



#1 1996

A Chronology Of The Revolutionary War

with emphasis on Bedford County, Pennsylvania's role

Continued

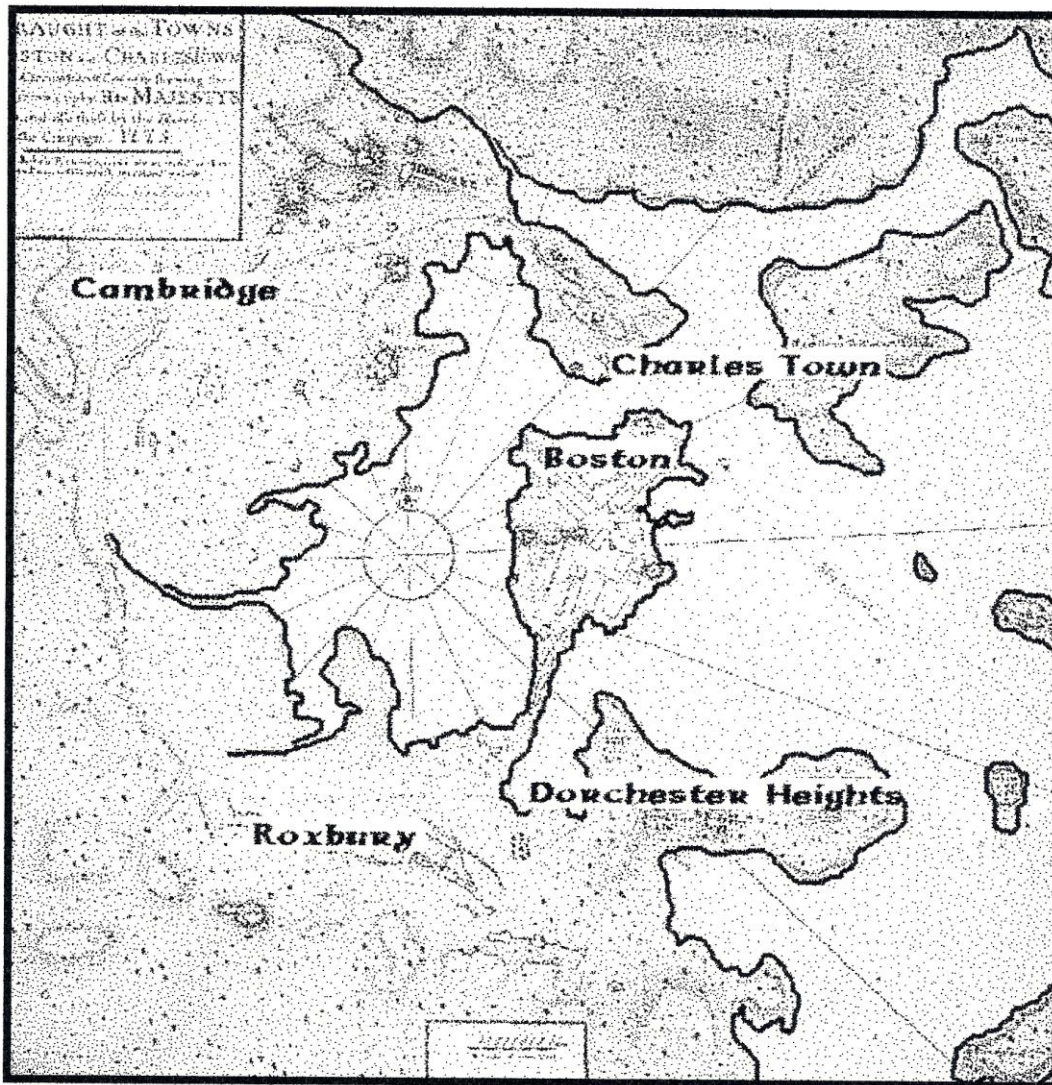
1775: *The Battle of Bunker Hill*

Recently commissioned General Israel Putnam held command over the Connecticut troops in the vicinity of Cambridge. He was a veteran of the French and Indian War, and was an experienced soldier whose career had been sprinkled with more than a few bold adventures. He certainly wasn't backwards about making known what he felt should be done at Boston now. On the 15th of June news of a possible British move against the Dorchester Heights and the Charlestown Peninsula had come to the American camp. The British plan was to seize both points three days later. Their possession of the two sites would safeguard the British in Boston, and from those two sites they could launch an offensive that would crush the rebellious colonials between them. It was Israel Putnam who made the suggestion to General Artemus Ward that the Charlestown Peninsula should be fortified. The action would draw the British into attacking the provincial troops, but the engagement would be on the Americans' terms. Two high points, Breed's and Bunker Hills, if fortified by the Americans, would give them an