

BOST-D.005
CRBIB# 015856

457/130623

DORCHESTER HEIGHTS

CRB1B #000434
015856

BOST - D. 005
PROPERTY OF LIBRARY
DIVISION OF CULTURAL
RESOURCES, NARO

DORCHESTER HEIGHTS

The most important event in Dorchester during the Revolution was the almost bloodless victory of the Americans in suddenly fortifying Dorchester Heights, thereby forcing the British fleet and army to evacuate Boston and its harbor without any great attempt to dislodge the Americans from their positions.

Prior to this event Dorchester had a very high record for "rebel"¹ activities. John Hancock was among its most popular citizens. The citizens of Dorchester did not approve of the Stamp Act. In 1769 the Sons of Liberty had a great and enthusiastic banquet at Robinsons Tavern. After the feasting there was a great procession "headed by John Hancock in his chariot". In 1770 Dorchester resolutions upheld the non-importation agreement. Three years later the town passed nine resolutions in answer to those of Boston. These nine resolutions urged a constitutional redress of their grievances and upheld the compact theory of organized society. Dorchester was one of the towns which voted not to allow the landing of the tea in 1774. A part of a chest of tea was seized and destroyed near Dorchester at this time. Carpenters dared not continue to build British barracks in Boston, because of the fear of their fellow Dorchester townspeople. Dorchester had a delegate at the rebel provincial assembly. In 1774 the town decided to pay its taxes to the rebels instead of to the royal government and by March, 1775, had its body of Minute Men. Dorchester men were not at Bunker Hill because they were ordered to watch Gage's men elsewhere.

1. William Dana Orcutt, Good Old Dorchester, Cambridge, 1893, 126-131.

Neither Washington nor Howe was anxious to fortify Dorchester Neck in the winter of 1775 although Washington, realizing the great value of siege ordnance, had had Henry Knox perform what was also a military miracle. In the winter of 1775-6 Knox had brought heavy artillery and mortars from Fort George to Boston. Before their arrival, Washington had at one time wanted to storm the town in row boats. This had been in the fall of 1775. In this last plan he was overruled by his officers. The rank and file looked with joy upon the big guns but "the effect upon the general officers was less marked because of their knowledge of the scantiness of the gun powder supply". In February of '76 Washington chafed when his desire to attack Boston with a "musket attack" was refused by his officers in council. Artemus Ward the first commander of the Continental Army, had frustrated a plan of the British to take Dorchester in the preceeding summer. Now at last Dorchester Neck was to be fortified. How to erect fortifications in one night was a problem. Rufus Putnam discovered a "chandelier" in "Muller's Field Engineer" and the solution began to appear. A chandelier consisted of a stout frame in which fascines could be set, held

2. "Knox brought him (Washington) from Fort George, on forty-two sleds, eight brass mortars, six iron mortars, two iron howitzers, thirteen brass cannons (sic), twenty six iron cannons (sic) two thousand three hundred pounds of lead, and one barrel of flints." Benson J. Lossing, The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution, New York, 1860, Vol. I, pp. 577-578. Frothingham indicates that some materials also came from Ticonderoga, Crown Point or St. Johns. Knox was in Ticonderoga December 5. He wrote Washington from Fort George in the 17th..From Fort George he went to Kinderhook via Saratoga. In Kinderhook the route was to lead to Great Barrington and down to Springfield. Thomas J. Frothingham, Washington, Commander in Chief, Boston, 1930, 98-100.

3. Charles Martyn, The Life of Artemus Ward, New York, 1921, 197.

4. Ibid., 198

5. Ibid., 195, note

6. Note: a fascine is a bundle of rods or sticks used in filling earth works or ditches.

in place by picketing and covered with soil. "The plan determined upon for the fulfilment of the council of war resolution was the fortification of the two main hills, "the Heights", overnight. In the Northwest part of the Neck, less than half a mile from the Heights was a very important location for a battery. It was called Nook Hill and was one of the lower hills of the peninsula and "one more directly on the English pontoons - both on the Boston Neck lines and the town itself - but it was not tenable unless the higher points were first possessed; and it could not be occupied simultaneously with them without prematurely disclosing the American objective." "The place where this hill then was is the spot on which now stands the Lawrence School-house, (1851)."

"It was decided to screen the causeway with a great barricade of bundles of twisted hay 'screwed into large bundles of seven or eight hundred weight' - the barricade to be raised on the same night that the peninsula should be occupied. The hay bundles could serve also for filling the chandeliers."

