

The Saxon kings were not by any means the first sovereigns to establish a militia system. The most ancient national military organization of which we have any authentic record is the great military caste of Egypt, really a national militia. The defensive force of Egypt at the command of the Pharaohs of the Old Testament, eighteen centuries before the Christian era, consisted of the soldier-farmer caste, the men of which were agriculturists in peace time; soldiers in the time of war. The occupancy and tillage of the soil imposed upon them the obligation to military service, and each man provided himself with his own arms and had to be in readiness to serve when called upon. Two thousand of this old Egyptian militia were kept embodied as royal guards, and each soldier while on this service drew rations of bread, beef and wine. The strength of the Egyptian armies chiefly depended upon the number and skill of their archers, who fought either on foot or in chariots. Scarcely any representations of Egyptian cavalry are found on the monuments, but frequent mention is made in Holy Writ of the horsemen of Egypt as accompanying Joseph, pursuing the Israelites, and being thrown in the Red Sea.

But to return to the militia force in Britain. After the Norman Conquest, A.D. 1066, the baronial troops introduced with the continental feudal system, rendered the militia unnecessary, but it never ceased wholly to exist, and when the period of contention between the Crown and the barons began, the kings found their most powerful instrument in the Saxon militia.

Henry II established in 1181 "an assize of arms," at which every holder of land was bound to produce one or more men fully equipped and capable of fighting in the national defence. An Act passed in the reign of Edward I. (13 Edward I., cap. 16) decreed that every freeman between the age of fifteen and sixty was to be available to preserve peace within his county or shire, and liable to serve elsewhere "upon the coming of strange enemies into the realm." During the reigns of Mary and Elizabeth, the statutes bearing upon the military obligations of subjects were consolidated and the lieutenants of counties were constituted as the agents of the Crown for the purpose of effecting levies for the internal defence of the country.

In 1604, four years before Champlain founded Quebec, James I. abolished the old Saxon "fyrd," and substituted "trained bands," a force being established numbering 160,000 men, partaking of the nature both of volunteers and militia, but deficient in discipline and drill.

During the reign of Charles I (1625 to 1648), frequent disputes arose between the King and the Parliament as to the command of the "trained bands," and during a Parliamentary debate on this subject the name militia appears to have been first given to the trained bands. A Parliamentarian of the day, Whitelocke, piously expressed his regret "that this great word, this new word, the militia, this harsh word," had ever been introduced in the House.

One of the first Acts after the restoration was one to establish the militia on a constitutional basis, owners of property by the Act of 1662 being obliged to furnish horses, horsemen, foot soldiers, and arms in proportion to their property. The similarity of this system and that of feudal days, when the nobility were called upon to supply their quota of retainers, must strike any one. In 1757, the English militia having been several times called out in the meantime on active service, a reorganization took place, and the obligation to supply the men, horses, etc., was transferred from the owners of property to the counties and parishes, which had to provide fixed quotas. Obligatory service by ballot was also introduced. The period of service was for three years, the age limits being 18 to 50, with certain exemptions. An Act passed in 1758 was the first to officially recognize volunteers as counting toward the quota.*

* Capt. Cutley L. Perry's "Rank, Badges and Dates in Her Majesty's Army."