

Bunker Hill

The Battle of Bunker Hill actually took place at nearby Breed's Hill. In colonial times, the entire town of Boston was situated on a peninsula with hills to the north and south. Governor-General Gage decided to fortify these hills before the Patriots could. On the night of June 17, 1775, the Patriots, hearing of his plans, seized both Bunker Hill and Breed's Hill and began to dig in on Breed's Hill. The next morning, when Gage learned of the Patriots' actions, he decided to attack and dispatched 2,500 troops under Major General William Howe.

On Breed's Hill, Colonel William Prescott commanded some 1,700 Americans—some of them only boys. Because they had little gunpowder, Prescott allegedly ordered his troops, "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes." The American forces included men from various ethnic groups and professions. Among those waiting on the hill were African Americans Peter Salem, Salem Poor, and Cuffe Whitmore.

The British came charging up the hill, and the Americans fired. The British fell back, regrouped, and attacked again, only to be pushed back by heavy gunfire. By the third charge, the Americans had run out of ammunition and were firing nails and metal scraps. The Americans finally had to retreat, and the British claimed victory. However, it was a costly victory; there were 1,000 British casualties, and 400 on the American side. The victory also cost the British their sense of superiority in battle and boosted American confidence.

The British withdrew from Boston in March 1776. Forces under General George Washington's command had dragged 60 cannons some 300 miles (483 km) from Fort Ticonderoga, in what is now New York State, to Boston and pointed them at the British in Boston Harbor. With no possibility of taking the guns, Gage and his troops set sail for Nova Scotia.

Second Continental Congress

In May 1775, about a month before the Battle of Bunker Hill, the colonies had convened the Second Continental Congress. One of its early acts was to authorize the creation of an army and to appoint George Washington as commander-in-chief. Washington may have been trying to influence others to choose him by wearing his uniform from the French and Indian War during each congressional session. The colonial troops that had gathered around Boston were the beginnings of the Continental army. Washington traveled from Philadelphia to Boston and assumed command of those forces on July 3, 1775.

As with the First Continental Congress, not all members of the Second Continental Congress wanted independence from Great Britain. During the summer of 1775, delegates tried to find a way out of the situation. There had been fighting in New England and in New York (Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys had taken Forts Ticonderoga and Crown Point), and all but three colonies had set up their own governments separate from the royal governors. The Second Continental Congress issued the Olive Branch Petition restating the colonists' loyalty to the king and asking for peace. King George III rejected it and issued the Proclamation of Rebellion instead, declaring the colonies in rebellion.