

## **“An Uninterrupted Peal of Thunder” - The Battle of Bunker Hill**



*An Essay by Alexander Cain  
HistoricalNerdery.Com  
2024*

## Prelude to Battle

The Siege of Boston can be divided into three overlapping categories. The first was organizational, addressing General Artemas Ward and then General George Washington's efforts to organize the Continental Army surrounding Boston and ensure it was adequately supplied. The second dealt with the American interdiction efforts on land and sea that were designed to deny vital supplies to the British troops and civilians trapped inside the town. The final category focused on the American military effort to envelop Boston. This final phase started with the Battle of Bunker Hill and ended with the British Evacuation of Boston on March 17, 1776.

The Battle of Bunker Hill was fought on June 17, 1775, and was the third major military engagement in Massachusetts during the American Revolution. In the days leading up to the engagement, British commanders realized that the Charlestown Peninsula, located north of Boston and Dorchester Heights to the south, commanded the town and its harbor. If the American forces seized either or both of the hills, His Majesty's Forces would be forced to abandon Boston.

General Thomas Gage, commander of the British forces, met with Major Generals William Howe, Henry Clinton, and John Burgoyne to discuss potential options. The officers quickly concluded that they should seize both hills before the rebels. General Burgoyne noted, "It was absolutely necessary to become masters of these heights."<sup>1</sup>

The original military plan called for a complex and coordinated strike against the American lines, Bunker Hill, and Dorchester Heights. General Howe was to command an amphibious landing, while Generals Burgoyne and Clinton would attack by land. Unfortunately, for Gage, on June 15th, the leaders of the colonial forces besieging Boston learned of the proposed British operation. In response, American forces formulated their plan to tighten Boston's encirclement by seizing Dorchester Heights and Bunker Hill.

The following day, General Artemas Ward, commander of the New England forces, ordered Colonel William Prescott, with the aid of one thousand colonial troops, to take and fortify Bunker Hill. Prescott was a native of Groton, Massachusetts, and a veteran of the French and Indian Wars. According to the colonel, he received orders the evening of June 16, 1775, to take his regiment, Bridge's and Frye's Regiments, and a detachment of Connecticut troops under the command of Israel Putnam to fortify Bunker Hill.

## The Americans Dig In

---

<sup>1</sup>"Massachusetts Historical Society. Founded 1791.," MHS Collections Online: A Plan of the Battle, on Bunkers Hill, accessed January 12, 2025, [https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item\\_id=801&pid=2](https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=801&pid=2).

Prescott and his troops arrived at the Charlestown peninsula that same night. Prescott and other officers held a council of war and ultimately decided to bypass Bunker Hill, which rose 110 feet and was near the only route back to Cambridge. Instead, they ordered the troops to march to Breed's Hill, a smaller mount further south that was within cannon range of Boston and British ships in the harbor.

Historians have been attempting to reconstruct the events that transpired during Prescott's council of war and the reasoning behind the decision to bypass Bunker Hill and construct entrenchments on the lower hill. Breed's Hill was closer to Boston and His Majesty's forces, making it even more likely to force a military confrontation. However, by positioning troops there, the Americans risked being cut off by British warships controlling Boston Harbor and the mouth of the Charles River. Regardless of the reasons behind the decision, the colonists advanced to Breed's Hill and began to dig in. According to Prescott, "We arrived at the Spot the Lines were drawn by the Enginier and we began the Intrenchmant about 12, o Clock and plying the Work with all possible Expodition."<sup>2</sup>

New England troops toiled industriously throughout the night and early morning to construct an earthen fort 160 feet long and 30 feet high atop the hill and with breastworks. Adjacent to the redoubt was a pre-existing rail fence running towards the Mystic River.

