



THE WHITES OF THEIR EYES

*Bunker Hill, the First American Army,
and the Emergence of George Washington*

Paul Lockhart

Author of *The Drillmaster of Valley Forge*

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Dedication

*To my son, Alex
With love, from Daddy*

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Prologue

Boston, Massachusetts
Friday, June 17, 1825

Forty-two years had passed since the Revolution had drawn to a close, fifty since it had begun, in this very town. During those years, Boston had become something very much different from what it had been in the days of the Massacre and the Tea Party, of Paul Revere's ride and the bloodshed on Lexington Green, a place that would have been unrecognizable to those who had lived through those mythic events. Boston was now everything that America had come to be: big, loud, brash, contentiously exuberant. And growing. Ten thousand souls had called the place home in 1775; now there were nearly sixty thousand, and there was no sign that the burgeoning growth would stop anytime soon. The only thing that could stop it was geography, and modern Bostonians were doing their best to make sure that *that* didn't happen. If the city would no longer fit within the confines of the old Shawmut peninsula, then the geography had to be changed. With spade and pick, the people of Boston altered the very landscape itself, laying low the hills, populating every empty space with homes and warehouses, filling the shallow waters of the harbor nearby to make more room—for more buildings, more commerce, more people.

Beacon Hill had lost its beacon, and was only a mere stub of its former self. The ancient and majestic Trimountain had once towered over the city, but it stood in the way of progress and hence it had to go: the summit of Beacon Hill, the tallest peak in the Trimountain, stood sixty feet below its former height. Laborers carted the earth from the truncated hill to fill the old Mill Pond on the North End. The open green spaces west and south of town rapidly filled in with new neighborhoods until only the Common remained. The physical reminders of the Revolutionary past were dwindling by the year. Within a few decades, most—like the former residence of the royal governors, Province House—would be gone, and only a handful of old churches and government buildings would survive. Boston was a growing city, mindful of its gleaming future, boundlessly confident. Sentimentality was something it couldn't afford.

But today was different. Today, Boston would revel in its past, glory in great deeds of arms, congratulate itself for having done so much to author the new republic. And it would do so in grand style. For fifty years ago this very day—a day that had been just as bright and glorious, a day when the air was just as redolent of the sweetness of late spring in New England—the sons of Massachusetts and New Hampshire and Connecticut fought and died for the cause of American liberty on a grassy, windswept hill that loomed over Charlestown. There, American citizen-soldiers had dared challenge Britain's military might; there the Revolution truly began. Locals called the place Breed's Hill, but in the popular imagination the struggle there was known by another name: the Battle of Bunker Hill.

For several years there had been a humble wooden pillar, lonesome and unprepossessing, placed on the site by the Freemasons to mark the spot where one of their own had fallen in the battle, but to many in Boston it was not tribute enough. In 1823, a group of prominent Bostonians, the great orator and congressman Daniel Webster among them, resolved to erect a more enduring memorial to all those who died in liberty's name atop Breed's Hill in 1775. Two years later they had subscribers, money, a design, and land . . . though ultimately some of that hallowed ground would be sold to raise more funds for the monument. The fiftieth anniversary of the battle seemed a fitting time to lay the cornerstone. The timing was fortuitous, for in that year Boston played host to a distinguished visitor:

the Marquis de Lafayette, George Washington's young protégé. He had not fought at Bunker Hill, but at age sixty-seven he was the last surviving general of the Revolutionary War. On the invitation of President James Monroe, Lafayette had come to visit America. He would spend time in all twenty-four states, drawing admiring crowds wherever he went. The old veteran of two revolutions, still boyish in the face, had already visited Boston once during his American tour. He raced back again from Albany in June 1825 just to grace the ceremonies with his magnetic presence.

No one could have asked for a finer morning, sunlit and warm and fragrant, when the solemn procession of celebrants set out through Boston's twisting streets toward the North End, crossing the Charlestown Bridge where the old ferry used to run. Two hundred veterans of the Revolution, some wearing odd items of military gear and uniforms from their service five decades before, led the parade, then a "long array of numerous subscribers to the monument," followed by two thousand Freemasons. They were followed by the Marquis de Lafayette himself, in a "superb calash drawn by six white horses," with the governor of Massachusetts and a flock of dignitaries bringing up the rear. Seven thousand men and women, it was said, marched in the commemoration.¹

The procession came to a halt just off High Street at the apex of the hill, where the old redoubt had once stood, now surrounded by farmland and marked by a great pit . . . the foundation of the new monument. As thousands of spectators watched and cheered, Lafayette and three other men laid the cornerstone; an artillery salute boomed from the hilltop, and the party walked in stately grace to take their places in a special amphitheater erected for this very purpose. Fifteen thousand people crowded into the amphitheater, while thousands more stood outside, covering the hillside in all directions. The noise of the crowd died gradually, to be replaced by the singing of a choir, and then the speakers. First to ascend the podium was Reverend Joseph Thaxter, an eighty-three-year-old Unitarian preacher who had fought at Concord and Bunker Hill, wearing a massive powdered wig underneath his hopelessly outmoded tricorn, clothing and man alike relics of a bygone age. The audience stilled to listen as Reverend Thaxter prayed aloud in his quavering voice, thanking the Almighty for the blessings He had bestowed on happy free America, pointing out almost apologetically that the object of the dedication ceremony was "not for the purpose of idolatry, but a standing monument to the rising and future generations, that they may be excited to search the history of our country."²

The listeners were moved to tears, it was said, by the prayer, but nothing could contain the crowd's excitement when Daniel Webster took the stage. The great orator had given many speeches, and would give many more. His Bunker Hill oration, though, would be considered one of his best, and for decades it found a holy place in schoolbooks, its expressions of patriotic sentiment deemed worthy of memorization. Webster was in fine form, thanking the Revolutionary veterans seated before him, praising the tenacity and the foresight of the Founding Fathers. He spoke of representative government and civil liberties, of tyranny and its malcontents, and every time he praised America for bestowing the gift of freedom on a benighted Europe his audience went wild. Their enthusiasm for the high-flown rhetoric was undampened by the prodigious length of the speech. And in between all his expressions of patriotic reverence, Webster returned again and again to the battle itself. It had been *the* battle of the Revolution; it forced America to break with the Old World and embark on its own enlightened course. And—now that there would be a monument to commemorate it—the battle of Bunker Hill could serve as a reminder that Americans must constantly labor to keep the ideals of the Revolutionary forefathers alive. He took that theme, built upon it, and brought it to a thunderous conclusion: "And let the sacred obligations which have devolved on this generation, and on us, sink deep into our hearts. . . . We can win no laurels in a war for independence. Earlier and worthier hands have gathered them all. . . . But there remains to us a great duty of defence and preservation. . . . Let our object be, our country, our whole country, and nothing but our country. And, by the blessing of

