

British proclamation forbids residents from leaving Boston, 1775

The new commander in chief of the British army, Major General Sir William Howe, issues a proclamation to the residents of Boston on this day October 28, 1775. Speaking from British headquarters in Boston, Howe forbade any person from leaving the city and ordered citizens to organize into military companies in order to “contribute all in his power for the preservation of order and good government within the town of Boston.”

Almost four months earlier, on July 3, 1775, George Washington had formally taken command of the Continental Army. Washington, a prominent Virginia planter and veteran of the French and Indian War, had been appointed commander in chief by the Continental Congress two weeks before in an attempt to turn the impromptu siege of Boston, instigated by New Englanders enraged by the Battle of Lexington and Concord the previous April into a congressionally organized inter-colonial revolt against parliamentary oppression. **The ad hoc siege of Boston enjoyed its greatest moment when New Englanders under the command of Israel Putnam and William Prescott managed to kill 226 and wound 838 members of the world-famous British army before withdrawing their rag-tag force from Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775.**

The newly minted General Washington was unimpressed upon meeting his supposed army outside Boston a few weeks after their momentous success. Just as the British had during the French and Indian War, he saw “stupidity” among the enlisted men, who were used to the easy familiarity of being commanded by neighbors in local militias with elected officers. Washington promptly insisted that the officers behave with decorum and the enlisted men with deference. **Although he enjoyed some success with this original army, the New Englanders went home to their farms at the end of 1775, and Washington had to start fresh with new recruits in 1776.**

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The British did not leave Boston until March 27, 1776, after Washington's successful occupation of Dorchester Heights 13 days earlier, during which he had turned the cannon captured from the British at Fort Ticonderoga on May 10, 1775 upon the British-held city. More afraid of their own cannon than Patriot soldiers, the British departed, thus allowing Bostonians to move freely in and out of their own city for the first time in six months.