

Plans and Preparations

The first weeks of February 1776 were a time of feverish activity, all carried out in secret.

At Washington's orders, Colonel Knox brought some of the new guns, under cover of darkness, to Cobble Hill and Lechmere Point near the Cambridge lines. Others were set up around Roxbury. But the main gun batteries—and the big surprise for the British—would be elsewhere.

Near Roxbury, southwest of Boston Harbor, was a peninsula with steep hills known as Dorchester Heights. These ridges overlooked Boston and dominated the entire harbor. For some strange reason—though they had the troops and guns to do so—the British hadn't bothered to capture this strategic spot. Washington's plan was to put most

of Henry's cannons here on the heights. But it had to be done secretly. If General Howe got wind of the rebels' activities, he would attack without delay.

Meanwhile the British commander stomped along the deck of his warship, deep in his own plans. He now had 13,500 redcoats and tons of munitions—more than enough to launch a drive on Cambridge. But Howe was nervous about the weather. It was still winter; great windstorms often swept the harbor, and it would be dangerous to move his marines by boat. The rebels, he thought, were getting weaker and had no artillery—so it wouldn't hurt to wait a bit longer.

Unknown to smug General Howe, the colonists were working feverishly to get their guns all in place. Then one night toward the middle of the month, General Washington decided to probe the British defenses. Accompanied by Henry Knox and another colonel named Rufus Putnam, he left Roxbury on horseback. Later they dismounted and crept silently toward the causeway that crossed Boston Neck. The men moved carefully and quietly. Henry was enjoying the secret foray.

Suddenly two British officers came galloping toward them. The officers were waving their

swords and signaling frantically to a British battery positioned near the town gates!

Washington and his men were startled. Colonel Knox grabbed his pistol, ready to defend the general. What fools they'd been, he thought. How careless! The British cavalymen drew closer. The colonists turned, raced to their horses, leaped into the saddles, and galloped safely back to Roxbury. Henry shuddered when he thought of what might have happened if George Washington had been captured.

Narrow escape or not, General Washington was kept busy. A large shipment of powder had arrived, sent from France to New York, then brought overland. This, plus thousands of round shot taken from the captured brig *Nancy* meant plenty of ammunition for the Ticonderoga weapons.

Henry and Will worked day and night, and by the first of March they were able to report to the War Council that all was ready. General Washington's master plan could now begin.

On the night of March 2, cannons began firing steadily from the rebel lines north of Boston.

Paul Revere, Jr., reading by candlelight, heard them. Old Toby, rowing his skiff near the banks of

the Charles River, heard them. Will Knox, working in Roxbury, heard them. And the British aboard their warships heard them, too.

General Howe, peering from the deck of HMS *Somerset*, was very surprised. Why were the fool colonials wasting powder when they had so little to spare? And where did they get those new guns? Well, no matter. If the rebels wanted an artillery duel, he'd jolly well oblige them. The British commander snapped orders to his adjutant, and soon the guns of the fleet began answering the rebel barrage.

For several hours cannons on both sides banged away loudly at each other, and the following night the duel was continued. Only light guns were being used, and in the darkness neither side did much damage. Which was just what Washington had expected. For the truth was, this sudden noisy barrage was simply a hoax—a clever diversion set up to fool the British and to draw their attention away from Dorchester Heights.

During the daylight hours Washington's ruse continued. He paraded an armed regiment along the ramparts of the Cambridge line as if preparing for battle. Knowing that spies would quickly

tell the British, he assembled scores of wagons to carry the "wounded." He also turned the main Cambridge barracks into a hospital for use in the coming "attack."

The British easily took the bait. Unaware of Henry's Ticonderoga prizes, Howe and his officers concentrated only on Cambridge. They paced the decks of their ships, studied the northern lines with their telescopes, and worried about the activities in that area.

While all this was going on, Henry and Will, with their artillerymen, worked like fiends to fortify Dorchester Heights. Washington had assigned many troopers, plus four hundred oxen, to the job of hauling the biggest guns up the steep hills and setting them in place. But winter winds had done their work. "The ground here is frozen solid," Henry said unhappily to Will. "It's like iron. We'll never be able to dig trenches."

Will frowned, his mind racing. "If we can't dig *down*, let's try building *up*."

The young soldier relished solving tough problems. In no time at all, he had his men gathering huge bundles of loose branches and tying them together tightly. These bundles were called

fascines. Placed upright, jammed one next to the other, the fascines formed a solid, musket-proof wall. He also had dozens of empty barrels rounded up and filled with rocks and sand. These were hauled up the hill and placed in front of the fascines. The heavy barrels gave strength to the makeshift wall. They also had another use: If Howe's marines stormed Dorchester Heights, the barrels, chained together, would be rolled downhill, smashing into the British lines.

Once this crude parapet was in place, openings were cut for the muzzles of the big guns. Then, one by one, the cannons were hauled uphill by straining teams of oxen. With so many men and animals to help, the work went swiftly. But Henry laid down strict rules of silence. Nobody was allowed to speak above a whisper. They used night lanterns, which shed only small patches of blue light, and straw was spread over the hillside to muffle the sound of the carts. Luckily, the wind was blowing from the west, carrying any sounds away from the British.

The men worked feverishly and quietly, under great pressure. The forts were going up right under the noses of Howe's redcoats, who were patrolling Boston Neck only a mile away. If they

discovered the scheme, they would sound the alarm. British gunboats would race to the spot and destroy everything.

