* pp. 385 and 315.

---

\(^{32}\) This is the sequence of events that Fischer gives, although he gives no indication that he noticed the contradictory accounts and deliberately proposed this sequence in order to resolve the contradictions. See *Paul Revere’s Ride,* pp. 91-92.

It is also possible that Loring, Brown, Sanderson, and Revere never saw Josiah Nelson because, as they were being taken back toward Lexington after two o’clock, the British patrol split into two contingents, one escorting the captives and the other following some distance behind and confronting Josiah when he ran from his house. This sequence would match the Nelson family tradition on a number of points, including the time of night, the direction that the British patrol was headed, and the presence of Revere and others in the party. However, there are two difficulties with this sequence. It implies that Major Mitchell would have reduced the guards around his four mounted captives, in order to have some of his soldiers lag behind (for an unknown purpose), despite their sense of urgency in carrying a warning back to the main British column. And, it would place Josiah’s encounter with the British, and his departure for Bedford, until after 3 am — contrary to the credit Josiah gets in Abram Brown’s version of the tale for bringing an early alarm to south Bedford. I am grateful to Prof. Joyce Lee Malcolm for pointing out this possible sequence of events to me in private correspondence, although I judge this sequence to be less likely than others.
If a detachment under Major Mitchell did continue patrolling along the road after capturing Loring, Brown, and Sanderson, it would explain another aspect of Josiah Nelson’s tale — and underscore Josiah’s bravery. According to the earliest versions of the tale, Josiah was roused from sleep by the sound of horsemen on the road. Unless Josiah’s hearing (or that of his wife) was exceptionally acute, it is not clear how he could have heard British horsemen so far off in the distance that he had time to collect his wits, grab his breeches, and make it to the road in time to meet them in front of his house. Even at a mild and noisy trot, the horsemen could have covered the distance between the pasture where they held their captives and the site of Josiah’s house in little more than a minute. However, if Major Mitchell’s detachment had been making periodic passes up and down the road that night, Josiah could have been awakened as the British passed in one direction and then encountered them on the road outside his door as they returned some time later. If so, then Josiah was running a substantial risk when he saddled his horse and rode toward Bedford on the same road, knowing that the British detachment was still in the neighborhood and patrolling.

We are left to speculate about the time at which Josiah’s encounter with the British soldiers might have occurred. According to the 1905 Account, Nelson family tradition placed the event at around two o’clock. That is at least possible, although an hour or so earlier seems more likely. Sanderson’s 1824 deposition says that he was detained in the pasture “till quarter past two o’clock,” and that he knew this because a British officer consulted his watch and told him the time. According to Sanderson, the capture of Paul Revere happened soon after that. After Revere, Prescott, and Dawes were seized and led into the pasture, they spurred their horses in an attempt at escape. Prescott went left, Dawes went back toward the road, and Revere headed “to the right towards a wood at the bottom of the pasture” — whereupon six more officers appeared from the wood, among whom was the officer that Revere later learned was Major Edward Mitchell. Since we know from other sources that Prescott made his escape to the north into a swamp and later regained the road to the west near the Hartwell residences, when Revere spurred his horse to the right, he presumably headed east and south, broadly in the direction of Josiah Nelson’s house. If Major Mitchell’s detachment was already in place at the edge of the wood, it must have arrived there sometime before Revere was seized. And in turn, if it was Major Mitchell’s detachment that confronted Josiah Nelson, held him hostage briefly, and then released him (and this is admittedly a substantial if), then the episode must have occurred much earlier.
than two o’clock — enough earlier for Josiah to bandage his wound, mount his horse, and clear the old North Road on his way to Bedford before Revere, Prescott, and Dawes arrived.33

