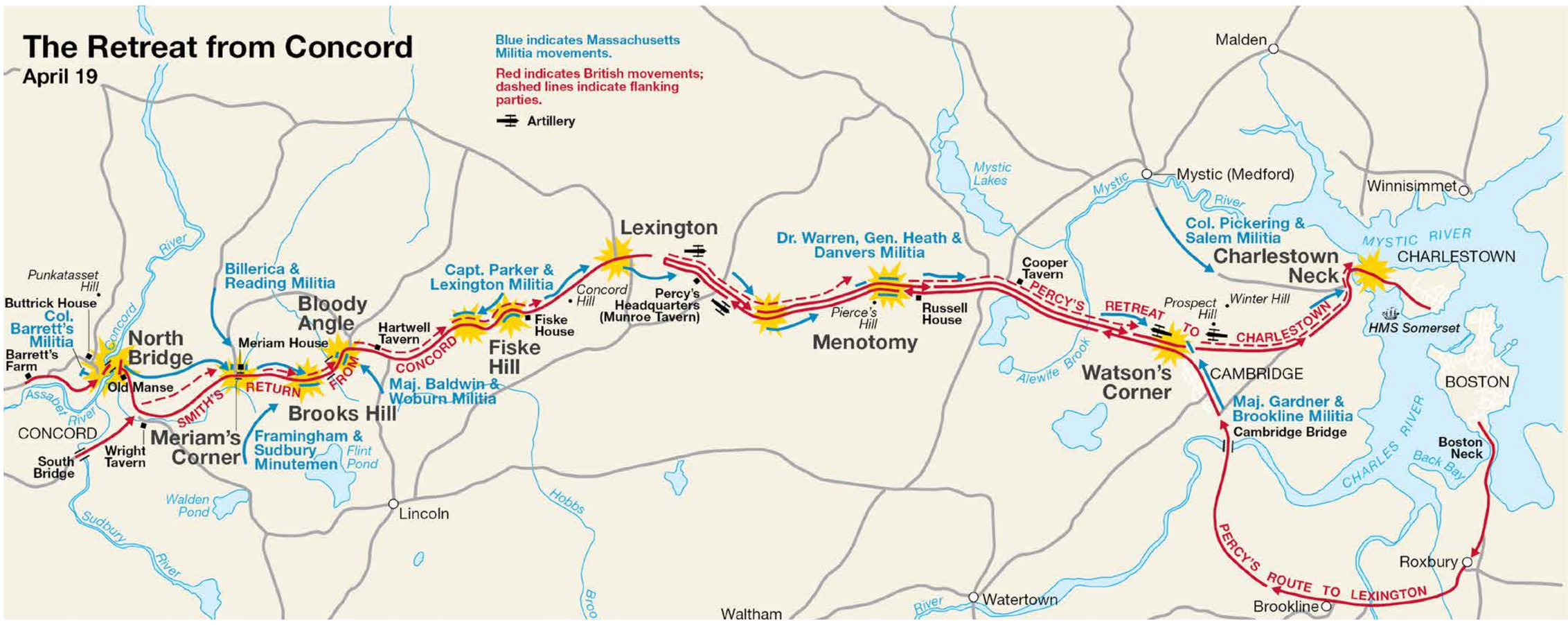
The Road Where It Happened: Revolution Comes to Menotomy

- How did prehistoric geological forces create the landscape of Menotomy?
- Did the narrow corridor of Battle Road between steep hillsides at the Foot of the Rocks influence the outcome of the American Revolution?
- Who were the people of Menotomy who played a role on that critical day of April 19, 1775?

These are some of the questions explored in this exhibit.



Source: National Park Service, Public domain via Wikimedia Commons

Battle Road was the route traversed by some 2,000 British regulars marching to Concord and back again on April 19, 1775, sparking the start of the American Revolution. More than 3,000 colonists from Menotomy and nearby towns also gathered along the road to fight for independence from British attempts to impose greater control over the colonies.

Known today as Massachusetts Avenue, the road to revolution travels through Cambridge, Arlington (Menotomy), and Lexington on the way to Concord. The region's Semiquincentennial (250th) commemoration of the initial battles in 1775 seeks to re-examine that history and the particular role that the people and the landscape of Menotomy played in the founding of America.

The rugged rocks and ridges of western Menotomy, known as the Foot of the Rocks, and the roadway stretching east to Spy Pond saw the day's worst fighting and many deaths on both sides. Local militias battled the beleaguered British troops during their retreat from Lexington and Concord. Many accounts of the day's heroes—Paul Revere, Samuel Whittemore, Jason Russell—are enshrined in local folklore.

Yet, the road itself is also a hero and a witness to revolutionary changes over thousands of years.

The road through Menotomy holds the origin story of the entire Boston Basin. Volcanos, earthquakes, and glaciers churned and scraped the Earth's landforms to create the steep hillsides surrounding Mill Brook and its marshlands. As native peoples inhabited the abundant woodlands, meadows and waterways, they established footpaths throughout the Mystic River valley.

Colonists began arriving in the 1630s, and by 1775 the village of Menotomy was a small enclave with a church, several mills, stores and taverns, and around 100 homes and farmsteads. It remained a separate parish of Cambridge until 1807, but the people of Menotomy were as diverse and interesting as their landscape. Through some of their stories, we share the deep history of a road that spanned thousands of years of natural and manmade changes to arrive at the dramatic events of April 19, 1775.

ARLINGTON 250 MASSACHUSETTS
The Untold Stories of Menotomy

Freedom's Way NATIONAL HERITAGE AREA

The landscape of Menotomy was formed over millions of years.