God, may that country itself become a vast and splendid monument, not of oppression and terror, but of Wisdom, of Peace, and of Liberty, upon which the world may gaze with admiration forever!”³

The thousands sitting in the amphitheater leapt to their feet, as a massive throaty roar of approval rose from the crowd. The procession re-formed, not so solemn this time, and walked a short distance to “an immense wooden building” nearby for a festive banquet. The revelers drank toast after toast to the dignity of the Republic, to liberty and liberation, to the health and honor of the doddering old veterans who were in their midst.

There were among those veterans forty special guests: the last survivors of Bunker Hill. Or at least so they claimed. Historians would interview them later, finding much to their disgust that a fair number of these talkative old men had not been in the battle, or not even in the Revolution, but still there were a few among them who had stood on that day, long ago, with Prescott or Putnam or Stark. They were stooped and gray now, the youngest of them in their late sixties, and all wore ribbons bearing the simple legend “June 17th 1775.” As their carriages took them through Charlestown and up Breed’s Hill, the real survivors chatted quietly, pointing and gesturing, marveling at how much everything had changed. Where once General Howe’s red-coated battalions formed up for the assault on a vast navy yard now sprawled; where once there was only open pastureland flowing into the distance rolling over and down gentle slopes, new streets and tidy rows of houses greeted their gaze. A long time ago, a lifetime ago, there had been stone walls and broken rail fences, marshes and orchards, and tall grass, stomped down by heavy shoes, dappled with gore. The veterans gazed dreamily at the almost unrecognizable landscape around them, and some of them heard again the song of the musket balls and the screaming solid shot, the haunting cries of men in their death throes and the hoarse animal shouts of men mad with rage and bloodlust, saw the gleam of polished bayonets and the quivering clumps of madder-red bodies, the billowing smoke and fire and death and all the swirling red chaos of battle. And they remembered how, while yet in the blush of early manhood, they had seen the glorious pageantry of war and the dreadful, unspeakable things that they wished they could forget but never would . . . how they—as mere boys—had stared death in the face and done deeds that not one of them would have thought himself capable of doing.

The monument on Breed’s Hill did not go up immediately. Another seventeen years would pass before it was completed, and during that time there were many locals who regarded the half-finished monument as an unsightly blot on the pleasant bucolic landscape on the edge of Charlestown. Patriotism and civic pride won out in the end. On June 17, 1843, the sixty-eighth anniversary of the battle, Daniel Webster gave another oration to commemorate the completed obelisk, 221 feet high, that towered over everything in Charlestown.

The battle of Bunker Hill simply would not be forgotten. And that is very curious. Bunker Hill may have been the first honest-to-goodness battle of the Revolution, but beyond that it doesn’t enjoy any special tactical or strategic significance. It was not decisive, nor was it an American victory. We often seem to forget that Bunker Hill was, in fact, a British victory and a significant one at that. It was small even when compared to other battles of the Revolutionary War, and laughably puny when compared to lesser-known battles in Europe. Though often portrayed as a day of incomprehensible carnage, the loss of life at Bunker Hill was pretty much typical for comparable European battles of the same time period. As Americans, we tend to associate George Washington—the embodiment of the Revolution itself—with all events of the Revolutionary War, yet that doesn’t apply to Bunker Hill: George Washington wasn’t there.

There is no earthly reason, no logical reason at least, that Bunker Hill should be so famous, and yet it is. We shame ourselves for our profound ignorance of our history and heritage, but the name Bunker Hill lives on. Few if any battles in American history are remembered so well by name; only

Gettysburg and D-Day rival it.

Its longevity in American legend owes to many things, things that transcend its tactical or strategic significance. Bunker Hill was indeed the first pitched battle of the Revolution, a much more equal contest than the rebel ambush of British troops after Lexington, during the retreat from Concord; and while there was still a chance, a real chance, that the grievances of the colonies might have been settled peaceably after Lexington and Concord, there was no chance after Bunker Hill. Once the first volley thundered from a thousand American muskets on the heights above Charlestown, the die was cast, and on both sides men agreed that the contest must now be settled with blood. It was not a “decisive” battle, if indeed it can be said that there are such things: it ended neither the Revolution nor even the siege of Boston, and outside of boosting American confidence—and giving the amateur soldiers a taste of battle that they would not soon forget—it did not further the American cause, nor did it seriously set that cause back. Bunker Hill was, however, the only battle of the Revolution, and one of the very few in American history, that was fought publicly. All of Boston had turned out to watch the drama unfold on that blistering-hot Saturday afternoon. Spectators far outnumbered participants in the battle that day. But there is more behind the battle, more than the details of its place in the story of America’s miraculous and violent birth. Bunker Hill captures the essence of American mythology—the stories we tell ourselves about how America came to be, what it means to be American, why it is that America is so very distinctive, so different from the European roots from which it sprang.

Bunker Hill lives on because it is *the* great American battle, more so than Gettysburg, more so than the landings at Normandy. It is the stuff from which classical Fourth of July oratory is wrought, the American spirit writ large in letters of fire and blood. Though the rebellious colonials lost the battle, they emerged triumphant. They proved that American ingenuity, resourcefulness, and pluck trump the staid conventions of the Old World; that free men fighting for liberty, hearth, and home cannot be vanquished by the slaves of despotic regimes. The story of Bunker Hill strikes at the very heart of what it means to be an American, embodies all that Americans believe and have believed about their superior virtue and martial prowess.

