

# Bunker Hill: A City, a Siege, a Revolution<sup>1</sup>

Reviewed by Major Phillip T. Korman\*

*I see the clouds which now rise thick and fast upon our horizon. The thunders roll, and the lightnings play, and to that God who rides on the whirlwind and directs the storm I commit my country.*<sup>2</sup>

## I. Introduction

So spoke lawyer Josiah Quincy, Jr., on 16 December 1773, to the crowd of more than five thousand people crammed inside Boston's Old South Meeting House to consider the way ahead regarding the East India tea currently stored on three ships tied up along Griffin's Wharf.<sup>3</sup> Tensions were high, as Great Britain had demanded that the tea be unloaded, sold exclusively by loyalist agents at a significant discount, and taxed.<sup>4</sup> Although Quincy had implored his fellow citizens to thoughtfully consider the consequences before taking action against Great Britain, later that evening more than a hundred Bostonians, disguised as Indians, liberated the East India Company's tea into Boston Harbor.<sup>5</sup>

In *Bunker Hill* author Nathaniel Philbrick endeavors to "provide an intimate account of how, over the course of 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."<sup>6</sup> He also asserts that "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."<sup>7</sup> This review examines the author's background, explores how the Boston patriots ultimately triggered the war for independence, critiques the book, and makes a recommendation as to its usefulness.

## II. Background

Nathaniel Philbrick, a skilled writer who labored three years on this book, is well-suited to craft this narrative.<sup>8</sup> A Boston native, Philbrick holds a Bachelors of Art degree in

English from Brown University and a Masters of Art degree in American Literature from Duke University.<sup>9</sup> Philbrick's most notable works include *In the Heart of the Sea*, a winner of the National Book Award; *Mayflower*, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; *Sea of Glory*, winner of the Theodore and Franklin D. Roosevelt Naval History Prize; *The Last Stand*; *Why Read Moby Dick?*; and *Away Off Shore*.<sup>10</sup>

## III. Philbrick Demonstrates How Boston Patriots Triggered the War for Independence

Revealing how Boston patriots championed liberty, Philbrick organizes *Bunker Hill* chronologically into three parts: *Liberty*, covering the Boston Tea Party to April 1775;<sup>11</sup> *Rebellion*, which includes the battles at Lexington and Concord through Bunker Hill on June 17, 1775;<sup>12</sup> and *The Siege*, which covers the siege of Boston to the first Boston public reading of the Declaration of Independence in July 1776.<sup>13</sup> Although *Bunker Hill* introduces a cast of historical figures, from leading patriots Samuel Adams and John Hancock to British generals Thomas Gage and William Howe, Philbrick focuses on the almost forgotten patriot Dr. Joseph Warren, a respected Boston physician, and shifts to General George Washington after the battle of Bunker Hill.<sup>14</sup>

Warren entered the political scene as a writer and later joined his mentor Samuel Adams on the Boston Committee of Correspondence, a colony-wide network of communication intended to promote the patriot cause throughout the colony and beyond.<sup>15</sup> When Parliament enacted the Port Act<sup>16</sup> to close Boston Harbor due to the Tea Party, Warren served on the committee that drafted a circular letter broadcasting the port's closure and calling for a complete boycott of British goods.<sup>17</sup> After Parliament targeted Massachusetts with the Massachusetts Government

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<sup>1</sup> NATHANIEL PHILBRICK, *BUNKER HILL: A CITY, A SIEGE, A REVOLUTION* (2013).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 4. Quincy, an eloquent lawyer who was dying from tuberculosis, had teamed with John Adams to successfully represent the British soldiers tried for the Boston Massacre a few years earlier. *Id.* at 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 3.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 8-9.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 4, 8-9.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at xvi.

<sup>7</sup> *Id.* at xiv.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.* at xv.

