



EPIISODE 7, 2004: REV. WAR CANNON BOSTON, MASSACHUSETTS

Elyse: Our last investigation could provide a new details about the incendiary events that ignited the Revolutionary War. It's April 1775. A time of growing dissent in Britain's North American colonies. To disarm suspected rebels, the British Governor of Massachusetts orders 800 redcoats to march on Concord, a known anti-British stronghold. By the time the army arrives, the rebels have assembled. The sides converge on the famous North Bridge and shots are fired. The first battle of the Revolutionary War has begun. Almost 230 years later, we've heard a story about an old brass cannon that, if true, could reveal unexpected details about those momentous events. The cannon, claimed to date back to the Revolutionary War, was recently rediscovered by the National Park Service. The find has especially intrigued Kate Barrett from Boston. She has a personal connection with the start of the conflict.

Kate Barrett: My ancestor, Col. James Barrett was the commander of rebel forces in Concord on April 19, 1775.

Elyse: Kate also knows an old family legend, that claims the real reason redcoats marched on Concord was to retrieve a brass cannon - stolen from the British in Boston - and hidden on her ancestor's farm. Could the cannon discovered by the Parks Service be the one featured in her family story? And if it is, did the search for it really ignite the Revolutionary War?

Kate: I've never seen, but I've heard lots of stories about it and I'd like to know if the stories are true.

Elyse: I'm Elyse Luray and I've come to Boston to investigate. The first thing I want to do is show Kate the cannon, which is now stored at the Charleston Navy Yard

Elyse: Here it is. This is the cannon.

Kate: It's the one I've heard about?

Elyse: Yep, what do you think?

Kate: I think it's incredibly old, but very neat.

Elyse: So Kate tell me, what do you want to know?

Kate: I'd like to know if the cannons were the real motivation for the British march on Concord and if this is one of the cannons

Elyse: Well, that would certainly make this one important cannon...

Kate: Yes it would, it would be great to know for sure...

Elyse: Do you know anything else about it, anything else I can go on?

Kate: I don't. That's all I've heard.

Elyse: Well, I have to honest, that sounds a little farfetched, but I'll check it out.

Kate: That's great, thank you very much Elyse.

Elyse: If this story is true this could be one of the most important pieces we've ever investigated. You know

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I've sold a lot of arms and armor before, but I've never sold a cannon and it looks old, it looks period... and there's an inscription, it says: "possessed by the British colonies of MA at the commencement of the war on the 19th of April 1775" It gives me a time frame, but...I don't always trust inscriptions, so I think this is gonna be a tough one...I need to confirm the cannon's age, but first I want to do some background research. And I've found a number of books retelling the popular history – here's what they have to say...In the colonies "attitudes had become polarized during 1774"... and Massachusetts was the eye of the storm. The British Army had occupied Boston, from where they tried to control the colony. But the colonists refused to surrender their power and resistance grew, with many militiamen – the people's army - taking up the rebel cause. And Concord became a base for their operations. In an attempt to neutralize the opposition, the British army general and governor of Massachusetts, Thomas Gage ordered his troops to confront them. But spies learnt of the plans and Paul Revere and two other riders were dispatched to alert the populace. By the time British troops had marched the 20 miles from Boston to Concorde, the rebels were ready for them. The redcoats were forced to retreated - but had to run a rebel gauntlet. Snipers attacked the troops from behind stone walls, trees, barns and houses. By the end of the day, "nearly 300 red coats and 100 colonists lay dead." "Massachusetts was at war with Great Britain" and the rebels success had inspired the spirit of revolution across all the American colonies. But I don't see any mention here of a theft of a cannon. I wonder if the cannon itself might hold some clues? I'm meeting cannon expert Chris Fox from Ft. Ticonderoga, NY, to learn about the cannon and whether it could even have been around in the late 18th century.

Chris Fox: Cannons were produced beginning in the 14th century. The first cannons were a lot simpler than this gun here. They were simply bars of iron that were held together by rings and everything was just welded together to make a tube basically from which a cannon ball could be fired.