advantageous position. The plan suggested by Putnam was not readily embraced by General Ward and the rest of the Patriot commanders. General John Thomas, whose troops were encamped in the vicinity of Roxbury refused to spare any of his men. The Committee of Safety met on the 15th and at the urging of General Putnam and Colonel William Prescott, they agreed to order the immediate occupation of the Charlestown Peninsula.

It appeared that it would be up to General Putnam's Connecticut militia to carry out the plan. An order was issued for a detachment of 1,200 men to assemble at Cambridge Common at six o'clock on the evening of 16 June, 1775. On the evening of the 16th of June the detachment, most of them from the Massachusetts militias, had been assembled at the campsite at Cambridge. According to Amos Fransworth, a corporal in the Massachusetts militia:

"Nothing done in the forenoon; in the afternoon we had orders to be redy to march. At fix agreable to orders our regiment preadid and about fun~fet we was drawn up and herd prayers; and about dufk marched for Bunkers Hill under command of our own Col. Prefcott."

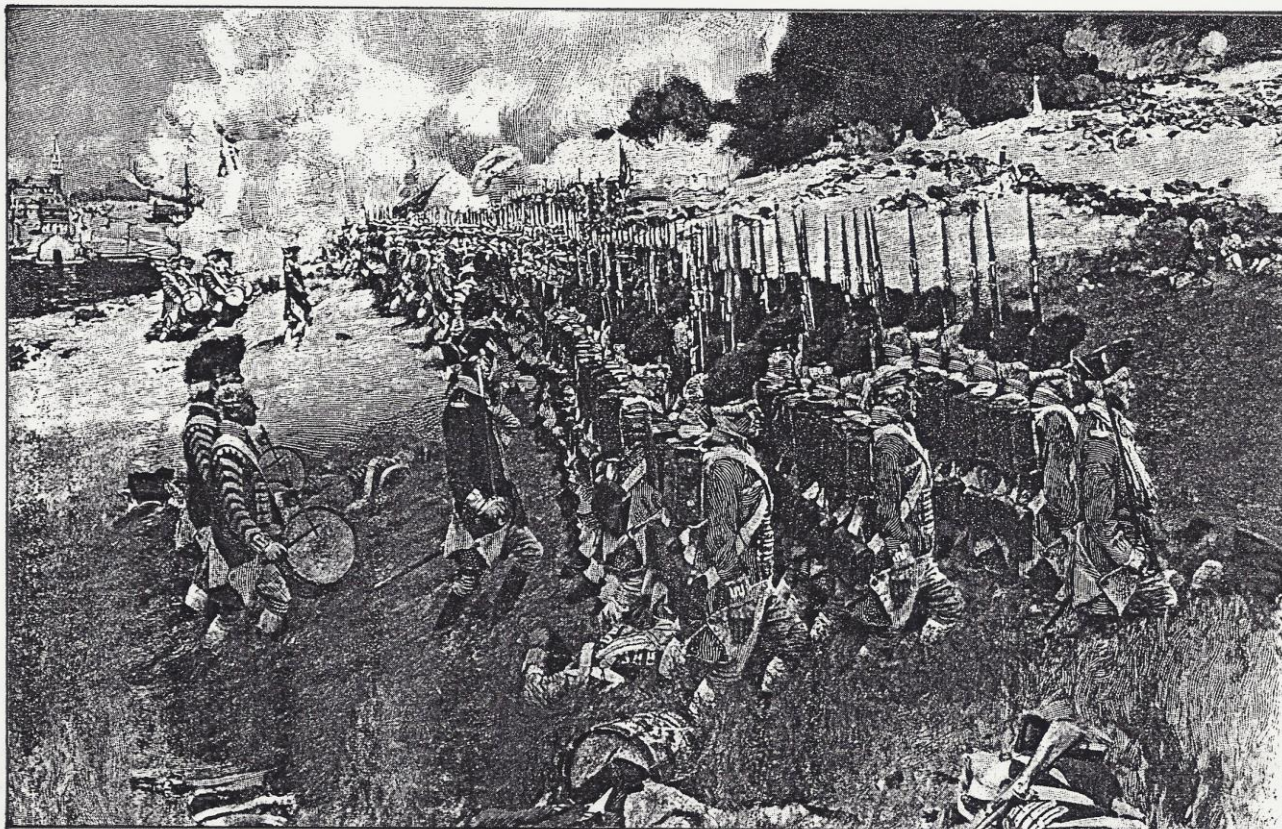
The entire plan was not divulged to the men at first. Peter Brown, a militiaman, wrote to his mother that:



