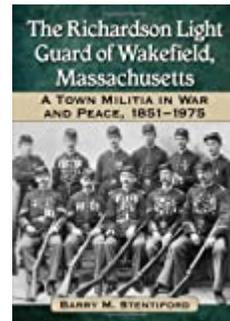


Barry M. Stentiford. *The Richardson Light Guard of Wakefield, Massachusetts: A Town Militia in War and Peace, 1851-1975.* Jefferson: McFarland. 224 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7864-7348-9.



Reviewed by Donald MacCuish (Air Command and Staff College)

Published on H-War (December, 2013)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air War College)

The Richardson Light Guard of Wakefield, Massachusetts a Town Militia in War and Peace, 1851-1975 by Barry Stentiford is a well-organized, superbly written, and very informative book. The title suggests that the narrative begins in 1851 with the formation of the Richardson Light Guard, but that is not the case. Stentiford begins his narrative with the founding of the settlement by residents of Linn (now spelled Lynn), Massachusetts, in 1639. Reading was the original name of the community until 1812, when the name was changed to South Reading. In 1868 the name was again changed to Wakefield. What makes these name changes significant is that other communities in the United States have changed their names from time to time as well. Such changes can confuse people when, for example, studying American history or researching their ancestry. Dr. Stentiford should be commended for including this sort of detail in his book.

In many ways the title of the book does not adequately describe its contents. That statement, however, is not intended to be a criticism of the author. Stentiford gives us a wonderful history of the United States from the colonial period to 1975 through the prism of Wakefield, Massachusetts.

Although the Richardson Light Guard did not come into existence until 1851, the notion of a town militia traces its roots to the time when the colonists first landed on the shores of America. Colonial law required that every village and town have a militia company. Initially, a full-strength militia company required sixty-four members. As the Massachusetts colony grew this minimum requirement was raised to one hundred; when a militia company grew to include two hundred members it was, by law, to divide into two companies.

Although the primary purpose of a militia company was to defend the community against Indian attacks, it was also a social organization gluing the community together. As time passed and the threat of Indian attacks grew less likely, the militia company became an organization by which men, regardless of economic position, could gain social status within the community. The prestige of membership was enhanced by the passage of new militia laws in the 1840s.

In 1844 the Boston and Maine railroad was extended to include Wakefield and the town began a major transformation from an agricultural to an industrial community, and then to a bedroom city. The other major part of this transformation began in 1846 and lasted until 1851.

This was the period when Wakefield did not have a militia company that bound all elements of the community together. According to the author these two factors caused social, ethnic, and cultural change in Wakefield, changes that were also occurring in the larger American society. His discussion of this 125-year transformation ought to broaden the appeal of this work to a much wider audience than the title suggests.

The establishment of the Richardson Light Guard in 1851 helped to bring back the civil-military relationship that had existed previously in Wakefield. Other villages and towns around the country had similar experiences. President Lincoln's request that each state provide volunteers at the start of the Civil War affected militia units because they were not activated. The request for volunteers also initiated a significant change in the organization of the U.S. armed forces as well as significant changes in American society.

After the Civil War militia units and their respective communities tried to find that prewar relationship. However, the pre-Civil War relationship between the citizens and the military could not be restored despite the efforts of although influential organizations and citizens. The author provides several reasons for this, among them the labor strikes of the late 1870s and the dawn of the Progressive Era.

The Militia Act of 1903 not only authorized states to use the term "national guard" rather than "militia," but it also established the difference between "organized" and "unorganized" militia units. In 1916 Congress passed a new National Guard Act. It allowed the president to call National Guard units into federal service during an emergency. These two acts were the first wedges that the central government used to begin the separation of the military from its citizens.

In 1917 Congress passed the Selective Service Act. Then in August 1918 the U.S. Army, followed by the Navy and Marine Corps, stopped accepting voluntary enlistments. These two acts further weakened the tie between

communities and their National Guard (formerly militia) units. When a local National Guard unit was activated into federal service, the Army usually dispersed the unit's members among other units, thereby destroying unit cohesion. Prior to WWI they went as a cohesive unit and returned the same way. This strengthened the civil-military relationship that had begun with the first colonists.

After WWI, cities and towns such as Wakefield may have retained their traditional National Guard units, but the members of these units were no longer primarily from the local community. Stentiford discusses the social, cultural, and economic context of the interwar years. This information is quite helpful in understanding how and why the legacy of the Richardson Light Guard is little understood.

During WWII National Guard units across the United States were called into federal service. As was the case during WWI, units were broken up. Again, unit cohesion and the relationship of Guard units to their communities were stressed. Changing social, cultural, and economic factors also affected these relationships.

The Vietnam War, however, broke the camel's back. The traditional relationship between community and military was severed for good. Today there is no longer a militia or National Guard unit in Wakefield to carry on the heritage of the Richardson Light Guard. In fact, the armory built in 1894, once the center of the community's pride and social life, now houses five small businesses. Many communities across the nation have had a similar experience.

In short, Dr. Barry Stentiford has written a wonderful cultural, social, and economic history of not only the Town of Wakefield, but the United States also. This is an informative book that should appeal to not only those who want to trace the development of the National Guard, but those who want to read an overview of the social, cultural, or economic history of the United States. Read, relax, and enjoy!

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Donald MacCuish. Review of Stentiford, Barry M., *The Richardson Light Guard of Wakefield, Massachusetts: A Town Militia in War and Peace, 1851-1975*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. December, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39160>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.