The work started right after dark and went on all through the long moonless night. Henry was on edge, but he tried to remain calm. This was his moment—the goal that he and Will had worked so hard for. With his brother at his side, the colonel was everywhere, up the hill and down, helping to load carts, pushing guns into position, and seeing that each post had a supply of shot and powder, and that each crew knew its duties. And all of this was done with signs, gestures, and quiet whispers.

Washington, anxious about the plan, moved his headquarters to Roxbury, where he could keep in touch with the work on the ramparts. By four that morning, as the first glow of dawn appeared over the eastern bay, everything was finished. The heavy guns, including the runaway mortar and Will's giant twenty-four-pounder, were all in place.

Colonel Knox reported this to the commander, who nodded and smiled. But Washington's smile was an anxious one. So far things had gone smoothly. In the morning the rebels would face their final test.

The Guns Speak

At daybreak on March 4, the watch officer aboard HMS *Somerset* was quietly pacing the quarter-deck. Glancing around the harbor, he happened to look toward Dorchester Heights. What he saw made his jaw drop and his eyes pop wide. He shouted for a messenger and sent him to awaken the British commander.

"Say that it's urgent!" the officer called as the messenger raced off.

General Howe hurried on deck, pulling a boat cloak over his nightshirt. By then the other officers were also on deck, all of them staring toward Dorchester. Howe followed their gaze and gasped in disbelief. There on the ridge—deserted and bare the day before—were two massive forts! As

the first rays of wintry sun appeared, the watchers could see a long line of heavy cannons mounted on the parapet—and their muzzles were pointing straight at the British fleet!

Sir William Howe swore. He sputtered. He fretted and fumed. What manner of black magic was this? How did the Yanks work such a miracle overnight? Where did those guns come from—and why hadn't the British sentries seen what was going on?

Looking for somebody to blame, Howe raved at his staff officers, who stood in a daze. Just then there was a long rolling of drums on the Dorchester ramparts.

Standing behind the fascines, General Washington nodded to Henry Knox. "Let's begin, Colonel," he said. Henry raised his arm and swung it down.

Boooom! CRASH! Crack!

With billowing smoke and flashes of flame, the guns of Ticonderoga spoke. They roared out, growling defiance at the enemy who, for so long, had tormented their city. Startled by the sounds, Paul and many other Bostonians pulled on clothes

and raced to the waterfront to watch the spectacle and cheer wildly.

After the great opening salvo, Henry's guns were hauled in, sponged out, and reloaded with powder and shot. And once again they roared in loud triumph.

Crash! BOOOOM!

The cannonade thundered across the harbor, sweeping over the city and rousing its citizens. In the rumbling, Will Knox heard a magic echo of things to come. To his ears, the blast was a song of victory... a mighty shout of freedom... a challenge to British rule... a roar of support for the colonies.

None of the cannons had been aimed and most of the shots fell harmlessly, sending up a forest of waterspouts around the blockading ships. But this was deliberate on Washington's part. His goal, at that point, wasn't to sink ships or take British lives. The Dorchester Heights gunfire was symbolic. Washington wanted a gesture of power—something to show the British the danger of their position. His guns sent a strong message to the enemy: *The siege is over and the tide of battle has turned.*

General Howe was furious. He hated to accept defeat. Signal flags raced up the mainmast of the *Somerset*, giving orders to the fleet to return the rebel fire. Dutifully, the warships swung into position, bringing their broadside guns to bear on the audacious Yanks. Then a hundred British weapons belched fire and smoke, pouring shot after shot at Dorchester Heights.

Safe behind their barricade, Washington's men waited calmly. The British cannons were powerful, but they had limited movement. The colonists knew that the guns of the fleet couldn't be elevated high enough to damage the ramparts; in fact, Howe's barrage was useless. Try as they would, his gunners could barely reach halfway up the hillside, where their shots fell harmlessly.

For a while the British continued to waste powder and shot, but one by one the enemy guns began to fall silent. Washington studied the blockading ships and nodded to Henry Knox with satisfaction. In time—with careful attention to range and windage—the rebel cannons could sink the whole British fleet, ship by ship. But Howe still had cards to play. If he came under heavy attack, he might bombard the city and kill

hundreds of innocent people. Even in defeat, his marines could torch Boston and burn it to the ground.

So the patriots had to move carefully. Washington's aim was to free the city and force the British out. He wanted *victory, not tragedy*—and now that he had artillery, victory was in his hands.

The sun crept higher while Henry's gunners stood by their weapons and waited. The last British cannon gave up and stopped firing. As the grim warships finally turned away from Dorchester, the men on the heights sent up a loud, ragged cheer. Somebody raised his voice in song, and soon a thousand joyous voices were added:

Then join hand in hand, brave Americans all,
By uniting we stand, by dividing we fall.
In so righteous a cause let us hope to succeed.
For Heaven approves of each patriot's deed!

Will Knox, his face streaked with powder and grime, came over and put an arm around his brother's shoulder. The two men looked at each other and grinned happily. They both had the same thoughts—and words weren't needed. The

British were facing a clear defeat. Boston would now be free—and the brothers knew that some day the *rest* of America would also be free.

For the British rulers, this moment was the beginning of the end. For the American patriots, it was the end of the beginning.