The Americans already knew that Howe was considering an evacuation of the city and warned the American forces in New York to be on the lookout for him in case he left Boston. "Although the winter was

-
7. "Dorchester Neck, in its topographical appearance, wavering, uneven, abounding in hills and valleys...." Ebenezer Clapp, Jr., and a committee of the Dorchester Antiquarian and Historical Society, History of the Town of Dorchester, Massachusetts, Boston, 1859, pp.335-337.
 8. Martyn, op. cit., pp. 195-196
 9. Clapp, op. cit., p. 335-6
 10. Martyn, op. cit., p. 196
 11. Ibid., 197,note

warm for New England, Howe was in no hurry to leave the harbor before spring and was alarmed by news of rebel fortifications on Dorchester Neck in February. Consequently he ordered the Neck raided on the night of February 13-14, destroyed some houses which might be used for defense, and made a few prisoners. Now on the morning of the 29 again came news of a British landing at the Neck. The whole army at Roxbury was aroused and prepared for battle. "It proved a false alarm but it shocked Washington into a full sense of the work under way...."¹²

On Saturday March 2, a council of war decided Washington to name¹³ the night of Monday, March 4 as the time to "go on" Dorchester Neck. If the British showed signs of attack, Boston was to be stormed at once. A terrific bombardment was planned to divert the attention of the enemy. About sunset it began and Bostonians were treated to the heaviest bombardment they have ever experienced even unto this day. Thomas, as was his due, had been selected to head the occupying detachment. The route has been described by a Dorchester authority as follows:

"On the night of March 4, under cover of heavy cannonading from batteries to the north of the Charles River, soldiers moved quietly from Roxbury along Dudley, Humphrey and Cottage Streets to what is now Edward Everett Square, where they turned into the lane leading to Dorchester Neck. Dorchester farmers furnished the hay bound about the cartwheels to deaden their sound and three hundred Dorchester teamsters under the direction of James Boies hauled the birch saplings cut on Boies farm in the present day Hyde Park, and other material needed for the fortifications. The women of the town did their part in supplying food to the workers."¹⁴

12. Ibid., 198

13. Ibid., 199

14. Dorchester, 1630 - old and new - 1930 in the Old Bay Colony, Dorchester, Mass., 1930, pp. 29-30.

Thomas wrote to his wife of the event

"....about seven o'clock, I marched with about three thousand picked men, beside three hundred and sixty ox teams and some pieces of artillery. Two companies of the train of teams were laden with materials for our works. About eight o'clock we ascended the high hills and by day light got two hills defensible."¹⁵

One group worked until the early morning. Then came the relief "3000 men (2342) rank and file" who arrived between three and four o'clock in the morning. With them came five companies of riflemen. Later trips of the carts brought several pieces of artillery. Points of the abattis were faced with barrels of sand and stones. These were actually chained together and were to be run down the smooth hill against the enemy if they attacked.¹⁶

The British were astounded at what the morning brought. The forts, declared one British officer, had been raised "with an expedition equal to that of the genii belonging to Aladdin's wonderful lamp."¹⁷ Howe believed the fortifications to have been the work of no less than 12,000 men and even a New England Colonel admitted it, "a very great work for one night."¹⁸

Howe had been already to leave the harbor but he did not relish being driven out. He feared what the Orientals call "a loss of face" for the British cause. Hence he decided to fight. The Americans re-²⁰

15. Charles Coffin, The Life and Services of Major General John Thomas, New York, 1844, 20.

16. Martyn, op. cit., 204

17. Ibid., 205, note

18. Ibid., 204

19. Note: Later on March 9 a battery was planted to the north of the east point of the peninsula as a special menace to the British shipping. Two attempts were made to fortify Nook Hill, also, but they were both frustrated by artillery fire. Martyn, op. cit., 210

20. Bellamy Partridge, Sir Billy Howe, New York, 1932, p. 35.

joiced. They had not forgotten Bunker Hill. In vain did the British try to get the range by placing the back of their cannon carriages lower in the earth. After a couple of hours they ceased. Upon subsequent occasions bombardments were continued with but little or no effect.

At this point, old Father Neptune or one of his lieutenants took a hand in the proceedings by raising such an intemperate gale in Boston harbor that even the native Bostonians remarked upon the ferocity of this maritime visitation. "The storm not only lashed the British in the flat boats, but drove some of the larger vessels aground and completely paralyzed Howe's offensive".

"The weather continuing boisterous the next day and night", wrote the General, "gave the enemy time to improve their works, to bring up their cannon, and to put themselves into such a state of defense that I could promise myself little success by attacking them under all the disadvantages I had to encounter; wherefore I judged it most advisable to prepare for the evacuation of the town....." ²¹ Nor had Bunker Hill been forgotten by His Majesty's forces.

