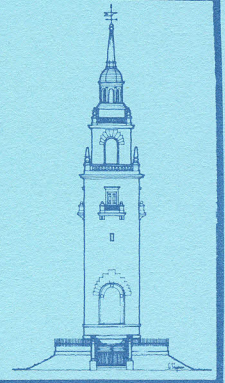


the monument



Dorchester Heights - Thomas Park

It is an Indian summer afternoon in November. The warm sun and gentle breeze add to the peaceful beauty of the park. The leaves have fallen from the trees and shift noisily over concrete walks and gather in corners of long stairways until maintenance men sweep them away each day. We climb steep South Boston hills to reach the park, like climbing a small mountain, and are rewarded with panoramic views over rooftops inviting games like "Can you name this?" and "What's that?" The skyline of Boston, familiar even from this different perch, with its tallest buildings stretching skyward, seems close and compact.

This is Dorchester Heights, the same hill the colonists fortified in one night on March 4, 1776 and forced the British evacuation of Boston. We try to imagine this park fortified with cannon, fascines, chandileers; we try to picture colonial soldiers and we listen for cannon sounds booming in the distance but nothing remains of its former military power. Two centuries later the park gives no clues to its early military importance.

For several years after the evacuation of Boston by the British, Dorchester Heights Fort remained idle, unused, unneeded. Its military purpose served, Dorchester Heights might have gone into land fill as did its twin, but happily

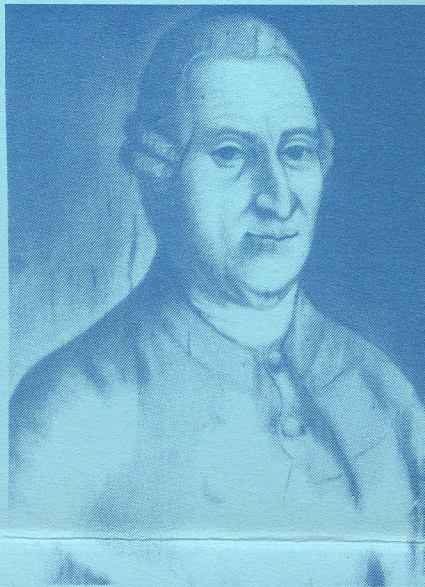
this did not happen. A growing South Boston needed a water supply and in 1849 the city built a reservoir on Dorchester Heights. The city then levelled the western area of the hill and planned a park with paths and approaches from the street. The park plan called for grassy slopes, plentiful trees, and an iron fence surrounding the park at street level. This area was named Thomas Park in honor of General John Thomas, the man who led the fortification of Dorchester Heights in 1776.

In 1902, the State of Massachusetts erected the imposing Georgian Revival monument on the site. From 1902 to 1913 the park enjoyed its most groomed look. Pictures of the park during this period show tree-lined walks, grassy slopes, a pristine monument and wrought iron fences.

Today this unusual city park is receiving the attention it deserves. The park is managed by the National Park Service. National Park Service Rangers give interpretive talks upon request. Maintenance staff groom the grounds and protective services offer protection for the park. The Dorchester Heights Staff has worked hard to restore the park to its former picturesque condition for the enjoyment of local residents and all visitors interested in colonial history.



City of Boston from Dorchester Heights, 1859



courtesy, Massachusetts Historical Society

General John Thomas

Letters to His Wife: General John Thomas

What kind of man led the Continental Army during its fortification of Dorchester Heights? General John Thomas, surgeon, soldier, farmer, husband, father, citizen is portrayed favorably in numerous sources. Allen French wrote in *The First Year of the Revolution* that John Thomas died early and he had fewer achievements than his fellow generals but his abilities at Dorchester Heights were probably next to those of Washington. The fortification of Dorchester Heights was done quietly and effectively by a general who was not a career soldier and who preferred being home with his family but felt a need to serve his country. It seems, however, that his family was never far from his thoughts and there are letters from General Thomas during his command at Roxbury to his wife, Hannah, who resided in Kingston, Massachusetts, that demonstrated his concern for her.

