

Battlefield: Boston Harbor

Following the battles at Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, Boston Harbor and the surrounding communities in this area became the center of a quickly developing war.

Here, British and revolutionary colonial forces engaged in a series of battles, skirmishes, and raids over the next 11 months. The Siege of Boston marked the first chapter of what would become the War for American Independence.

15,000 years ago, glaciers formed the landscape of Boston Harbor that would define this siege. Glaciers deposited till into hills called drumlins. Over millennia, rising seawaters created the many islands, peninsulas, hills, and tidal flats you see on this map.

This complex landscape not only served as the backdrop for the Siege of Boston, it also dictated the actions of both British and colonial forces. Each struggled to navigate and control these features to win the siege.



View of Boston Harbor in 1768, before the American Revolutionary War. Library of Congress

A 1775 sketch depicting the southeast view from a British fortification on Beacon Hill in Boston. The drumlin hills of neighboring Dorchester and Roxbury are in the distance. British Library



A Rebellion Begins

April & May 1775



1. Lexington & Concord

On April 19 a detachment of British soldiers marched to Concord by way of Lexington to seize weapons and supplies. Alarmed by their presence, colonial militia assembled. The tension erupted into violence, and a series of running fights drove the British to the refuge of Boston.

The Horror [Boston] was in when the Batle Aproch'd within Hearing...caus'd such an Agetation of minde I beleve none had much sleep...

- Jane Mecom to her brother, Benjamin Franklin

2. Beginnings of the Siege

To contain the 3,500 British forces now occupying the town, 20,000 New England colonial militia established defensive lines surrounding Boston. Fearing greater violence, Loyalist and Patriot residents either chose to hunker down in this town under siege, or flee to the countryside as refugees.

The outnumbered British soldiers and marines relied on a massive naval presence in the harbor to provide them with security and supplies. In May, several skirmishes occurred throughout the harbor, as both sides recognized the islands' valuable resources and strategic location to the coastline.

The allarm flew [like] lightning, and men from all parts came flocking down till 2000 were collected... Our people landed upon [Grape] Island, and in an instant set fire to the Hay which with the Barn was soon consumed, about 80 ton[s]...

- Abigail Adams to her husband, John Adams

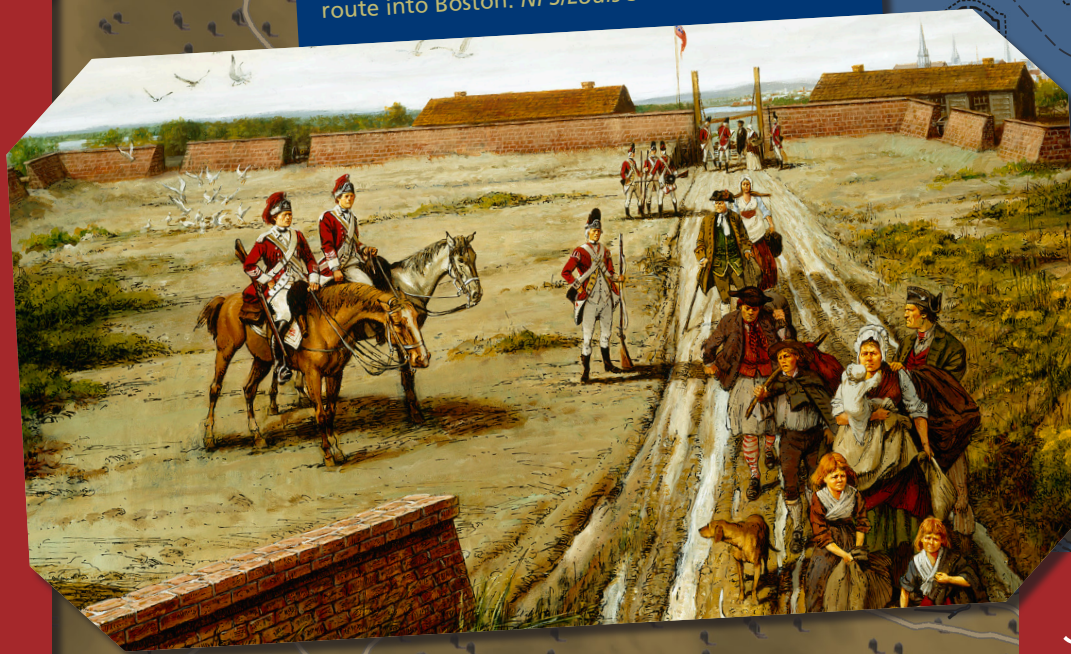
4. Battle of Chelsea Creek

Days later, colonial militia began burning down buildings on Noddle's Island to prevent the British military from accessing supplies. British marines pursued militia both on foot and via a narrow waterway called Chelsea Creek. This prompted a series of land and sea skirmishes over two days (May 27-28), which became known as the Battle of Chelsea Creek.

