

# Prudence Cummings Wright



## Guardian of the Bridge

A Daughter of the American Revolution

1740-1823

**In April 1775, at the opening of the Revolutionary War, a group of resolute women led by Prudence Wright immortalized themselves and the bridge crossing at the place of the Pepperell Covered Bridge by defending it against British spies.**

- Prudence Cummings was born in November 26, 1740 in the town of Groton. A re-alignment of state lines in 1741 made her a Hollis, New Hampshire resident. She married David Wright of Woburn at age 21 and moved to the parish of Pepperell. By the time the revolution began, at age 35, she had given birth to 7 children.
- The Cummings family was split in its loyalties. Her brothers Samuel and Thomas Cummings had close associations with Leonard and Benjamin Whiting. The Whiting family had deep connections to English aristocracy and Leonard Whiting was a commissioned British Officer. The commitment of Prudence to the revolutionary cause was considered unfaltering.
- In July of 1774 she gave birth to Liberty Wright. His name perhaps

reflecting his parent's commitment to the revolutionary cause. Liberty Wright died at the age of 8 months, in March 1775 only a month prior to the events that made Prudence famous. Did she feel the cruel irony of her son Liberty's loss as her people commenced the struggle for their liberty?

- On April 19, 1775 Edmund Bancroft rode into Pepperell with word that the British regulars were on the march. The minutemen of Pepperell, Groton and Hollis NH under the command of Colonel Prescott rallied to the revolutionary cause by marching on Concord.
- Shortly after, word returned of the skirmish on Lexington Green, the engagement at Concord and the British retreat back to Boston. The women of Pepperell knew that their husbands and brothers were engaged in open war with the Crown, that blood would be spilled and all manner of threats would be manifest.
- Rumors of British spies or troops crossing through the region to provide information to the British command were everywhere. One account has Prudence, visiting her mother in Hollis and overhearing her brother Samuel and a known Tory, Leonard Whiting, discussing a plan to get word of rebel actions to the British.
- Perhaps a few days after the events at Lexington and Concord, in response to rumors, the overheard conversation or both, word was sent from house to house for the women to gather. They gathered 30-40 strong perhaps equipped with the few remaining guns, pitchforks and whatever else would serve as a weapon. They wore men's clothing possibly to represent more formidably to whoever may pass. Prudence Wright was elected their captain and she chose Sarah Hartwell (Mrs. Job Shattuck of Groton) as her Lieutenant. They assembled at Jewett's Bridge (at the same location as the Pepperell Covered Bridge) where they would await in ambush for

any foe to the cause. This force of women, forged in revolutionary spirit was to become known as "Mrs. David Wright's Guard."

- What happened next can best be described by the story written by Mary L.P Shattuck for the dedication of the Prudence Wright Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1899. The document was entitled, "Prudence Wright and the Women Who Guarded the Bridge". This narrative was written in 1899 and was derived from family accounts passed down through several generations. It contains two slightly different versions of events from the "Grandmothers'" and from a direct descendent. This work remains the definitive source of what happened on that day.

*The account derived from the "Grandmothers'":*

"The Guard" assembled at dark one night a few days after the nineteenth of April, when they heard the rumor that British messengers were expected to cross the town. There were pine trees on one side of the river near the bridge, but no houses very near. The bridge at that time was an open one. The road, then as now, curved around high land on the north side so that the bridge was not visible until it was nearly reached by a person coming from the north. How long the women waited there was not remembered by our grandmothers in their story, but they were excited, so the story runs, as told by a descendant of Leonard Whiting, for when two horsemen approached from the north they heard the women's voices before they came in sight, and the captain's voice above the others. One of the horsemen recognized it as that of his sister, whose fearless, determined spirit he knew full well.

... and from that hour her brother Thomas was never seen by his family or townsmen, so this tradition runs. Capt. Whiting being a military man, was not so much impressed by the voices of the women, and rode on into the midst of the "Guard" before he realized the nature of the force he had to face. The women

surrounded him, seized his horse, and at the command of “Capt. Wright,” compelled him to dismount and submit to search. In his boots were found treasonable papers. The women marched their prisoner to the middle of the town, probably up Main Street to the tavern kept by one Solomon Rogers. “They were entertained-a substantial supper no doubt-and guarded their prisoner until morning, when they marched him to Groton and delivered him into custody. The papers were sent to the committee of safety at Charlestown.”

*Account of an unknown descendent of David and Prudence Wright:*

“Soon after her son Liberty died, Prudence went to her Hollis home, and one afternoon heard her brother Samuel, and Leonard Whiting make plans to meet a force of English and lead them to Groton. She succeeded in leaving Hollis without exciting their suspicion and returned to Pepperell, where she called together the women, who dressed in their absent husband’s clothing and proceeded to the bridge near Jewett’s fordway, prepared to defend it in the absence of their husbands and brothers.

Soon after nightfall, horses were heard approaching, but instead of the force of British expected, only two horse men approached. Prudence, as chosen leader, ordered a halt. They turned to fly, but the women seized their horses. Leonard Whiting drew his revolver and was about to use it when Samuel Cummings made him lower it, saying: “I recognize Prude’s voice and she would wade through blood for the rebel cause.” The men were dismounted and searched, and dispatches from the British forces in the field, to the British General in Boston were found upon them. The prisoners were taken to Groton to the committee of safety, and the next day were given their liberty on condition that they would leave the colony. They departed in the direction of New York. Samuel Cummings never returned. Samuel was the favorite brother of

Prudence, and his loss was a life-long grief to her.”

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**Records show that 4 conspirators were charged for this action but were released. Thomas and Samuel Cummings as well as Benjamin Whiting fled rather than face further jeopardy. Leonard Whiting later spent time in jail for other transgressions against the revolution. The loss Prudence experienced in the death of her child and the absence of her brothers was likely, profound. Clearly, her commitment to liberty was unswayed by personal sacrifice.**

**In the absence of their husbands these women elevated the cause of revolution beyond themselves or their families. They gathered to face a single messenger or perhaps a group of soldiers escorting vital messages from Canada to Boston. While we are unsure what they knew of their potential foe, would they dress as men or gather 30-40 strong to waylay a lone rider? Regardless, this act of resistance and the selfless story of courage it tells, is worthy of the birth of a nation. For this, Prudence Wright, the Captain of “Mrs. Prudence Wrights Guard”, her compatriots, and the site of the bridge where this action took place, will be forever remembered by history.**

Author: Paul Keating

References:

The History of Groton, Caleb Butler, Boston 1848  
The Women who Guarded the Bridge, Mary L.P. Shattuck, 1900, Copyright 1912