

Siege of Boston

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.

The Siege of Boston was essentially a containment of British forces in Boston laid out by the American militia, later known as the Continental Army on the British held Boston.

Sara Winslow Deming's journal notes the British were anticipating something, it states, in part (Massachusetts Historical Society),

On Saturday, ye 15th April [1775] P.M. I had a visit from Mr. Barron. I never saw him with such a countenance. He affected a smiling countenance when he came in. I was glad to see him as ever -- I pointed him to a chair, & seated myself, he rose & took the next chair by me, saying "permit me to set by you."

I try'd to affect an ease I did not feel, & I tho't, & still think, that he did the same. Soon however, a gloom spread over his countenance, -- after a short silence, he told me, (I have since recolected, somewhat officiously,) that "the light Infantry, & all the Grenadier Companies were drafted from all the reg.rs & were ordered to be ready to attend whatever duty they might be called to at a minutes warning, & you know I am one."

"And are you ready? Yes. After another short silence, he proceeded, unasked, to tell me many things tho' I have since tho't that he would have given direct answers to any questions I might have ask'd, so far as he was let into their secrets - but I ask'd no question of consequence.

Several times I saw him catch in his handkerchief the tears that fell from his eyes. Sometimes, there was a silence of several minutes together, both before & after Mr. Deming came in. It was evident, that his soul labor'd under some heavy pressure.

Once with very little introduction, he said, "I advise you as a friend to stay in Boston - I think it will be the safest place."

Following these skirmishes, British forces under General Thomas Gage garrisoned at Boston, Massachusetts Bay. Subsequently, the American militia surrounded the area in an attempt to contain the British forces. Hence, the siege of Boston started on April 19, 1775.

Sara Winslow Deming's journal notes, in part (Massachusetts Historical Society),

Early on Wednesday the fatal 19th April, before I had quited my chamber, one after another came runing up to tell me that the kings troops had fired upon & killed 8 of our neighbors at Lexington in their way to Concord.

All the intelligence of this day was dreadfull. Almost every countenance expressing anxiety & distress. But description fails here. I went to bed about 12 this night having taken but little food

thro' the day; having resolv'd to quit the town before the next setting sun, should life, & limbs be spar'd to me.

Towards morning, I fell into a sound sleep from which I was waked by Mr. D.g between 6, & 7 o'clock informing me that I was Genl Gage's prisoner -- all egress, & regress being cut off between the town & country.

Here again description fails. No words can paint my distress -- I feel it at this instant (just 8 weeks after) so sensibly, that I must pause before I can proceed.

A town meeting was held in Boston on April 22, 1775; minutes of the meeting note two actions. The first, in part, is summarized as (Massachusetts Historical Society),

His Excellency Genl. Gage in an Interview with the Selectmen having represented that there was a large Body of men in Arms assembled in the Neighbourhood of this Town with Hostile Intentions against his Majestys Troops Stationed here, &

that in case the Troops should be Attackd by them & the Attack should be Aided by the Inhabitants of the Town it might Issue in very unhappy Consequences to the Town for the prevention whereof his Excellency assured the Selectmen that whatever might be the event of the Attack he would take Effectual Care that

the Troops should do no damage, nor Commit any Act of Violence on the Town but that the lives & properties of the Inhabitants should be protected & Secured, if the Inhabitants behaved peaceably. & the Selectment in behalf of the Town engaged for the peaceable behaviour of the Inhabitants Accordingly in Confirmation of which engagement. Voted.

That as the Town has behaved peaceably towards the Troops hitherto they hereby engage to Continue to do so & the peace Officers are enjoind, & the Majestrates and all persons of Substance in the town are earnestly requested to Exert their utmost Endeavours to preserve the peace of the Town,

the Town at the same time relying on the Assurances of his Excellency that no Insult Violence or damage be done to the Persons or property of the Inhabitants either by the Troops or the Kings Ships, whatever may the event of the Attack his Excellency seems to apprehend, but of which Attack,

we have no knowledge or Information whatever, as all Communications between the Town & Country has been Interrupted by his Excellencys Order ever since the Collection of the Body aforesaid.---

2d. Vote Whereas the Communications between this Town & the Country both by Land & by Water is at present stopd by by Order of his Excellency Genl. Gage & the Inhabitants cannot be Supplied with provisions, fewell & other Necessarys of Life by which means the Sick & all Invalids must Suffer greatly, & Imediatly & the Inhabitants in general be distressed espesically Such ...

which is by much the greatest party as have not had the means of laying in a Stock of provisions, but depend for daily Supplies from the Country for their daily Support & may be in danger of perishing unless the Communication be opened. --- Boston 22d. April 1775---

A letter of April 23, 1775 from Andrew Eliot to his son helps explain the attitude of the residents in Boston (Massachusetts Historical Society):

What you feared is come upon us - We are moving out of Boston - We have been shut up for some days We the way is like to be open in a few short time - I know not what to do, not where to go - At present I think to tarry in Boston - Whether ever I shall have the pleasure of seeing you God only knows - I must intreat you to set out immediately ...