### The American Position is Detected

At dawn, the lookouts of the British Royal Navy warships and the sentries in Boston quickly noticed the new redoubt, which had been constructed within the cannon range of the North End of Boston. Artillery fire directed at the fortification swiftly awoke the town and countryside. Colonel Prescott noted, "Just before sun rising, when the Enemy began a very heavy Canonading and Bombardment, in the Interin [Interim] the Enginier forsook me, having thrown up a small Redout, found it necessary to draw a Line about 20 Rods in length from the Fort Northerly, under a very Warm Fire from the Enemys Artillary."<sup>3</sup> Massachusetts militiaman Peter Brown, would later describe the ferocity of the morning bombardment against his position. "The danger we were in made us think there was treachery and that we were brought there to be all slain, and I must and will say that there was treachery oversight or presumption in the Conduct of our Officers, for about 5 in the morning, we not having more than half our fort done, they began to fire (I suppose as soon as they had orders) pretty briskly for a few minutes, then ceas'd but soon begun again, and fird to the number of twenty minutes, (they killd but one of our Men) then ceas'd to fire till about eleven oClock when they began to fire as brisk as ever, which

---

<sup>2</sup> *Letter from William Prescott to John Adams, August 25, 1775*; "Founders Online: To John Adams from William Prescott, 25 August 1775," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed January 12, 2025, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-03-02-0070>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

caus'd many of our young Country people to desert, apprehending the danger in a clearer manner than others who were more diligent in digging, & fortifying ourselves against them.”<sup>4</sup>

As the morning wore on, British warships continued to bombard the American troops as they worked on their redoubt. Prescott would later report his men were “under a very Warm Fire from the Enemys Artillary, About this Time the above Field Officers being indisposed could render me but Little Service, and the most of the Men under their Command deserted the Party.”<sup>5</sup>

The men inside the redoubt atop Breed’s Hill were understandably anxious. They were thirsty, hungry, and tired. They expected fresh troops from Cambridge to relieve them of their duty so they could retire to a safe location behind friendly lines. According to one period account, “the men work'd exceeding hard all Night & no refreshment had been sent them of any kind. that they were almost suffocated with Dust & Choak'd for want of liquor. they expected to have been releav'd early in the Morning, but no releafe came in & to add to their Distresses they found the Regulars preparing to pay them a visit.”<sup>6</sup> Peter Brown recalled how the morale of the troops was quickly collapsing. “We began to be almost beat out, being fatigued by our Labour, having no sleep the night before, very little to eat, no drink but rum, but what we hazzarded our lives to get, we grew faint, Thirsty, hungry and weary. --The enemy fir'd very warm from Boston, and from on board their Ships.”<sup>7</sup>

Back in Boston, Gage summoned a war council. Understandably, the planned military operation to attack Dorchester Heights and Bunker Hill was cast aside. When the British generals met to discuss their options, General Clinton urged an attack as soon as possible and suggested an attack from the Charlestown Neck that would cut off the colonists' retreat route. However, he was outvoted by the other three generals, who were concerned that his plan violated the rule of not allowing one's army to become trapped between enemy forces. Howe believed the hill was “open and easy of ascent and in short would be easily carried.”<sup>8</sup> General Burgoyne concurred, arguing that the “untrained rabble” would not match their “trained troops.”<sup>9</sup>

### British and American Forces Mobilize

---

<sup>4</sup> *Letter from Peter Brown to Sarah Brown, 25 June 1775*; “Peter Brown (U.S. National Park Service),” National Parks Service, accessed January 12, 2025, <https://www.nps.gov/people/peter-brown.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> *Letter from William Prescott to John Adams*

<sup>6</sup> *Letter from John Bromfield to Jeremiah Powell, June 21, 1775*; “Massachusetts Historical Society. Founded 1791.” MHS Collections Online: Letter from John Bromfield to Jeremiah Powell, 21 June 1775, accessed January 12, 2025, [https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item\\_id=720](https://www.masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=720).

<sup>7</sup> *Letter from Peter Brown to Sarah Brown*.

<sup>8</sup> John L. Smith, “Worst Working Relationship?,” *Journal of the American Revolution*, December 16, 2016, <https://allthingsliberty.com/2017/01/worst-working-relationship/>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

Following the council of war, British forces sprang into action. According to an American eyewitness, the Royal Navy transport boats “[were] hurrying about with great velocity.”<sup>10</sup> General Burgoyne noted that the regulars received little resistance as they crossed by water from Boston. “On the 17th, at dawn of day, we found the enemy had pushed intrenchments with great diligence, during the night, on the heights of Charles-Town, and we evidently saw that every hour gave them fresh strength; it therefore became necessary to alter our plan, and attack on that side. Howe, as second in command, was detached with about 2000 men, and landed on the outward side of the peninsula, covered with shipping, without opposition; he was to advance from thence up the hill.”<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, General Ward was notified in Cambridge that the enemy was preparing for an assault against the American position and quickly ordered “without delay several Regiments down to their Assistance.”<sup>12</sup>

Among the first regiments to respond were those from New Hampshire, under the command of Colonel John Stark. As the men approached Charlestown Neck, a narrow strip of land connecting Charlestown to the rebel positions, the 20-gun *HMS Lively* began to rake the position with artillery fire. As other American regiments scrambled for cover or cowered in fear, Colonel Stark ordered his men to continue across the neck. Miraculously, no one was hurt.