Just as the story of Bunker Hill has shaped our national mythology, that mythology in turn has shaped our image of what happened at Bunker Hill. The battle is, and always has been, so central to the grand narrative of our revolutionary beginnings that what the battle stood for has eclipsed the demonstrable facts. We Americans, after all, like our history big and our heroes bigger. We want everything about our nation to be the best, or the worst, or the most original, or the most iconoclastic or the boldest. The protagonists of our national story must triumph over insurmountable obstacles, but must do so in a uniquely American way; our enemies, conversely, must be formidable, morally inferior, and preferably just a bit ridiculous, too. The danger of this approach is that it confuses history with heritage, it conflates fantasy and patriotic sentiment. The truly wonderful stories from America’s past can drown thereby in a sea of false absolutes and hyperbole.

Battles are inherently dramatic events, events that bring out the best and the worst in human nature and so they easily fall victim to this kind of well-intentioned misinterpretation. Bunker Hill is no exception. It stands out as being among the most misunderstood of battles, even though it is probably the least complex combat of the entire Revolutionary War. Historians—even professional scholars, who strive to be dispassionate—have consistently skewed or ignored a thousand little details, driven by long-standing traditions and stereotypes, and by the desire to highlight the singular courage of the American soldiers who fought and died on Breed’s Hill on that hot June afternoon in 1775. Those soldiers, we are told, were not only amateurs but completely bereft of any conventional notion of military discipline. And yet these same neophyte soldiers were products of the frontier; they were skilled marksmen and knew how to fight like Indians—an idea that conveniently overlooks the fact

that the average New England soldier in 1775 was not particularly familiar with firearms, had never heard a shot fired in anger, and probably had never seen a Native American, much less fought with or against one. The British, on the other hand, were brave and battle-hardened professionals, the cream of the finest army in the world. They were led by aristocratic dandies who were contemptuously dismissive of American military ability. The Redcoat officers, so the story goes, knew nothing of warfare in the New World, and therefore they pridefully drove their ranks of hapless automatons to the slaughter in unimaginative “parade-ground” assaults in the best European tradition—a tradition that was supposedly irrelevant in the broken wilderness of North America.

In all these regards, the traditional narrative is demonstrably wrong. Bunker Hill was, instead, a clash between two young armies—one indifferently trained and inexperienced, one slightly better trained and equally inexperienced. The American army was not a band of hardy frontiersmen; the British army was not the finest in the world, and the British troops who fought at Bunker Hill were not veterans. The British leadership was neither unimaginative nor unaware of American military abilities.

Recognizing these truths in no way detracts from the valor of the fighting men, both American and British. It does not deny that, at Bunker Hill, the rebels accomplished something quite remarkable. When we throw away the stereotypes of rugged American frontier warriors and imperious, impractical Britons, when we strip away the layers of hyperbole and flag-waving sentimentality, what we find is a much more nuanced, interesting, and ultimately compelling story. It is the story of the first army raised on American soil to defend American interests, made up of men whose sole motivation was the protection of their liberties and their communities, who held together only because they remained steadfastly devoted to a cause that was much bigger than the sum of their individual wants or needs or fears. It is the story of how that army stood its ground in its first real fight, even when pitted against a superior foe, even when led by officers whose courage and sense of duty far outstripped their generalship. It is the story of a new and uncertain George Washington, who came to the army after Bunker Hill and gradually turned it into a force designed to survive the rigors of a prolonged war. And it is also, above all, the story of the heroes of '75, the first leaders of what would soon become an American nation. They were flawed men, some of them proud and sensitive, some not especially talented. Yet their actions ensured that the Revolution would not fail in its tenuous infancy, and when they had done their duty, they withdrew quietly from the limelight. They took the first, unimaginably bold steps toward the creation of the new nation, risking everything, demanding nothing, gaining little, not even the honor of a place in the pantheon of the Founding Fathers. It is, in short, like all great American stories: about ordinary people who, when put to the test, did extraordinary things.

Massachusetts's War

"Things at present have a war Like appearance . . ."

JOHN THOMAS TO HANNAH THOMAS, APRIL 22, 1775¹

God damn it, they are firing ball!" Timothy Brown gasped, incredulous, as the echoes of the first British volley slowly faded and all around him men crumpled and dropped to the ground. He and his comrades in Colonel James Barrett's regiment of Massachusetts minutemen were advancing on Concord's North Bridge as the Redcoats fell back before them, struggling in their haste to tear up the bridge's planking as they retreated.

The volley had caught the minutemen off-guard. What truly surprised Brown and all of Colonel Barrett's boys was that this was *real*. The Massachusetts men—the "country people," as the British liked to call them—had been genuinely convinced that the Redcoats meant only to frighten them, perhaps with a volley or two of harmless blank charges. Now they knew better. The British meant business. The British meant to kill.

It was not the first blood spilled that day, the nineteenth of April 1775, nor would it be the last. Only a few hours earlier, just before dawn, this same body of Redcoats had marched into nearby Lexington in hopes of finding and arresting the Whig agitators Samuel Adams and John Hancock. The two men were long gone, having been tipped off to the British plan. But the advance elements of the British column, commanded by Major John Pitcairn of the Royal Marines, instead came across Captain John Parker and his company of militia. Neither side wanted a battle, yet in the confusion of the jarring encounter, a firefight broke out, and when the smoke cleared, eight of Parker's men lay dead on Lexington Green.

The entire British column then marched directly on Concord, where the real target of the operation lay. Lieutenant General Thomas Gage, commander of His Majesty's forces in North America and military governor of Massachusetts, had learned that the colony's malcontents—directed by an illicit governing body that called itself the Provincial Congress—had stockpiled munitions, provisions, and even cannon at Concord, deep in the countryside west-northwest of Boston. Even after the unplanned and unanticipated clash at Lexington, the overall commander of the British expedition, Lieutenant Colonel Francis Smith, decided to override the cautions of his nervous subordinates and push on toward Concord. He had his orders, and a handful of country people, armed or not, were not about to deter him. The British column, seven hundred strong, continued down the road to Concord, fifes and drums setting the steady, unrushed cadence, defiantly announcing their presence.

