Dorchester Heights

Prelude to Independence

By

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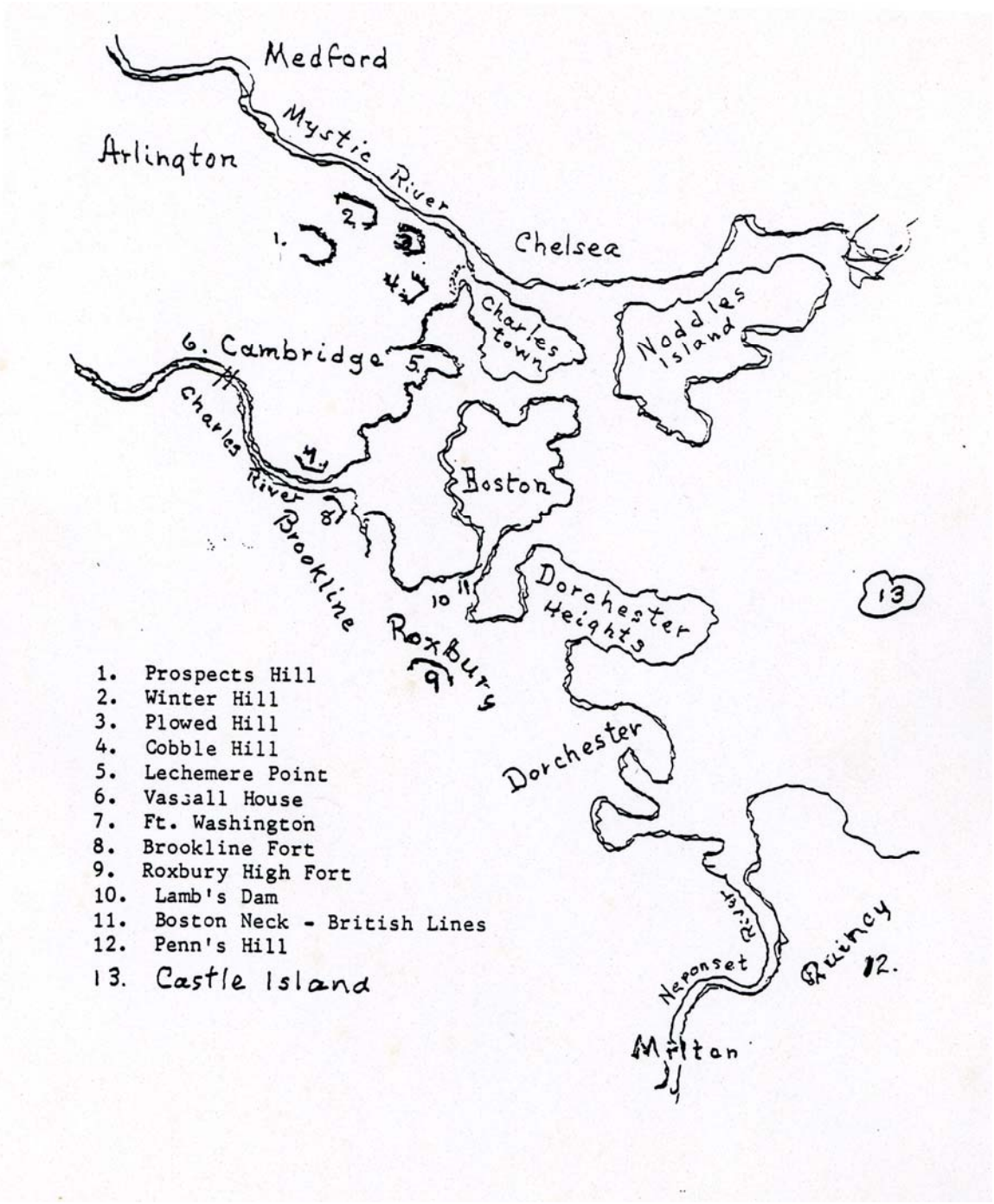
Dorchester Heights: Prelude to Independence

I. Impregnable City

1. Winter of Discontent

"A PLACE, THE STRONGEST BY NATURE ON THE CONTINENT: AND STRENGTHENED AND FORTIFIED IN THE BEST MANNER, AND AT ENORMOUS EXPENCE." Thus it was that Washington described Boston, so long under siege, and so impregnable.

"Strongest by Nature," meant that Nature had endowed it with numerous steep hills, very favorable for artillery batteries and for defensive construction; Nature had surrounded it with bays and a harbor where the British transports could bring in troops and supplies, and where the British navy could exercise undisputed control; Nature had made it almost an island that could be approached only over a long, narrow Neck, like the drawbridge of a castle.



None of this, of course, was anything like the city we know today which has expanded in all directions. It has cut down the scenic hills and dumped them in the pockets of the hollows and shallow coves. It has filled in the tidal basins by hauling sandy gravel in huge quantities from Canton and Needham until no one can tell where the old city ends and where the new begins. No metropolis in the country, they tell us, has so completely altered and extended its topography by artificial replacement. As for old, Revolutionary Boston, we can best think of it on the map as being shaped like a squeezed-in frying pan at the end of a long panhandle, sticking out from the Roxbury shore. With its ocean tides, we recall Emerson's description of his native town:

The rocky nook, with hilltops three,
Looked eastward from the farms,
And twice each day, the flowing sea
Took Boston in its arms.

That other phrase Washington used, "strengthened and fortified in the best manner, and at enormous expence," meant all that it said. From as far back as September, 1774, the fortifications had been growing, beginning with the first scare the British experienced after the "Powder Alarm," when Gen. Gage was so frightened he employed teams of men before he could get horses to hurry the guns into place on the Neck. Ever since then batteries had been located "on every rise;" and breastworks, trenches, and redoubts had been placed in depth along every line the Rebels might approach. All of this, of course, was reinforced by the guns of the fleet, and with numerous floating batteries. The defenses were manned by about ten thousand troops from British regiments whose battle honors gave them the reputation of being the best combat units in the world: disciplined, experienced, and professionally drilled and commanded. Their senior officers, Major Generals William Howe, Henry Clinton, and John Burgoyne, were also all battle trained, and had been picked because of their distinguished services.

Opposed to this veteran army, Washington's forces presented many inadequacies. Most of his difficulties began with the word "lack." There was an acute lack of gunpowder. At one point the total supply when portioned out would allow only nine rounds per man: take nine shots at the enemy, then run! There was a crippling lack of weapons. Even as late as February 1776, two thousand men were without firearms of any sort, and desperately they were being armed with pikes and spears. Wise, old Ben Franklin had even suggested bows and arrows, and remembering how these weapons had mowed down the mounted charges of French knights during the Hundred Years War, the suggestion was more than reasonable, though it would not be practical for the farmers to acquire them or gain skill in their use. The army had almost no bayonets, and did not know how to use them. Lack of artillery was acute. Henry Knox had been sent as far as Ticonderoga to bring back some cannon, but even with them there would be no surplus. The lack of manpower varied but became alarming at the close of 1775 when all enlistments ran out. On New Year's Eve, Gen. Nathaniel Greene remarked, "We have never been so weak as we shall be tomorrow." By prodigious effort, a new army was being recruited; but they came in by drips and drabs, never in regiments. Amongst the troops themselves, there was a total lack of experience, lack of discipline, and lack of drill, making them hopelessly inferior to the British regulars when it came to combat on an open field. What saved them was that there was no lack of spirit; and for hardihood, endurance, and self reliance, they were the equal of any troops, anywhere.

Beyond these specific deficiencies in the elementary requirements for an army, the Revolution itself rested on a total deficiency in economic and financial resources for waging war. That the movement could survive at all, and go forward without collapsing, seems incredible when we come face to face with the overall problem. Nowhere can we obtain a better view of this breakdown than in one of Washington's factual summations of the circumstances confronting him:

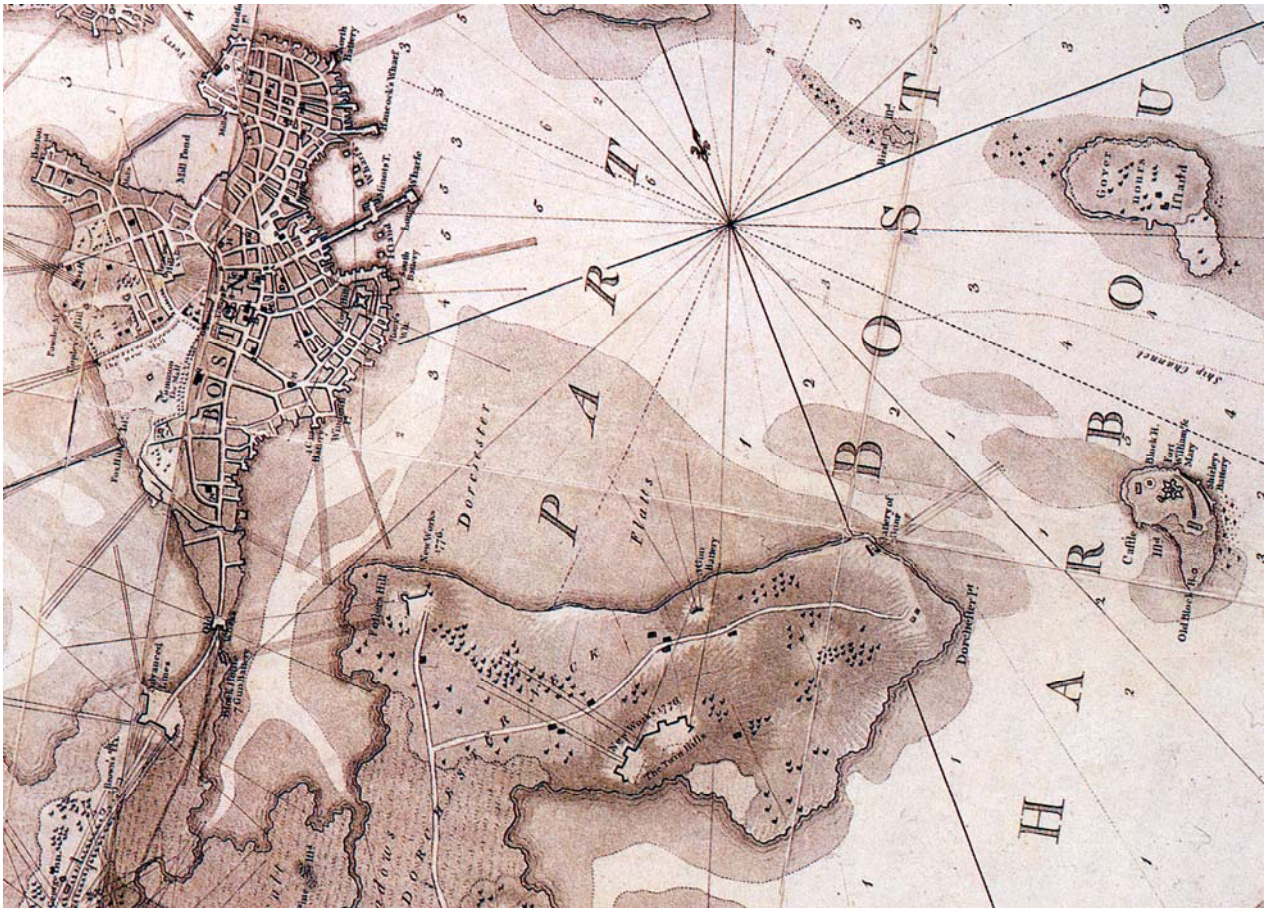
> My situation is inexpressibly distressing to see the winter fast advancing upon a naked army; their time of service within a few weeks expiring, and no provision made for such important events. Added to these, the military chest is now totally exhausted; the paymaster has not a single dollar in hand; the commissary general assures me that he has stretched his credit for the sustenance of the army to the utmost; the quartermaster general is in precisely the same situation; and the greater part of the troops are in a state not far from mutiny.

This was the material from which Washington was now expected to weave the fabric of victory; and the wonder of it all was that he succeeded! Even where the means of success was so slender, and hope so frail, Washington was galled by the realization that the ignorant public, unaware of his perplexities, would criticize him for any prolonged delays or inactivity. In some quarters, such criticism had already arisen: it was whispered "from chimney corner patriots," as Col. Joseph Reed wrote. Furthermore, the Continental Congress, without meeting Washington's needs, was complacently urging that he should attack Boston "as soon as a favorable opportunity shall open;" which hinted at veiled dissatisfaction. Washington never allowed himself to express or show despair, but his letters at this stage betray the depth of irritation he felt. The responsibilities and the insurmountable obstacles haunted him, especially in dull, lonely hours of darkness when his nagging cares held him from rest. In a confidential letter he stated, "The reflection on my situation and that of this army produces many an unhappy hour when all around me are wrapped in sleep. Few people know the predicament we are in on a thousand accounts; still fewer will believe, if any disaster happens to these lines, from what cause it flows." Perhaps the fact that he cared so much, and tried so everlastingly hard, was the reason for his ultimate achievement

2. SIEGE LINES

From the very start, Washington made thorough and frequent inspections of the Patriot fortifications; and thus he gained firsthand impressions both of the physical contours of the battleground, and of the personal make-up of his army. He was "continually on the line," as chaplain William Emerson, grandfather of the poet-philosopher, wrote in his diary; and within a short time, there could have been hardly a man in his army who had not caught sight of the commander. He began on the day of taking command, July 3, by riding to the summit of Prospect Hill in Somerville. From here, a view of the whole siege area stretched before him, with Boston not far off, under his gaze. Cambridge, he remarked, lay in "the midst of a very delightful country, and is a very beautiful place itself." The area has been so totally converted into brick and concrete, over the intervening centuries, that we find it hard even to imagine the exceptional charm of these earlier days. Lord Harris, a discerning British captain of Revolutionary times, was struck with the unique loveliness that surrounded him as he looked out from Boston itself: "The country," he wrote, "is most beautifully tumbled about in hills and valleys, rocks and woods, interspersed with straggling villages, with here and there a spire peeping over the trees, and the country of the most charming green that delighted eye ever gazed on." However, it was not the scenery that Washington came to observe, but rather the siege map; and from here he could catch extended glimpses of breastworks, fortified hills,

redoubts, tented camps, and the defense posts that stretched from twelve to thirteen miles around Boston. They reached from the Mystic River to the Neponset, and they held the British garrison close-bound in a ring of steel, or rather a ring of mounded earth that circled sinuously about it.



Castle Island with Fort William is located at the extreme right. The only land passage to Boston from the mainland was through Roxbury Neck, where the British had a fortification. The only land passage from Dorchester to Dorchester Neck (now South Boston) was Boston Street which was a causeway through tidal marshes.

Unrecognized today, but still in its original location, lies the old road that linked these defenses together, now a traffic- burdened thoroughfare called Harvard Street in Brookline and Boston, and extending over the Lars Anderson Bridge, site of the Revolutionary Great Bridge, to Boylston Street in Cambridge. Little noticed along this route, but still in their original sites, are three granite mile posts of that era or earlier. Still, through its glass windows, the Dorchester Heights pre-Revolutionary cottage of Edward Devotion looks out on the passing scene. In 1775 - 1776, this house saw Lord Percy's colorful Column of eight hundred troops march to the rescue of the British forces retreating from Concord; and along this same old road, as the Brookline History tells us "the occupants of houses watched the passing and repassing of the different companies and regiments of new recruits which patriotism and privations finally developed into the

Continental army." Here, at night, they might have been "awakened and startled by mounted messengers galloping at top speed between Generals Ward and Thomas at Roxbury and the Commander-In-Chief at Cambridge."

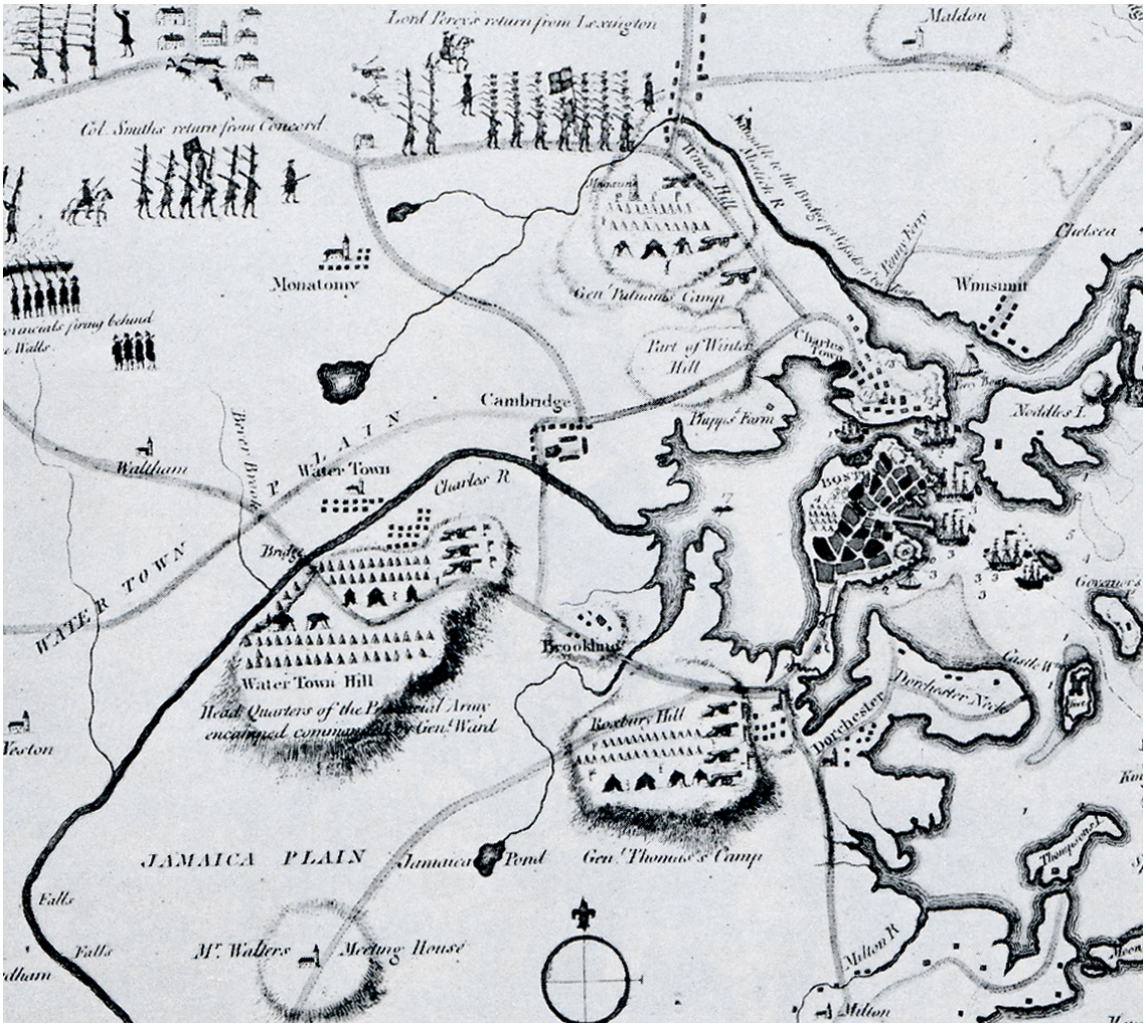
Out of this great, siege network, after over two hundred years, one little spot remains to us where the original earth that was heaved up by revolutionary soldiers can still be seen, unspoiled and little changed except for the erosion of its contours that time has filled in. From a world of phantom memories, it alone has survived to remind us that the rest were real. It is now a National shrine, "Fort Washington;" but it is lost among the surrounding buildings, warehouses, and a truck terminal, and but few visitors know of its presence in Cambridge. The overgrown city hides it from the Charles River which its cannon once guarded. Sentimentally, the spot is endlessly fascinating, for here our imaginations can revive the whole revolutionary scene. We can even listen for the rhythm of hoof beats arriving, and sense the excitement of seeing Washington appear with his staff on one of his frequent inspection tours. James Thacher, the revolutionary surgeon, has left us a picture of just how he looked in the eyes of a young, patriotic, country doctor who for seven years never ceased serving in this army, and admiring its commander: "truly noble and majestic in appearance, tall and well proportioned. His dress a blue coat with buff-colored facings; a rich epaulette on each shoulder, buff under dress, and an elegant small sword; a black cockade in his hat."

