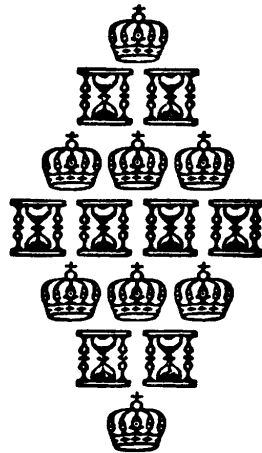


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Early Days
on
BOSTON COMMON

By
Mary Farwell Ayer

With many Illustrations after Old Prints



BOSTON
Privately Printed

1910

IV

GOVERNOR HUTCHINSON decided that if the leading rebels in Boston, John Hancock and Samuel Adams, were captured, he could easily reduce the town to subjection. Troops were therefore sent to Lexington to effect their seizure. A second motive for this expedition was to obtain possession of the gunpowder thought to be concealed in Concord.

On the night of the 18th of April, 1775, a detachment of eight or nine hundred men, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Smith, proceeded to the beach under the new powder-house, the most unfrequented part of the town, and there embarked. With oars muffled they silently rowed over to the Cambridge shore, where they were met at Phips farm by the infamous Captain Beeman, and conducted to Concord.¹

The following morning Earl Percy drew up his brigade, which extended from Scollay Building through Tremont Street along the Mall, and prepared to start for Lexington and Concord.² The accompanying map by an English engineer shows the route taken. He led his forces over the Neck through Roxbury and Cambridge, but when he reached Lexington, the defeated soldiers, hastening back from Concord, met him on the road. There was nothing, therefore, for Percy to do but to turn back with them.³

The battle of Bunker Hill, which occurred in June, proved a doubtful victory for the British, for they lost many more men than did their enemy.⁴ Their large number of dead and wounded, however, was partly compensated for in the fall of

¹ Frothingham's *History of the Siege of Boston*, page 60. ² Letter of Harrison Gray Otis, formerly in the possession of Rev. Edward Everett Hale.

³ Letters of Hugh, Earl Percy, edited by Charles K. Bolton. Ezekiel Price wrote in his diary for June 7, 1775: "The Regular Army have encamped on all the ground from Beacon Hill to the sea, on the west side of the Common, and in the pastures on the West side Pleasant Street, and fortified all the hills in the town; and there seemed to be as many tents as soldiers. The Continental Army, at Roxbury, appeared in high spirits and healthy." *Mass. Hist. Society Proceedings, Series 1, vol. vii, page 188: Diary of Ezekiel Price.*

⁴ A letter written to Nathan Hale, dated Roxbury Camp, June 25, 1775, states: "The number of those slain in the Battle between Putnam and the Gages is uncertain." *Boston Public Library Bulletin, vol. 5, no. 11, page 390.* The question of who was in command of the Continental army during the battle has aroused much controversy. The writer apparently favors Putnam.



A View on Boston Common.

1813

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General Warren, whose death, they declared, was better for them than that of five hundred men.¹

After the battle, the Continental troops were stationed in different places outside the town. Winter and Prospect Hills were guarded, and Cambridge and Roxbury were well garrisoned.²

From the last-named vantage points, many attacks were made on the British encampment on the Common. One man wrote that four boats went up within gunshot of the Common and alarmed them by firing, and then returned without any loss on our side. Dr. Belknap mentioned that two floating batteries came within three-quarters of a mile of the bottom of the Common, and that the shot fired from that point "struck the tents on the Common, and killed one man; also the manufactory-house which is an hospital, which occasioned the removing of the sick; also the Lamb Tavern and Martin Brimmer's house."³ As the manufactory house mentioned stood opposite the Granary Burial-Ground, we realize that the shot was carried some distance.

In October certain men from Cambridge attempted to

¹*The New England Chronicle or The Essex Gazette, August 3-10, 1775.*

*"Here lies the Body of a worthy Man;
Whose Name shall live and fill the World with wonder,
Although his Ashes scarcely fill an Urn,
His Virtues shall remain when we have left the Stage:
His Praises shall be spoke for many an Age to come."*

From the New England Chronicle or the Essex Gazette, June 29, 1775.

A letter dated July 19, 1775, in Almon's Remembrancer, vol. i, page 151, states: "The factory alms-house and work-house are taken up for hospitals; they are continually carrying in the patients, and bringing out dead bodies.—That a flux rages among them, of which they die so fast, that great numbers are buried without coffins—They dig trenches (in the burying ground at the South end) long enough to hold 50 or 60 in length, and two in depth, several of these trenches have been already filled."

Benjamin Franklin wrote to Dr. J. Priestley, October 3, 1775: "Britain, at the expense of three millions, has killed one hundred and fifty yankees this campaign which is 20,000 to a head: and at Bunker Hill she gained a mite of ground, half of which she lost again by our taking fort on Ploughed Hill. During the same time sixty thousand children had been born in America."