Although few casualties occurred, militia ransacked and burned the British warship HMS *Diana*, which had run aground while attempting to navigate the tidal mudflats.

3. Grape Island Alarm

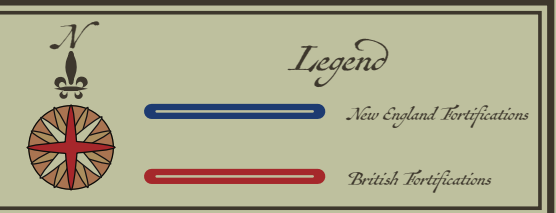
On May 21, the townspeople of Weymouth saw British forces moving hay on Grape Island with the approval of a Loyalist resident. Sounding the alarm, local militia fired at the British from the mainland shore before taking boats across the water to drive them away.



Thousands of civilians fled Boston to the countryside. Most had to clear the fortified British checkpoint on "Boston Neck"—the only land route into Boston. NPS/Louis S. Glanzman

The Battle of Bunker Hill

June 1775



The peninsula of Charlestown is dominated by the drumlins of Bunker Hill and Breed's Hill. Library of Congress

A PLAN OF THE ACTION AT BUNKER HILL on the 17th of June 1775 Between HIS MAJESTY'S ARMS and THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA Under the Command of THE BRITISH GENERAL AND THE AMERICAN GENERAL who acted as AID TO THE COMMANDER IN CHIEF



3. A Bloody Battle

For two hours, bloody fighting consumed the hilly landscape. New England militia attempted to hold off the British assaults. Exhausted and low on ammunition, the militia retreated across the Charlestown Neck to the mainland.

When the smoke cleared, the British forces claimed the field but at a cost of 1,054 troops. The New England militia reported 450 soldiers killed, wounded, or captured. Set on fire by British forces during the battle, the town of Charlestown lay in ashes.

I cannot pretend to describe the Horror of the Scene within the Redoubt, when we enter'd... it 'twas streaming with Blood & strew'd with dead & dying Men...[it] was a sight too dreadful for me to dwell any longer on.
- British Lieutenant John Waller, 1st Battalion of Marines

1. Fortifying Breed's Hill

By the end of May, a newly reinforced British Army planned to break the siege. They looked to the drumlins north and south of Boston as strategic locations to make their next move. Learning of their plans, colonial leaders decided to strike first.

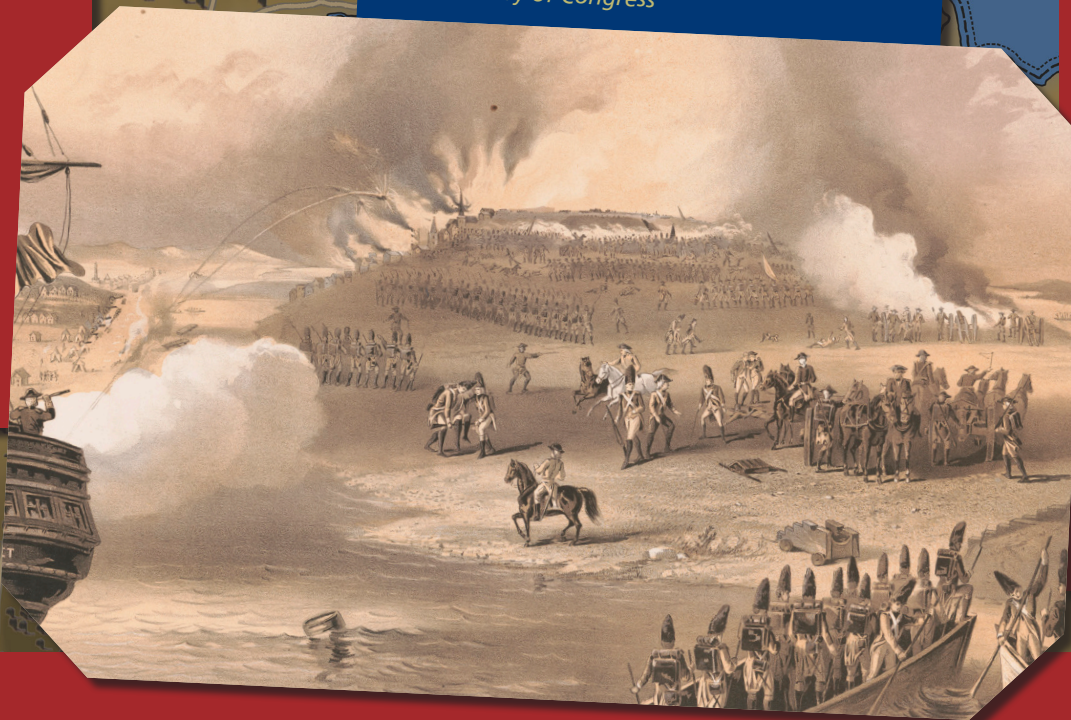
On the night of June 16, roughly 1,200 New England colonial militia dug an earthen fort—called a redoubt—on Breed's Hill in Charlestown. From their fortified position overlooking Boston and its harbor, they awaited sunrise.