3. FIGHTING INSTINCTS

While the Rebel army was thus seeking to throttle Boston's garrison, the siege lines were constantly being drawn tighter and tighter; for though these farm soldiers were unskilled in bayonet drill, they were adept with shovels, and were tireless in wielding them. The lines had been advanced from Winter Hill, on the south shore of the Mystic River, to Plowed Hill, a thousand yards nearer to the British; and then to Cobble Hill, close enough to be the eyebrow of Charlestown itself. With each advance, the Rebels had hoped the British would storm out and attack them; but like a woodchuck in his hole, the British lay dormant. At last the Patriots, led by the dauntless Maj. Knowlton, on a cold, December night, stole over Charlestown Neck and burned some buildings; but still no retaliation. In all their maneuvers, the Rebels' purpose was constantly provocative; and in all their responses the British remained wholly defensive. They even hoped the Americans would one day become overbold, and would advance close enough to be slaughtered; for such a blood bath would extinguish the flames of local, patriotic ardor, and might put an end to what the King still looked upon as a local uprising that required punishment rather than conquest.

As his soldiers were inexperienced in drill, so Washington himself was inexperienced in generalship. Never had he commanded an army; never had he conducted a major battle, or toiled through the painfully slow progress of a siege. Of course, he was thoroughly versed in the soldierly qualities of campaigning; and he had learned the principles of combat from lifelong experience, under grueling hardships. From twenty to his present age of forty three years, Washington had spent a major portion of his time in military service; and as a frontier fighter, his feats were already legendary. Quite naturally, his instincts were still molded to the point of view of a soldier, not a general. The tactics that

appealed to him, as soon as he could get men, guns, and powder enough, were to accept normal risks, to suffer reasonable casualties, and to slug it out with the enemy, trusting that they would give way before he did. As a strategist, he could not yet judge whether normal risks and reasonable casualties might grow into heavier losses than he could afford. Nevertheless, unlike most instinctive fighters, he was ready to learn, and he proved to be an apt pupil.



Roxbury Hill or Fort Hill was fortified by the Revolutionary Army.

Frequent councils of war were held between Washington and his subordinate generals. A grand assault was the end they kept in mind, but not before conditions were ripe for success. Various plans had been considered, such as an attempt to break through the strong defenses at Bunker Hill and enter Charlestown; or a surprise at Boston Neck; or even a beach landing on the river shore after approaching by rowboats down the Charles. Shortages in manpower and in gunpowder always stood in the way; and then, too, the risks that every plan offered seemed too formidable to be undertaken. With shrewd practicality, the Council members again and again concluded, "it is not yet expedient," even though Washington impatiently yearned for action. This was a hard- headed group

of men he consulted: free spoken, independent minded, and realistically cautious. He accepted their judgment as over- ruling his own; but in September, when he reported to Congress the rejection of his river plan, he added, as if under his breath, "I can't say I have wholly laid it aside." He had yet to discover that strategy might offer a better alternative than onslaught. The Council, more conservative than he, would help to teach him.

4. LIONS IN A DEN

William Howe

Quite unlike Washington, William Howe, comfortably quartered at Province House in Boston, was a sybarite by nature: easy-going, pleasure- loving, and indolent; though both men were utterly fearless and heroic in action. Furthermore, Howe's ultimate aim at a later date was to withdraw his army altogether, and to commence operations afresh in New York, where military prospects seemed much brighter. In accord with his leisurely nature, Howe would postpone the transfer until the spring, when more ships would be available, and when the move would be more convenient. Meanwhile, from the British point of view, a general assault by the Americans would suit their plans ideally; for then at little cost they could slaughter the Rebels from behind their own impregnable defenses, much as the Rebels had slaughtered them on the slopes of Bunker Hill.


Province House

We should remember that at this stage public opinion throughout the country as a whole was still vacillating. A poll would probably have shown one third to be solidly pro-British, especially in New York and New Jersey. One third were actively revolutionary, led by New England and Virginia; and one third remained neutral or undecided, as in Pennsylvania and much of the South. Under such circumstances, success would be the strongest argument to support the rebellion, and defeat, the quickest way to destroy it. If Gen. Howe, by continued inertia, could repel all assaults on Boston, and could exhaust the Patriots through hopeless frustrations, this of itself, would tend toward British victory. In such a light, it could be said that he was pursuing a policy of triumphant indolence: at least, so he might hope.

Persistent inactivity, however, carried with it a certain stigma of humiliation, especially to proud regiments who had boasted of their superiority over the contemptible "peasants." One of Gen. Clinton's friends in England wrote to him somewhat unkindly, "You may be lions, but you are lions confined in a den, and the provincial rebels are your keepers." Much more bitterly, Lord Shelburne, always a friend of the Americans, said in Parliament, "Our arms have been disgraced. Upward of ten thousand of the flower of our army, with an immense artillery, and four generals of reputation, and backed with a great naval force, have been miserably blockaded in our seaport town; and after repeated and obstinate battles in which such numbers of our bravest men have fallen, the British forces have not been able to penetrate one mile into the country they were sent to subdue."

Even such a condemnation as this could not overcome Gen. Howe's wholly defensive attitude, which he had no intention of changing. Though a hard winter lay ahead, he complacently informed the authorities at home that his army, “without the most unforeseen accident, would be in no danger from the enemy during the winter.” Again, as late as January, 1776, he reported to the Home Secretary, Lord Dartmouth, "We are not under the least apprehension of an attack on this place from the rebels by surprise or

otherwise." Lord Percy, too, who should have known better after the mauling his troops had suffered in their retreat from Lexington, felt altogether secure. Though he admitted, it was unpleasant to have "raggamuffins all around us," he predicted, "I suppose they intend to be our neighbors for this winter. I do not believe they will be very troublesome ones."

TURTLE AND TERRIER

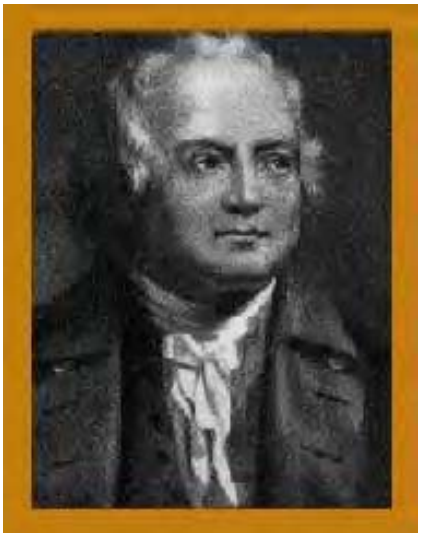
Apart from headquarters, the rank and file of the two armies were, of course, largely unaware of intricate strategical policies, offensive or defensive. On both sides, the soldiers groused over their hardships, grumbled at their privation, both of which were in excess of anything we can imagine, and cursed their foes, just as soldiers always do. British letters and journals of the time refer to Americans as villains, poltroons, traitors, or rabble. In return, Americans refer to their foes as lobsters, murderers, brutes, pirates, or in Biblical terms, Philistines. Yet both armies were of the same race, and both spoke the same language; and beneath their contemptuous scorn, we come upon many instances of tolerance, or even personal respect and friendliness. The warm-spirited, loyal-hearted Gen. Israel Putnam, whom everyone affectionately called "Old Put," went so far on one occasion, as to send some mutton, beef, and butter through the siege lines to "his old friend, Maj. Moncrieffe," in the semi-starving garrison, for Moncrieffe had been a comrade in arms of Putnam during the French and Indian wars, and Putnam "begged his acceptance of it, with a hearty welcome." At idle times, there were a surprising number of flags of truce and meetings of officers between the lines -- so much so that the Connecticut Yankee, Lt. Jabez Fitch jokingly proposed to some British officers that they should "make a coffee house for the convenience of such occasional conferences; upon which we held a considerable banter, with good humor on both sides." Still more amusingly, Lt. Samuel Webb, on Washington's staff, told of a similar meeting with five British officers, one of whom "mentioned the disagreeableness of their situation, cooped up in one, so small town. I told him that we were all sorry that matters were so situated, but was determined to persist, and that it would be very agreeable to us to have a free passage into Boston." This pretty well summed up the state of the siege, for a stalemate had developed where the British could not break out nor the Americans break in. It was much like a box turtle that withdraws into its shell while being attacked by an impatient terrier. This leaves nothing exposed for the dog to bite, nor can the turtle stick out its neck to snap back at the dog. As one British officer wrote, "both armies kept squibbling at each other, but to little purpose. . . . The whole scene was an idle business." Earlier in the summer, Washington, satisfied with the strength of his own siege lines, and knowing the impregnability of the British, had summarized the situation succinctly: "We now wish them [British] to come out: but they, that is the enemy, discover no inclination to quit their own works of defense; and as it's impossible for us to get to them, we do nothing but watch each other's motions all day at the distance of a mile."

Something must be found to break this deadlock of impregnability.

II. A NEW BEGINNING

1. JANUARY THAW

Revolution or no revolution, New England weather continued on its customary contrary course. December had brought some very cold days -- very cold -- one of them "the coldest ever remembered" -- as happens every year. Christmas Eve was smothered in moderately heavy snow, soft, and glistening, and fairy-like; but Christmas day dawned with sparkling bright sunlight which must have been beautiful, shining on winter's fresh, unspoiled carpet. Shortly thereafter came the invariable, inevitable, "Jenooary thaw," so familiar to Yankees. Ice began to melt, and Winter retreated for a time. Capt. Moylan, the muster-master-general of the Continental army, reported merrily, "The bay is open. Everything thaws here except for Old Put. He is still as hard as ever, crying out, 'Powder, powder, give me powder!'" Israel Putnam, who had first come posting to join the army at Cambridge on hearing word of the Lexington Alarm, leaving his yoked oxen standing in the plowed field, was now 58 years old, which made him venerable in this youthful army. Washington was 43, and Henry Knox, the artillery man, only 21.

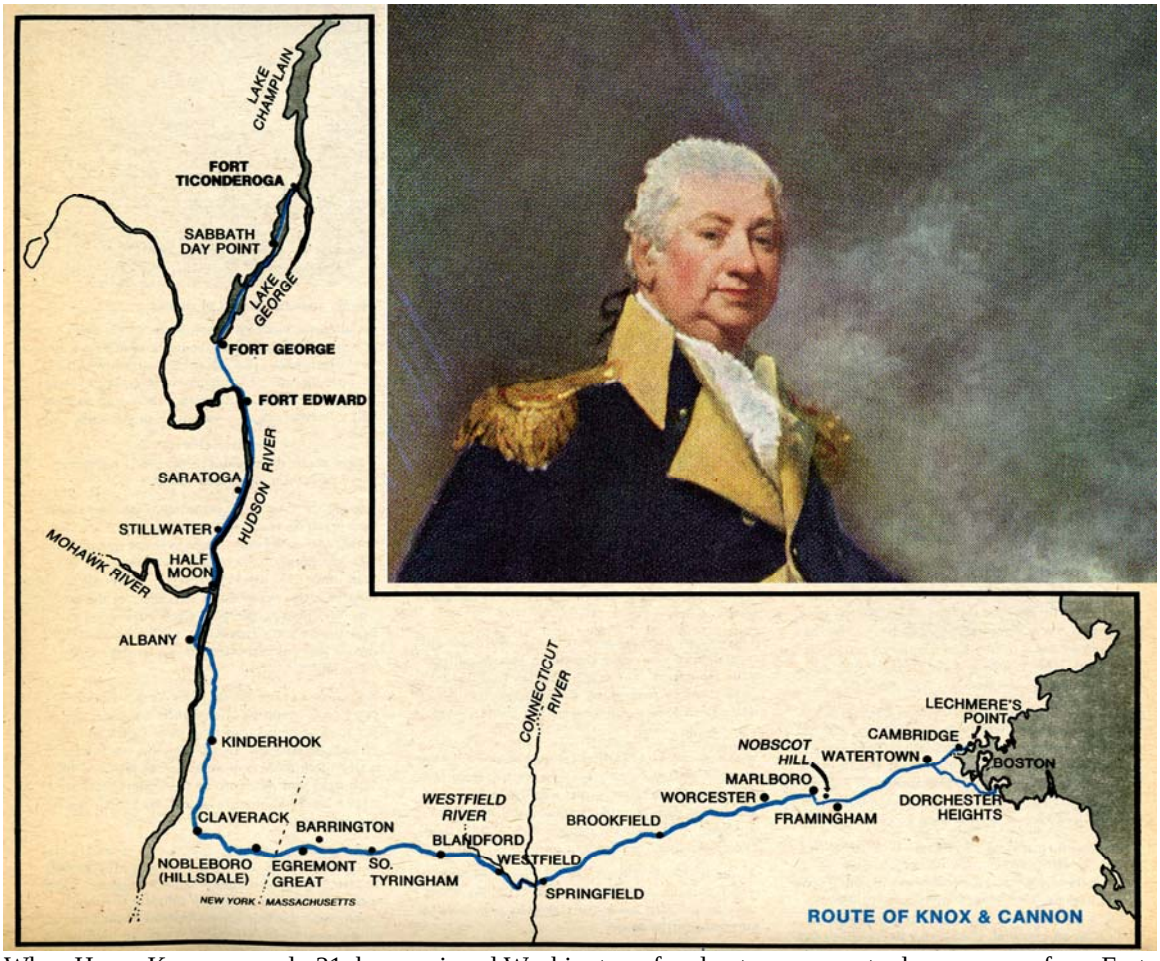


Israel Putnam

In this winter of their discontent, the Rebels were finding that other things yielded to the January thaw as well as the weather. Powder, for instance, perhaps because of Putnam's prayer, or perhaps because of unceasing efforts the Patriots made in every direction, was gradually being accumulated. Small lots arrived from other colonies. The Continental Congress did its best to add to the supply. Desperate attempts were made to manufacture saltpeter. An unexpected addition was received from Bermuda, where many of the local people were sympathetic and cooperative. Col. Henry Tudor of that Island, dealing secretly with the enterprising patriot financier, Robert Morris of Philadelphia, eventually arranged to exchange eighteen hundred barrels of powder in return for much needed American food supplies, all of which had to be smuggled in and smuggled out. Further afield, half a world away, Rhode Island sea captains, according to William Gordon's history, had visited posts in West Africa where they had traded the very merchantable commodity, New England rum, for its explosive equivalent. Information varies as to the actual amounts gathered; but Trevellyan states that the reserve by mid-February had reached one hundred barrels. This was hardly enough for a major offensive; but far better

than the crisis level of only 39 brrls, which according to Gen. John Sullivan, had left Washington unable to speak for half an hour when he first learned of the scarcity.

The shortage of artillery was also thawing away since Col. Henry Knox, on January 20th, had returned from his astonishing, midwinter trip to Ticonderoga, having at his back the “noble train of artillery" he had sledged, and dredged, and skidded, and sledded across freezing lakes and icebound rivers, up and over the precipitous slopes of the Berkshire mountains, and through the unplowed snowdrifts that covered western Massachusetts. The train included 55 guns: cannon, howitzers, cohorns, and mortars; enough to meet, though not to equal British firepower. This armament rested, for the moment, at nearby Framingham, where John Adams, returning to the Continental Congress, laid his hands on each gun. A few of their representatives are still, today, mounted on Cambridge Common, bearing the royal monogram GR, George Rex; and with the motto, “ultima ratio regis,” the last argument of Kings!



When Henry Knox was only 21, he convinced Washington of a plan to use oxen to drag cannons from Fort Ticonderoga to Boston. Knox supervised the heroic project.

2. THE WORD, AMERICANS

A further event had taken place at the start of this month. Ezekiel Price had opened his diary on January 1, 1776 with the prophetic note, "This day begins the new year which there is the greatest reason to suppose will be by far the most important year that ever happened in America. It is probable it will be determined whether America will be tributary to venal and arbitrary administration, or 'that her sons be free men." True enough, the year would provide America's first great victory at Boston; followed by an overwhelming series of crushing defeats in New York; but ending with the incredible triumph at Trenton that would restore a lost cause. The year would deliver the epoch-making Declaration of Independence; and most inspiring of all, it would introduce The Spirit of '76: not a new year, but a new epoch!

The event that signalized all this occurred at the fort on Prospect Heights in Somerville where, by Washington's order, a new flag was flung out representing a new nation. No one knows who designed this flag, or where, though it is probable that it originated in Philadelphia and the pattern was then sent to Washington. Only three days later, too soon for word to pass, the same flag was authorized for ships in Philadelphia commissioned for an American navy. Congress had not yet demanded independence, nor even desired it. Consequently, the upper, inner corner of the flag, or canton, still bore the British Union Jack; but the field was filled with thirteen red and white stripes, indicating that the separate colonies were united. It was called the Continental, or Grand Union flag. At this time, the concept of a union was so new that it deserved commemoration. Up to now, the colonists had identified themselves locally and separately, and the word American was strange-sounding to many ears. Patrick Henry had blazoned it forth, in his forceful, oratorical manner, at the Continental Congress where he had thundered one day: "Continental landmarks are dissolved. Where are now your boundaries? Distinctions are no more. I am not a Virginian. I am an American!"

The huge significance of this flag-raising was lost on Boston's Tories who saw the flag unfurled at a distance, and who imagined from the Union Jack that it represented an appeal for amnesty, and a desire to return to British rule. This was still not too late for reconciliation if Britain had also heeded the meaning of the brotherhood of stripes, showing that the thirteen colonies now demanded recognition as a responsible government, with, or WITHOUT, Britain! Washington, who had ordered the flag displayed, and a thirteen gun salute fired, noted, "Today we raised the Union flag in compliment to the United Colonies," thus fulfilling Price's prediction that this year America's "sons would be free men!"

Finally, to cap the other hopeful developments, enlistments were starting to reach sufficient numbers for at least an adequate army, though not as many as desired. Under a recent act of Congress, the term of service would end with the coming year, and thereby create another almost fatal crisis; but for the present, the new recruits would constitute an American army that Washington chose to describe optimistically as "in every point, entirely Continental." Little did anyone realize that this would be the forerunner of many American armies for generations to come: The Grand Army Of The Republic, in the Civil War; the A. E. F., or American Expeditionary Force, of World War I, and the Army Of The United States in World War II; not to mention numerous other forces in other wars. Let it be said; however, that these proto-patriots, as we might call them, were not

draftees, but purely volunteers; that they made sacrifices and accepted risks greater than any that have been required since; and that their pay was a mere pittance, in worthless currency, with no insurance, bonus, or reward promised after this service terminated. Of no other army can it be so fully and truly said that they served solely for their country's good: pro bono publico; like the old Romans.