At age 50, John Thomas possessed the military experience that qualified him for the position of General in the Massachusetts Army against the British. He had risen from Ensign to Colonel in the French-Indian Wars. He spent the years between the wars with his family in Kingston, Massachusetts, farming and practicing medicine. In 1774, the Provincial Congress appointed him one of the five generals of the projected army and assigned him to Roxbury. He took command of the Roxbury High Fort in April, 1775. In May, 1775, he wrote the following letter of encouragement to his wife:

I am Sorry the People there are not Possessed with a Greater Firmness of mind than Constantly to keep themselves and women in Terror... My wife I Should be Glad you would muster up that firmness and Resolution which the times we Live in Requires be not Terrefyed at Every Shadow and the Chat of Every Timerious Person I am Confident from Good authorety that I have Received out of Boston that Plimouth at present is not in any Danger of the Kings Ships for they Dare not venture a Kings Ship to go into that harbour.

In July, 1775, Thomas was thinking of resigning his commission and wrote his wife,

I am not Sertain but I may visit you herelong which would give me much pleasure to Return to my Dear Famely

But he was prevailed upon by the House of Representatives and Commander-in-Chief, Washington, to remain in command and so he wrote home:

When I wrote you Last I mentioned Returning Home and Living with my famely which is the only Happy way of Life that I am acquainted with and Never Shall Injoy my Self untill that Happy Day Shall Come but as my Country Calls me I must obey.

Thomas remained in service to his country and experienced a very active command in Roxbury. In May 1775, he wrote General Ward that he was informed of General Gage's determination to take possession of Dorchester Neck. He noted that he had posted 400 men very near the Neck and two Regiments about a mile and a half away and was equally determined that the British should not possess the Neck. He asked the Committee of War for an opinion as how to best defend that territory. At this time he also wrote his wife, advising her on farming, planting, care of cows and included information about the war:

A vesel or two arrived yesterday from hallafax with a Small Number of Regular Troops we have very Favourable accounts from the other Colonys that of New Yourk is about as Favourable as at first if you Should hear that we have a Short Time a Number of Brass Cannon from Tyconderoga you may not Disbelieve it... General Gage Still Continues to Distress the Inhabitants of Boston....

General Thomas was destined to play an important role in Revolutionary history. When events and strategy made it advisable to fortify Dorchester Heights, he undertook this responsibility and made a full report of that event to his family in Kingston. He reported that on Monday night of March 4, 1776, at 7 p.m., he marched with 3,000 men beside 360 team of oxen and several pieces of artillery and by 8 a.m. had fortified both hills at Dorchester Heights. "At sunrise The Enemy viewed us with Astonishment" he wrote his wife shortly after the event. General Thomas was modest in his description of his accomplishments. General Howe wrote that there must have been between 12,000-14,000 men working to fortify Dorchester Heights that night. General Thomas and his men worked diligently and silently fortifying the Heights. They had been carefully briefed and went about their tasks with great energy. It went quickly. Fortification on the Heights gave the Colonial Army command of the Castle, the channels and the town of Boston itself. The British were non-plussed. Their cannons were no threat to the redoubts on the Heights. In a very short time they had gone from security to defeat. A surprising personal anecdote concerning General Thomas was reported in a letter he wrote his wife a few days following the fortification of Dorchester Heights:

Your Son John is well & in High Spirits he ran away from Oakley Privately on Tuesday morning & got by the centrys & came to me on Dorchester where he has bin mostly since.

Even in these hours of great responsibility and activity, General Thomas combined the roles of soldier/father and allowed his 10-year-old son to accompany him in his command.

On March 6, 1776, Congress appointed General Thomas a Major-General and dispatched him to Canada to command troops led by Montgomery and Arnold. He died of smallpox in Canada in June 1776.

CHOICES - National Park Service Brings Historical Site to the Classroom

"I am a British soldier and I need a place to stay in Boston so I decide to move into your house and watch everything you do. How do you feel?"

"Angry," comes prompt reply.

