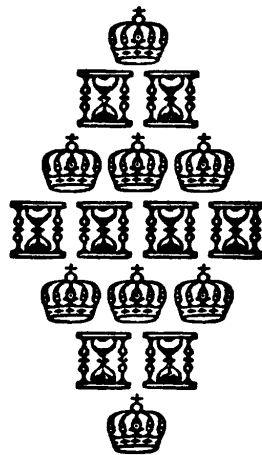


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Early Days  
on  
BOSTON COMMON

By  
*Mary Farwell Ayer*

With many Illustrations after Old Prints



BOSTON  
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A. Bowen Sc.

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# NEW STATE HOUSE.

J. Kidder del.

**A**FTER the evacuation of Boston, although a few British vessels remained for several months off Nantasket, the greater part of the fleet at once set sail for Halifax.

On board were not only British officers and soldiers, but also many Tories, who intended starting life anew in a land loyal to the King. A few of these loyalists found their way back later to New England, but the majority settled permanently in England or in the Provinces.<sup>1</sup>

General Washington feared that the next move made by the British would be on New York; for this reason he delayed in Boston only a few days before hastening thither. Reinforcements had already preceded him, for on March 15 we find that five regiments of the Continental forces had been drawn up on the Common for inspection before starting for New York.<sup>2</sup> As the inhabitants of Boston feared the possibility of another attack, five regiments, under the command of General Artemus Ward, General Greene's successor, were left to protect Massachusetts.<sup>3</sup>

General Ward's orders were to find out what supplies had been left by the British, to repair any damage done to the fortifications and to keep up rigid discipline among the troops. Upon investigation it was found that "between 90 and 100 pieces of cannon, 2 or 3000 bushels of wheat, and a vast quantity of coal, have been found in Boston."<sup>4</sup>

The general found it necessary to still further strengthen the fortifications in the town, and in order to drive away the remainder of the British fleet he also determined to fortify the lower harbor. This was soon accomplished, and by the middle of June the fleet had set sail from Nantasket Roads.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Many of these exiles were wealthy and well educated, and had been held in high repute in the colonies before the outbreak of the war. Among those who fled to Halifax was Rev. Henry Caner, the minister of King's Chapel. He carried with him the communion plate, which had been presented to the Chapel by William and Mary. No trace of it has ever been discovered to my knowledge. The coat of arms formerly attached to the old State House, which was also carried off at this time, is now said to be in a church in St. John, N. B.

<sup>2</sup> *The New England Chronicle or Essex Gazette*, March 21, 1776.

<sup>3</sup> *Mass. Hist. Soc. Proc.*, Series 1, vol. 16: Colonel Hutchinson's Orderly Book. Also *Revolutionary Letters*, vol. 194, no. 347: *Mass. State Archives*.

<sup>4</sup> *The New England Chronicle or Essex Gazette*, March 21, 1776.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, June 20, 1776.

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In spite of the precautions taken, the townspeople did not yet feel secure from another attack. Of the comparatively few forces left in town, only a very small number were fit for duty. At one time it was reported that not more than seven hundred could be called upon.<sup>1</sup> To add to the difficulties, certain Tories who still remained in Boston encouraged another attack by informing the enemy of the weak condition of the town.<sup>2</sup> In May a report was circulated that the troops in Halifax were preparing to attack Boston by land, the men of war by sea.<sup>3</sup>

The uncertain condition of affairs made it necessary for General Ward to exert himself to maintain rigid discipline among his troops. The Common played its part in accomplishing this end. According to one orderly book, all the drum and fife majors were to meet twice a week, on Tuesday and Friday, at the bottom of the Common, for practice.<sup>4</sup> In case of mutiny or misconduct among the troops, the offenders were sometimes whipped on the Common.<sup>5</sup>

The following entry occurred at this time in the Boston Gazette: "A number of soldiers of Col. Hutchinson's regiment, stationed at Dorchester, were lately convicted, before a Court Martial, of mutiny, rescuing a prisoner, and other high crimes; when a number of them were ordered to be whipped, and two of the principals sentenced to suffer death. The former received their punishment last week, on the Common in this town, and the two latter remain in gaol."<sup>6</sup>

The troops had not been long under General Ward's command before five regiments were ordered from Massachusetts to the South.<sup>7</sup> The places left vacant were filled by men drafted until December, who were to receive the same pay

<sup>1</sup> *Revolutionary Letters*, April 16, 1776, vol. 194, no. 347: *Mass. State Archives*.