"Frydy the 16th of June we were ordered to parade at 6 o'clock with one day's provisions and blankets ready for a march fomewhere, but we did not know where. So we readily and cheerfully obeyed, the whole that was called for, which was thefe three, Col. Prefcotts, Frys and Nickfons regiments..."

The troops were marched to Charlestown Neck and at that point were told of the project they would take part in. A small group was sent into the village of Charles Town on the southern tip of the peninsula to keep watch for the British and to guard the town. The rest moved onto the rise known as Bunker Hill.

There were four hills on the Charlestown Peninsula: Bunker, Breed's, Moulton's and School. Bunker Hill was located at the west end of the peninsula, near the Charlestown Neck and measured one hundred and ten feet to the summit. Breed's Hill stood seventy-five feet in height in the center of the peninsula and was connected to Bunker Hill by a ridge. Moulton's Hill stood thirty-five feet high at the northeast corner of the peninsula. And finally, School Hill rose to the west of the town which occupied the southeast corner of the peninsula. Bunker Hill, by virtue of being the largest of



The British regiments ascend Breed's Hill in an engraving from a painting by Howard Pyle

of his troops to begin their ascent of the hill, he signaled for the eleven companies of light infantry to make their advance along the Mystic River to strike at the rail/stone wall. Without any obstacles to impede their progress, they marched four abreast down the strand of beach almost at a trot. A stake had been placed in the sand about forty yards in front of the wall. Colonel Stark had ordered his men not to fire until the first rank of redcoats had passed the stake.

The Twenty-Third Royal Welsh Fusiliers rushed past the stake and Colonel Stark stood up and shouted "Fire!". The line of nearly two hundred New Hampshire Patriots rose up in unison and a blaze of musket fire blasted from the front rank. The Twenty-Third was almost completely destroyed with that initial eruption. The men of the Fourth King's Own Regiment hardly lost a beat in their rush forward. They were met with a volley that ripped them apart like their fellow soldiers of the Twenty-Third. Unit after unit of redcoated soldiers met the same fate as they came to the stake, with none able to pass it alive. Within only a few minutes there were ninety-six Englishmen lying dead on the beach in front of the hastily erected barricade. The rest turned and fled back to Moulton's Hill. Howe's plan to break through the American line with a flanking movement had come to an abrupt end.

Despite the anxiety created by the bombardment, the uneasiness induced by the sound of the battle that had suddenly raged on the beach of the Mystic River, and the sheer excitement of the moment, Colonel Prescott ordered his troops to remain quiet and hidden behind the breastworks. The supply of ammunition was low and could not be wasted. In order to get the most effect from the ammunition they had, Prescott ordered the militiamen not to fire upon the British until they had reached a close enough distance where the whites of their eyes could be seen. Colonel Prescott told the men to "*Then aim at their waistbands; and be sure to pick off the commanders, known by their handsome coats!*" Although the American commanders gave orders that they should remain hidden, a few of the men gave in to their anxiety and raised their muskets up to fire on the advancing red lines. General Putnam hurried to where those men were and threatened to shoot the first man to again disobey the orders.

The British lines did not stream up the hillside without effort as one might be led to believe from the perfect lines depicted in the famous picture by Howard Pyle. There were many obstacles, such as fences, which had to be crossed. They would regroup and form into lines after a delay in the march and so made their way slowly up the hillside. The men were laden down with knapsacks on their backs, and that added weight, combined with the hot summer sun which blazed in the clear Massachusetts sky that afternoon, must have made the ascent of the hill very difficult.

