



Debate on a Town Meeting Article re Paying Lincoln’s Minute Men, March 1775

At Lincoln’s Town Meeting on March 29, 2025, members of the Lincoln Minute Men presented a “debate” that might well have occurred in the town meeting of March 20, 1775, over a proposal to provide each of the town’s minute men with a proper set of soldier’s equipment.

The proposal on March 20, 1775 was:

“that the sum of fifty two pounds four shillings be and is hereby granted to provide for those persons who have inlisted as minute men each one a bayonet belt cartridge box steal ramer. gun stock and knapsack: they to attend military exercise four hours in a day twice in a week till the first day of May next.”

Town meeting records in 1775 did not include the specific points made in discussion. So what follows below is not a re-enactment in the strict sense. It is instead a historically-informed dramatic presentation. A note at the end explains more about the historical basis for the “debate.”

Moderator: [Moderator in March 1775 was Deacon Samuel Farrar Sr.]

[Moderator introduced Article 21, which calls for a report from the Lincoln250 Committee]

Kim Bodnar: [Select Board and Chair, Lincoln250 Committee]

[Bodnar called upon **Captain Eleazer Brooks** (Rick Wiggin) to present the proposal]

Capt. Eleazer Brooks: [Rick Wiggin]

I would remind everyone that this question of paying the minute men was first introduced at Town Meeting more than two months ago, on January 9th. At that time, Town Meeting voted to make “some allowance” for the minute men, but a vote on the form of such allowance has been postponed now three times in subsequent Town Meetings.

Honorable Moderator,

The town has been cautious in its response to the current troubles with Great Britain—and this is indeed prudent. But during the past year, the crisis has become very grave. It has become apparent that Parliament has no respect for our rights and liberties as loyal British subjects, and as protected under the British constitution. Ever since the destruction of the tea in Boston harbor fifteen months ago, Parliament has sought to punish all of us—indiscriminately—including all of our lawful residents who had nothing to do at all with the dumping of the tea.

The Port of Boston Act, which shut down the harbor to commercial shipping last June has seriously affected commerce here in Lincoln—not just in Boston—and this has affected all of our livelihoods.

Then General Gage arrived with the Massachusetts Government Act, which revoked our charter, placed us under martial law, replaced our elected officials with Crown-approved Mandamus Councilors—and (do I need to remind you?) outlawed meetings like this unless we petition the Royal Governor for permission!

It got worse! The Administration of Justice Act authorized the governor and his men to snatch any of us unfortunate enough to be charged with a crime—to be sent across the ocean to be tried in England instead of by a jury of his peers. Yes, that could be you, John Gove! Or you, Zechariah Wesson! Or Nathan Billing ... or Capt. Joseph Adams ... Any of us!! Imagine trying to defend yourself 3,000 miles away with the Court stacked against you

And how has the King responded? He spurned the petition from the Continental Congress, last fall, and full of defiance, he told Parliament that he blamed the colonies. He affirmed Parliament's supreme authority over the colonies, and his determination to enforce these Coercive Acts.

How grave does the crisis have to be before we respond? We have seen General Gage's willingness to send soldiers into our towns, to enforce these Acts. The Provincial Congress, last fall, called upon all the towns to form and equip companies of minute men to be ready to defend our property and our rights. We complied. For the better part of two months our good citizens have been drilling and preparing. We hope this won't be necessary, but we need to be prepared.

During these two months, since January 9, this meeting has repeatedly postponed a decision, and chosen not to approve the necessary funds. We can no longer put this off!

Let me remind you of the words that this very meeting adopted in its letter to the Boston Committee of Correspondence—15 months ago, even before the crisis became so grave:

“We trust we have courage and resolution, sufficient to encounter all the horrors of war, in defense of our rights and privileges civil and religious, which we esteem more valuable than our lives. And we do hereby assure ... the world, that whenever we shall have a clear call from heaven, we are ready to join with our brethren in facing the most formidable forces, rather than tamely to surrender our rights and privileges ...”

I, for one, am no longer willing to be the slave, dupe, or fool of Parliament. Now is the moment when the town must be prepared to live up to these courageous words.

Moderator then called for discussion of the proposal:

Deacon John Gove: [Don Hafner]

With all due respect to Captain Brooks, I oppose this proposal.

Captain Brooks reminds us that the grave situation we are in has been brought upon us by the unlawful action of a Boston rabble who dumped the tea into Boston harbor. Were it not for their behavior, Parliament would never have imposed the harsh laws we now suffer under.

And where was our representation in those decisions? We hear much talk about how we should protest Parliament's laws because we have no representation in Parliament. But the Boston rabble who dumped the tea into the harbor did not ask us in this town whether we agreed with what they were about to do. And now all of us suffer, without ever being given a voice in these events. Will that same rabble now drag us into war, without asking our consent?

