

# BOSTON IS FREE!

At the start of the Revolution, two bold gambles gave the Americans a surprise victory over the British

COMMON  
CORE  
QUESTION

## CHARACTERS

**GEORGE WASHINGTON**, commander in chief of the Continental Army

**ARTEMAS WARD**, American major general

**NATHANAEL GREENE**, American brigadier general

**HENRY KNOX**, American colonel

**WILLIAM HOWE**, commander in chief of the British Army in America

**JAMES GRANT**, British brigadier general

**HENRY CLINTON**, British major general

**TIMOTHY NEWELL**, Boston resident

\***LIEUTENANT COOTE**, British officer

**WILLIAM KNOX**, Colonel Knox's brother

\***MESSENGER**

**RUFUS PUTNAM**, American colonel

\***JACK BULL**, aide to General Howe

**ISAAC BANGS**, American soldier

\***PATRICK MORAN**, American soldier

**NARRATORS A-E**

\*Indicates a fictional or composite character. All others were real people.

Getting 60 tons of guns over mountains on ox-drawn sleds was not an easy task.

## PROLOGUE

**Narrator A:** The writer Ralph Waldo Emerson would famously call it “the shot heard ‘round the world.” On April 19, 1775, members of a New England **militia** exchanged gunfire with British soldiers at Lexington and Concord, two villages outside Boston, Massachusetts. The struggle of the 13 American colonies to free themselves from the rule of Great Britain—the American Revolution—had begun.

**Narrator B:** After the battles of Lexington and Concord, a stalemate set in. About 7,000 fully armed and trained British troops—called “Redcoats” by the colonists—occupied Boston. To the west, across the waters of Back Bay and the Charles River (*see map*), poorly equipped, ragtag American forces laid **siege** to the city . . . and waited.

**Narrator C:** In June, the **Continental Congress**, meeting in Philadelphia, appointed George Washington commander of the rebel militias. Setting off for Boston, the general wondered how his “army” of untested farmers and townspeople turned soldiers could possibly take on the military might of the British Empire.

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## WORDS TO KNOW

- **militia** (*n*): a group of citizens organized into a fighting force
- **siege** (*n*): the surrounding of a place by a military force
- **Continental Congress** (*n*): the government of the 13 colonies
- **fortification** (*n*): defensive barrier on a battlefield, often a wall made of earth or stone

ILLUSTRATION: SUPERSTOCK; MAP: JIM MOHRINGER/ARTWAY

## THE SIEGE OF BOSTON, 1776



## SCENE 1

**Narrator D:** Even before Washington arrives, the fight for Boston begins. On June 17, 1775, the armies clash on the hills that overlook the city from the north. The British win the Battle of Bunker Hill—but the Americans show that they can fight.

**Narrator E:** When Washington arrives in July, he sets up his headquarters in Cambridge. Alarmed at his troops' lack of discipline, he sets about turning them into a unified fighting force. That September he assembles a council of war with his officers.

**George Washington:** I am determined to attack before winter sets in. Our men have no firewood or barracks. Plus, most of them have enlisted for only a year, and we could lose them in December.

**Artemas Ward:** With respect, General, moving against the Redcoats now could be disastrous. We are sorely lacking in arms and gunpowder.

**Nathanael Greene:** In addition,

our only way to attack Boston is by water. If our boats don't catch the tide right or get stranded in the mud, the slaughter could be horrible.

**Narrator A:** Washington remains impatient to act. Then in November, one of his junior officers has an idea.

**Henry Knox:** Sir, when we took Fort Ticonderoga from the British last spring, they abandoned many cannon and mortars there. Why don't we go get them?

**Washington:** That's hardly a simple mission—to haul thousands of pounds of equipment 300 miles over rough terrain while risking enemy attack. But it's a bold plan, and worth the risk. Mr. Knox, prepare to lead the expedition.

**Narrator B:** On November 16, Knox and his 19-year-old brother William head to Fort Ticonderoga in upper New York (*see map inset*). Time is critical. Within days, the first snows of winter begin to fall in Boston.

*continued on p. 8* →

## SCENE 2

**Narrator C:** In the bone-chilling Boston cold, the British have their own challenges. In early December, General William Howe consults with his officers.

**William Howe:** Our situation is serious. We're running short of food, and rebel ships are stopping supplies from reaching us.

**James Grant:** Also, smallpox is spreading. Some men speak openly of deserting. We should just burn this place to the ground and move on to take New York.

**Henry Clinton:** Sir, I think we should seize Dorchester Heights, to the south. If anything could defeat us, it would be rebel cannon pointed at us from those hills.

**Howe:** It's too late. Winter is here. We will dig in and wait for spring.

**Narrator D:** The people of Boston suffer too. One of them confronts a British officer.

**Timothy Newell:** Lieutenant, please stop your soldiers. They're tearing apart my barn.

**Lieutenant Coote:** Sorry, sir. Orders from General Howe. We need firewood.

**Newell:** This is outrageous! You're even pulling down churches—and turning pews into pigsties.

**Coote:** Take it up with General Howe. Now stand aside.

## SCENE 3

**Narrator E:** After three weeks of traveling, the Knox brothers reach Fort Ticonderoga on December 5. They're amazed at what they find.