To make the advance of the redcoats more difficult, Captain Walker took fifty men and headed down the hill to the village of Charles Town. There, from the windows of the houses, and from behind fences, they sniped at the troops under Major Pitcairn and General Pigot. Pitcairn's marines were literally staggered by the rain of bullets that showered down on them from the direction of the town. They had to move away from the vicinity of the village in order to reform their ranks. In so doing they began the ascent of the hill at about the exact instant that General Howe's lines were just reaching the breastworks. One might speculate that, had Pigot's troops been able to advance evenly with Howe's, the battle might have taken a different course.

When Howe's troops finally had arrived close enough to the breastworks, Colonel Prescott waved a sword over his head and shouted "Fire!" On that order, the entire line of militiamen rose up and fired a deadly volley into the British lines. Entire companies of the redcoats were mowed down. The rest turned and fled back down the slope. A few of the Patriots leapt onto the breastworks and were going to chase after the retreating British troops, but the officers ordered them to get back to their positions behind the earthworks. As the survivors of the Fifth and Fifty-Second Regiments fled from the scene of the carnage, Pigot's troops rushed headlong into a second eruption of musketfire from the breastworks. Howe, in the safety of the valley below the hill, rallied his men and organized them into a proper formation for a second assault.

Among other things General Howe was concerned about the sniper fire that continued to come from Charles Town. He sent a message to General Burgoyne to set fire to it by shelling it from the Copp's Hill battery. Burgoyne complied with the request by firing a carcass into the town, setting it ablaze. A carcass was a hollow shell constructed of iron with holes in it. The shell would be filled with a combustible material and then wrapped in cloth. The carcass quickly set the wooden houses on fire and within a very short time nearly two hundred buildings were sending flames and thick billowing smoke into the air. It drifted up and over the summit of Breed's Hill like a cover of fog. Howe saw his opportunity to advance through that screen and hoped to be able to swarm over the breastworks before the rebels could respond. General John Burgoyne, watching from the battery on Copp's Hill, later wrote to Lord Stanley and gave this description of the day:

"...It was absolutely necessary we should make ourselves masters of these heights, and we proposed to begin with Dorchester, because, from the particular situation of batteries and shipping... it would evidently be effected without any considerable loss. Every thing was accordingly disposed; my two colleagues and myself (who, by the by, have never differed one jot of military sentiment) had, in concert with General Gage, formed the plan. Howe was to land the transports on the Point; Clinton in the centre; and I was to cannonade from the causeway or the Neck: each to take advantage of circumstances. The operations must have been very easy; this was to have been executed on the 18th.

On the 17th, at dawn of day, we found the enemy had pushed intrenchments with great diligence during the night, on the heights of Charlestown, 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 two thousand men, and landed on the outward side of the peninsula, covered with shipping, without opposition; he was to advance from thence up the hill which was over Charlestown, where the strength of the enemy lay; he had under him Brigadier- General Pigot. Clinton and myself took our stand (for we had not any fixed post) in a large battery directly opposite to Charlestown, and commanded it, and also reaching the heights above it, and thereby facilitating Howe's attack.

Howe's disposition was exceedingly soldierlike; 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. They were also exceedingly hurt by musketry from Charlestown, though Clinton and I did not perceive it until

Howe sent us word by a boat and desired us to set fire to the town, which was immediately done; we threw a parcel of shells, and the whole was instantly in flames; our battery afterwards kept an incessant fire on the heights; it was seconded by a number of frigates, floating batteries and one ship-of-the-line.

And now ensued one of the greatest scenes of war that can be conceived: if we look to the height, Howe's corps, ascending the hill in the face of intrenchments, and in a very disadvantageous ground, was much engaged; to the left the enemy pouring in fresh troops by thousands, over the land; and in the arm of the sea our ships and floating batteries cannonading them; straight before us a large and noble town in one great blaze—the church-steeple, being timber, were great pyramids of fire above the rest; behind us, the church-steeple and heights of our own camp covered with spectators of the rest of our army which was engaged; the hills round the country covered with spectators; the enemy all in anxious suspense; the roar of cannon, mortars and musketry; the crash of churches, ships upon the stocks, and whole streets falling together, to fill the ear, the storm of the redoubts, with the objects above described, to fill the eye; and the reflection that, perhaps, a defeat was a final loss to the British Empire in America, to fill the mind—made the whole picture, and a complication of horror and importance, beyond any thing that ever came to my lot to be witness to.