When the New Hampshire men arrived at Breed’s Hill, Stark surveyed the ground and immediately saw that the British would probably try to flank the rebels by landing on the beach of the Mystic River, below and to the left of Bunker Hill. Stark led his men to the low ground between Mystic Beach and the hill and ordered them to “fortify” the rail fence by stuffing straw and grass between the rails. Stark also noticed an additional gap in the defense line and ordered Lieutenant Nathaniel Hutchins and others to follow him down a 9-foot-high bank to the edge of the Mystic River. They piled rocks across the 12-foot-wide beach to form a crude defense line. After this fortification was hastily constructed, Stark deployed his men three deep behind the wall.

Elements of other regiments also risked the dangers of Royal Navy artillery fire, crossed Charlestown Neck, and reinforced the American positions. These troops included portions of Massachusetts regiments of Colonels Brewer, Nixon, Woodbridge, Little, Major Moore, and Callender’s Company of Artillery.

---

<sup>10</sup> *Letter from John Bromfield to Jeremiah Powell.*

<sup>11</sup> *A Plan of the Battle, on Bunkers Hill; “Massachusetts Historical Society. Founded 1791.,” MHS Collections Online: A Plan of the Battle, on Bunkers Hill, accessed January 12, 2025, [https://masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item\\_id=801](https://masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=801).*

<sup>12</sup> *Letter from John Bromfield to Jeremiah Powell*



One volunteer who arrived to support the American Cause was the President of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress and a recently appointed Major General, Joseph Warren. Upon arrival, Colonel Prescott offered Warren command of the field. Surprisingly, he declined the offer, deferring to Prescott and Putnam's military experience.

The Committee of Safety dispatched alarm riders to the countryside as American forces struggled to shore up their defenses. The riders quickly spread the news that a battle had commenced and that militia companies would be needed to help stem the British tide should they break through the American positions on Breed's and Bunker's Hill. The "Bunker Hill Alarm," as it became known, reached Essex, Middlesex, and Norfolk Counties in the afternoon of June 17th. Captain John Parker's Lexington Company was among those militia companies that responded to the Bunker Hill Alarm. Despite still reeling from the events of April 19, 1775, Captain Parker ordered the Lexington militia company to assemble and personally led sixty-four men to Cambridge to assist in the cause.

Between midday and two o'clock in the afternoon, the first wave of British troops began to cross over from Boston and land in Charlestown. They assembled out of musket range and awaited the second wave of soldiers. Prescott quickly adjusted his defensive lines in preparation for the coming attack. "The Enemy continueing an incessant Fire with their Artillary. about 2, o Clock in the afternoon on the seventeenth the Enemy began to land a northeasterly Point from the Fort, and I orderd the Train with 2 field Pieces to go and oppose them and the Connecticut Forces to support them but the Train marched a different Course & I believe those sent to their support followd, I suppose to Bunkers Hill."<sup>13</sup>

### The Destruction of Charlestown

General Howe anticipated sending his force in two thrusts: One force under the command of Brigadier General Robert Pigot would advance on the redoubt as a feint, and a second, under the direction of Howe, would march to the right through an open pasture and flank, surround, and crush the resistance inside the redoubt. Major John Pitcairn of the Marines led a reserve force.

