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Of Rocks and Revolutions

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Of Rocks and Revolutions

Abstract

This post is part of a series featuring behind-the-scenes dispatches from our [Pohanka Interns](#) on the front lines of history this summer as interpreters, archivists, and preservationists. See [here](#) for the introduction to the series.

It is difficult to explain how the most advanced military technology of the 18th century relies upon a rock to function. Examined with modern eyes, the flintlock musket is as absurd as the macaroni fashion of the era. A petite vise grips a hunk of flint, which when thrown upon a steel battery, showers sparks on a criminally unmeasured amount of black powder. This produces a blinding flash, ushering a jet of flame through an eighth inch wide hole in the barrel. The powder condensed behind the ounce ball of lead is transformed from inert sulfur, charcoal and potassium nitrate into instant leviathan strength. The bullet careens down the barrel until its ejection from the twelve gauge bore, destined for whatever organic matter may halt the progress of this thoroughly unnatural reaction. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

A Look at the Past, Pohanka Internship, Thinking Historically

Disciplines

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Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Of Rocks and Revolutions

By [Benjamin Roy '21](#)

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The author firing a flintlock musket at Minute Man NHP during a black powder demonstration. Photo courtesy Benjamin Roy.

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The Flintlock musket is itself a metaphor for the era of change it helped affect. It is not quite ancient, yet not thoroughly modern. It is a prime example of the enlightenment's infantile understanding and dangerous fascination with science and nature; and it had an undeniable power to upend the natural order. The flintlock musket was the final expression of Colonial dissent leading up to the American Revolution. Concord's Reverend Emerson spoke for many Provincials when he thundered to his flock, "Arise my injured Countrymen, and plead even with the Sword, the Firelock and the Bayonet, plead with your Arms." The roaring plea of the flintlock musket would register with seismic power, upending an entire Empire. The firelock was the engine of revolutionary social and political change, and every aspect of its use was involved in the buildup to Revolution on April 19th, 1775.

Reloading begins with tearing the paper cartridge to expose the black powder. Exhibiting Puritan thrift, old newspapers were often recycled into paper cartridges. Those repurposed newspapers would be twice formative in the story of the Revolution. High literacy rates in Massachusetts meant that most of the Militiamen who were tearing these cartridges could read what was written on them. And there was no shortage of newsprint. Tory newspapers were outnumbered in Massachusetts four to one, their voice drowned out in the popular clamor for liberty. The same incendiary words that pushed the people of Massachusetts further to the edge of revolution would contain the powder they would use to ignite it.

A draught of powder is poured into the pan, the piece is cast about, and the rest is unceremoniously dumped down the throat of the gun. Without this source of energy, the weapon is impotent. Powder, and other supplies of war, were what the British marched on Concord to find, looking for the "35 half barrels of powder" hidden there. Powder had long been a critical point of contention. When the British seized gunpowder from The Cambridge Powder House on September 1st, 1774, the response commanded respect. The alarm brought 20,000 militiamen from all over New England to Boston to see just what the British thought they were doing. In the mass of armed humanity that choked the roads to Boston, a poor countryman with flintlock musket laid over his shoulder, met a haughty, well known Tory on horseback and defiantly taunted, "Damn you, how do you like us now, you Tory son of a bitch"? Resistance to British rule was rapidly becoming an engine of social change, the muscle of which was the flintlock musket.

The steel rammer drives the whole cartridge into the claustrophobic breech. Even this steel rammer is an important aspect of the coming war. Steel rammers were a technological innovation that allowed the soldier to load faster; yet some British regiments were still equipped with older, wooden rammers on April 19th. In contrast, the town of Lincoln, among others, provided each of its Minutemen with steel rammers, demonstrating that this local democratic force was on an equal, if not better technological footing with their opponents. British arrogance concerning the “raw, undisciplined cowardly men” of the Provincial Militia, would shatter against the hard front of burnished Provincial steel.

Loaded, the musket is ready to emit its deadly articles. The charge in the pan is ignited with a terse hiss, followed by the baritone detonation of the main charge. The different sounds of gunfire that erupted on April 19th speak eloquently of the dispute that aroused them. The ordered volleys of Lord Percy’s relief column garnered cheers from the bludgeoned Regulars of Lt. Colonel Smith’s original force signaling that help had arrived, that the omnipresent might of the Crown would escort them back to Boston. Alternatively, the scattered, peppering fire of the militia, like a chorus of voices speaking at the local meetinghouse, alerted the British that they had blundered into another ambush. Those shots, the ubiquitous “shot heard round the world,” resounded like a thunderclap across the thirteen colonies. In New York, a disgusted Loyalist observed a band of Patriots celebrate the news “with avidity” and “paraded the town with drums beating and colours flying, (attended by a mob of negroes, boys, sailors, and pickpockets) inviting all of mankind to take up arms in defence of the ‘injured rights and liberties of America.’” The gunshots fired on April 19th reverberated in Patriot ears as a universal call to arms.

The flintlock musket was simultaneously ornate and savagely simple and brutal. The weapon of both Empire and Revolution, it would destroy an old order, and enforce a new one. Nearly 250 years removed from the American Revolution, the flintlock musket, and the war it won, still produces awe. Like the modest stone that slew Goliath, a small, sharp flint, thrown against steel, would topple an Empire.

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