I much lament Tom's absence; it was a sight for a young soldier that the longest service may not furnish again; and had he been with me he would likewise have been out of danger; for, except for two cannon balls that went a hundred yards over our heads, we were not in any part of the direction of the enemy's shot."

Reinforcements in the form of four hundred marines under the command of Major Small had just arrived from Boston, and they were placed in the line in time to make the second assault on the redoubt. The lines moved slowly back up the slope of Breed's Hill. That would have been a rather grim experience for the soldiers who had to step over the bodies of their fallen comrades. The second attack was accompanied by more effective artillery fire. During the first assault, the cannon had become stuck in the swampy ground of the valley between Moulton's and Breed's Hill and their range had little effect on the redoubt, but they had, in the meantime, been freed. They were then moved to a position where their grapeshot could reach the redoubt. For this second advance, Howe decided against any flanking attempts; instead, a simple frontal assault would be made against the redoubt and extending breastwork. As the lines of red coats moved up the slope, the wind shifted and the smoke that had blanketed the redoubt cleared away. The British lines came in full view of the Patriots.

Once more the Americans held their fire until the British troops were within a few feet of the breastworks. For a second time, the New England militiamen fired a devastating volley into the British line, and for a second time, the British line was cut into pieces. General Howe tried to rally his troops, calling the remnants of the light infantry forward. But the attempt was futile. The Patriots' musketballs hit most of their marks and the redcoats fell in heaps. At one point in this second assault, General Howe, who had been surrounded by his aides, suddenly found himself alone because they had all been struck down. It was a miracle for him that he was not also killed in the action. Groups of the British soldiers began to turn back and head down the hillside, and General Howe joined them.

The British officers watching this second repulse from Copp's Hill were appalled. Henry Clinton remarked that, "*General Burgoyne and I saw appearances on the left of the army engaged which made us shudder ~ in short, it gave way!*" 'Gentleman Johnnie' Burgoyne noted in his report to Lord Stanley that Clinton decided to take matters into his own hands at that point.

A moment of the day was critical: Howe's left were staggered; two battalions had been sent to re-enforce them, but we perceived them on the beach seeming in embarrassment what way to march. Clinton then, next for business, took the part without waiting for orders, to throw himself into a boat to head them; he arrived in time to be of service;"

The two battalions of fresh British troops, which Henry Clinton delivered to Howe, consisted of about four hundred men of the Sixty-Third Regiment and the Second Battalion of Marines. Some of the officers protested against making another ascent of the hill, but Howe would not listen to such talk. He would not accept defeat, no matter what the cost.

Nearly two hours went by as the redcoats prepared for their third assault. The second assault had taken place between three and four o'clock. It would be five-thirty before the third assault got underway. The Americans began to wonder if the battle was, in fact, over. Figuring that the British would make another attack, they took time to recompose their own lines. It was time also to scavenge for whatever ammunition might still be available. The cartridge packs of the dead were ransacked, but there were only a few rounds for each man.

During the lull in the battle, Robert Steele, a drummer in Ephraim Doolittle's regiment, and another young lad, was sent by an officer to obtain some rum and water to refresh the exhausted militiamen. He noted that when he got to the Charlestown Neck, there was quite a bit of shot raining down from the ships on the Charles and Mystic Rivers. He entered a store on the Cambridge side of the Neck and found the storekeeper and his family in the cellar, frightened by the never ending bombardment. Robert later wrote:

"I seized a brown, two-quart, earthen pitcher and drew it partly full from a cask and found I had got wine. I threw that out and filled my pitcher with rum from another cask. Ben took a pail and filled it with water, and we hastened back to the entrenchment on the hill, when we found our people in confusion and talking about retreating. The British were about advancing upon us a third time. Our rum and water went very quick. It was very hot..."

