From Heater Cox Richardson, April 20, 2026

On the evening of April 18, 1775, the people who lived in the British colony of Massachusetts had gone to bed with the sun, as usual. By the evening of April 19, everything had changed. In the past twenty-four hours, soldiers from their own government had opened fire on them, killing their own people. And Massachusetts men had fired back.

It was hard to understand how things had gotten so bad. Only a dozen years before, at the end of the French and Indian War in 1763, Bostonians had looked forward to a happy future in the British empire. British authorities had spent time and money protecting the colonies, and colonists saw themselves as valued members of the empire. They expected to prosper as they moved to the rich lands on the other side of the Appalachian Mountains and their ships plied the oceans to expand the colonies' trade with other countries.

But that euphoria faded fast. Almost as soon as the war was over, to prevent colonists from stirring up another expensive struggle with Indigenous Americans, King George III prohibited the colonists from crossing the Appalachian Mountains. Then, to pay for the war just past, the king's ministers pushed through Parliament a number of revenue laws.

In 1765, Parliament passed the Stamp Act, requiring the payment of a tax on all printed material—from newspapers and legal documents to playing cards. It would hit virtually everyone in the North American colonies. Knowing that local juries would acquit their fellow colonists who violated the revenue acts, Parliament took away the right to civil trials and declared that suspects would be tried before admiralty courts overseen by British military officers. Then Parliament required colonials to pay the expenses for the room and board of British troops who would be stationed in the colonies, a law known as the Quartering Act.

But what Parliament saw as a way to raise money to pay for an expensive war—one that had benefited the colonists, after all—colonial leaders saw as an abuse of power. The British government had regulated trade in the empire for more than a century. But now, for the first time, the British government had placed a direct tax on the colonists without their consent, a right the king had guaranteed to Englishmen in the Magna Carta of 1215. Then it had taken away the right to a trial by jury—also a historical right—and now it was forcing colonists to pay for a military to police them.

Far more than money was at stake. The fight over the Stamp Act tapped into a struggle over a profound question of human governance: Could the king be checked by the people?

This was a question the colonists were perhaps uniquely qualified to answer. While the North American colonies were governed officially by the British crown, the distance between England and the colonies meant that colonial assemblies often had to make rules on the ground. Those assemblies controlled the power of the purse, which gave them the upper hand over royal officials, who had to

await orders from England that often took months to arrive. This chaotic system enabled the colonists to carve out a new approach to politics even while they were living in the British empire.

Colonists naturally began to grasp that the exercise of power was not the province of a divinely ordained leader, but something temporary that depended on local residents' willingness to support the men who were exercising that power.

The Stamp Act threatened to overturn that longstanding system, replacing it with tyranny.

When news of the Stamp Act arrived in Boston, a group of dockhands, sailors, and workers took to the streets, calling themselves the Sons of Liberty. They warned colonists that their rights as Englishmen were under attack. Lawyer John Adams recognized that the Sons of Liberty were changing the political equation. He wrote that gatherings of the Sons of Liberty "tinge the Minds of the People, they impregnate them with the sentiments of Liberty. They render the People fond of their Leaders in the Cause, and averse and bitter against all opposers."

John Adams's cousin Samuel Adams, who was deeply involved with the Sons of Liberty, recognized that building a coalition in defense of liberty within the British system required conversation and cooperation. As clerk of the Massachusetts legislature, he was responsible for corresponding with other colonial legislatures. Across the colonies, the Sons of Liberty began writing to like-minded friends, informing them about local events, asking after their circumstances, organizing.

They spurred people to action. By 1766 the Stamp Act was costing more to enforce than it was producing in revenue, and Parliament agreed to end it. But it explicitly claimed "full power and authority to make laws and statutes...to bind the colonies and people of America...in all cases whatsoever." It imposed new revenue measures.

News of new taxes reached Boston in late 1767. The Massachusetts legislature promptly circulated a letter to the other colonies opposing taxation without representation and standing firm on the colonists' right to equality in the British empire. The Sons of Liberty and their associates called for boycotts on taxed goods and broke into the warehouses of those they suspected weren't complying, while women demonstrated their sympathy for the rights of colonists by producing their own cloth and drinking coffee rather than relying on tea.

British officials worried that colonists in Boston were on the edge of revolt, and they sent troops to restore order. But the troops' presence did not calm the town. Instead, fights erupted between locals and the British regulars.

