

Find out where & how the first land battle of the American Revolution could have started in Marblehead &/or Salem just 6 weeks before the battles at Lexington & Concord on April 19, 1775

Visual programs at Old North Church, Marblehead

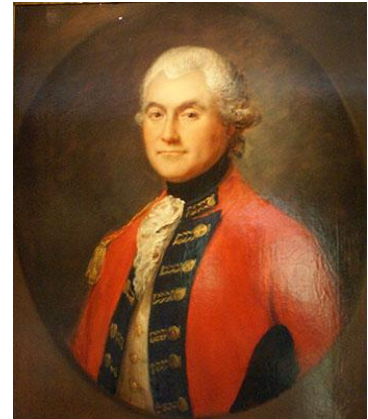
◆ 35 Washington St., Marblehead, MA ◆

- Sunday, February 23, 2025 11:45 to about 12:30 pm &
- Sunday, April 27, 2025 11:45 to about 12:30 pm

Free / donations welcome.

Parking in the adjacent lot. No restrooms.

At right ~ Portrait of Lt. Colonel Alexander Leslie as a General (in 1776) by Thomas Gainsborough (private collection in Scotland)



with images & visuals, social historian Judy Anderson of Marblehead will talk about the confrontation in Salem on February 26, 1775

and where the British Regular Army troops are said to have landed in Marblehead. The program will emphasize the historical background of Marblehead at that time, and the distinctive differences between Salem & Marblehead, both during the Revolution and before.



Walking Tours Harborside & into Marblehead

◆ Meet at the end of Front Street, below Fort Sewall ◆

- Friday, April 25, 2025 5 pm to 6 pm &
- Saturday, April 26 9 am to 10 am &
- Sunday, April 27 5 pm to 6 pm

\$10 p/p / Limited street parking / no RSVP / no restrooms

For more information, call Marblehead Tours 781-631-1762

Background ~ and some mysteries :

On a Sunday afternoon in late February 1775, a cohort of 240 British Regular Army troops disembarked from a transport ship at the densely populated Atlantic seaport metropolis of Marblehead, then marched to Salem to confiscate cannon that rebels (Patriots) had hidden beyond Salem's North Bridge over that town's North River.

Marbleheaders, who were NEARLY ALL zealous Patriots (for a particular reason), poured out of the three churches in the town, which was very populous then. Marblehead's defensive militia (a sizeable corps that in February included fishermen not yet out to sea), hurried into their militia ranks (but waited ~ and find out why). In Salem, the Regulars were met by a closed drawbridge over Salem's North River.

Remarkably, no shots were fired that day, despite a tense debate at the bridge between the British commanding officer Lt. Colonel Leslie and American Colonel David Mason of Salem's rebel militia, along with the wise and prudent minister of Salem's First Church. That afternoon, cool heads prevailed on both sides.

The British marched ~ or "retreated" ~ back to their ship, with no shots fired.

Negotiation and compromise avoided the bloodshed that occurred just six weeks later on Lexington's common and at Concord's North Bridge, igniting 7 long years of hostilities and war.

The two actual battles soon afterward on April 19, 1775 overshadowed the restraint that truly avoided the war's first skirmish on that cold and snowy February afternoon.

Decades after those 7 years of war,
the word “retreat” framed the event in a way that shamed the British.

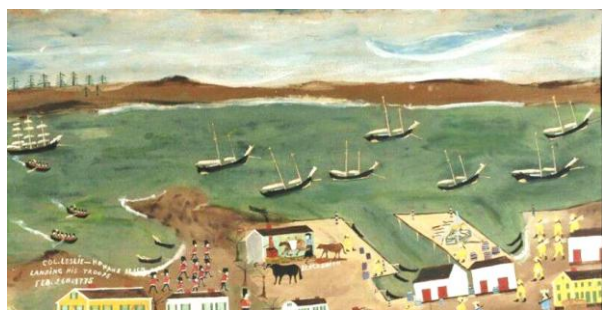
Where the British actually landed, and who alerted them ~ and how ~ still remain a mystery.

Due to an absence of specific accounts right afterward, and misrepresentation later, questions remain:

- ◆ **Where did the British land ?** (And where didn't they land ?)
- ◆ **How could 240 British troops expect to march undetected or unchallenged through Marblehead's crowded maze of streets** — in a town that was, at that time, the **sixth most populous metropolis** in British North America, and not be quickly discovered, and potentially confronted ?!
- ◆ **How did Salem find out they were coming ? Who warned them ? — And who didn't ?**

The heroic role of a military messenger from Marblehead was totally invented later, in the 1800s ~ as another dramatic part of the story appears to have been as well, highlighting a Marbleheader

Alternative facts, skewed stories, and outright fabrications are nothing new. ...



Later, a well-intentioned “historical” painting from the 1920s in Marblehead, depicting a Marblehead legend relating to the event further turned the myth into an assumed fact.

DETAIL J.O.J. Frost painting, Marblehead Museum

Images have always potently shaped perceived reality, whether actual, or photo-shopped, or now, A.I.

This entire sequence of events was uncannily similar to what happened just two months later ~ on **April 19, 1775**, when a British contingent marched through Lexington toward Concord, to seize cannon hidden beyond Concord's North Bridge, but meeting resistance by Lexington's militia on their town green early that Spring morning, which “launched” the American Revolutionary War — though tensions had been mounting for several years, and colonial acts of resistance had been taking place.