This timing would also have to be compatible with what we know about the alarm reaching Bedford. Revere had brought the news of the British troop movements to Lexington at about midnight. Dawes arrived a half-hour later, and after “we refreshed ourselves,” they set off for Concord, joined along the way by Prescott. Other alarm riders were sent at the same time westward along other roads, including the northwest road directly from Lexington to Bedford Center. Abram Brown notes both that “Nathan Munroe and Benjamin Tidd, at Captain Parker’s request, went up to Bedford from Lexington, some time in the evening, and, according to the sworn statement of one of them, ‘notified the inhabitants,’” and that the alarm “sounded in the extreme south part of Bedford by [Josiah] Nelson explains the readiness with which the minute men and militia of that part of Bedford reported at Jeremiah Fitch’s tavern in Bedford Centre when the alarm from Lexington was first given in the opposite [northern] part of the town.”34 Captain John Parker, commander of Lexington’s militia, said that he received the alarm at “about one of the clock,” so he presumably dispatched Munroe and Tidd shortly afterward. The distance Munroe and Tidd covered to Bedford Center was about the same as the distance from Josiah Nelson’s house to Bedford Center along roads coming from the south. If the militia and minute men from south Bedford reached Fitch’s Tavern not long after those alerted by Munroe and Tidd did, then perhaps Josiah was already spreading the alarm in south Bedford between one and two o’clock — and hearing the militia’s musket fire from Lexington Center. If this timing makes sense, it would again explain why Sanderson and Revere made no mention of Josiah in their accounts. By the time Josiah was on his way, Sanderson, Loring, and Brown were already prisoners, and Revere, Prescott, and Dawes were still on the road from Lexington Center to Lincoln, stopping at each house to “alarm all the inhabitants till we got to Concord.”35

33 The maps in Joyce Lee Malcolm, *The Scene of the Battle*, show the distances and locations of fields, roads, and houses in this area.


35 John R. Galvin suggests that Josiah was assaulted by the British patrol as it was first passing on its way toward Concord, and before it had set the trap that captured Brown, Loring, and Sanderson — presumably an hour or so after the patrol had passed through Lexington Center, or around 8:30 or 9 pm. (The distance is three miles, there was no moon yet to show the road, and the patrol seems to have been in no particular hurry at that point in the evening, so an hour in transit would be plausible.) See Galvin, *The Minute Men* (London: Brassey’s, 1989),
One might wonder, of course, what kind of warning Josiah would have carried to south Bedford, if he began his ride before Revere, Prescott, and Dawes passed by his house with specific news about the British column. However, it would not have been difficult for Josiah to infer that if British patrols were on the road in Lincoln and trying to stop alarm riders, then Bedford should be alerted. The prospect of a British foray toward Concord was a topic of open conversation well before April 19th. *The Pennsylvania Journal*, a newspaper in Philadelphia, for instance, published the following letter from its correspondent in Boston:

March 30 — This morning at daylight, the troops at Boston beat to arms, and five regiments marched out, with Earl Percy at their head. It was supposed they were going to Concord, where the Provincial Congress is now sitting. A quantity of provisions and warlike stores are lodged there. Several expresses were immediately sent away to give notice of their marching. Important consequences were apprehended; but happily, they only went a few miles out and then returned. The town and country were alarmed, and many of them got equipped for a march. ... The military spirit and resolution prevailing in this province, in support of their liberties and constitution, is astonishing. ... It is said that forty or fifty of the [British] troops were so fatigued by their march, that they could not keep up with their fellow-soldiers on their return. It is also said they are intending to go out again soon.\(^{36}\)

The question Josiah reportedly blurted out to the British horsemen, “Have you heard anything about when the Regulars are coming out?” would have been a natural one for an appointed alarm rider to ask.

This speculative interpretation of the timing of events along the North Road, of course, raises doubts about the prudence of the British patrol. If the mission of the British soldiers was to impede the spreading of the alarm, and if they already had Brown, Loring, and Sanderson held captive in a pasture a half-mile or so to the west of Nelson’s house, what sense was there in releasing Josiah with just a sword slash, a warning, and a threat? Perhaps they judged that an old

---

man on foot (and lame?) was not part of the alarm-rider network and thus posed no particular danger.  

More important, this speculative interpretation of events calls into question any part of the tale that has Josiah Nelson in the company of Paul Revere that night. Yet in fact, the first published version of Josiah’s adventure in 1890 stated only that Paul Revere had been captured at “about the same time and near the same place” as Josiah’s encounter. And the 1905 Account states only that “It is said that Paul Revere was a prisoner with this party,” which is tentative about both fact and source. It is the accounts by Small and Hersey in 1930 that transform that tentative phrase, “it is said … ,” into elaborate narratives — narratives that are infused with phrases and details clearly drawn from sources (such as Revere’s depositions) that were not originally part of Nelson family lore. This seems to be a case where some modern historians have contaminated a family tradition rather than clarifying it.