As Howe prepared to launch his attack, American militiamen took up sniper positions in the homes, barns, and warehouses of Charlestown and opened fire on Brigadier General Pigot's troops. As casualties mounted, General Howe requested assistance from the Royal Navy. Admiral Graves, who had planned for such a possibility, ordered hot shot and incendiary bombs fired into the village and then sent a landing party to set fire to Charlestown. Amid the smoke and flames, local inhabitants fled to escape to safety. General Burgoyne observed the town's

---

<sup>13</sup> *Letter from William Prescott to John Adams.*

destruction from Boston and later reported, “Strait before us a large and a noble town in one great blaze; the church steeples, being of timber, were great pyramids of fire above the rest.”<sup>14</sup>

A broadside announcement published in the aftermath of the Battle of Bunker Hill described the fate of Charlestown and its residents. The town “was wantonly and inhumanly set on fire and consumed, previous to the engagement: This town contained one large meeting-house, about three hundred dwelling-houses, a great number of which were large and elegant, besides one hundred and fifty or two hundred other buildings, whereby about six or seven hundred of its distressed inhabitants are now forced from their dwellings, and obliged to seek new habitations for themselves.”<sup>15</sup>

As the bombardment of Charlestown and the American positions continued, many residents of nearby towns climbed to nearby hills and rooftops to watch the events unfold. In Boston, General Burgoyne observed, “behind us the church steeples and heights of our own camp covered with spectators of the rest of our army which was not engaged; the hills round the country covered with spectators.”<sup>16</sup> Abigail Adams and her eight-year-old son, John Quincy Adams, watched the engagement from a hilltop in Braintree. Twenty-two miles to the north, in Andover, Massachusetts, residents watched from Holt Hill as Charlestown burned. Due to over a century of deforestation, colonists as far north as Exeter, New Hampshire, and Newburyport, Massachusetts, could hear the British artillery bombardments.

### The First Attack

By three o’clock in the afternoon, over 2,000 British soldiers had landed and were ready to attack the American positions. When Howe finally launched his attack, he had hoped the artillery crews he had brought over with his forces would provide cover for their assault. However, it was soon discovered that these cannons had been supplied with the wrong caliber of ammunition, rendering them useless during the first assault.

General Howe led the light infantry companies and grenadiers in assaulting the American left flank along the rail fence, expecting an easy effort against Stark's recently arrived troops. His light infantry advanced along the narrow beach in column formation to turn the far left flank of the colonial position. Howe’s grenadiers were deployed to his left and advanced towards the rail fence. Pigot led the 5th, 38th, 43rd, 47th, and 52nd regiments and the Marines as they advanced towards the redoubt.

---

<sup>14</sup> *A Plan of the Battle, on Bunkers Hill.*

<sup>15</sup> John L. Bell, “The Russells’ Poetic Broadside on Bunker Hill,” *The Russells’ Poetic Broadside on Bunker Hill*, accessed January 12, 2025, <https://boston1775.blogspot.com/2014/06/the-russells-poetic-broadside-on-bunker.html>.

<sup>16</sup> *A Plan of the Battle, on Bunkers Hill*

Many historians point to the alleged order given to the American troops to hold their fire until they “see the whites of their eyes.” It is uncertain who said it, if at all, and some historians attribute it to Putnam, Stark, or Prescott, and it may have been told first by one and repeated by the others. Furthermore, the phrase was not an original one. As historian John Bell correctly pointed out, holding fire for that long was said to be a tradition of the Royal Navy. According to newspaper accounts from the 1750s, Royal Navy officers repeatedly ordered their men to hold their fire until “they could see the white of their enemy’s eye.” Whether or not it was said in this battle, it was clear that the colonial military leadership regularly reminded their troops to hold their fire until it would have the most damaging effect.<sup>17</sup>

As the British forces advanced on the American positions, they faced a host of difficulties - the hay on the hillside had not been harvested, necessitating that the regulars march through waist-high grass that concealed the uneven terrain beneath. According to Boston National Historical Park research, hidden beneath the matured hay and grasses was a web of stone walls, rail fences, hedges, and a marsh of unknown proportions. General Burgoyne would later complain, “Howe's disposition was exceeding soldier-like; in my opinion it was perfect. As his first arm advanced up the hill, they met with a thousand impediments from strong fences, and were much exposed.”<sup>18</sup>

From a vantage point in Boston, 10-year-old Loyalist Dorothea Gamsby watched as Howe’s forces advanced against the American positions. According to Gamsby, “The glittering host, the crashing music, all the pomp and brilliance of war, moved on up toward that band of rebels, but they still laboured at their entrenchment, they seemed to take no heed- the bullets from the ships, the advancing column of British warriors, were alike unnoticed ... Every available window and roof was filled with anxious spectators, watching the advancing regulars, every heart I dare say throbbed as mine did, and we held our breath or rather it seemed to stop and oppress the labouring chest of its own accord so intensely we awaited the expected attack, but the troops drew nearer and the rebels toiled on ... At length one who stood conspicuously above the rest waved his bright weapon, the explosion came attended by the crash [illegible] the shrieks of the wounded and the groans of the dying. My aunt fainted. Poor Abby looked on like one distracted. I screamed with all my might.”<sup>19</sup>