Continental drift, volcanoes, earthquakes, glaciers, erosion—all of these geologic forces have shaped the landscape of steep rocky hills, smoothed-over slopes, outwash plains and kettle ponds that make up the 5.5 square miles that we now call Arlington.

About 400 million years ago, the land that we call Vermont was separated from that of New Hampshire and Eastern Massachusetts by an ocean, and its east coast was about where the Connecticut River lies now. Islands and micro-continents broke off what later became European and African land masses. Over time they drifted and slammed into Vermont, creating eastern New England.

The Bloody Bluff in Minute Man Historic Park in Lexington is an exposed outcrop of northwest African geology, evidence of the power of continental drift. The bluff was also the site of fighting between British troops and colonial militias on April 19, 1775.

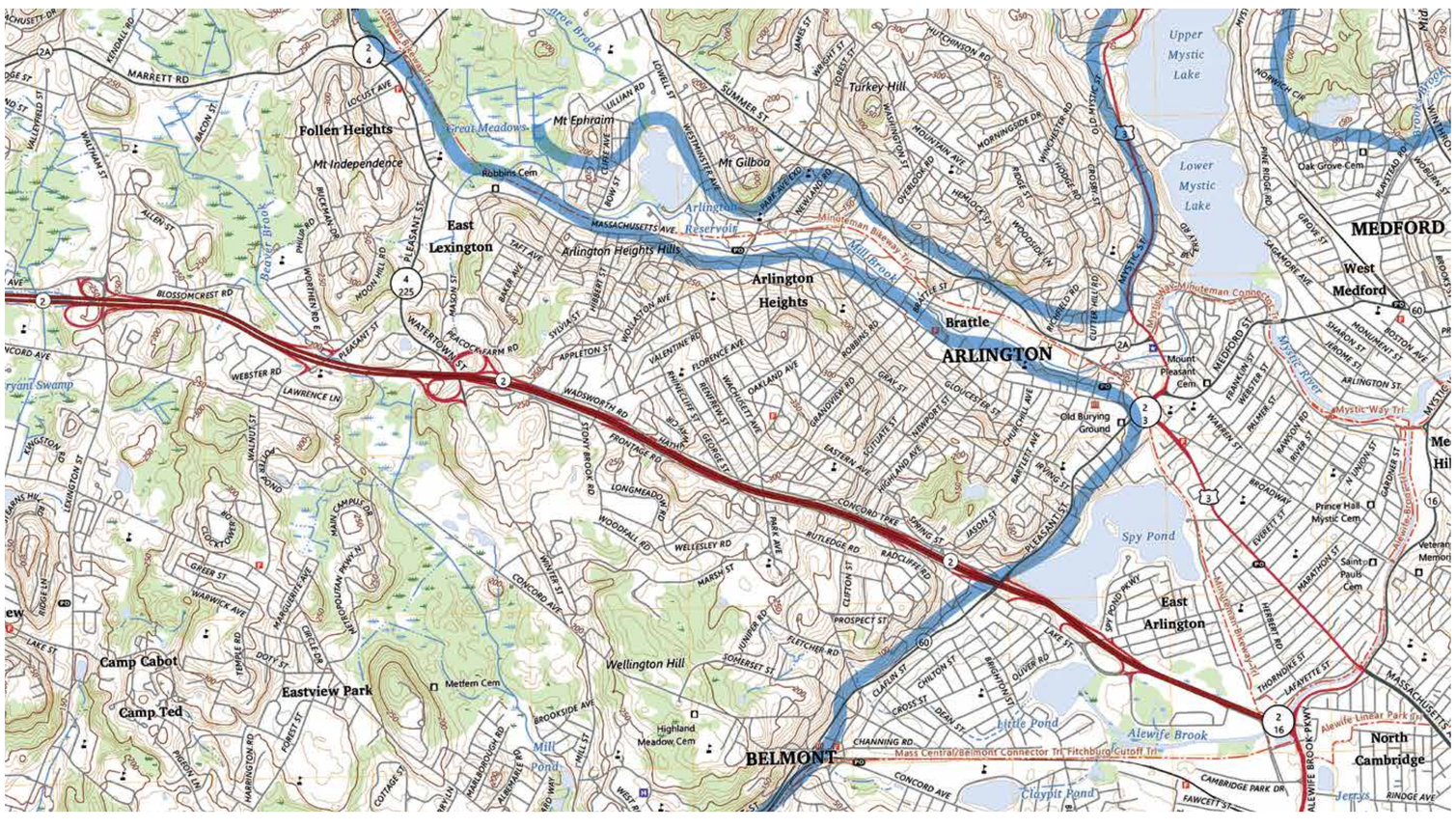
Glaciers shaped the land.

50,000 years ago, the greater Boston area was covered by glaciers more than a mile thick. As they gradually receded 10,000 to 12,000 years ago, waters from the melting ice overflowed the flatter areas and created rushing rivers that carried stones, sand, and silt down into the Boston Basin. The margins of the basin create an escarpment stretching from Lynn and Saugus on the north through Malden, Medford, Arlington, and other western suburbs, and southeast through the Blue Hills.

The glaciers left hundreds of tons of rocks and debris in the deep valleys they had created, as well as deposits on the surface. The softer slate and conglomerate rocks were slowly worn away by erosion leaving the harder granitic rocks as hills reaching over 350 feet above sea level in Arlington Heights, flanking both sides of the Mill Brook valley.

Immense blocks of ice also detached from the glacier and left kettle holes that later filled with water, forming what are now the vast marshes in Arlington's Great Meadows, as well as the Mystic Lakes and Spy Pond. The Mystic River, like the much smaller Mill Brook which empties into the lower Mystic Lake, originated in fault lines that crisscross the bedrock below the greater Boston area.

