



The Siege of Boston

U.S. Department of Interior , J.L. Bell

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This study attempts to view Washington's activity in the siege of Boston based on what he and his colleagues knew in 1775-76, not through the hindsight of later developments. Most of the chapters, organized by themes rather than chronologically, lay out an alternative narrative of the general learning on the job.

When George Washington came to Boston, he was forty-three years old. He had never led more than a few hundred soldiers, participated in a large siege, or been the commander-in-chief of an army. The campaign was therefore a learning experience for him. Because of the British commanders' lack of aggression, Washington's situation was actually much less risky than he feared. He was able to make mistakes and gain experience, whether the challenge was picking the right staff or maintaining strict secrecy on intelligence.

As the siege of Boston began, the British army had several clear advantages: trained soldiers; weapons, gunpowder, and other military supplies; hard currency; and the support of a much stronger, larger navy. The Americans, on the other hand, had more men (though Washington did not always realize just how big his advantage was, and his army's numbers dipped low at the turn of the year); far better access to food, forage, and firewood; and enthusiastic civilian support. Each army's strengths corresponded to the other's weaknesses. The classic strategy for conducting a siege was to cut off the enemy troops' resources from outside while gradually hemming them into a smaller area. Both goals were close to impossible for the new American military. The strength of the Royal Navy and the resources of the royal government, once London bureaucrats learned that war had begun, meant that the British garrison inside Boston was relatively well supplied. Furthermore, that royal army had excellent natural and man-made defenses because it was situated on two narrow-necked peninsulas and a well-fortified island. The Continental Army was necessarily at a distance; short of heavy guns and powder, it could do little damage.

Washington was eager to do something to win the campaign because of his active temperament, his desire to please the Continental Congress, and his hope for a decisive early victory that would convince the government in London to back down. But he could see only one basic strategy available: forcing a battle. Much of the general's activity during the siege was directed toward that goal. In 1775-76, Washington had not yet learned the value of simply keeping the Continental Army together until it wore out the enemy, a strategy that did not bring him many glorious battlefield victories but in the end won the war.

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