

## **The Early Years (1836-1865)**

During the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, most American cities had an elite cavalry troop that escorted high government officials, presidents and other visiting personages. While part of the state militia with the mission defending the state from invasion or putting down insurrection, the cavalry's first obligation was to wear resplendent uniforms mounted on well-groomed horses. Some of these units, such as the 1st and 2d Companies, Governor's Horse Guard of Connecticut; First Troop, Philadelphia City Cavalry still exist. Many units such as Squadron A of New York; the Essex Troop of Newark; and the Charleston Dragoons have faded into history.

Boston had several elite cavalry troops. Prior to the Revolution, the royal governor was escorted by the Governor's Horse Guard; the unit disappeared in 1775 and reorganized in 1787 only to disband two years later. The Boston Dragoons were organized in 1802 and were joined by the Boston Hussars, composed of Boston's richest gentlemen, in 1810. The Hussars wore elegant Napoleonic hussar uniforms which proved to be extremely costly leading to the troop's demise in 1818. The Dragoons disbanded in 1833.

For several years there was no cavalry in Boston. The enrolled militia, composed of all men between the ages of 18 to 45, was disbanding due to a lack of interest. In its place were companies and battalions of volunteer militia.

The volunteer militia was a popular organization in American towns and cities in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. These companies were made up of men in the 20s and 30s with the means and time to purchase uniforms and to drill and parade several times a month. While the ostensible mission was to take the field in case of invasion or insurrection, its *raison d'être* was to function as a military unit-social club that wore ornate uniforms, took part in patriotic and civic ceremonies and maintained a

busy social calendar with meetings, dinners and balls. The volunteer militiaman was part soldier, part policeman and a fulltime social butterfly.

Edward Everett, governor of Massachusetts from 1836-1840, was the founding father of the National Lancers. In early 1836 he was seated next to Thomas Davis, a former militia brigadier general, at a dinner. The governor raised the issue that there was no elite cavalry troop in Boston to provide escorts for him to important civic and patriotic events such as the Harvard Commencement. Davis liked the idea so much that he promised the governor to raise a cavalry troop.

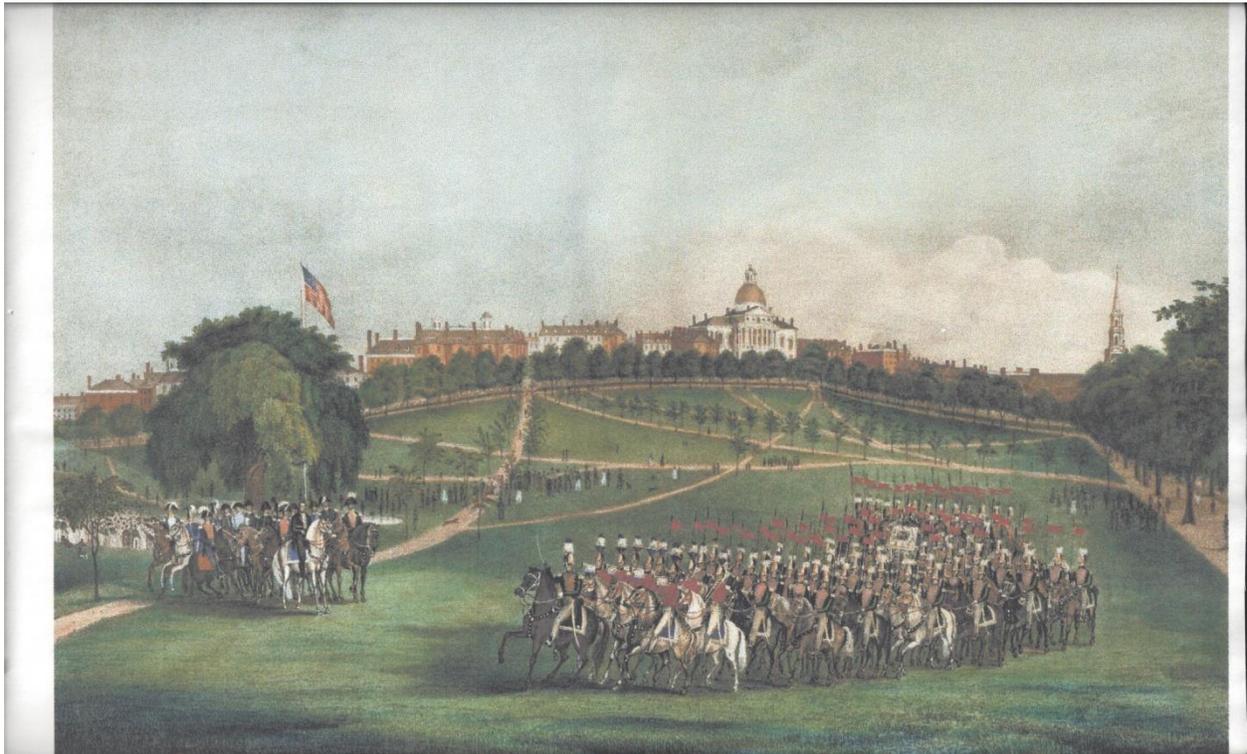
General Davis spoke with several friends who had contacts in the teamster business in Boston. During the summer of 1836 Davis and others approached stable owners, teamsters, and young men who had an interest in horses and by October had recruited 58 men who signed a petition sent to the Governor's Council requesting permission to organize a cavalry troop with admission into the militia. The Council and governor quickly approved the petition and on 31 October Brig. Gen. Henry Dearborn, The Adjutant General, authorized the troop's organization.