The fault line under Mill Brook is key to understanding the landscape of its narrow valley and jagged surrounding hills that have influenced the patterns of growth in Arlington over thousands of years of indigenous and later colonial development.



The map illustrates the edge of the Boston Basin (blue line) and the fault line under Mill Brook. Map *source: USGS, Basin boundary courtesy of Bill Reed.*

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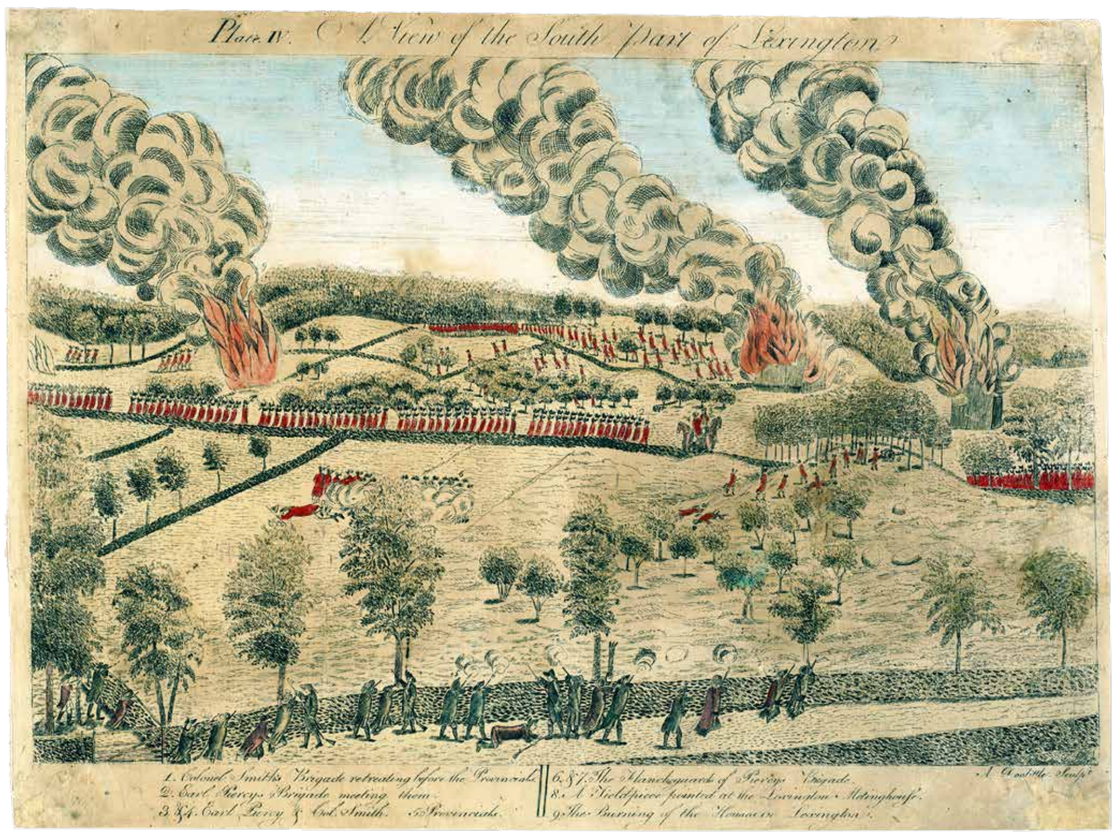
The geological forces that sculpted the Mill Brook valley created a narrow corridor that became the road to revolution.

Just as indigenous peoples had found the easiest pathways through their ancestral lands, so too did the settlers who spread west from Boston in the early 1630s. The primary east-west route stretched from the flatlands of Cambridge through the steep edge of the Boston Basin at the Foot of the Rocks and continued into the meadowlands and rolling hills of Lexington and Concord. This road evolved into what we know as Massachusetts Avenue, but on April 19, 1775, it was known by various names—The Great Road, Bay Road or Concord Road—in different towns along the way.

This was the well-trodden road taken by Paul Revere to warn John Hancock and Samuel Adams in Lexington, by the British troops marching to and from Concord to seize caches of military supplies, and by the colonial militias protesting British rule. Late in the afternoon of April 19, the badly bruised British regulars were retreating back to Boston from earlier skirmishes in Lexington and Concord. They entered Menotomy at the Foot of the Rocks.

Statue of Paul Revere by Cyrus Dallin in the garden of the Cyrus Dallin Art Museum.



"A View of the South Part of Lexington" (Plate IV), by Amos Doolittle, 1775. *Source: Public domain, Wikimedia Commons*

"Retreat from Lexington, Battle at the Foot of the Rocks," by Aiden Lassell Ripley (1896-1969). Courtesy of Unum Group, *Private Collection, Chattanooga, TN*

Why was the topography of this small crossroads town so important?

The narrow corridor between the jagged ledges at the base of Circle Hill (Park Circle) to the south, the brook, mill ponds and marshlands within the valley, and the dense woodlands atop Mount Gilboa and Turkey Hill to the north forced the British troops into tight formations. The minutemen and militia units chasing them out of Lexington attacked from behind the rocky outcrops, stone walls and farmhouses along the route, even as the British were ransacking those same houses and terrorizing the residents.

The Battle of Menotomy

Throughout the day fresh militia units from nearby towns converged in Menotomy village using an established network of intersecting roadways– Watertown Road along Spy Pond to the south, Woburn and Medford Roads to the north, and Massachusetts Avenue and Charlestown Road to the east. Some 3,000 colonial militiamen battled the British regulars throughout the mile-long corridor from the Foot of the Rocks to Spy Pond.

The Battle of Menotomy saw the fiercest fighting and more that half of all deaths on both sides on that fateful day, April 19, 1775, including twelve provincials at the Jason Russell House. The events along this normally quiet village road marked the beginning of the American Revolution and led to the creation of the United States of America.