3. BOREAS AND JACK FROST

Predictably, February ushered in a renewed cold spell: intensely so. The ground froze to the depth of twenty eight inches, according to the trustworthy report of Col. Jeduthan Baldwin, a veteran military engineer who was helping to build the siege lines. While citizens and soldiers shivered in their refrigerated quarters and homes, a daring idea came to Washington. Because of the cold, Boston's defense works had lost their unapproachable isolation. Dorchester Bay, Roxbury Bay, the Back Bay, or Cambridge Bay, as it was sometimes called, had now all become a pavement of solid ice. Brigadier John Sullivan remarked that "Boreas and Jack Frost had built a bridge" over which the Rebels could advance to the attack, "or perish in the attempt." Washington's favorite hope of a sudden, overpowering assault had temporarily become a possibility, though not for long. Quickly, a plan developed in his mind.

The difficulties and perils that were threatened by Sullivan's last phrase, "perish in the attempt," were very obvious. While marching across the frozen river, troops would be completely exposed to the enemy's defensive fire over a devastating distance: not muskets alone, but concentrated batteries of artillery. The enemy, all this while, would be securely stationed behind their own breastworks, ready in full strength to meet the wavering line of attackers as it straggled forward to meet them. At this stage, the American ranks were not yet completely filled, and the men themselves were totally inexperienced, homemade fighters who would be competing with tough, disciplined, professional troops. American artillery support for the attack would be weakly inadequate, because Knox's guns had but just arrived and gunpowder reserves were still limited.

Nevertheless, in Washington's sanguine opinion, all these obstacles could be overcome by a "bold and resolute push" made secretly at night, storming the British defenses by surprise. As an old Indian fighter, surprise was with him an instinctive element of strategy, and in less than a year, he would demonstrate at Trenton how effectively it could be used to win an incredible victory. Washington had learned from reports that leaked out of Boston almost daily, that Gen. Clinton had left the town, taking some troops with him on an undisclosed mission; and from this information he greatly underestimated the remaining British strength as being only 4,000 to 5,000 men. He felt sure that the attack he proposed "must have succeeded if undertaken with resolution."

Little did Washington appreciate at this time the strength of Boston's defenses, though later on, after entering the city and inspecting them, he conceded that they were "amazingly strong . . . almost impregnable, every avenue fortified." Ezekiel Price tells us in his diary that "Regular Army [British] have encamped on all the ground from Beacon Hill to the sea on the west side of the Common, and on the west side of Pleasant St., and

fortified all the hills of the town, and there seemed to be as many. tents as soldiers." The town in those days was made up of hills, and each of them formed a nest for artillery batteries. Beacon Hill, Fort Hill, and Copps Hill dominated the city, hence the name Tremont, or Trois Monts -- three hills; and there were also Fox Hill, Powderhouse Hill, and West Hill, all of which bore directly on approaches that any assault party would follow across the ice. In addition, there were batteries on the Neck that could sweep the area.

All this was observed by Lt. Jabez Fitch of Connecticut who gives us in his diary an impressive picture of Boston as he viewed it from nearby Nooks Hill, with the help of a spyglass:

> We discovered no less than four different ranges of breast- works . . . besides these formidable works toward the Neck, we observed strong fortifications on all the hills and eminencies in town and also a great number of cannon planted on all the wharves and near the water, almost the whole length of town . . ."

Mark Howe, in his history of, Boston Common, describes the British defenses over the river front which at that time lay along the present course of Charles Street from approximately Park Square to the site of the Massachusetts General Hospital. Here there were two redoubts, a breastwork, two half moons, and secondary lines of entrenchments. Grassy remains of these sodden, old battlements persisted in the city for another two generations, leaving grandsons of the Revolution a place to play at war during their boyhood, as Edward Everett Hale remembered. The Common itself, as Drake tells us, “was an entrenched camp with a regular garrison of 1750 men.” Knowing all this, as we do now, we can judge how fatal a frontal attack on such a position would be even if launched as a surprise at night. Without a trial, of course, no one can say positively that an assault might not catch the British off guard, creating a disastrous panic, and ending in the destruction of their army. We can only say that with such seasoned troops, so alert to the danger, so firmly commanded, there would be little chance of overwhelming them. Stolid by temperament, and bulldogs by nature, British troops seldom panic or run away. The greater chance, it seems certain, would be that if such an attack were attempted, the assault troops would have been slaughtered, and the cream of the patriot army wiped out. Failure, however, was not in Washington's overconfident and overwrought mind. As he recognized, his assault 'would be attended by considerable loss," yet he was convinced "it would succeed if the men behaved well." That was a somewhat doubtful IF, for he himself wrote, "all raw and undisciplined troops were not to be depended on," and his whole army was nothing else but "raw and undisciplined.' After consideration, Washington determined to urge "his plan upon his council of generals; and thus he framed the question he would ask them to consider:

> A stroke well aimed at this critical juncture might put a final end to the war and restore peace and tranquility, so much to be hoped for. For these reasons, and under these circumstances, and as Cambridge and Roxbury bays are so frozen as to admit of an easier entry into the town of Boston than could be obtained either by water or over the Neck, the General desired to know the sentiments of the general officers respecting a general assault upon the town.

The Pelham map of 1776 shows the Back Bay area of the Charles River separating Boston and Cambridge.

A council of war was immediately convoked for February 16, where opinions would be weighed out and balanced on scales that would measure the ultimate survival or overthrow of the Patriot cause.

4. THE SOUTH EAST ROOM

By habit, whenever possible, Washington submitted his own, well formulated ideas to a full discussion by his staff; and in fact, his orders from the Continental Congress, which was in essence his commanding officer, directed him to do so before any major move. Since taking charge in July, there had been already a dozen or so of such meetings, but the present one might be regarded as the most important Council Washington would ever summon. It reversed his own plan, involving almost fatal rashness; and it substituted one with very nearly certain hope of success. How often in history, has it happened that a handful of men, in one intimate discussion, have altered the fate of a nation!

Fortunately for us, we can today visit the very room where this council was held; and in imagination, at least, we can participate in the conference. Though this may interrupt our narrative slightly, it will add interest and reality to our story. As we all know, Washington had taken up his residence in the magnificent John Vassall House in Cambridge, which has been splendidly preserved as a national, historical heirloom. It had been built about fifteen years earlier by the wealthy merchant, John Vassall, who held strong Tory loyalties, and had fled to the shelter of Boston on account of them. Whatever his political beliefs, he knew how to construct a mansion that, for dignity and spacious comfort, would compare favorably with the best in the land. The house has often been called by the name of Craigie, for Andrew Craigie, apothecary-general of the revolutionary army, who later bought it. More familiarly still, it is known as the Longfellow House for the poet who purchased it and lived out his life there. Reverentially, all this time, Longfellow recalled the memory of Washington's residence here, as he related in his verse, "To A Child."

> Once, ah once, within these walls,
> One whom memory oft recalls,
> The Father of his country dwelt;
> And yonder meadows, broad and damp,
> The fires of the besieging camp
> Encircled with a burning belt.
> Up and down these echoing stairs,
> Heavy with the weight of cares,
> Sounded his majestic tread.
> Yes, within this very room,
> Sat he in those hours of gloom,
> Weary both in heart and head.

The front room, on the southeastern corner of this house, served as Washington's military office; and the spirit of Longfellow's lines haunts us as we enter it today. There is still a handsome, Chippendale chair that was present here when the Council of War was held; and on the table itself rests a cannon ball once fired by the British and picked up in the Rebel camp.


The Vassall House

February 16 was a severely cold day. We can picture the various generals, with heavy overcoats covering their buff and blue uniforms, dismounting at the gate. We can notice their misty breath as they strode up the terraced walk and received the salute of a half-frozen sentry beside the mansion door. As this opened, they stepped into a pleasant hallway, and turning right, entered the spacious military office, heated by only a single, open fireplace where a sparkling fire would have been burning on the hearth; and here, the General himself would greet them with a strong handshake.

5. THE. GENERALS

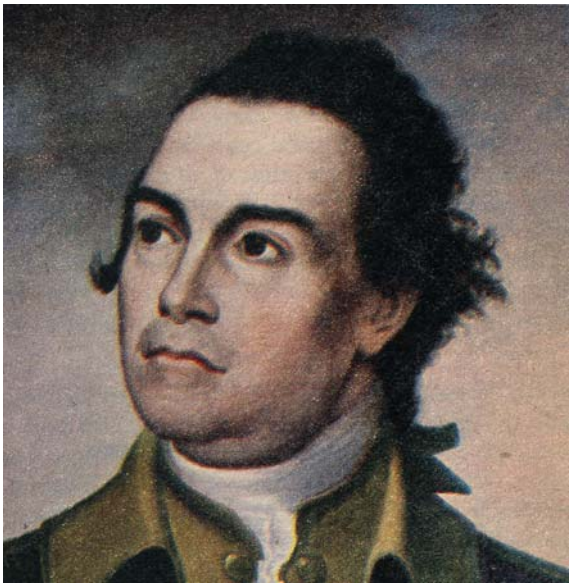
Each of the eight general officers deserves a few words of introduction, though at the start we might point out that not one among them had previously held any high rank in any professional army; nor had any of them, with the exception of Putnam, ever served in other than frontier battles. Nevertheless, here they were to decide the fate of their present army. Perhaps they were better qualified for this purpose than if they had been steeped in sterile military traditions, for at least their judgments would be guided by strong endowments of practical sense.


Artemas Ward

Major General Artemas Ward was the senior of the group in rank, having formerly served as commander-in-chief until Washington's arrival. Some historians have tried to imagine a jealousy between the two; but Ward never allowed the slightest evidence of such a feeling to appear. He had greeted Washington cordially and had arranged a convivial dinner at the old Hastings House headquarters on the night after Washington's arrival. Both men were too big-hearted for petty envy. On the other hand, each was almost the complete antithesis of the other; and by nature, their temperaments were unsympathetic, if not contrary. Ward deserved credit for holding the army together through the early stages, and for never losing his head in desperate circumstances; but he was accused of having a "spiritless, sluggish, confused, and dirty camp," in the judgment of James Warren, President of the Massachusetts Congress. Jeremy Belknap, however, when he dined with Ward, found that "Ward appears to be a calm, cool, thoughtful man;" and this probably described him well: not necessarily energetic, decisive, or inspiring. Though Ward had served extensively in the French and Indian Wars, he had seen little of actual combat, and was at heart and by profession, more of a Judge than a Soldier. Ward's importance here, if we can rely on the opinions of a contemporary historian, William Gordon, lay in the fact that he would lead the opposition to Washington's hoped-for assault, and would guide the generals to the alternative choice of occupying Dorchester Heights. His further importance lay in the fact that he held command of the army's right wing, and would therefore be in over-all charge of the Dorchester Heights operation. He deserves much unclaimed credit for the steady, thorough, and efficient manner with which the operation was carried out. Ward may be one of the unsung heroes whom history has overlooked, though with his unglamorous, slow-moving nature, he never sought praise or even recognition.

Israel Putnam

In contrast to Ward, Israel Putnam, the other Major General, was called by Belknap "a fiery genius." He had caught the imagination of the people of his time by unlimited daring and a theatrical presence, never concealing or trying to conceal his background as a farmer, a tavern keeper, and a fabulous frontier soldier. However, genius, he was not; and though Washington cherished him for his likable personality, it was clearly apparent that he could not carry the responsibilities of independent command adequately: a man whom troops might love, but neither a strategist nor a tactician. Nevertheless, in his own way, he contributed magnificently to the revolutionary cause.

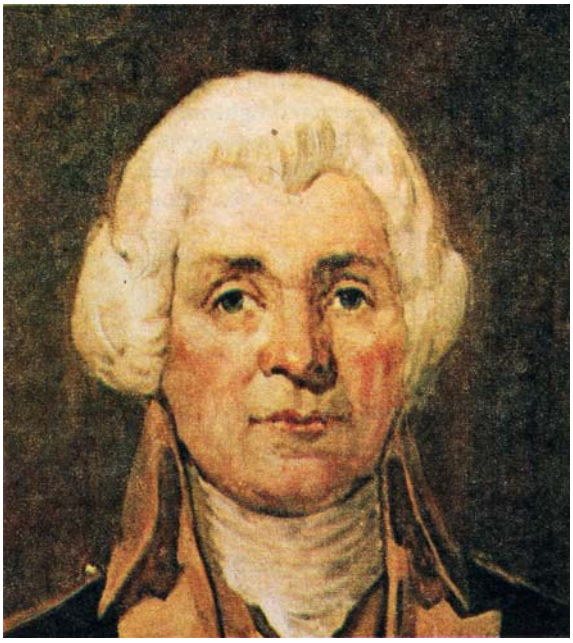


John Sullivan

Among the Brigadiers, John Sullivan had been Washington’s colleague in the Continental Congress where they both served as delegates. As a first-generation Irish-American, born in Maine and raised in New Hampshire, Sullivan's earliest interest had been in law, then in politics, and always in opposing British policy toward America. He was ambitious, loyal, energetic and courageous: one who could be relied on to lead troops in battle as his future record would show. However, he lacked a genius for war in independent commands, or at least, he suffered from successive ill fortune that blighted his career through no special fault of his own.


Horatio Gates

Horatio Gates, had been a professional officer in the British military establishment, and was a native born Englishman. . He was personally well acquainted with army routine, all of which made his position with Washington extremely helpful at the moment. As adjutant-general, he managed to bring some order out of the total chaos that prevailed, the whole army being nothing but "a mixed body of people under very little discipline, order or government," as Washington described the command when he took over. In early days, Gates had served with Washington under the disastrous leadership of Gen. Braddock; and then he had become genuinely converted to American democracy, had given up the British army, had settled in America, and had become, with Washington's help, a Virginia planter. He would later have the good fortune of commanding the army that defeated Burgoyne at Saratoga: but thereafter his career would be tainted with cowardice, ill judgment, and deviousness, ending in moderate dishonor. At this present council his opinions would be valued as coming from a man well versed in military affairs.


Joseph Spencer

Two others of the Brigadiers were men of less consequence, though not to be dismissed. Joseph Spencer had served as a major in the French and Indian war, which gave him some firsthand military experience, but aside from this, there was little to recommend him. He might be judged from the fact that his men called him "Granny." He had been much piqued by the fact that Putnam had been promoted over his head; and when this news arrived, he simply walked out of camp without reporting to anyone or taking proper leave. Subsequently he recovered from his huff, but never accomplished any distinguished service.


William Heath

William Heath, 38 years old, on the other hand, was a loyal- hearted, likable character, if not a gifted soldier. He was tactful, genial, and levelheaded, serving well in command of garrison posts. During the Lexington-Concord affair, he was the only general officer present, though under circumstances where no general officer could exercise effective command. His foremost virtue was an outspoken expression of his honest opinions; but his mood was more for caution than for risky enterprises. To us, his value is that he kept a record of affairs, and later published a book of “Memoirs By Himself", giving a sketchy, eyewitness account of his experiences. Amusingly, he always referred to himself in the narrative as "our general": an agreeable, bald, pleasant featured, stouthearted, citizen-soldier.


John Thomas

One of the key officers in this group was Brigadier John Thomas of Kingston and Marshfield; another man whom history has overlooked, or rather one whom history never came to know, for the reason that he was transferred to the northern front soon after this campaign, and died there of camp fever. A handsome man, about Washington's height, he too had served in the French and Indian Wars, then retired to the practice of medicine. At the very start of the siege of Boston, bringing troops whom he raised himself, he had assumed command of the army's right wing in defense of Roxbury. Here, he exercised splendid firmness and resolution, even when his forces were too weak to offer any serious resistance. To intimidate the British, he once marched his command several times round a hill in Roxbury where the British could observe his much exaggerated manpower. His quiet, self-reliance impressed all observers, and James Warren reported his camp as "spirited, regular, active, and clean.” Like Spencer, he had been passed over in promotions; but instead of quitting, he declared he would serve in the ranks if necessary. At the last moment, Washington was empowered to rectify the mistake, and was later so impressed that Thomas was the first officer he recommended for a major

generalship. Thomas served under Artemas Ward, and held direct, personal command of the troops who occupied Dorchester Heights.


Nathaniel Greene

The last of the Brigadiers was Nathaniel Greene, the most gifted of them all, who was later regarded as the only general who possessed Washington's special gift for high command. Only 32 years of age, and totally unacquainted with warfare, he began as a Quaker, son of a foundry-man, and himself a school teacher. He served in the Rhode Island legislature, and fostered educational improvement; but very early, he recognized the seriousness of the patriot cause, and joined the militia, at the same time engaging in intensive study of military theory and science. He was handicapped with a knee injury, possibly the common athletic ailment of a torn cartilage, but in spite of this, he was appointed to command the Rhode Island troops. On Washington's arrival, Greene greeted the new general enthusiastically, and a friendship developed that became almost an interdependence. Greene's most intimate friend was Henry Knox, Washington's other closest friend and chief reliance. Knox said of Greene, "His knowledge was intuitive. He came to us the rawest and most untutored being I ever met, but in less than twelve months he was the equal in military knowledge, to any general officer in the army, and very superior to most of them."

These, then, were the officers who sat in the southeast room at Vassall House, listening to Washington's urgent recommendations for an assault; and it was this group "whose sentiments, the General desired to know."

6. CATASTROPHE AVERTED

There may have been heated arguments; and there must have been protracted discussions; but in the end this hard headed group of practical soldiers flatly, and “almost unanimously” opposed Washington’s cherished plan, to his own very great disappointment. Reviewing the reasons they expressed, we cannot help agreeing fully with their opinions.

Let us listen to their discussion. Foremost was the fact that only one month earlier, January 16, crushing news had arrived from Quebec. High hopes had been fastened on that valiant venture, so arduously pursued and so heroically performed up to the last moment. With unflinching enterprise, Gen. Richard Montgomery had pressed his patriot army into Canada, moving from one surprising victory to another, until under the very walls of Quebec itself. There, he met the second patriot contingent, led by Benedict Arnold whose men had proceeded on an even more impossible, midwinter journey through the wilderness of Maine. Driven by necessity more than choice, Montgomery led his troops in a direct assault upon the city, collaborating with Arnold who did the same on the other side of the city. Though it had been thought the defense was weak, both American attacks met with disaster. Arnold was severely wounded, and Montgomery was killed. Direct assaults on fortified garrisons were thus shown to be fatally dangerous. It was this, according to the contemporary historian, Gordon, that "cooled some fiery spirits, and prudence prevented such a rash undertaking" as Washington had proposed.

Again, the generals argued that Washington had grossly underestimated the strength of the British garrison, which was, in fact, nearly twice as great as he had thought. Finally, the generals made a realistic appraisal of American weaknesses: inexperience of the men, shortages of gunpowder and firearms, a perilously long route over the ice, exposure to enemy artillery all the way, and the fact that the army was not yet fully recruited. For all these reasons, it was concluded that "the chances of success were exceedingly doubtful." Washington was greatly discouraged by this reversal of his recommendation; and was never truly convinced that the enterprise was unwarrantably risky. However, he demonstrated greatness of character as well as good judgment in allowing his subordinates to overrule him. If Robert E. Lee had done the same at Gettysburg, he would have won the Civil War! Washington manfully analyzed his feelings in a letter to his intimate, Col. Joseph Reed, "The irksomeness of my position," he wrote, "might have inclined me to put more to the hazard than was consistent with prudence;" and he added generously that the decision of the staff, “being almost unanimous, I suppose must be right." Nevertheless, he could not help regretting that what he considered a "golden opportunity" had been lost: to which we might add our own comment, that a catastrophic calamity had been averted. All that glitters is not gold!