<sup>9</sup> Nathaniel Philbrick, <http://nathanielphilbrick.com/about> (last visited Aug. 21, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 1, 3, 9, 104.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.* at 107, 127, 143-59, 221-30.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 231, 249, 285, 290.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.* at 26-27, 33-34, 46, 121, 216-17, 237-39.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* at 34-35, 68-69.

<sup>16</sup> Boston Port Bill (March 31, 1774), <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/related/bpb.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.* at 36-37.

Act<sup>18</sup> and enacted various legislation collectively known as the “Coercive Acts”<sup>19</sup> against the colonies, Warren authored the “Suffolk Resolves,” advocating disobedience of the Coercive Acts, encouraging towns to elect military officers to muster militia, boycotting of British goods, establishing a provincial congress, and creating a system of couriers to alert towns in the countryside of the need for assistance should the enemy move quickly.<sup>20</sup> In the preamble to the Suffolk Resolves, Warren eloquently stated that Massachusetts had observed “the power but not the justice, the vengeance but not the wisdom of Great Britain,” convincing the members of the First Continental Congress to vote unanimously to endorse his resolves and to consent to an intercolonial boycott of British goods, an important step for unity among the colonies.<sup>21</sup>

Philbrick pays special attention to Warren’s decision to alert the countryside the night of 18 April 1775, which set the stage for confrontation with the British.<sup>22</sup> As one of the last patriot leaders still in occupied Boston that evening, Warren received a tip about an upcoming secret British raid on the military supplies stored in Concord and information about a possible effort to capture leading patriots Samuel Adams and John Hancock.<sup>23</sup> Rather than convene a meeting of the Committee of Safety and vote on whether to send the alarm out to the towns as directed by the extra-legal Provisional Congress, Warren decided on his own to have William Dawes and Paul Revere sound the alarm to towns throughout Massachusetts.<sup>24</sup> The next day British troops would meet the gathered militia in the celebrated battles of Lexington and Concord.<sup>25</sup> Philbrick indicates that at this stage, the patriots were still seeking simply to restore their liberties and flew the British flag out of loyalty to the king.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>18</sup> The Massachusetts Government Act effectively prohibited regular town meetings, the heart of the patriot movement, and transferred to the King, rather than the Massachusetts House of Representatives, the power to determine the upper chamber of the General Court, the colony’s legislative body. <http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/related/mga.htm>.

<sup>19</sup> Along with the Massachusetts Government Act and the Boston Port Bill, the Administrative of Justice Act and the Quartering Act form what were called the Coercive or Intolerable Acts by the colonies. See MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOC’Y, <http://www.masshist.org/revolution/coercive.php>.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.* at 74–75.

<sup>21</sup> The Suffolk Resolves (September 6, 1774), <http://constitution.org/primarysources/suffolk.html>.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 116–17.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 116–19; see also DAVID H. FISHER, PAUL REVERE’S RIDE 95 (1994) (stating that an informer notified Warren that the British plan called for seizing Samuel Adams and John Hancock in Lexington and burning the military supplies at Concord).

<sup>24</sup> Even if five members of the Committee of Safety had met, it is not certain they would have unanimously approved sending out the alarm since the seven hundred British troops readying for the operation lacked baggage or artillery, a requirement of the Provincial Congress for sending out the alarm. PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 118.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 127–28, 141–59.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.* at 55, 180–81.

The energetic Warren served as President of the Provincial Congress, led the Committee of Safety, and was chosen to be a major general.<sup>27</sup> Following Concord, he drafted a circular seeking recruits colony-wide, and the Provincial Congress aimed to raise a New England-wide army.<sup>28</sup> When the Battle of Bunker Hill broke out nearly two months later, the de facto patriot leader in Massachusetts joined the provincial army forces because he could not remain in safety “while my fellow citizens are shedding their blood for me.”<sup>29</sup> Volunteering to serve where the action would be the hottest rather than to command, Warren was killed in combat.<sup>30</sup>

