

= Siege of Boston =

The Siege of Boston (April 19 , 1775 ? March 17 , 1776) was the opening phase of the American Revolutionary War . New England militiamen prevented the movement by land of the British Army garrisoned in what was then the peninsular city of Boston , Massachusetts . Both sides had to deal with resource supply and personnel issues over the course of the siege . British resupply and reinforcement activities were limited to sea access . After eleven months of the siege , the British abandoned Boston by sailing to Nova Scotia .

The siege began on April 19 after the Battles of Lexington and Concord , when the militia from surrounding Massachusetts communities blocked land access to Boston . The Continental Congress formed the Continental Army from the militia , with George Washington as its Commander in Chief . In June 1775 , the British seized Bunker and Breed 's Hills , but their casualties were heavy and their gains were insufficient to break the Continental Army 's hold on land access to Boston . Military actions during the remainder of the siege were limited to occasional raids , minor skirmishes , and sniper fire .

In November 1775 , Washington sent the 25 @-@ year @-@ old bookseller @-@ turned @-@ soldier Henry Knox to bring to Boston the heavy artillery that had been captured at Fort Ticonderoga . In a technically complex and demanding operation , Knox brought many cannons to the Boston area by January 1776 . In March 1776 , these artillery fortified Dorchester Heights (which overlooked Boston and its harbor) , thereby threatening the British supply lifeline . The British commander William Howe saw the British position as indefensible and withdrew the British forces in Boston to the British stronghold at Halifax , Nova Scotia , on March 17 (celebrated today as Evacuation Day) .

= = Background = =

Prior to 1775 , the British had imposed taxes and import duties on the American colonies , to which the inhabitants objected since they lacked British Parliamentary representation . In response to the Boston Tea Party and other acts of protest , 4 @,@ 000 British troops under the command of General Thomas Gage were sent to occupy Boston and to pacify the restive Province of Massachusetts Bay . Parliament authorized Gage , among other actions , to disband the local provincial government (led by John Hancock and Samuel Adams) . It was reformed into the Provincial Congress , and continued to meet . The Provincial Congress called for the organization of local militias and coordinated the accumulation of weapons and other military supplies . Under the terms of the Boston Port Act , Gage closed the Boston port , which caused much unemployment and discontent .

When British forces were sent to seize military supplies from the town of Concord on April 19 , 1775 , militia companies from surrounding towns opposed them in the Battles of Lexington and Concord . At Concord , some of the British forces were routed in a confrontation at the North Bridge . The British troops , on their march back to Boston , were then engaged in a running battle , suffering heavy casualties . All of the New England colonies (and later colonies further south) raised militias in response to this alarm , and sent them to Boston .

= = Siege = =

= = = Digging in = = =

Immediately after the battles of April 19 , the Massachusetts militia , under the loose leadership of William Heath , who was superseded by General Artemas Ward late on the 20th , formed a siege line extending from Chelsea , around the peninsulas of Boston and Charlestown , to Roxbury , effectively surrounding Boston on three sides . They particularly blocked the Charlestown Neck (the only land access to Charlestown) , and the Boston Neck (the only land access to Boston , which

was then a peninsula) , leaving only the harbor and sea access under British control . In the days immediately following the creation of the siege line , the size of the colonial forces grew , as militias from New Hampshire , Rhode Island , and Connecticut arrived on the scene . General Gage wrote of his surprise of the number of rebels surrounding the city : " The rebels are not the despicable rabble too many have supposed them to be In all their wars against the French they never showed such conduct , attention , and perseverance as they do now . "

General Gage turned his attention to fortifying easily defensible positions . In the south , at Roxbury , Gage ordered lines of defenses with 10 twenty @-@ four pound guns . In Boston proper , four hills were quickly fortified . They were to be the main defense of the city . Over time , each of these hills were strengthened . Gage also decided to abandon Charlestown , removing the beleaguered forces (that had retreated from Concord) to Boston . The town of Charlestown itself was entirely vacant , and the high lands of Charlestown (Bunker Hill and Breed 's Hill) were left undefended , as were the heights of Dorchester , which had a commanding view of the harbor and the city .

The British at first greatly restricted movement in and out of the city , fearing infiltration of weapons . Besieged and besiegers eventually reached an informal agreement allowing traffic on the Boston Neck , provided no firearms were carried . Residents of Boston turned in almost 2 @,@ 000 muskets , and most of the Patriot residents left the city . Many Loyalists who lived outside the city of Boston left their homes and fled into the city . Most of them felt that it was not safe to live outside of the city , because the Patriots were now in control of the countryside . Some of the men , after arriving in Boston , joined Loyalist regiments attached to the British army .