<sup>2</sup> *Revolutionary Letters*, vol. 195: *Mass. State Archives*.

<sup>3</sup> *Revolutionary Letters*, vol. 194,

no. 376. <sup>4</sup> *Colonel Hutchinson's Orderly Book: Mass. Hist. Soc. Proc., Series 1, vol. 16, page 348.*

<sup>5</sup> *Diary of Captain Henry Sewell: Historical Magazine, New Series*, vol. 10.

<sup>6</sup> *The Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, April 29, 1776. It is generally believed that the old elm on the Common served as a whipping-post at this time, for mention is sometimes made of punishment inflicted "at the tree." The old elm occupies a conspicuous place on early maps of the Common.

<sup>7</sup> *Revolutionary Letters*, vol. 195, no. 142: *Mass. State Archives*.

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as that granted the Continental troops. Recruiting, however, was attended with difficulties, for on the same day that the Declaration of Independence was read from the balcony of the old State House, James Bowdoin wrote: "Last Monday the Militia of this Town were called into ye Field to draught the town's proportions of the last ord<sup>d</sup> Levies. After much uneasiness, between 30 and 40 men I understand were enlisted on a promise of extravagant bounties. Some demanded and I am told were promised 100 dollars over and above ye Governmen<sup>t</sup> Bounty."<sup>1</sup>

These recruits, as well as the regiments, were doubtless often drilled on the Common. Some of the orders given are interesting. At one time certain regiments were to embark from Dorchester Point at six o'clock in the morning "to March from thence by Land to Boston, so as to be in the Common by 12 o'Clock with Arms and Accoutrements Compleat."<sup>2</sup> A few weeks later it was ordered that "all the Non-Commissioned Officers and Matrosses encamp in the Common in Tents On Monday Morning 28th Instant."<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps some of these forces were sent to Boston in order to guard the prisoners quartered in different parts of the town. Among those imprisoned were representatives of several nationalities. In June some Scotch troops, under the command of Colonel Campbell, had been sent as prisoners to Boston, and four hundred of them had been confined in the workhouse and almshouse. They were not kept there very long, but were soon sent into the country.<sup>4</sup>

At another time, Hessian prisoners occupied the workhouse, guarded by a sentinel who was to permit no person "to go into s<sup>d</sup> Yard, (Workhouse yard) or any of said Hessians to Come out without M<sup>r</sup>. Robert Pierpont, Esq<sup>r</sup> Commiss<sup>y</sup> of Prisoners being present, or his Order in Writing."<sup>5</sup>

Germans captured at Bennington were also sent to Boston,

<sup>1</sup> *Revolutionary Letters*, vol. 195: *Mass. State Archives*.    <sup>2</sup> *Essex Institute Hist. Coll.*, vol. 13, page 124.    <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, page 129.    <sup>4</sup> *Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, June 24, 1776.

<sup>5</sup> *Orderly Book of a Regiment of Artillery raised for the Defence of the Town of Boston in 1776: Essex Institute Historical Collections*, vol. 13, page 123.

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but as the colonies were not at war with the Prince of Brunswick, it was considered that we had no right, according to legislative authority, to retain them. The prisoners, therefore, received their freedom, and many eventually settled in the country.

It was not long before another instalment of prisoners of war arrived, for as Colonel Jackson's regiment which had been encamped on the Common was marching out to join the army, upwards of one hundred Canadian British prisoners, taken near Lake George by Colonel Brown, marched in.<sup>1</sup>

After Burgoyne's surrender in October, 1777, five or six thousand soldiers were sent to Boston, with the understanding that one thousand were to go to Canada, while the rest were to have free passage to England on transports furnished by General Howe. Heath, who had replaced Ward in command, provided temporary accommodations for the prisoners in Cambridge, Charlestown, Medford, and on Prospect and Winter Hills, but to judge from the frequent complaints made by both officers and men the quarters must have been far from satisfactory.<sup>2</sup> These prisoners had scarcely been disposed of when the colonists once more felt cause for alarm, for in the fall of 1778 a fleet of some twenty sail appeared off Boston Harbor.<sup>3</sup> Under the direction of Count d'Estaing, who was at the time in Boston, islands in the harbor were hastily fortified, and nine regiments of militia were ordered to reinforce garrisons in and about Boston.<sup>4</sup> The expected attack, however, did not take place, and the following morning the fleet had disappeared.