Assuming, then, that the earliest versions of Josiah Nelson’s adventure are likely the most accurate, we are compelled to confront perhaps the most significant part of his story: the presence that night of American Tories.

The earliest versions by Wheeler, Brown, and the 1905 Account are incrementally specific on this point. There were Tories serving as guides for the British patrol, at least three of them. They apparently lived nearby, for they “were men of [Josiah’s] acquaintance,” they “knew him well.”

Fischer speculates that it was Major Mitchell himself who slashed Josiah Nelson. Fischer describes Mitchell variously as “excitable,” “not a happy man,” “showing the strain,” “in high excitement,” “highly excited,” and “mercurial.” See Fischer, Paul Revere’s Ride, pp. 91, 133, 184, 185, 189, and 194. Apart from Revere’s own account of how he was treated by Mitchell, it is not clear what evidence Fischer relies upon for his judgment about Major Mitchell’s excitable nature. Galvin also proposes that “the saber-swinging officer was probably Mitchell; his subordinates would have been hesitant about striking a provincial.” See Galvin, The Minute Men, p. 111.

Historian Arthur Tourtellot, notes that “At times it appeared that there were more riders abroad than there were soldiers; many of them were meeting each other, dodging each other, or capturing each other. The general confusion of this whirl of communications and espionage was further augmented by the casual attitudes of many of the riders. Just as the British officer didn’t bother about Revere after chasing him three hundred yards [in Charlestown, shortly after Revere began his ride], other officers that night caught scouts, chatted with them, and let them go. … Certainly the officers had been under orders from Gage to treat the colonists they encountered with respect, but they carried it to such extremes that they nearly defeated the whole purpose of their being out at all.” See Tourtellot, Lexington and Concord (New York: Norton, 1959), pp. 96-97

Abram Brown’s Beneath Old Roof Trees (1896) is cited by Frank Warren Coburn as his source, in The Battle of April 19, 1775, published in 1912, where Coburn gives a quick summary of the Josiah Nelson tale. However, Coburn also notes that he had a conversation personally with George A. Nelson in 1890, during which George and Coburn walked the area of the old Nelson farm, discussed the events of April 19th, located the historical landmarks, etc. The fact that Coburn makes no mention of Josiah being held captive in the same party with Paul Revere may indicate that George A. Nelson was making no such claim in 1890. See Coburn, pp. 38 and 103.

---

37 Fischer speculates that it was Major Mitchell himself who slashed Josiah Nelson. Fischer describes Mitchell variously as “excitable,” “not a happy man,” “showing the strain,” “in high excitement,” “highly excited,” and “mercurial.” See Fischer, Paul Revere’s Ride, pp. 91, 133, 184, 185, 189, and 194. Apart from Revere’s own account of how he was treated by Mitchell, it is not clear what evidence Fischer relies upon for his judgment about Major Mitchell’s excitable nature. Galvin also proposes that “the saber-swinging officer was probably Mitchell; his subordinates would have been hesitant about striking a provincial.” See Galvin, The Minute Men, p. 111.

38 Abram Brown’s Beneath Old Roof Trees (1896) is cited by Frank Warren Coburn as his source, in The Battle of April 19, 1775, published in 1912, where Coburn gives a quick summary of the Josiah Nelson tale. However, Coburn also notes that he had a conversation personally with George A. Nelson in 1890, during which George and Coburn walked the area of the old Nelson farm, discussed the events of April 19th, located the historical landmarks, etc. The fact that Coburn makes no mention of Josiah being held captive in the same party with Paul Revere may indicate that George A. Nelson was making no such claim in 1890. See Coburn, pp. 38 and 103.
well as an honored citizen,” they “liked Nelson,” they knew where the colonists’ arms were stored, and they believed that their threat to return and “burn his house over his head” would be credible to Josiah. Moreover, this element of the tale does not seem like the kind of gratuitous addition that might accumulate in a family tradition. After all, the story would be good enough and complete if the British officers themselves had slashed Josiah, threatened him, and then set him loose. In this sense, the pointlessness of including Tories in the story makes this element seem all the more authentic.