The new troop met the next day on 1 November and organized itself as a militia unit and social organization that, according to the unit constitution, promised to maintain the law by strengthening the security of the state by forming a cavalry troop in order to "form a more perfect union, to better our common purpose and to promote our own common welfare." Davis was elected captain; Louis Dennis was elected first lieutenant; Peter Dunbar as second lieutenant; Gervis Monroe as cornet by the 64 men present. The new unit voted to designate itself as the National Lancers.

The new organization was officially part of the Massachusetts Militia (redesignated as in 1840 as the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia) and was attached for administrative purposes to the 2d Regiment of Infantry, 3d Brigade, 1<sup>st</sup> Division. Capt. Davis and his officers spent the winter of 1836-1837 training the troop in the rudiments of mounted drill and school

of the soldier. The troop was busy organizing, training and equipping in preparation for its first inspection in 1837.

It is unclear as to why the new troop voted to call itself the National Lancers. It was not unusual for militia units to call themselves the National Greys, National Rifles, etc. The designation of lancers, however, is interesting. The troop elected to be uniformed, trained and equipped as lancers.



The National Lancers with Reviewing Officers on Boston Common 1837 by Fitz Hugh Lane

Lancers were light cavalry that carried a nine-foot lance with a sharp finial designed to kill infantrymen. Lancers were the elite Polish and French cavalry who earned a reputation in Napoleon's army as shock troops. The British were impressed enough that they converted five light dragoon regiments as lancer regiments beginning in 1815. Other European armies soon followed suit.

By definition, lancers were uniformed in the Polish fashion with distinctive uniforms; the traditional square-topped shako called a czapka, and carried a lance with a pennon. Lancers were the height of military fashion in Europe and their fame spread to the United States. The National Lancers were the first lancer unit in the United States and one of the few in American military history.

The state issued the troop Model 1833 light cavalry sabers and horse pistols. Each trooper provided his own mount and purchased his own uniform. The uniform consisted of a green lancer tunic which could be buttoned to show a red plastron. The distinctive troop button, N.L. in Old English, was adopted and is still worn today. The breeches were scarlet with gilt braid. The czapka was red and blue, embellished with gold lace, cords and tassels; the helmet plate was a sun-burst insignia, and topped by a plume of swan feathers. This style czapka was worn into the early 1960s. The Lancer uniform was intended to give the wearer an imposing martial appearance on horseback.

