



*Salem Common on Training Day, 1808*  
George Ropes, Jr. (1788-1819)

Peabody Essex Museum  
Salem in History, 2006

## Salem Common on Training Day, 1808

George Ropes, Jr. (1788-1819)

Salem, MA

Oil on canvas

Museum Purchase

107924



### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Salem Common was once used as pasture for farm animals, and also as a practice area for military training. Documents suggest that men practiced their skill with firearms there as early as 1685. In the years following the Revolutionary War, pride in local military skill would have held particular meaning.

Leaders who organized the Articles of Confederation felt it was necessary to include a statement that every state would always keep a well-regulated militia. The Articles were written to support a nation with strong individual states and a weak central government. In the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, there is also the provision that: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." In time, the necessity of a centralized, federal militia was recognized, but there are still local military organizations in existence.

### ART HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although George Ropes only lived to age thirty, he produced a number of works that portray daily scenes of life in Salem. He worked as a sign, carriage, and landscape/marinescape painter to support his family following his father's death. Ropes was trained by an Italian artist in Salem, but maintains a unique, personal style, seen in such elements as the stylized trees that line the park in this painting.

From this depiction, the festive and social spirit of militia training is evident, as are people from different social, and economic, and ethnic backgrounds. Of particular note is the presence of African Americans. They, like all others in the painting, are shown engaged in everyday activities that would have occurred on Training Day.

### SAMPLE GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What activities are depicted in this painting?
- Is it significant that the militia is training on Salem's "Common" land? What might this suggest?
- Who might have been the audience for this painting? Why?
- What does this painting suggest about the democratic values that people of Salem (or of Massachusetts) held?

### SUGGESTED LEARNING ACTIVITIES

- Read the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution (see Article XVII) which is a Seminal Primary Source Document in the 2003 Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. Ask students why they think the writers of this document held these views. Is this Article in conflict with the military training as depicted in the *Training Day* painting?
- Examine the *William Pepperell* portrait. How is *Training Day* in the same tradition as the depiction of Pepperell's success at the battle Louisbourg in 1745?

2003 Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Frameworks: 3.5, 5:14, 5.15, USI.2, USI.5, USI.9, USI.16