At this point Howe showed himself a sensible diplomat. Too humane to burn the town he was leaving, he did not care to be attacked. Nor did he desire to give the rebels any additional prestige which might come from "negotiations". Hence he would not "treat with the rebels" but he would deal with them indirectly. "So he let it be known around Boston that if the provincials would not molest him, he would evacuate

21. Ibid., 38

without destroying the town. The news was not long in penetrating the rebel lines. Washington took no official action but he withheld his fire.²²

The Americans were wary and continued the erecting of fortifications on Saturday night, March 16. Nook's Hill was fortified, a potent menace to English ships in the harbor.²³ The British fired at them with old cannon they intended to leave behind. By March 27, the greater part of the fleet set sail for Halifax carrying with it over a thousand Loyalists, who for the King's Cause²⁴ and fears of rebel "scalpings" and confiscations were leaving their native land. Some military stores had to be left behind. Some were destroyed.²⁵ The outgoing fleet suffered much inconvenience from overcrowding. Brittania might still rule the high seas but no longer the waves of Boston harbor. New England's soldiers with their Virginia commander had beaten the King's men without a fight and Dorchester Heights had become a landmark in the Nation's history.

22. Partridge, op. cit., 36

23. Martyn, op. cit., 212

24. Frothingham, op. cit., 102, 103

25. Partridge, op. cit., 39

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, James T., Revolutionary New England, Boston, 1927
- Anonymous, Dorchester - 1630 Old and New 1930 - in the Old Bay Colony, Dorchester, Massachusetts, 1930.
- Carrington, Henry B. Battles of the American Revolution, New York
- Clapp, Ebenezer Jr., and a Committee of the Dorchester Antiquari and Historical Society, History of the Town of Dorchester Massachusetts, Boston, 1859.
- Coffin, Charles, The Life and Services of Major General John Thomas New York, 1844
- Frothingham, Thomas G., Washington, Commander-in-Chief, Boston,
- Ford, P. L., The True George Washington, Philadelphia, 1896
- Lossing, Benson J., The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution, York, 1860, 2 vols.
- Lartyn, Charles, The Life of Artemus Ward, New York, 1921
- Orcutt, William Dana, Good Old Dorchester, Cambridge, 1893
- Partridge, Bellamy, Sir Billy Howe, New York, 1932

MAPS

- Massachusetts, A Plan of Boston and its Environs, etc. Drawn by an Engineer Bolton October, 1775. Shows town of Boston in colors and roads to Dorchester Neck.
- Massachusetts, A Plan of Boston in New England with its Environs, etc. with the military works constructed in those places in the year 1775 and 1776, by Henry Pelham (Copy by W. A. Butterfield, Boston, 1907.
- Massachusetts, Boston and its Environs, 1775-1776. From Marshall's Life of Washington. Small but clear on Dorchester operations.
- Massachusetts, Boston and Vicinity - War positions 1776. (1 original 1 negative) not actually a map but drawn as from one military point to another.
- Massachusetts, Boston and Vicinity, 1776. Engraved from Frothingham's History. Excellent large map, about $39\frac{1}{2}$ x $28\frac{1}{2}$
- Massachusetts, Boston's Revolution, 1776. A. O. Crane, 1875. very clear.
- Massachusetts, Dorchester Neck, 177-. Clinton collection from Clement's Library . Photostat. A sketch map.
- Massachusetts, Dorchester. A view of the country towards 1775. Engraving.
- Massachusetts, View of fortifications, 1776. Photograph from a ms. in Library of Congress. Anonymous. A coastline sketch.
- Massachusetts, Dorchester, 1st and 2nd Hill Forts, colored.
I - Fort on first Hill in Dorchester
II - Fort on Second Hill in Dorchester
- Massachusetts, Dorchester (town of). Dorchester Heights, view of fortifications around Dorchester 1776 - manuscript of photostat already mentioned - colored. 1776?
- Massachusetts, Dorchester. Dorchester Point - Fort.

DORCHESTER HEIGHTS

The site proposed for recognition is the summit of Dorchester Heights, an area of not more than three acres, owned by the City of Boston and maintained at present as a small municipal park. The area proposed covers the western two-thirds of an ellipse which is surrounded by a street that establishes the outline. The eastern third of the ellipse is occupied by the South Boston High School. In the center of the ellipse and on the highest point of Dorchester Heights stands a memorial tower erected in commemoration of the part attributed to the occupation of Dorchester Heights by the Continental Army in effecting the evacuation of Boston by the British, March 17, 1776.

The tower occupying as it does a considerable elevation is one of the well known landmarks in the vicinity of Boston, and was the location of the largest of six forts and batteries erected on the eminences of Dorchester Neck during the night of March 4, 1776 by order of General Washington (Allen French, Siege of Boston, 410). The sites of the other five forts and batteries could not be identified today without prolonged study and field investigation as Dorchester Neck is now one of the most thickly populated and built up sections of South Boston and entirely changed from the conditions of 1776 as a result of filling. The value of the Neck in 1776 as a military position has been described by Trevelyan (American Revolution, Part I, 384):

"Two miles long, and two-thirds of a mile broad,
it was dotted with heights of sufficient elevation

for military purposes, planted exactly where they were most useful to the beseigers. A battery placed on the Eastern extremity would carry its shot across the deep-water approach to the harbour; and a battery on the Western horn (location of present tower is on part of it) could annihilate the town."

