

Battle of Bunker Hill

Following the battles at Lexington and Concord in April 1775, colonial forces from Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island formed a New England army to surround and contain the British forces occupying Boston.

To prevent British soldiers from conducting further attacks on the countryside after the march to Lexington and Concord, 20,000 provincial militiamen encircle Boston in the spring of 1775. The Charlestown peninsula and Dorchester Heights, commanding both the city of Boston and Boston harbor, lie abandoned. This has been referred to as the Siege of Boston.

Hoping to make the British “masters of these heights,” General Gage, in conference with Major Generals William Howe, Henry Clinton, and John Burgoyne, plans to seize the neglected positions before the colonists do so.

News of Gage’s intent filters across from Boston and down from New Hampshire on June 15. Acting quickly on this intelligence, the Massachusetts Committee of Safety orders General Artemas Ward, commander of the colonial militia surrounding Boston, to race the British to the Charlestown peninsula, capture Bunker Hill, and then seize the Dorchester hills.

Colonel William Prescott and General Israel Putnam were the ranking officers in the expedition to Charlestown, however Prescott, being from Massachusetts, commanded the majority of the men.

The following day, Ward orders Colonel William Prescott, with the aid of one thousand colonial troops, to take and fortify Bunker Hill. Unknown to the British, Prescott and his troops arrive at the Charlestown peninsula that same night.

Prescott and other officers ultimately decide to bypass Bunker Hill, rising 110 feet and situated near the only route back to Cambridge, and instead give “orders to march” to Breed’s Hill, a smaller mount further south and within cannon range of Boston and British ships in the harbor. They built an earthen fortress 160-foot long and 30-foot high atop the hill. (Massachusetts Historical Society)

For generations many have argued over who ultimately chose where to fortify a position on the lower, more centrally located hill known today as “Breed’s Hill,” rather than the higher prominence known today as “Bunker Hill.”

But on that night, construction began sometime around midnight as hundreds of men with pickaxes and shovels constructed a fort atop the lower hill overlooking the settlement of Charlestown and the beaches along the Harbor. (NPS)

Astonished British generals wake on the morning of June 17 to discover the newly erected defenses. As the day continues, British ships bombard the untrained militia as they work, and Colonel Prescott walks the fortifications to raise morale. Thirsty and tired, the soldiers receive “no refreshment.” Back in Boston, Gage summons a war council.

At three o’clock in the afternoon, over 2,000 British soldiers, commanded by General Howe, land on the Charlestown shore. Continental snipers fire at the British as they march, and General Howe orders a combustible shell launched on Charlestown. Amid smoke and flames, local inhabitants flee their homes in order to escape “Charlestown’s dismal fate.”

From rooftops and hilltops, spectators watch Charlestown burn. The clear day affords views to residents as far off as Braintree, including Abigail Adams and eight-year-old John Quincy Adams, who later recalls,

The year 1775 was the eighth year of my age. Among the first fruits of the War, was the expulsion of my father's family from their peaceful abode in Boston, to take refuge in his and my native town of Braintree....

For the space of twelve months my mother with her infant children dwelt, liable every hour of the day and of the night to be butchered in cold blood, or taken and carried into Boston as hostages, by any foraging or marauding detachment of men ...

My father was separated from his family, on his way to attend the same continental Congress, and there my mother, with her children lived in unintermitted danger of being consumed with them all in a conflagration kindled by a torch in the same hands which on the 17th. of June lighted the fires in Charlestown.

I saw with my own eyes those fires, and heard Britannia's thunders in the Battle of Bunker's hill and witnessed the tears of my mother and mingled with them my own, at the fall of Warren a dear friend of my father, and a beloved Physician to me. (John Quincy Adams, National Archives)

British troops headed uphill, where they are frustrated by fences, pits, and tall grass. In dust and heat, the continental militia wait behind their walls. They hold fire until the British are in within 150 feet of the fortifications.



(Contrary to urban legend, there's no evidence anyone ordered the men to hold their fire until they saw "the whites" of the enemies' eyes. The writer Parson Weems seems to have invented this decades later.)