III. DORCHESTER PENINSULAR

1. ACHILLES HEEL

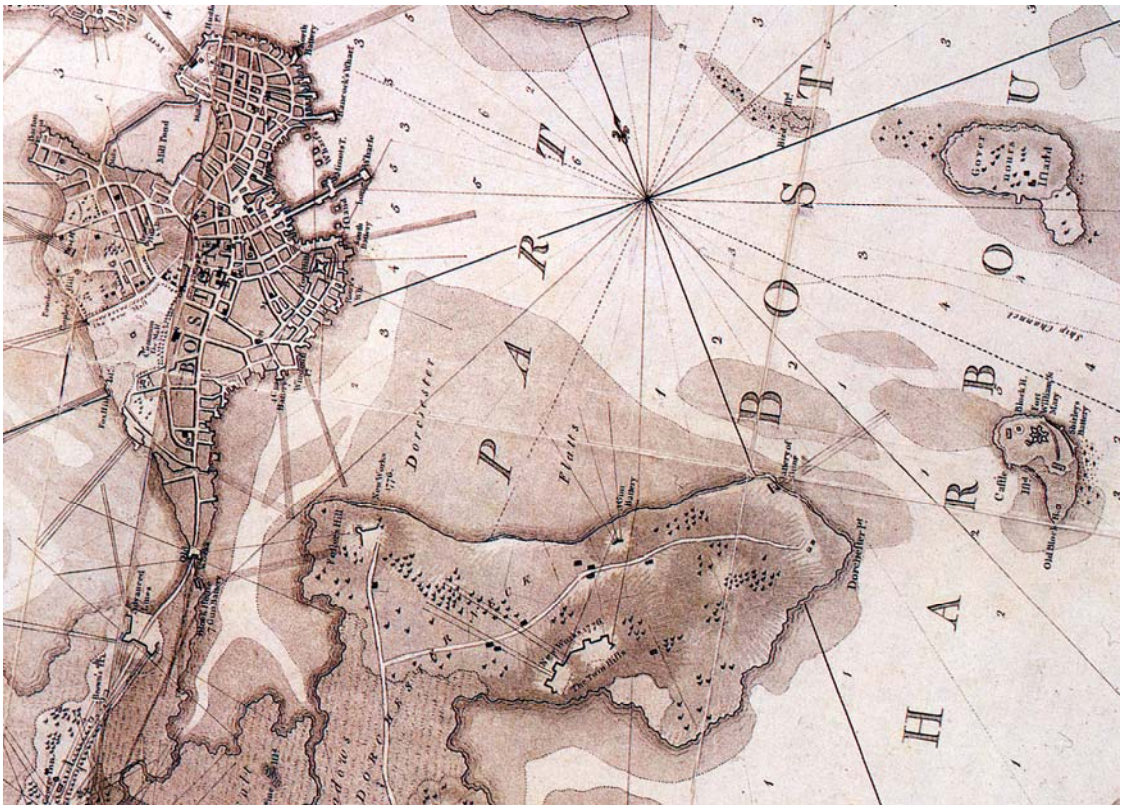
The Council of War was not by any means dedicated to a policy of inertia. Instead, it proposed the alternative maneuver of occupying Dorchester peninsula. This would be sure to provoke the British, though under more favorable terms, for the Patriots would hold the advantage of a defensive position, as at Bunker Hill, while the enemy would

bear the perils of attacking. As the historian, Gordon suggested, this plan may have been proposed by Artemas Ward whose right-wing position would have made him most interested in it. Washington seems to have given it no approval up to as late as February 14, two days before the council met. On that date, when the British raided Dorchester, as we shall later relate, Washington appeared indifferent to it, and remarked that the area was of no serious concern. Furthermore, it was characteristic of Gen. Ward's nature that a defensive type of maneuver, being safer for the troops, would appeal to him more than hazardous, offensive tactics. Beyond this, the greatest advantage the position at Dorchester could offer would be that once taken and held, it would afford an opportunity of directly bombarding the Boston waterfront, which would force the British to abandon the city altogether.

View from Boston of Dorchester Neck in 1776

As yet, neither army, British or American, had occupied Dorchester, though from the start both sides had continually kept such a move in mind. Washington's first Council of Generals had debated the matter as early as July 9, This was at the Rebels' weakest stage, when shortages were most acute; and wisely the council concluded that "for the present it is inexpediant to fortify Dorchester Point or to oppose the enemy if he should attempt to take possession of it." In fact, the Patriots felt so insecure at this time that they had even considered withdrawing to defensive positions as far back as West Roxbury, or what were called the "Welch Hills," behind and around the present Arnold Arboretum.

However, rather amusingly, the British at this same time, stunned by their losses at Bunker Hill, felt they were in an equally helpless condition. Lord Percy had observed on July 27, "our army is so small we could not afford even a victory." On that ground, General Clinton, the most practical of the British commanders, was denied permission to carry out an expedition he had organized for taking over Dorchester. Clinton, at the time, had remarked prophetically, "if the King's troops should be ever driven from Boston, it would be by rebel batteries placed on those heights;" but the Rebels at the time had no excess batteries, nor could they transport them to the heights. This same attitude of “we'd like to do it but we can't," prevailed on both sides, continuing up to this latest recommendation of the Council of Generals; and even now, there remained the almost unsolvable question, "How can Dorchester be occupied?" Here, as Clinton had correctly recognized, was the Achilles Heel of the British.

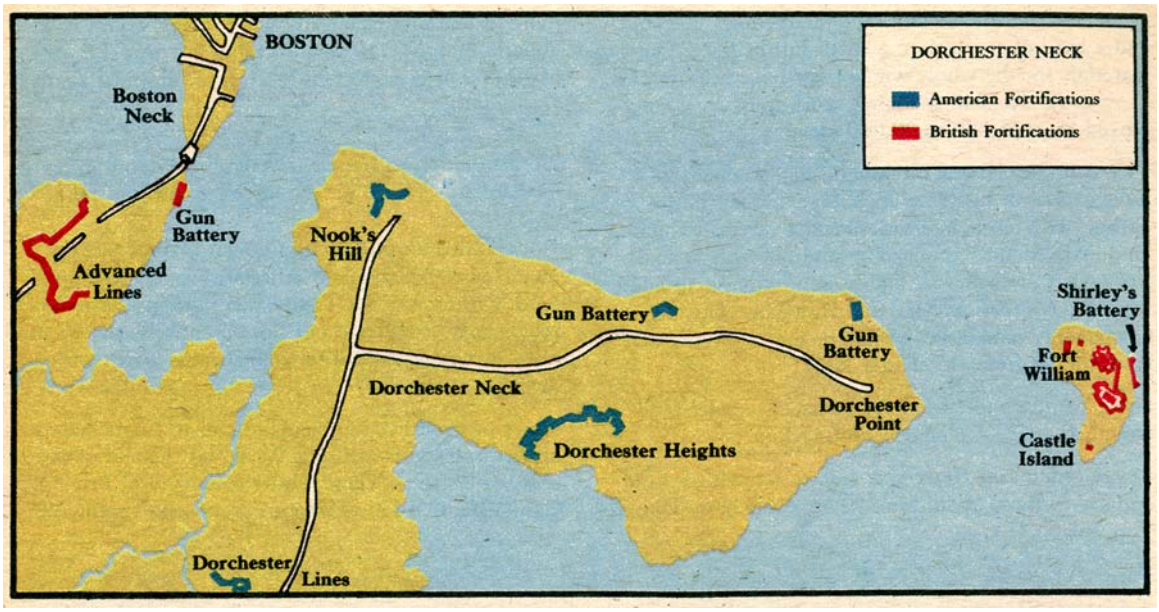


The Point, as people of the time called it, lay across Dorchester Bay at a distance of only a half mile or so from Boston Neck, and three quarters of a mile from docks along the waterfront. It formed a prominent landmark in the lovely view looking southeast from Boston Common and could be clearly seen from all the hills of the city.


View of Dorchester Neck from Boston

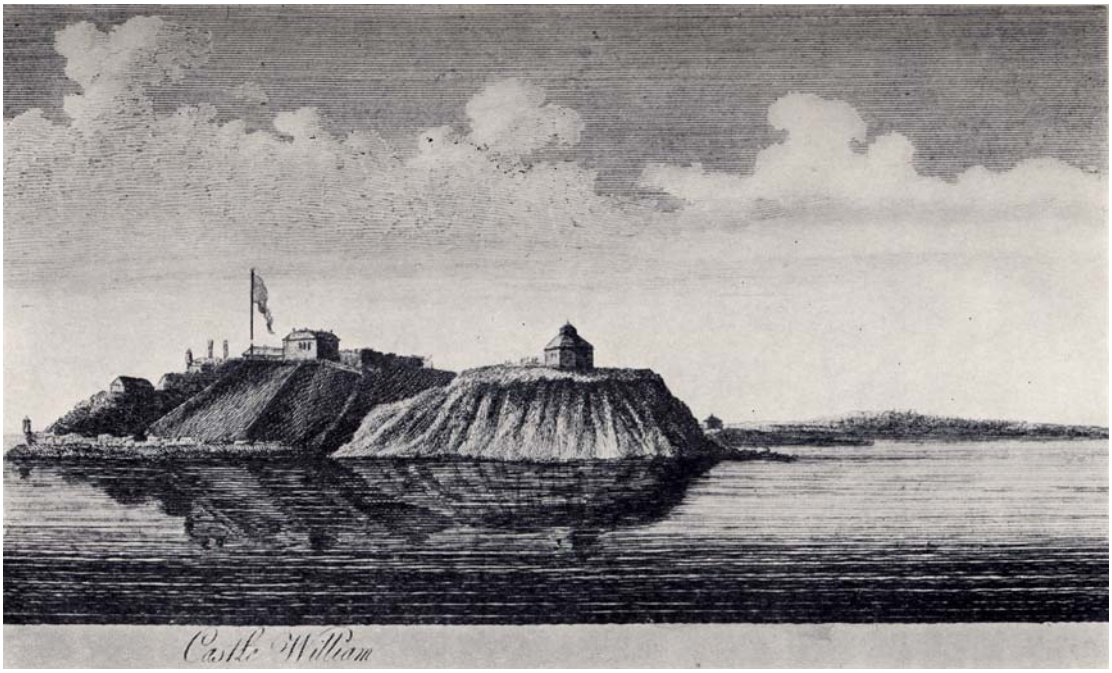
The peninsula, which was about a mile's length and a half-mile's width, was shaped at a right angle, having a moderately wide, low lying, neck, over which a marshy causeway led to the area beyond. At the eastern end of the point stood a group of three very steep

hills that merged into what we might call conjoined summits, known by the separate names, Bush Tree Hill, Signal Tree Hill, and Foster Hill. Collectively, they were called Dorchester Heights, with two prominent crests, "The Twin Hills." Westward from these twins, across a marshy level, stood a somewhat lower, steep, little elevation called Nooks Hill, directly facing Boston. In a military sense, we might say it thumbed its nose at the city's wharves where British transports and warships were docked.

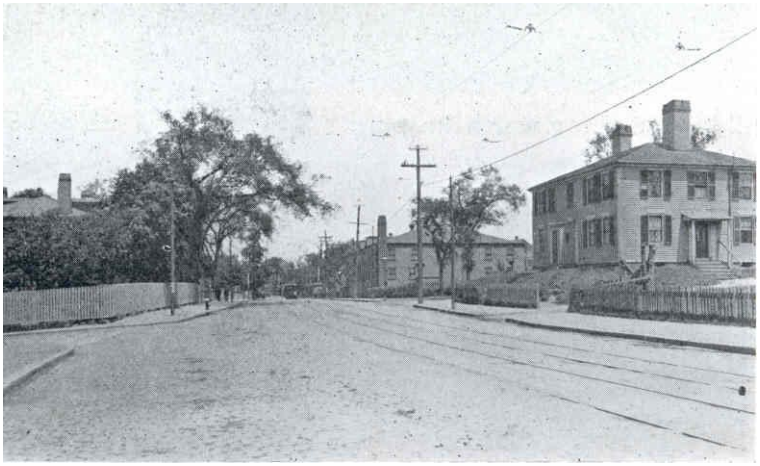


The Dorchester Lines and the British fortifications were in place before the big night. The Revolutionary Army's fortifications on Dorchester Neck were erected in a secret operation in one night.

None of this terrain is recognizable today except for a moderate elevation where the battle monument stands. The summits have all been cut down, and Nooks Hill leveled altogether to provide land fill. The watery bays and marshes have been built up into an extensive urban area covering what has long been called South Boston. Even the heavily fortified Castle Island, or Castle William, that stood a half-mile off shore, adding conspicuously to the British harbor defenses, has been joined to the mainland, thus completely transforming the coastline. To visualize the revolutionary topography, we must refer to old maps or illustrations; and these will easily enable us to understand the tactical problems.



View of Castle Island/Fort William


To defend the against the British, the Revolutionary Army placed a breastworks on Boston Street just north of the entrance to Willow Court (now Enterprise Street).

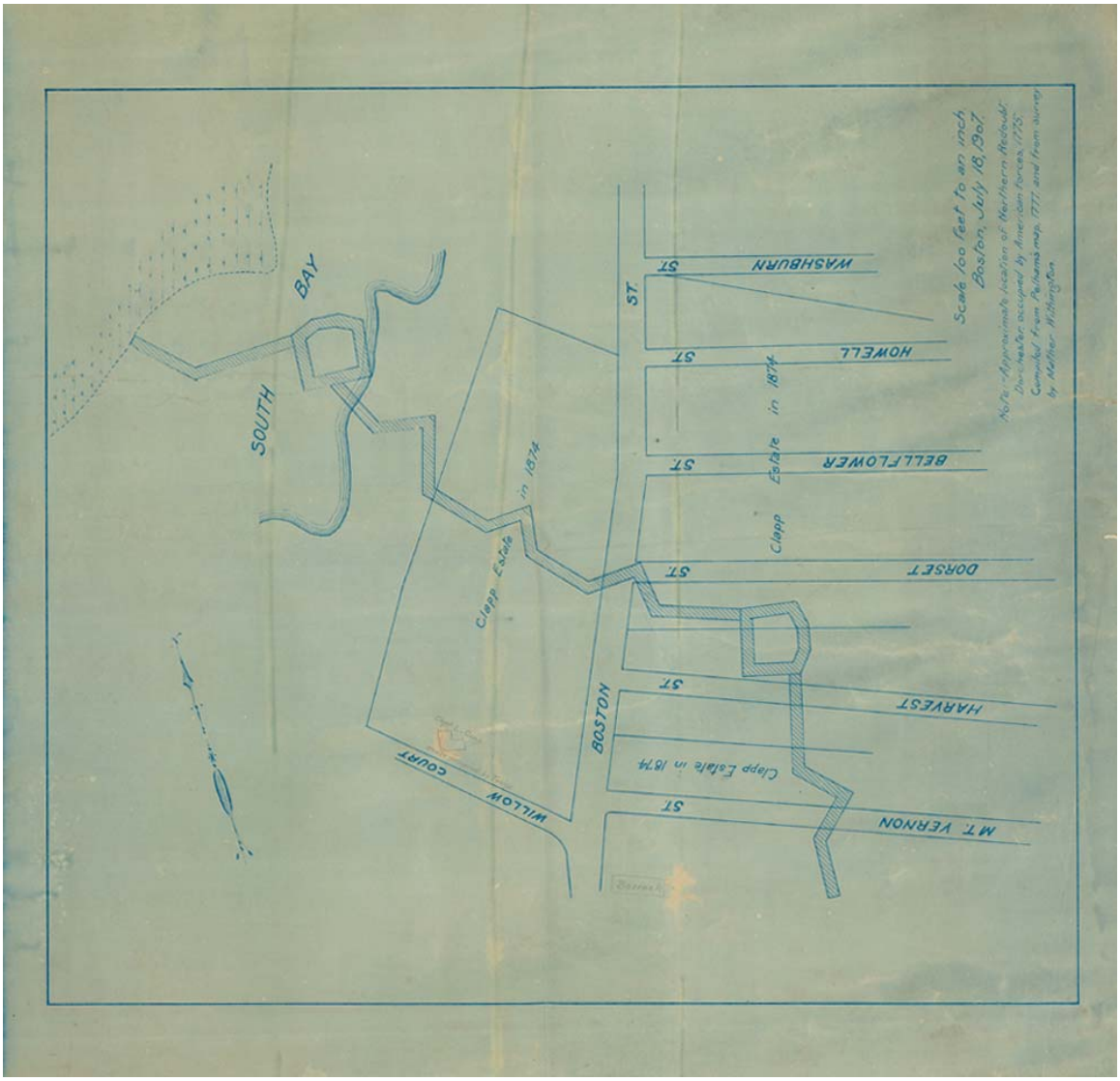


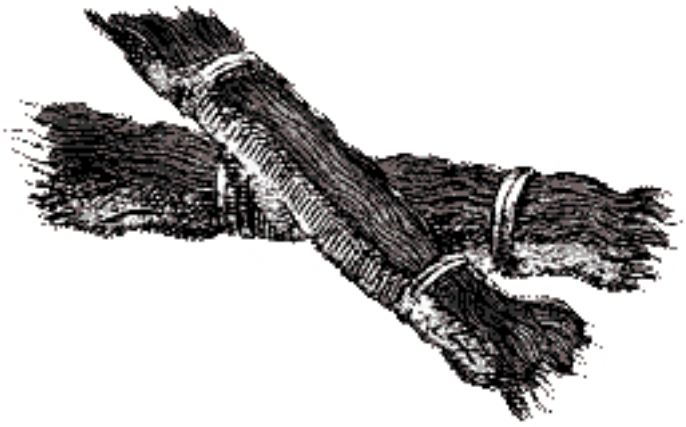
Illustration of the defensive redoubt in relation to modern streets.

With his usual thoroughness, Washington had already reconnoitered this area. As early as February 11th, and again on the 12th, he rode out over the causeway, accompanied by his staff, including Gens. Ward, Putnam, and Thomas, together with Col. Gridley, the chief engineer, Lt. Col. Rufus Putnam, and Col. Henry Knox who served somewhat as an engineering advisor as well as having command of the artillery. In other words, the party included much of the nucleus of the American high command. The officers continued to the further end of the peninsula, left their horses with orderlies, and strolled on across the terrain for another half mile. At this point, someone looking across at Boston noticed British cavalrymen riding furiously toward their artillery batteries on the Neck. Evidently Washington's group had been noticed; and if the guns opened up, their return over the causeway would be cut off. A contemporary account reports that this danger "set them all running and scampering for life” to get back to their horses and out of reach of the potential enfilading: "all except Israel Putnam "who never runs, and who tarried for lame Col. Gridley", unable to run because of his Bunker Hill leg wound. They all escaped, but

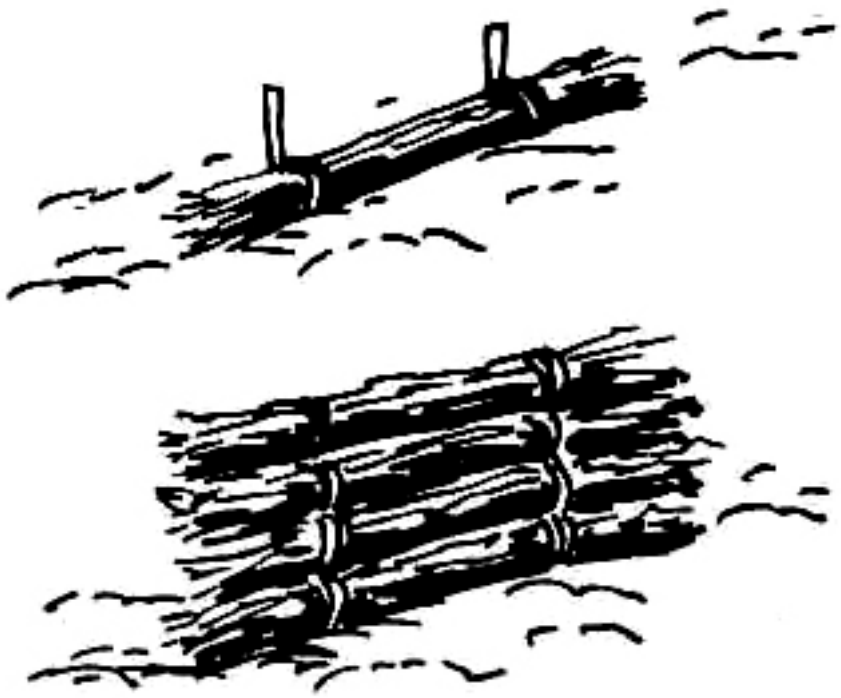
had the timing worked out differently, Washington's career might have ended tragically on Dorchester Neck: all of which bears out the optimist's maxim: "our worst fears never happen."