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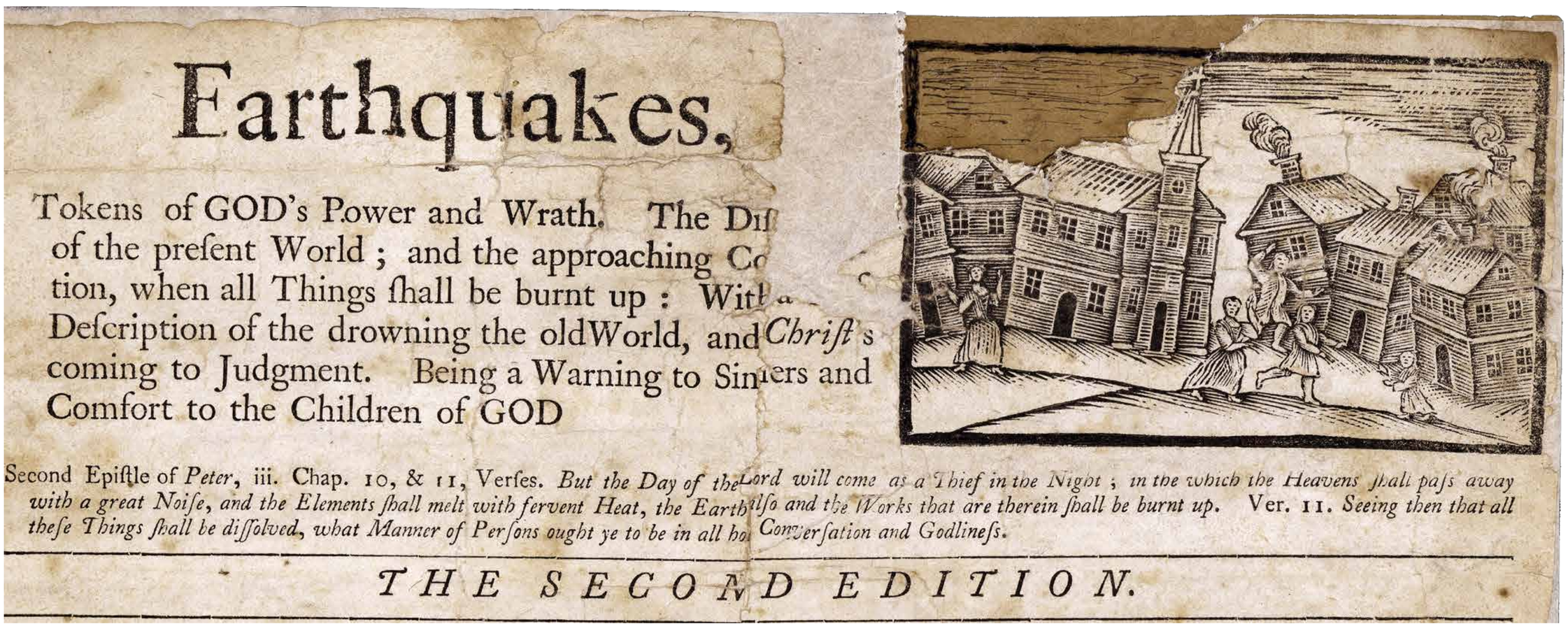
New England is not known for earthquakes, but between 1638 and 2016, more than 2,000 tremors shook the region.


Earthquakes,

Tokens of GOD's Power and Wrath. The Dif
of the preſent World; and the approaching Co
tion, when all Things ſhall be burnt up: Wit
Deſcription of the drowning the oldWorld, and *Chriſt*'s
coming to Judgment. Being a Warning to Sinners and
Comfort to the Children of GOD

Second Epiſtle of *Peter*, iii. Chap. 10, & 11, Verſes. *But the Day of the Lord will come as a Thief in the Night; in the which the Heavens ſhall paſs away with a great Noiſe, and the Elements ſhall melt with fervent Heat, the Earth alſo and the Works that are therein ſhall be burnt up.* Ver. 11. *Seeing then that all theſe Things ſhall be diſſolved, what Manner of Perſons ought ye to be in all ho Converſation and Godlineſs.*

THE SECOND EDITION.

Illustration by Benjamin Gray in the Boston weekly news-letter, June 14, 1744. *Source: The New York Public Library, Rare Book Division.*

Long after the prehistoric volcanos and glaciers had left their mark on Boston's complex geologic legacy, violent disruptions continue to occur and shape the landscape. Most regional earthquakes do not cause major damage, but the strongest one noted in the historical record shook Bostonians out of bed at about 4:30 in the morning on November 18, 1755.

Estimated at between 6.0 and 6.3 on the Richter scale, the quake was centered about 25 miles east of Cape Ann and lasted more than a minute, followed by aftershocks. It occurred just 17 days after a catastrophic earthquake had destroyed Lisbon, Portugal, and shaken most of Europe.

Most colonial buildings in 1755 were made of wooden frame construction so, aside from dishes and other household objects falling off shelves and tables, the principal damage in Boston and surrounding areas was seen in shattered brick chimneys and gabled end walls, tilted church steeples, and crumbled stone walls. Some streets along the waterfront were so covered with bricks and debris that passage by horse-drawn carriage was impossible for days afterward.

