

Did You Know That...?

Excursions into Walpole People, Places & History with Ray Boas

...the first shots and deaths

of the American Revolution occurred in Westminster, Vermont, a month before the shots and deaths at Lexington and Concord? And, that Walpole's (then Captain) Benjamin Bellows arrived at the next morning's light to quell the stirring assemblage of farmers and militia?

Named the Upper and Lower Streets, the King's Highway ran from what is now Westminster Station south to Westminster. To get from the Upper Street (the flats – but upper denoting the northerly section) to the Lower Street (on the bluff) there was a jog to the west on the rise so oxen and horses could negotiate the steep incline. It was at this commanding spot on the bluff (now cut down for a straight US Route 5) that a Court House was built in 1772. The county seat was located in Westminster by vote of the Crown-supportive New York Assembly (Vermont was claimed by both New York and New Hampshire Grants, but that is another story). The imposing structure was about 40 feet by 40 feet, two stories with a gambrel roof. Upstairs was the courtroom, and on the first floor were cells and a bar room. Lower Street was ten rods wide (165 feet) to provide space for militia drills.



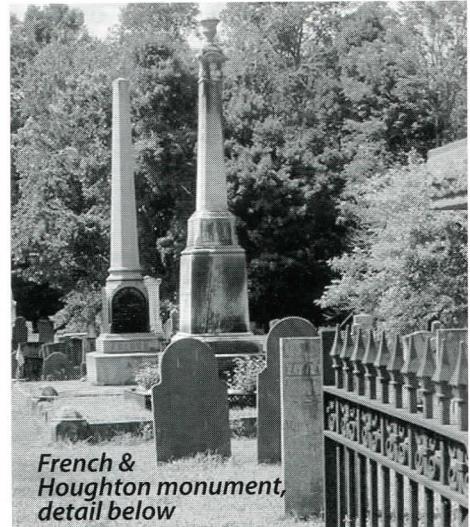
Westminster Court House

Court was scheduled for Tuesday, March 14, 1775, with Judge Thomas Chandler officiating. The previous growing season was poor and most farmers feared that Sheriff William Paterson would persuade the judge to allow him to confiscate the debtors' properties to settle their debts. The judge, however, assured the farmers that he would only hear criminal cases at that session, allowing them additional time to settle their debts. However, not trusting the New York judge, a group of unarmed local farmers took possession of the courthouse in protest. Learning this, Sheriff Paterson led a posse to the courthouse on March 13, 1775, ordering the farmers to leave within fifteen

minutes. The farmers jeered and ignored the order and the posse retreated to Norton's Tavern to assess the situation.

Hearing what had happened, Judge Chandler rushed to the courthouse to tell the farmers Sheriff Paterson was wrong to threaten them with an armed posse, and they could stay in place. The judge then left for a short talk with the sheriff. About four hours later, and fueled by four gallons of rum, the armed posse returned to the courthouse. Sheriff Paterson attempted to enter. The farmers pushed him back, and the sheriff yelled to his men, "Fire!" Twenty-one year-old William French was killed, and Daniel Houghton died nine days later from his wounds. The colonists had stood in protest against King George III's representatives. Those representatives now for the first time took the lives of colonists who wanted nothing to do with the king.

By noon on Tuesday, more than four hundred militia had assembled in Westminster, including Captain Benjamin Bellows' Walpole militia. The Rev. Henry W. Bellows in his 1854 speech reported that the mob was threatening lynch law against the sheriff and his men, but his ancestor Benjamin Bellows, "persuaded the maddened people... to seize the principle men, and carry them, under his escort, to Northampton, where the only strong jail could be found, out of disputed territory." On March 19, Robert Cochran of the Green Mountain Boys guarded those prisoners downriver. In Boston, General Gage was angered over the riot at Westminster. Fearing additional rebel problems, on April 19 he ordered his troops to Concord to confiscate munitions known to be stored there. Upon hearing of the bloodshed in Lexington and Concord, Captain Bellows hastened there with his brother and thirty-five Walpole volunteers.



French & Houghton monument, detail below

After the county seat was moved, the courthouse was used for various purposes before being dismantled about 1806. In 1873 the State of Vermont erected a monument on the graves of William French and Daniel Houghton on the west side of the King's Highway, and the Daughters of the American Revolution placed a marker (now hidden due to the cut of the roadbed on the bluff) to the east in 1902, commemorating the courthouse.



MILESTONES

- Congratulations: Mrs. Jacqueline Ronning, 2013 Harry Westcott Teacher of the Year Award.
- Congratulations: Cindy Westover of Galloway Real Estate, 2013 Realtor of the Year by the Monadnock Region Board of Realtors. Westover is a past president of the board and is active at the state level in the NH Association of Realtors.
- Congratulations: Demere Kasper, promoted to Major, US Army, July 8

Family milestones submitted to *The Clarion* will be published free of charge.