What Colonel Smith—or Gage himself, for that matter—hadn't taken into account was the expanse, the breathtaking breadth and speed, of the provincials' reaction. Gage had sent British columns into the countryside west of Boston before, and on a couple of occasions they had encountered bodies of disloyal militia. In every instance there had been no blood drawn, no gunfire, no exchange of anything more than shouted challenges and sullen glances.

This time things were different. Word of the bloodletting on Lexington Green had spread as fast as the Patriot alarm-riders could carry it by horseback. By the time Smith's men reached Concord that morning, several dozen companies of militia and minutemen were on the road, armed, converging on

Concord from all directions and within only a few minutes' march of the town.

~~At Concord, Smith's Redcoats were admirably well behaved, conducting their search for illicit munitions with a courteous, even gentle, touch. They did indeed find cannon, musket balls, flour, and other vital military supplies, and they did their best to destroy what they found. The people of Concord offered no resistance, and even the local militia companies drew back a respectful distance. But the tension that had radiated from Lexington could not be so easily dispelled. An awkward encounter of Redcoats and minutemen at the town's North Bridge led to the fatal volleys. And then there was no way that further bloodshed could be averted. When the British left Concord, all hell broke loose.~~

Smith's retreat to Boston began calmly enough, but the Redcoats had put only a mile or so of road behind them when they ran headlong into the first of many ambushes. The militia and the minutemen—not just from Concord, but from a score of nearby towns and even from neighboring counties—were not about to let Smith escape unpunished. To the increasingly frustrated British, who were just trying to get away from the unpleasant business at Concord, it seemed as if the entire countryside had risen against them, armed, gripped by an unquenchable relentless fury. At Meriam's Corner and Brooks Hill, at a sharp wooded bend in the road later dubbed the "Bloody Angle," the citizen-soldiers swarmed upon the retreating British column, front, flanks, and rear. The Americans poured ragged volleys into the Redcoats from behind trees, stone walls, hedgerows, barns—anything that would afford them some cover. Smith judiciously sent out flankers—patrols to sweep the areas immediately adjoining the road—and while they managed to flush out some of the Yankee militia, there were always more coming. The rebels were continually firing, melting away, then reappearing farther down the tree- and brush-lined road. When Smith's men finally found a measure of safety at Lexington, where Lord Percy's relief force stood waiting for them, they were bloody, dazed, enraged, and nearly out of ammunition.

Still the rebels refused their foes a moment's respite. Percy's fresh troops, even his artillery, did little to slow or discourage their tormentors. More roadside ambushes, bitter and bloody house-to-house fighting through the town of Menotomy . . . the casualties mounted on both sides, but there was no question that it was the British who suffered more.

It was approaching nightfall when the British troops halted outside Charlestown. There, on a gentle grass-covered rise called Bunker Hill, they dug in and prepared for an American onslaught that never came. The rebels were thoroughly drained, too. They knew their limits, and conducting an open assault against entrenched British Regulars was clearly beyond them. Some of the militia moved furtively to within a respectful distance of the British position. They gazed in almost innocent curiosity at the soldiers they had just defeated, who stared back in sullen, enervated resentment.

Soon the British would begin their evacuation by boat, across the Charles to Boston. HMS *Somerset*, one of the massive men-of-war keeping watch over the harbor, maneuvered close to the Charles River ferryway to discourage the impudent rebels from attempting any further mischief. But the country people did not interfere further. Neither did they disperse. In the thousands, the sons of Massachusetts had turned out to protect and avenge their neighbors that day, many, many more than the relatively small numbers who had dogged the Redcoats' footsteps all the way from Concord. They clustered at Cambridge to the west and Roxbury to the southwest, and their mass grew visibly through the evening and into the next day.²

It had been the Day of Days, the Glorious Nineteenth of April. While there were still those who clung to the hope that there could yet be a peaceful resolution to the impasse that separated the colonists from Mother England, the Boston radicals in self-imposed exile were jubilant. Virtue had triumphed over tyranny, liberty over slavery, free men over Gage's madder-clad legions. The leaders of revolutionary Massachusetts, the voices who had counseled resistance on the floor of the Provincial

Congress, had been vindicated. And it had been Gage who had struck the first blow, not they.

Massachusetts learned from the experience. The colony, and the Cause, learned of its strength. The armed citizenry had answered the call to arms in numbers almost too great to grasp, risking death and worse without hesitation. It was a deceptive lesson. Few were willing or able to see anything but unqualified triumph in the day's events. It was all too easy to wax overconfident in the martial abilities of citizen-soldiers, to dismiss the failings of the British troops and their leadership with unjustified contempt . . . to fail to realize, in short, that the favorable outcome of the day had been more the result of a unique and unlikely set of circumstances, or unimaginable luck, than anything else.

The rebels felt that they had taught the British a lesson, and indeed they had. General Gage was already familiar with the American character, and he knew something of Americans at war. He had fought alongside the colonists in the last war with the French. Over the past year, he had also learned not to underestimate the influence of rabble-rousers like Adams, Hancock, and the smooth Boston physician Dr. Joseph Warren. It wasn't the fact that the provincials had responded in the way they had that surprised him; it was the scale and ferocity of the response. As he sat in his Boston headquarters in the stately Province House on Marlborough Street, Gage pieced together the story of the day's events from the reports that nervous orderlies placed diffidently on his desk, looking for answers, racking his brains for a way to explain the defeat to his masters back home. Perhaps these rebels had not—not yet—acquired military discipline in the way that the term was ordinarily understood in Europe. And yet they had organization, some kind of system, some deceptively simple way of mobilizing armed men and bringing them to bear against even his stealthiest moves. He already knew that Americans could be determined, resourceful, clever, and physically and morally brave, but until that day he did not fully comprehend how much. Gage learned quickly. He would not forget the lesson.

More unsettling was what Gage and his lieutenants discovered about their own men. Yes, they were professionals, better drilled than the Americans, capable of moving in large formations with speed and even with grace. Thanks to Gage, the British soldiers had received extensive target practice, something that was all but unknown in most European armies. They were *soldiers* in a way that the Americans definitely were not. They had discipline, organization, and hierarchy. They should have behaved with the utmost calm and professionalism even when caught in the crossfire of hundreds of Yankee muskets. They *should* have, but they did not. For the difficult truth was that the men that Pitcairn, Smith, and Percy led into battle were raw, only slightly less raw than the half-trained farmer who bested them that day. The Redcoats were not ready for combat.