Contemporary accounts of the 1755 earthquake

Many felt God's wrath had brought the earthquake upon the region, prompting sermons, poems, and much soul-searching. In 1772, Menotomy's Reverend Samuel Cooke considered New England's recent series of earthquakes as political metaphors:

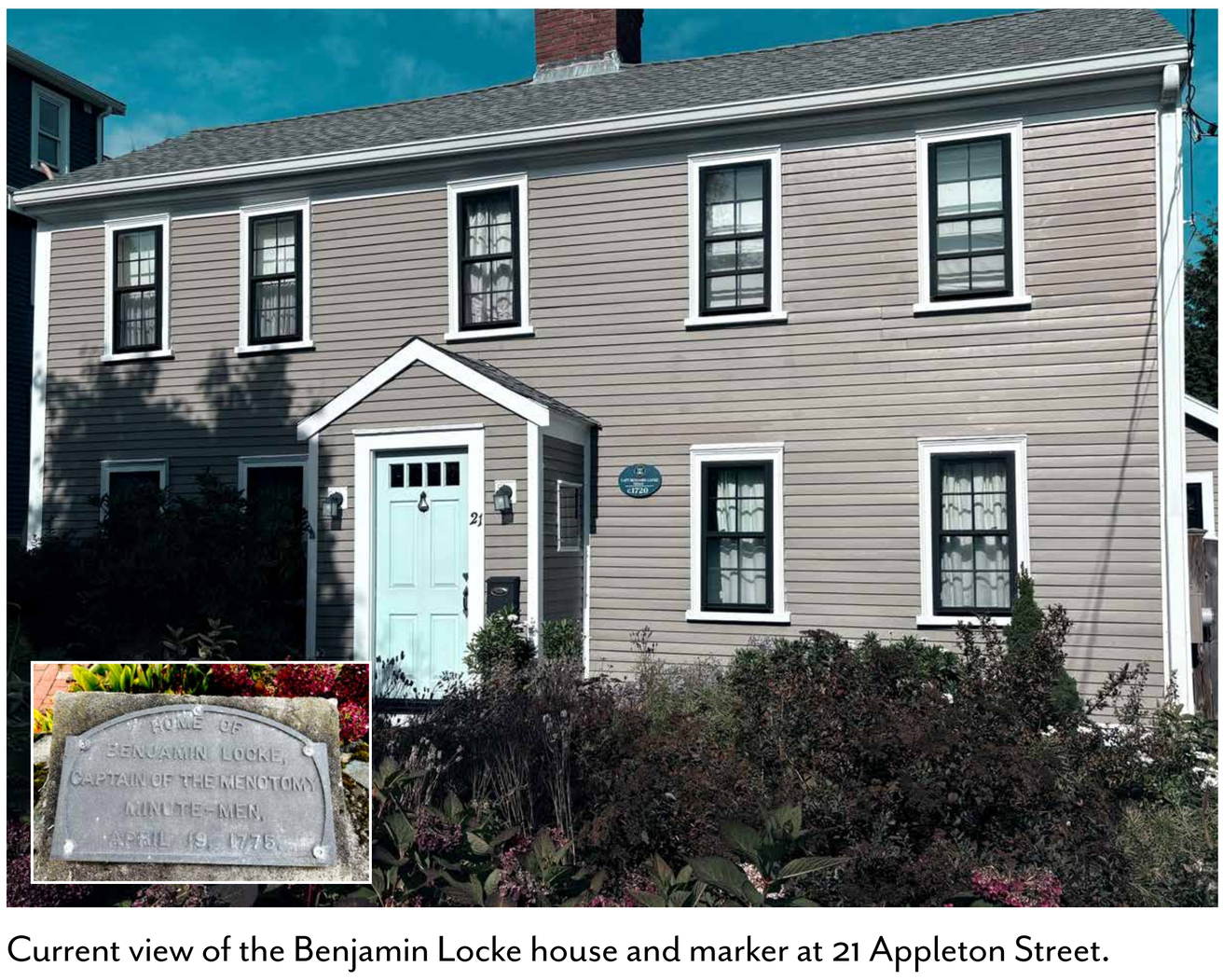
> *[Earthquakes] . . . in divers places, and frequently in this land, as foreboding, we may conclude, our present calamities [the British occupation of Boston]; which we have reason to fear are but the beginning of our sorrows, the loss of our civil and religious liberties, and we are left to the will of arbitrary men, to those whose tender mercies are cruelty.*

Professor John Winthrop (1714-1779) of Harvard University transmitted a detailed description of the event to the Royal Society, London, where it was published in *Philosophical Transactions* in 1757.

> *The earthquake began with a roaring noise in the N.W. like thunder at a distance; and this grew fiercer, as the earthquake drew nearer; which was almost a minute in coming to this place… The bed, on which I lay, was now tossed from side to side; the whole house was prodigiously agitated; the windows rattled, the beams cracked, as if all would presently be shaken to pieces.*

Foot of the Rocks is more than a historic point on a map. By the mid-1700s, it was a distinct neighborhood.

As settlers moved beyond Boston and Cambridge, some found opportunities in Menotomy's "Bear Pasture"—the early name for the lower slopes of Circle Hill (now Park Circle). Among those residents were the ever-expanding Locke and Cutter families whose homes were located at the base of the hill along the marshy banks of Mill Brook.



Current view of the Benjamin Locke house and marker at 21 Appleton Street.