With the death of Warren, Philbrick switches his focus to General George Washington, the Continental Congress’s choice to lead the Provincial Army, and his effort to transform them into a disciplined, intercolonial force.<sup>31</sup> In this new, intercolonial army, the seeds of independence were sown.<sup>32</sup> On 1 January 1776, the first day of the new Continental Army, General Washington replaced the previous flag with the Union flag.<sup>33</sup> When Boston loyalists printed a copy of the King’s Speech as a final ultimatum for the rebel soldiers to either return as British subjects or admit their participation in a war for independence, the soldiers publicly burned it.<sup>34</sup> With the Continental Army besieging Boston, the British would evacuate, and in July 1776, a copy of the *Declaration of Independence* would be publicly read in Boston, confirming the transformation of the liberty movement into a national struggle for independence.<sup>35</sup>

#### IV. Critique of *Bunker Hill*

In retelling the momentous events that shook Boston from 1773 to 1775, *Bunker Hill* reflects the dynamic, and at times, seemingly uncontrollable events in that short but tumultuous era. This well-documented work contains over fifty pages of notes and a bibliography stretching over twenty small print pages.<sup>36</sup> While nearly a dozen maps and thirty-two pages of illustrations are helpful, the sheer volume of information and rapid movement in this work may overwhelm the first time reader.

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 175, 191, 194.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at 163, 165.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 215.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 219, 229–30.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 236, 242–44, 246.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.* at 262.

<sup>33</sup> *Id.* at 265.

<sup>34</sup> *Id.* at 264–65.

<sup>35</sup> *Id.* at 290–91.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.* at 301–56, 357–78.

By injecting commentary and presenting unflattering images of Boston citizens, the militia, and even patriot icons General Washington and Warren, Philbrick provides an unvarnished, contemporary view of the liberty movement and the leading patriots. For example, he devotes nearly six pages to describing how citizens of Boston cruelly administered their “tar-and-feather” brand of street justice to a loyalist customs officer for knocking a patriot unconscious with his cane.<sup>37</sup> Philbrick juxtaposes the respect Lieutenant General Gage paid to the civil liberties of the patriots with the intimidation certain Boston citizens heaped upon loyalists.<sup>38</sup> In a similar manner, he chips the veneer off the patriot militia’s exalted image by observing that their narrow concept of freedom apparently did not extend to slaves.<sup>39</sup> He does not shrink from speculating on the shortcomings of the venerated General Washington.<sup>40</sup>

Philbrick overachieves in portraying the human failings of Warren by speculating on whether Warren impregnated an unwed young woman named Sally Edwards while he courted the notable Mercy Scollay.<sup>41</sup> Philbrick leaps to his conclusion based in part on an entry in Dr. Nathaniel Ames’ diary mentioning a visit to his friend Dr. Warren along with a near contemporaneous entry in his tavern account book identifying Joseph Warren’s “fair *incognita* pregnans” as a boarder.<sup>42</sup> He also notes that a letter by Warren’s fiancée Mercy Scollay refers to a “Sally Edwards” as a “little hussy” and “vixen” and assumes the “fair *incognita* pregnans” was none other than Sally Edwards.<sup>43</sup> Philbrick admits the possibility that another man impregnated Sally Edwards and that Warren was merely providing her a safe haven, but on multiple occasions he returns to his theory that Warren impregnated Sally Edwards.<sup>44</sup> Later Philbrick posits that

Warren may have surreptitiously visited the pregnant Edwards the morning of the battle of Bunker Hill.<sup>45</sup>

The available evidence is inconclusive as to whether Warren fathered an illegitimate child and arranged care for the mother, or, alternately, served merely as discreet caretaker for a young patient in a difficult circumstance. In view of the limited evidence and the reputational harm associated with wrongly identifying Warren as the father of Sally Edwards’ child, Philbrick’s persistence in raising such speculative claims distracts and risks the author’s credibility.