Elyse: According to Chris, cannons were widely used in North America as far back as the French and Indian War of the 1750's. To devastating effect. Pulverizing fortifications and wiping out entire lines with a single volley of buckshot. Let's get back to our cannon

Chris: Well, first of all it's a brass cannon...

Elyse: Brass cannons were lighter and more durable than older style iron cannons. You know, I noticed that there was some type of design here, what do you make of this?

Chris: Yeah, there's a remnant of a seal or coat of arms of some sort, what it was is hard to say...

Elyse: Perhaps the size and shape of the cannon can tell Chris more about it. First he checks out the caliber. It seems to be a four-pounder, meaning it fired cannon balls weighing four pounds. But what about the date?

Chris: In terms of dating we would often look at the base ring here and on the base ring, very often you'll find a maker's mark - an inscription and a date and this lacks that...

Elyse: This missing mark suggests to Chris that the cannon wasn't made for the British Army, but perhaps imported from Britain for use by the local militia. Then he spots something else...

Chris: One thing I notice is that the back end, the breech of the gun, there's a set of rings here and this is the point where an elevating screw is attached for raising and lowering, for aiming it and that's a trait that is seen on British cannon beginning in the late 1750's. Take all this together, it seems to suggest to me a date of around 1760 or the mid 1760's perhaps..

Elyse: So would it have been in use just before the revolutionary war?



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Chris: Yes this certainly would have been in use before the revolution and right up through the war no doubt...

Elyse: So we know the cannon is from the right period – and would have been a nice addition to any arsenal. But what about the alleged theft? Kate thinks the stolen cannons were chased to Concord. So that's where I've come to meet historian and park ranger Jim Hollister – whose an expert on the events leading up to the battle. Jim, I'm trying to find out about a theft of cannons by the rebels in Boston in the 1770's. Have you heard about it?

Jim Hollister: Yes I have, some cannons were taken in September 1774 just as events were starting to spiral out of control.

Elyse: There was a theft.

Jim: Yes, there was.

Elyse: Jim explains that rebels raided several forts and armories across Massachusetts. But their most audacious theft was from Major Adino Paddock's artillery arm of the Boston militia. That's the theft.

Jim: Our theft. That was it. Some rebels had broken into the gun houses and stole two brass cannons right out from the noses of the British soldier that were standing guard. And soon after when one of the British officers discovered that the guns were taken he said "by god the guns are gone, I'll be damned if these people won't steal the teeth out of your head while you're watching".

Elyse: So a brass cannon was stolen – from the militia – which fits our story perfectly.

Jim: It was very important both symbolically as well as strategically. A lot of the cannons that the colonists had been stockpiling were old heavy iron guns of really not much use for an army in the field. What they needed were lighter cannons and that's exactly what these were.

Elyse: Losing these cannons would have infuriated the British Governor, Thomas Gage. He must have wanted them back. But is that why he sent his troops to Concord? First I need to find out if the stolen cannons were even there. I'm headed to the Massachusetts Historical Society which has one of the best collections of documents and accounts from 18th century Boston.

Librarian: Here's the material you requested.

Elyse: Thank you. Here are copies of some of Gage's correspondence. Some of the pages are in French and I've had them translated. They are intelligence reports and were probably written in French to hide their contents. This is interesting. This is from a royal spy in Worcester, MA, another place where rebels had arms. And it says here "the brass cannons which were once in Mr. Paddock's hands never got here and are probably presently in Concord". This is huge. Jim told us the stolen cannons had belonged to Paddock's group of the militia – so they really were in Concord and Gage knew it. But did he send troops there specifically for the cannons? I think I may have found our answer... This is a copy of Gage's marching orders to seize weapons in Concord: four brass cannon and two mortars with a number of smaller arms in the cellar or outhouse of Mr. Barrett, so they were marching to Kate's ancestor's farm in Concord and the cannons were on the top of the list. But wait, it's only a draft, I've found the orders that were actually given and they're a bit different. He puts ammunition, and provisions before cannons. So we can't say the stolen cannons were the only moti-