Because the siege did not blockade the harbor , the city remained open for the Royal Navy , under Vice Admiral Samuel Graves , to sail in supplies from Nova Scotia and other places . Colonial forces could do little to stop these shipments due to the naval supremacy of the British fleet . Nevertheless , American privateers were able to harass supply ships , and food prices rose quickly . Soon the shortages meant the British forces were on short rations . Generally , the American forces were able to gather information about what was happening in the city from people escaping the privations of Boston , but General Gage had no effective intelligence of rebel activities .

= = = Early skirmishes = = =

On May 3 , the Massachusetts Provincial Congress authorized Benedict Arnold to raise forces for taking Fort Ticonderoga near the southern end of Lake Champlain in the Province of New York , which was known to have heavy weapons , but to be only lightly defended . Arnold arrived in Castleton (in what is now Vermont , but was then disputed territory between New York and New Hampshire) on the 9th , where he joined with Ethan Allen and a militia company from Connecticut , all of whom had independently arrived at the idea of taking Ticonderoga . This company , under the joint leadership of Arnold and Allen , captured Fort Ticonderoga and Fort Crown Point . They also captured the one large military vessel on Lake Champlain in a raid on Fort Saint @-@ Jean . They recovered over 180 cannons , as well as other weaponry and supplies that the nascent Continental Army would find useful in tightening their grip on Boston .

Boston lacked a regular supply of fresh meat , and many horses needed hay . On May 21 , Gage ordered a party to go to Grape Island , in the outer harbor , and bring hay to Boston . When the Continentals on the mainland noticed this , they took alarm , and the militia were called out . As the British party arrived , they came under fire from the militia . The militia set fire to a barn on the island , destroying 80 tons of hay , and prevented the British from taking more than 3 tons .

Continental forces , partly in response to the Grape Island incident , worked to clear the harbor islands of livestock and supplies useful to the British . On May 27 , in the Battle of Chelsea Creek , the British Marines attempted to stop removal of livestock from some of the islands . The Americans resisted , and , in the course of the action , the British schooner Diana ran aground and was destroyed , but not before the Continentals recovered its weaponry . In an attempt to help quell the rebellion , Gage issued a proclamation on June 12 offering to pardon all of those who would lay down their arms , with the exception of John Hancock and Samuel Adams . Instead of quelling the rebellion , it ignited anger among the Patriots , and more people began to take up arms .

= = = Breed 's Hill = = =

Throughout May , the British had been receiving reinforcements , until they reached a strength of about 6 @, @ 000 men . On May 25 , three Generals arrived on HMS Cerberus : William Howe , John Burgoyne , and Henry Clinton . Gage began planning to break out of the city .

The plan decided on by the British command was to fortify both Bunker Hill and Dorchester Heights . They fixed the date for taking Dorchester Heights at June 18 . On June 15 , the colonists ' Committee of Safety learned of the British plans . In response , they sent instructions to General Ward to fortify Bunker Hill and the heights of Charlestown ; he ordered Colonel William Prescott to do so . On the night of June 16 , Prescott led 1 @, @ 200 men over the Charlestown Neck , and constructed fortifications on Bunker Hill and Breed 's Hill .

On June 17 , in the Battle of Bunker Hill , British forces under General Howe took the Charlestown peninsula . The British succeeded in their tactical objective of taking the high ground on the Charlestown peninsula , but they suffered significant losses . With some 1 @, @ 000 men killed or wounded , including 92 officers killed , the British losses were so heavy that there were no further direct attacks on American forces . The Americans , while losing the battle , had again stood against the British regulars with some success , as they had successfully repelled two assaults on Breed 's Hill during the engagement . From this point , the siege essentially became a stalemate .

= = = Stalemate = = =

General George Washington arrived at Cambridge on July 2 . He set up his headquarters at the Benjamin Wadsworth House at Harvard College . He took command of the newly formed Continental Army the following day . By this time forces and supplies were arriving , including companies of riflemen from as far away as Maryland and Virginia . Washington began the work of molding the militias into something more closely resembling an army , appointing senior officers (where the militias had typically elected their leaders) , and introducing more organization and disciplinary measures to the encamped militias . He required officers of different ranks to wear differentiating apparel , so that they might be distinguished from their underlings and superiors . On July 16 , he moved his headquarters to the John Vassall House , also in Cambridge , that would later become well known as the home of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow . Toward the end of July , about 2 @, @ 000 riflemen arrived in units raised in Pennsylvania , Maryland , and Virginia . The accuracy of the rifle was previously unknown in New England , and these forces were used to harass the besieged forces .