Finally, in March 1770, British soldiers fired into a crowd of angry men and boys harassing them. They wounded six and killed five, including Crispus Attucks, a Black man who became the first to die in the attack. Son of Liberty Paul Revere turned the altercation into the "Boston Massacre." His instantly famous engraving showed soldiers in red coats smiling as they shot at colonists, "Like fierce Barbarians grinning o'er their Prey; Approve the Carnage, and enjoy the Day."

Parliament promptly removed the British troops to an island in Boston Harbor and got rid of all but one of the new taxes. They left the one on tea, keeping the issue of taxation without representation on the table. Then, in May 1773, Parliament gave the East India Tea Company a monopoly on tea sales in the colonies. By lowering the cost of tea in the colonies, it meant to persuade people to buy the taxed tea, thus establishing Parliament's right to impose a tax on the colonies.

In Boston, local leaders posted a citizen guard on Griffin's Wharf at the harbor to make sure tea could not be unloaded. On December 16, 1773, men dressed as Indigenous Americans boarded three merchant ships. They broke open 342 chests of tea and dumped the valuable leaves overboard.

Parliament closed the port of Boston, stripped the colony of its charter, flooded soldiers back into the town, and demanded payment for the tea. Colonists promptly organized the Massachusetts Provincial Congress and took control of the colony. The provincial congress met in Concord, where it stockpiled supplies and weapons, and called for towns to create "minute men" who could fight at a moment's notice.

British officials were determined to end what they saw as a rebellion. In April they ordered military governor General Thomas Gage to arrest colonial leaders Samuel Adams and John Hancock, who had left Boston to take shelter with one of Hancock's relatives in the nearby town of Lexington. From there they could seize the military supplies at Concord. British officials hoped that seizing both the men and the munitions would end the crisis.

But about thirty of the Sons of Liberty had been watching the soldiers and gathering intelligence. When the soldiers set out on the night of April 18, two Sons of Liberty flashed two lanterns in the steeple of the Old North Church—the highest point in Boston—to signal to watchers that the soldiers were traveling across Boston Harbor to Charlestown. Armed with that knowledge, messengers could avoid the troops and raise the alarm along the roads to Lexington and Concord.

Paul Revere and William Dawes headed for Lexington. There, they warned Adams and Hancock and then set out for Concord. They picked up young doctor Samuel Prescott, who had been in Lexington courting, on their way. British soldiers stopped Revere and Dawes, but Prescott got away and made it to Concord. As they heard the news, families set off a system of "alarm and muster" developed months before for just such an occasion, ringing bells and banging drums to alert the next house that there was an emergency.

Just before dawn on that chilly, dark April morning, militiamen had heard the news and were converging on Lexington Green. When the soldiers marched onto the Lexington town green in the darkness just before dawn, they found several dozen minute men waiting for them. An officer ordered the men to leave, and they began to mill around, some of them leaving, others staying. And then, just as the sun was coming up, a gun went off. The soldiers opened fire. When the locals realized the soldiers were firing not just powder, but also lead musket balls, most ran. Eight locals were killed, and another dozen wounded.

The outnumbered militiamen fell back to tend their wounded, and about 300 Regulars marched on Concord to destroy the guns and powder there. But news of the arriving soldiers and the shooting on Lexington town green had spread through the colonists' communication network, and militiamen from as far away as Worcester were either in Concord or on their way. By midmorning the Regulars were outnumbered and in battle with about 400 militiamen. They pulled back to the main body of British troops still in Lexington.

The Regulars headed back to Boston, but by then militiamen had converged on their route. The Regulars had been awake for almost two days with only a short rest, and they were tired. Militiamen fired at them not in organized lines, as soldiers were accustomed to, but in the style they had learned from Indigenous Americans, shooting from behind trees, houses, and the glacial boulders littered along the road. This way of war used the North American landscape to their advantage. They picked off British officers, dressed in distinct uniforms, first. By that evening, more than three hundred British soldiers and colonists lay dead or wounded.

Even before the British soldiers made it back down the Battle Road from Concord on April 19, militiamen—both white and Black, free and enslaved—from the Massachusetts countryside, furious that soldiers of their own government had shot at them and killed their neighbors, rushed to surround Boston, laying siege to the soldiers and British officials there.

By the next morning, more than 15,000 militiamen surrounded the town of Boston. The Revolutionary War had begun.

Just over a year later, the fight that had started over the question of whether the king could be checked by the people would give the colonists an entirely new, radical answer to that question. On July 4, 1776, they declared the people had the right to be treated equally before the law, and they had the right to govern themselves.