

Massa have a great, long whip platted out of rawhide, and when [someone] fall behind or give out, he hit him with that whip. . . . Mother, she give out on the way, 'bout the line of Texas. Her feet got raw and bleeding, and her legs swoll plumb out of shape. Then Massa, he just take out he gun and shot her. . . . Boss, you know that man, he wouldn't bury mother, just leave her laying where he shot her at. You know, then there wasn't no law 'gainst killing . . . slaves.

Possible Inferences:

- _____ 1. The events related above occurred before the end of the Civil War.
 _____ 2. Ben Simpson could read and write.
 _____ 3. The interviewer was an African American.
 _____ 4. Ben Simpson's father had died before the family was moved to Texas.
 _____ 5. Ben Simpson changed his name after the slaves were freed.

Reasons for "F" labels:



The First Blow for Liberty. Battle of Lexington, April 1775. Copy of a print by A.H. Ritchie after F.O.C. Darley. John K. Hillers Collection, U.S. National Archives, ARC Identifier 559250.

SET A *Exercise 4 — Analysis of Evidence*

Lexington Green, April 19, 1775

The first shots of the American Revolution were fired on April 19, 1775. At Lexington Green colonial militiamen confronted British troops on their way to destroy colonial military stores in nearby Concord. Shots rang out and military hostilities began.

Since neither the British nor the American colonists wished to appear the aggressor, both sides denied firing the first shot. Below are five brief accounts of the event.

In this exercise your task is not to determine who fired the first shot, but to examine the reports with the critical eye of the historian. Instead you should try to note any facts about each piece of evidence that would help you assess its believability. Make pertinent observations concerning the authorship, circumstances of composition, content, and potential believability of each piece of evidence. To do so you should ask of each piece of evidence the following questions:

1. Are there any problems in understanding the literal meaning of the document, or parts of the document? That is, are there words you have to look up? Phrases you don't understand? Etc.
2. Who made the report, and under what circumstances?
3. When was the report made?
4. How well placed was the witness to observe and record the event?
5. Is bias present? (ideological, class, personal?)
6. Might your own biases influence your interpretation of the evidence?
7. Is specialized information necessary to understand the document? If so, what information is required?

For a discussion of these questions, review pages 144–146.

1. The official deposition of the commander of the colonial militia, John Parker:¹⁷

Lexington, April 25, 1775

I, John Parker, of lawful age, and commander of the Militia in Lexington, do testify and declare, that on the nineteenth instant, in the morning, about one of the clock, being informed that there were a number of Regular [British] Officers riding up and down the road, stopping and insulting people as they passed the road, and also was informed that a number of Regular Troops were on their march from Boston, in order to take the Province Stores at Concord, ordered our Militia to meet on the common in said Lexington, to consult what to do, and concluded not to be discovered, nor meddle or make with said Regular Troops (if they should approach) unless they should insult us; and upon their sudden approach, I immediately ordered our Militia to disperse and not to fire. Immediately said Troops made their appearance, and rushed furiously, fired upon and killed eight of our party, without receiving any provocation therefor from us.

John Parker

¹⁷Excerpts 1 and 2 are taken from the Peter Force, ed., *American Archives* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corp., 1972), Fourth Series, II, 491. Excerpt 3 is from Peter S. Bennett, ed., *What Happened on Lexington Green* (Reading MA.: Addison-Wesley, 1970), 16–17. Excerpts 4 and 5 are from Allen French, *General Gage's Informers* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), 53–54; 55.

Analysis:

Sample Comment: *Parker was an American and might tend to blame the British for firing the first shot.* (Note: This is only one of a number of possible comments you might make on this passage. Add some observations of your own. See the seven guide questions above.)

