

**WATERTOWN PUBLIC
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WATERTOWN IN THE REVOLUTION

1770-1781

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**Watertown Mass.
1973**

Watertown in the Revolution.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, Watertown was a small farming community, smaller than Billerica, Lincoln, Chelmsford, Sudbury, or Groton. In 1764 there were 103 houses, 117 families, 179 males over 16, and 195 females over 16. Total population was 693. The condition of the negroes is not stated, but a census of 1754 listed 13 slaves. There were still many slaves in Massachusetts, owned by Tories no doubt. In 1776 the Watertown valuation was £6000, and there were 207 polls.

Welfare was a major part of the town's expense. It was administered in a rather personal manner. Those unable to support themselves were boarded out, and one finds such items as "Mr. Bemis will furnish Samuel Coolidge with a pair of britches".(later reimbursed at one shilling sixpence) A School Committee came into existence in 1768, and "womens" schools were started at about the same time. Schools were not taken for granted. Every year the Town Warrant for the March Meeting contained an article "To determine whether schools shall be kept". Womens schools were discontinued in 1776. There was an item for replacement of glass in the schoolhouse. The only salaried officers were the minister and the school teachers. The minister's salary was the largest item in the budget. Another annual article determined whether hogs were to be permitted to run free.

Watertown early joined the surrounding towns in opposition to the policies of the British Parliament. The March Meeting of 1770 passed a resolution supporting the movement to boycott English goods, and in February of 1773 the Meeting voted to support "in every constitutional way" efforts of Bretheren in neighboring communities, and to approve the stand of the "Representative body of the people in the defense of Liberty."

Two Watertown citizens participated in the destruction of the tea at Boston in December 1773. The Town Meeting of January 4 1774 took notice of this event, denouncing the dispatch of the tea from England, and defending its destruction. The resolution further declared that those who assembled at the ships had no design or desire to destroy the tea. The destruction was the fault of the customs officers who refused to return it to England. The Meeting also resolved to discourage the importation of tea, and agreed that its members would not buy any tea or "suffer it to be used in our families". Shopowners who sold tea should be boycotted, the resolution continued, and the Selectmen were instructed not to renew the license of any tavern keeper or retailer who should supply tea or use it in their families-and finally any person who continues to use tea"shall be treated as a public enemy". It was not uncommon to tar and feather public enemies, though there is no record of such an event in Watertown. The resolution passed unanimously. A few weeks later it was voted to appropriate twenty pounds for the purchase of powder and flints from the money received for the sale of pewsl

Capt Jonathan Brown was elected to represent the town in the Provincial Assembly, a body formed by the members of the General Court when General Gage, the Royal Governor, prevented that body from meeting in September Of 1774. Provision was made for the enlisting and drilling of militiaand for paying them, and for mounting the guns which the town owned. The town's military stores were kept at Richardson's Tavern, which stood at the junction of Belmont and Mt. Auburn streets in East Watertown.

In October 1774, the Town Meeting voted to instruct their tax collectors to pay the town revenue to the Town Treasurer, rather than to the Crown Treasurer. A later vote (January 16 1775) instructed the Town Treasurer to pay the tax receipts to the Receiver General appointed by the Provincial Congress. This move, made by other towns as well, cut off the crown revenue, and provided the

with which
Provincial Congress with funds to purchase military supplies.

The town had voted, in September, that the militia should exercise every week for two hours, and that the Selectmen should take a view of the arms and ammunition of all persons on the alarm list and report it to the town. Militiamen were responsible for furnishing their own arms and ammunition and for the condition of their equipment. £20 was appropriated to make carriages for the town's two guns.

In January of 1775 a militia company was formed, but it was voted not to draw out minute men. Sameul Barnard was appointed Captain. Four coppers were allowed each man for refreshments for his attendance at drill once a week. At the March Meeting 11-10-2 was voted to be paid tavern keeper Dorothy Coolidge under a warrant article calling for the town "to do anything relating to the encouragement of the military."