The Americans opened fire at about 50 yards, much too distant to see anyone's eyes. However, one commander did tell his men to wait until they could see the splash guards - called half-gaiters - that British soldiers wore around their calves.) (Smithsonian)

"Heavy and severe Fire" decimates the thick British ranks. Recoiling from the first attack, General Howe relies on "the Bravery of the King's Troops".

He immediately ordered his stumbling and disordered soldiers to make a second charge, this time only at the hill and rail fence. Again the colonists slaughter the King's troops with their fire.



An hour passed as the British recover from the two attacks. They receive 400 new troops from Boston. A third time, General Howe orders his soldiers, with the help of the reinforcements, to charge the breastworks and the rail fence.

Prescott's men again waited until the last minute to fire. This time they are running out of ammunition and are soon overrun by the British; then they fought with rocks and the butts of their muskets.

No longer able to withstand the British attack, Prescott's men retreat north over the road to Cambridge, as General Stark's New Hampshire troops cover them in the rear.

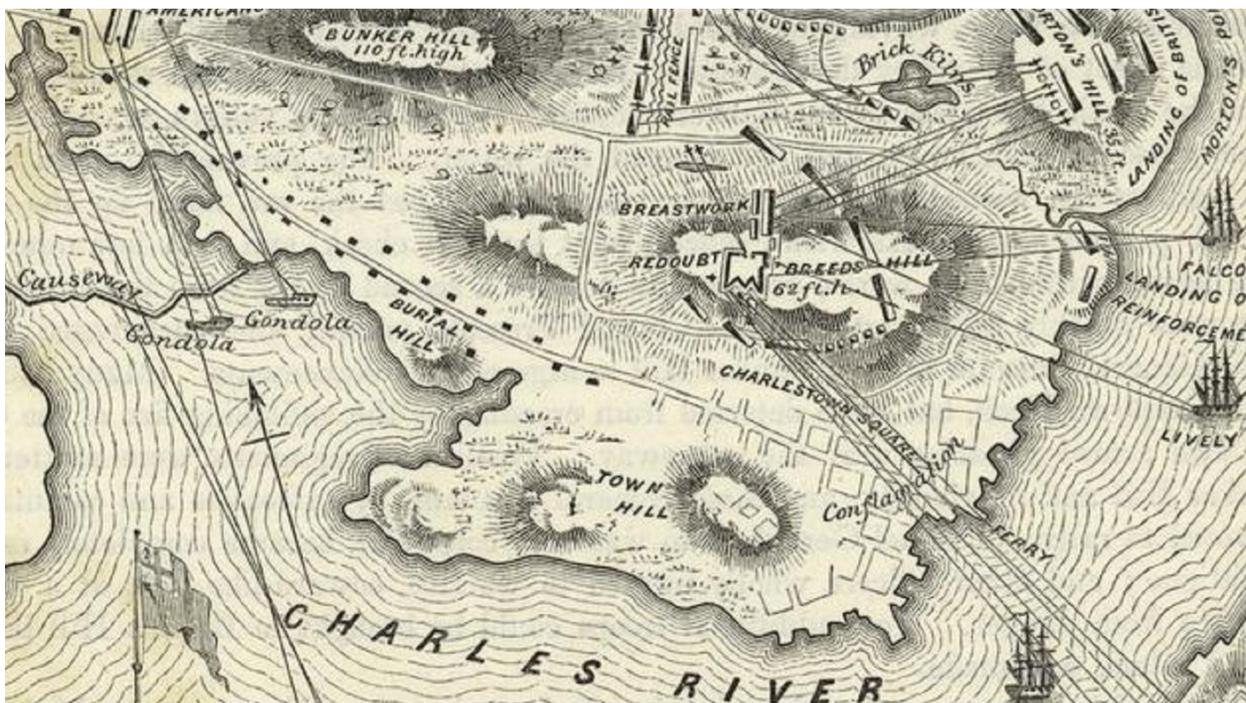
One of the last to abandon the fort on Breed's Hill, Joseph Warren was killed as he retreats, and he was mourned with "the tears of multitudes." In total, 140 colonists are dead and 271 are wounded. Before dark, the British again command the Charleston peninsula, though 226 British lie dead and 828 are wounded.

Despite renewed British control of the peninsula, colonial forces still trap the British in Boston. As supply issues and shortages plague them, the British prepare for further military commitment to defeat the "poor and ignorant" colonists. Meanwhile, the colonies scramble to assemble more soldiers.

