

Bunker Hill: A City, A Siege, A Revolution (The American Revolution Series)

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The bestselling author of *In the Heart of the Sea*, *Mayflower*, and *In the Hurricane's Eye* tells the story of the Boston battle that ignited the American Revolution, in this "masterpiece of narrative and perspective." (Boston Globe)

In the opening volume of his acclaimed American Revolution series, Nathaniel Philbrick turns his keen eye to pre-Revolutionary Boston and the spark that ignited the American Revolution. In the aftermath of the Boston Tea Party and the violence at Lexington and Concord, the conflict escalated and skirmishes gave way to outright war in the Battle of Bunker Hill. It was the bloodiest conflict of the revolutionary war, and the point of no return for the rebellious colonists. Philbrick gives us a fresh view of the story and its dynamic personalities, including John Adams, Samuel Adams, John Hancock, Paul Revere, and George Washington. With passion and insight, he reconstructs the revolutionary landscape—geographic and ideological—in a mesmerizing narrative of the robust, messy, blisteringly real origins of America.

Nathaniel Philbrick is the author of *In the Heart of the Sea*, winner of the National Book Award; *Mayflower*, finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; *Bunker Hill*, winner of the New England Book Award; *Sea of Glory*; *The Last Stand*; *Why Read Moby Dick?*; and *Away Off Shore*. He lives in Nantucket. His newest book, *Valiant Ambition: George Washington, Benedict Arnold, and the Fate of the American Revolution*, will be published in May 2016. Preface: The Decisive Day

On a hot, almost windless afternoon in June, a seven-year-old boy stood beside his mother and looked out across the green islands of Boston Harbor. To the northwest, sheets of fire and smoke rose from the base of a distant hill. Even though the fighting was at least ten miles away, the concussion of the great guns burst like bubbles across his tear-streaked face.

At that moment, John Adams, the boy's father, was more than three hundred miles to the south at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia. Years later, the elder Adams claimed that the American Revolution had started not with the Boston Massacre, or the Tea Party, or the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord and all the rest, but had been "effected before the war commenced . . . in the minds and hearts of the people." For his son, however, the "decisive day" (a phrase used by the boy's mother, Abigail) was June 17, 1775.

Seventy-one years after that day, in the jittery script of an old man, John Quincy Adams described the terrifying afternoon when he and his mother watched the battle from a hill beside their home in Braintree: "I saw with my own eyes those fires, and heard Britannia's thunders in the Battle of Bunker's hill and witnessed the tears of my mother and mingled with them my own." They feared, he recounted, that the British troops might at any moment march out of Boston and "butcher them in cold blood" or take them as hostages and drag them back into the besieged city. But what he remembered most about the battle was the hopeless sense of sorrow that he and his mother felt when they learned that their family physician, Dr. Joseph Warren, had been killed.

Warren had saved John Quincy Adams's badly fractured forefinger from amputation, and the death of this "beloved physician" was a terrible blow to a boy whose father's mounting

responsibilities required that he spend months away from home. Even after John Quincy Adams had grown into adulthood and become a public figure, he refused to attend all anniversary celebrations of the Battle of Bunker Hill. Joseph Warren, just thirty-four at the time of his death, had been much more than a beloved doctor to a seven-year-old boy. Over the course of the two critical months between the outbreak of hostilities at Lexington Green and the Battle of Bunker Hill, he became the most influential patriot leader in the province of Massachusetts. As a member of the Committee of Safety, he had been the man who ordered Paul Revere to alert the countryside that British soldiers were headed to Concord; as president of the Provincial Congress, he had overseen the creation of an army even as he waged a propaganda campaign to convince both the American and British people that Massachusetts was fighting for its survival in a purely defensive war. While his more famous compatriots John Adams, John Hancock, and Samuel Adams were in Philadelphia at the Second Continental Congress, Warren was orchestrating the on-the-ground reality of a revolution.

Warren had only recently emerged from the shadow of his mentor Samuel Adams when he found himself at the head of the revolutionary movement in Massachusetts, but his presence (and absence) were immediately felt. When George Washington assumed command of the provincial army gathered outside Boston just two and a half weeks after the Battle of Bunker Hill, he was forced to contend with the confusion and despair that followed Warren's death. Washington's ability to gain the confidence of a suspicious, stubborn, and parochial assemblage of New England militiamen marked the advent of a very different kind of leadership. Warren had passionately, often impulsively, tried to control the accelerating cataclysm. Washington would need to master the situation deliberately and-above all-firmly. Thus, the Battle of Bunker Hill is the critical turning point in the story of how a rebellion born in the streets of Boston became a countrywide war for independence.

This is also the story of two British generals. The first, Thomas Gage, was saddled with the impossible task of implementing his government's unnecessarily punitive response to the Boston Tea Party in December 1773. Gage had a scrupulous respect for the law and was therefore ill equipped to subdue a people who were perfectly willing to take that law into their own hands. When fighting broke out at Lexington and Concord, militiamen from across the region descended upon the British stationed at Boston. Armed New Englanders soon cut off the land approaches to Boston. Ironically, the former center of American resistance found itself gripped by an American siege. By the time General William Howe replaced Gage as the British commander in chief, he had determined that New York, not Boston, was where he must resume the fight. It was left to Washington to hasten the departure of Howe and his army. The evacuation of the British in March 1776 signaled the beginning of an eight-year war that produced a new nation. But it also marked the end of an era that had started back in 1630 with the founding of the Puritan settlement called Boston. This is the story of how a revolution changed that 146-year-old community-of what was lost and what was gained when 150 vessels filled with British soldiers and American loyalists sailed from Boston Harbor for the last time.