That first deadly skirmish in Lexington between a colonial American militia and the British army sparked eight years of battles, bloodshed, and loss of life and livelihoods, as Britain's colonies along the North American mainland fought hard, against all odds, to win their independence from tyranny and economic repression (though of course Nova Scotia and Florida would both have very different stories).

But that very same April scenario AND outcome could easily have happened in Salem or M'hd instead on that February Sunday northeast of Boston, rather than in the other two towns NW of the occupied capital.



Lt. Colonel Alexander Leslie (later General) was born in Scotland in **1731**, just a year before both **George Washington** (who became Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army on June 15, 1775, two days before the Battle of Breed's / Bunker Hill) and Marblehead's **Colonel John Glover** (who was promoted to Colonel in May 1775 and General in 1777) — both born in 1732.

All three military leaders would serve throughout the war, and would die in the mid-to-late 1790s (Leslie in 1794, Glover in 1797, G.W. in 1799).

Colonel Glover and **General Leslie** would face each other in several battles during the late summer and autumn of 1776, before Glover was promoted to General in 1777, after his Marblehead Regiment disbanded following the Crossing of the Delaware River on Christmas night in 1776 (then back again, with Hessian prisoners, after the battle of Trenton).

Portrait of Gen. Alexander Leslie by Thomas Gainsborough / Private collection, Scotland



Sunday, February 26, 1775 Col. Leslie's 'Retreat' or The 'Salem Alarm'

On that date in 1775, 250 years ago, the American Revolutionary War ALMOST ~ or easily could have ~ started in Marblehead &/or Salem in exactly the same way that it did just six weeks later in Lexington and then in Concord on April 19, 1775.

In the pre-dawn hours of **Wed. April 19** in 1775, **700 British Regular Army troops** marched by land through Lexington on their way to Concord, to seize weapons that were stored and hidden at some farms in Concord. In Lexington, the Regulars were confronted by some of the town's militia who had gathered. A shot rang out. And a battle ensued, first on Lexington's common, then at Concord and its North Bridge.

But that first land battle of the American Revolution COULD have occurred in Marblehead instead:

Because **on Sunday afternoon, February 26 in 1775**, while people in most towns (including M'hd. then) were in church, almost the same scenario occurred. **British Regular Army troops landed in Marblehead** (though from the sea instead) and marched through the densely populated town, down its streets lined with closely-built homes, to Salem, where they had orders to seek and seize some brass cannon (formerly Crown possessions) that were reportedly stockpiled beyond Salem's North Bridge over *its* North River.

Alarms would have rung out, and alerts quickly circulated through an efficient pre-established (and probably secret) network. So, Salem and its militia were warned that Regulars were on the march.

Marbleheaders flowed out of their 3 churches, no doubt panicked. While women hurried children and families home, men rushed to grab their weapons from home or from the town militia's storage areas, then formed into their familiar militia ranks. But they actually remained in town, though at high alert.

In Salem, the column of Regulars ~ **240-strong** ~ was stopped by a drawbridge that prevented their advance to look for the cannon, as a resolute Salem militia major there refused to raise the bridge. But, with darkness looming, the British colonel finally accepted a negotiated deal which allowed him to cross the river and back, but not to actually hunt for the cannon (which had been removed to safer hiding before and during the standoff) — thereby fulfilling his orders from his superior officer, the military general who was also governor of Massachusetts. The Colonel and his troops then marched back to their ship.

So ~ on that Sunday in February, cooler heads prevailed. And the 8-year war that followed the April battles did not begin in Salem or Marblehead. A violent clash was prevented due to respectful negotiation between the two opposing sides, which ended in a suitable compromise.

It's not that the British officers thought 240 soldiers with flintlocks and bayonets could march quietly or secretly to Salem on a Sunday morning — but rather (probably) that the seaport's busy streets would be clear of the daily hustle and bustle of a weekday (which included Saturdays then), allowing them to march in formation straight through to the road to Salem. It ALSO would have been a daunting display of force in the same way large troops of soldiers march ceremonially in some countries even today — to show their strength, and to impress or frighten rivals, or to intimidate the local population.

In the mid-1700s, Marblehead was apparently the sixth most populous metropolis in British N. America, with nearly 5,000 people and approx. 950 families (living in about 525 houses, approx. 300 of which still stand).

Already in December 1774 and January 1775, most towns' defensive militias had been dividing and arming themselves, preparing for a potential war. The leader of Marblehead's militia at that time was not Colonel John Glover (who was perhaps still a Major, then a Lt. Colonel until May 10 that year), but Colonel Jeremiah Lee. Lee and Elbridge Gerry provided many of the supplies being stockpiled in areas outside of Boston. Lee was also a leader of the town's rebel ('Patriot') faction, which seems to have comprised about 90% of Marblehead's population, and dominated its town government. And he covertly used his trade contacts in Spain to try to secure weapons for the rebellion ~ thrice treasonous.

The 'Salem Alarm' event became known as '**Leslie's Retreat**' much later ~ after British Regular Army **Lt. Col. Alexander Leslie**, a Scotsman, who had led the British troops that day. His life dates are almost exactly the same as John Glover's — whose life dates are also similar to George Washington's. Both Leslie and Glover began the war as Lt. Colonels, before being promoted to General in 1776 (Leslie) & 1777 (Glover). And each served through the entire war, and suffered from it, but continued in other service afterward.

Alexander Leslie (1731 - 1794) **John Glover** (1732 - 1797) **George Washington** (1732 - 1799)