For fear that a larger fleet might return later and attempt to destroy the French fleet in the harbor, Count d'Estaing continued to strengthen the harbor fortifications. Twelve hundred men were added to those already on duty, and in order to supply them with ammunition a force was detailed to make cartridges in the laboratory.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs of Major-General William Heath*, page 119.      <sup>2</sup> *Memoirs of Madame Riedesel*.

<sup>3</sup> September 1, 1778: *Memoirs of Major-General Heath*, page 177.      <sup>4</sup> *Independent Ledger and the American Advertiser*, September 7, 1778.      <sup>5</sup> *Court Records: Mass. State Archives*, vol. 200, no. 105.



PROMENADING ON BOSTON COMMON IN THE EVENING.

## Early Days on Boston Common

As the fear of any further attack gradually subsided, the grateful inhabitants vied with each other in entertaining the French admiral. One morning he and his officers breakfasted with Hancock. The story is told that on this occasion so many more guests arrived than were expected that his wife Dorothy, in order to make up for deficiencies in her own larder, ordered all the cows on the Common to be milked. A few days later d'Estaing returned the compliment by giving a dinner on board his flagship. It is said that the fair Dorothy, in retaliation, invited two hundred ladies to accompany her.

On another occasion, five hundred guests sat down to a dinner in Faneuil Hall, given by the governor to the French officers. Still further entertainment was afforded by a ball, given in honor of the French visitors at Concert Hall.<sup>1</sup>

The Bostonians were much surprised at the appearance of these stout and healthy Frenchmen, whom they had imagined as belonging to a thin and puny race. In regard to their favorite article of diet, however, they felt sure of their fondness for frogs, for some French soldiers had been discovered hunting them in the Frog Pond.

A good story is told of a Cambridge man, Nathaniel Tracy, who gave a dinner for some of the officers of the French fleet. He had heard of their partiality for this delicacy, and was naturally perplexed to see the look of amazement shown when each Frenchman found a frog in his plate of soup. "Why don't they eat them?" he exclaimed; "if they knew the confounded trouble I had to catch them in order to treat them to a dish of their own country, they would find that with me, at least, it was no joking matter!"<sup>2</sup>

It was unfortunate that in the midst of this apparent good will existing between the two nations a riot should have occurred in the town between the French and American sailors, which resulted in the death of St. Sauveur. Congress did all it could to compensate for this unfortunate occurrence,

<sup>1</sup> *The Independent Chronicle and Universal Advertiser*, October 1, 1778.

<sup>2</sup> *Recollections of Samuel Breck*, page 26.



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and even ordered a statue of the officer to be erected to his memory. The affair soon blew over, the statue was never erected, and it is only recently that the subject has been revived.<sup>1</sup>

During the summer of 1780 the presence of an English fleet at the mouth of the harbor resulted in an engagement between one of the French ships and an English gunboat. A frigate was bringing ships containing spars and naval stores from Newport, for the use of the French squadron stationed at Boston. An eyewitness wrote that "both ships were close in with the lighthouse; the whole town was in motion and all the heights were crowded with people. I ran with the rest, and reached the top of Beacon Hill. The cannonading had commenced, and was kept up with spirit for an hour, when the Frenchman struck. . . . At length, about five o'clock in the afternoon, when the Englishman and his prize were out of sight, our friends weighed anchor and commenced the chase, which lasted till they reached Halifax, at which fort the captor and captured ship had arrived the day before."<sup>2</sup>