Gage's superiors in London expected the general to quell the local discontent in the Bay Colony before it became a full-blown rebellion. They expected him to do it with the instrument he had at hand. Only now, Gage was beginning to learn just what an imperfect instrument it was.

And that was an especially bitter pill for the ordinarily genial and patient British general to swallow, for the ordeal that lay ahead for him and his humbled army promised to be infinitely more challenging than the one through which it had just passed. Anyone who cared to look—and there were hundreds who did—from the towering summit of Beacon Hill could see the fiery portent: a necklace of glowing orange in the night, ringing the Charles River and the Back Bay as far south as Roxbury . . . the hundreds of campfires tended by the thousands of rebels who had converged on Boston that day. From their posts on Boston Neck, atop Copp's Hill, and along the dark waters lapping rhythmically on the shore of Boston Common, British sentries could hear the drums, the shouts, the occasional random musket-shot from the camps across the water. The ring of fire was there the next night, too, and the next, swelling—shifting perhaps, but never diminishing.

Thomas Gage did not despair. He did not panic. For months he had been expecting this moment, the headlong rush to outright rebellion. Now that it was upon him, he could indulge himself in the luxury

of vindication. His masters in London had dismissed his warnings with undisguised contempt, but Gage had been right. The proof was right there in front of him, and for all the world to see. Yet vindication was cold comfort. It could not drive away the uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach. He was reluctant to accept the unpleasant truth: that his army was trapped in Boston, that there was no easy way out. To Gage, as he gazed sadly and uneasily upon the dancing orange glow on the western horizon, it seemed as if the whole world was afire.

The world had indeed caught fire, and that fire raced as fast as horse and rider could carry the word of the bloodshed at Lexington . . . through Massachusetts to New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Connecticut, and New York, and eventually across the length and breadth of the Continent, as men called the thirteen contiguous British colonies in those days. The conflagration engulfed nearly all of eastern Massachusetts in a matter of hours. The flames licked at men's hearts, driving them to shoulder their muskets and set out down the roads that led to Boston, to avenge their fallen brethren.

Artemas Ward, the man destined to command the rebels in the fight to come, also sensed the fire. But he was in such gut-wrenching pain that he could scarcely marvel at the flames that burned all around him.

Nor could he pause to consider the danger of the moment, the perils that faced his native Massachusetts, the perils into which his own actions were leading him. Forty-seven-year-old Ward, major general and de facto commander of the colony's military forces, had just ridden into Cambridge to take charge of the men who had congregated there over the past twenty-four hours. And in doing so he had just about signed his own death warrant. For several years he had worked alongside the most ardent Whigs; had in fact become one of them, and was close with Sam Adams and Dr. Warren.

That association was damning enough in and of itself. But so far the rebellion against the ministerial government in London had been fought with words and protests only. True, blood had been spilled once before, five years ago in Boston, but the "massacre" in the snow on King Street was not armed rebellion. What had transpired at Lexington and Concord, and even more so on the road back from Concord, surely was rebellion. And Ward was not just joining the insurrection—he was actually putting himself squarely in the front rank of notorious traitors to the Crown.

But there was much else on Artemas Ward's mind as he rode into Cambridge late in the afternoon of April 20, 1775, exhausted and saddle-sore and all but doubled over with the pain that seared his bowels. Only five days before, he had returned to his stately if plain home in Shrewsbury after nearly four weeks of politicking in the Provincial Congress, which had been meeting in Concord. The long hours, the sleepless nights, the hurried meals had taken their toll on his health. Ward had unwillingly become reacquainted with a malady that had plagued him on-and-off for much of his adult life: what the doctors called "calculus," in his case bladder stones. He had had no more than three days to rest and recuperate at home when he had been called again to duty.³

It was just before noon on the Glorious Nineteenth when a man named Israel Bissel tore into Shrewsbury on his frothing and overheated mount. To the gaggle of anxious men, women, and young boys who crowded around him, Bissel breathlessly croaked out the news. Gage's bloodybacks had fired, without provocation, on the militia at Lexington. At least half a dozen innocent men, undoubtedly more, lay dead on the Green there. Now the Committee of Safety—the body of thirteen men appointed by the Provincial Congress to oversee the colony's military affairs—was calling upon all able-bodied men to come to the aid of their oppressed brethren to the east.⁴

Having sounded the alarm, Israel Bissel took a deep breath, dug his spurs into his tired horse's flanks, and in a flash was flying westward again along the Post Road that led to Worcester and points beyond.

Shrewsbury, like nearly every town and crossroads in Massachusetts that day, exploded into action. For weeks, men of military age—especially the so-called minutemen—had been preparing for this day, taking up the habit of carrying their firelocks and their military gear along with them as they worked in the fields, even when they gathered at the meetinghouse for worship on the Sabbath. Now that the time had come, farmers set aside their plows, tradesmen doffed their aprons, wives and mothers and sweethearts hurried to round up whatever provisions they could find or spare. Within minutes, it seemed, armed men were saying their abrupt and stoic farewells. They took to the road in twos and threes, muskets in hand, lumpy bedrolls slung hurriedly over one shoulder. They did not know what was expected of them, not really, and they had no idea of what they would find once they got to where they were supposed to go.

Artemas Ward, though, did not rush off when the alarm was sounded. Still an invalid, he was in no condition to travel, and despite his prominent position in the community and the colony, no one would have thought ill of him had he declined to make the trip to Boston. But it was not in Ward's nature to make excuses, to shirk his duty, to complain.