2. British Cannon & Crossing

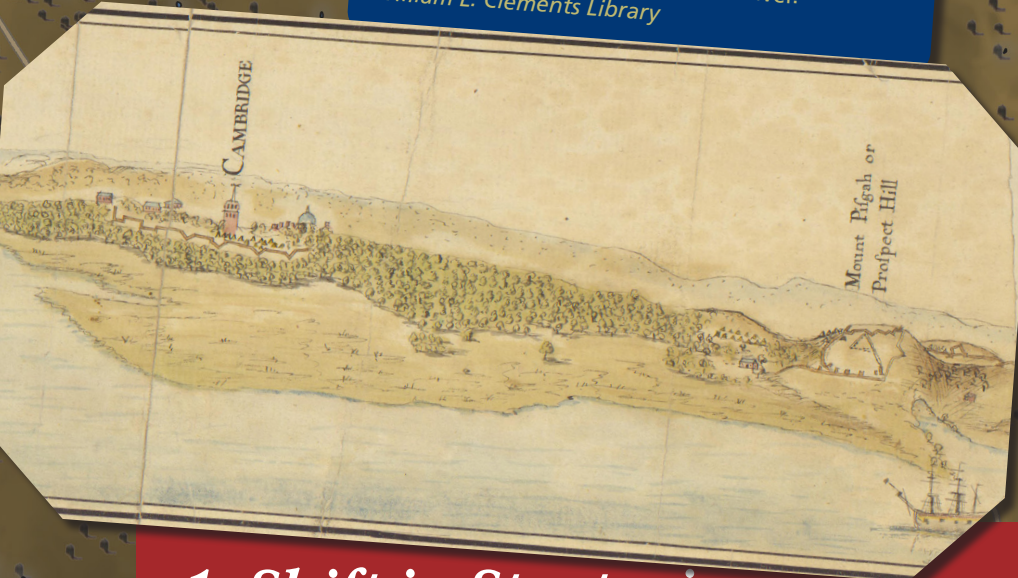
When British commanders saw the redoubt on the morning of June 17, they looked to immediately respond with a crushing assault. The British Navy bombarded the redoubt with cannon from Copp's Hill and ships in the harbor. However, the shallow waters and low morning tide prevented British warships from getting a clear aim.

The tides and dramatic depth changes of Boston Harbor delayed the timing of the British landing on Charlestown. In the early afternoon, 2,400 British soldiers landed here on the Charlestown waterfront and began their attack.

British forces had to cross Boston Harbor by rowboat in multiple waves. The final wave of reinforcements landed here, where you now stand. Library of Congress



After retreating from Bunker Hill, New England militia extensively fortified the hills west of Charlestown Neck and the Charles River. William L. Clements Library



Island Raids

July & August 1775



1. Shift in Strategies

The sheer destruction of the Battle of Bunker Hill illustrated how devastating assaults over hilly terrain could be. Neither side felt prepared to renew any attacks for the coming months. Instead, armies on both sides built extensive fortifications on hills beyond the burnt remains of Charlestown.



3. Boston Light

The British forces depended on their link to the sea for supplies and reinforcements. As a result, they needed to keep the lighthouse on Little Brewster Island—Boston Light—operational. On July 20, however, a small colonial force rowed out and set fire to the wooden part of the lighthouse.

Within days, a British work party and a guard of British marines began to rebuild the lighthouse. In response, 300 colonial troops set out to stop their progress on the morning of July 31. Their assault came as a surprise and overwhelmed the British contingent. Several marines lay dead as the party captured survivors and set the entire island on fire. Boston Light remained extinguished for the rest of the siege.



British military engineers constructed an immense fortification they called the "Citadel" on the high peak of Bunker Hill to control access to Charlestown Neck. William L. Clements Library

2. Long Island Raid

On the night of July 11, several hundred New England militia rowed whaleboats to Long Island. The party quickly captured the sleeping residents and hay mowers employed by the British Army. They also rounded up and rowed to the mainland every cow and sheep on the island. The next morning, another group returned and set fire to the house, barn, and every bit of hay. Nothing remained for the use of the British forces.

