



Battle Road 2000

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“Battle Road 2000.” Organized by Battle Road Committee and Lexington 2000 Commission.

Commemoration, April 13–17, 2000, Concord, Lexington, and Lincoln, Massachusetts, including Minute Man National Historical Park, 174 Liberty St., Concord, MA 01742-1705. Gardner Hayward, chair, Battle Road Committee and Lexington 2000 Commission, assisted by Sean Kelleher, 2nd Massachusetts Regiment, Paul O’Shaughnessey, H.M. 10th Regiment of Foot, and other representatives of regional Revolutionary War reenactment units, event organizing; Myles McConnon, Rhonda McConnon, John Newell, and Nelia Newell, interpreter training; Sue Felshin, Web site development.

Internet: information on the reenactment for participants and for visitors. Go to <http://www.2000lexington.com/>, enter site, and select Reenactors Website.

It has become a commonplace to note that historical sites develop histories of their own, as different constituencies constantly redefine the meaning of past events and negotiate their own positions in the commemorative landscape. Recent events celebrating the 225th anniversary of the start of the American Revolution demonstrated those dynamic processes of remembering the past and showed how one group has used the medium of public performance to make a claim for its particular interpretation of history at the iconic sites of Lexington and Concord.

Local traditions have long marked the events of April 19, 1775, when British regulars first encountered organized military resistance from colonials. Every twenty-five years, the usual civic parades, reenactments, and ceremonies on Patriots’ Day are expanded by organizers seeking to reach a broader, often national audience. The impetus for a large-scale celebration for April 2000 came from a coalition of regional Revolutionary War reenactors who convened a “Battle Road Committee” and spent three years in intensive fund raising and planning for what they billed as “the largest Revolutionary War reenactment ever.”

The centerpiece of the weekend was a mammoth outdoor performance re-creating the daylong running battle between the British regulars and colonial militiamen. Beginning at dawn on Lexington Green, the reenactors traveled (a few on foot, most by military transport provided by the National Guard) to North Bridge in Concord, then to four other sites in Lincoln and Lexington, staging what were in effect six connected reenactments in a twelve-hour period. The setting encompassed much of Minute Man National Historical Park, the downtown areas of both Concord and Lexington, and several miles of busy roads in Boston’s affluent northwestern suburbs. The more than 1,500 reenactors included enough in British uniform that it was possible to portray the redcoats’ column at almost its original strength of 700 men. Peripheral events included reenactments of Paul Revere’s ride and capture the night before the battle, a host of musical and interpretive presentations at sites throughout the area, and a rededication of Lexington Battle Green, which used Civil War reenactors to help re-create the centennial celebration of 1875. Good weather and efficient publicity resulted in crowds of over a hundred thousand spectators.

The three-year planning process for “Battle Road 2000” exposed some revealing

tensions among regional and national groups. One fault line lay between styles of reenactment. Ceremonial minuteman companies, which function much like civic or fraternal orders, have a very long history in many eastern Massachusetts towns. Those groups feel linked to the Minutemen of 1775 through genealogy or geography, and they have traditionally been prominent in Patriots' Day parades and reenactments. However, over the past twenty-five years, another form of reenactment has developed, in which material and factual "authenticity" is a central value. The organizers of "Battle Road 2000" were sympathetic to this newer style and set authenticity standards for the event that excluded local groups not willing to conform to the performance practices that now prevail within the national reenactment community.

There was also friction between event organizers and Minute Man National Historical Park. Drawn to the park by the symbolic importance of such sites as North Bridge and by a restored landscape that offers a vivid sense of the past, reenactors sought as "authentic" an experience as possible on the sacred ground of Battle Road. But the National Park Service (NPS) prohibits simulated combat on its lands, a policy that severely limited the extent to which reenactors in April 2000 could re-create the events of April 1775. Underlying this interpretive dispute were two quite different systems of values. NPS policies are largely rooted in the belief that the memory of war should prompt a sober reflection that is at odds with the often carnivalesque atmosphere created by large battle reenactments. Further, the Park Service must be responsive to many different constituencies, including those critical of versions of American history that revolve around the military and political actions of white Euro-American men. Reenactors, in contrast, literally try to embody those traditional histories, valorizing the experiences of the "ordinary" soldier and avoiding larger critical contexts in which questions might be raised about possible alternative readings of the Revolution. Although throughout the weekend alternative or more nuanced views of history were presented (for example, by civilian reenactors or in small-scale park-sponsored programs), the emphasis, as at all battle reenactments, was overwhelmingly on masculine military experience.

Minute Man park staff members and reenactor organizers did manage to form a successful working partnership, and they reached an agreement that satisfied NPS policies while allowing reenactors to execute many of the tactics and troop movements of 1775. But the resulting presentations were an odd hybrid that showed the incongruities between the two groups. The Battle Road segments held outside the park followed an outline familiar to anyone who has ever witnessed a battle reenactment: the two sides pretend to fire on one another, leaving "dead" and "wounded" on the field, and then all the reenactors form up and march off the "stage," usually to applause from the audience. One can challenge the realism or appropriateness of this kind of production, but there is an undeniable coherence in its familiar plot lines and performance conventions.

Within the park, however, the action was strangely truncated. Since NPS rules forbid the simulation of casualties or opposing forces, gunfire had to be framed as purely ceremonial or commemorative. But this attempt at reframing coexisted uneasily with the continuing battle narrative that was maintained throughout the day. The



The column of British regulars was portrayed at almost its original strength of seven hundred men at the April 15, 2000, “Battle Road” reenactment. Here, part of the column marches past the restored Hartwell Tavern in Minute Man National Historical Park, Lincoln, Massachusetts. *Photograph by Ray Dunbar.*

result was that spectators in the park saw fragments of the action—British soldiers retreating across North Bridge, colonials popping up in the woods along the edges of Battle Road—without the actual confrontations that would have made all the maneuvering comprehensible. In one particularly indicative moment, several hundred British soldiers lined up along a dirt road and fired two stupendous volleys—at an empty field. Neither true ceremonies nor battle reenactments, these episodes seemed to show, albeit unintentionally, the tension between critical and celebratory approaches to the nation’s history, especially its military history. It was hard to be moved by “ceremonies” shaped only by the need for compromise and equally difficult not to become caught up in the color and pageantry of what the reenactors were doing. I found myself wondering which was preferable: a cohesive performance of a largely uncritical history or an unconvincing display that at least hinted at alternative views.

“Battle Road 2000” raised questions familiar to public historians. How do we balance the desires and demands of groups claiming access to places of collective memory? What happens when public expectations conflict with the convictions of those who act as the official guardians of historic sites? The events in Lexington and Concord this April show us that there is considerable room for negotiation over the “ownership” of these sites. Despite the tremendous challenges of staging a series of large outdoor performances in a busy suburban area, resistance from some traditional

commemorative groups, and a clash of interpretations with the National Park Service, reenactors were able to leverage their own strong sense of identity and their command of a particular set of interpretive strategies to put their vision of the past in front of a very large audience at the symbolic birthplace of the nation. Their success—and the fragmented performances that resulted from the uneasy blending of that vision with the National Park Service's challenge those who would present a more reflective or critical history to find ways to advance their own claims in an equally effective fashion.

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