



The American Revolution

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Sons of the American Revolution

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Article 3

Evacuation Day:

Since Washington's arrival and assumption of leadership for the Patriots, some degree of order had prevailed among their ranks. Washington had appointed men known for their skills and leadership to the officer ranks, and required them to dress according to rank and to distinguish themselves from the regular soldiers. Now in midwinter, Washington began to maneuver his men to secure positions on the hills around Boston and Boston harbor. Of particular interest to Washington were the Dorchester Heights. From late September into January, the Patriots and the British had been exchanging probes, attacks and reprisals with one another. General Washington had authorized all Patriot fishing vessels to be armed and enabled to carryout privateering.

This action greatly diminished the British ability to supply the troops and loyalists population within Boston. In addition, General Washington had cleared the area

around Boston of all livestock and stored crops, thus accomplishing a “parched earth policy.” The British forces had been on half-rations for over two months, and the men were so hungry that many were seriously considering defection to the Patriots. Worse than this was the fact that vitamin deficiency diseases began plaguing these troops, so that scurvy and smallpox became terrible threats. General Washington quarantined his smallpox affected troops and thus avoided an epidemic among the Patriots.

By late February, 1776, Henry Knox had completed the mounting of Ticonderoga cannons onto wooden carriages, which could be mounted on fortified emplacements or on to wagon axles for easy field movement. Some of these pieces were of size and range not previously available to the Patriots. Several of these pieces were situated in fortifications around and above the city of Boston, and by the night of March 2, all were in place and the Americans began their nocturnal bombardment of the British held city. The totally stunned and surprised British returned fire, but their guns could not be elevated enough to reach the American gun emplacements. Checkmate had been achieved by the Patriots. The exchange of cannon fire continued until March 4. On March 5 General Washington moved several thousand men, among them about 1,000 with rifled muskets for long range sniping, and with these men came several of the Ticonderoga cannons, and both cannons and men secretly and quietly occupied Dorchester Heights with its grand and sweeping view of Boston harbor containing the British naval fleet.

The morning of 5 March brought alarm to the British. British General Howe exclaimed, “My God, those fellows have done more work in one night than I could make my army do in three months.” It was obvious, the entire British fleet and army were within range of the Patriot guns on Dorchester Heights and the British could not

effectively answer any of the Patriot cannonade, which would naturally be accompanied by sniper fire from 1,000 rifled muskets.

General Howe planned a large scale attack on the heights, but a serious storm struck the area and the attack never developed. On 8 March 1776 the British opened an all night massive artillery barrage from Nook's Hill directed at Dorchester Heights. No damage was done and the Patriots went out the next day and gathered over 700 cannon balls and stored them for future reuse. Over the following week the British fleet remained at anchor in the harbor as there were no favorable winds, however, on 15 March the winds rallied and preparation for evacuation was put into effect, only to have it stopped, when the winds unexpectedly quit. On the 17th of March 1776 the winds returned and at 4:00 AM, evacuation of the British began. By 9:00 AM, all ships were under way and the departing fleet was composed of 120 vessels, more than 11,000 people were on board, and of this number, 9,906 were British troops, 667 were women, and 553 were children.

From this day forward, it would not only be celebrated as St. Patrick's Day, but also as "Evacuation Day." Colonel Henry Knox had handed General Washington his first complete victory over the British. Many shots had been fired, some damage done, but a virtually bloodless victory had been wrought by the crafty intelligence and perseverance of Colonel Henry Knox, who would go on to become this nation's first Secretary of War and rise to the army rank of general. Pretty remarkable for a bookstore salesman, but after all, this was America where such things not only happened, but are expected.