Other towns were adopting similar measures, and the Committee of Public Safety of the Province was collecting military stores of all kinds. It must not be supposed that General Gage moved against a body of peaceful farmers on the 19th of April. Extensive preparations for war had been made-the supplies stored at Concord and other places were considerable in quantity and variety, and the Provincial Militia were led by men experienced in the French and Indian wars.

There is a curious and total lack of documented information about the actions of Watertown men on the 19th of April. A family tradition says that Abner Whitney was passing through Charlestown on the night of the 18th with his panniers full of shoes for delivery in Lynn next day. Upon learning there of the departure of the British from Boston, he left his shoes and returned to Watertown to give the alarm.

One Watertown man was killed. Joseph Coolidge, according to tradition, was plowing his field in East Watertown when the alarm reached him. He unhitched his team, told his wife where he had buried the tax records, (he was the tax collector for the East Precinct), took his powder horn and gun and hurried away to the village two miles away. He remarked to an acquaintance on the solemnity of the occasion. At the village he attached himself to a party of a dozen or more minutute men who had come from Needham and guided them "by the upper road" to Lexington. He was killed where the road descends the hill into Arlington. Several Needham men were also killed at this point. The British passed this location at about three in the afternoon. Coolidge is not listed among those paid for their service that day, and seems not to have been with the other Watertown men.

The widely accepted story, related in Solon Whitney's history of Watertown, without citations of sources, has the Watertown militia assembled on the common debating their course when the Needham company came up. The captain of the Needham men urged an end to debate and advance to the scene of action on the Lexington road.

General Heath, the senior American officer in the field that day, states in his memoirs(written in 1790) that he was in Watertown that morning and encountered militia on the common awaiting orders. He sent them to Cambridge to destroy the bridge there, barricade the Boston side and prevent the British from retreating by that road. Unfortunately he does not identify the militia. If these men obeyed their orders they would have been far from the scene of action. Lord Percy stated in his report of the day that the bridge was taken up, giving that as a reason for the retreat through Charlestown. Heath seems to have been in Watertown at about eleven o'clock.

The provincial records list 134 Watertown men as being paid for service,

opened its adjourned meeting in Watertown. The Selectmen quickly granted their request for the use of the Meeting House, which stood on Common St. The house of Marshall Fowle, which stood nearby on Mt Auburn St. was used for committee meetings.

The militia gathering from all over New England quickly established a siege about the land side of Boston. The Provincial leaders left the city to avoid arrest, and Watertown became the seat of government. So many Bostonians were in town that the Boston town meetings were held here. It is said that Boston congregations opened their church services with the psalm-

"By the rivers of Watertown we sat down and wept

When we remember thee O Boston "

Paul Revere was established in a house south of the river, near Galen St. and was soon commissioned to make plates for provincial notes, and to print them. A committee was appointed to be with him during the printing and to take charge of the plates when the printing was completed. These plates still exist in the Massachusetts Archives.

Another Boston institution which moved to Watertown was the "Boston Gazette" newspaper, the mouthpiece of Sam Adams. Edes, the publisher evaded the British lines by carrying his press and type up the river by night and set up shop near the bridge on the north side of the river. Existing copies are printed with worn type on poor paper.

The Provincial Assembly went quickly to work on the organization of the rebellion. On April 23 it voted to raise in Massachusetts a force of 13000 men toward a total army of 30,000, the remainder to be raised in the other New England provinces. A Committee of Supplies was set up and authorized to impress horses. The military establishment was outlined. Each company was to have 59 men, 1 Captain, 2 Subalterns. Each regiment to have ten such companies.

of Great Britain

Early in the session a statement to the inhabitants was prepared to be sent to Benjamin Franklin who was still representing the Americans in London, hoping for a peaceful settlement of the dispute. Depositions were taken from many participants and observers. The story which emerged was of citizens of Lexington, peacefully dispersing, fired on without provocation by British soldiers. Capt. Parker's famous lines did not appear until years later, and are belied by the deposition which he gave at the time.. Much was made of the savagery of the British troops. Women in childbed it was said were driven naked into the streets. An investigation of the scalping incident at Concord bridge was also undertaken.