2. SCORCHED EARTH

Realizing that Dorchester held the key to Boston, Howe was not so indolent as to disregard it altogether. In early February, he received reports that the Rebels were secretly beginning to fortify the area. The information was premature, as no such operation had yet been seriously contemplated, though the appearance of Washington's party there might have confirmed the suspicion. It was true that Artemas Ward had arranged for making fascines in case they should ever be called for; but this material was still stored in the rear. Since the intelligence reports suggested a threat from this direction, Howe prudently determined to eliminate any such possibility by a surprise raid that would scorch the earth of Dorchester like a strip of fried bacon.



Fascines



Fascines erected into a wall.

An enterprise of this sort must have been eagerly welcomed by the idle British garrison, for soldiers are like small boys, and they love the sound of gunfire, the excitement of a night attack, and the glamor of adventure. Lt. Col. Alexander Leslie and Maj. Musgrave were called to Province House where plans for the foray were thoroughly discussed. Leslie was to take four hundred men to Castle William on the afternoon of Feb 13, placing them in readiness to attack the eastern end of the peninsula. At the same time, Musgrave would hold an equal force on the Boston waterfront, ready to pounce on Dorchester's northwestern shore. Advantage would be taken of the thick ice, as Washington himself had hoped to do; and in the early hours of Feb. 14, the two parties would march forward to launch simultaneous attacks. The operation was carried out with complete success except for the fact that no fortifications were found to demolish; no enemy was present except a small guard post providing six or seven prisoners; and no objective was won. It all ended in a blaze of glory, brightening the night as far away as Charlestown and beyond, while ten or so, ramshackle houses, barns, and sheds were burned to the ground in full view of the distressed citizens who had dwelt in them. With the sky still flaming red at dawn, and with their incendiary mission accomplished, Leslie, Musgrave, and their eight hundred braves returned triumphantly to receive the plaudits of their general.

Inconsequential as this raid might appear, it had a deeper significance that we might appreciate. It gave Gen. Howe the false assurance that in spite of rumors to the contrary, there was really no threat from Dorchester. Had there ever been a threat, he could now feel that it was totally eliminated by dint of fire and sword. His sense of security on this score was further enhanced when he increased the batteries along Boston Neck, whose guns as Gen. Robertson, the British chief engineer, expressed it, could "easily dislodge

any Rebels who might attempt to annoy us from thence:" that is, from Dorchester. Leslie's raid also taught another lesson, for it showed the Rebels how speedily the British could mount a counterattack here, converting the whole peninsula into a favorable battleground. The Yankees took good heed of this warning; whereas the British, not unnaturally, were lulled into a very false sense of security by Leslie's exploits. Security, the nemesis of those it reassures!

3. DORCHESTER ENIGMA

The question was not so much whether to march on Dorchester Point, but how to obtain a foothold after once having arrived there. Since the causeway and heights were fully open to sweeping British artillery fire, since the whole peninsula was exposed to guns of the Castle and fleet, and since all were easily accessible to immediate British counterattack, obstinate difficulties presented themselves, and grew into impossibilities once they were studied. The operation bore some resemblance to the Patriot's sudden seizure of Bunker Hill eight months previously; but with one, all-important difference. At Bunker Hill, the Patriots were able to entrench and to form a strong redoubt. By this means, and only by this means, had they defended their position through a long day, and had inflicted fearful casualties on their foes; but even so, in the end, they had been driven off.

At this time, American soldiers had one failing that must be recognized: they had to have cover. Their eccentric general, Charles Lee, himself a professional soldier, had noticed this trait, and had commented, "the fatal persuasion has taken deep root in the minds of the Americans. . . that they are no match for the regulars but when covered by a wall or a breastwork." The fatal persuasion had proven fatally effective at Lexington-Concord, and fearfully so at Bunker Hill; but whether orthodox or unorthodox, it was the only way that this homespun, American "rabble" could be counted on to hold its ground and fight. Here at Dorchester, this essential condition that required entrenchments was made impossible by the condition of the ground, frozen as solid as concrete, or almost so, to a depth of two feet. Generals must think realistically or pay the consequences in death and defeat; and in realistic terms, this difficulty presented what we might call The Dorchester Enigma. Like the riddle of the Sphinx, the alternative was to find an answer, or to die for lack of it.

Though the occupation of Dorchester had not been Washington's favorite or even his desired choice, he was no man to sulk or temporize. Once in the thing, he was in it to the hilt. Apparent impossibilities deterred him but little. He operated on a principle that he later recorded, "enquiry and observation serve to point out a remedy." In other words, sit down and study the problem. Meanwhile, he had expressed another maxim in a letter to Congress: "I am determined to do everything in my power to bring on" an engagement with the enemy. As a matter of fact, he was beginning to relish the new operation, and he told Reed somewhat amusingly, "I am preparing to take post on Dorchester Heights to try if the enemy will be so kind as to come out to us." He now proceeded to put these principles into operation, "and that, as soon as possible," in his own words.

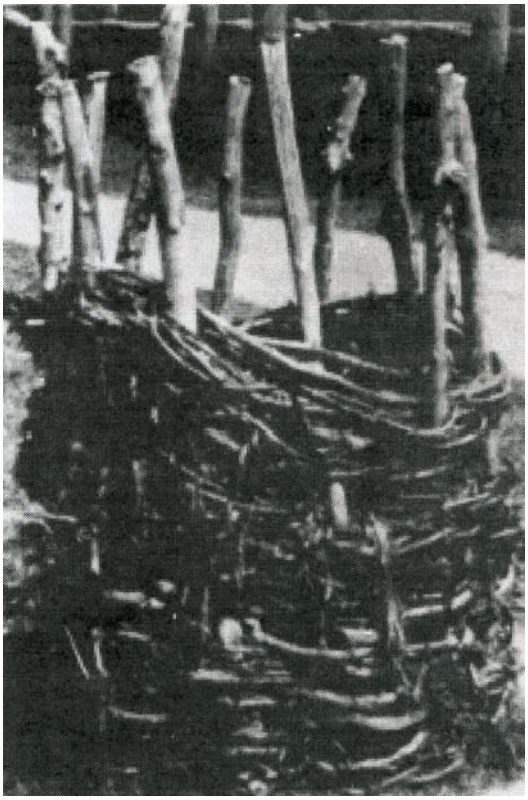
By comparing dates, we can see that no time was wasted; for the decision to move could have been reached no earlier than the Council meeting, February 16; and the operation, with all the huge preparations that it required, was now scheduled to begin its preliminary

stage on March 2 -- fifteen days later, this being a Leap Year. The first part of the problem was not difficult to solve, though hard enough to put in execution.

A large combat labor force would be secretly assembled by nights and would march to the peninsula, taking the British by surprise, and being prepared the next morning to fight off any and all counterattacks. The position, being so vital, it would be expected that the British would strike back with very powerful force: in fact, Lt. Sam Webb, of Connecticut told that Gen. Howe "had sworn if we break ground [in Dorchester], he will sally on us, if he was sure of losing two thirds of his army;" and Webb added significantly, This is what we wish for." At the same time, Washington would be prepared to launch a counterattack of his own. The British could not be in two places at once; and if they ever proved so reckless as to squander two thirds of their garrison in Dorchester, he would hold troops in readiness to assault Boston itself, as we shall see later on.

4. FASCINES, GABIONS AND CHANDELIERS

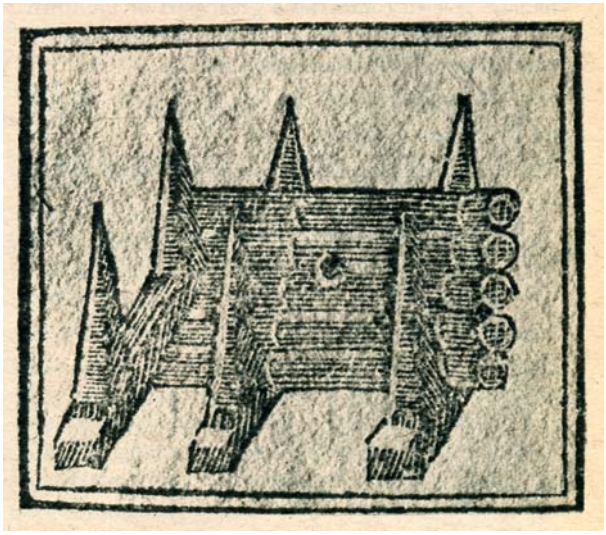
For the second part of the enigma, fortifying Dorchester once it had been occupied, a partial, though inadequate solution was already available. Superficial parapets to shield troops could be provided by material called fascines. These consisted in simple bundles of sticks laid parallel in piles of about four feet length and two to three feet thickness, then bound in tight rolls, more or less like faggots. As has been mentioned, Artemas Ward's corps on the right wing had been preparing stocks of these since early January or before. When such bundles were distributed end to end and side by side, they would provide a breastwork that could stop a musket ball, though they would be much too unstable for a solid wall. The parapet could be strengthened by another simple element: gabions. These were wicker bags or baskets that could be carried on to a field empty and then filled with surface stones or gravel. When interspersed among the fascines, these baskets of earth and rocks would weight down the defenses and add to their strength; but again, such a wall would lack firmness. Huge numbers of fascines and gabions would he required; but this was just the type of work an army of farmers, aided by the whole local population could and would do. In this type of warfare, they held a great advantage over barrack room regulars.



Gabion

Gabions erected into walls and filled with earth in the Civil War

There still remained the essential question how to stabilize such a loose-jointed breastwork; and here the answer was revealed by serendipity, for those who like that odd word; or "providentially," as Rufus Putnam did not hesitate to call it. John Harris, in his fine history of “Washington’s First Victory," tells us the interesting details of this fortunate coincidence. Col. Rufus Putnam, 38 years old, was a young cousin of Old Put, though not too young to have fought in the French and Indian wars. At 19 years of age, he had taught himself surveying back on his home farm at Sutton, Massachusetts, much as Washington had done. He possessed many Putnam characteristics, with a love of the wilderness, a yen for adventure, and steady courage. In spite of lack of much schooling, he became an engineer on joining the Patriot army, and would later distinguish himself in that field by helping with the defenses of West Point, and eventually becoming surveyor general of the United States. His future career was made more interesting by his becoming a pioneer, forming the Ohio Company, and settling the town of Marietta. As a member of the Constitutional founders of the state, he helped to exclude slavery from Ohio.



Chandelier

Washington, through a continued policy of extending as much hospitality as possible to all his officers, thus gaining their closer acquaintance, had invited Rufus to dinner, and then taken him aside to explain the problem of fortifying Dorchester. If Rufus should come across any solution for the difficulty, he was asked to report at once. Following the conference, Rufus decided on the spur of the moment through a stroke of luck to drop in on the genial Gen. William Heath; and at Heath's home, again by pure luck, he noticed a copy of Muller's Military Field Manual. This, he insisted on borrowing, though Heath was reluctant to lend any book out of his library. Finally, as a third case of pure luck, Putnam thumbed through the text that evening and accidentally came across a description of "chandeliers," of which he had never before heard. They were nothing but skeleton-like frames of light, long timbers, nailed together in a way to form cribs or cradles for fascines and gabions, thereby giving strength and coherence to such a breastwork. "No sooner. did I turn the page where it was described with its use," Putnam remembered, "but I was ready to report a plan for making a lodgment on Dorchester Heights." He

promptly carried the news to Gridley, chief of engineers, and discussed it with Knox, both of whom approved; and then took it to Washington who adopted it enthusiastically. "Vast quantities" of chandeliers were at once put in production by the ever-ready woodcutters and carpenters and mechanics and handymen of this amateur army -- once again, superior in this respect to parade ground troops of the regular establishment.

5. YANKEE INGENUITY

Even Muller's Field Manual did not provide the answer to the serious problem of approaching Dorchester over its exposed causeway. As we mentioned, the road here crossed some low-lying, marshy ground which was particularly exposed to British artillery batteries, not over half a mile away -- the very guns on which Gen. Robertson had placed so much confidence. Here, the frosty ground would prove helpful since it would provide a hard pavement for the passage of supply wagons: but how could the road be protected from the enemy cannon? In military terms, a "covered way" is a road walled-off or protected from hostile fire; but here, neither stone work, nor timbered walls, nor sod, nor least of all, tunneling, could be utilized for protection in the frozen, marshy soil where overnight-defenses were required. The solution adopted by the Rebels was the last possibility that we could have imagined: hay! Our instinct is to exclaim, Impossible; but hay it was. There were at this time no machines for baling hay, but instead the farmers would take strands or skeins of long hay-stalks, and twist them rapidly together with a spiral motion that would form ropes at the rate of "a fathom [6 feet] a minute." The ropes were then tightly bound into bundles of seven or eight hundred- weight: a third of a ton. Because of the spiral, twisting process, the bales were called "screwed hay." Rev. Gordon's history tells us the plan: "The bundles of hay were designed for Dorchester Neck which is very low and exposed to be raked by the enemy; and are to be laid [on the side of the causeway] to cover the Americans in passing and re-passing." Again, no time was lost, though the greatest quantity of these heavy bales was brought from far off, at the opposite end of the siege line, across the Mystic and Charles Rivers, in Chelsea. Gen. William Heath tells us briefly, "bundles of screwed hay were brought from Chelsea to be used in the works." When cannon balls hit them, the iron could not shatter their clumsy structure, but would sink in and fall dead. Situated in low lying, marshy, wetland, the moist hay would not catch fire: in fact, it would provide a perfect wall. At last, when the advance finally took place, James Thacher noted as he marched forward with his regiment: "On passing Dorchester Neck, I observed a vast number of large bundles of screwed hay, arranged in a line next the enemy to protect our troops." No small job, we might comment: vast numbers of bales, seven and eight hundredweight apiece, brought clear from Chelsea, all by hand power and horse power!

We are not yet done in recounting the resources of Yankee ingenuity, nor of Washington's readiness to explore and exploit any suggestion that might be brought to his ever sympathetic and open ears. The genial chronicler, Gen. William Heath, tells us in his "Memoirs By Himself" that at the crest of the very steep slopes of Dorchester Heights, it was suggested that a line of barrels should be laid on their sides, held in place by chock-blocks, forming a reinforcement for the breastwork. These barrels could be brought to the site empty, and then filled with stones or surface gravel. Besides adding to

the strength of the parapet, the barrels would be so placed that the chocks holding them could be pulled aside at the proper time, in which case, they would plunge downward, rolling into the ranks of attacking troops with destructive effect. Heath states that "the credit of this suggestion is justly due to Mr. Wm. Davis, merchant of Boston, to whom the writer gives it." Heath immediately transmitted the idea to Washington who was so delighted with it that he mentioned it three times in Orders, and took the precaution of adding that the barrels must be securely hooped, so that they would not burst apart when bouncing down. There was some thought of chaining the barrels together; but Washington felt they would serve better if released individually. It is hard to imagine how an assault party, even with the best drilled discipline, could escape from such obstacles: in fact, Stedman, a British military historian who served here, felt that these barrels were largely responsible for making the works unapproachable.

Where the slopes were less steep, or the ground level, a final defensive measure was planned: a hedge-work of felled trees in front of the walls forming the familiar "abatis," well known to military engineers. This would be particularly demoralizing to assault parties who relied on the compactness of their ranks for delivering an effective bayonet charge. If obliged to climb over, around, and through the branches of fallen timbers, their formations would be completely split apart. Then, too, their charge would be greatly delayed, in close proximity to murderous volleys of musketry from the defenders. For construction of this formidable tree-barrier, two hundred and fifty axemen were called forth and added to the laboring troops in building the works. Farmers, carpenters, mechanics, hay-twisters, wood choppers, barrel makers, and pick-and-shovel laborers: such was the fiber of Washington's army!

6. WAGONERS

There was still another trade that would be essential to this movement: teamsters. To transport such an enormous amount of material in the course of a single night, posed a problem that seemed insuperable; but here again Washington was well served by the homebred character of his army, and the skills of the local community. To begin with, there was John Goddard, one of the many devotedly patriotic Brookline citizens who had been spending his own, private funds to provide wagons and teams for moving military supplies. His efforts began even before Lexington-Concord; and had continued tirelessly ever since. In behalf of the Province, he had been advertising in the New England Chronicle and the Essex Gazette, “wanted directly for the use of the Continental Army a number of teams to be employed in the camp where they may have good encouragement and immediate employ . . . . It is desired that people would exert themselves as they value the safety of their country." That last sentence was not merely a sentimental appeal, for these people did value the safety of their country: not in vain were they called "patriots."

Goddard had done such invaluable work for the army in general and for Col. Wm. Prescott's regiment in particular that as early as August, '75, Capt. Abijah Wyman noted illiterately, “Mr. John Goddard is appinted by the Commander yn Chief, wagon master genl to the 13 army of the twelve united colonies, and is to be obayed as such." Where the thirteenth colony had gone is not recorded; but now, in February, 1776, Goddard was responsible for the tremendous task of organizing a supply train for the advance into

Dorchester. In their spare time, Goddard's son related that his father's “men were employed in cutting and making fascines to carry on to the hill, while getting the teams ready to transport all the stores for the troops."

A train of three hundred and sixty teams of horses or “mostly yoked oxen," was gathered from all the towns and villages around, together with teamsters, hostlers, farriers, and ox-drivers. Barns and sheds were assigned, and hay, oats, and fodder was furnished. The required loads were apportioned off for each team. Schedules were worked out for the timing and number of trips that would be necessary: all in all, a tremendous undertaking in military organization and logistics, yet particularly suited to the ways and means of the enterprising villagers round about. Thus, by one means and another, and quite largely by the self-reliant cooperation of the community as a whole, the Dorchester enigma was beginning to be solved.

V. INVITATION TO BATTLE

1. OPENING THE BALL

The movement which today might be called "Operation Dorchester Heights” actually began on March 2nd at Lechmere Point, in East Cambridge rather than Dorchester. More truly, this was "operation surprise,” where it was essential to deceive the British as to the intended objective. Consequently Knox's great mortars on Cobble Hill and Lechmere itself, and on the northwestern section of the siege line, were ordered to bombard West Boston as if that would be the focus for attack. In addition, but still deceptively, the heavy guns from Roxbury's high fort had been moved forward close to the front line at "Lamb's Dam,” and they cast their cannon balls at the British fortifications on the Neck. The intriguing name, Lamb’s Dam, incidentally, was derived less from a dam than a dyke, erected in the lower, marshier area of Roxbury, not to hold water in, but to keep it out when the sea tides rose too high. This point, where platforms for guns had been laboriously constructed, played an important role both in hammering British defenses, and in giving a false warning that Patriot assaults might be aimed here. Unfortunately, among American cannoneers there were too few "students of great guns," as the trained artillery men were called. As a result, three of the mortars were overloaded or poorly served, so that their barrels burst in the course of firing. Nevertheless, the barrage as a whole achieved its intended effect by alarming the British, and by alerting them at the wrong defense points. In return the British cannon responded; but rather ineffectively at first as one of their junior officers, Lt. John Barker grumbled in his diary: "our shells, very bad most of 'em, bursting in the air or not at all." The entire bombardment on both sides was more a gesture than a true barrage, for the Americans, in conserving their gunpowder, fired a total of only twenty-five shots. However, this was enough, as we might say, to shout at the enemy, "Look out for us: trouble's ahead." In reply, the British artillery snarled back, "Do your damndest, we’re ready." Even cannon can talk; and their advantage over humans is that they mean what they say.