A few days ago one hundred and five Boats, full of men, landed on Long Island and carried off all the Stock. ...From their Lightness and drawing little Water, [their whaleboats] can not only outrow our Boats, but by getting into Shoal Water, and in Calms, they must constantly escape. It is not possible to guard every Island in this Harbour from such pyratyical attempts...

- British Vice Admiral Samuel Graves



(above) The small island raids served as a morale booster for the Patriot cause. The fights over Boston Light inspired one broadside of poetry celebrating the attacks. Boston Public Library

(right) The Patriot government of Massachusetts purchased and amassed over 200 whaleboats from across southern New England, seen here in this purchase log. Whaleboats moved quickly and could navigate the various depths of Boston Harbor, allowing colonial militia to outmaneuver British ships. Massachusetts State Archives

A Return of Whale Boats purchased for the use of the American Army

Name	Owner	Price	Remarks
John's	John's	1	
John's	John's	2	
John's	John's	3	
John's	John's	4	
John's	John's	5	
John's	John's	6	
John's	John's	7	
John's	John's	8	
John's	John's	9	
John's	John's	10	
John's	John's	11	
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John's	John's	26	
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Dorchester Heights

February & March 1776



1. A Plan to Break the Siege

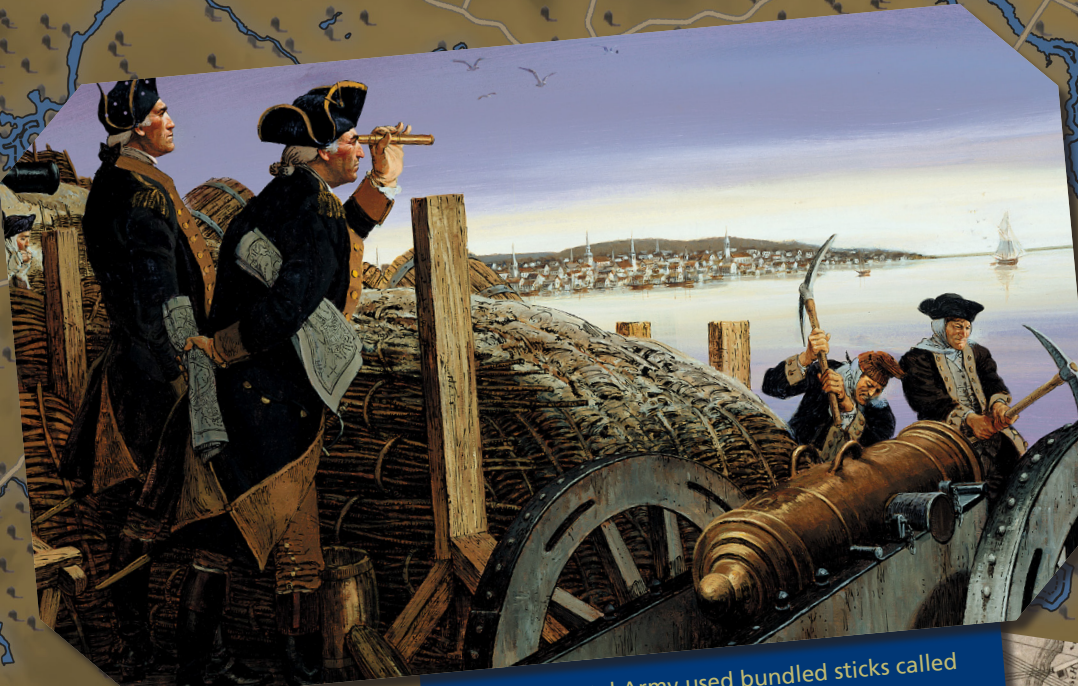
General George Washington arrived in July 1775 to take command of the colonial forces. Throughout the rest of summer and into fall, he organized them into the Continental Army and ordered further fortifications to contain the British forces.

Cannon fire and small skirmishes became a regular occurrence, but both sides remained at a stalemate. Over the winter, Washington's generals sought a plan to finally end the siege.

Fortifying Dorchester Heights, a strategically located drumlin to the south of Boston, became the answer.

"The joy of our friends in Boston, on seeing the victorious and gallant troops of their country enter the town almost at the heels of their barbarous oppressors was inexpressibly great. The mutual congratulations and tender embraces, which soon after took place between those of the nearest connections in life, for long time cruelly left asunder by the tyranny of our implacable enemies, surpasses description..."

