

Arming America: Part II

Last month, I discussed Professor Michael Bellesiles's book *Arming America: The Origins of a National Gun Culture*, and how it makes false claims about the state of gun ownership in early America--not just errors of fact, but intentionally deceptive misquotation of sources. This month, I will provide a few more examples of this deceptive misuse of sources.

Bellesiles claims that immediately before the American Revolution, "Massachusetts conducted a very thorough census of arms, finding that there were 21,549 guns in the province of some 250,000 people." Bellesiles claims that this included all privately owned firearms.¹ Bellesiles's source for this claim is an inventory of "Warlike Stores in Massachusetts, 1774." But when I examined the inventory, dated April 14, 1775, I found that there is nothing there that tells what categories of firearms were counted. Certainly, it includes stockpiles owned by towns.² But does it include all privately owned arms as well? Bellesiles claims that it does.

The sources that Bellesiles lists for this claim, however, are largely silent as to what categories of firearms were counted. The only information that I can find about this arms census is a note of February 13, 1775. It orders a committee to inquire "into the state of the militia, their numbers and equipments, and recommending to the selectmen of the several towns and districts in this province, to make return of their town and district stocks of

¹ Bellesiles, 180.

² Massachusetts Provincial Congress, *The Journals of Each Provincial Congress of Massachusetts in 1774 and 1775* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1838), 756.

ammunition and warlike stores to this Congress.”³ This seems to say that only military weapons possessed by enrolled militia members and publicly owned weapons were counted. There is nothing that indicates that *all* privately owned arms in Massachusetts were counted.

The evidence from Bellesiles’s own sources suggests that firearms were plentiful, and that the inventory recorded only a small part of all firearms in the province. An entry for October 27, 1774, directs inhabitants of Massachusetts to be “properly and effectually armed and equipped.” Furthermore, “if any of the inhabitants are not provided with arms and ammunition according to law” the town was to arm them.⁴ Was there really only one gun for every eleven people, as Bellesiles claims? If so, it seems a bit odd that the Provincial Congress was ordering every militia member to be armed, and the towns to provide arms to those who didn’t have them. Why issue an order that was, according to Bellesiles, utterly impossible to achieve?

A committee appointed to examine the problem of soldiers who lacked firearms reported on May 9, 1775, that “a few of the inhabitants of this colony, who are enlisted into its service, are destitute of fire arms, bayonets, and other accoutrements....”⁵ Not “most of the inhabitants of this colony, who are enlisted into its service” are without firearms. Not “many.” Not “some,” but “a few”—and it isn’t clear whether the problem is firearms, bayonets, or “accoutrements” (for example, cartridge pouches). Certainly, it is possible

³ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 98.

⁴ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 34.

⁵ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 209-10.

that a person who used a musket primarily for hunting would lack a bayonet. Perhaps the Revolutionary government of Massachusetts didn't know how poorly its militia was armed--at least, their knowledge was inferior to that held by Professor Bellesiles.

As the Revolutionary War continued, there are again discussions of the need to arm those soldiers "who are destitute of arms," but there is no indication that this was a problem of great concern.⁶ If there were a serious shortage of firearms or ammunition for the militia, as Bellesiles claims, it seems strange that the Provincial Congress on June 17, 1775 (almost two months after Redcoats fired on Minutemen at Lexington) recommended to non-militia members "living on the sea coasts, or within twenty miles of them, that they carry their arms and ammunition with them to meeting on the [S]abbath, and other days when they meet for public worship."⁷ Somehow, there was a shortage of guns and ammunition for the militia, but non-militia members still had enough arms and ammunition that they were encouraged to bring them to all public meetings.

Were guns rare in colonial Massachusetts, as Bellesiles claims? If so, you would expect the value of guns to be high, especially once the Revolutionary War started, and there was no way to import more guns from Europe. (Bellesiles claims that there were almost no guns made in the colonies.)⁸

The Provincial Congress of Massachusetts bought weapons from many private owners in the first few months of the war, sometimes purchasing as many as 100 weapons in a

⁶ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 332.

⁷ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 348-49.