There was little heroic about the man. Not quite fat, but by no means trim or athletic, Ward was a man who had enjoyed a sedentary life, with a flat, sallow face surmounted by narrow-set, heavy-lidded eyes that made him appear only half-awake. Though the most prominent citizen of Shrewsbury and possibly in all of Worcester County, Ward did not cut a dashing figure. Yet he had virtues that did not show on the surface, and these virtues suited him to be the man of the hour. Calm, unflappable, and dignified, Artemas Ward knew little of combat, but he knew how to organize, and he had a great deal of native common sense. He knew Massachusetts and its people, their hopes and fears and aspirations, as no one else could. Ward knew how the New England mind worked, and he commanded the respect of his fellow Yankees, men who did not grant respect casually. He was not an especially gifted orator—yet he was the kind of man whose words, even in the most raucous and contentious town meeting, others stilled to hear.

Artemas Ward would not, could not remain an invalid when Massachusetts needed him, and it needed him at that very moment. Rising early the following morning, Thursday, April 20, 1775, he packed his saddlebags and valise with a few personal belongings, donned his militia general's uniform, and climbed awkwardly into the saddle. Then he headed east up the Post Road toward Boston.

Ward made the trip in one day. The weather was in his favor. After an uncharacteristically mild winter, with temperatures rarely dipping below freezing, spring had come early to New England in 1775. The trees were almost fully leafed-out, and since there had been little snowmelt and no recent downpours, the roads were not the impassible expanses of sticky liquid muck that they should have been that time of year. Regardless of the comfort brought by a warm sun and cool air, the journey from Shrewsbury was a nightmare. For a younger, more robust traveler, forty miles on horseback was a demanding ride. For Ward—overweight, sick, and exhausted, his affliction reminding him of its presence with every step his horse took—each moment of the trip was an ordeal.

Ward traveled alone, and yet he did not have the road to himself. The Post Road was alive, crawling with militia companies and small groups of armed men, all headed in the same direction. The groups snowballed in size as they strode along, as individuals coalesced into small bands. Squads became companies, and companies regiments, not only on the Post Road that connected Boston to Worcester and points west but on all of the other roads that converged in the environs of Boston. By afternoon, the thoroughfares were clotted with men.

At long last, toward dusk that same day, Artemas Ward reached Cambridge.

General Ward knew the town well. He was a Harvard man, having graduated from the ancient college nearly three decades before, and he had had occasion to visit the town many times in the year

since. But *this* Cambridge was almost unrecognizable. The town of fifteen hundred men, women, and children had burst at the seams, and was now an armed camp of nearly ten thousand souls . . . and all in the space of little more than a day.

The newly arrived men were everywhere: encamped around cook fires on the Common, some in tents, most not; nearly every house, every barn, every sheltered space and pasture in the small town had become a dwelling for the footsore citizen-soldiers. The men had not exactly settled in, though, for rumors continued to fly that the British would mount another, more vigorous, foray into the countryside to seek revenge for the blood and pride they had lost the day before. The men, dressed in the earthen-toned woolen frock coats, breeches, and smocks of ordinary civilian garb, clutched their muskets and fowling-pieces in some apprehension as they milled about the town. Though the formally designated regiments of the colony's militia had begun to cluster together, there was little apparent organization at work here. The militiamen thronged Cambridge's streets, yards, and taverns. Woodsmoke from hundreds of campfires permeated every inch of sky and perfumed every inch of clothing, mixing with the smells of sweat and offal and manure to create an acrid stench that stung the eyes. The usually subdued sounds of a village in mid-spring had been supplanted by an inescapable cacophony of shouts and curses, the ringing of axes, and the squeal of wooden wheels on ungreased axles.

Still on horseback, Artemas Ward somehow threaded his way through the pulsing crowd, stopping to dismount in front of the house of Jonathan Hastings, the steward of Harvard College. The Hastings House, which fronted directly on Cambridge Common, was destined to host personages yet more renowned in the months to come, but already on the twentieth it had become the command post for the Massachusetts "army." Since morning, ruddy-faced General William Heath—the top-ranking officer on the scene before Ward's arrival—had set up his temporary headquarters here, trying as best he could to impose some sort of order on the militia units that had found their way, piecemeal, to Cambridge.

But now General Ward was here, at the very center of things, and the command became his. Ward dismounted, the stabbing pain almost unbearable, and slowly hobbled his way into the Hastings House. Shortly he would call together the ranking officers in town—General Heath and a dozen colonels and lieutenant colonels—for an official Council of War, the first true command act of the American Revolution. The awful responsibility of it all, of the chaos that enveloped him, had fallen on his slumped and weary shoulders.

Ward's burden would be especially onerous because only a few hours before his arrival, a small group of men had settled on a course of action that would drastically raise the stakes in the standoff with the mother country. Without any authority to act, these men had taken it upon themselves to make one of the boldest, most momentous decisions in American history: to make war on Great Britain.



Artemas Ward, by Charles Willson Peale, from life, c. 1790–1795. Neither a dashing figure nor a brilliant battlefield commander, Ward nonetheless did what nobody else was ready to do in the spring of 1775: he took a mob of New England farmers and tradesmen and made them act like an army.

(INDEPENDENCE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK)