2. Deposition of John Robbins, colonial militiaman:

Lexington, April 24, 1775

I John Robbins . . . do testify and say, that . . . the Company under the command of Captain John Parker being drawn up (sometime before sunrise) on the green or common, and I being in the front rank, there suddenly appeared a number of the King's Troops, about a thousand, as I thought, at the distance of about sixty or seventy yards from us, huzzaing and on a quick pace towards us, with three officers in their front on horseback, and on full gallop towards us; the foremost of which cried, "Throw down your arms, ye villains, ye rebels;" upon which said Company dispersing, the foremost of the three officers ordered their men, saying "Fire, by God, fire; at which moment we received a very heavy and close fire from them, at which instant, being wounded, I fell, and several of our men were shot dead by one volley. Captain Parker's men, I believe, had not then fired a gun.

Analysis: _____

3. Robert Douglass, who had been at Lexington, swore to the following deposition on May 3, 1827:

In about fifteen minutes after we entered the tavern, a person came to the door and said the British were within half a mile. I then heard an officer (who I afterwards learned was Captain Parker) call his drummer and order him to beat to arms. I paraded with the Lexington company between the meeting-house and the tavern, and then marched to the common near the road that leads to Bedford; there we were

ordered to load our guns. Some of the company observed, "There are so few of us, it would be folly to stand here." Captain Parker replied, "The first man who offers to run shall be shot down." The Lexington company began to break off on the left wing, and soon all dispersed. I think no American was killed or wounded by the first fire of the British, unless Captain Parker might have been. No one of Captain Parker's company fired on the British, to my knowledge, that morning, and I think I should have known it, had they fired. I knew but two men of the Lexington company, and I never heard any person say that the Americans fired on the British that morning at Lexington.

After the British marched toward Concord, I saw eight men who had been killed. . . .

Analysis: _____

4. British commander Major John Pitcairn's official report to General Gage:

I gave directions to the Troops to move forward, but on no account to Fire, or even attempt it without orders; when I arrived at the end of the Village, I observed drawn up upon a Green near 200 of the Rebels; when I came within about One Hundred Yards of them, they began to File off towards some stone Walls on our Right Flank—The Light Infantry observing this, ran after them—I instantly called to the Soldiers not to fire, but to surround and disarm them, and after several repetitions of those positive Orders to the men, not to Fire &c—some of the Rebels who had jumped over the Wall, Fired Four or Five Shott at the Soldiers, which wounded a man of the Tenth, and my Horse was Wounded in two places, from some quarter or other, and at the same time several Shott were fired from a Meeting House on o[u]r Left—upon this, without any order or Regularity, the Light Infantry began a scattered Fire, and continued in that situation for some little time, contrary to the repeated orders both of me and the officers that were present—It will be needless to mention what happened after, as I suppose Col. Smith hath given a particular account of it. I am sir

Boston Camp
26th April, 1775

Your most humble Servant,
John Pitcairn

Analysis: _____

5. Personal account of British ensign Jeremy Lister written in 1782:

However to the best of my recollection about 4 oClock in the Morning being the 19th of April the 5 front [companies] was ordered to Load which we did, about half an hour after we found that precaution had been necessary, for we had then to unload again [i.e., fire] . . . and then was the first Blood drawn in this American Rebellion. It was at Lexington when we saw one of their [Companies] drawn up in regular order Major Pitcairn of the Marines second in Command call'd to them to disperse, but their not seeming willing he desired us to mind our space which we did when they gave us a fire they run off[f] to get behind a wall. we had one man wounded of our [Company] in the Leg his Name was Johnson also Major Pitcairns Horse was shot in the Flank we return'd their Salute, and before we proceeded on our March from Lexington I believe we Kill'd and Wounded either 7 or 8 men.

Analysis: _____

For Discussion:

1. Which pieces of evidence do you find most convincing? Which do you find least convincing? Why?
2. On which “facts” does there seem to be general agreement?
3. What are the central points of disagreement?

SET A *Exercise 5 — Essay*

Based on the evidence above, write a paragraph-length account of the confrontation on Lexington Green. In your paragraph take a position on the question at issue: Who fired first? In your paragraph you might want to help the reader understand (1) what can be established beyond doubt (assume the excerpts above are all the sources you have available to you), (2) what is *probable* given the above evidence, and (3) what cannot be established with certainty. In your account, include direct quotations from the documents. Read Writing Capsule 6 (next page) before you begin.