²*The fort in Roxbury which stood upon a hill near the meeting-house contained about 1 1-3 acres of land. Another battery stood "where the roads part that come out of Boston." Two more batteries were placed on the Neck, one of them "against the Burying Yard." See letter from Ezra Selden to Levi Hart, June 25, 1775: Boston Public Library Bulletin, vol. 5, no. 11, page 391.*

³*Journal of Dr. Belknap for October 20, 1775. See Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings, Series 1, vol. iv, page 82.*

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provoke the British by sailing down the bay by Brookline Fort until they had approached near enough to the Common to open fire on the town.¹ Although the Regular army was busy erecting fortifications it sometimes retaliated. On one occasion some one wrote: "Their was a number of our men went a scating on the Bay near Boston Common and the Enemy fired upwards of a hundred small arms that did no damage."² At another time about two hundred Regulars took advantage of the high tide to land at Lechmere's Point, and in spite of the arrival of five hundred men sent to drive them off, they escaped with eleven head of cattle.³

It was not long before the British had fortified all the highest parts of the town. Beacon Hill, Powder-house Hill, and Fox Hill were all crowned by fortifications, a fort was placed on West Hill, and a barricade was erected on the Common opposite the present Carver Street.⁴

The Regular army did not neglect to drill on the Common, and Sundays as well as week days the troops would appear on the parade grounds and go through their manœuvres.

Although so far from the home country, the British did not forget to celebrate the anniversary of the King's coronation, for one Samuel Bixby wrote on September 22: "This is the 'King's Coronation Day,' and at 12 o'clock the regulars fired on Boston Common and Bunker's Hill."⁵ At another time it

¹ *Samuel Bixby's Diary: Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings, Series 1, vol. xiv, page 295.*

² *Military Journal of Samuel Hews of Wrentham, February 8, 1776.*

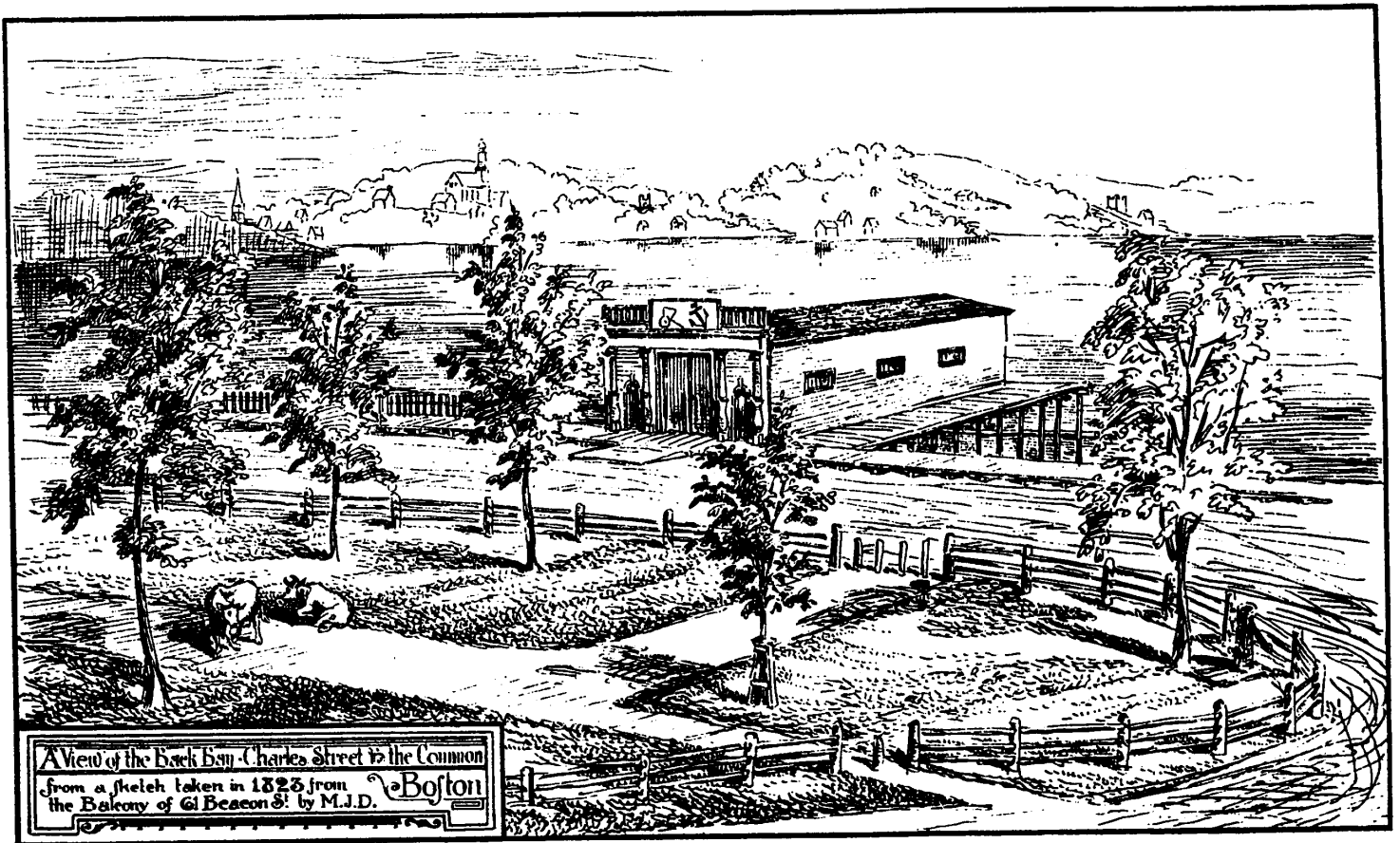
³ *Letter of William T. Miller to his wife, November 10, 1775. See Boston Public Library Monthly Bulletin, vol. vii, no. 10, page 424.*