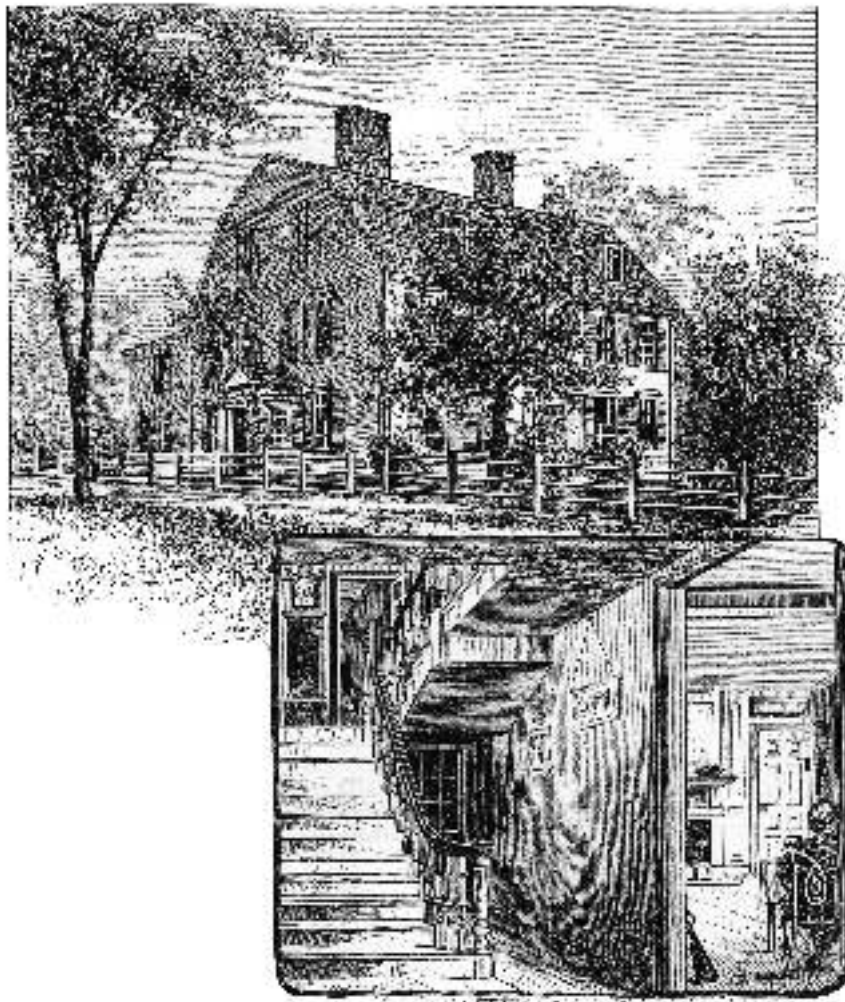


Dr. Joseph Warren. The fashionable young Boston physician—a widower with four children—was without a doubt the most influential Revolutionary leader in Massachusetts until his death at Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775. Portrait by John Singleton Copley.

(MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON)

Blood had been spilled, quite a lot of it, but that didn't mean that a full-fledged war had begun. There was no reason to believe, in Boston or Cambridge or Watertown, that a negotiated settlement was entirely out of the question, that the Sons of Liberty and their ilk had already pushed their cause past the point of no return. But there were indeed men who wanted war, who were not sated by Lexington and Concord. And to them, the opportunity presented by the Lexington alarm was just too good to be passed up.

Chief among them was Dr. Joseph Warren, the most influential Whig in Massachusetts. His colleagues Sam Adams, John Adams, and John Hancock would go on to earn undying fame, but in April 1775, Joseph Warren was the very embodiment of the Cause and—in British eyes—the most dangerous man in America. Unlike Sam Adams, the handsome thirty-three-year-old doctor was cultured, polished, refined, and charming; unlike Hancock the merchant, there was nothing venal or self-serving about him; and unlike John Adams, Warren was outgoing and gregarious. He was a born leader, and he was tireless. Warren, a Harvard-educated native of Roxbury, was the widowed father of four small children, an actively practicing physician, Grand Master of the St. Andrews Lodge of Freemasons, president of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, and chairman of the Committee of Safety. He was relatively late to join the ranks of the leading Patriots, but when he did, he put his all into the Cause. His high standing in Boston society and his elegant manners and deportment could not mask his ardor for the cause of Liberty, which bordered on fanaticism.



The Hastings House. This imposing Cambridge house—the residence of Jonathan Hastings, steward of Harvard College—became American military headquarters immediately after Lexington and Concord. It was in the Hastings’ dining room that Artemas Ward and his officers entertained the newly arrived George Washington in a loud and informal party on the night of July 2, 1775.

(FROM THE MEMORIAL HISTORY OF BOSTON, INCLUDING SUFFOLK COUNTY, MASSACHUSETTS, 1630-1880 [4 VOLS., BOSTON, 1880-81], 3:108)

In talent for bombastic speech and in sheer nerve, Joseph Warren easily equaled his friend Sam Adams. In March 1775, he gave the annual address at Faneuil Hall commemorating the Bostonians who had fallen in the “Massacre” five years earlier. Although there were more than a few British officers in the audience, Warren did not hesitate to make pointed references to the “murders” perpetrated by British soldiers in 1770. His rhetoric was effective in part because he truly believed in it. The Redcoats, he wrote in the Committee of Safety’s “official” narratives of the events of April 19, had fired the first shots on Lexington Green, and during the retreat from Concord the British soldiers were guilty of “barbarous murders committed upon our innocent brethren.” He absolutely detested Loyalists as “the most abandoned villains on earth.” At the same time, he was courtly and genuinely warm, even to his enemies. Immediately after Lexington and Concord he wrote cordially to General Gage, offering to allow British surgeons to treat wounded Redcoats who had fallen into rebel hands. His friendliness, never feigned, gave him a degree of influence in the Provincial Congress that cold, reserved Sam Adams couldn’t match. The Committee of Safety was *his* committee, and its recommendations rarely encountered resistance in Watertown where the Congress met. He was the young and charismatic ideologue of the Revolution, a Robespierre with a heart and a human touch. It wouldn’t be long before he became the Revolution’s first true martyr.⁵

Warren also had the rare ability to shift from being commanded to being in command, and back

again; he subordinated his ego and his ambition to his sacred Cause. On the nineteenth, the indefatigable doctor shouldered a musket and fell in with the militia, right in the thick of the fighting around Menotomy. A British musket ball came within an inch of ending his life then and there, neatly removing a pin from his elegantly coiffed hair. With William Heath he rallied the militia and led the withdrawal back to Cambridge that evening, and the very next morning he and Heath rounded up all the senior militia commanders they could find for an impromptu council of war. It was at this moment, as Warren witnessed firsthand the vast scale of Massachusetts's response to the Lexington alarm, that the thought struck him. There were so many men here, armed and ready to fight. If there were to be war with Britain, why wait for the moderates, for the reluctant souls who still hoped for compromise, to be convinced that there was no way but the way of the sword? If there was going to be a war . . . why not *here*? Why not *now*?

Consulting with Heath and the other militia officers, Warren presented a bold proposition. Boston was already under siege, in fact if not in name. The opportunity was right here under their noses. Why not take advantage of the situation and act while Gage was still reeling from yesterday's blow?