Britain replaced General Gage with General Howe in early October 1775, and two weeks after the battle at Breed's Hill, on July 2, 1775, George Washington arrived in Cambridge to take command of the Continental Army. (Massachusetts Historical Society)

Getting the Names Straight

Popularly known as 'The Battle of Bunker Hill,' as noted, the battle actually occurred on Breed's Hill.



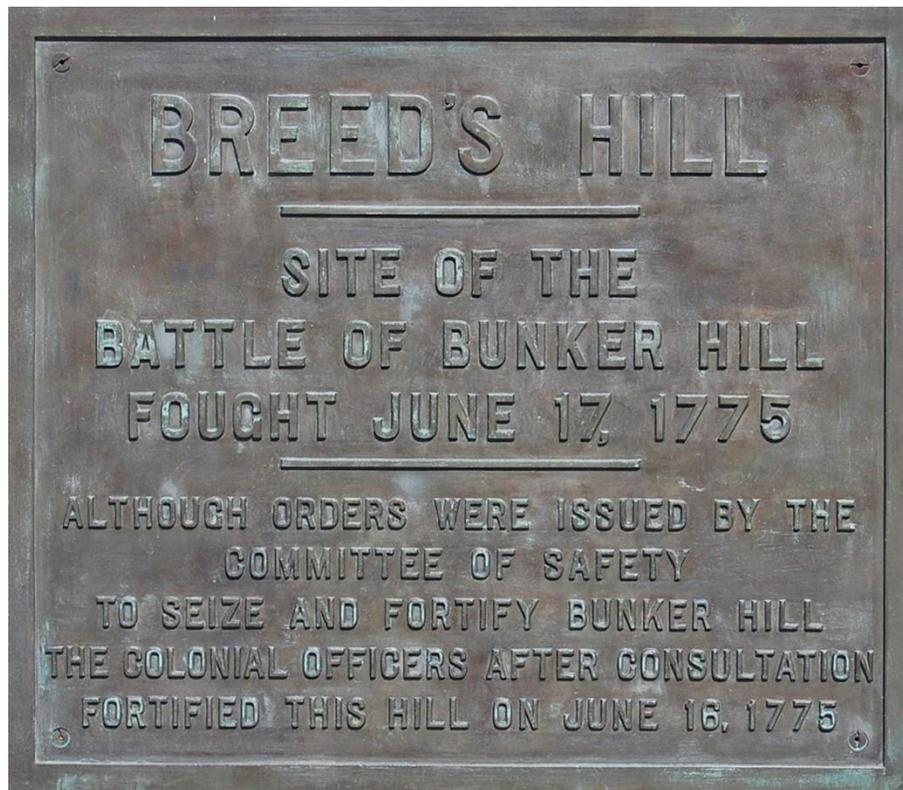
The National Park Service, on their Boston National Historical Park website, notes that Historian Richard Ketchum stated,

To the south of [Bunker Hill], and connected to it by a lower, sloping ridge, was a height of land not sufficiently distinguished to bear any particular name. Some called it Charlestown Hill; others, considering it an appendage of Bunker Hill, referred to it by that title;

while some of the local people, out of deference to a farmer whose cattle grazed there, called it Breed's. Its steep western flank, covered with orchards and gardens, leveled out near the settlement of Charlestown.

By 1775, the population of Charlestown hovered around 2,000 to 3,000 people with 400 structures in it, mostly situated on the south shore facing Boston. Bunker and Breed's Hills, named after George Bunker and Ebenezer Breed, were mostly undeveloped with some farmhouses and pastures.

The Battle of Bunker Hill, also called the Battle of Breed's Hill, (June 17, 1775), first major battle of the American Revolution, fought in Charlestown (now part of Boston) during the Siege of Boston.



This plaque states: "Breed's Hill Site of the Battle of Bunker Hill Fought June 17, 1775 Although orders were issued by the Committee of Safety to Seize and Fortify Bunker Hill the Colonial Officers After Consultation Fortified this Hill on June 16, 1775."

Information here is primarily from National Park Service; Massachusetts Historical Society; American Heritage Museum; Britannica

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the American Revolution, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young