The British lines moved slowly up the eastern slope of Breed's Hill once more. As the redcoats came toward them a third time, Colonel William Prescott recalled that:

"I was now left with perhaps one hundred and fifty men in the fort. The enemy advanced and fired very hotly... and meeting with a warm reception, there was very smart firing on both sides. After a considerable time, finding our ammunition was almost spent, I commanded a cessation till the enemy advanced within thirty yards, when we gave them such a hot fire that they were obliged to retire nearly one hundred and fifty yards before they could rally again and come back to the attack. Our ammunition being nearly exhausted, 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."

General Howe sent the remainder of light infantry to the rail/stone wall to keep that line occupied while the general assault would be made against the redoubt. The Americans there put up a fight, but soon abandoned that defensive line. The defenders of the earthen breastworks and fleches to the north of the redoubt also abandoned those positions and crowded into the redoubt.

The British troops, like the Americans, were tired of the battle by this time, but they had endured so much slaughter that they now fought with greater purpose. Above the noise of the melee and the cries of the wounded and dying shouts of "Push on! Push on!" could be heard by the Patriots behind the defensive wall. As the last of the Patriots' ammunition was used up, the Forty-Seventh Regiment scrambled onto the parapet and into the midst of the New England militiamen, some of whom had already broken their gun stocks to be used as their own makeshift bayonets. Peter Brown was one of those militiamen who were in the redoubt when it was finally stormed by the British. He ended his letter to his mother by saying:

*"...But God in mercy to us fought our battle for us and altho' we were but few and fo were fuffered to be defeated by them, we were preferved in a moft wonderful manner far beyond expectation, to admiration, for out of our regiment there was about 37 killed, 4 or 5 taken captive, and about 47 wounded....
If we fhould be called into action again I hope to have courage and ftrength to act my part valiantly in defence of our liberties and our country,*

trusting in him who hath yet kept me and hath covered my head in the day of battle, and tho' we have loft 4 of our company and our Lieutenant's thigh broke and he taken captive by the cruel enemies of America, I was not fuf~fered to be touched altho' I was in the fort till the Regulars came in and I jumped over the walls, and ran for about half a mile where balls flew like hail~ftones and cannons roared like thunder."

Colonel Prescott, at length, realized that nothing could be gained by continuing the hand-to-hand fighting within the redoubt. He ordered a retreat of the American militiamen. Dr. Warren and a few others formed a rearguard to cover the retreat of the rest. Just as he turned to leave the redoubt, a bullet found its mark at the base of Joseph Warren's skull. The Patriot was killed instantly and America lost a true hero.

Late in the afternoon General Artemus Ward had directed his own regiment, along with Generals Patterson's and Gardner's, to the Charlestown Peninsula as reinforcements. General Gardner led the three hundred militiamen onto Bunker Hill, where General Putnam directed them to go on to the breastworks on Breed's Hill. They arrived just after the British had burst into the redoubt. Lieutenant Samuel Webb served in Captain John Chester's Company from Connecticut. Chester's company, as it came over the summit of Bunker Hill, saw that it was too late to help defend the redoubt, so it took a position to the side, along a low stone fence. There was no regularity to the firing at that point. Every man loaded and fired as quickly as he could. Samuel Webb noted:

"We covered their retreat till they came up with us by a brisk fire from our small arms. The dead and wounded lay on every side of me. Their groans were piercing indeed, though long before this time I believe the fear of death had quitted almost every breast. They now had possession of our fort and four fieldpieces, and by much the advantage of the ground; and to tell you the truth, our reinforcements belonging to this province, very few of them came into the field, but lay skulking the opposite side of the hill. Our orders then came to make the best retreat we could. We set off almost gone with fatigue and ran very fast up {Bunker Hill}, leaving some of our dead and wounded in the field."

The Americans moved westward to the Neck and on into the hills surrounding Cambridge. Lord Rawdon was one of the British who chased the Americans across the summit of Bunker Hill and through the gauntlet of shot which was still being fired into the Charlestown Neck by the warships on the river. He noted that the Americans did not simply retreat but carried on a running fight until they had reached the far side of the Neck.

The American militiamen were rallied by General Putnam about a mile west of the Neck and they established a fort on Winter Hill. General Howe's redcoats remained on the Peninsula and pitched tents to spend the night. General Clinton urged Howe to continue on and attack Cambridge, but Howe knew that his troops were too exhausted to continue the fight.