While the uniform made the troop appear to be an elite volunteer unit; it was not made up of the Boston's elite. From the beginning, the Lancers were open to all classes in all trades. Most troopers were connected to the large horse business in Boston and were teamsters, hostlers, carriage and harness makers with the means to purchase uniforms. Others were merchants, clerks and artisan "mechanics."

The National Lancers functioned both as a militia cavalry troop and social organization which was typical of volunteer companies. The captain was the troop commander and president of the club. The militia unit carried out military duties. The club planned social events such as dinners, balls and outings. The first headquarters was the fourth floor armory of Faneuil Hall where most of Boston's volunteer companies were stationed.

Capt. Davis was informed by Brig. Gen. Dearborn that the National Lancers would be reviewed by Governor Everett and his military staff on

14 June 1837 on Boston Common. The Lancers were making preparations for the review when on the night of 11 June the city alarm system summoned the militia to duty. Troopers quickly reported to Faneuil Hall and were issued weapons and ball ammunition. They mounted and rode to break up what was later called the "Broad Street Riot," a street clash between an Irish funeral procession and a Yankee fire company. The troop was on duty until the morning of the next day.

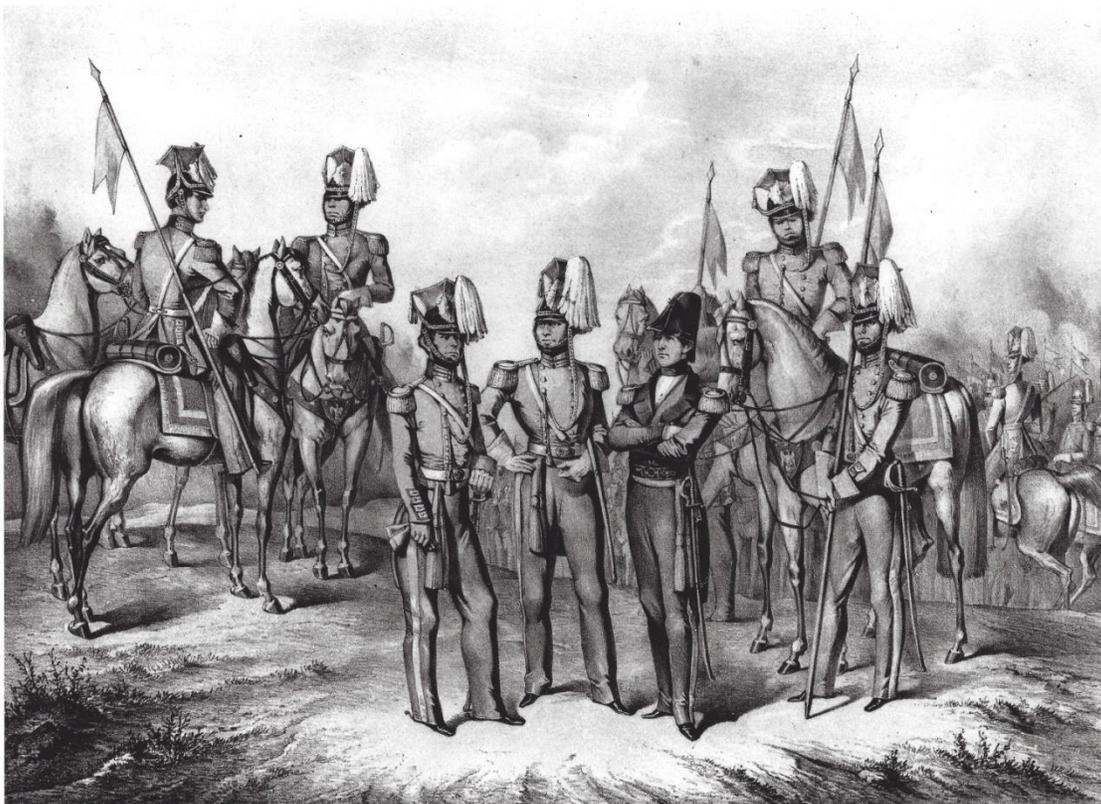
In the morning of 14 June, the troop assembled and rode to the Common. Several thousand spectators watched as a mounted band and the National Lancers did a slow trot. The scene was captured in a painting by Fitz Hugh Lane with 64 Lancers in formation in line before the governor and his staff, also mounted.