- Letter from Cambridge to the Essex Journal and New-Hampshire Packet



The Continental Army used bundled sticks called "fascines" to build up the fortifications on Dorchester Heights. The ground was too frozen to dig a redoubt. NPS/Louis S. Glanzman

2. Fortification of Dorchester Heights

To distract the British forces, Washington ordered a large bombardment of Boston. On the night of March 4, 1776, more than 1,200 Continental soldiers and volunteers stealthily fortified Dorchester Heights.

The dawn of March 5 revealed what the Continental forces achieved overnight. A fortification with cannon towered over Boston and the only shipping route out of the harbor.



This selection from a map of the Siege of Boston illustrates how the 1776 fortifications on "Dorchester Neck" threatened the south side of Boston as well as the only shipping route out of the harbor. Boston Public Library

3. Evacuation of Boston

British General William Howe planned to land troops and attack Dorchester Heights in response to this aggressive act. A major winter storm prevented it. Now completely surrounded in Boston, Howe determined he had no choice but to abandon the town.

On March 17, all British forces evacuated Boston by ship. More than a thousand Loyalist refugees joined them. As they set sail from the inner harbor, British troops destroyed the fortifications on Castle Island.

The Continental Army marched victoriously into Boston, finally ending the siege.

After the Siege

1776 - 1783

1. British Navy in the Outer Harbor

After the British evacuated Boston, some ships of the British naval fleet remained in the outer harbor, near Nantasket (Hull), while the rest of the fleet departed for Halifax, Nova Scotia. Several small naval confrontations between British ships and American schooners occurred in May.

In 1778, a French naval fleet came to Boston Harbor for refit and repairs. Along with the island forts, this fleet helped secure the harbor by guarding shipping routes, as shown in this French map. *Library of Congress*

4. Protecting Boston Harbor

To ensure Boston remained safe from a future British attack, Continental and French forces fortified mainland hills as well as several of the harbor islands including Georges, Gallops, and Peddocks Islands. Though war did not directly return to Boston, these fortifications served as early coastal defenses for a new nation.

2. Expelling the British

Impatient to fully expel the British from the harbor, Massachusetts leaders devised a plan to bring troops out to the islands to fire upon the British fleet.

On June 14, militia landed at Peddocks, Moon, and Long Islands, as well as other coastal posts along the southern shore. After a short exchange of cannon fire, the British ships left the outer harbor. Upon their departure, they blew up the remains of Boston Light as a final act of retribution.

I have the pleasure to inform you that we have driven the Pirates out of this Harbour. ...[A] detachment of five hundred men, with several pieces of battering Cannon...was ordered to take post on Long Island and throw up works[.] [T]he next morning they began a fire upon the Enemy's Ships... which soon drove them all out of the Harbour.

- Continental Officer
Joseph Ward to John Adams

3. Safe Harbor

Although the Siege of Boston concluded, Boston and its harbor remained strategically vital to the cause for American independence. Over the next seven years, French aid arrived in Boston Harbor in the form of troops, money, arms, and ammunition. Boston served as the largest open harbor in North America for allied merchant ships, American warships, and large French naval fleets.

This sketch by a British Army officer, made in 1775 or 1776, depicts ships at the entrance to Boston Harbor. Boston Light is to the right on Little Brewster Island. *New York Public Library*

Experience the Revolutionary Harbor

With the end of the Siege of Boston and the expulsion of the British Navy in the summer of 1776, Massachusetts had broken free from British control. The actions of the colonists here helped inspire the American colonies' official break from British rule with the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776.

For 250 years, generations of Americans have memorialized, remembered, and sought inspiration from the sites and stories of this chapter in the founding of the United States. The National Parks of Boston is proud to continue that legacy for generations to come.



Boston Harbor Islands

With 34 islands and peninsulas, Boston Harbor Islands National and State Park serves as a natural respite from the hustle and bustle of the city. Every summer, visitors can take a short ferry ride to one of the publicly accessible islands and enjoy stunning views of downtown Boston and the surrounding harbor. Rangers also narrate lighthouse cruises, during which visitors see all three standing lighthouses of Boston Harbor, including Boston Light.

Bunker Hill

The Bunker Hill Monument, a 221-foot-tall obelisk, stands as a tribute to the memory of the Battle of Bunker Hill. The Freedom Trail leads to both the Monument and the Bunker Hill Museum, which delves into the story of the battle and its legacy.



Dorchester Heights

The Dorchester Heights Monument commemorates the fortification of Dorchester Heights on the evening of March 4, 1776, which led to the evacuation of the British. Since that historic moment, Dorchester Heights has turned into a community park with national significance.