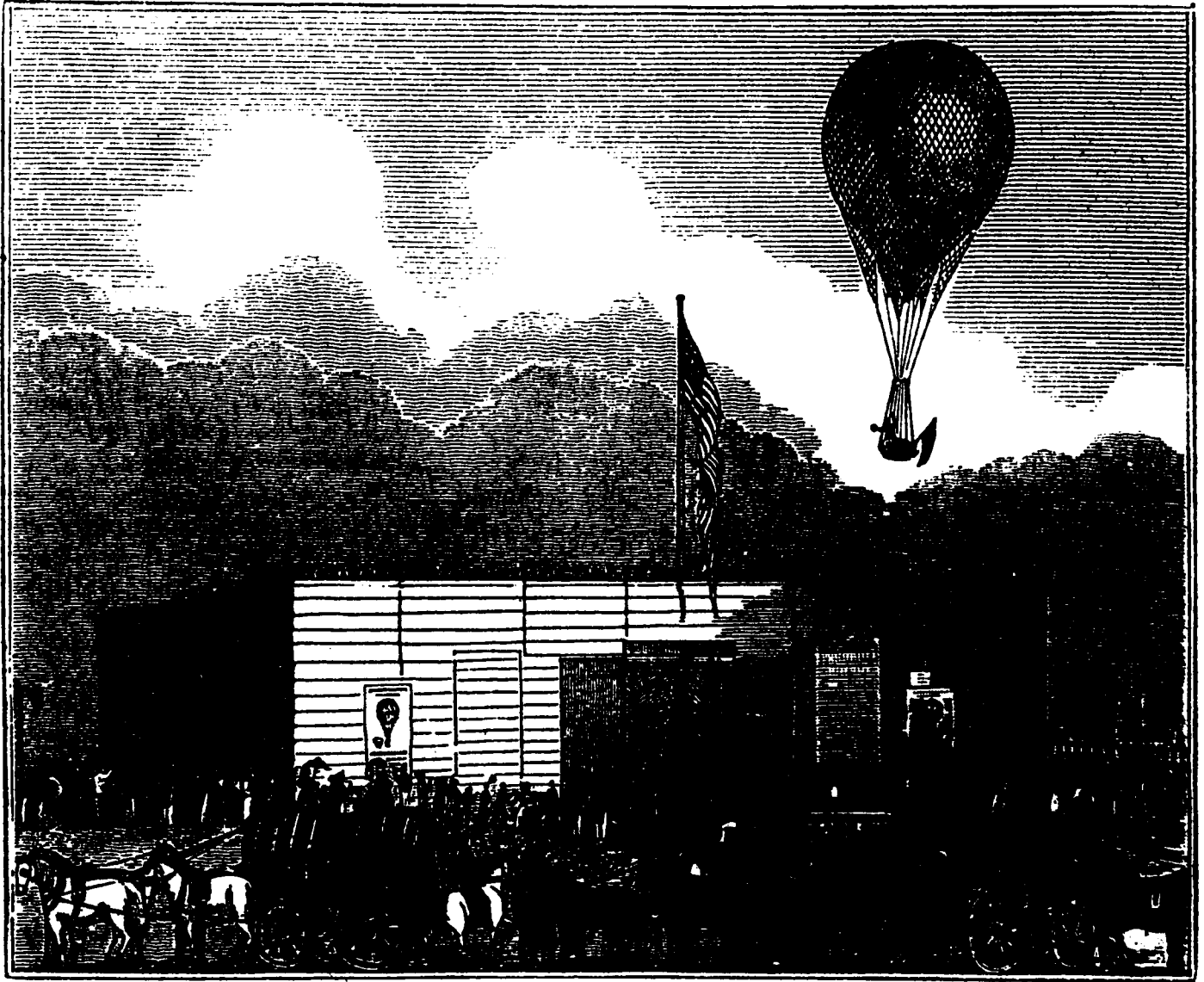
Among the many Frenchmen interested in watching the progress of the American Revolution was the Marquis de Lafayette. Through his intense desire to aid the colonies in their struggle for independence, he decided, in spite of all opposition, to come to our country and offer his services to Washington. In the month of April, 1778, he landed in Boston and at once set forth to join in the attack planned upon Newport. The expedition unfortunately proved a failure, for a storm so scattered Rochambeau's fleet that the plan was abandoned.

By this time the war was gradually drawing to a close. Thanks to the good work done in the South the colonists became more and more confident that the British could not hold out much longer.<sup>3</sup> Great enthusiasm was shown at the

<sup>1</sup> *Court Records: Mass. State Archives, vol. 200, no. 72.*

<sup>2</sup> *Recollections of Samuel Breck, page 44.*

<sup>3</sup> *Early records show that although the progress of the war was the absorbing topic, yet the selectmen did not for all that neglect town affairs. They had met regularly and had spent much time in the consideration of matters pertaining to the town. The Common seems to have come in for*



Mr. Durant's ascension from Boston, September 13, 1834.