Orders were read and the troop was formally inducted into the Massachusetts Militia. That evening there was a sumptuous banquet attended by all Boston civic and military officials and the Lancers. This day has been observed by the National Lancers as their Organization Day with an annual dinner. In peacetime the dinners were held in Boston but when the Lancers were on active duty, dinners have been held in South Carolina, Virginia, France, and in the Pacific.

The Lancers drilled several times a month and held weekly social meetings. On 30 August 1837, the Lancers were ordered to escort Governor Everett to the Harvard Commencement. At the state house, the governor addressed Capt. Davis stating "I congratulate you sir on the success of the efforts made by yourself in raising this handsome troop." The governor then presented Capt. Davis with the Lancers' first color. Capt. Davis accepted the color and pledged that the sacred cause of the National Lancers would be "Liberty, Union and the Laws." This became the unit motto and is embroidered on the Lancers present unit color and on its distinctive insignia worn on the uniform. (The motto comes from the speech given by Senator Daniel Webster in the Senate on 27 January 1830. He ended the speech with "Liberty and Union now and forever and inseparable.")

From 1837 through the early 1960s, the National Lancers escorted the governor to Harvard Commencement exercises. The Lancers continue to serve as the governor's mounted escort and, over the years, have escorted presidents and other dignitaries.

The Lancers through the 1840s and 1850s consisted of some 80 officers and troopers. The troop took part in many inspections, summer camps and parades. Also important was the troop's social activities such as dinners, dances and beginning in 1850 with a trip to Brooklyn, NY, exchange visits to other volunteer militia units.



National Lancers 1850

In 1845 the National Lancers adopted a new uniform that consisted of a red swallow-tail coat trimmed in blue; enlisted men wore red and blue epaulets, a white belt, and light blue breeches with a yellow stripe. Officers were identified by their gold epaulets. They continued to wear the distinctive lancer shako. The Lancers elected to wear a red uniform which made a distinctive military fashion statement. The 1845 uniform, with minor modifications, was worn until 1935.



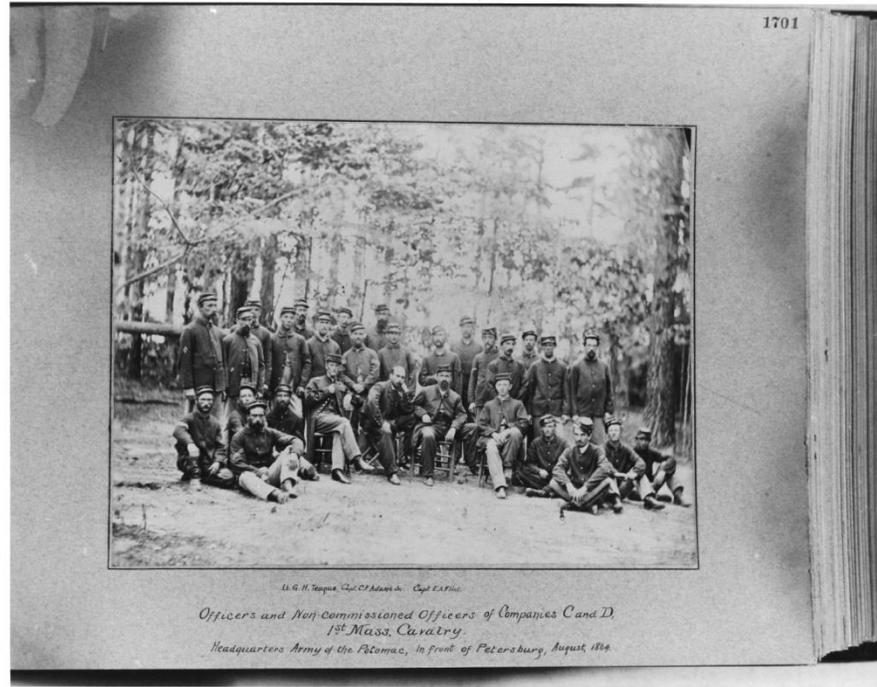
Officer, National Lancers 1850

Police duties were always part of the Lancers mission. In 1842, the Lancers dispersed a mob. In 1850 the troop was called up to raid illegal gambling houses. In February 1852 the Lancers were assigned to the newly organized Battalion of Dragoons and designated as Company A. The Lancers kept the designation of either Company A or Troop A for many years but also retained their traditional designation of National Lancers.