I will endeavor to get them to Weston or further if possible - I am unhapy till they are away – but cannot possibly bring them. If Capt. Thorp comes I shall endeavour to send in him Polly, Sally & Eph. & Sukey - I should be glad there were any other way to conveying them

I hope your people will have pity upon them, & take them in – Whether ever I shall be able to remunerate you or them is uncertain –

All property is precarious or rather annihilated. If it is in my power I shall be willing to make a suitable allowance –

Be kind to your Mother who is the best of Women - your Sister must get their living as well as they can - I know I put you to difficulties - but you are the only Asylum I have - poor Boston

May God sanctify our distresses which are greater than you can conceive - Such a Sabbath of melancholy and darkness I never knew - Most of the Meeting houses shut up - the ministers gone - Our Congregation crowded with Strangers - A Town Meeting in the forenoon - Agreed to give up their Arms in order to get leave to depart ...

every face gathering paleness - all hurry & confusion - one going this way & another that - others not knowing where to go - What to do with our poor maid I cannot tell - in short after the melancholy exercises of the day - I am unable to write anything with propriety or connection ...

Possibly you may prevail on some Friend as you come along that will be willing to come & carry some of your Sister, if any could come It would be an unspeakable Relief to your affectionate but distressed Parent Andrew Eliot.

A May 6, 1775 letter from John Andrews to William Barrel describes some of the initial impacts to the residents of Boston at the time of the Siege (Massachusetts Historical Society),

You'll observe by this, that I am yet in Boston, & here like to remain -- three of us chartered a vessell a fortnight since to convey us to Halifax as Sam dont think your city Safe by any means,

but the absolute refusal of the Governor to Suffer any merchandize to be carried out the town, had determd me to Stay & take care of my effects, together wth the perswasion of Saml & his wife & Ruthy –

the latter being perfectly willing & desirous of going without me, as her peace of mind depends entirely upon his leaving the town;

in consequence of which have acquiesced, but am affraid it will be a long time before I Shall See her again, if ever.

near half the inhabitants have left the town already, & another quarter, at least, have been waiting for a week past with earnest expectation of getting Passes, which have been dealt out very Sparingly of late, not above two or three procur'd of a day, & those with the greatest difficulty.

its a fortnight yesterday Since the communication between the town & country was Stop'd, of consequence our eyes have not been bless'd with either vegetables or fresh provisions, how long we Shall continue in this wretched State - God only knows –

but that no more blood may be Shed is the earnest wish & prayer of your affectionate friend & Brother. Jno. Andrews

PS, ... if the lines Should be attackd, as Some are apprehensive of, farewell to life & prosperity — you must know that no person who leaves the town is allow'd to return again & this mornng an order from the Govr has put a stop to any more passes at any rate not even to admit those to go, who have procurd im already —

After that, the course of the siege was littered with small skirmishes and nothing substantial occurred until May 21. The British forces learned that they needed hay for their horses. Hence Gage ordered an expedition to go to Grape Island and bring back hay to Boston.

The Continentals, however, spotted the troops and called for the militia. At first, the armies engaged in shooting over a long distance, but the militia was able to get their hands on a sloop and sailed to Grape island. Once on land, they set fire to the hay barn and essentially destroyed about 80 tons of hay. Consequently, the Continentals cleared out the cattle, sheep and hay from the islands around Boston.

On June 12, 1775 John Andrews writes to Willaim Barrel again (Massachusetts Historical Society), he notes, in part,

I find an absolute necessity to be here myself, as the Soldiery think they have a license to plunder evry ones house & Store who leaves the town, of which they have given convincing proofs already

and the wanton destruction of property at the late fire, makes the duty, in my mind, more incumbent upon me.