vation for the march - but they were there and they were on Gage's mind. But was our cannon one of them? I'm going to see if I can find any other records that might give us a description of the cannons that were stolen and taken to Concord. Apart from Gage's papers, I can't find any mention of brass cannons. But wait a second. I think I've found something. Here's a mention of cannons coming in from London in the Boston Gazette from 1768: "In the Brigatine Abigail from London came two beautiful brass field pieces, 3lbers. Wait a minute, Chris said ours was a four pounder. Hmm. Could the newspaper have gotten it wrong? Let's see if there's anything else... With province arms there on for the use of the train of artillery of the regiment of this town - Boston. So these are cannons for the Boston militia's artillery. - Paddock's artillery. They must be the stolen cannons and now we have a physical description - they have a Massachusetts coat of arms. And our cannon definitely had a remnant of a coat of arms or seal. I need to find out what the Massachusetts coat of arms would have looked like back then. Here it is. Now I want to see what Chris thinks.

Elyse: Listen, I think I found something, can you meet me back at the cannon? OK, see you there, thanks. The first thing I ask him is about the newspaper article.

Chris: The thing about newspaper articles, particularly those of the 18th century is that very often the information in them is inaccurate or if the person writing the article didn't know the difference, the slight difference between a three and four pounder, he may have gotten it wrong...

Chris: Well what I think we need to do here is take a look at the seal. It would be very unusual for a cannon apart from say, a British military piece to have some sort of elaborate seal.

Elyse: Chris thinks if we can match the seals then we've got our stolen cannon. I don't really think we're gonna be able to do that...

Chris: It's pretty worn flat...

Elyse: It's completely worn...I was about to give up when I thought of one more thing: the cannon that this would have come over from London with...why don't we try to find the pair? If we can find the correct seal on the twin cannon then we can assume that our cannon had the seal as well. And Chris has a surprise for me. He's done some research on his own and he thinks he knows where the twin cannon is... Oh good, let's go.

Elyse: Bunker Hill was the site of one of the earliest and bloodiest battles of the American Revolution. There is now a towering monument here and if Chris is correct, the twin cannon could be in it, 294 steps high... Wow, look at this, there it is. Alright, let's check out that seal. That's it.

Chris: I can see mistaking the caliber of the gun, but that's the seal and there's really no mistaking that. But let me take some measurements so that we can compare this with the other gun to make sure they are in fact a pair. We're looking for about 42 inches.

Elyse: These results are going to be a real surprise for Kate. I can't wait to tell her what I've found: that a theft did occur, and retrieval of cannons does seem to have been behind the British Army's march to Concord.

Kate: No way! Oh my God. I had no idea, that's great news...

Elyse: As for your other question, was our cannon one of the ones that was stolen? I think I have your answer. The bore diameter should be just over 3 1/8. What do we have?



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Chris: Just over 3 1/8.

Elyse: This last one will be the clincher if it's 20.5

Chris: 20.5 inches right there, so I'd say we have a match.

Elyse: Just what I wanted to hear. If you take that with all the other evidence combined, I think I can make a strong enough case that these cannons were in Concord in April 1775.

Kate: Wow that's cool, oh that's great! A whole new part of the family history.

Elyse: There's more, I have a surprise for you, but you'll have to follow me...OK, are you ready? We're going to teach you how to fire this replica 18th century brass cannon...

Kate: You gotta be kidding me.

Elyse: Nope, you ready?

Kate: So, I'm just going to be lighting it.

Artillerist: You're going to be lighting it.

Kate: Okay.

Artillerist: Kate, before we fire this, every one of us on the crew wears a medal of Saint Barbara.

Elyse: Saint Barbara is the patron saint for those in danger of sudden death.

Artillerist: She is the patron saint of all artillerists. For you, we have your very own medal of Saint Barbara. She protects us and watches over us. "Advance cartridge! Charge with cartridge! Ram down cartridge! Prepare to fire! Fire!"

ENDS.