Might Josiah have mistaken some of the British officers for Americans, inferring that they must be Tories because they did not appear to be soldiers? Perhaps, although others who saw the patrol that evening said that the officers were dressed in uniforms under their cloaks, including holstered pistols and swords. The weather was clear that night, with a waning gibbous moon, three days past full and near its peak in the sky, at a time of year when the New England trees are still bare of leaves — reasonably favorable conditions for Josiah to make out what manner of men his captors were as they hustled him along the road. And in any case, the versions by Brown and the 1905 Account said that Josiah and the Tories recognized each other.

Why didn’t Sanderson or Revere report that there were Tories accompanying the British soldiers? Perhaps for the same reason they did not report seeing Josiah — because the Tories entered and left the scene after Sanderson was captured and before Revere arrived.

39 Solomon Brown, who was later captured by the British patrol, had observed the soldiers earlier that evening on the road east of Lexington, and “he had discovered by the occasional blowing aside of their top coats that they were armed.” A short while later, Elijah Sanderson also recognized the British as soldiers when they passed by his house east of Lexington, “all dressed in blue wrappers.” Even later, shortly after he landed in Charlestown and began his ride, Paul Revere had to elude two British soldiers hiding ahead in the road: “I got near enough to see their holsters and cockades.” See Solomon Brown’s deposition in Lemuel Shattuck, History of Concord (Concord, 1835), p. 341; William Munroe’s and Elijah Sanderson’s depositions of 1824 in Phinney, History of the Battle of Lexington; and Paul Revere’s depositions of 1775 in Morgan, Paul Revere’s Three Accounts.

40 The moon was 87% sunlit that night, and it reached transit at 2:42 a.m. Eastern Standard Time. In the 1770s, however, times were expressed in local solar or “sundial” time, with Noon set at the moment when the sun reached its zenith each day. In local solar time for Boston on April 18-19, 1775, the moon reached its highest point in the night-time sky at 2:58 a.m. See Donald W. Olson and Russell L. Doescher, “Astronomical Computing: Paul Revere’s Midnight Ride,” Sky and Telescope, April 1992, pp. 437-440. Revere said in his depositions that “the moon shone bright” when he began his ride at eleven o’clock, and Sanderson said in his 1824 deposition that “it was a bright moon-light after the rising of the moon, and a pleasant evening.” It was obviously bright and clear enough around two o’clock for Revere to spot some distance ahead the two British horsemen who intercepted him, even though, according to Revere, they were standing under a (leafless?) tree. I have stood at the surviving foundation of Josiah Nelson’s house, on a night when the trees were bare of leaves and the moon was in the same phase as that night of April 18-19, 1775. The moonlight is indeed very bright — bright enough so that it is possible to discern colors of clothing and readily make out figures in the road.
It is commonly remarked that history is written by the victors. In New England, where patriotic furor ran especially strong, the drama of the Revolution has been cast as a battle of heroic Americans against the oppressive British. Elsewhere in the colonies, in places such as New York or the Carolinas, the war had more the character of a true revolution — a fratricidal contest between Americans about the ultimate shape of government and society — in which the British were supporting players. There were Loyalists as well as Patriots in revolutionary Massachusetts. Some were benign Loyalists, such as Lincoln’s own James Nichols, a recent immigrant from England who deserted from the ranks of the Lincoln militia at the North Bridge in Concord on April 19th, and then later deserted again from the army besieging Boston, crossing the British lines and taking refuge in the city. Others were active, even zealous Loyalists who armed themselves that April morning and marched with the British column to Concord. In the vanguard of the British column, scouting the path ahead, was at least one Tory guide, Daniel Murray, a young Harvard graduate from Worcester, and perhaps another, Thomas Beaman of Petersham. Further back in the column were Loyalists in civilian garb, carrying muskets or serving as auxiliaries. And scattered in the countryside, other Loyalists had passed information to the British about where the patriots had hidden the arms and ammunition that were the target of the British action that day. On the Massachusetts Committee of Safety, Dr. Benjamin Church betrayed the American cause by selling information to the British. If there were Loyalists in the highest Patriot circles on that historic day, why not on the country roads?

41 The story of James Nichols is told by Amos Baker of Lincoln, the last surviving participant at the North Bridge, in his affidavit of April 22, 1850. The text is in Hersey, *Heroes of the Battle Road*, pp. 33-37. Wiggin notes service records containing mentions of a James Nichols that, pieced together, may indicate that Nichols did not desert but instead enlisted and served in Patriot military units as late as 1778. Wiggin cautions that these records may not all be for the same James Nichols, however. See *Embattled Farmers*, pp. 355-358.