At the head of the Howe’s light infantry column was His Majesty’s 23rd Regiment of Foot, also known as the Royal Welch Fusiliers. As the light infantrymen from the regiment advanced along the shoreline towards Stark’s position, the New Hampshire men crouched low to

---

<sup>17</sup> John L. Bell, “Who Coined the Phrase ‘till You See the Whites of Their Eyes’?,” accessed January 12, 2025, <https://boston1775.blogspot.com/2007/06/who-coined-phrase-till-you-see-whites.html>.

<sup>18</sup> *A Plan of the Battle, on Bunkers Hill*.

<sup>19</sup> Alexander Cain, “‘I Screamed with All My Might’ - Dorothea Gamsby, a Child Witness to the Battle of Bunker Hill,” “I screamed with all my might” - Dorothea Gamsby, A Child Witness to the Battle of Bunker Hill, accessed January 12, 2025, <https://historicalnerdery01.blogspot.com/2021/05/i-screamed-with-all-my-might-dorothea.html>.



the ground. They waited until the advancing British were almost on top of them and then stood up and fired as one. They unleashed a fierce and unexpected volley directly into the faces of the fusiliers. The deadly volley swept through their ranks, killing and wounding over 90 men almost instantaneously. The unexpected volley broke the light column's advance, and the surviving men panicked, broke, and fled from the field.

Behind the 23rd Regiment of Foot was a light infantry company composed of men from the 4th Regiment of Foot, also known as the King's Own Regiment. The 4th Foot rushed forward and tried to scramble over and around the dead and wounded fusiliers. This charge was also decimated by a withering fusillade of Stark's men. The remainder of the light infantry quickly broke and retreated from the field. Some ran as far as the Royal Navy's landing boats.

Howe's grenadiers to his left were not faring better. They, too, were cut down by the barrage of musket fire. At the height of the attack, James Abercrombie, commanding the Grenadiers, was fatally wounded. Pigot's attacks on the redoubt and breastworks suffered a similar fate. He halted his forces before the redoubt and attempted to exchange fire with the colonists. As a result, his men were fully exposed and suffered heavy losses. At the same time, his soldiers continued to be harried by snipers inside Charlestown as it continued to burn. After learning of Howe's fate, Pigot ordered a retreat.

### The Second Attack

Howe quickly met with his officers and ordered a second assault on the American position. This time, Pigot was to assault the redoubt directly while Howe would lead an attack against the rail fence. The regulars reformed on the field and marched out again, this time not only navigating a field strewn with obstacles but with dead and wounded comrades as well.

Along the rail fence, Connecticut troops under the command of Lieutenant Charles Knowlton were ordered to hold their fire until the enemy came within 15 rods of their position. Inside the redoubt, Prescott also ordered his men to hold their fire.

In Boston, civilian spectators watched as the British troops ascended the hill again. Suddenly, a large orange flash like "a continual sheet of lightning" danced along the earthworks, followed by "an uninterrupted peal of thunder."<sup>20</sup> Rebel fire tore into the ranks of the regulars. According to Prescott, "the Enemy advanced and fired very hotly on the Fort and meeting with a Warm Reception there was a very smart firing on both sides. after a considerable Time finding our Amunition was almost spent I commanded a sessation till the Enemy advanced within 30

---

<sup>20</sup> Harold Murdock, "January Meeting, 1925," Notes on Bunker Hill - The British Attack, accessed January 12, 2025, <https://www.colonialsociety.org/node/717>.

yards when we gave them such a hot fire, that the [y] were obliged to retire nearly 150 yards before they could Rally and come again to the Attack.”<sup>21</sup>

Howe’s forces were cut down before the rail fence and redoubt. A British officer would sadly report "Most of our Grenadiers and Light-infantry, the moment of presenting themselves lost three-fourths, and many nine-tenths, of their men. Some had only eight or nine men a company left.”<sup>22</sup> It was too much to endure, and the British troops again broke and ran from the field.