The succeeding days were spent in final preparations for the takeoff: wagons and teams readied, supplies concentrated, troops squeezed into quarters conveniently close for their combat assignments. From the start, quartering the troops had been a major problem, and

of late, even more so, with new levies moving in. The Continental troops, as we may now call them, constituting the army of one-year volunteers, had reached the number of about 9,000 men. In addition, Massachusetts and New Hampshire had furnished about 5,000 militia men for the emergency, arriving with their own three-days rations. We should not forget that the colonies were in a sense military states, where every male citizen from 16 to 60 was required by law to render military service, though on a short term basis of not over two to three weeks. All this had resulted from a century and a half of Indian perils when every town had maintained its company of Minute Men, and every village green was a training ground for troops. The six regiments of Massachusetts militia who now marched in, were commanded by Gen. Benjamin Lincoln, who would play a major role in Revolutionary history. With varying success and misfortune, but always with outstanding personal performance, he would serve here, and at Saratoga, and in general command of the Southern area; and finally, as the trusted second-in-command, receiving the surrender of Cornwallis as Washington's deputy. The association of the two names, Washington and Lincoln, greatest in our history, was somewhat prophetic, for Benjamin Lincoln was a collateral ancestor of Abraham, and had many of his characteristics: geniality, humor, courage, persistence, wisdom, and patience.

A more vivid, personal picture of conditions the troops found in coming to their quarters at this period is furnished by the diary of Lt. Isaac Bangs, a small town farmer who had enlisted in January, and had marched from the other end of the Cape to join the siege, coming from far away Chatham. He described his community as having “a very civil sort of people, with whom I lived very quietly.” He was to live quietly no more. He wrote, “Our company turned in at Roxbury Street for about five days in old houses and cellars; but as we could no longer stand it thus barracked, we made complaint to our colonels and were provided for in homes in Dorchester about four miles distant. There, we continued about nine days during which time great preparations were making for some enterprise, such as fascines, gaberoons, and barracks ready-made and boards cut [probably chandeliers]. All imagined that Dorchester Hill was the object of their attention.”

Baker House on Savin Hill used as a barracks for Revolutionary troops.

The final sentence just quoted indicates a peril that troubled Washington considerably, for it was essential that the advance into Dorchester be kept a surprise from the British, yet everyone in the Rebel camp knew of the project and word could hardly fail to reach Gen. Howe. "There will be something done amongst you very soon," wrote a soldier's wife from Ipswich, excusing her husband from his promise to come home and see her once a month. It was commonly repeated that Gen. Sullivan had been overheard saying that he “would lay a bet we shall be in possession of Boston in fifteen days." Worse still, several days before, an American rifleman had deserted and joined the British, carrying to them all news of the camp. The artillery bombardment itself was a warning of an intended attack; but for all this, Howe took no effective counter measures, beyond alerting his troops to be ready for some sudden onset. Perhaps the last place he expected action was the one most obvious -- Dorchester; for only two weeks before he had scorched the earth there!

Revolutionary troops were quartered in the Lemuel Clap House.

In the Rebel camp there was no such complaisant confidence, for the risks of a shattering defeat were all too well appreciated. This can be fully recognized if we read between the lines of Washington's wary letter to Congress on the night of March 2:

> Sir: After weighing all considerations of tides, etc., and considering hazard of having the posts on Dorchester Neck taken by the enemy, and the evil consequences which would result from it, the gentlemen here [his general staff] are of opinion that we should go on there Monday night [March 4]. I give you this early notice of it that you may delay no time in preparing for it, as everything. here will be got in readiness to cooperate. In haste, I am , Sir, . . . “

It is said that the night, Monday, March 4th, was selected on the suggestion of Col. Thomas Miflin, because this would bring about the opening of actual combat on the 5th: the anniversary of the Boston Massacre, when patriotic fervor would be at a maximum. The day had been specially commemorated annually, with intense zeal ever since the event in 1770; and it was to be a Boston custom for a century to come. Whatever the rights or wrongs of that sad affair, "the Massacre" was to Bostonians an infuriating memorial of patriotic martyrdom, very appropriate for launching a deathblow at British occupation.

Now, with "everything got in readiness," Washington was about to open the ball.

2. THE DREADFUL TOMORROW

According to Thacher's journal, a full moon was shining on March 4, and the night was serene. At the time, some three thousand patriot soldiers, numberless anxious civilians, and three hundred and sixty teams of horses and yokes of oxen were waiting tensely for full darkness to set in. At 7:00 PM. Gen. John Thomas gave the word as the artillery thundered out its overture to battle. Then, from every lane and roadway, from every square, from every shed and stable in the neighborhood, men and materiel started to move.

To grasp such an event, our imagination must participate in its dark, grim, explosive commencement. From the point of view of a civilian observer, we gain a splendid picture from excerpts of the letters Abigail Adams wrote her husband John, then serving with the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. Abigail had been left in sole charge of the farm in West Quincy, the family of children, and the entire household. On the crest of nearby Penn's Hill, she could step out for a full view of the whole thundering, pyrotechnical scene. She had sat down on the night of March 2 for the first letter, and with her goose quill she had penned the lines:

> Saturday, Mar. 2. It has been said, Tomorrow and Tomorrow for this month, but when the dreadful tomorrow will come, I know not: but hark! the house this instant shakes with the roar of cannon. I have been to the door, and find it is a cannonade from our army. Orders, I find are come for all the remaining militia to repair to the line Monday night by 12.
>
> Sunday, Mar. 3. I went to bed about 12, but got no rest. The cannon continued firing and my heart beat pace with them all night.
>
> Monday, Mar. 4. I have just returned from Penn's Hill where I have been sitting to hear the roar of cannon, and from whence I could see every shell that was thrown. The sound I think is one of the grandest. 'Tis an incessant roar. How many of our dear countrymen must fall!
>
> Tuesday, Mar. 5. I went to bed about 12, midnight, and rose again about 1:00. I could no more sleep than if I had been in the engagement: the rattle of windows,

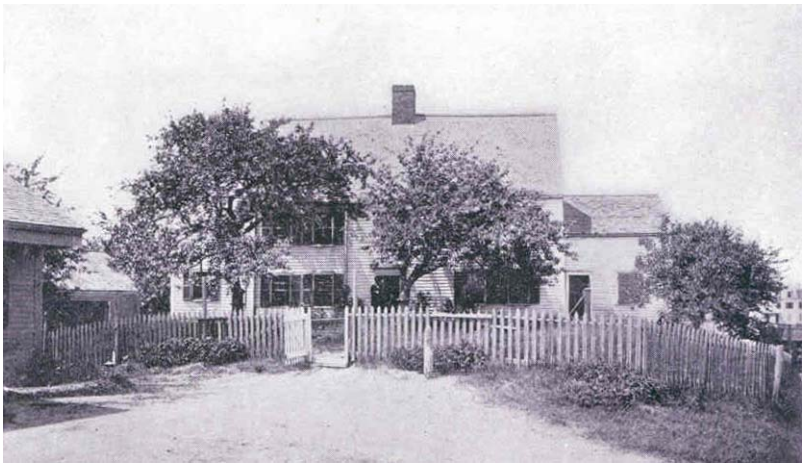
> the jar of the house, the continual roar of twenty-four pounders, and the bursting of shells -- a scene of which we would scarce form any conception!

A similar view, at first hand, is given us from within Boston by Captain Charles Stuart as he watched the gunfire this same, eventful night:

> A nobler scene it was impossible to behold. Sheets of fire seemed to come from our batteries. Some of the shells crossed one another in the air, and then bursting, looked beautiful. The inhabitants were in a horrid situation, particularly the women who were several times drove from their homes by shot, and crying for protection.

In spite of the fright, however, little military or civilian damage was actually done, as the great majority of missiles were simple, non-explosive cannon balls, aimed at random. However, the emotional effect was great since every ball carried potential death.

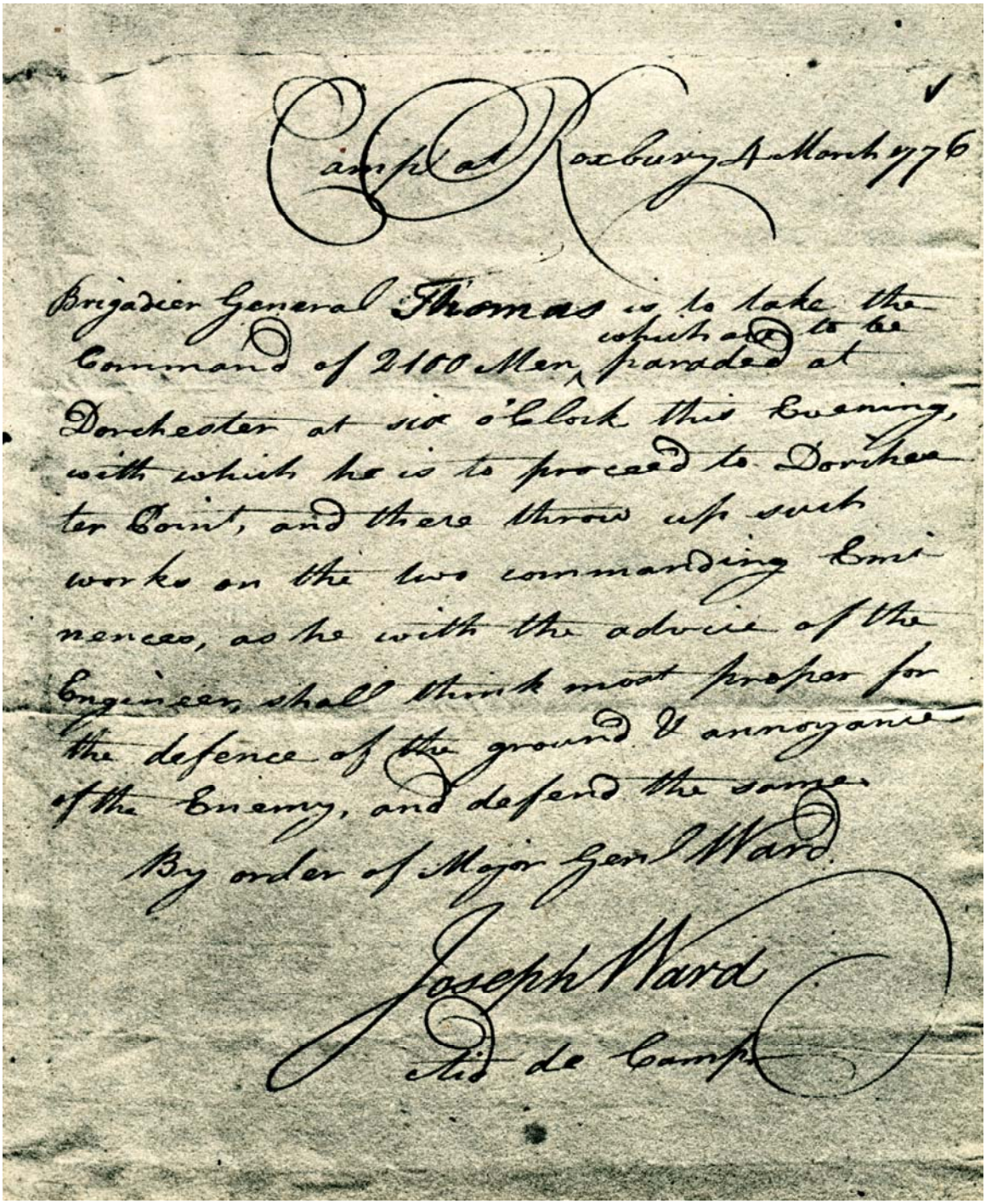
We can recreate the scene even better if we move to the center of action in old Dorchester. There, at Edward Everett Square, where the crossroads from Roxbury and Boston meet, stands the old Blake Homestead, as it stood on this night when the advance took place, and had stood for a hundred years and more before that, being Boston's oldest surviving dwelling. It saw and heard all, and from its doorway we can picture the dark spectacle of lumbering oxen plodding by, dragging their overloaded carts and vans with creaking wagon wheels that rumbled over the rutted, half-frozen roadway. Around them, we would see a shadowy press of soldiers, indistinctly silhouetted in the moonlight, or with their taut faces lit up by lanterns as they passed the house door. Over their shoulders they would be carrying shovels, pick-axes, crow-bars, or other tools in addition to their muskets. Overhead, we would trace the fiery missiles criss-crossing the sky, while the framework of the house itself would shudder with the crash of cannon, and shake at the bursting of shells. All in all, it would present a drama never to be forgotten, of a new nation surging forward in the night to meet its destiny.



The Blake House

3. LEADING THE ADVANCE

During the afternoon and evening of the 4th, ahead of the troops, individual engineer officers had straggled on to the Point clandestinely, as Col. Jeduthen Baldwin tells us, and had marked out the locations and outlines for the fortifications, and the depots where supplies were to be unloaded. Thus, no time would be wasted when the night's work started in, for a blueprint would have been scratched on the ground: and there the engineers would be waiting.



Camp at Roxbury 4th March 1776

Brigadier General Thomas is to take the Command of 2100 Men which are to be paraded at Dorchester at six o'Clock this Evening, with which he is to proceed to Dorchester Point, and there throw up such works on the two commanding Eminences, as he with the advice of the Engineers shall think most proper for the defence of the ground & annoyance of the Enemy, and defend the same.

By order of Major Genl Ward

Joseph Ward
Aid de Camp

Foremost of their number was Col. Richard Gridley, limping about on his lame leg which had been seriously wounded nine months before at Bunker Hill. There, he had played a similar role, staking out the Patriot redoubt. His had been a long record of service, dating back to the French wars. In 1759, he had accompanied Lord Jeffrey Amherst in the recapture of Ticonderoga, and had designed fortifications at Crown Point. Later that same year, he joined Gen. James Wolfe at Quebec, where he constructed engineering apparatus for lifting cannon up the cliffs, thus materially helping in the conquest of Montcalm. In recognition of these services the British had given Gridley the rare distinction of a royal commission as colonel, and had begged him to stay with them when the Revolution broke out. However, he felt justice lay with the Patriot cause, and he contributed a major share in these two, decisive, opening battles, thus culminating a life of patriotic devotion. In spite of all this, history has hidden his name in its files, as with many others of the foremost and best. Who, today, has ever heard of Richard Gridley?

An advance guard or "covering, party" of eight hundred soldiers, carrying thirty rounds of ammunition apiece led the march to the Point. Among them went three units of Col. Wm. Thompson's remarkable regiment of riflemen -- Marylanders, Pennsylvanians, and Virginians, who had, in the case of Morgan's company, marched over 600 miles in 21 days, at a pace of 30 miles a day, to get to the siege of Boston. They had been personally recruited by such leaders as Thompson, Cressap, and Morgan, because of their phenomenal skill with the long rifle -- slower in loading, but far more accurate and three times the range of a musket. These men, though scornful of discipline, and troublesome in garrison duty, were splendid fighters. John Harris reminds us that they dressed in long hunting shirts, and that during the siege they had plagued the British by picking off sentries at great distance. In fact, the British had said of them, "these shirt-tail men with their cursed, twisted guns were the most fatal widow and orphan makers in the world."

They now spread out in small groups along the Dorchester shore, where they could repel any reconnoitering parties the British might send over during the night. As Daniel McCurtin, a Marylander, described it, they "lay in ambush close to the waterside, expecting every moment that the butchers belonging to the tyrant of Great Britain would be out among us." However, no such parties appeared, and the riflemen could spend their time merely waiting and watching. There was much to watch, as we learn from McCurtin's excited recollections. As he gazed at the sky from his covert, he exclaimed:

> The other two nights [Mar. 2 and 3], which I have mentioned, I thought was bad enough. But, o my God, the wonders of last night! Just as it was dusk our people let fly from all sides and corners. I can't, it's impossible I could describe the situation of this town and all about it. This night you could see shells, sometimes seven at a time in the air; and as to the cannon, the continual shaking of the earth by cannonading caused wells to dry up.

4. A FORTRESS MOVES IN

Behind the advance guard came the main column led by Gen. John Thomas: twelve hundred fatigue troops wielding some of the oldest weapons of war: not firearms, but shovels and picks. "We got over the little neck in fine order and good spirits," Thomas reported, referring to the low-lying causeway which would soon be shielded by screwed hay, but which was at the start "greatly exposed to their fire," to quote Isaac Bangs, as he passed it. Even under a full moon, the marching troops were not observed by the enemy; partly because there was a low-lying ground mist, according to Thacher, though the air was clear above. In any case, no British cannon opened on the troops, and their passage was made in full safety. With the troops, and interspersed among them, came the toiling supply trains: carts, teams, vans, wagons, hay-ricks, anything that could roll, including numbers of wheel barrow that were useful not only for what they carried in, but for what they might have to carry out. In these primitive combat conditions, no ambulance service existed, and for want of a better means of evacuation, wheel barrows might be used. Washington had made full preparations for two thousand casualties, this being one of the provisions for getting seriously wounded to the rear.

The teams did not stop at a single trip over the neck but kept on a semi-continuous circuit, some of them returning as many as three or even four times; and by this means, the huge quantity of material required was all delivered at designated spots as it was needed. If for nothing else, this advance was unparalleled as a triumph in military logistics; but that would include also resourcefulness, enterprise, and tireless energy. In the night's advance, it was not just an army arriving; but an entire, prefabricated fortress that crossed the marsh, climbed the steep hilltops, and set itself up on the crests.

As soon as the troops had marched over the "little neck," they dispersed to their assigned positions, and hurled themselves into the labor of erecting their parapets in the designated alignment. They added all the reinforcement they could scratch together from as much surface soil as they were able to break up with picks or dig out with shovels. The day having been mild in temperature, there were probably two or three inches of dirt that had thawed on top; all of which was eagerly used to cover fascines and gabions. Gen. Heath remarked in admiration, "there was never so much work done in so short a space of time." A diarist with Col. Whitcomb's regiment noted, "in an hour's time, we had a fort enclosed with fascines and chandeliers, and we employed as many men at entrenching as could be conveniently used for that purpose," showing that some of the surface earth could be spaded up and shoveled.

Throughout the operation, silence was strictly imposed, and every precaution was taken to reduce noise to a minimum. As the wagons moved back and forth, wisps of hay had been bound over their wheels to lessen the rattle or squeaks. Teamsters were warned not to call out or shout at their draft animals, and it was said that the ox-drivers whispered their commands! More likely, they relied on sharp goads which could be felt but not heard. Nevertheless, it would be ridiculous to suppose that such a gigantic project could be carried out with anything approaching true silence. Instead, the operation was buried in a barrage of sound: the heavy and almost continuous interruption of cannon fire. The Patriots were limited in expenditure of gunpowder; but the British, without realizing it, cooperated magnificently by exchanging three or four shots for every one fired against them. Throughout the night the Americans shot off one hundred and fifty five rounds,

French tells us, firing at spaced intervals, and the British filled in the gaps with three or four times as many.