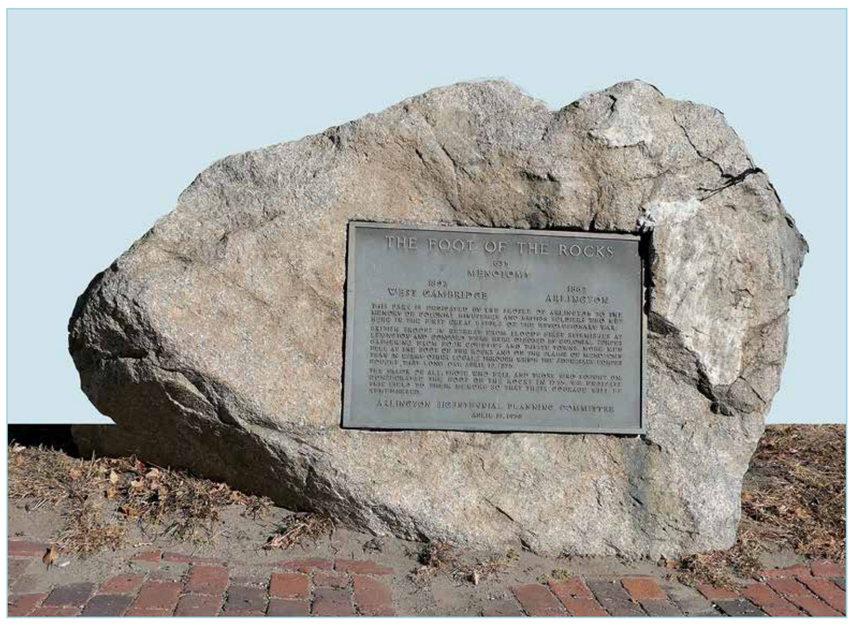
The Locke family

Migrating from his family homestead on the border of Woburn and Lexington, Francis Locke (1690-1770), a tanner by trade, settled in 1719 near the intersection of today's Appleton Street and Massachusetts Avenue, the route of the Great Road to Concord. Taking advantage of the road's steady traffic, Locke started a small store and tavern in his home, selling goods to livestock drovers and other travelers. Other Locke family members settled nearby, including grandson Benjamin Locke (1735-1791), later the captain of the Menotomy Minutemen.

The Cutter family and their mills

Abutting the Locke compound at the Foot of the Rocks was Gershom Cutter (1703-1777), one of many Cutter family members who dominated mill ownership along Mill Brook for decades, including a mill site near today's Old Schwamb Mill. The brook's drop in elevation of about 160 feet over two and a half miles promoted many small family grist mills and sawmills that thrived in the valley.

A postcard from the 1920s shows the Foot of the Rocks with the Old Schwamb Mill in the background.



Foot of the Rocks historical marker

A strong neighborhood identity

Nearby East Lexington families shared with their Foot of the Rocks neighbors a relative isolation from their town centers and many of the same occupations, such as milling, trades and tavern ownership, or dairy farming. The families intermarried, sold land to each other, and, most notably, decided that the established Congregational Church no longer met their spiritual needs. The founding of Menotomy's Baptist Society in the 1770s solidified the neighborhood's identity as separate from the village center just a mile down the road.

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Menotomy's Baptist movement broke with the Congregational Church based in the village center.

As political unrest against British policies grew during the mid-1700s, a religious insurrection was brewing in Menotomy against the established Congregational Church. Reverend Samuel Cooke (1708-1783), the village's spiritual leader, believed all community members should be baptized as infants, and all should belong to his church. Baptists believed that only adults could decide if they should be baptized, and they wanted their own place of worship. They also honored the primacy of individual conscience, believed in the separation of church and state, favored lay church leadership, and engaged in a more direct, emotional emphasis in their worship.

Above: Silhouette of Reverend Samuel Cooke, minister of the Congregational Church in Menotomy, the Northwest Parish of Cambridge. *Courtesy of the Arlington Historical Society.*

Religious dissent

Fast friends, Francis Locke and Gershom Cutter in 1747 were fined 30 shillings for travelling from Cambridge to Newton on a Sunday to attend a religious meeting, probably one occasioned by the visits of the great evangelical revivalist George Whitefield during the First Great Awakening, a populist religious movement in the colonies during the 1730s and 1740s. Whatever the nature of that particular meeting, by the 1770s a strong Baptist congregation, anathema to the dominant Congregational order, was established in the Foot of the Rocks neighborhood.

Benjamin Locke (1735-1791), the captain of the Menotomy Minutemen, led a group of religious dissidents in forming a Baptist Church, which initially met in the homes of Stephen Robbins, Jr. and Thomas Williams in East Lexington. Benjamin Locke's house on Appleton Street was later used as the Baptists' formal home until their meeting house was built in 1790.

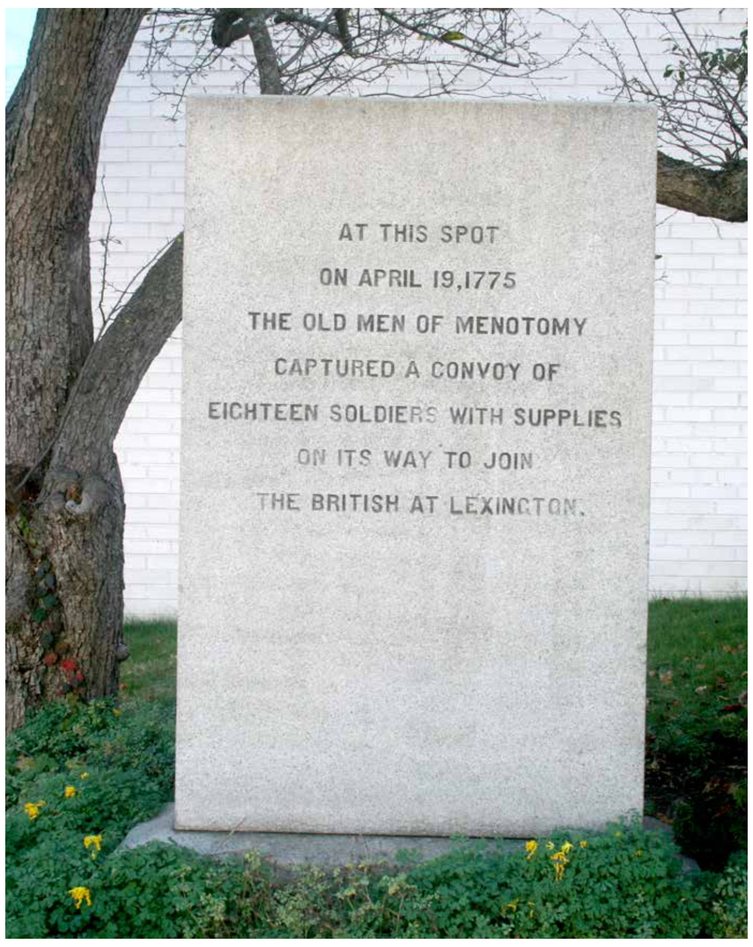
For more than ten years (1773-1786) the Baptists brought suit against Cambridge's Northwest Parish (Menotomy) to be exempted from the mandatory tax for the support of established Congregational ministry. While they eventually won, the Congregational Church in Massachusetts remained state-supported until 1833; it was the last state to fund a religious institution in that way.