42 See French, *General Gage’s Informers*, p. 43. Beaman subsequently served as an officer in one of the Loyalist militia companies formed by the British inside of besieged Boston. See also Fischer, *Paul Revere’s Ride*, pp. 127, 184, 240. The *Massachusetts Spy* (Boston) of May 3, 1775, carried the following account of an episode on April 19th: “A young man, unarmed, who was taken prisoner by the enemy at Lexington and made to assist in carrying off their wounded, says he saw a barber who lives in Boston, thought to be one Warden, with the [British] troops, and that he heard them say he was one of their pilots. He likewise saw said barber fire twice upon our people.” Quoted in Frank Moore, *The Diary of the Revolution: A Centennial Volume* (Hartford: J.B. Burr Publishing, 1876), p. 64. And in *The Pennsylvania Journal* (Philadelphia), May 24, 1775, quoting a letter from a correspondent in Boston: “April 20 — One Mansfield, a breeches-maker in Boston, who went out with the [British] troops yesterday, was in the skirmish fired at by the Regulars through mistake — they taking him to be one of the provincials. The ball entered his neck and came out of his mouth. Wretches like him often meet their just reward.” Quoted in Moore, p. 67.
Who these Tories were — or even if they were — may lie beyond our knowing. Much of what we know about the events of April 19th we have learned from the depositions that were taken from Patriot participants within a week or so after the battles. They were collected in a deliberate effort to persuade American and European publics that the King’s soldiers fired the first shots and behaved in a barbaric manner. For understandable reasons, the Tories had far less incentive to make public declarations about where they were and what they did that day. Quite likely many Loyalist diaries and documents were destroyed or carried away when their authors later fled to Nova Scotia, to Canada, or to Britain. And for those who stayed, their children and grandchildren may not have been so eager to keep alive the family tales of Tory exploits. The victors celebrate their history, the vanquished must be more cautious.

A noted historian has remarked that the deeds of Tories “have rarely been noticed in American histories of the battles” on April 19, 1775. Perhaps one of those deeds has been right in front of us all along — in the tale about what happened to Josiah Nelson, on Lincoln soil, along the old North Road.

---

43 Fischer, Paul Revere’s Ride, p. 240. The source commonly cited on the participation of Tories that April day is Allen French’s General Gage’s Informers, which was published in 1932. Richard C. Wiggin, Embattled Farmers (Lincoln, MA: Lincoln Historical Society, 2013), pp. 449-455, provides brief profiles of four Tories who were residents of Lincoln and provided military service to the British during the War: Joseph Adams, Jr.; Ebenezer Cutler, Jr.; Zaccheus Cutler; and Charles Russell. Of these, only Charles Russell was living in Lincoln in April, 1775. Although their parents still resided in Lincoln, Ebenezer Cutler, Jr., had moved to Oxford, Massachusetts, in 1764, and Zaccheus Cutler had moved to Amherst, New Hampshire, in 1768, so both were living some 50 miles from Lincoln. However, Joseph Adams, Jr., was living in Townsend, Massachusetts, some thirty miles away, and he maintained ties to Lincoln through his parents, Joseph and Mary Adams, as well as through his father-in-law, the Reverend William Lawrence. Wiggin speculates that soon after his marriage to Lovey Lawrence of Lincoln, Joseph Adams, Jr., may have begun providing information to British authorities about the Patriots’ storage of military supplies. Joseph Adams, Jr., was 26 years old in 1775 and had lived in Lincoln for most of those years, so his local knowledge would have been recent and presumably quite good. However, I have as yet found no evidence that any of these men accompanied the British patrol on the night of April 18-19, 1775.
Appendix

These are the full passages about Josiah Nelson in the sources referred to above.


In the northeasterly part of Lincoln, within a few rods of the Lexington line, dwelt Mr. Josiah Nelson. He was an ardent patriot, and the men of Bedford had arranged with him to give the warning in case an expedition should be sent out. Awakened in the night by the noise of horsemen riding along the road, he rushed out half-dressed to ascertain the cause of the riding, and on asking what it meant, he was struck with a sword, gashing his head, and told he was a prisoner. At the same moment, he was surrounded by several men, some of whom were British scouts, and the others, evidently Tories, acting as guides. After detaining him awhile, the scouts left him in charge of the Tories, who soon released him, telling him to go into his house, and threatening, if he gave any alarm or showed any light, to burn his house over his head. Nevertheless, after dressing himself and his wound, he started to give the alarm at Bedford. He had not two miles to go to reach some of the Bedford patriots. About the same time and near the same place, Paul Revere was captured on his midnight ride — immortalized in song.