Even at that, some aspects of the work could not be adequately hushed or stifled. Two hundred and fifty axe men were busy cutting down orchard trees to prepare the abatis; and their ringing blows echoed in between artillery salvoes. Lt. Col. Campbell, of the British infantry, had been alerted when a Rebel cannon ball had crashed into his guard house, dismembering one of his men and wounding six others. Thereafter, the Colonel noticed noises across the bay, coming too steadily and too regularly to be explained by anything less than parties of men heavily engaged in constructing large works. As early as 10:30 in the evening, he reported definitively to his commanding officer that "the Rebels were at work on Dorchester Heights "; but here the divinities of the British War Office that filled so many superior ranks with inferior officers intervened to shield the Americans. The commanding officer in this case was Francis Smith, none other than the Lt. Col. who had bungled the Lexington-Concord affair first into a failure, and finally into a disaster. For this achievement, he had been promoted to Brigadier General. Now, on receiving Campbell's report relatively early that night, Smith might have called for an immediate counter attack; or at least, he might have put the British army in readiness to attack at dawn. Instead he elected to pass over the information altogether until it could be verified by daylight the following morning. In battle, such an opportunity, once lost, never returns; but Maj. Gen. Howe and Lieut. Gen. Gage had done exactly the same thing when warned of Rebel activities at Bunker Hill! Procrastination was no new recruit in the British high command.

Though others in the British garrison also had heard the Rebel workers, their noise was muffled enough so that it roused more curiosity rather than alarm. In any case, the work went on continuously, unceasingly, and effectively. By 3:00 AM, after eight hours of high tension labor and marching, the work parties were ordered to lay down their tools and march back to camp; but they were replaced by a new contingent of about twenty five hundred fresh men, carrying muskets and thirty rounds of powder and shot. Eagerly, they snatched up the tools to complete the fortification, and worked with the same vim and enthusiasm as their predecessors. Now, however, there was already a fortress in existence; and they were simply reinforcing it. As early as 10:00 PM Gen. Thomas, consulting his watch, had noted that the parapet would repel musketry or even grape shot; but much was left to be added for greater security. Even by dawn, Lt. Bangs reported that "our forts were thus weak, being then little besides fascines six feet thick." Meanwhile, at some time during the night, teams of horses arrived dragging a battery of twenty or so cannon: 12 pounders. It is hard enough for assault troops to climb a steep hill in the face of volleying muskets; but cannon, breathing grapeshot in their faces would mean not individual death but actual annihilation: and here the guns were waiting for daylight when they would be wheeled forward.

In and out through the moonlight which "shone in its full luster," as he described it, Washington himself had come to be with the troops, Thacher tells us; but what the General said or thought was not recorded. In preliminary general orders he had already voiced the sentiment that always seems to have been uppermost in his thought: "Every temporal advantage and comfort to us and our posterity depends upon the vigor of our exertions. It is a noble cause we are engaged in: it is the cause of virtue and mankind." He

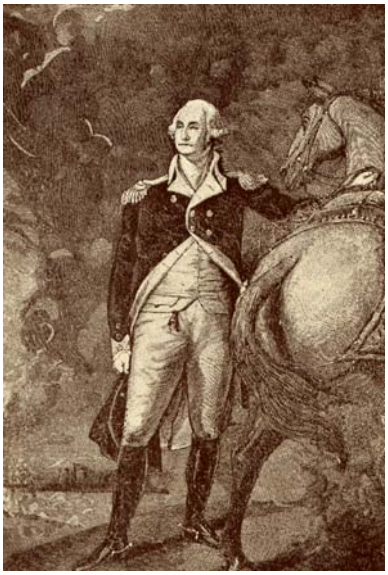
had been careful not to take over command himself, leaving that to Gen. Thomas, whom he later cited as the "first Brigadier, a brave and good officer." Even to Artemas Ward, Washington had issued no arbitrary orders, but had conditioned them by saying that he intended rather to convey my orders generally, than wishing them to be adhered to strictly." Nevertheless, all would agree that Washington was the key, the center, the focal point of this whole operation.

At last, the night drew to a close; but not before the huge defense work had grown into reality. This included two fortresses, one on each of the "twin hills," together with three redoubts at lower levels. Even the old veteran engineer, Jeduthan Baldwin, conceded that this was "a very great work for one night." Lt. Bangs went further and admitted to being "prodigeously surprised at the vast work that had been carried on in so little time." With obvious delight he speculated, in his Cape Cod spelling, that the British would be “much shagriened" when they beheld the miracle that had been performed.

5. ALADDIN's LAMP

Every dawn brings the surprise of a new day. March 5, 1776, brought the surprise of a new era. An independent nation had been born, strong enough to stand on its own feet, and to drive England from its shores. The fortifications served a notice of eviction that would be enforced within the next twelve days when stores, and artillery, and ships, and troops to the last man, bag and baggage, would be obliged to quit the town. British rule in America had come to an end, though it would take another seven, grueling years to prove it.

As filtering daylight crept into the sky, Gen. Thomas began to notice citizens and soldiers on Boston's docks staring at his position with astonishment and incredulity. More and more people gathered along the shores, sailors popped up on the decks of ships, heads stuck out of windows, roofs were peopled with observers gazing and pointing at the unbelievable thing that had happened: a fully manned, strongly structured fortification frowning down on the city in confident defiance! Gen. Howe was called from his bed to see it, and leveling his field glass for a closer look, he exclaimed, "The Rebels have done more in one night than my whole army could do in a month." He thought it must have taken the work of ten thousand men; but his chief of engineers, Gen. Archibald Robertson, went higher and wrote, "a most astonishing night's work. Must have employed from 14,000 to 20,000 men." Still better was the report of another British officer: "the fort was raised during last night with an expedition equal to that of Aladin's lamp." Most distressing of all was the conclusion of the British admiral, Molyneaux Shuldham, who quickly informed Gen. Howe that because of this “alarming and unexpected reversal," his ships would have to leave the harbor unless the Rebels could be driven off: a fact that Howe hardly needed to have explained to him. Every subaltern in his army knew it at a glance.


Washington at Dorchester Heights

Battle commanders, like surgeons, are obliged to make quick decisions: the eye, the hand, the knife all move together. Bred in the school of war, Howe had been taught that when the army is challenged, the only answer that honor permits is combat. Overruling his better judgment, this was his immediate response; and from his headquarters at Province House, orders promptly emerged for a counterattack. Just how many troops were involved, and just who would lead them varies in different accounts, but the most acceptable figure seems to be reliably that five regiments, some 3,000 men, commanded by Brigadier Jones, would be transported to Castle Island by ships that would tow landing barges, and from there, they would storm the southeastern shores of the peninsula. Because of infinitely slow movement, and because of the tides, this assault could not be staged before night time. It would be supported by a coordinated attack from the northern side of the peninsula that would be carried out by two more regiments, some 2,000 to 2,500 light infantry and grenadiers, commanded by Lord Percy. Thus, a force of up to five thousand men, or more, would be committed to Dorchester. An undetermined force of several thousand would also be prepared to attack the line at Roxbury, over the narrow passageway of the Neck. Remembering that the total British garrison was not over ten thousand men, those left behind to guard the city would be but a skeleton force. By this schedule, the defenders on Dorchester heights would have a full day more for strengthening their defenses; and the grenadiers a day more to live, for few of them would have survived such an assault. Nevertheless, with characteristic courage, the units prepared for their missions, and Howe stated that he was encouraged by the ardor they displayed. On the other hand, a citizen watching the troops embark commented that they "looked pale, and dejected, and said to one another that it would be another Bunker Hill affair, or worse."

V. INVITATION REFUSED

1. IMPENDING BATTLE

As an eagle from his aerie may look down on a farmyard, so the Rebel troops on the heights could survey the town and harbor of Boston. A spectacular view met their eyes. The outlook, even today, is scenically very beautiful with the meeting of three river mouths, the varying blue shades of the bays, the deep channels, and the waters studded with islands. The waterfront was hedged with a forest of tall masts and branching yard arms: "so great a number of ships," Jabez Fitch Jr. tells us from his view of them, "that it was impossible for us to number them." Behind, lay the hill-crested town itself, silhouetted with numbers of white church steeples, as Paul Revere depicted them for us in his engraving. Now, down to the wharves with drums beating, paraded the red-coated soldiers, while various transports unfurled their canvas, ready to sail off as soon as the troops and their field guns were loaded aboard. "And still they come:" more and more crowding down to the docks; five regiments in battle strength! Ships moved out, making way for others to fill and follow on their fateful mission. White sails speckled the harbor. Masts bent in the breeze. Flags fluttered. Were it not war, this might be a colorful yachting carnival, so picturesque was the setting. But here there was a grim solemnity; and on the decks, gleamed the steel bayonets the grenadiers held firmly in their hands. Strict orders had been issued that when the British marched against the works, there would be no musket fire: only the push of steel.

Within the Rebel forts, stolid confidence and firm resolution reached a point of hopeful anticipation. At first-discovery, tension was heightened by expectation of heavy cannonading; but here a great disappointment met the British gunners. They found it impossible to elevate their field pieces to reach the heights effectively. They then attempted to dig holes in order to sink the trail-ends and rear wheels of the cannon, but with the ground hard frozen, this proved difficult, and even then the firing became awkward. After an hour and a half, many batteries ceased fire altogether. For those that continued, it was found that the cannon shot was relatively harmless; for as a result of previous bombardments, the Rebels had become quite indifferent to a rain of cannon balls. Thacher reported, "cannon shot are continually rolling and bounding over the hill, and it is astonishing to observe how little our men are terrified by them.” To the British, this must have been a most disheartening experience, for the earsplitting crash of cannon, like hounds in a chase, creates a triumphant sound that dies out in gloomy reverberations when the quarry has gone to earth. Like the cannon, gloom had taken hold of the British Headquarters where it was noted that officers, came and went silently, with long, sober faces. Even the troops seemed loathful over their duty.

By mid-afternoon, excitement had reached its highest peak, with the tragic splendor that war often presents before its carnage. The hilltops roundabout were now crowded with spectators, waiting for the fearful drama that seemed to be impending. Sails were still crossing the harbor, bearing more ships that would attempt to form a line off Castle Island, ready for their final beachhead landing on the Point. Actually, no convenient beach faced them, but only mud flats that would be hard to cross except at high tide, which was due at 8:00 o'clock. Meantime the wind was whipping up white caps; scudding clouds were crossing the sky, and there were signs of an approaching storm that might make landings impossible, enforcing further delay. Nature itself seemed to be embroiled in the oncoming conflict.

2. BATTLE REACTIONS

Battle reactions vary with each individual, but all feel a heightened sense of fearful excitement that comes only with combat. Fear is one of its elements, being face to face with the grim reality of death or torture. Thrill is another of its features, since few other experiences offer such zestful adventure. Behind both, many feel the exaltation of an ultimate faith they might never have been aware of before. The spirit within tells them, live or die, this is the ideal I serve." Somewhat in that mood Lt. Ebenezer Huntington had written to his father before advancing on to the peninsula, expressing a conscious resignation "in case that my Maker should in his great good pleasure so ordain that I shall not live to come off the hill. Pray that we may succeed, as we trust that we are fighting the Lord's battle." Washington himself had returned to the heights, and it is not difficult to interpret his mood, for no one had a more devoted sense of the righteousness of his cause; and but few felt the zest of battle more keenly. Years before, after his first engagement, at Fort Necessity on the frontiers of Virginia, he had written home to his brother Jack, "I have heard bullets whistle, and believe me, there is something charming in the sound." We can picture him now as Gilbert Stuart painted him in that stirring portrait, "At Dorchester Heights;" or we can imagine him more realistically, totally calm and self possessed, but with alert, animated features, eagerly anticipating the expected action. "He enters a battle as a bishop goes to his prayers," some had said of him. Through months of fatigues and frustrations, he had been hoping for this moment when he could "bring on a rumpus between us and the enemy," as he expressed it. With his guarded reticence in writing, he had summed up the present moment: "the premeditated plan laid for this purpose [to draw the British out for an attack] seemed to be succeeding to my utmost satisfaction;" and further he commented, "an engagement was to be fully expected. I never saw spirits higher or more prevailing."

Outwardly, the least excited man on the heights might have been Gen. John Thomas, frequently consulting his watch to time the exact progress of events, with a stolid firmness that reassured and inspired those around him. He bore the aspect of stony strength, like a namesake though no relative of his in the Civil War, the equally impassive Gen. George Thomas, called the "Rock of Chickamaugua." Somewhat amusingly, by midmorning, Thomas had an unexpected problem on his hands, for his ten year old son, on learning of the previous night's engagement, had slipped out of school, found his way to the Point, eluded all the guards, and joined his father on the Heights. He was not the only youngster present. John Harris tells us that all night long, Goddard's assistant waggon-master, James Boies of Milton [at Mattapan Square], had been directing, encouraging, and regulating the trains of teamsters as they came and went; and riding pillion behind him on his stout horse, was Jeremiah, his thirteen year old son, helping Dad carry messages, gather information, or at times holding his horse. Very much in the thick of things, no doubt he was hoping for a chance to pick up a musket and take a pot shot on his own.

In many a soldier's mind, the fear of death may be less prominent than that of some ghastly wound. As they marched in, some of the Patriots had seen their comrade, Lt. Mayo, dismembered by a cannon ball that struck his thigh and partially carried away his leg. In an agony of pain, he had been taken from the Roxbury parade ground where he

was struck, to a nearby, makeshift hospital, where his limb was amputated completely; but during the night he had died. Such an experience is worse than quick death; and even survival with a lifelong, crippling disability, brings dread with it. For a few, such possibilities make fear insupportable -- though in the crisis, it must be faced and borne. Washington's preliminary orders cautioned the men to "prepare their minds" for the immediate emergency of battle; and he added, "it may not be amiss for the troops to know that if any man in action shall presume to skulk, hide himself, or retreat from the enemy, he shall be instantly shot down . . . . cowards having too frequently disconcerted the best formed troops by their dastardly behavior." Such extreme measures may be needed when a country is fighting for its existence.

Letters and journals of the time enable us to present some of the battle reactions accurately, and in the first person. One of the best eyewitness descriptions of conditions within the Rebel redoubt at this time comes from the remarkable soldier-artist, John Trumble. His father, Jonathan, was governor of Connecticut, an ardent patriot; and his older brother, Joseph, was enormously helpful, serving as Commissary General. John, however, possessed special talent, in fact, genius, as we all know from his magnificent painting of the Signing of the Declaration of Independence, and numerous other national heirlooms. He had served from early in the siege of Boston, and had witnessed Bunker Hill from a distance, being stationed at the other end of the line in Roxbury. After Washington's arrival, he had joined the General's personal staff where for a time he had been responsible for “receiving company and doing the honors of the house" at headquarters. But here he was in the front lines, and evidently reveling in the experience. Thus he describes the day's outlook:

> Our movement [to Dorchester] was not discovered by the enemy until the following morning, and we had an uninterrupted day to strengthen the works which had been commenced the night preceding. During this day, we saw directly the preparations which the enemy were making to dislodge us. The entire waterfront of Boston lay open to our observation, and we saw the embarkation of troops from various wharves on board ships which hauled off in succession and anchored in a line in our front a little before sunset, prepared to land the troops in the morning. We were in high spirits, well prepared to receive the threatened attack. Our positions on the summits of two smooth, steep hills were strong by nature and were fortified. We had at least twenty pieces of artillery mounted on them, well supplied with ammunition, and a considerable force of well armed infantry. We waited with impatience for the attack, when we meant to emulate, and hoped to eclipse the glories of Bunker Hill.

The number of Patriot soldiers on the hill, mentioned by Trumble, had by now been reinforced and came to a total of 4,000, quite adequate to meet the British assaults of a possible 5,000.

For a final, firsthand narrative of these same events, we have the journal of Lt. Isaac Bangs, who recounts matters more briefly, and in a matter-of-fact manner, as though he might be describing events at a county fair:

> Enemy embarked on board transports at 11:00 [AM] and were to have landed on the Point the next night [meaning the night of Mar. 5]. Why they had not done it that day, God only knows. I should have been willing to receive them either night or day as we had a tolerable cover for musketry: and as for field pieces, they could not have brought them to bear on account of the ground. Had they been so rash, they probably would have found the 5th of March 1776 more bloody than Preston made this same day in 1770 [referring to the Boston massacre, where Preston was the British captain of the guard]. In fine, I think it was their design [to do no] more than to make a parade.

3. THE BLOW THAT NEVER FELL

All absorbing as the spectacle from Dorchester Heights must have been, Washington had other plans in mind that would have preoccupied him even more. To any observer, it was obvious that even the stoutest British assaults on the Patriot fortifications would send them reeling back with catastrophic casualties; and with half their army in these dire straits, while perhaps one third more were waiting to attack Roxbury, the defense lines in Boston itself would be reduced to little better than a skeleton force. Under these circumstances, but only under these circumstances, Washington felt it would be safe to launch his favorite maneuver: an assault proceeding by water, down and across the Charles River, striking the Boston river-front. Every preparation had been made to launch such an attack, as Lt. Samuel Webb tells, writing for the date of March 5:

> Maj. Gen. Putnam with the Brigadiers Sullivan and Greene were paraded on the [Cambridge] common in front of the colleges at the head of 4,000 men, ready to embark in sixty boats prepared for that purpose in the Charles River, and land at the foot of Mt. Whoredon on the west part of Boston, and take possession . . . by which means we were in hopes of totally routing the enemy.

Bostonians today are far too sophisticated to refer to any part of their fair city by such a gross term as Mt. Whoredon, which some modern historians have politely translated into Mt. Horam; but in Revolutionary times, the western aspect of Beacon Hill and the Mt. Vernon area were spoken of, even in polite circles, by this unblushing, occupational term that apparently was well earned. Its tactical significance lay in the fact that the western defenses of the city were centered here, extending along the face of the Common as far as to the present location of Park Square. By breaching this sector, Patriot troops could strike into the interior defenses, and destroy the center of command. Such an operation, if successful, as it had every prospect of being, would mean much more than hasty evacuation of Boston by the British. It would mean the total destruction of their army -- a defeat as decisive as was later administered to Lord Cornwallis, after seven more years of fighting. Washington readily acknowledged the dangers associated with such an assault, and he explained that he would not order it "unless the town had been drained or pretty considerably weakened of its force."

It should be noted that the sixty river boats mentioned by Webb had been constructed on Washington's special order, from as far back as the previous October -- each boat capable of carrying sixty to seventy men, as Rev. Gordon tells us. In the intervening months,

special troops had been training, according to Webb, "to row, paddle, land, and climb a precipice, and prepare for action from these boats." The maneuver was to be supported by all the fixed artillery at Lechmere Point and Cobble Hill, together with three specially constructed artillery barges, carrying two 12 pounders apiece. These had been tried out the previous October in a colorful river bombardment that caused much consternation to the British at the time, though it inflicted little damage. In half an hour's engagement, seventeen shots were fired: but at the end, one of the guns burst and one Patriot was killed with others wounded. Abigail Adams noted in a letter that "some of their balls went into the work house, some through the [British] tents on the Common, and one through the sign of Lamb's Tavern." The two barges would now be reinforced by a third, and more effective results were hoped for.

This attack would not be delivered until British casualties at Dorchester had reached a disaster point. As soon as this condition was reached, word would be signaled to Roxbury where a flag would be flung out on the John Eliot church steeple, easily visible in Cambridge; and then the 4,000 doughty troops would start down the river. Troops, boats, artillery barges, guns were all ready and waiting; but the signal was never flung from the Eliot church!