Washington also ordered the defenses to be improved . Trenches were dug on the Boston Neck , and then extended toward Boston . However , these activities had little effect on the British occupation . The working parties were fired on from time to time , as were sentries guarding the works . On July 30 , in retaliation for an American attack , the British pushed back an American advanced guard , and burned a few houses in Roxbury . Four days later , on August 2 , an American rifleman was killed , and his body hung up by the neck . In retaliation , other American riflemen marched to the lines and began to attack the British troops . They continued their sharp shooting all day , killing or wounding many of the British , and losing only one man . On August 30 , the British made a surprise breakout from the Boston Neck , set fire to a tavern , and withdrew to their defenses . On the same night , 300 Americans attacked Lighthouse Island and burned the lighthouse , killing several British soldiers and capturing 23 at the loss of one life . On another August night , Washington sent 1 @, @ 200 men to dig entrenchments on a hill near the Charlestown Neck . Despite a British bombardment , the Americans successfully dug the trenches .

In early September , Washington began drawing up plans for two moves : first , to dispatch 1 @, @ 000 men from Boston and invade Quebec , and second , to launch an attack on Boston . Washington felt that he could afford to send some troops to Quebec , as he had received intelligence from British deserters and American spies that the British had no intention of launching an attack from Boston until they were reinforced . On September 11 , about 1 @, @ 100 troops

under the command of Benedict Arnold left for Quebec . Washington summoned a council of war , and made a case for an all out amphibious assault on Boston , by sending troops across Back Bay in flat @-@ bottomed boats which could hold 50 men each . Washington believed it would be extremely difficult to keep the men together when winter came . In a war council , the plan was unanimously rejected , and the decision was not to attack " for the present at least . "

In early September Washington authorized the appropriation and outfitting of local fishing vessels for intelligence @-@ gathering and interdiction of supplies to the British . This activity was a precursor to the Continental Navy , which was established in the aftermath of the British Burning of Falmouth (present @-@ day Portland , Maine) . The provincial assemblies of Connecticut and Rhode Island had by then also begun arming ships and authorized privateering .

In early November , 400 British soldiers went to Lechmere 's Point on a raiding expedition to acquire some livestock . They made off with 10 head of cattle , but lost two lives in the skirmish with colonial troops sent to defend the point . On November 29 , colonial Captain John Manley , commanding the schooner Lee , captured one of the most valuable prizes of the siege , the British brigantine Nancy , just outside Boston Harbor . She was carrying a large supply of ordnance and military stores intended for the British troops in Boston .

As winter approached , both sides faced their own problems . The Americans were so short on gunpowder that soldiers were given spears to fight with in the event of a British attack . Many of the American troops remained unpaid and many of their enlistments would be up at the end of the year . On the British side Howe , who had replaced Gage as commander in October , was faced with different problems . Wood was so scarce that they began cutting down trees and tearing down wooden buildings , including the Old North Meeting House . To add to this , supplying the city had become increasingly difficult because of winter storms and the rise in rebel privateers . The British troops were so hungry that many were ready to desert as soon as they could . Worse , scurvy and smallpox had broken out in the city . Washington 's army faced similar problems with smallpox , as soldiers from rural communities were exposed to the disease . Washington moved infected troops to a separate hospital , the only option then available given the public stigma against inoculation .

Washington again proposed to assault Boston in October , but his officers thought it best to wait until the harbor had frozen over . In February , when the water had frozen between Roxbury and Boston Common , Washington thought that in spite of his shortage in powder he would try an assault by rushing across the ice ; but his officers again advised against it . Washington 's desire to launch an attack on Boston arose from his fear that his army would desert in the winter , and how easily he knew that Howe could break the lines of his army in its present condition . He had not yet learned how completely he could trust in Howe 's inactivity ; he abandoned an attack across the ice with great reluctance in exchange for a more cautious plan , to fortify Dorchester Heights using cannon arrived from Fort Ticonderoga .

In mid @-@ January , on orders from London , British Major General Henry Clinton and a small fleet set sail for the Carolinas with 1 @,@ 500 men . Their objective was to join forces with additional troops arriving from Europe , and to take a port in the southern colonies for further military operations . In early February a British raiding party crossed the ice and burned several farmhouses in Dorchester .

= = End of the siege = =

Between November 1775 and February 1776 , Colonel Henry Knox and a team of engineers used sledges to retrieve 60 tons of heavy artillery that had been captured at Fort Ticonderoga . Bringing them across the frozen Hudson and Connecticut rivers in a technically challenging and complex operation , they arrived back at Cambridge on January 24 , 1776 .

