



*Stow's Minuteman Company keeps the town's Revolutionary War past alive by taking part in 10 to 12 events each year, including parades in Stow and other communities, and encampments recreating camp life. Here, they marched in the 2009 Memorial Day ceremonies.*

## 5. Minuteman Things

**T**he New England concept of militia – ordinary citizens trained to take up arms in an emergency – is a legacy of olde England, exemplified by the English Muster Law of 1572.

Militias were present in the American colonies from the beginning, reflecting concerns about possible French or Spanish incursions as much as about Indians. In 1645, Massachusetts Bay Colony ordered every town to have 30 percent of its men ready for service on a half-hour's notice.

In the early days militia training tended to be poor and musters more social events than military preparedness. It was only during King Philip's War (1675-76) that an effective fighting force came into being.

**By the time of Stow's organization in 1683,** towns were required to maintain supplies of ammunition and other military

stores. In Stow, these were kept in the Meeting House and, eventually, in a brick powderhouse erected on Pilot Grove Hill.

With continuing tensions between settlers and Indians from regions to the north, Stow voted in 1698 to fortify the minister's house as a garrison. A company of militia was organized.

For a time, beginning in 1689, Massachusetts maintained militia units called "Snowshoe Men," each equipped with "a good pair of snowshoes, one pair of moggisons and one hatchet," to be prepared to march on a moment's warning.

**As Stow's population grew, its militia was formed into two companies** based in the northern and southern sections of the town.

During the French and Indian War (1755-63), Stow militiamen took part in



**The “Stow Musket” is a Revolutionary War firearm** believed to have been acquired by Ichabod Stow in 1778 in Rhode Island and passed down in the Stow family. In 2009, the generosity of Stow resident Jean McFedries enabled its purchase as a town artifact. It’s now displayed in Randall Library.

successful campaigns at Crown Point, near Lake George, and in Nova Scotia.

**In 1774, as tensions with the British increased,** the Massachusetts Congress called for each town’s militia to include handpicked companies of “minutemen” – soldiers who would be ready to serve “on the shortest notice.”

Each minuteman was to have a musket or other weapon, 30 rounds of ball and powder and a bayonet or hatchet. He was to keep his arms and equipment with him at all times, ready to march.

**Some towns declared that all their militiamen** were ready on the minute and didn’t need special designation. No record has been found terming Stow’s militiamen as minutemen, but in view of their quick assembly on April 19 (and Stow’s ardent patriotism), it’s arguable that they fit into this last category.

By April of 1775, Massachusetts had some 12,000 men enlisted in 47 regiments of militia. About a quarter served in minuteman companies. Far from being the sturdy individualists so often portrayed as spontaneously mobilizing to pick off the British, the militia of 1775 was well-organized, well-trained and well-led.

Stow’s soldiers were part of Col. William Prescott’s regiment of ten militia and seven minuteman companies from nine towns, including Pepperell, Westford and Groton.

**In March, 1775, in anticipation of a British raid,** portions of the military stores kept in Concord were moved to Stow and Sudbury for safeguarding. Cannon were hidden in woods near the Lower Village, powder and other stores in the Meeting House and powderhouse. As British Regulars marched on Lexington and Concord on April 19, Dr. Samuel Prescott

*Today, of course, “Battle Road” is part of Minuteman National Historical Park.*





*Following their organization in 1965, members of the modern-day Stow Minuteman Company – shown here on a Patriot’s Day march to Concord – wore uniforms of homespun hunting shirts.*

rode in from Concord to alert the town, arriving before dawn at Henry Gardner’s Lower Village home.

**Stow had two companies of soldiers** organized under Capt. William Whitcomb and Capt. Jonathan Hapgood. A force of 81 men assembled on the Lower Common and began the march to Concord.

**Here’s what’s clear about what happened next:** The colonists won.

**Beyond that, details of Stow’s** participation in the battle are hazy. Perhaps Stow’s minutemen didn’t write them down. Perhaps the accounts were lost. Perhaps they’re simply waiting to be found in somebody’s attic.