From Abram English Brown, Beneath Old Roof Trees (Boston, 1896), pp. 218-219:

In the north-easterly part of the town, near the Lexington line, and not far from Bedford, dwelt Mr. Josiah Nelson, an ardent patriot, with whom arrangements were made to extend an alarm in case of danger. Nelson was awakened in the night of the 18th of April by the noise of horsemen passing up the road. He rushed out half-dressed to ascertain the cause of the passing, and instead of information was given a blow with a sword, gashing his head, and was told that he was a prisoner. He was immediately surrounded by a party of British scouts and Tories, who acted as guides; after detaining him a while, the scouts left him in charge of the Tories, who knew him well as an honored citizen, and they soon released him, with an order to go into his house and extinguish the light. They threatened to burn his house over his head if he gave any alarm, or showed any light. But this did not cause the patriot to shrink from duty. After dressing himself and his wound, he started to keep his promise to the Bedford neighbors, a little north of his home. This alarm, sounded in the extreme south part of Bedford by Nelson, explains the readiness with which the minute-men and militia of that part of Bedford reported at Jeremiah Fitch's tavern in Bedford Centre when the alarm from Lexington was first given in the opposite part of the town.

From “Notes on Illustrations,” in An Account of the Celebration by the Town of Lincoln, Massachusetts, April 23, 1904, of the 150th Anniversary of its Incorporation 1754-1904 (Boston, 1905), pp. 220-221:

The following is a tradition as handed down to George Nelson, the grandson of Josiah Nelson: “On the 19th of April, 1775, at about 2 o’clock in the morning, Josiah Nelson, who had been appointed a minute man to keep watch and notify Bedford when the British spies were coming, was awakened by his wife, who told him that she heard voices of persons going by and that he had better go out and inquire if they had heard anything about the British. He arose, slipped on his breeches and hurried out without shoes or hat, and was soon among a party of fifteen or sixteen horsemen who were riding toward Boston. It is said that Paul Revere was a prisoner with this party. Josiah Nelson, thinking they were some neighbors going to market, ran in among the horsemen before he looked up to make sure who they were, and called out, ‘Have you heard anything about when the Regulars are coming out?’ One of the men, who was a British officer, drew his sword and said, ‘God d — you, we will let you know when they are coming,’ and struck him on the head, cutting a gash three inches
long. They then said, ‘You are our prisoner and must come along with us,’ and he was made to walk between the soldiers. When they were a short distance below the Hastings house he told them he couldn’t walk as fast as they rode, for he was lame. They said they couldn’t ride as slow as he walked, for they were in a hurry, so they left him with three men. When he began to talk with these men he found they were men of his acquaintance, Tories, who had been to Concord to show the spies where the ammunition was stored. They told him if he would go home and not light a light, they would let him go, but if he lighted a light they would burn his house over his head. He went back to his house, lighted a candle and had his wife bind up his head; then he loaded his horse pistols and saddled the old mare, put on the pistols and followed after the soldiers toward Lexington. When he reached the top of the hill just west of the town, he heard them firing on the Common. He knew then that the Regulars had surely come, so he took the road to the left and rode to Bedford to notify that town, as he was appointed to do.

From Lucy C. Small, “The Nelson House,” Lexington Times-Minute Man, April 11, 1930:

It had been the habit of the farmers to start in the very early hours of the morning from Concord and Lexington and Lincoln as well as other nearby towns, to carry their produce to market. Word had been passed to Josiah Nelson that the British were expected along the road and that at first indication of their approach, he should carry the word to the people of Bedford so that they might be warned of the breaking of the storm, and lend whatever aid possible in the colonial cause. At about 2:00 o’clock on the morning of April 19, 1775, he heard the clatter of hoofs in the distance. His wife, thinking that it was the farmers going to the city with their wares, suggested that he stop them and ask if they had seen any signs of the British. He too thought the farmers were passing, so he arose, slipped on his breeches, and hurried out without shoes or hat, in order that he might inquire what they knew before they had all passed his house.

