

Some thoughts and observations on the concept of Militia.

Militia---several sources define this as : a military organization composed of citizens enrolled and trained for service in times of a national emergency. This in contrast to a standing army.

It needs to be remembered that for most of its existence the world's people, its warring tribes you might say, lived under dismal, if not appalling, economic conditions. Most of the time there wasn't any economic surplus available to support a standing defense establishment to protect the clan, tribe or regional population against marauding outsiders, unless slavery was part of the system. As a consequence states like Egypt in its Pharaonic period and the Romans in their heyday had large standing armies and were very good at looting. But for many other potentates another approach was needed to make a fist, either defensively or aggressively. Hence, the occasional, what you may call, fighting mob came into being, with the promise and possibility of loot as a prime mover. Nevertheless, some historians claim this structure should be thought of as a primitive militia.

One might have thought that the idea of a citizen defense force was something developed by the "freedom loving" immigrants into this country. They were certainly familiar with it, because they brought the concept with them from Europe. But they did not invent it.

With the distinction that earlier "citizen" armies were mostly made up of "unfree" citizens the concept as such goes way back into history. Philip of Macedon, in the 4th century BC, the father of famous Alexander the Great, already employed the method of basically coercing his peasants to take up arms and help him fight his wars. So did Charlemagne in the 8th century. The point here is that the common soldier was merely a momentary, a "special occasion" contributor, you might say, with a very low rank and value.

As a practical matter, the political leaders of the day promised to protect their people against danger from the outside provided that, in return, the people, primarily agrarian, would satisfy their leader's demand for food and sustenance and hold themselves available for military service, when required. This allowed the leaders, in times of peace, to create a core group of armed professionals under whose command the peasants would muster to fight. The so-called "militia man", in times of crisis, left his civilian duties and responsibilities behind and became a soldier until the emergency was over. Although it was involuntary, the alternative might have been worse. So people cooperated, albeit reluctantly, but in the hope that they would survive and come home with a lot of loot.

For a very long time this was the way many wars were fought and it was considered an early form of "militia" in Asia, Europe and Africa.

The modern concept of militia, as an "ad-hoc" defensive organization against invaders grew out of the Anglo-Saxon concept of "fyrd". Webster's Unabridged dictionary defines "fyrd" as --- the national military array or host prior to the Norman Conquest of 1066.

Five hundred years later, in 1572, under the potential threat of invasion by Spain, Queen Elisabeth I used the same concept when she passed the so-called Muster Law, to establish a method of organizing such a force on short notice. Her liege lords were responsible for arming their peasants and teaching them a minimum of discipline.

Notwithstanding its feudal overtones the Militia concept survived the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 but it diminished in practice with the slow rise of standing military forces.

Not surprisingly, as emigration from Great Britain to the New World got under way early in the 17th century, local militias were established fairly soon after settlements were functioning in the Northeast of this country. As John Keegan says in his book "Fields of Battle", the Muster Law provided the model. He goes on to say that "as a matter of fact, when the United Colonies of New England were formed in 1643 for mutual defense, the colonists were actually arming and training themselves to take the field on short notice." In 1645, the Massachusetts Council passed a regulation ordering militia commanders "to appoint out and to make choice of 30 soldiers of their companies in ye hundred, who shall be ready at half an hour's warning upon any service they shall be put upon by their chief military officers".

The Military Company of Massachusetts was the first military organization in America and was followed by similar groups in the other colonies.

Local control and voluntary service prevailed. Yet fines were levied on those who did not show up for drill practice, musket training, basic infantry tactics and the like.

Most importantly though, the members were free men and disciplined and responsible in their support for the common defense. At first mostly against the natives. The Pequot War, in 1636-37 and later King Philip's War in 1675-76 were already fought with militias. There were very few British troops in the territory and not near enough to be of any use to the locals. They had to fend for themselves

From the beginning, the threat of Indian uprisings and raids were a constant concern to the colonists for quite some years. However, as time passed the militias became increasingly involved in the titanic struggle between France and Britain for control of the eastern part of America and Canada. It was the very effective French support of the Indians that made the natives frequently much more aggressive and dangerous than they would have been on their own. So when the natives went marauding a colonist settlement, it was often instigated by the French and the militias were therefore fighting Indians who were really proxies of the French and as such, part of a larger conflict.

As examples of militia involvement against the French, during the French and Indian Wars, in the 17th and 18th centuries, I may mention William Phipps in 1689-90, during King William's War, when he led an expedition that captured Port Royal, but failed to take Quebec and Montreal. The French retook Port Royal the next year. Similar ventures were made by Francis Nicholson in 1711, during Queen Anne's War when he re-took Port Royal, now known as Annapolis Royal in Nova Scotia. By William Pepperell in 1745, during King George's War when he captured the fortress of Louisbourg on Cap Breton, N.S., by George Washington in 1754, at Fort Necessity, and by John Johnson and William Shirley in 1755 against Canada.

The most serious challenge of the militia concept came 20 years later at the outbreak of hostilities between England and the American Colonies. Vivid descriptions by the Marquis de Lafayette of the shocking, rag-tag appearance of Washington's "soldiers", really militia men, made clear that the odds were long against a successful fight with England. But the militia's patriotic spirit and willingness to endure unreasonable personal discomfort made up for their early lack of military performance.