The Baptist Society Meeting House, built in 1790, is the town's oldest surviving church; it is now used as a residence. Originally located on Massachusetts Avenue, the building was moved to Brattle Street in 1913.

The "Old Men of Menotomy" captured a British supply convoy on April 19, 1775, establishing their place in the patriotic record.

The "Old Men of Menotomy" were termed "exempts"—too old to be on the regular militia rolls and therefore "left at home" on April 19, 1775. A half-dozen of them were gathered in Cooper's Tavern and later hid behind a rough, dirt embankment opposite Reverend Samuel Cooke's Menotomy Meeting House. Except. . . the men were not really so old, and it's not clear why they were exempted from service.

They ambushed the convoy of military supplies meant for Lord Percy's British regulars, taking some men prisoner, killing the driver and wounding several other British troops. It was one of the day's provincial successes, and was reported equally with news about Lexington and Concord in American and British papers.



Marker commemorating the "Old Men of Menotomy" in front of the First Parish Unitarian Universalist on Massachusetts Avenue.

David Lamson organized the "Old Men."

Their presumed leader, David Lamson, was called a mulatto, but he was at least part Indigenous and possibly part white or part Black and part Indigenous. He was never identified as "enslaved," but was clearly described as Indian in the history of his hometown of Charlestown. Lamson fought in the French and Indian War and later in several different units during the Revolution.

Another uncertainty concerning Lamson is whether he was the only leader of the "Old Men." A muddled record lists entries from Malden, Medford and Chelsea, all claiming the command role for citizens of their towns in the capture of the convoy. The strongest candidate is Reverend Phillips Payson, who was in Menotomy with a group of Chelsea militia. It is also possible he and Lamson each captured one of the two wagons, or that the racism of an earlier time required a colonist of European descent be the one enshrined in historical accounts for the events of April 19.

David Lamson had a peripatetic past, having been a resident of Charlestown, Reading, Medford, and Menotomy, and leaving a paper trail that bespoke the difficulty of a mixed-race life with no settled family, home or farmstead. He was "rated"—meaning he was taxed—in Menotomy in 1781, and listed as a resident and free man of Charlestown in 1790. There is no record of his date or place of death.

The Not-So-Old Men of Menotomy

Israel Mead, age 24

David Lamson, age c. 35

Joseph Belknap, age 37

Jason Belknap, age 39

Ammi Cutter, age 42

James Budge, age 55

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Taverns along Menotomy's Great Road provided livelihoods and gathering places for residents and travelers alike.

This photo of "Cooper's Tavern" shows the building that replaced the original tavern in 1826 at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Medford Street. *Courtesy of the Arlington Historical Society.*

Taverns were popular establishments where local residents could gather for meals, drinks, and discussions about community and political matters, and where travelers could find food and shelter. Also known as public houses, they served as informal post offices and news centers as visitors shared updates about regional events or brought messages from other colonies.

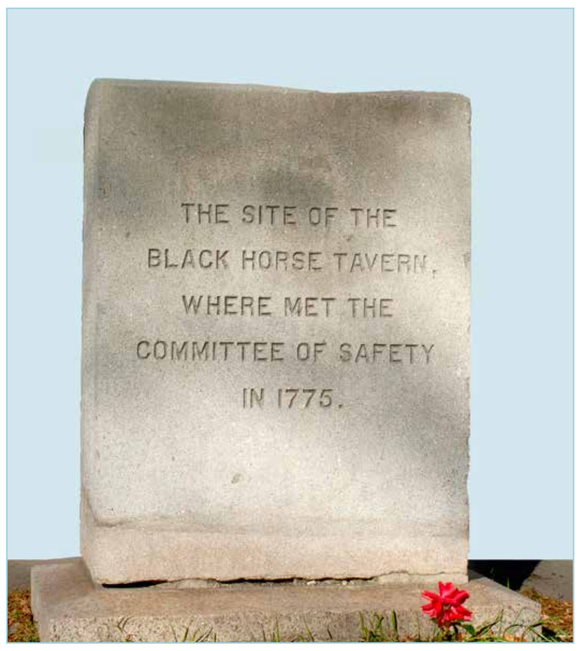
Taverns were considered so necessary that the General Court of Massachusetts passed legislation requiring towns to establish taverns from the early 17th century on. Licensed by the county courts, tavernkeepers had to be persons of "sober life and conversation."

These multi-purpose businesses were essential to the town's social structure, economy, and political life. A combination of barter, credit, and occasional use of currency allowed the local economy to function smoothly. Since much of the water supply was not potable, cider, beer and rum were everyday necessities. Some taverns were large enough to shelter horses and carriages or provide pastures for cattle or sheep being transported to market. During wartime, they served as make-shift hospitals.

