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# Bunker Hill



Boston National Historical Park

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## The Battle of Bunker Hill

On June 17, 1775 British regulars faced an assemblage of independently minded colonial militia at the Battle of Bunker Hill. By evening of that day the British held the Charlestown peninsula, and a new respect for the determination and resourcefulness of colonial forces. The colonials, if shaken from what was for many the first taste of war (and what it reveals of men's character), had proven to themselves that in direct confrontation they could thwart the British army, a force superior in training, equipment, and organization.

Following the beginning of the war at Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775 the citizens of Boston found themselves between two armies. General Artemas Ward's New England volunteers surrounded Boston and blockaded the land approaches; General Thomas Gage and 4,600 British soldiers held the city itself. One Bostonian wrote, "We are besieged this moment with 10 or 15,000 men, from Roxbury to Cambridge . . . We are every hour expecting an attack by land or water."

Critical to the British occupation of Boston was control of the hills on the Charlestown peninsula. An army holding this position overlooked both Boston and her harbor. On June 15 the Americans learned that the British planned to occupy Charlestown. To frustrate them the Americans decided to act first.

On the evening of June 16, Colonel William Prescott, leading 1,200 Massachusetts and Connecticut soldiers, left Cambridge to fortify Bunker's Hill, the dominant hill in Charlestown. Prescott, however, bypassed this position and instead dug in on a lower hill closer to Boston called Breed's Hill. The next morning, the British awoke to find Breed's Hill fortified with an earthen redoubt measuring 160 feet by 30 feet. Gage ordered the position captured.

Major General William Howe, Gage's senior officer, was given field command. A shortage of boats, poor navigational maps, and ill-timed tides affected Howe's strategy and delayed the operation. In the end, Howe decided to land his troops at Moulton's (or Charlestown) Point near the mouth of the Mystic River. From here he could press westward across the peninsula, out-

flank the American redoubt and sieze Bunker's Hill and Charlestown neck. While the British waited for the tide to rise, the Americans used the time wisely.

Prescott's men extended their fortifications to the north of the redoubt by building a breastwork. As Colonel Stark's New Hampshiremen arrived, they joined Connecticut troops in fortifying a rail fence that extended down the slope of Breed's Hill toward the Mystic. Other soldiers constructed three shelters of fence rails, called fleches, in the exposed area between the breastwork and the rail fence. To cover Prescott's right flank, still other men took up snipers' positions in deserted Charlestown. In all, between 2,500 and 4,000 New Englanders manned the lines.

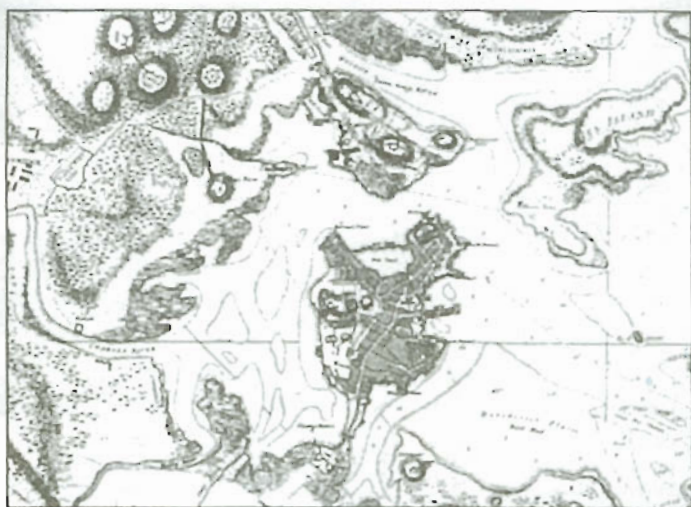
### The First Assault

By 3:30 p.m. transports had delivered Howe's initial force, and reinforcements were landing on the shore between Moulton's Point and Charlestown. When colonial snipers began firing at the arriving Redcoats, Howe ordered immediate retribution and the town was set afire by cannon. As Charlestown burned and spectators crowded the rooftops of Boston for the best view of the spectacle, Howe launched his first assault.

Howe's primary object was the rail fence. As a diversion, Brigadier General Robert Pigot was to lead an assault on the redoubt and adjoining breastwork, while an elite group of light infantry would proceed up the Mystic shore to outflank the colonials on their left. Simultaneously, Howe and his principal force would hit defenders of the rail fence hard.

The advance of the Redcoats must have been a terrible sight to the Americans. But nervous as they were, they had to wait. It was critical that the first rounds of fire be coordinated, with men alternately firing and loading to keep up a barrage capable of breaking the enemy's charge. Whether or not they were told to hold fire until they saw the "whites of their eyes", the colonials were told to wait for the order to fire, to aim low, and to pick off British officers.

Interrupting the advance of Howe's and Pigot's soldiers were fences and uneven terrain hidden by tall grass. Unhindered by such obstacles, the light infantry was able to move swiftly along the Mystic shore, only to be met by Colonel Stark's deadly surprise—a stone



"Montresor's Map of Boston and her Harbour with the Rebel Works in 1775," detail. (Courtesy Cornell University Library)

wall on the beach backed by soldiers who gave no ground. On the meadow above, as Howe's men approached their enemy, they were met by premature but increasingly steady musketry. In the struggle to negotiate fences while under fire, momentum and discipline were lost. Their ordered march broken, the Redcoats fell back. Pigot's attack on the redoubt, too, was repulsed. Prescott's men had held.

No sooner was the first assault turned back than Howe regrouped and marched forward again in a hasty, uncoordinated attack all along the American front. Once again the assault was a costly failure.

### The British Victory

The colonials were jubilant, but not for long. Confusion, a lack of discipline, inter-colony rivalries, and the resulting lack of reinforcements and supplies were to take their toll. Howe had been frustrated but not defeated. It was true that British troops were no longer fresh or overconfident and had suffered devastating losses of both rank and file and officers. The officers that remained, however, roused their troops and put together for the final charge a group grimly determined.

This time the British drove against the right and center of the American line. They cut through the breastwork and overran the redoubt from three sides. Stark managed to hold on at the rail fence long



**General William Howe**  
(Courtesy Anne S. K. Brown  
Military Collection)



**Colonel Prescott**  
(Courtesy Beverly Historical  
Society)

enough to help cover Prescott's retreat, but the final scene inside the redoubt was carnage.

The surviving colonials retreated northward toward Cambridge. The British, bloodied and exhausted, pursued only as far as Bunker Hill and there dug in. By 5:30 p.m. the fighting was over.

### Aftermath

Both armies had fought courageously and learned much. For the Redcoats, the lesson was painful. Although they had captured the hill, out of 2,200 soldiers engaged, 1,034 were casualties. The British attempted no further actions outside Boston for the next nine months. When Howe replaced Gage as military commander in America, the events of that day would continue to haunt him, and he would time and again fail to follow up a victory over the Americans.

The Americans had shown they could stand up to the British in traditional open field combat. But where they had succeeded, it had been through individual gallantry rather than tactical planning or discipline. Some regiments had fought well, others not at all. Of an estimated 2,500 to 4,000 men engaged, 400 to 600 were casualties. Stronger leadership would be critical to success in further battles. This leadership was provided on July 2, 1775 when George Washington arrived in Cambridge to assume his role as Commander-in-Chief of the new Continental Army.