



Sunday, February 26, 1775 or The “Salem Alarm”

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

In the pre-dawn hours of **Wednesday April 19 in 1775**, 700 British Regular Army troops marched by land through Lexington on their way to Concord, to seize weapons including cannon (some owned by the Crown), which had been stockpiled in Concord, beyond that town's North Bridge. Due to a warning by 2 lanterns hung in a steeple to alert message riders who expected such action might occur, they were confronted by militia men (“Minutemen”) who had gathered in Lexington. A shot rang out. More immediately followed, and a battle ensued.

But that first true battle of the American Revolution COULD have happened here instead

On Sunday, February 23 in 1775, while people in most towns (including Marblehead then) were in church, almost the same thing occurred. **British Regular Army troops landed in Marblehead** from the sea, and marched through the densely populated town along its “thickly settled” streets with their closely-built homes, on their way to Salem, to seize Crown-provided weapons (including cannon) that had been stockpiled beyond that town's own North Bridge over *its* North River.

The local populace was alerted by various individuals pounding on the church doors, just as in Salem, because somehow Salem and its militia were warned that Regulars were on the march.

Church bells rang out in both towns ~ and eventually beyond.

Marbleheaders flowed out of their 3 churches, very probably fairly panicked. While women hurried their children and families home, the men grabbed their weapons from home or from the town militia's storage areas, then formed up into ranks, and quickly marched to Salem.

As in Lexington, the British column ~ 240-strong ~ was met by Salem's militia. The 'Headers fell in behind the Regulars, arriving in Salem behind them, creating, in essence, a sandwich.

However, in February, cooler heads prevailed. A compromise was reached, and blood-shed was averted. Due to a respectful negotiation between the two opposing sides, the 8-year shooting war that followed the April confrontation did not begin in Salem or Marblehead.

At that time, Marblehead was apparently the sixth most populous metropolis in British North America, with nearly 5,000 people and about 950 families — (all living in about 525 houses).

Already in December and January 1775, local town defensive militias had been dividing and arming themselves, and preparing for potential war. The leader of Marblehead's militia at that time was not Colonel John Glover (who was still a Major, then Lt. Col. until May 10 of that year), but Colonel Jeremiah Lee. (Col. Lee was also a leader of the civilian rebel (“Patriot” *) faction, which comprised about 90% of Marblehead's population, and dominated its town government.

(* “Patriots” were widely referred to as “rebels” then. Loyalists were also called “Tories.”)

It's not that the British thought 240 soldiers with flintlocks and bayonets could march quietly and 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.

Perhaps it was also to display a show of force in the same way large troops of soldiers march ceremonially through cities even today, to impress and/or intimidate the local population.

(Though why the Regulars didn't just land in Salem instead still remains a mystery ...)

DECADES LATER, the event became known as **“Leslie's Retreat”** – after British Lt. Colonel Alexander Leslie, who led the British troops.