Menotomy had three notable taverns in 1775.

Cooper's Tavern appears in many accounts of the events on April 18-19. Paul Revere rode past it on his way to Lexington, and the "Old Men" staying there planned their ambush of a British supply convoy. While retreating from Concord, British troops stormed the tavern killing Jabez Wyman and Jason Winship, both of whom were unarmed at the time. Tavern owners Benjamin and Rachel Cooper gave a deposition about the bloody attack in May 1775:

> *. . . in the afternoon of the nineteenth day of April last, the King's Regular Troops, under the command of General Gage, upon their return from blood and slaughter which they had made at Lexington and Concord, fired more than one hundred bullets into the house where we dwell . . . We escaped for our lives into the cellar; the two aged gentlemen were immediately most barbarously and inhumanly murdered. . .*



The Black Horse Tavern was located on Massachusetts Avenue near Tufts Street in East Arlington.

The Black Horse Tavern also played an important role on the night of April 18-19. Meeting there to plan for the protection of provincial weapons, several members of the Committee of Safety had to escape from an advance party of British soldiers by hiding in a cornfield behind the tavern. By the time the full British force marched through Menotomy on their way to Concord, at about 3 a.m. on April 19, everyone in the village knew the time for meetings was over; the time for action had begun.

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Menotomy's largest group of enslaved servants worked at the Cutler Tavern.

The Cutler Tavern was in a building from c. 1711 on Massachusetts Avenue near Prentiss Street. *Courtesy of the Arlington Historical Society.*

William Cutler (1717-1781) operated the Cutler Tavern, a popular waystation on the Great Road between the village center of Menotomy and the Foot of the Rocks. Cutler held numerous enslaved servants, including Ishmael, Tobey, and Rose and her children Venus, Prince, and Dinah. Rose's first husband, Punch, was enslaved by the large Brooks family in Medford. She and Punch had paid 10 shillings for Reverend Samuel Cooke to marry them in 1754, and they and their children were baptized in Menotomy's Meeting House.

When Punch died Rose married another Medford man, Scipio Pool, in 1768. Pool was a freed man, able to pay Reverend Cooke the one-dollar fee for their marriage. He was also "rated"—able to afford the poll tax required of citizens—in the 1770s in Medford after Rose's death in 1769 at age 48.

Dinah's Legacy

William Cutler died in 1781 without a will, and settling his complicated estate took years. His first wife was Elizabeth Whittemore, a daughter of April 19 hero Samuel Whittemore. She died in 1770 at the age of 48 after giving birth to 37 children, all but one of whom died infancy, as documented in several family genealogies. The original executor of Cutler's estate was William Whittemore, Elizabeth's brother, but it was Cutler's friend and relative Thomas Brooks who finally brought order to the estate years later, much to the relief of Rebecca Hall Cutler, William's second wife, who still owned Dinah.

No one knows Dinah's thoughts on the decisions of her brother Prince and his friend Ishmael to serve in George Washington's army, nor on the many deaths at the Cutler Tavern—her own mother's and all the Cutler babies. It is known that Dinah became very ill, adding to the difficulties for Rebecca Cutler, then a widow with several small children. The documentation is slim, but Rebecca's actions seem peevish—charging the Cutler estate for her time and effort in nursing Dinah. William Whittemore later moved Dinah to his house, and he too charged the unsettled estate for doctor's fees and nursing care for Dinah. There is no record of her death.

In 1798 William and Rebecca Cutler's daughter, Rebecca (1779-1862), married John Tufts (1776-1817) and the Cutler Tavern became known as the Tufts Tavern during the 18th century. The building was dismantled in 1907.

Two-sided memorial monument in the Old Burying Ground erected by the Arlington Historical Society, dedicated on Juneteenth 2023.

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General stores were an important part of colonial communities, where people could find items they did not produce themselves.

Established by 1633, Massachusetts Avenue in Menotomy had many names through the years: The Great Road, Concord Road, and Battle Road. The roadway, then as now, was the major route for transporting people, goods and services from Boston to Concord and beyond.

Thomas Russell's General Store was the primary emporium and gathering place in Menotomy's village center. Russell (1751-1809) was the son of Jason Russell, and three future generations of Thomas Russells kept the store, whose vital role in the community and oak timber construction lasted until the early twentieth century.

The Russell General Store, on the east corner of present-day Water Street and Massachusetts Avenue, was built c. 1750, prior to Russell ownership. It served the town until it was torn down in 1906. *Courtesy of the Arlington Historical Society.*

A variety of imported and specialty products

Most Menotomy families operated small farms or cultivated gardens for fresh vegetables, culinary and medicinal herbs, dairy products, candles and other home-made products. They relied on the store to provide the kinds of supplies they could not produce themselves, such as imported coffee, tea, rum and molasses, codfish, and calico. In an average week, Thomas Russell traded three hogsheads of rum to locals and to passing teamsters. Like contemporary general or hardware stores, colonists could find tools, dry goods, and a variety of specialty items as well. With limited access to hard currency, the colonists used a bushel of corn or grain as the standard of trade.

In addition to the Russell Store's mercantile function, the upper floor, some twenty-five feet in length and unexpectedly light and airy due to its arched ceiling, was used as a social hall for meetings and dances, and a dancing master even gave lessons. On occasion town precinct meetings were held there.

The store was a prime target on April 19, 1775, as the retreating British soldiers ransacked the shelves and opened molasses casks that flooded the store cellar.

> *It was here that the distressed colonists gathered to talk over their grievances after the memorable 19th of April, 1775; and the father of the proprietor [Jason Russell] was sleeping with his eleven comrades in the graveyard but a few rods away.* Source: Charles S. Parker, *Town of Arlington: Past and Present*, 1907. p. 294.