In 1857 the troop moved out of Faneuil Hall to its new armory at 71 Sudbury Street. The noted American composer and military bandmaster Patrick Gilmore joined the Lancers as

the troop trumpeter. When the Civil War broke out in April 1861 the Lancers waited for an opportunity to serve.

Initially, the War Dept. refused to call on the states for cavalry. On 27 August 1861 the troop sent a letter to Governor John Andrew tendering their services for three years provided that the state



Officers and NCOs, Troops C and D, 1<sup>st</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Cavalry

accept its officers and organization. The War Dept. requested that Massachusetts provide a three-year cavalry regiment. Rather than accepting the Lancers' offer as an entire unit, the Lancers were authorized to organize Troops C and D of the 1<sup>st</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Cavalry Regiment. The Lancers provided the cadre who recruited and trained new troopers. In effect there were three National Lancers troops during the war; the militia troop in Boston and two war-service troops.

Troops C and D were mustered into Federal service on 17 September 1861 at Readville, Mass. There the 1<sup>st</sup> Massachusetts Cavalry trained for three months under the supervision of former militia cavalry officers now on active duty. On 19 December, the National Lancers escorted the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry from Roxbury to Boston as the regiment rode through the city prior to its deployment to Hilton Head, South Carolina.

The 1<sup>st</sup> remained on occupation duty until the regiment was transferred to the Army of the Potomac in Virginia in September 1862. Elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> took part in the Antietam Campaign in September; and the Fredericksburg Campaign in December.

The active duty Lancers saw some action at Brandy Station, VA on 9 January 1863. The 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry saw the heaviest action of the war at Aldie, Virginia on 17 June. Union cavalry were attempting to locate the Confederate Army which was marching north into Maryland. The 1<sup>st</sup> Massachusetts and 4<sup>th</sup> New York charged into the 5<sup>th</sup> Virginia. The ensuing battle cost the 1<sup>st</sup> some 200 casualties.

The 1<sup>st</sup> screened the Union left flank at Gettysburg and took part in a number of skirmishes in the fall of 1863. The Lancers of Troops C and D performed reconnaissance missions during the 1864 campaigns of the Wilderness, Spottsylvania, Cold Harbor and Petersburg. The two troops served as military police in the spring of 1865.

The 1<sup>st</sup> was mustered out of Federal service in July 1865. In accordance with Army lineage and honors policy, the National Lancers were granted the right to carry the 11 campaign streamers earned by Troops C and D on its squadron colors by The Adjutant General's Office.

Back in Boston the National Lancers were issued state regulation blue uniforms which were worn during drills and on active service. From then on the Lancers have worn its unique full dress uniform and Army uniforms. During their annual summer camp in Medford in 1862 the troop mustered 100 men. The Lancers performed escort duties for the many regiments going to the front.

The Lancers were relegated to home guard duties since most of the troop was made up of older men. They were ordered into active state service in July 1863 when Irish American mobs began rioting in Boston after learning about the draft riots in New York on the night of 14 July. Lancers

were ordered to report to the armory and by 7 PM some 100 troopers were mounted and ready.

At 8 PM Capt. Lucius Slade ordered the troop to load ball ammunition and then ordered the troop to ride to Faneuil Hall Square. There the troop confronted the mob and were able to disperse it without casualties to either side. Later that night, the troop rode to the North End where the mob was preventing firemen from dousing the fire at the armory of the Boston Light Artillery on Cooper Street. The mob attacked the troopers who fired their pistols in self-defense. After the melee, the mob dispersed and the troop rode back to its armory but remained on duty until 16 July and on call for several more days.