**Henry Knox:** What a haul! I count 58 mortars and cannon.

**William Knox:** Nearly 60 tons of guns! But how do we get it all back to General Washington?

**Henry Knox:** We'll float them down the river, then move them



Bostonians cheer General Washington as he makes his triumphant entrance into the city.

by sled across land to Cambridge.

**William Knox:** By sled? Well, let's pray for snow.

**Narrator A:** The brothers set off, using teams of local men along the way. Henry Knox writes about the many hazards they confront.

**Henry Knox (writing):** On the very first day, one of the boats sank, and we had to fish it out. After Lake George, we moved everything onto 40 sleds. But a cruel thaw set in, and we had to wait for days for snow. Then on Christmas Day, we got three feet! I nearly froze to death riding ahead to Albany.

There we had to cross the frozen Hudson River, but one of the heaviest cannon fell through the ice, and it took all day to save it. Then on the road to Cambridge, getting the sleds over the Berkshire Mountains sometimes seemed impossible. We had to tie rope

lines between trees to keep the guns from plummeting down mountainsides!

**Narrator B:** On January 18, Washington is still waiting impatiently at his headquarters for an opportunity to attack Boston when a messenger rushes in.

**Messenger:** Sir, Knox is nearly here with the guns: 58 of them!

**Narrator C:** It's true. Against all odds, Knox has come 300 miles in six hard-winter weeks—and hasn't lost a single gun.

## SCENE 4

**Narrator D:** Washington's officers also recognize the importance of taking Dorchester Heights. Now they have this artillery! If they can get the guns onto the hills, which loom 100 feet over the south of Boston, it will give them a big advantage over the battlefield.



**Narrator E:** But getting the guns up there and digging **fortifications** for them in the frozen ground is a huge problem for Washington. In late February, another junior officer comes to see him.

**Rufus Putnam:** Sir, I've been reading a book on battle tactics, and it's given me an idea. Instead of trying to dig fortifications up there, we can build them here in sections and then *carry* them there.

**Washington:** They'll be *portable*? But what will they be made of?

**Putnam:** They'll be large frames made from timber and filled with bundles of brush and hay. We'll make a wall of them—which should be thick enough to stop a musket ball.

**Greene:** Obviously, we'll have to get it all past the British troops that guard the Boston Neck . . .

**Putnam:** It's a gamble, but we can

**“Each of us must prepare his mind for the challenge ahead. . . . Freedom or slavery will result from our conduct.” —George Washington**

sneak everything up after dark—and in a single night.

**Washington:** Excellent work, Colonel. Finally, we can bring on a rumpus with these Redcoats!

**Narrator A:** Hundreds of people throw themselves into preparing a huge number of the timber frames, called chandeliers. The attempt on Dorchester is set for March 4. As the day draws near, Washington addresses his troops.

**Washington:** Each of us must prepare his mind for the challenge ahead. It is a noble cause we are engaged in, the cause of virtue and mankind. Freedom or slavery will result from our conduct. I must warn you that if any man in action hides or retreats from the enemy, he will be instantly shot down as a coward! Now on to our great task.

## SCENE 5

**Narrator B:** On March 4, American guns bombard Boston to distract the British. Through the night, some 4,000 soldiers and workmen and hundreds of ox-drawn carts haul the guns up the steep, frozen Dorchester hills. In the morning, the British commander wakes to a surprise.

**Jack Bull:** Sir, you must come look. On Dorchester! All these cannon—pointed right at us!

**Howe (running outside):** My God, these rebels have done more work in a night than I could make my army do in three months.

**Narrator C:** Howe soon realizes he's trapped and decides to evacuate Boston. On March 8, American soldiers on Dorchester

are witness to an incredible sight.

**Isaac Bangs:** Did you see the Redcoats crossing the Neck with a white flag? What did that mean?

**Patrick Moran:** Howe has sworn not to burn Boston if we just let his troops go. They're leaving!

**Narrator D:** Then on Sunday, March 17 . . .

**Bangs:** What a St. Patrick's Day! Cast your eyes on that long line of British ships stretching out to sea. Good riddance to them all.

**Moran:** Boston is free again. And without our firing a single shot!

**Narrator E:** Cheers rise as the entire British Army and 1,100 Loyalists [Americans opposed to splitting from Britain] board 120 ships. That day, American troops enter the city in triumph.

**Narrator A:** But Washington knows that the struggle for independence has only just begun.

**Washington (in a letter):** I am hurrying to dispatch brigades for New York, where I'm sure the British will strike next. There is still a long fight ahead of us.

## EPILOGUE

**Narrator B:** As Washington expected, the British attacked New York City in August—and controlled it by October. It took seven more years for the Americans to win their revolution. But saving Boston was a huge boost to the cause of independence. Today, Bostonians celebrate each St. Patrick's Day along with what they call Evacuation Day—and the improbable miracle of 1776.

—Bryan Brown