

## No ghost: Wounded Minute Man returned home to Tewksbury

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By Larz F. Neilson Editor Emeritus |

It was a long road home to Tewksbury for a young man wounded at the Battle of Bunker Hill in 1775. His harrowing story of battle, imprisonment and escape was published in 1830 in a book called *The Quintessence*, in a chapter entitled "The Young Provincial." It was republished in *Yankee Magazine* in 1975.

The story does not name the man, but Dave Marcus of the Tewksbury Historical Society believes it was Jacob Frost, one of four brothers in the Tewksbury Minute Men under Col. Jonathan Trull. Subsequent research has confirmed that it was indeed Jacob Frost.

The story provides an account of the opening events of the Revolutionary War, from the perspective of a participant, rather than a historian. There has been no attempt to check facts stated in the article, however.

The story opens with the Tewksbury Minute Men setting off for Lexington on the morning of April 19, 1775. They participated in the fighting along the Battle Road, firing on the Regulars as they retreated to Boston.

Of the colonel, he wrote, "He was a man whose equanimity nothing ever disturbed, and I am free to confess that I heartily envied him, when I heard his quiet tones calling to his men to mind their business; and when they had sufficiently arranged their ranks, saying, 'Come, we'd as good's go along.'"

In the fighting that day, Frost said he received "two balls in my clothes, and one passed through my hat, but so engaged was I in firing that I hardly noticed them at the time."

Two months later, they were called to Breed's Hill in Charlestown. Frost arrived on the hill as morning broke. "It was clear and calm; the sky was like pearl, the mist rolled lightly from the still water, and the large vessels of the enemy lay quiet as the islands. Never shall I forget the earthquake voice with which that silence was broken. A smoke like that of a conflagration burst from the sides of the ships, and the first thunders of the revolutionary storm rolled over our heads."

The British troops crossed from Boston by boat, organized, and began marching up to the American position on the hill. "Then a fire blazed along their ranks, but the shot struck in the redoubt or passed harmlessly over our heads."

The Redcoats continued their advance, as the Americans held their fire. "But when they stood so near us that every shot would tell, a single gun from the right was the signal for us to begin, and we poured upon them a fire." . . . "As the vapour passed away, their line appeared as if a scythe of destruction had cut it down, for one long line of dead and dying marked the spot where their ranks had stood."

A second American volley had similar effect, but also exhausted the supply of powder and shot. "It was evident that our post must be abandoned, but I resolved to resist them once again. They came upon us with double fury. An officer happened to be near me; raising my musket and putting all my strength into the blow, I laid him dead at my feet. But meantime, the British line passed me in pursuit of the flying Americans, and thus cut off my retreat; one of the soldiers fired and the ball entered my side. I fell and was beaten upon the head by muskets until they left me for dead on the field."

After the battle, the British hauled him to a boat, and then into Boston. He was put in a hospital, which he described as an abode of woe, where patients, both regular and provincial, were visited, or looked upon once a day by a physician who neither understood nor cared for his duty.

A comrade reported to his parents that he had been killed. They placed a rude stone in the burying ground.

On March 17, 1776, the British evacuated Boston. The prisoners were taken to Halifax, Nova Scotia. After a brief time on a prison ship, they were put in a prison in the city. There were six men to a cell.

Frost found a bayonet in the cell, and the men began to cut a hole in the wall. It took them four weeks, and then another week as they waited for a stormy night. As they fled, a sentry approached, but was overcome, beaten with stones.

The escapees split up. Four were strong, but the narrator and another wounded man encouraged the others to go on without them. The four were captured and eventually died in prison. Frost and his companion, though, hid in a swamp and made good their escape. They traveled on foot for one week, subsisting on roots, berries, and a stolen chicken. Finally, they encountered a farmer on horseback, taking goods to market. He shared his lunch, then went home, brought a second horse, and took the two men to his home.

The next day, the farmer went to town, and on return said there was much confusion there on account of their escape. A reward was offered for their capture, and a detachment of soldiers was sent in pursuit. The farmer said he had been questioned, and did not feel quite easy in his mind, when he thought of the lies, which he had felt obliged to tell.

The farmer and his wife put them up for two nights; they left on the third, with directions to a place where they could take a boat to Falmouth (now Portland.) From there, they returned home on foot.

“I entered my native place in a clear summer afternoon,” he wrote. He had been absent for more than a year.

“I went to my father’s door, and entered it softly. My mother was sitting in her usual place by the fireside. . . . When she saw me, she gave a wild look, grew deadly pale, and, making an ineffectual effort to speak to me, fainted away.”

His little brother took him for a ghost and ran to the meetinghouse in alarm. The Sunday service had just ended, and the whole congregation came to the house.

“Never was there such a confusion in our village. The young were eloquent in their amazement, and the old put on their spectacles to see the stranger being who had thus returned as from the dead.”

Frost married Lydia Shedd in 1777 and they became the parents of 10 children. Tewksbury records do not show a date for his death.

A Frost genealogy indicates that the family moved to Norway, Maine in 1800, and it was there that their tenth child was born in 1802.

Two histories of Norway both relate the story of Frost’s capture and escape with slight variations from the story as related above. He died in Norway, Maine on January 28, 1839 at age 84.

Jacob’s brother Joel (not a veteran) also moved to Norway, as did two Tewksbury Minute Men veterans, Nathan Foster and John Needham, along with many other Bay State veterans.

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