A postal system was established with a post office near the bridge on Galen St. Routes were laid out, and the rate for a letter was set at 5½ pence for 60 miles.

Very early (May 15) efforts were being made to enlist Indians against the British. They were offered a blanket and a ribbon as an inducement. The plan was to enlist a company. Although parleying with the Indians continued throughout the session, and the Penobscots were promised a commissary "as soon as we can take breath", they did not hasten to join the colors. A treaty with the northern tribes was signed during the session of the General Court. A group of Stockbridge Indians were in service, camped on the Arsenal grounds near the river. Their technique of picking off sentries silently with bow and arrow was considered atrocious by the British. This early use of Indians by the Colonists was later cited as justification for the use of Indians by the British on the frontier. A commissioner was appointed to receive the Stockbridge Indians' pay. To save them from the demon rum no doubt. Both Stockbridge Indians and Penobscots were Christians after their fashion, the former Protestant, the latter Catholic.

On May 11 Col. Edward Mott arrived with the news of the taking of Ft. Ticonderoga by a motley force of Vermont, Connecticut, and Massachusetts men led by Ethan Allen and Benedict Arnold. He had a proposal from Arnold for the removal of the guns to Boston. Since there was some confusion as to just who had captured the fort, Connecticut was asked to release its claim on the guns. The question of garrisoning the fort was debated.

As the army grew, additional general officers were authorized, one Lt. General, 2 Major Generals and four brigadiers. John Thomas was commissioned Lt. General on May 25, just before the Second Provincial Congress adjourned.

The Third Provincial Congress assembled in Watertown on May 31, with Jonathan Brown again representing "atertown. One of the first acts of this Congress was to authorize chaplains in the army. By the 15th of June the problems of the war were sufficiently in hand so that the Congress could turn its attention to Sabbath violations.

Warren

Joseph had been elected president of the Congress. He was not at the House on June 17th. He was in Watertown on the evening of the 16th, and one tradition says that he slept in town. Another tradition says that he did not sleep that night, but was engaged with medical and public business. He was at the Cambridge headquarters on the morning of the 17th, and went to Charlestown in the afternoon, where he was killed. The only notice of that event in the proceedings is a note that 3P.M. of of the 19th was assigned for the choice of a president of this Congress in the room of Joseph Warren Esq. "supposed to be killed in the late battle of Bunker Hill."

On the 19th also General Ward requested spears for the troops. "Spears might have saved the entrenchments". It was later voted to obtain 1500 "good spears".

The Watertown militia was not called out for the Battle of Bunker Hill,

but Capt. Crafts' company in Col. Gardiner's regiment of the new army, enlisted for eight months had 41 Watertown men. This regiment was posted on Bunker Hill in support of the redoubt on Breed's Hill. It covered the retreat, and Col. Gardiner received wounds of which he died.

Dr. Marshal Spring's house was designated as a hospital for the wounded from Bunker Hill. Dr. Spring was an open Tory sympathiser but so popular that he was tolerated in the community. He had gone to Lexington on the 19th of April to care for the wounded there. He remained in town through the war, and later was elected to the General Court of the new Commonwealth.

James Warren of Plymouth, not related to Joseph, was chosen to succeed him as President of the Congress.

The Provincial Congress was a purely legislative body, set up to replace the lower house of the General Court under the charter of Charles II when General Gage had prevented that body from meeting. Its primary purpose was to conduct the resistance, and except for the Committees of Public Safety and Supplies ^{it} had no executive branch. A judicial branch was also lacking, since the patriot mobs had forced the judges and court officers appointed by Gage to relinquish their offices. No courts were sitting, and laws were enforced only by popular action.

The opinion of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia was sought on the procedure for setting up a civil government, and the advice of that body was to set up a government as nearly as possible like that existing ^{prior} to the insurrection., that is the Royal Charter of Charles II. The Massachusetts leaders favored this also, since the Charter contained many privileges which they would not wish to lose, and independence from Great Britain was not yet proposed.