"I am a British soldier; I've been driven back to Boston from Lexington and Concord. How do I feel about you, the colonists?"

Questions and answers flow back and forth. Pat Bartello, a Park Ranger at the Dorchester Heights Historic Site, has brought the site to the classroom in a program named CHOICES. Twenty-nine 5th grade students, already familiar with the Revolutionary War, will learn more about the problems of the colonists, what life was like for them, how they coped with their problems and how they eventually forced the evacuation of the British from Boston.

The CHOICES program begins with a discussion between Pat and the students about the events leading to the occupation of Boston by British soldiers; what the occupation was like for Bostonians, and how the colonists ultimately freed themselves from British occupation. Pat's presentation helps the students look closely at the colonists' plight and how they chose to solve the problems of fuel, food, and supply shortages, lack of ammunition and well-trained army, curtailment of freedoms, destruction of property and other changes that were forced on them by the British.

After discussion the class separates into groups. Each group studies a packet with letters, documents, laws, and other material which describe in detail the overwhelming problems of the colonists. The group members read the material within their small group. With the help of the group, one group member writes three problems facing the colonists and each group later shares this information with the entire class.

The final exercise takes place around a map depicting Boston and surrounding areas in 1776. Dorchester Heights appears as the highest point on the map. Pat describes how the colonists fortified it in one night, March 4, 1776. Pat relates the story of Henry Knox's arduous journey to Fort Ticonderoga for supplies and ammunition, and she tells the students that the colonists contributed to the fortification by supplying materials and building parts of the fort which was later assembled on the Heights. The students learn that the British were fooled into thinking that the colonial army at Dorchester Heights consisted of many more soldiers than actually participated, and how the well-fortified fortress forced the evacuation of the British from Boston.

The students follow up the presentation with good questions, "Why is July 4th Independence Day instead of March 4th?" "Does this mean the war is over?" Pat explains that the evacuation of Boston did not mean the end of the war but it was a significant victory for the colonists and July 4, 1776 was the day the colonists signed the Declaration of Independence.

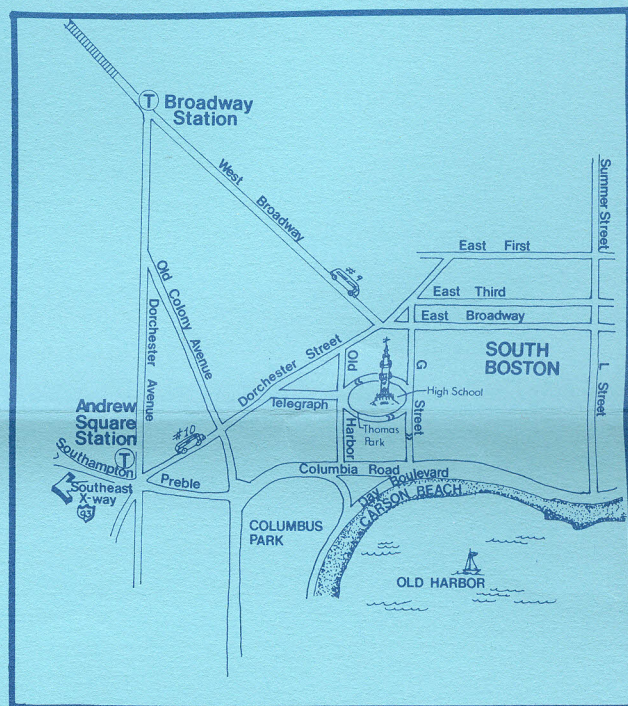
The program is over. The class was knowledgeable about Revolutionary history. They are now well versed in significant problems of the colonists and the choices they made to solve them. The National Park Service has brought the interpretive history of the Dorchester Heights Site to the classroom.



photo by Vincent Lombardi

CHOICES Program

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR National Park Service

Dorchester Heights National Historic Site is a unit of Boston National Historical Park. For more information