= = = Fortification of Dorchester Heights = = =

Some of the Ticonderoga cannons , which were of a size and range not previously available to the Americans , were emplaced in fortifications around the city , and on the night of March 2 , the

Americans began to bombard the city with those cannon , to which the British responded with cannonades of their own . The American guns , under the direction of Colonel Knox , continued to exchange fire with the British until March 4 . The exchange of fire did little damage to either side , although it did damage houses and kill some British soldiers in Boston . On March 5 , Washington moved more of the Ticonderoga cannon and several thousand men overnight to occupy Dorchester Heights , overlooking Boston . Since it was winter the ground was frozen , making the digging of trenches impractical . Washington 's men instead used logs , branches and anything else available to fortify the position overnight . General Howe is said to have exclaimed , " My God , these fellows have done more work in one night than I could make my army do in three months . " The British fleet was within range of the American guns on Dorchester Heights , putting it and the troops in the city at risk .

The immediate response of the British was a two @-@ hour cannon barrage at the heights , which had no effect because the British guns could not reach the American guns at such height . After the failure of the barrage , Howe and his officers agreed that the colonists must be removed from the heights if they were to hold Boston . They planned an assault on the heights ; however , due to a storm the attack never took place , and the British elected instead to withdraw .

On March 8 , some prominent Bostonians sent a letter to Washington , stating that the British would not destroy the town if they were allowed to depart unmolested . Washington was given the letter , but formally rejected it , as it was not addressed to him by either name or title . However , the letter had the intended effect : when the evacuation began , there was no American fire to hinder the British departure . On March 9 , after seeing movement on Nook 's Hill on Dorchester , the British opened a massive fire barrage that lasted all night . It killed four men with one cannonball , but that was all the damage that was done . The next day , the colonists went out and collected the 700 cannonballs that had been fired at them .

= = = Evacuation = = =

On March 10 , General Howe issued a proclamation ordering the inhabitants to give up all linen and woolen goods that could be used by the colonists to continue the war . A Loyalist , Crean Brush , was authorized to receive these goods , in return for which he gave certificates that were effectively worthless . Over the next week , the British fleet sat in Boston harbor waiting for favorable winds , while Loyalists and British soldiers were loaded onto the ships . During this time , American naval activities outside the harbor successfully captured and diverted to ports under colonial control several British supply ships . On March 15 , the wind became favorable , but before they could leave , it turned against them . On March 17 the wind once again turned favorable . The troops , who were authorized to burn the town if there were any disturbances while they were marching to their ships , began to move out at 4 : 00 a.m. By 9 : 00 a.m. , all ships were underway . The fleet departing from Boston included 120 ships , with more than 11 @,@ 000 people aboard . Of those , 9 @,@ 906 were British troops , 667 were women , and 553 were children .

= = Aftermath = =

= = = Americans clean up = = =

Once the British fleet sailed away , the Americans moved to reclaim Boston and Charlestown . At first , they thought that the British were still on Bunker Hill , but it turned out that the British had left dummies in place . Due to the risk of smallpox , at first only men picked for their prior exposure to the disease entered Boston under the command of Artemas Ward . More of the colonial army entered on March 20 , once the risk of disease was judged low . While Washington had essentially acceded to the British threat to burn Boston , and had not hindered their departure from the city , he did not make their escape from the outer harbor entirely easy . He directed Captain Manley to harass the departing British fleet , in which he had some success , capturing among other prizes the

ship carrying Crean Brush and his plunder .

General Howe , when his fleet finally left the outer harbor , left in his wake a small contingent of vessels whose primary purpose was to intercept any arriving British vessels . While they successfully redirected to Halifax numerous ships carrying British troops originally destined for Boston , some unsuspecting British troop ships landed in Boston , only to fall into American hands .

The British departure ended major military activities in the New England colonies . Washington , fearing that the British were going to attack New York City , departed on April 4 with his army for Manhattan , beginning the New York and New Jersey campaign .

There are six units of the Army National Guard (101st Eng Bn , 125th MP Co , 181st Inf , 182nd Inf , 197th FA , and 201st FA) derived from American units that participated in the Siege of Boston . There are thirty currently existing units in the U.S. Army with lineages that go back to the colonial era .

= = = Fate of the British generals = = =

General Howe would be severely criticized in the British press and Parliament for his failures in the Boston campaign . General Gage was never given another command . General Burgoyne would see action in the Saratoga Campaign , a disaster that saw his capture , as well as that of 7 @, @ 500 troops under his command . General Clinton would command the British forces in America for four years (1778 ? 1782) .

= = = Fate of the Loyalists = = =

Many Massachusetts Loyalists left with the British when they evacuated Boston . Some went to England to rebuild lives there , and some returned to America after the war . Many stayed in Nova Scotia , settling in places like Saint John , and many became active in the future development of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick .

= = = Fate of Boston = = =

Following the siege , Boston effectively ceased to be a military target , but continued to be a focal point for revolutionary activities , with its port acting as an important point for fitting ships of war and privateers . Its leading citizens would have important roles in the development of the future United States . Boston and other area communities mark the March 17 end of the siege as Evacuation Day .