The significance of Dorchester Heights was appreciated by General Gage. American occupancy of Bunker Hill and the consequent battle of June 17, 1775 was precipitated by knowledge of a British plan to take Dorchester Heights, (Allen French, Siege of Boston, 252). This plan of Gage's was not abandoned after the battle, but the Heights were never taken by Gage nor his successor, Howe. As Trevelyan indicates, Howe had a good excuse for not taking Dorchester. "The ground, open on the quarter towards the enemy (Roxbury), required a larger force to hold it than he could spare from his widely extended and ever-threatened lines. He had no hope of being reinforced from across the ocean." (American Revolution, Part 1, 384).

Not only did Howe not expect additional troops, but he had difficulty in getting enough supplies to feed the regiments he had. Van Tyne (War of Independence, 84) suggests pointedly that Howe was not in a position to have remained long in Boston irrespective of the actions of the Continental Army. With reference to the status of the British food supply at the time Dorchester Heights was occupied, he writes: "There was meat for only fourteen days. Howe had long been desperate for

provisions. As far back as January, the troops had been put on short rations."

Long before Washington decided to take possession of Dorchester Heights, Howe had concluded that Boston was useless as a base of operations and was intending to leave it sooner or later (Trevelyan, American Revolution, Part I, 382; Van Tyne, War of Independence, 87-88). He made the mistake, however, of thinking that he could choose his time of departure. By taking Dorchester Heights on March 4, 1776, Washington no longer left the choice in Howe's hands.

In the light of the above evidence it does not appear that the occupation of Dorchester Heights, apart from the time element, made very much difference in the final outcome of the Siege of Boston and generally on the subsequent course of the war. It is felt that in order to be of national significance Dorchester Heights should have had greater influence on the result of the Siege of Boston. By greater influence is meant a situation which would have been the cause of a change in British plans. Say if the British had occupied Dorchester Heights, they would have felt more secure in Boston. In order to upset their plans and security, Washington would have been obliged to drive them from Dorchester Heights. As it was the British had never been too secure and the occupation of Dorchester Heights simply accelerated the execution of a plan that had already been adopted rather than determined a change in plan. To give the occupation of Dorchester Heights

the position of a determining factor would be to discredit the good work done by the Continental Army in other locations since Bunker Hill and by privateers in keeping the British hemmed in and under privation in Boston.

The above view is not that popularly held. Locally the occupation of Dorchester Heights is regarded as a military achievement which resulted in the evacuation of Boston. Furthermore, it is considered the focal point of the first great military success of the Revolution. If the proposed site is to be eligible for national recognition, it is believed that it must be based on acceptance of the latter view.

Congressman McCormick was interviewed on the subject at his office on September 9. The Congressman said that his interest in Dorchester Heights is the interest shared by the South Boston Citizens' Association. The Association is the annual sponsor of the gigantic parade and celebration held on Evacuation Day or March 17, which is a holiday in Boston. The Congressman described the parade as a big event drawing the attention of between 300,000 and 400,000 people. The parade starts in Roxbury along Dudley Street, passes through Edward Everett Square and on to Dorchester Heights where ceremonies are held beneath the memorial tower. The procession then marches on to City Point or Castle Independence and returns through the streets of South Boston. It is significant to note that the parade to Dorchester Heights follows as nearly as possible the route taken by the troops and

teamsters who carried the saplings and other material needed for the fortifications thrown up on the Heights on the night of March 4, 1776.

Congressman McCormick stated that he and the South Boston Citizens' Association were primarily interested in securing national recognition for an historical event that they consider of national importance. The Congressman emphatically declared that neither the Association nor he himself would favor the proposition if the acquisition of private property were required. What is proposed is simply the transfer of title of the municipal park area and memorial tower on Dorchester Heights from the City of Boston to the Federal Government. The Congressman mentioned no improvements he thought it important for the Government to undertake should it accept the site.

The writer came away from the interview with the distinct impression that national recognition is what is chiefly desired and that the sponsors believe this can be best achieved by turning the site over to the Government. It was, furthermore, concluded that interest in securing recognition seems to center not at all in any possibilities for treatment of the site itself, but entirely in connection with the festivities and events held on Evacuation Day. Congressman McCormick was advised that the matter would be considered by the Advisory Board at its meeting in November and he replied that he would await with interest notification of the decision reached.

Edwin W. Small

Edwin W. Small
Acting Superintendent

September 29, 1938