Once out of musket fire range, British forces began to ferry their wounded back to Boston. Loyalist Dorothea Gamsby witnessed the carnage of the battle firsthand. According to Gamsby, “By and by, drays, carts and every description of vehicle that could be obtained were seen nearing the scene of conflict, and the roar of artillery ceased ... Then came the loads of wounded men attended by long lines of soldiers ... a sight to be remembered ... there is nothing but woe and sorrow and shame to be found in the reality.”<sup>23</sup>

### The Third Attack

After much debate and consultation with his staff officers, General Howe ordered his troops to assault the American position a third time - a concentrated bayonet charge against the redoubt. Before launching the assault, Howe sent word to General Clinton in Boston for additional troops. Clinton, who had observed the first two attacks with Burgoyne, sent around 400 men from the 2nd Battalion of Marines and the 63rd Regiment and followed himself to help rally the troops. In addition to these reserves, he convinced around 200 walking wounded to form up for the third attack.

Meanwhile, men rejoiced inside the redoubt and along the rail fence. However, the celebration was short-lived, as the American troops faced three distinct issues: They had received very little support in the form of reinforcements from the American main army, men inside the redoubt and along the rail fence deserted and abandoned their posts in large numbers and worst of all, they were almost out of ammunition.

General Ward desperately tried to funnel troops to shore up the American position; however, most regiments either refused or could not cross Charlestown Neck due to its continuous bombardment by the Royal Navy. At least one regimental commander did little to distinguish himself in the face of combat. Gerrish’s 25th Massachusetts Regiment had arrived at Charlestown Neck shortly after the first assault on Breed’s Hill. The battalion immediately came under heavy fire. As Major Loammi Baldwin of Woburn later recalled, “[I] went with the

---

<sup>21</sup> *Letter from William Prescott to John Adams.*

<sup>22</sup> Richard Ketchum, *Decisive Day: The Battle of Bunker Hill* (New York: Owl Books, 1999), p. 161.

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Cain, “I Screamed with All My Might’

recruits and met men from the fort or breastwork where there was a great number of cannon shot struck near me, but they were not suffered to hurt me.”<sup>24</sup> Upon seeing the narrow roadway being raked from both sides by British warships, Colonel Gerrish was overcome with fear. “A tremor seiz’d [Gerrish]. He began to bellow, ‘Retreat! Retreat! Or you all be cutt off!’ which so confused and scar’d our men, that they retreated most precipitately.”<sup>25</sup> Moments later, Connecticut’s General Israel Putnam arrived on the scene, fresh from the fight and intent on returning reinforcements to the American position. He found Gerrish prostrate on the ground, professing that he was exhausted.<sup>26</sup> The general pleaded with Gerrish to lead his troops onto the field. Finding both the colonel and the entire regiment unresponsive, Putnam resorted to threats and violence. He cursed and threatened the men and even struck some with the flat of his sword in an attempt to drive them forward.<sup>27</sup> Only the regimental adjutant and a handful of men rallied around him, crossed over the neck, climbed Bunker Hill and moved forward to take up a defensive position on Breed’s Hill.<sup>28</sup> The remainder of the regiment scattered and fled back towards Cambridge, where they remained for the rest of the day.

As Howe’s men advanced towards the redoubt, they were again met with a heavy volley of musket fire. However, subsequent firings became ragged and started to sputter. When the Americans ran out of powder, they began to hurl rocks and sod at their assailants. Realizing the Americans were defenseless, the British troops let out a blood-curdling roar and rushed the redoubt walls. Prescott would later report “Our Amunition being nea [r]ly exhaustid could keep up only a scattering Fire. The Enemy being numerous surrounded our little Fort began to mount our Lines and enter the Fort with their Bayonets, we was obliged to retreat through them while they kept up as hot a fire as it was possible for them to make we having very few Bayonets could make no resistance, we kept the fort about one hour and twenty Minutes after the Attack with small Arms.”<sup>29</sup>

One of the last British casualties as the battle neared its end was Major John Pitcairn, the marine who was present at the Battle of Lexington. As he lay dying on the battlefield, his final words returned to the engagement that started the American Revolution. According to Ezra Stiles, Pitcairn insisted it was the Americans who initiated the fight at Lexington.

