



## THOMAS DITSON JR. BILLERICA CIVIC HALL OF FAME INAUGURAL CLASS OF 2022



Billerica's official recognition as "America's Yankee Doodle Town" is thanks to the heroic—if not unfortunate—ordeal of Thomas Ditson Jr., in March 1775. The 33-year-old was a Billerica farmer eager to become a Minuteman with the town's militia as the American colonies were on the brink of war for independence against the British Regulars.

On March 7, 1775, Thomas left his Billerica farm and traveled to Boston to legally purchase a firelock in preparation for the inevitable conflict. When arriving, he inquired of townsmen who might have firearms for sale and was directed to a man who "appeared to be a soldier." Thomas went with the soldier, identified as British Sgt. John Clancy of the 47th Regiment of Foot, to a "house" that turned out to be the barracks for the regiment.

At the barracks, Thomas bargained for a greatcoat for which he paid a sum of two pistareen, a small silver coin used in the colonies. He placed the coat in a bag and began to barter for a firelock.

What happened next largely depends on whose story you believe, Ditson's or Sgt. Clancy's. Thomas testified he offered four dollars for a "very fine piece" and would also pay one and a half dollars for an "old rusty piece." Sgt. Clancy assured Thomas he would have no problem carrying the firelocks past the sentry at the ferry because they were friends.

Meanwhile, Sgt. Clancy claimed he and Thomas began drinking while discussing the firelocks sale. The sergeant said Thomas offered to buy as many firelocks as the soldier could gather. He further stated Ditson made an offer of "any sum of money" if Clancy would desert the British Regulars and come with him back to the country.



What resulted was Thomas being seized by a group of British soldiers and carried off to the guard house on Foster's Wharf that evening. The next morning, a different sergeant told Thomas to strip to his breeches. More men followed carrying a bucket of tar and a "pillow-bear of feathers." An officer standing in the doorway ordered the men to tar and feather Thomas from head to toe, including his breeches. A proclamation was read to him then hung around his neck declaring, "American liberty or Democracy exemplified in a villain who attempted to entice one of the soldiers of His Majesty's 47th Regiment to desert and take up Arms with Rebels against his King and Country."

Thomas was ordered to sit upon a chair that had been fastened to a two-wheeled donkey cart. Led by Lt. Col. Thomas Nesbit, about 40 to 50 Regulars with muskets and fixed bayonets paraded Thomas through the streets of Boston in what is today the city's Financial District. The chiding soldiers jeeringly sang an original verse of "Yankee Doodle," playing it on their fifes and drums:

*Yankee Doodle came to town,  
For to buy a firelock.  
We will tar and feather him,  
And so we will John Hancock.*

As the crowd of incensed colonists grew and pressed closer to the soldiers, the order was given to load firelocks. Perhaps wanting to avoid another Boston massacre, Lt. Col. Nesbit stopped the procession and told Thomas he was free to go.

Upon returning to his farm, located in Pinehurst near what is now the town line with Burlington, the tale of Thomas' ordeal spawned outrage throughout the countryside, and "Yankee Doodle" was soon transformed into an anthem of colonial pride during the forthcoming war. The Billerica selectmen penned a letter of protest to Gen. Thomas Gage, the then-provincial governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony, who promised to investigate the incident, but nothing resulted from it. Patriot Samuel Adams referred to Thomas' torment in a letter written to a fellow Bostonian: "General Gage has lost command over his officers."

Surviving the episode in good health, Thomas did join the Billerica militia. Just more than month later, the Billerica Minute Men Company answered the alarm of April 19, 1775. As he and his fellow townsmen marched toward Concord, Thomas



was one of the first colonists to open fire on the Regulars at Meriam's Corner—a skirmish sometimes referred to as “Ditson's Revenge”—which evolved into a 16-mile battle stretching to Charlestown and marking the start of the eight-year American Revolutionary War.

After also fighting in the Battle of Bunker Hill in June 1775, Thomas enlisted in the Continental Army in January 1776. He was discharged after losing an eye to smallpox the following year but soon re-enlisted as a sergeant for three more years, serving much of that time as an officer directing the local injured soldiers of Corps of Invalids. A father of nine children, Thomas and his wife Elizabeth moved from Billerica in 1784 to Townsend, Mass., but he eventually settled in Mason, N.H., with his second wife, Prudence Douglass. He died there on September 2, 1828, at the age of 87, but his grave site is unknown.

The Town of Billerica first commemorated Thomas' legacy by naming a new Pinehurst elementary school in his honor in 1931 and rededicated the current Ditson Elementary School in 2001. In 1988, the Board of Selectmen voted to adopt the identity “America's Yankee Doodle Town” prior to the commonwealth officially recognizing the moniker in 2016 when Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker signed the classification into law on the steps of the public library. Since 1990, the town has also celebrated the Yankee Doodle Homecoming on the third weekend of September during which the Billerica Colonial Minute Men annually re-enact the tar and feathering of a volunteer proxy Thomas Ditson Jr.