The third Provincial Congress therefor issued a call for the election of a General Court under the terms of the Charter. The Charter called for a

lower house, popularly elected, and a Council, elected by the members of the lower house and the outgoing Council, voting jointly. The new Council was to be elected by the lower house only. The Executive under the Charter was the Royal Governor, appointed by the King, and currently General Gage.

The Congress decided that Gage had vacated his office by failing to govern according to the terms of the Charter. The Executive power of the Province would be exercised by the Council "until such time as His Majesty shall be pleased to appoint a Governor who will govern according to the Charter."

The Second Provincial Congress had, in May, passed a resolution declaring that General Gage had "utterly disqualified himself to serve this colony as a governor,---that no obedience ought to be paid, by the several towns and districts in this colony, to his writs or acts----he ought to be considered and guarded against, as an unnatural and inveterate enemy to this country."

Thus a month after the Battle of Bunker Hill, the Royal Charter of Charles II (with modifications to suit the circumstances) was reestablished as the basic law of Massachusetts. The Council would appoint judges and other officers, make treaties, and perform the other functions which the Charter assigned, ^{to the Governor} The Council was retained in the Constitution of the Commonwealth, and still exists, sharing the executive power with the Governor.

In the concluding days of the Third Provincial Congress, provision was made for the disarming and control of loyalists, and a committee was appointed to look into the lack of discipline in the army. Quotas of coats, shirts, and britches for the army were assigned to the towns. Watertown's share was 49 of each item out of a total of 13,000. Mrs Coolidge, the tavern keeper had her account allowed for £7-15-8, and Paul Revere was ordered to print more money, making a total of £30,000. Mr Fowle's claim for the use of his house for committee meetings was referred to the new General Court. The Congress was dissolved on July 13, 1775.

In June, the Continental Congress had adopted the force before Boston as the Continental Army, and appointed George Washington as commander. Washington had set out from Philadelphia and Congress sent a delegation including Benjamin Church, of whom more will be heard, to Springfield to meet him. Washington arrived in Watertown on the morning of July 2 and received a congratulatory address at the Provincial Congress. Among other things it sought to prepare the Virginia aristocrat for the shock of meeting the motley military forces of New England. An address was also made to General Charles Lee who accompanied Washington. Washington left Watertown escorted by a cavalcade of citizens and a troop of light horse, and arrived at Cambridge headquarters at about 2 P.M. He replied with an address to the Congress on July 4th.

The first meeting of the General Court under the new plan of government opened on July 13 1775. Having deposed General ^{Gage} as Governor and made provision for the exercise of his office by the new Council, they felt justified in referring to his force in Boston as the "rebel army". The Provincial government maintained that it was loyal to King ^{George}, and fighting for its rights as Englishmen against a Parliament and a Governor who had usurped the powers of the people. Their acts were dated in the "fifteenth year of the reign of George III, and the royal family were regularly prayed for not only in the churches and the Congress but in the camps of the army besieging Boston.

Since the new Council needed a place to meet, a lease of the Marshall Fowlehouse nearby was arranged, and money was appropriated for a floor and chairs. An upstairs room was assigned to James Warren, who continued as President of the Assembly, and a member of the Council. He was often joined there by his wife, Mercy Otis Warren.

This building remained the seat of the executive power of the province until late in 1776 when the government returned to Boston. The house has known the presence not only of the Revolutionary leaders of Massachusetts—The Warrens, James Otis, father and son, and John Adams who sat here as a member of the Council between meetings of the Continental Congress, but of General Washington and of Benjamin Franklin who visited the scene of war in October of 1775.

The Marshall Fowle house originally stood on Mt. Auburn St where Marshal St. now joins it. It was moved in the eighteen-eighties about 200 feet to its present location on Marshal St. It is now owned and preserved by the Historical Society of Watertown.

Many important events took place in the Meeting House and in the Council Chamber. The Province was organized for war, taxes levied, and a military establishment created. Treaties were signed with Indian tribes. A civil government was re-established whose general form was retained when the Commonwealth adopted a constitution some years later.