Over the more than two centuries since the Revolution, Boston has undergone immense

physical change. Most of the city's once-defining hills have been erased from the landscape while the marshes and mudflats that surrounded Boston have been filled in to eliminate almost all traces of the original waterfront. But hints of the vanished town remain. Several meetinghouses and churches from the colonial era are still standing, along with a smattering of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century houses. Looking southeast from the balcony of the Old State House, you can see how the spine of what was once called King Street connects this historic seat of government, originally known as the Town House, to Long Wharf, an equally historic commercial center that still reaches out into the harbor.

For the last three years I have been exploring these places, trying to get a fix on the long-lost topography that is essential to understanding how Boston's former residents interacted. Boston in the 1770s was a land-connected island with a population of about fifteen thousand, all of whom probably recognized, if not knew, each other. Being myself a resident of an island with a year-round population very close in size to provincial Boston's, I have some familiarity with how petty feuds, family alliances, professional jealousies, and bonds of friendship can transform a local controversy into a supercharged outpouring of communal angst. The issues are real enough, but why we find ourselves on one side or the other of those issues is often unclear even to us. Things just happen in a way that has little to do with logic or rationality and everything to do with the mysterious and infinitely complex ways that human beings respond to one another.

In the beginning there were three different colonial groups in Massachusetts. One group was aligned with those who eventually became revolutionaries. For lack of a better word, I will call these people "patriots." Another group remained faithful to the crown, and they appear herein as "loyalists." Those in the third and perhaps largest group were not sure where they stood. Part of what makes a revolution such a fascinating subject to study is the arrival of the moment when neutrality is no longer an option. Like it or not, a person has to choose.

It was not a simple case of picking right from wrong. Hindsight has shown that, contrary to what the patriots insisted, Britain had not launched a preconceived effort to enslave her colonies. Compared with other outposts of empire, the American colonists were exceedingly well off. It's been estimated that they were some of the most prosperous, least-taxed people in the Western world. And yet there was more to the patriots' overheated claims about oppression than the eighteenth-century equivalent of a conspiracy theory. The hyperbole and hysteria that so mystified the loyalists had wellsprings that were both ancient and strikingly immediate. For patriots and loyalists alike, this was personal.

Because a revolution gave birth to our nation, Americans have a tendency to exalt the concept of a popular uprising. We want the whole world to be caught in a blaze of liberating upheaval (with appropriately democratic results) because that was what worked so well for us. If Gene Sharp's *From Dictatorship to Democracy*, the guidebook that has become a kind of bible among twenty-first-century revolutionaries in the Middle East and beyond, is any indication, the mechanics of overthrowing a regime are essentially the same today as they were in the eighteenth century. And yet, given our tendency to focus on the Founding Fathers who were at the Continental Congress in Philadelphia when all of this was

unfolding in and around Boston, most of us know surprisingly little about how the patriots of Massachusetts pulled it off.

In the pages that follow, I hope to provide an intimate account of how over the course of just eighteen months a revolution transformed a city and the towns that surrounded it, and how that transformation influenced what eventually became the United States of America. This is the story of two charismatic and forceful leaders (one from Massachusetts, the other from Virginia), but it is also the story of two ministers (one a subtle, even Machiavellian, patriot, the other a punster and a loyalist); of a poet, patriot, and caregiver to four orphaned children; of a wealthy merchant who wanted to be everybody's friend; of a conniving traitor whose girlfriend betrayed him; of a sea captain from Marblehead who became America's first naval hero; of a bookseller with a permanently mangled hand who after a 300-mile trek through the wilderness helped to force the evacuation of the British; and of many others. In the end, the city of Boston is the true hero of this story. Whether its inhabitants came to view the Revolution as an opportunity or as a catastrophe, they all found themselves in the midst of a survival tale when on December 16, 1773, three shiploads of tea were dumped in Boston Harbor.

Other Books

A Guide to the Battles of the American Revolution, *A Guide to the Battles of the American Revolution* is the first comprehensive account of every engagement of the Revolution, a war that began with a brief skirmish at Lexington Green on April 19, 1775, and concluded on the battlefield at the Siege of Yorktown in October 1781. In between were six long years of bitter fighting on land and at sea. The wide variety of combats blanketed the North American continent from Canada to the Southern colonies, from the winding coastal lowlands to the Appalachian Mountains, and from the North Atlantic to the Caribbean. Unlike existing accounts, *A Guide to the Battles of the American Revolution* presents each engagement in a unique way. Each battle entry offers a wide and rich but consistent template of information to make it easy for readers to find exactly what they are seeking. Every entry begins with introductory details including the date of the battle, its location, commanders, opposing forces, terrain, weather, and time of day. The detailed body of each entry offers both a Colonial and British perspective of the unfolding military situation, a detailed and unbiased account of what actually transpired, a discussion of numbers and losses, an assessment of the consequences of the battle, and suggestions for further reading. Many of the entries are supported and enriched by original maps and photos. Fresh, scholarly, informative, and entertaining, *A Guide to the Battles of the American Revolution* will be welcomed by historians and general enthusiasts everywhere.

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