The proposal Captain Brooks has set before us will have us arming for war. I warn you, such belligerence will only inflame matters, and at great risk to our lives and property. This is not the wise path. The wise and proper path is to present our case by petition to Parliament. We have friends in Parliament who will plead our case. Appeals to Parliament can bring an end to this crisis. Arming and going to war will only bring us years and years of suffering and death, beyond anything we can now imagine!

For these reasons, I oppose this proposal, and I urge all of you to oppose this proposal.

Moderator then recognized Abijah Peirce

Abijah Peirce: [Tom Risser]

I am also one of your representatives to the Provincial Congress, and I support this proposal.

Past petitions to Parliament have been ignored and despised. Wise men such as Samuel Adams and James Otis have warned us repeatedly in the decade since the Stamp Act that Parliament intended to impose tyranny upon us and reduce the colonies to slavery.

Now the Massachusetts Government Act has revoked our original royal Charter under which we have governed ourselves for 150 years. The tyranny is now upon us.

It is unreasonable to suppose Parliament will now restore our charter rights unless we make clear our resolve to defend our rights and privileges, with force of arms if necessary.

I support this proposal.

Moderator then recognized Zechariah Wesson

Zechariah Wesson: [Ben Soule]

I object to this proposal.

I am not so wealthy as many men in town. I am already hard-pressed to pay my taxes, and now we are asked to pay yet a third more?

And this is only the start of what is demanded of us. The Provincial Congress did more than just ask us to form a minute company and to pay the men. It also proposed 20,000 pounds in new taxes to form a Massachusetts army of 15,000 men.

Think of that —an army of 15,000 men. That would mean one of every four men in the colony would have to become a soldier.

These preparations for war are inviting war. I have five young sons. One of them has already agreed to be a minute man.

Do we really think that by giving these young men cartridge boxes, and bayonets, and knapsacks, that we will turn them into soldiers ready to take on the King's army?

These preparations for war are inviting war, and I fear for the lives of my own five sons.

I oppose this proposal.

Moderator then recognized Widow Ruth Gage

Widow Ruth Gage: [Bev Malone]

[Deacon John Gove rises to challenge Widow Gage's right to speak and vote in town meeting]

John Gove: Point of order! Point of Order!

Moderator recognized Deacon Gove and asked him to explain his objection.

John Gove proceeded:

With all due respect to the Widow Gage, this is highly irregular. It is not our custom — it has *never* been our custom — to allow women to speak in town meeting, much less to vote. I ask the Moderator, by what right, by what law, is the Widow Gage allowed to address us here?

Moderator denied John Gove's challenge and explained: Ruth Gage's husband, Jonathan, owned enough property to give him the right to vote in town meeting, and while Widow Gage still holds her right to that property, she also has a right to speak and vote in town meeting.

Widow Ruth Gage now spoke:

I support this proposal.

I, too, have a son who has already joined the minute men. As a mother, I worry about my son facing the horrors of war. And as a widow, I can ill-afford to pay this extra tax, especially if I do not have my son at home to help me with the farm.

But many of you will remember that two years ago, just after the dumping of the tea, there was a vote in town meeting pledging that we would not purchase or consume British tea, so long as there was a tax upon it. You will remember that I took quill in hand and signed that pledge. My name is on that pledge, along with the names of many of you.

I say again, that as a mother, I worry about my son going to war. But if our sons and husbands and brothers as minute men must face this danger, we need to assure they are properly equipped, for their own safety.

I support this proposal.

Moderator then recognized Ebenezer Cutler**Ebenezer Cutler:** [Liam Lewis]

I oppose this proposal.

We need to consider the ways in which these actions will divide our town – will divide our community. Clearly, we are not all agreed on what we should do. These are grave matters that go to the deepest values of all of us. Yet some in our community would now impose their views on everyone, by implying that anyone who opposes these actions must not be properly patriotic, or courageous.

Widow Gage mentions the town meeting back in December 1773 that pledged not to purchase or consume British tea. But Widow Gage did not mention another part of that pledge — which proclaimed that anyone among us who continued to drink tea should be regarded as “an enemy to their country.” Those were the very words: “an enemy to their country.”

What will become of our community if we start viewing each other as enemies because we disagree on these matters?

There is no need to rush into rash and dangerous actions at this time.

I oppose this proposal.

Moderator then recognized David Fisk

David Fisk: [Ronnie Row]

I support the proposal Captain Brooks has put before us.

I have now joined Lincoln's minute men, and I have been elected by the soldiers to serve as their sergeant.

As you know, I am a veteran of the last war against the French. Like so many Massachusetts men, I fought alongside His Majesty's army. Those regular soldiers at first despised all of us for our lack of fancy uniforms and military discipline. But they soon learned that we were brave and clever soldiers.