We have now & then a carcase offerd for Sale in the market, which formerly we would not have pickd up in the Street, but bad as it is, it readily Sells for 8 d [illegible] & a qr. of lamb when it makes its appearance wch is rarely once a week, Sells for a dollar, weighing only abt 3 or 3 1/2 pounds, to Such Shifts has the necessity of the times drove us. wood not Scarcely to be got at 22 S a cord

Was it not for a trifle of Salt provisions that we have, twould be impossible for us to live, Pork & beans one day, & beans & pork another & fish when we can catch it, am necessitated to Submit to Such living or risque the little all I have in the world

On June 13, 1775, the leaders of the Continental Army learned that the British forces were planning to fortify the nearby unoccupied hills.

This in turn would give them control of the Boston Harbor. Subsequently, the American forces under the command of Colonel William Prescott immediately occupied the hills.

On June 17, 1775, the British forces learned that the Americans had occupied the hills and they launched an attack against them. The battle came to be known as the Battle of Bunker Hill.

As noted in William Cheever's diary, entry for June 17, 1775 (Massachusetts Historical Society):

A large number (2 or 3000) of Regulars commanded by G'l Howe were boated over to Charlestown to day to dislodge the Provincials of a Hill which they had intrench'd on; this they did, and set the Town of Charlestown on fire.

The Engagement was very warm whereby a great many are killed & wounded, (10 or 1100 of the Regulars) A melancholy Scene of Fire & Slaughter.

Additionally, most of the battle took place on an adjacent hill which later came to be known as 'Breed's hill'. Even though the British forces were victorious in battle, they suffered heavy casualties.



Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker's Hill, June 17, 1775

Following the Battle of Bunker Hill, the siege of Boston essentially became a stalemate, with both sides hesitant to attack.

The Continental Congress formed the new Continental Army on June 14 and General George Washington was named its commander-in-chief on June 15, 1775.

In early July 1775, General George Washington arrived in Cambridge to take charge of the newly established Continental Army. He had the objective of removing the British forces from Boston. To achieve this he worked to fortify the troops and organize the militia into an army.

Washington was growing frustrated with the stalemate. He then proposed to attack the British troops in September, but his generals were against the idea and the stalemate continued. The following month, he again proposed for the same but was denied again.

Subsequently, in October 1775, General Thomas Gage was replaced by General William Howe as commander of the British forces.

Over the course of the siege, both armies had to deal with a harsh winter which resulted in a lack of resources and personnel issues. The winter brought an array of problems for both sides.

The Americans were facing a severe shortage of gunpowder. So much so that the soldiers were handed spears to fight with instead of guns in an event of a British attack. On the other hand, the British forces were facing a huge shortage of wood.

Washington wanted to break the ongoing stalemate. However, to achieve this he needed artillery. In November 1775, he ordered Colonel Henry Knox to bring back artillery captured at Fort Ticonderoga. Knox successfully transported more than 60 tons of captured armament from Fort Ticonderoga back to Boston. These supplies also included more than 55 cannons and they reached Boston by late January 1776.

On February 16 and 18 Washington once again tried to convince his generals to launch an attack against the British troops. However, he received the same answer as before. This was because his generals feared that they had lesser manpower and gunpowder than the British forces.

Moreover, instead of going offensive, they believed that it would be better to take over Dorchester Heights once they had sufficient firepower. In their opinion, this would force the British forces to come out of Boston and off of Noddle's island and then they would be in the open.

Finally, on March 2, 1776, the Continental Army placed some of the cannons in fortification around Boston. They then bombarded the British forces for two days straight. The artillery was strategically placed at Lechmere Point, Cobble Hill in Cambridge, and Lamb's Dam in Roxbury.

William Cheever notes in his diary (Massachusetts Historical Society),

March 3d. [1776] Last Night & this Morning the Provincials fired many Shells & Shot into Town from Phips's Farm, etc., which greatly endanger'd the Lives of those in it; tho' providentially not any one was killed.

On the night of March 4, 1776, the Continental Army led by General John Thomas marched to Dorchester Heights and fortified it with the artillery. By morning, they had the artillery pointed towards the Boston Harbor and the city.



Fortification of the heights south of Boston began on the night of March 4 and 5, 1776. On the other side of Boston, in Cambridge, guns bombarded the British-held town as a diversion. Over the next week, the stronghold grew in size and strength.

William Cheever notes in his diary (Massachusetts Historical Society),

5th. [March 1776] Last Night & this morning a very incessant Fireing from 1/2 past 7 in the even'g 'till 6 this morning: without much damage & this day at noon, Gen'l Howe notified that all Persons who intended to follow the Army should give in their names, as he must withdraw his Troops.