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thought that before long British control in the colonies would be at an end. In Boston, where a part of the French fleet was still stationed, there were continued celebrations. In October, 1781, General Hancock tendered a reception to the Frenchmen. In the evening fireworks were sent off from a green in front of his house.<sup>1</sup> A few weeks later, on receiving news of the surrender of Lord Cornwallis, there occurred another celebration. Bonfires were lighted in different parts of the town, and on the Common "a huge pyramid of cord-wood fifty feet high was piled up in the middle of the green and fired at night."<sup>2</sup>

In June, 1782, out of courtesy to the French nation, the Bostonians celebrated the birth of the Dauphin. The day "was introduced by ringing the bells of the several churches, and discharging the cannon from the Castle and ships in the harbour. . . . At evening the house of his Excellency and other gentlemen of character were most elegantly illuminated, and a number of rockets, wheels, bee-hives, and other fireworks displayed in the common."<sup>3</sup> On the arrival in Boston Harbor of Vaudreuil with his French fleet from the West Indies, entertainments were accorded the newcomers, who returned the compliment by a dinner on *The Triumphant*.<sup>4</sup>

In October our own troops, commanded by Edward Proctor, were ordered into the Common, where the parade was followed by a presentation of two standards.<sup>5</sup> In appearance, however, they could not have rivalled a division of French forces, called the White Dragoons, which encamped on the

*a goodly share of attention. In 1777 the selectmen had prohibited the passing of loaded carts over the grass. They had ordered gravel to be taken from Fox Hill to be used in different parts of the town. The ground in front of the Brick Church was raised by this means. The burial-ground near Charles Street was fenced in. Firing of guns on the Neck or on the Common was forbidden. The laboratory which had been used for the manufacture of cannonballs was prepared for storing artillery. Lastly, the earth used by the British for their fortifications, was carried away. Another duty of the selectmen was to dispose of the lands belonging formerly to the Loyalists who had left Massachusetts. Ever since their departure the grass on their lands had been cut and used for the benefit of the colony.*

<sup>1</sup> *The Boston Gazette*, October 8, 1781. Hancock's house stood where the house numbered 30 Beacon Street now stands.

<sup>2</sup> *Recollections of Samuel Breck*, page 38.    <sup>3</sup> *The Boston Evening Post*, June 15, 1782.

<sup>4</sup> *The Massachusetts Spy*, September 12, 1782.    <sup>5</sup> *The Boston Gazette*, October 14, 1782.

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Common before departing for France, nor the four divisions of French soldiers which arrived in December from the South. Of the latter it was said at the time that "a finer corps of men never paraded the streets of Boston in the infamous Administrations of Bernard, Hutchinson, and Gage."<sup>1</sup> Many other nations were represented before long in Boston, for in June, 1783, it was reported that "exclusive of the American, there are now flying in this harbour, the flags of eight different nations, viz., The Imperial flag, that of France, Spain, Holland, Sweden, Denmark, Ireland, and the British."<sup>2</sup>

It was many months before definite terms could be agreed upon by England and the colonies, and it was not until the following February that a treaty of peace was signed.

March fourth was appointed a day of celebration throughout the colonies. In Boston the morning "was ushered in with the ringing of bells and discharge of cannon, which continued by intervals through the day. . . . In the evening his Honor the Lieut. Governor, the Council, the President of the Senate, the Speaker of the House, together with a number of other respectable gentlemen were elegantly entertained at his Excellency the Governor's House, which with the public buildings were beautifully illuminated, and at seven o'clock a grand exhibition of fireworks were displayed in the Common, such as were never before equalled in this place."<sup>3</sup>

America at last realized that the war, which had resulted so disastrously for Great Britain, had drawn to a close. She was never again to be subject to the Home Government, but was henceforth to be a free and independent nation.

<sup>1</sup>*The Boston Gazette*, December 9, 1782.    <sup>2</sup>*The Massachusetts Spy*, June 12, 1783.  
<sup>3</sup>*The Continental Journal and Weekly Advertiser*, March 4, 1784.



*A VIEW OF BOSTON COMMON IN 1836.  
SHOWING IN THE DISTANCE A PORTION OF THE NEW FENCE.*