We have heard worries expressed that if we show ourselves to be ready for war, it will bring on war.

But surely Parliament knows it could not possibly place an army in North America large enough to impose Parliament's rule upon us.

If we show how resolved we are, how numerous we are, how well-prepared we are, Parliament will not send an army here, and will instead quickly come to reason.

Showing to Parliament that we are ready to fight for our rights will not provoke war, it will prevent war

I support this proposal.

Moderator at this point called for a vote on the proposal:

Slide displayed the proposal and the amount of additional tax being called for, with the modern comparison to Lincoln's current town budget. The slide noted that the £52 requested in the proposal was 32% of the town's budget in 1775, and the comparable amount for Lincoln in 2025 would be \$15 million.

Moderator reminded all attending town meeting that only those **men** who hold property in the town are allowed to vote on the proposal. The only exception are **widows and unmarried adult women** who also hold property in the town.

Historical note: Lincoln's town meeting records in the 18th century did not record the specific points of debate in any town meeting, nor the final vote tally. The record notes only the wording of the specific motion and whether it "passed in the affirmative" or "passed in the negative." Nor do the records state who was present or absent at the town meetings.

Nonetheless, there are indications that the funding the minute men was contentious. For one, the fact that the issue had been repeatedly postponed suggests that the town was striving for consensus, but having difficulty finding it. Second, the town's three representatives to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress — Deacon Samuel Farrar Sr., Captain Eleazer Brooks, and Abijah Peirce — had almost certainly supported the Congress' call for all towns to establish minute man companies and to pay the minute men for their additional drilling. Yet these three men, among the most respected in the town, were nevertheless unable to get prompt acceptance of the funding proposal. Not least, it may also be significant that the final proposal offered reimbursement to the minute men for their equipment but conspicuously did not pay them for the eight hours each week they were to spend in drill.

In the absence of a transcript of the town meeting in 1775, we turned to the pamphlets, newspaper articles, and speeches of the period for the arguments made by the players in this drama. Newspapers, political tracts, and letters from Committees of Correspondence flowed freely in the colonies and were read widely in Massachusetts — a colony where literacy was exceptionally high. These were arguments that residents in Lincoln would have understood and debated.

The identities given to the debaters on each side of the proposal also have historic support. On the patriot side:

- Captain Eleazer Brooks and Abijah Peirce had been Lincoln's representatives to the Provincial Congress, and both would receive promotions to high military rank in the colonial forces that assembled at the North Bridge on April 19, 1775.
- The widow Ruth Gage was indeed the only woman to sign Lincoln's pledge in December 1773, agreeing not to purchase or consume British tea. Whether she attended the town meeting in March 1775 is not recorded, but as mother of a twenty-year-old son in the minute men, she certainly had a compelling interest in the decision.
- Sergeant David Fisk was forty-three years old in 1775, married, and father of two young sons. Fisk certainly did not need to volunteer as a minute man, but he did nevertheless. He was the oldest of Lincoln's minute men and undoubtedly was elected as sergeant because he was a veteran of the French & Indian War.

It should not be assumed that those who may have argued against military preparations at the March 1775 meeting were necessarily ardent loyalists, in the sense of favoring British policies. But these residents would likely have been opposed to the proposal:

- Deacon John Gove had a son Nathaniel, age twenty-five, who joined the Lincoln minute men, so Deacon Gove might seem an unlikely opponent of the proposal. Also, he had signed both of Lincoln's pledges not to purchase or consume British goods, in December 1773 and August 1774. However, in 1827, a fictitious journal of a supposed British spy was published that told of Deacon Gove passing along information to the spy about the location of arms and supplies being hidden by patriots in Concord. Even though the journal was a fraud, the accurate details about Gove's life and residence in Lincoln raises the possibility that he was a known in local lore as a sympathizer of British policies.

-Ebenezer Cutler was a veteran of the French & Indian War (1754-1763) and was addressed by the title of Captain. He was widely respected in town and had been at various times elected as Selectman, Town Clerk, and Moderator. Cutler died in January 1777 at the age of 77, and his headstone acknowledges his virtues. Still, he did not sign either of Lincoln's pledges of non-purchase / non-consumption of British goods, one of which labeled Lincoln residents who did not agree as "enemies of their country." Two of Cutler's sons provided service to the British during the Revolutionary War.

-Zechariah Wesson was married with seven children in 1775. At the time, he had only modest land holdings and was of only middling prosperity. He had not signed either of Lincoln's pledges of non-purchase / non-consumption of British goods. He seems quite likely to have been a man unengaged with the politics of the time and concerned principally with supporting his family. Five of his sons served in army during the War.

Donald L. Hafner
The Lincoln Minute Men
March 29, 2025