Perhaps the most dramatic event in the Meeting House was the trial of Dr. Benjamin Church, who had been detected in correspondence with the enemy. One of the leading patriots, Church had long been a member of the Committees of Correspondence and of Public Safety, and a member of the General Court, privy to every plan of the colony. A competent physician who was Surgeon General of the Army, he had already been found guilty by a court martial convened by General Washington. The issue of the trial by the General Court was his expulsion from that body. He was found guilty and expelled, protesting his innocence to the end. While the evidence of guilty intent presented at the time was not entirely convincing, examination of Gen. Gage's correspondence files leaves no doubt that he had ^{been} supplying information to Gage long before the Battle of Lexington.

Watertown tradition says that Mrs. George Washington, passing through town on her way to join the general in Cambridge (Dec. 11 1775) paused for two hours at the Fowle house to receive the respects of the ladies of Watertown. There appears to be no mention of this event in contemporary accounts, and one wonders if a loving wife would so interrupt her journey only two miles from the husband she had not seen for six months. The historian Benson Lossing says that Mrs. Washington dined with Mrs. Warren the day before she left Cambridge to return to Mt. Vernon in April 1776.

In January of 1776, the guns brought from Ticonderoga by Col. Knox passed through Watertown. A few weeks ^{later} the militia were called out to assist the Continental army in the final assault on Boston. 95 Watertown militia men served at Dorchester heights for five days. The enlistments of those who had served at Bunker Hill had expired in December.

During the last days of March, the triumphant Continental Army passed through Watertown on its march to the defense of New York. General Washington left Cambridge on April 4th, and the war was over in Massachusetts.

The General Court continued to meet in Watertown because of conditions in Boston following the evacuation, and later a smallpox epidemic in the city postponed the return until November 1776. Smallpox in Boston again drove the General Court to Watertown in 1778.

Loyalty to King George had diminished as the war went on, and possibly influenced by the departure of the king's troops from the vicinity, the idea of independence was taking hold. On May 1, the General Court still meeting in Watertown, in an act setting the form of commissions declared that after June 1 next all commissions, civil and military, all writs and precepts for convening the General Court should be made out in the "name and style of the Government and People of the Massachusetts Bay in New England".

Also that all officers of the province, civil and military should receive their authority from the same source. Previously such documents had been issued in the name of the king. Thus Massachusetts in effect declared its independence of the King two months before the Congress in Philadelphia acted.

On May 10 the representatives Resolved: "That it is the opinion of this house that the inhabitants of each town in this Colony ought, in full meeting warned for that purpose to advise the person who shall be chosen to represent them in the next General Court whether, if the honorable Congress should, for the safety of the said Colony, declare them independent of the king of Great Britain, then the said inhabitants will solemnly engage, with lives and fortune to support the measure".

The special Town Meeting met on May 20, and after a discussion voted unanimously to stand and defend the same with their lives and estates. Town and Province were committed to independence while the Congress at Philadelphia still debated.

After the war moved away from Boston the militia were not again called into service except for guard duty at the prison camps in Cambridge and Somerville, but Watertown men served in the Continental army for various periods throughout the war. They were at White Plains, the invasion of Canada, and the Rhode Island campaign. Col William Bond went to Canada and in returning died at the camp at Mt. Independence as did Capt Edward Harrington. They lie beneath a neglected monument at that lonely and forgotten spot on the shore of Lake Champlain.

Two Watertown were among the guard at Maj. Andre's execution.

Captain Edward Fowle served throughout the war. He was on Lafayette's staff at Yorktown. He returned to Watertown, a disgruntled veteran, father of three famous beauties. His home on Mt. Auburn St. recently made way for a doughnut foundry.

There was constant difficulty in meeting the town's quota for the army. The Town Meeting records report many committees appointed for the purpose, with indifferent results. Considerable sums were appropriated to pay bounties. It is difficult to evaluate the amounts because of the constant inflation but they were large in terms of the town's means. In 1779 the total had risen to \$3468, and the appropriations continued. Enlistments were for periods from a few months to three years.