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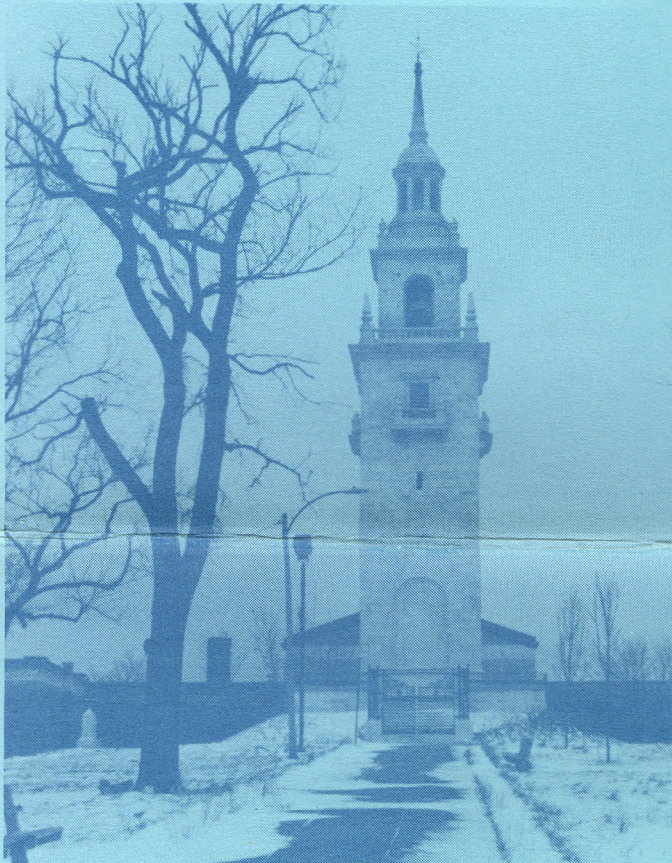


photo by Vincent Lombardi

The Monument at Dorchester Heights

City Park to National Park

At the time of its accomplishment, the fortification of Dorchester Heights in 1776 was a significant coup. That a collection of colonial militiamen and volunteers could drive thousands of British troops from their camp in Boston provided a much needed boost to American morale in the early days of the Revolution. The bloodless victory, however, faded from view as the more violent battles of the Revolution captured public attention.

The citizens of Boston did not forget the historic importance of Dorchester Heights. In 1898, almost 125 years after the evacuation, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts

held a competition for the design of a monument to commemorate the 1776 victory. The architectural firm of Peabody and Stearns submitted the winning design. A committee appointed by the governor selected a tower in the Georgian revival or style popular in the late nineteenth century.

Its creator, Robert S. Peabody, earned wide recognition for his work. He designed the United States Customs House Tower in Boston, as well as buildings in Worcester, Clinton and Chelsea, Massachusetts. An accomplished student of eighteenth century architecture, some historians consider him a pioneer in the colonial revival style.

Peabody drew inspiration for the Dorchester Heights Monument from eighteenth century church steeples, many of which mix with skyscrapers in Boston's modern skyline. The cupola, balustrades, and stage construction of the memorial clearly recall these earlier structures. Unlike the wooden steeples, the monument was constructed of brick and stone with white marble facing. When Peabody adapted the Georgian style to a free standing tower and modified the proportions for use in stone, the statement was unique. Thus, the Dorchester Heights Monument serves to commemorate not only an eighteenth century event, but also a popular nineteenth century architectural style.

For many years residents have worked to insure the preservation of the Dorchester Heights site. In 1951, with the support of Speaker of the House John W. McCormack, their efforts began to win results. On the 175th anniversary of the evacuation, the United States Department of the Interior entered into a cooperative agreement with the City of Boston and designated Dorchester Heights a National Historic Site. Twenty-seven years later, the National Parks and Recreation Act authorized the city of Boston to transfer the site to the National Park Service.

On March 8, 1980, a ceremony marked the opening of Dorchester Heights as the newest addition to Boston National Historical Park. At the site, visitors can learn about the successful fortification of the Heights by colonial militia and the resulting evacuation of British troops from Boston. From the hill, one can appreciate the historic significance of its location and see the result of two centuries of growth in the dynamic city of Boston.

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