The British forces first decided to go on the offensive but soon realized its futility as their cannons could not reach the American forces stationed at a height. Howe then sent troops to dislodge the Continental Army's guns from Dorchester Heights but a snowstorm hit Boston and that attack never materialized.

The British forces accepted defeat and on March 7. William Cheever notes in his diary (Massachusetts Historical Society),

8th. [March 1776] A Flag was sent out to inform Gen'l Washington that Gen: Howe would remove his Troops without injuring the Town; unless He (Gen: Washington) fired upon his Rear.

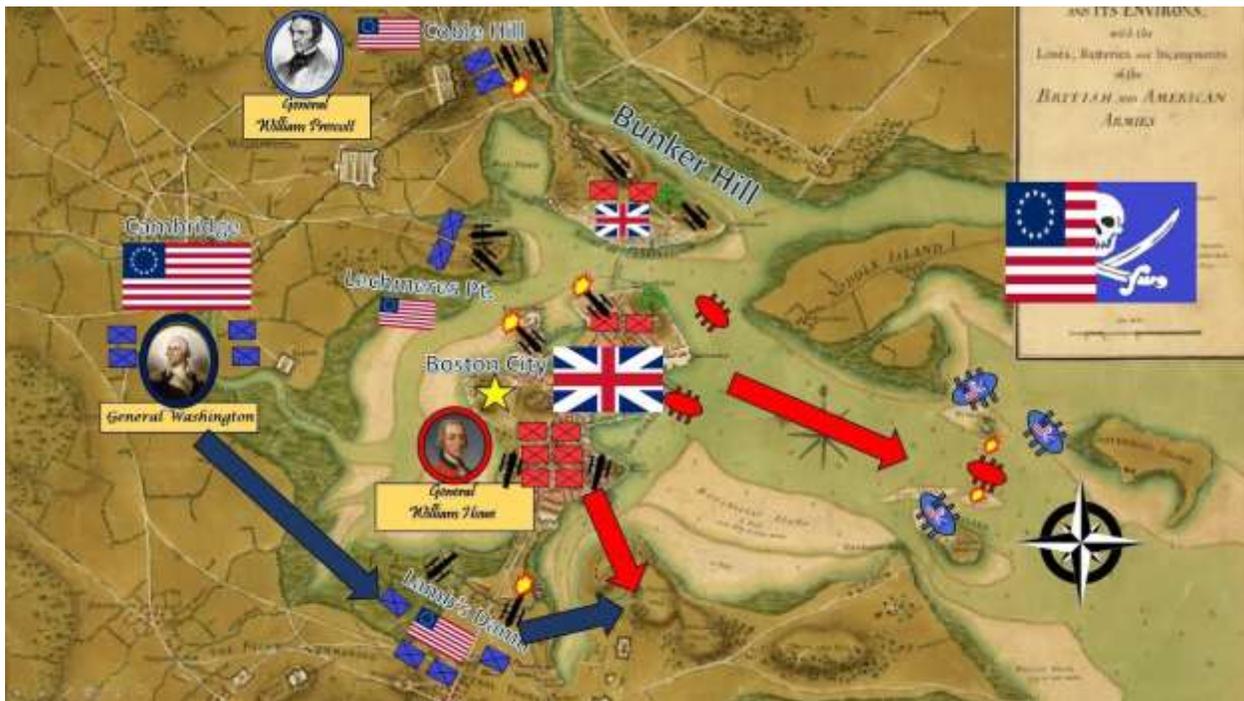
9th. [March 1776] An Answer by one of Gen. Washington Officer's—that as Gen. Howe did not see fit to offer any terms that should be obligatory upon him; so Gen. Washington would not engage himself by any neither.

Howe decided to evacuate the British forces from Boston. The British Forces finally left Boston on March 17, 1776. William Cheever notes in his diary (Massachusetts Historical Society),

17. [March 1776] Gen. Howe left the Town this morning with his Troops; upon which the Continental Army enter'd it.

Hence ending the 11-month long siege of Boston. Today, March 17 is celebrated as 'Evacuation Day' in Suffolk County, Massachusetts.

The siege began on April 19, 1775, and went on for 11-months, following which the British forces left the region and sailed to Nova Scotia. The siege of Boston finally ended on March 17, 1776.



Siege of Boston during the winter of 1775 and Spring of 1776. General Washington was appointed commander in chief of the Continental Army was assigned to oversee the siege of Boston (YouTube)

Information here is primarily from Museum Facts UK; Massachusetts Historical Society; Library of Congress

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