It was a big question, pregnant with frightening implications and consequences seen and unseen. All of the men with Warren that morning understood exactly what he was asking them to decide. There was still time—for tempers to cool, for the Provincial Congress to offer Gage some palliative that might stave off a British counterstrike, for something other than out-and-out war. Timothy Pickering, one of the more imaginative military minds in America and fated to be a key administrator for the future Continental Army, was positively terrified by what Warren had suggested. Pickering had just led his militia regiment from Salem to Medford, too late to take part in the fighting, and seeing that the British had already fled back to Boston he was prepared to take his men home again. At Lexington and Concord, Pickering believed, resistance to Gage had been justified . . . but to lay siege to Boston would be an unwarranted act of aggression. The colonel tried to make Warren see reason: “The hostilities of the preceding day,” he said, “did not render civil war inevitable.”⁶

But Warren had his blood up, and he was the more convincing speaker. Pickering's impassioned plea moved no one. Warren had his way: Massachusetts would go to war.

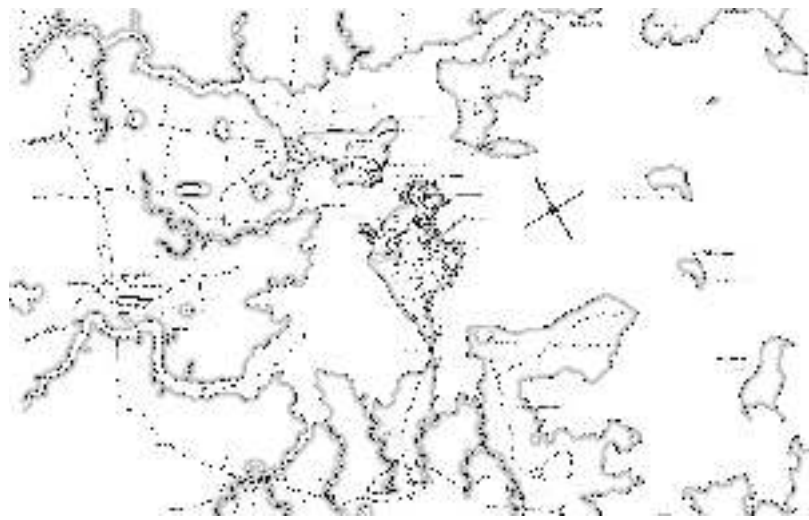
Dr. Warren's push for war was rash, optimistic, dangerous, and likely irreversible. Some Patriots had convinced themselves that an army of free Americans was, hands down, morally superior to an army of Redcoat hirelings and jailbirds. But even the most ardent Whig couldn't ignore the vast disparity in weapons, equipment, training, and professionalism between the American militia and Gage's Regulars. For all that, Warren's aggressive stance was not wholly unrealistic in April 1775. Gage's army had retreated to Boston, and it would be a relatively simple task to keep it bottled up there. It didn't take much to besiege Boston, or at least to isolate it, for Boston was little more than an island.

Modern Boston bears little resemblance to its eighteenth-century ancestor. The present-day city, topographically speaking, is the product of land reclamation and regrading on a massive scale. But before the mania for knocking down hills and backfilling salt marshes swept the growing, space-hungry town in the nineteenth century, Boston was a bulbous, oddly shaped protrusion jutting northeast into the harbor. It was technically a peninsula, but only barely: a slender tendril of land, called Boston Neck, tethered the town to the Massachusetts mainland at Roxbury. The Neck—roughly analogous to present-day Washington Street—was the only means of ingress or egress by land, and at high tide it was commonly awash.

Boston was bounded by the Charles River to the north, and to the west and south by the marshy shallows of the Back Bay, also known as Roxbury Flats. Most of the town's inhabitants crowded into the eastern half of the peninsula, divided almost equally into the North and South Ends. The western

half remained, well into the eighteenth century, thoroughly bucolic. On the very far western periphery of the town, the forty-five-acre Boston Common sloped gently down to the waters of the Back Bay. Far from being painstakingly groomed, the Common was a functional pasture for livestock, and hence was as muddy and foul-odored as any heavily used cow pasture. The Common came in handy, too, for mustering militia, or for hanging criminals and troublesome religious dissidents, or for any other public use that Bostonians could dream up.

It was a prosperous town, once the largest city and the busiest port in all of British North America—until Philadelphia and New York usurped its primacy in the 1760s. But even though third in rank, Boston buzzed with life, with commercial vitality. Successful merchants crowded the North End with opulent—opulent by Puritan standards, anyway—grand houses; even in the humbler neighborhoods the houses were plain but well built, with individual yards. Overall the town was tidy, neat, and pleasant. The spare but elegant spires of Boston’s many churches dominated the skyline. Wharves studded the waterfront of the North and South Ends, extending as far along the peninsula as the tip of the North End and the giant millpond to the west. The concentration of wharves was thickest around the Town Cove on the eastern shore. Here was Boston’s most distinctive maritime feature: the Long Wharf, lined with shops and warehouses, which extended nearly a half-mile into the harbor, allowing even the largest seagoing vessels to unload their cargoes directly into the town.



Boston and Environs, June 1775.

To visitors with cosmopolitan tastes, Boston may have seemed hopelessly staid and quaint when compared to a town like New York. It lacked the kinds of cultural refinements—such as theaters—that Puritan society had found so objectionable. Boston was indeed provincial . . . but it was comfortable. Even after Parliament closed the port in 1774, as punishment for the “Tea Party” of the previous year, Boston had much to offer. British officers in the garrison there feasted on fresh fish and lobster, fresh beef and pork, mutton, and veal, all reasonably priced.

What today are mere suburbs of Boston were, in 1775, separate settlements, made remote by the convoluted geography of the Bay region. Dorchester, Roxbury, and Brookline were all farming villages on the other side of the Back Bay; travel to any of them by horse, via the Neck, could use up the better part of a day. Cambridge, Medford, Chelsea, and even Charlestown were not really all that far away, but they might as well have been, because they lay so far north of the Neck’s base at Roxbury. Charlestown was only a few hundred yards across the Charles from Boston’s North End, but only those who could afford passage on the ferry from the North End to Charlestown found these neighboring towns to the west truly accessible.

From a strategic viewpoint, what was most significant about Boston—apart from its ready access

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