The British claimed the victory for this battle because the Americans had been driven off the field, but in terms of casualties, the British were the greatest losers. The statistics show that of approximately 2,250 British troops who had been engaged in the fighting, 1,054 (including 92 officers) had been hit by the Patriot musketfire. Of those, 226 died of their wounds; 89 officers were included in the number killed. All twelve of General Howe's staff officers had been struck. Of approximately 1,800 Americans who were actively engaged in the battle, only 449 had been struck by British fire, and of those, only 145 were killed. The majority of the Patriots who went to be with the Lord on that June day in 1775 were struck down in the running fight from Breed's Hill to the Charlestown Neck.

The tip of land known as the Dorchester Heights was not occupied by either the British or the Patriots until a fort was constructed there in March of 1776 by the newly appointed Commander-In-Chief of the American forces, General George Washington.

This chronological history of the Revolutionary War will be continued in a future newsletter.

1996 Meeting Schedule ~ Blair County Chapter

The first quarterly meeting of the Blair County Chapter, Sons of the American Revolution will be held at the Kings Family Restaurant at Altoona on January 20, 1996.

The following is a listing of meeting dates for this year:

January 20	1 st Quarterly Meeting	12:00 noon	Kings Family Restaurant
February 17	George Washington's Birthday	12:00 noon	(to be announced)
April 13	2 nd Quarterly Meeting	12:00 noon	(to be announced)
July 6	3 rd Quarterly Meeting	12:00 noon	(to be announced)
September 14	Constitution Day Dinner	12:00 noon	(to be announced)
October 26	4 th Quarterly Meeting	12:00 noon	(to be announced)
(to be announced)	Annual Meeting		(to be announced)

Comments On The Cancellation Of The 1995 Annual Meeting

The Annual Meeting for 1995, which had been scheduled for Saturday, December 9, 1995 was the second Annual Meeting that had to be cancelled due to lack of interest. A notice had been included in the last newsletter (#5 1995) which announced the meeting and requested that anyone who planned on attending the meeting should respond to either the Secretary or the Treasurer of the chapter by noon on the 4th of December. Compatriot Alvah Williams, who had made arrangements with the R~Waffle King restaurant, had requested that the number of reservations be turned in to the restaurant by that date and time. As of that time, only five members of the chapter had placed reservations for the dinner/meeting. A sixth was received later that evening, but even then that total number of six did not constitute a quorum. Without a quorum of seven, the election and installation of Officers, which is the primary purpose of the Annual Meeting, could not have taken place. It should be noted that only two of the twelve Directors of the Blair County Chapter made reservations for the Annual Meeting. Also, it should be noted that the Annual Meeting was listed in the 1995 Meeting Schedule, which was included in Issue #1, 1995.

The purpose of my mentioning this is to request all members of the Blair County Chapter, who live within a distance that will permit attending the meetings of the chapter, to attempt to come to at least the Annual Meeting. All compatriot members who will be installed as Officers of the Blair County Chapter (which includes the Directors) should attend the installation meeting.

If the threat of hazardous winter driving conditions is the main reason why attendance is low, the Annual Meeting could be arranged to be held at a different date. One of the problems with arranging a date for the Annual Meeting, which may have contributed to the necessity of cancelling the 1995 Annual Meeting (but which goes for every year, not just 1995) is that none of the compatriot members who would be installed as Officers or Directors for 1996, but who could not attend the meeting on December 9, bothered to contact the Secretary, Treasurer or President of the chapter to suggest another date. If the holding of the Annual Meeting in December is the reason why most members do not attend, then the "Annual Meeting" (*i.e.* the installation of Officers) could be held during either the 4th Quarterly Meeting of the year just passing, or during the 1st Quarterly Meeting of the upcoming year.

1996 Membership Dues Notice

As of the first of the year, 1996, the chapter has received the membership dues from all but eleven compatriot members. In accordance with the PASSAR by-laws, the membership dues have a deadline of January 31, 1996 to be forwarded to the State Treasurer. That means that the Treasurer of the Blair County Chapter needs to receive the dues payments prior to that date (in order to be able to deposit them in the bank and then submit a check to the State Treasurer). If you have not yet paid the membership dues, please do so.