By 1776, the State of Connecticut already had 28 regiments, 14 of those west of the CT River and 9 east thereof. I believe some of these were mostly on paper and 5 of them I could not account for. It is also likely that most of the "soldiers" were still Militia since the Continental Army had only been created by the Philadelphia Congress on April 29 the year before during the siege of Boston.

Anyhow, when in 1776, George Washington sent 2 requisitions to CT State for troops, CT responded with alacrity and agreed to make many regiments available for his plan to attack New York. We should realize that these regiments were formed with “volunteers”, militia men. Typically, the requisitions George Washington issued included the dates of service such as “ from August (1776) to end of emergency” in recognition of the fact that militia men could only be persuaded to participate so long as their own vital home-front responsibilities were not too severely impacted. However, as the war developed it became harder for militia to just up and leave. But it suggests the basic tolerance in existence in the body politic for the rights of the individual. Even so, many militia members would just disappear when harvest time came along and come back in the spring. Desertion was a bit more flexible than it is today.

Although the militia was valuable throughout the period before and during the American Revolution it proved less dependable during the war of 1812. As a result, no militia was used in the Mexican war of 1846-48. During the Civil war on the other hand, when manpower needs were enormous, both sides again resorted to the use of militias, notwithstanding 50 plus years of neglect in the interim.

Originally, Wilton Militia members were part of the Norwalk defense force, but after Wilton gained a measure of independence as a separate parish in 1726 it began to withdraw from its Norwalk embrace and appointed its own Militia leaders. Consequently, on October 9th, 1727 Major John Burr of Greenfield parish, the commanding officer of all Militias in Fairfield County approved the choice of Nathaniel Ketchum as Lieutenant and Matthew St. John as Ensign for the group of Wilton Militia members. This group became known as the Wilton Train Band and all male members from 16 to 55 were obliged to exercise and train a number of times during the 3 spring months and again during the 3 harvest months.

Three years later Ketchum and St. John were promoted to Captain and Lieutenant respectively and Samuel Betts as Ensign.

Subsequently, the Wilton Train Band came to be known officially as the Seventh Company of the 9th Regiment of Militia and at the time of the French and Indian wars Wilton also contributed to the Troop of Horse in the same Regiment. Groups of 64 men and officers were attached to each of the 19 Militia Regiments at the time the reorganization of the Militia took place in 1739.

Wilton provided more than its regular share of officers to the mounted Troop, probably because Wilton was known for raising horses of good quality. Horse Pound Hill played a role in this effort and David Westcoat of Horse Pound Hill became Cornet of the Troop.

David Lambert of Wilton was the first and only “Toller and Brander of horses” for the town of Norwalk. Even George Washington was aware that Norwalk sold horses to the West Indies as well as to the Army.

In 1773, Matthew Mead became Captain of the Wilton Train band, much to the chagrin of Clapp Raymond who had been its lieutenant for 10 years. Mead was succeeded in 1775 by Samuel Comstock.

On May 1st, 1775 Mead was made captain of the 5th or Norwalk Company in the 5th Connecticut Regiment. Of its 100 privates, 31 were from Wilton. This from a village that had much less than a third of the overall population of the whole town, which then included parts of new Canaan and Westport.

A snapshot of what it was like to be a militia man during the revolutionary War is reflected in some correspondence from Samuel Comstock (the same as mentioned before) writing to Ensign Salmon Hubbell of Wilton, who was commissioned by John Jay in 1777. Ensign Hubbell was

serving in the Continental Army, wounded at the battle of Monmouth on June 28, 1778 almost exactly 225 years ago. Captain Comstock, encamped at Camp Short Hills, N.J. was telling Hubbell how the British were just doing their regular thing of burning and looting local establishments while the Continental Army was just sitting there trying to make up its mind what to do about it. Waiting was a major part of a militia man's life and for some hard to understand and accept.

The historic record states that Wilton provided over 300 men to the Revolutionary war effort out of a population of just about 300 families. Of these 17 individuals were Militia Officers. Some others were Regular officers. I believe this means they were no longer considered part of a given Militia group but assigned to the Continental Army directly as individuals.

Some of the names of Wiltonians who served their country in those days we recognize today as among the most respected in our community. Without trying to be comprehensive we all know: Gregory, Olmstead, Betts, Keeler, Lambert, De Forest, Scribner, and the afore-mentioned Matthew Mead of course. Of this, every Wiltonian can and should be proud.

There is thus no question that militias have been a basic part of the history and development of the early USA, for which we must have the greatest respect. Their members would suddenly leave home and family behind on risky ventures from which not everyone returned. Much heartache and grief was quietly absorbed by many families when the father or son failed to come home. They paid a high price for our national freedom which we do well to remember as individual Americans but more poignantly as members of our WHS.

In sum, I consider it most appropriate that the WHS decided to broaden its representation of Wilton's History by re-creating a Wilton Militia with many of the trappings, or should I say noises, that are so much part and parcel of our past.

Frederik Engel