⁴ *Winsor's Memorial History of Boston, vol. iii, page 79: the works erected on the Common were as follows: A small zigzag earthwork, for infantry defence, opposite a point on Beacon Street, half-way between Spruce and Charles streets; a small redoubt on Fox Hill; an earthwork at the junction of Charles and Boylston streets; a bastioned redoubt at the junction of Boylston and Carver streets; another, square-shaped, on the hill where the monument now stands: other breastworks erected on the edge of the marsh.*

Other fortifications stood on Beacon Hill. An oblong redoubt stood on the summit, back of the present State House. A redoubt faced the Common, near the junction of Walnut and Chestnut streets. Another was erected near the corner of Spruce and Willow streets and faced the water. A fourth stood between Pinckney and Mt. Vernon streets, above Charles Street.

These fortifications are also shown on maps of Boston engraved in 1775 as those by Page and a British engineer.

⁵ *Samuel Bixby's Diary: Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings, Series 1, vol. xiv, page 294.*



A View of the Back Bay - Charles Street to the Common
from a sketch taken in 1823 from
the Balcony of 61 Beacon St. by M.J.D. Boston

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was written that there was "Heavy firing on Boston Common, by the ships in the harbor, and the Castle, in honor of the king."

It seemed from all appearances as if the Regular army was in flourishing condition. It was only through the deserters, who sometimes swam across to Roxbury from the foot of the Common, that the pitiable condition of affairs in the town became known. One man reported: "General Howe has barely six thousand effective men at Boston. The fortifications begun to be erected from water to water, within the *Neck of Boston*, he has been obliged to abandon for want of men sufficient to perform the work. . . . The distress of the troops and people of *Boston* exceed the possibility of description. . . . The inhabitants and troops literally starving with cold. They had taken the pews out of all the places of worship for fuel; had pulled down empty houses, &c., and were then digging up the timber at the wharves for firing; very poor clothing, and so scarce of provisions they have been eating horse flesh for some time."

Another account of the conditions in the town was furnished by a deserter who effected his escape in the middle of the summer. He stated that there were six thousand five hundred and seventy-three inhabitants. Three hundred Tories were chosen to patrol the streets, forty-nine of whom were placed on duty each night. The death-rate was large, there being sometimes as many as thirty funerals a day.²

In spite of the distress in the town, General Gage, who had been re-christened "That Crocodile and second Pharoë, namely Tom. Gage," continued to refuse to grant petitions to leave the town.³

With such conditions existing in Boston, therefore, it was no wonder the British felt dismayed when early one morn-

¹ *Forcé's American Archives*, vol. iv, page 266.

² From a letter dated Cambridge, July 12, 1775. See *Almon's Remembrancer*, vol. i, page 164.

³ *MacCurtin's Journal of the Siege*, page 17. During the blockade of Boston, prayers were held from time to time on the Common. The following entries occur in the diary of Amos Farnsworth: "May 21, 1775 Etended Pray on the Common in the morning." "August 20th in the morning I Etended prayers about 10. We went And herd the Re. Doctr Langdon on the Common." *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings*, Series 2, vol. xii, pages 80, 84.

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ing in March, 1776, they saw the fortifications which had sprung up so suddenly on Dorchester Heights. General Howe decided that he had no chance of resisting, and saw that his best policy was to evacuate the town. This was soon accomplished; by the 18th of March the redcoats had left Boston, and Washington was at liberty to enter the town with his victorious army.¹

The "Lobsters and Canabels" had cut down many trees and caused much damage to the Common during the time of occupation by the troops, and it was not long before the selectmen were obliged to take the matter in hand in order to repair it. Traces of British occupation, however, lasted for almost a hundred years after the departure of the troops. Dr. Edward Everett Hale declares that as late as forty years ago the circles made by the British tents could be distinctly traced in the grass, and that he can remember as a boy playing soldier in the trenches behind the British fortifications.²

Devastations had also been created by the British in other parts of the town as well as on the Common. In spite of these many reminders of British occupation, however, Boston was at last freed from the enemy, and was never again to be dependent on the Mother Country.

¹On the 17th of March, about noon, "the Selectmen of Boston came out to Roxbury and informed the Generals that the British had all embarked and left the town; whereupon a detachment from our army marched in with the American Standard displayed, and took possession of the town about 2 p. m. A party from Cambridge, in boats, landed on the Common at the same time." *Historical Magazine*, vol. viii, page 330.

²Edward Everett Hale: *Memories of a Hundred Years*, page 152.