4. HURRICANE TO THE RESCUE

The old adage that man proposes and God disposes still applies; and there is an older saying in Chaucer: "the decrees of destiny are not to be eschewed." It is greatly to the credit of Washington that with his hopeful plan for total victory so close to fruition, he resisted any temptation to launch it before conditions were fully ripe. Just what changed the scales of battle and saved the British from destruction is in itself a fascinating story. It involved a desperately rapid return of reason to the British high command, and the sudden appearance of a gale of wind, very nearly a hurricane, both of them appearing with almost equal velocity. Once Gen. Howe had determined to assault the Rebel works, none of his subordinates could question the orders without exposing themselves to charges of the two most serious military offenses: cowardice and disobedience. No doubt, there were many wiser heads who recognized from the start that the consequences of attacking the Rebel works would be suicidal. The situation was tragically like Bunker Hill, with this difference: here, the Americans were ten times more strongly situated, ten times better prepared, better coordinated, and better commanded. Nevertheless, ingrained British tradition taught them, as they would demonstrate later at Balaclave, and still later on the Somme, the tragic glory of loyal sacrifice:

> Theirs not to reason why,
> Theirs not to make reply,
> Theirs but to do and die.

Though Howe had blundered, fortunately for his men, the fatal error was rectified in time. Among those not directly concerned in carrying out Howe's order, yet standing high in his esteem, was his chief of engineers, Gen. Archibald Robertson, a man of clear intelligence and forthright personality. With practical intuition, he seems to have grasped the fact very early that the American position was impregnable. This was recognized by

others: Stedman, for instance, a British officer there present, who later wrote a *History of the American War*, where he stated, "to dislodge the Americans from their new works was impossible." The extreme tardiness with which the British army moved in this crisis, and the delays imposed on them by waiting for favorable high tides, all gave Howe himself more time to ponder on the enormity of his mistake. Robertson used the interval to study the Rebel position more closely and to convince himself of the impossibility of attacking such fortifications with success. He then returned to headquarters, and without direct access to Howe, he assiduously spread the word among his friends, the intimate group of staff officers, that "the fate of the whole army and of the town is at stake, not to say, the fate of America." This thought permeated headquarters. Everyone appears to have felt it, though few cared to express it outright.

Coincidentally, by late afternoon, the storm that had been rapidly rising had now become a serious factor, tossing the ships at their moorings, swamping one of the gunboats, casting two others on shore, and making the passage of transports to their battle stations impossible. Obviously, plans for the evening attack would have to be postponed until morning or perhaps later -- obviously, too, the Rebels would thus gain further time to secure and strengthen their defenses. The maximum hurricane force of the storm did not peak until midnight; but as darkness fell, it had become a major interruption to all battle plans. Still earlier, Robertson had reached his own peak of anxiety. Returning to headquarters, he was still unable to reach Gen. Howe personally. His journal, sketchily but vividly, tells us just what was taking place:

> It is now 8:00 o'clock [evening of March 5]. Went to headquarters at 7 :00. After waiting some time, Capt Montresor [Howe's aide] came down from the General. Told me he had been in council and had advised the going off altogether; that Lord Percy and some others seconded him; and that the General said IT WAS HIS SENTIMENT FROM THE FIRST, but he thought the honor of the army concerned. So it is agreed immediately to embark everything.

Thus, the evacuation of Boston was decided upon by or before 8:00 PM of March 5th; and it was celebrated by the storm breaking out in all its fury: chilling cold, drenching rain, howling wind, raging seas, swollen tides. Gen. Wm. Heath wrote, "about midnight the wind blew almost a hurricane from the south. Many windows were blown in; sheds and fences were blown down; and some vessels drove on shore." Isaac Bangs, out in the open on Dorchester Heights with no shelter, complained, "The most violent storm that ever I was exposed to. What I suffered that night, I shall ever bear in mind -- wind, wind, rain, and cold." Daniel, McCurtin, the long-shirt rifleman from Maryland, agreed: "Last night we had a violent storm of wind and rain. I never before felt such cold and distress." On the following day, when the wind was still blowing itself out, Gen. Howe announced, "The General desires that the troops may know that the intended expedition of last night was unavoidably put off by bad weather."

Howe's alibi was no doubt justifiable as a partial truth which would help preserve the morale of his army. Later, it would sound well when debated in Parliament or reported to the King. But as a partial falsehood, historians should not accept it, knowing that Howe came to realize before the storm blew up that the makeshift breastwork of fascines,

gabions, and chandeliers was invulnerable: invulnerably situated; invulnerably constructed, and manned with invulnerable determination. Had the full truth been told, Howe would have said that the night's expedition was inevitably put off by the amazing strength of the enemy's overnight fortress.

5. RETROGRADE GENERALSHIP

Extricating an army with all its goods and stores from a beleaguered city in a wind-bound harbor would be difficult; extricating an army with too few ships, too many troops, and a thousand civilians added on, would be very difficult; but most difficult of all would be to do this with a triumphant enemy pressing close all around, bringing up cannon to bombard the vessels and wharves where troops were embarking. Gen. Howe had been indolent, weak, and tardy up to now, but in this maneuver he was swift, efficient, and firm. He packed all his troops aboard, every man-jack of them, and all the eligible Tory citizens as well, and got them off in eleven days -- but without a single day to spare. Back in England the politicians would transform Howe's evacuation into a sort of triumph. As Edmund Burke wrote in one letter, and with some truth, "It is surprising that he should have been able to effect it with so much advantage. They say he has brought off everything with him, cannon, military stores, and a vast quantity of useful goods of all kinds . . ." Although this was a triumph of retrograde generalship, its precipitate speed smacked less of a retreat than of a rout; which in fact, it was. For all the propaganda the King's henchmen might create, this fact was not lost on the Opposition in Parliament who commented on it very sarcastically. The sharp-tongued critic, John Wilkes remarked rogueishly, "The retreat of Gen. Howe was an absolute flight: as much so as that of Mahomet from Mecca."

It was the Devil of a problem, for the Devil himself had gotten behind the British, and the question was who could run fastest. They had abandoned their hopes for victory, and now their hopes for escape were in jeopardy; but they still held one advantage. The town, with all its fine houses and buildings, and with about 6,700 Patriot citizens, was their hostage. If things became too desperate, they could burn the city as they departed, and could plunder it first. Fearing these possibilities, a group of responsible citizens, selectmen of the town, had formed a committee to intercede with Howe. They hoped to arrange an official armistice in return for a pledge to spare the city. The general replied without making any pledge, stating that he had no intention of harming the city unless his troops were molested during their departure. The citizens committee then turned on March 7, to Gen. Washington, carrying a flag of truce over Boston Neck, and requesting him to agree to an armistice. This was the first official news the Patriot army had received of the British intention to leave, for though they had seen troops in transports returning from Castle Island with their regiments, Washington had suspected a ruse and had remained very wary. However, the news was not official enough, coming merely from a non-belligerent group of citizens without the support of any military pledge. Washington quite properly refused to cooperate in any agreement that was not obligatory upon Gen. Howe; and there the matter was dropped. While the committee's work might thus appear to have been futile, it did nevertheless establish a sort of gentleman's agreement by which Howe proceeded in orderly fashion to prepare his troops for embarkation, while the Rebels forbore any major attempt at an onslaught. Washington, on the other hand, was by no

means idle. He began to explore the possibilities of transferring troops, and later, cannon, to the southern end of Noddles Island, as East Boston was then called; and the resourceful Patriot engineer, Loammi Baldwin, was dispatched on such a mission with two brass mortars. This, the British feared above anything else, for their best shipping wharves would be fatally exposed to such gunfire which would reach directly across the channel over a distance no greater than the present vehicular tunnels that pass under the harbor -- about half a mile's length. On the other hand, Noddles Island was somewhat inaccessible to the Rebel army, and would be very difficult to hold against the heavy bombardment of the British fleet. Nevertheless, the serious threat of such a move provided a great incentive for hastening the British withdrawal as much as possible. Still more serious was the danger from Dorchester, where Washington was moving his guns half a mile forward from the Twin Hills to the advanced point of Nooks Hill. From here, their salvoes could be effectively directed at Boston's southern waterfront from a range of three quarters of a mile, or at the Neck, only half a mile away. To delay such a move, the British concentrated intensive artillery fire on Nooks Hill. Daniel McCurtin, counting and estimating the shots, stated that the barrage was continued for over fourteen hours, and that it included 5600 cannon balls and shells, from land batteries, combined with massive fire from the fleet.

Within the city, meanwhile, chaos was rampant. One citizen observed, "all is confusion. Carts, trucks, wheelbarrows, hand barrows, coaches, chaises, are driving as if the devil were after them," which was very much the case. The garrison consisted of about nine thousand soldiers who, like all professional armies of those days, would quickly become professional plunderers. If they got out of hand, the devil would soon take over. Howe did his best to restrain the men. Officers were temporarily required to sleep in the barracks with their troops. The sale of liquor to soldiers was forbidden. Offender's committing serious depredations were to be hanged on the spot. Discipline remained rigid enough to restrain wholesale plunder or destruction; but on an individual scale, a great amount of private damage was done, extensive petty theft occurred, with of course much drunkenness, disorderly conduct, and some brutality. These events can be better related in historical fiction than in orthodox history; and perhaps the most vivid description of this terminal phase of the siege of Boston is furnished by Kenneth Roberts in his splendid novel, "Oliver Wiswell." For those who enjoy old fashioned literature, J. Fennimore Cooper's "Lionel Lincoln" may also be recommended. At best, a hostile garrison, driven from an occupied town after a grueling siege, cannot and will not leave behind happy memories.

None were more disconsolate in the course of the evacuation than the American Tories who had remained loyal to the Crown, and had taken up residence in Boston as a refuge from local Patriots. With full confidence in British protection, the Tories had been assured many times that Boston would soon receive strong reinforcements; and then they could enjoy the satisfaction of seeing "the King's troops ravage the country at pleasure." Though these dispossessed citizens had now lost everything, leaving them in tragic circumstances, little sympathy was meted out to them. They had acted largely on selfish motives, and had in a sense, betrayed their native land; and they had conspired to bring about the destruction of their neighbors. The evil of civil war is that people must choose sides one way or the other and there is no redress for the loser. Here, eleven hundred

Tories had become losers overnight. “Not the last trump could have struck them with greater consternation," said Washington, and commented, "There never existed a more miserable set of beings than these creatures now are." Observers within the town remarked that they went about "struck with paleness and astonishment," and "carried death on their faces." One, in fact, did commit suicide. Speaking of their plight, a Tory wrote that it was not like the breaking up of a camp where every man knows his duty. It was like departing your country with your wife, your servants, and your household furniture, and all your encumberances." The already overcrowded ships could afford little space for the latter, and much conniving and petty bribery was needed even to get essentials aboard. What lay ahead for them was worse than many knew: exile, poverty, disregard, and loneliness. Retrograde generalship brought them despair.

6. HELL, HULL, OR HALIFAX

Defeat looks upon its victims with a remorseless eye; and so it was that the British were remorselessly obliged to destroy all the King's stores that they could not take away, together with quantities of goods that might be serviceable to the Rebel army, such as clothes and blankets. Even Gen. Howe's state coach was pitched off the end of a wharf and consigned to the tides. In their haste, a hundred and fifteen damaged cannon and mortars were left behind, sixty, of which were easily repaired and made serviceable; and through some oversight, three thousand unspoiled blankets were found piled on the wharf. “The hurry in which they left is inconceivable," Washington observed, and recalled that Braddock's disastrous flight years before “was but a faint image to what was seen in Boston."

The ships, meanwhile, were being fully watered from the fresh springs that Nature had provided Boston from its own sources-- still commemorated by the name of Spring Street in the business district; and it was evident that all this commotion meant a very early departure. Daniel McCurtin, who kept a diversified number of epithets for his enemies, wrote in his diary, "It is thought the canabals will soon set out from here." However, while the troops were getting on board, every precaution was taken to maintain the rearguard at its very maximum efficiency, making provision for burning down blocks of houses behind them if they should be obliged to carry out a fighting retreat.

We gain a vivid impression of all this from the hurried diary kept by Lt. John Barker of the King's Own Regiment, much as if we were living through the experience. Here, we encounter the familiar frustrations of army life, which in modern days came to be expressed by the saying, "hurry up and wait." Here, also, we sense the expectations and the disappointments of the rank and file; and we can perhaps feel some of the chill anxiety that a hasty retreat always breeds, with men looking over their shoulders to see if the enemy are near. A few excerpts from this diary take us to the scene itself:

> March 14. Were to embark last night, but the wind came against us.
> Mar. 15. The wind being fair at 12:00 o'clock in the day, the troops were ordered under arms in order to embark; but after waiting some time, returned to their quarters, the wind having shifted.

March 16. Still detained by the wind; and still firing [by British artillery] all last night at Foster's [Nooks] Hill.

March 17. At 4:00 o'clock in the morning, the troops got under arms; at 5:00 they began to move; and by about 8 or 9 they were all embarked. . . We quitted Boston with a fair wind.

Gen. Robertson with the engineers, and with some Light Infantry and Grenadiers remained to the last, ready to incinerate houses in their rear if they were pursued. Another twelve or fourteen hours delay would have permitted Rebel salvoes to strike the overcrowded transports, for by this time, Washington had got his guns firmly planted on Nooks Hill; but the wind served the British, and not for the last time, their army found refuge on the sea! As their sails, like a huge flock of white gulls, drifted down the harbor, the Americans approached Boston's defenses cautiously. Almost in disbelief, Artemas Ward, John Thomas, and Col. Ebenezer Learned, with their men, unbarred the gates on the Neck and entered the city. Warily, also, Israel Putnam led his men, rowing from Sewell's Point in Brookline across the Back Bay to the Boston Common; and somewhat dubiously, John Sullivan, Col. Thomas Miflin and troops of the army's left wing stole up on the abandoned ramparts of Bunker Hill. Here, they found the British, with merry humor, had mounted dummy sentinels in red coats, with horseshoes hung on their necks in place of gorgets, and broomsticks for muskets, carrying greeting cards pinned to their tunics, bearing the words, "Welcome, brother Jonathan." Washington made no triumphal entry into the city, but remained in , Cambridge, oppressed with army business, though he entered inconspicuously the next day. For generations, Bostonians came to celebrate this date, March 17th, as "Evacuation Day" and quite appropriately for the large population of Irish-Americans who came to settle in Dorchester's South Boston, the date has continued to be celebrated as St. Patrick's day. The saints have been kind to the city, for the battle of Bunker Hill was fought on St. Botolph's day, he being by tradition Boston's patronymic saint.

For the next ten days much uncertainty persisted because instead of clearing the harbor, the British ships huddled in Nantasket Roads, leaving the cautious Washington in doubt whether they might be regrouping for another beach landing at Hull, or elsewhere, to attack when the Rebels were off-guard. Abigail Adams, from her lookout on Penn's Hill, counted one hundred and seventy sails, the largest flotilla of Tall Ships that Boston would ever witness. At last, on the 27th, they moved out in one great convoy, and cleared the horizon. Though Washington expected that New York would be their destination, Howe had decided from the start that he would first put in at Halifax to dispose of his Tory refugees and to reorganize his distraught army. This decision brought a sneer from the eloquent pen of Edmund Burke in Parliament. He wrote, "In that nook of penury and cold, the proud conqueror of America is obliged to look for refuge." Wherever they went, most of the refugees were glad to get away from Boston where they had suffered such privations throughout the siege; and one of them called the town "a cursed, cold, wintry place even yet -- nothing to eat; and less to drink." It was commonly said among them, "Hell, Hull, or Halifax would be better than Boston."

VI. CONCLUSION

Amidst the jubilation that accompanied the Town's emancipation, Washington was too reticent to claim any personal glory, with the single exception of a letter to his brother Jack, to whom he confided the pride and satisfaction the achievement gave him. “We beat them in a shameful and precipitate manner," he stated. At the same time, unlike many of his contemporaries, particularly in the local community, he foresaw that this campaign had not ended the war, but had simply begun it. If the British had fallen into the trap set for them at Dorchester, as Gen. Howe at first tended to do, it is quite possible that the fearful defeat the British would have suffered, might have overthrown the King's hold upon Parliament, and thus brought about an acceptance of all America's demands. Up to now, these had not included independence. Such a reconciliation, which great numbers of Englishmen in and out of Parliament desired, and which most Americans would have welcomed, could well have ended the "American War." But by escaping the trap, and carrying his army off in safety, Howe succeeded in creating the illusion that he had not been beaten: simply, withdrawn. Thus Washington's magnificent achievement had won a city, but through no fault of his own, had lost a victory.

There were, however, three vital factors which had been won by the successful termination of the siege of Boston. To begin with, it had crystallized public opinion throughout the colonies, by demonstrating that the immense power of the British monarchy could be withstood and defeated. A British army had been slaughtered at Bunker Hill; and it was now being driven out by the maneuver at Dorchester Heights. We should remember that at the start, only New England had challenged Britain in arms: that was the significance of Lexington and Concord, beginning a revolt that was backed merely by Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut and Rhode Island--the "four governments," as King George first referred to them. This was not a revolution, but a local insurrection; and as it began here, so it would have ended here, had it failed in its objectives. But by raising the standard of revolt, it roused all the other colonies in support; and by its success, it converted them very slowly to a sense of their own national cause. Matters had advanced "from argument to arms; a new era for politics is struck -- a new method of thinking has arisen," as the popular pamphlet, "Common Sense" declared.

Then again, the siege of Boston had an enormous international impact. For eleven months Boston was the topic of conversation throughout Europe whose royal courts envied, hated, and feared England above any other nation. Politically, American insurgence gave the international schemers an underhanded chance to strike back at their foe; and to their delight, possibly to their amazement, the Provincial rebels seemed to be succeeding. Idealistically, too, Europe had entered the Era Of Enlightenment; and motives of social justice and human equality were gaining popularity. The word BOSTON became what we now might call the logo or colophon of this movement. In France, particularly, it gained a mystical meaning. Trevellyan, in his history of the American Revolution tells us that almost everyone at Versailles held American sympathies; and that the Count of Artois, a prince of the blood royal, declared himself "a Bostonian." Thomas Paine, author of Common Sense, observed that "it was the Queen of France, Marie Antoinette, who gave the cause of America a fashion at the French court." This was soon reflected in the coming of Lafayette. The success at Dorchester Heights converted all this political, emotional, idealistic support into a movement of massive assistance, without which the Revolution itself would have collapsed. By the time of the evacuation of Boston,

Vergennes, the French foreign minister, and Beaumarchais, his secret agent, were channeling large sums of money and substantial shiploads of supplies to America.

Even more significant than these other two factors, was the change this victory in Boston brought to Revolutionary thinking. Up to now, the movement had been centered on upholding the political rights of representative government under the crown: rights which inherently belonged to all Englishmen, but which were being withheld from the Colonists in America. These were the very rights that England itself had fought for under Cromwell. But now, as these rights were more and more stubbornly denied by the King and his Ministers, a new word was being spoken: not Liberty alone, but Independence.

By the opening of 1776, Independence had been largely accepted by Washington and his officers. It was what the Siege of Boston had grown to mean. But to most of the Colonies, the word was too radical: too illusionary and impossible. All this was altered with the Patriots' victory. A country that could rout a royal army, repel a royal navy, and drive a royal government from its shores, WAS independent.

On the slopes of Dorchester Heights, with their fascines, and gabions, and chandeliers, the word became a reality.

View of Boston from Dorchester Heights in 1838

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