Whether the Stow unit that marched was one company under Whitcomb or two under Whitcomb and Hapgood isn’t clear. It’s possible that some soldiers delayed for a time to protect the munitions stashed in the woods from a possible British side-raid.

**Official records for the day do note** that Stow’s force “arrived in Concord after the initial fighting at North Bridge but pursued the British so as to deserve special mention.” Several comprehensive histories of the events of the day indicate that the Stow unit joined the battle at the area called “Bloody Angle,” as the Regulars were making their retreat toward Boston.

**In the day’s events as a whole,** the fight at North Bridge took place in early morning. Afterwards, as the British regrouped along the road to the east, minutemen rushed to block their way. Fighting resumed at Meriam’s Corner around noon, then intensified into a rolling skirmish as the British force of 700 Regulars retreated along the road toward Boston. It reached the Bloody Angle in the early afternoon. At this point, it’s believed some 1,200 Minutemen were engaged in the battle. By sunset, the moving battle had progressed all the way to Charlestown.

**The only Stow casualty reported** was Daniel Conant, a farmer who was wounded. More confusion: Conant wasn’t listed on the day’s muster. It’s not clear where he fought, or with whom. As organized and disciplined as the minutemen were, individual soldiers did rush to the scene and join the fighting with other units.

Among the casualties at North Bridge was Acton minuteman Capt. Isaac Davis, the son of a Stow woman, Mary Gibson Davis – and the first patriot killed.

**With the British army bottled up in Boston,** the situation changed. A full-time army was needed, and minuteman companies ceased to exist. Some Stow soldiers enlisted in other units and helped continue the campaign at Boston, some came home.

*From a beginning with one drummer, Stow's Minuteman Company has developed a strong fife-and-drum corps. Here, members perform at a West School event.*



Nearly 40 Stow soldiers took part in the Battle of Bunker Hill, 27 in the Battle of Saratoga in New York. In 1778, 70 Stow soldiers marched to Rhode Island to take part in the campaign there.

**The concept of militia continued well** into the 19th Century and Stow was full of prominent citizens bearing captain and colonel ranks that apparently originated with militia service. Evidently, once a captain, always a captain.

**In 1814, an infantry company called the Washington Guards** was organized in Stow (as in many other communities), enrolling many prominent men of the town.

It seems to have been more a ceremonial organization than a fighting force. Uniforms featured white pants, blue coats and eight-inch-high military caps with plumes. In 1823, the ladies of Stow presented them with a hand-painted silk flag that's now displayed at Randall Library.

The Washington Guards' moment came in 1824 when they served as an honor guard for the Marquis de Lafayette during his Grand Tour stopover in Stow.

**Although more than 100 Stow men** served with Union forces in the Civil War, they appear to have been enlisted as individuals rather than as members of a Stow militia unit. An entry in the 1863 town

report indicated that Stow's quota of 87 soldiers that year were serving in at least 25 different regiments of the Union army.

The report noted that "ladies chosen from each district" collected supplies to send to its soldiers, including bandages, books and magazines, 30 quilts, 71 pairs of socks and 12 bottles of blackberry wine.

**To commemorate the role** of Stow's 1775 Minutemen, the present Stow Minuteman Company was formed in 1965. Members, wives and others held modern-day "sewing bees" to prepare uniforms of tan homespun hunting shirts and dark green breeches in time for participation in the 1965 New York World's Fair.

**Recognizing that the Minutemen of 1775** were not usually uniformed, today's reenactors wear regular colonial clothing, as the Minutemen of 1775 would have.

Today's Minuteman Company offers opportunities for individual participation by both men and women and – with many kids taking part – for a shared family activity.

**Their signature event, of course,** is the march to Concord each Patriot's Day. Assembling at dawn near the Lower Village Cemetery, they fire a volley in honor of Revolutionary War dead buried there and then make the 10-mile trek over the 1775-Stow Minutemen's original path.