At his appearance, the party of nearly 20 horsemen stopped. Nelson ran to the midst of them and, before making certain whether or not they were friends, sang out “Have you heard anything about when the Regulars are coming out?” He soon discovered his error. He found himself with a group of British soldiers, one of whom drew his sword, struck him on the head, cutting a deep gash in it, and crying, “We will let you know when they are coming!” Another officer claimed him as a prisoner, and gave a terse command that he should march on with them. In doing so, Nelson discovered that the horsemen were escorting Paul Revere back to Lexington, having captured him a short time before when he, with Dawes and Prescott, attempted to make their escape. Dawes and Prescott succeeded, but Revere, as he tried to reach a neighboring wood, was intercepted by the party of officers who now had him a prisoner. The party moved on for some time when Nelson who, of course, was on foot, complained that he could not keep up with the horses, for he was lame. The officers, in turn, complained that they could not ride as slowly as he walked, since they were in a great hurry.

After a short discussion as to what should be done with him, it was decided to leave him with three men of his acquaintance who, though acquaintances, were the staunch Tories who had been to Concord to show the British where the colonists had stored their ammunition. Liking Nelson, they told him he might return to his home if he would give them his word not to light his house or give any alarm of what had happened. They threatened to burn his house should he betray them in any manner.

Nelson agreed to this, but immediately on returning to his house, he lighted a lamp, had his wife attend to his wound, and inside of an hour he was on his way through the woods to Lexington Centre. Nelson was a man of honor, but his duty to his country preceded all others. By the time he reached the top of the hill just west of the town, he heard firing on the Common. Realizing that the British were in Lexington, he did not journey the rest of the way to the Centre, but cut across country so that he could warn the good people of Bedford as he had previously been instructed to do.
And so ends the story of Josiah Nelson. There are no further references to him in the annals of history ….

From Frank Wilson Cheney Hersey, *Heroes of the Battle Road 1775* (Boston: Perry Walton, printer, 1930), pp. 18-20:

When [Paul] Revere had mounted, the Major took the reins out of his hand, saying, “By God, sir, you are not to ride with reins, I assure you!” and gave them to an officer to lead him.

When they reached the road, the officers formed a circle round the three Lexington men — Solomon Brown, Jonathan Loring, Elijah Sanderson — and a peddler who had also been detained. The Major ordered Revere to be led in front.

“We are now going towards your friends,” he said. “If you attempt to run, or we are insulted, we will blow your brains out.”

Then the whole troop set off towards Lexington at a quick pace. They soon came to the farmhouse of Josiah Nelson, which stood a few rods north of the road. The thudding of so many hoofs awakened the sleeping farmer. He had been appointed a Minute Man to keep watch and carry the alarm to Bedford in case the British marched for Concord. His wife, hearing the voices of persons and thinking that they were neighboring farmers going to market in the early hours of morning, as was the custom, told him he had better inquire if they had heard anything of the British. He arose, slipped on his breeches and hurried out without shoes or hat. He ran in among the horsemen before he looked up to make sure who they were, and called out, “Have you heard anything about when the Regulars are coming out?”

One of the officers drew his sword, and crying, “We will let you know when they are coming!” struck him on the crown of his head, cutting a long gash. As Nelson sprang back, the warm blood trickled over his face and dripped to the ground. It was the first blood shed in the Revolution. This blood was to be dearly paid for on this very spot the next day.

“You are our prisoner and must come along with us,” cried the Major, and he ordered Nelson to walk between the horsemen. When they were a short distance below the Hastings house, Nelson complained that he could not walk as fast as they rode, for he was lame. The officers replied that they could not ride as slowly as he walked, for they were in a hurry. Consequently, Major Mitchell left him in charge of three Tories, who had been acting as guides of the party. Nelson found that they were men of his acquaintance. They decided to let him go home, but gave him this warning: “Go back to your house and stay there and don’t light a light. If you give any alarm or light a light, we will burn your house over your head!”

Once under his roof again, Josiah Nelson lighted a candle and had his wound dressed by his wife. When the retreating hoof-beats were lost in distance, he set lighted candles in the windows. Then, loading his horse pistols and saddling the mare, he followed after the troop down the Lexington road. He took a turn to the left and sped on the back road to Bedford, where he gave the alarm as he was appointed to do, in all the south part of that town.