The Massachusetts archives list a total of 140 men credited to Watertown, some serving for only a few days. Several Indians and several Negroes are included. It is evident that not all these men were residents of Watertown, but many were bounty men, credited to Watertown but recruited elsewhere by the several committees appointed to hire men for the service with the bounty money appropriated by the town. Bond's History mentions 21 men from Watertown serving in the war, and three deaths.

The March Town Meeting of 1777 voted that taxes owed by deceased soldiers would be taken out of any money owed them by the town. The same spirit was shown in the Meeting of Nov 17 of that year when a warrant article seeking to make provision for poor families of men in the service "passed in the negative" in the peculiar language of the day. A few weeks later Washington's army took up quarters at Valley Forge.

Votes to provide clothing and beef for the army give an interesting view of the methods of supply. It appears that a substantial part of the supplies for the national army were furnished directly by the towns.

On November 6 and 7 1777, Watertown again watched the passage of an army. The troops surrendered at Saratoga were on their way to the camps in Cambridge and Somerville. Burgoyne rode arrogantly in the lead, followed by an army worn out by its long march through early storms of snow

and sleet in the Berkshires, a march which had started from Canada in June and which had included four battles. On the second day came the Hessians, followed by their wives and camp followers, burdened with kettles and babies, some born by the wayside. Sensitive observers said that an odor lingered in the air for some time after the passage of this unhappy army.

The Watertown Town Meeting voted that the Selectmen were not to receive any of the British officers within the town, though General Heath grumbled that he saw no reason why Watertown should be so favored. The soldiers were quartered in the old barracks at Prospect and Winter Hills in Somerville. Many of the officers were able to rent quarters in private houses, and some lived in Watertown in spite of the popular objection.

Richardson's tavern at East Watertown, once the depository of the town's military supplies, became a favorite resort of the British officers, drawn there by the attraction of the cockpit across the road.

Certainly one of the most sharply felt effects of the war at home was the great inflation which made the Continental dollar a byword. Its course is traced in the town records. The Minister's salary ^{was} £50 in 1775. While the position was vacant during much of the war, there are many votes for extras to compensate for rising prices until finally the minister's salary became £5000, and £1500 was appropriated for the installation of a new minister in 1781. At that ^{time} the official rate of exchange was 75/1, so that this salary ^{dollar} suggests that the actual value of the Continental was less than the official quotation.

In an economy which used money relatively little the effect of the inflation ^{serious} was probably not as it would be today, still great hardships were created.

In 1779 the Selectmen of Boston and the surrounding towns established a schedule of fixed prices for many commodities and service.. The depreciation

of money continued since the printing presses still turned, and the controls did not prevent prices from rising. Their effectiveness is shown by the fact that the price of labor was at ^{set} 13/day in July 1779 (up from 3sh 4pence in 1775). In ^March Of 1780, the Watertown Selectmen who had solemnly declared their support of the price fixing, were offering 19/day, three times the price they had decreed nine months previously.

The old issue was withdrawn as legal tender, and the cycle began again on a somewhat more restrained scale. It is interesting that a resolution to ask the General Court to rescind its action in withdrawing the old issue produced the only roll-call vote in the Town Meeting during this period.

It is difficult to compare the purchasing power of money at different periods, but the price of labor is probably the the best standard, although it is distorted by the increasing productivity of labor and the smaller labor component in manufactured articles. Watertown paid about 75 ¢/day for labor in 1775. In 1780 it paid \$30.00/day in March when the exchange rate was \$33 paper/1 specie. This was about the midpoint of the inflation. The Watertown Town Meeting last month set the minimum rate for labor at \$31.00 for an eight hour day. In the early 1800 the price of unskilled labor was about \$1.00/day, falling to 0.50 in the 1850's, rising during the war, and returning to \$1.00 in the 1880,s. A steady rise began about 1900. Thus it would seem that the inflation of the last seventy years is about half that which occurred in six war years, and the 1973 dollar has gone nearly half-way on the road which made the Continental a byword. It is worth two Continentals.