⁸ Bellesiles, 188-91.

single transaction. Interestingly enough, they appear not to have seized these weapons, but repeatedly appealed to the patriotism of private gun owners.⁹ The *Journals* that Bellesiles uses had records of at least 483 guns, “fire-arms,” and “small arms” purchased from private parties by the Provincial Congress. The weapons were appraised; the values listed do not suggest that guns were rare.¹⁰

The average price of these weapons comes to just under £2. Perhaps some of these weapons contained in transactions labeled “small arms” were actually pikes or swords. Let’s give the benefit of the doubt to Bellesiles, and only look at transactions labeled “fire-arms” or “guns,” and assume that *none* of the “small arms” are guns. Even the “fire-arms” and “guns” transactions (total of 89 weapons) show an average price of £2 5 s. 1 d.--not a trivial amount of money for the time, but about the same as a sergeant’s monthly wages in the Massachusetts army.¹¹ If guns were scarce, it doesn’t show up in their valuation.

If the Revolutionary government of Massachusetts were desperately short of arms for its soldiers, one would expect them to have used their power of eminent domain to obtain privately owned firearms. Instead, the private owners were told, “[I]t is strongly recommended to such inhabitants..., that they supply the colony with same.”¹² A request of June 15, 1775, for individuals to sell their arms is phrased in terms that seem quite voluntary. “*Resolved*, that any person or persons, who may have such to sell, shall receive

⁹ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 210, 336-37.

¹⁰ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 536-37, 584-93.

¹¹ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 413.

¹² Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 210.

so much for them, as the selectmen of the town or district in which or they may dwell, shall appraise such arms at....”¹³ It seems most peculiar that a government in desperate need of guns would continue to make polite requests, especially since Bellesiles claims repeatedly that governments in this period regarded all gun ownership as being at the pleasure of the state, and for its purposes.

Finally, there is the evidence of the guns seized by General Gage shortly after the Battles of Lexington and Concord. There was great suffering among civilians in Boston once hostilities had started. Supplies of food were becoming scarce, and many of the civilians, especially those with Patriot sympathies, were anxious to leave. General Gage demanded that the citizens of Boston turn in their guns as a condition of leaving the town. Gage had two goals. One was to make sure that British soldiers would not be shot from the rear, if the Patriot militias attacked the city. The other goal was to make sure that any guns or ammunition in town would not be smuggled out to be used by the American forces.

In exchange for passes to leave the city, the people of Boston surrendered 2,450 guns. Owners marked each gun to identify to whom it belonged, so that he could claim it at a later time.¹⁴ This tells us that these were privately owned weapons, not owned by the government. The population of Boston before the war is usually estimated at 17,000

¹³ Massachusetts Provincial Congress, 336-37.

¹⁴ Richard Frothingham, *History of the Siege of Boston, and of the Battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill* 6th ed. (Boston: 1903), 94-95.

people.¹⁵ At first glance, this isn't very impressive; only about 14% of the population turned in a gun.

But we now know that many Bostonians, especially those sympathetic to the Patriot cause, had left the city in the weeks before the “shot heard round the world.” There had been large scale smuggling of muskets, ammunition, and even publicly owned *cannon* out of occupied Boston during that time.¹⁶ This means that the percentage of the population that had surrendered their guns was much higher than 14%. More importantly, General Gage complained on June 19, less than two months after the surrender of the guns, that the population had been dishonest. Gage claimed that many “had secreted great numbers” of guns. Gage ordered those who still had guns in Boston to immediately surrender them.¹⁷

It is important to remember, also, that families were much larger in those days, with five to eight children not at all uncommon. If you are counting households, you find that there were probably no more than 3000 households in Boston. This would mean that, on average, almost every household had surrendered a gun—and according to General Gage, many households were still armed!

Guns were scarce in Massachusetts at the start of the American Revolution? I don't think so.

Next month: our final installment debunking Bellesiles's claims.

¹⁵ Frothingham, 19.

¹⁶ Frothingham, 19, 54-55.

¹⁷ Frothingham, 208.

Clayton E. Cramer (<http://www.ggnra.org/cramer>) received his M.A. in History from Sonoma State University in 1998. His fifth book, *Concealed Weapon Laws of the Early Republic: Dueling, Southern Violence, and Moral Reform* was published by Praeger Press in 1999. More detailed critiques of Bellesiles's claims, including other diaries, travel accounts, and statistical evidence, can be found at <http://www.ggnra.org/cramer/GunScarcity.pdf> and <http://www.ggnra.org/cramer/ArmingAmericaLong.pdf>.