As British soldiers and Marines swarmed over the walls, they were initially met with stiff resistance that devolved into a bloody hand-to-hand fight inside the redoubt. However, the rebels

---

<sup>24</sup> Letter from Loammi Baldwin to his wife, June 18, 1775; Richard Frothingham, *The Battle-field of Bunker Hill: With a Relation of the Action by William Prescott, and Illustrative Documents*, (Boston, 1876), 43.

<sup>25</sup> An unknown Newbury man, writing on June 21, 1775, relates Gerrish’s conduct. This excerpt of the letter appears in Richard M. Ketchum, *Decisive Day*, (New York, New York: Anchor Books, 1962), 165.

<sup>26</sup> Frothingham, *History of the Siege*, 143.

<sup>27</sup> Ketchum, *Decisive Day*, 165.

<sup>28</sup> Frothingham, *History of the Siege*, 179. It is not known whether those who followed Febiger onto the field included men from Lexington.

<sup>29</sup> *Letter from William Prescott to John Adams*.

quickly broke and ran. Any colonists able to flee ran as the British pursued them. Many Americans tossed aside their muskets, equipment, and packs to escape. In a letter to his mother, Militia man Peter Brown described his mental state as he fled from the battlefield. “When the Arrows of death flew thick around me, I was preserv'd while others were suffer'd to fall a prey to our Cruel enemies.”<sup>30</sup>

Joseph Warren was one of the more notable men who remained inside the redoubt as the American troops fled. As he parried British bayonets with his ceremonial sword, he was shot in the head and was instantly killed. A 2011 medical forensic analysis spearheaded by physician and historian Dr. Samuel Forman revealed that Warren had been hit with a small caliber weapon - either a pistol or an officer's fusil.<sup>31</sup> His body was stripped of its clothing, and he was bayoneted until unrecognizable and then shoved into a shallow ditch. British Captain Walter Laurie later said he "stuffed the scoundrel with another rebel into one hole, and there he and his seditious principles may remain.”

In the aftermath of the battle, Howe held the field but refused to press his advantage to punch through the American siege lines.

### The Aftermath of the Battle

In a letter to John Adams, Benjamin Hichborn describes how British Lieutenant James Drew of the sloop *Scorpion* allegedly desecrated Warren's body two days after the Battle of Bunker Hill. “In a day or two after, Drew went upon the Hill again opened the dirt that was thrown over Doctor: Warren, spit in his face jumped on his stomach and at last cut off his head and committed every act of violence upon his body.”<sup>32</sup>

In the aftermath of the engagement, The British had taken the ground but at a significant loss; they had suffered 1,054 casualties --- 226 dead and 828 wounded, with a disproportionate number of these officers. British dead and wounded included 100 commissioned officers, a significant portion of the British officer corps in North America. The total casualty rate for the British was almost 50%. General Clinton, remarked in his diary that “A few more such victories would have shortly put an end to British dominion in America.”<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Letter from Peter Brown to Sarah Brown.

<sup>31</sup> See Forman, Sam. *Dr. Joseph Warren: The Boston Tea Party, Bunker Hill, and the Birth of American Liberty*. Pelican Publishing, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Letter from John Adams to Benjamin Hitchborn, November 25, 1775; Founders Online. To John Adams from Benjamin Hichborn, 25 November 1775. Accessed from <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-03-02-0172> on September 25, 2022.

<sup>33</sup> Diary of General Henry Clinton, June \_\_, 1775; “The Henry Clinton Papers,” UM Clements Library, accessed January 12, 2025, <https://clements.umich.edu/exhibit/spy-letters-of-the-american-revolution/clinton-papers/>.

The colonial losses were about 450, of whom 115 were killed, 305 wounded, and 30 missing. Most of the colonial losses came during the withdrawal.

In London, the casualty counts alarmed the military establishment, forcing many to rethink their views of colonial military capability. King George's attitude toward the colonies hardened, and the news may have contributed to his rejection of the Continental Congress' Olive Branch Petition, the last political attempt at reconciliation.

In July, General George Washington arrived in Cambridge to assume command of a new Continental Army and direct the ongoing campaign at Boston.

General Gage was eventually recalled to London to answer for the battle's outcome. General Howe, the field commander at Bunker Hill, assumed command. Howe was unwilling to repeat another disaster he had witnessed firsthand, and Washington lacked the supplies to mount an offensive. Thus, the Siege of Boston devolved into a stalemate, which did not end until March 1776.