#### V. *Bunker Hill’s* Usefulness to Judge Advocates

This book’s focus and workmanship make it appropriate fare for history fans. Philbrick does a service by introducing the modern reader to the often overlooked Dr. Joseph Warren and his significant contributions to the patriot cause. While this historical narrative does not present itself as an activist handbook, political activists, nevertheless, can also glean helpful tips from its pages, such as waging an effective communication campaign. Likewise, in an era of Middle Eastern uprisings and social media, would-be revolutionaries can absorb important lessons on strategic planning from the Massachusetts patriots, including preparing an armed force, securing military resources, creating clandestine communication and spy networks, framing public opinion at home and aboard, and establishing a shadow government.

Servicemembers and commanders would benefit from reading this book in order to better appreciate the formation of the Continental Army under General Washington and learn leadership lessons for maintaining a disciplined military. The Provincial Army’s lack of unity of command and discipline at the Battle of Bunker Hill could have been the beginning of the end for the Continental Army. The lack of cohesion among the state militia’s was evident: elements built a fort on the wrong location, and patriot leaders Colonel John Stark, Colonel William Prescott, and General Israel Putnam fought separately rather than combining forces.<sup>46</sup> When a Captain John Chester reached Bunker Hill, he even observed numerous provincial soldiers trying to avoid fighting.<sup>47</sup>

General George Washington’s steps to transform the Provincial Army into the Continental Army are instructive to any commander faced with overhauling an undisciplined force. First, he directed courts-martial proceedings to correct derelictions and issued numerous orders to restore

<sup>37</sup> *Id.* at 16–22.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 121.

<sup>39</sup> *Id.* at 120–21.

<sup>40</sup> Philbrick recounts how early in his military career, Washington lost control of a situation near Fort Duquesne, leading to the slaughter of likely surrendering French troops and ultimately the start of the French and Indian War. *Id.* at 238–39. See also JOSEPH J. ELLIS, *HIS EXCELLENCY* 14–16 (2004) (recalling that Washington’s first combat experience likely involved a massacre later considered the hostile act responsible for the French and Indian War).

<sup>41</sup> PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 101–02.

<sup>42</sup> *Id.* at 101. Warren biographer Dr. Samuel Forman, in a comment on an internet post discussing Philbrick’s claims, notes that he had stated in his earlier work that “secrecy, Warren’s close identification with the proceedings, and posthumous continuation of charges to his account suggest, but do not prove, Joseph’s paternity.” DR. JOSEPH WARREN ON THE WEB, <http://www.drjosephwarren.com/2013/06scandalous-implication-with-no-solid-documentation/> (last visited Sept. 11, 2013). See generally SAM FORMAN, *DR. JOSEPH WARREN: THE BOSTON TEA PARTY, BUNKER HILL, AND THE BIRTH OF AMERICAN LIBERTY* (2011).

<sup>43</sup> PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 101.

<sup>44</sup> *Id.* at 101–02, 112, 177, 215–16.

<sup>45</sup> *Id.* at 215–16. In her Amazon.com review of this book, reprinted as a guest blog entry to the Dr. Joseph Warren website, Warren biographer Janet Uhlar takes issue with Philbrick’s portrayal of Dr. Warren’s purported relationship with the young, unwed Sally Edwards and reaches a different conclusion. See FORMAN, *supra* note 41.

<sup>46</sup> PHILBRICK, *supra* note 1, at 204, 214.

<sup>47</sup> *Id.* at 222.

camp order.<sup>48</sup> In choosing officers, he placed a premium on merit rather than family connections.<sup>49</sup> To bolster cohesion among the intercolonial troops, in a ceremony he replaced the flag at the heights of Prospect Hill with the “Union flag,” a symbol of colonial unity.<sup>50</sup> The Continental Army’s completion of two towering forts atop the hills of Dorchester in just one night, a feat that stunned British Major General Howe, attests to General Washington’s inspirational leadership.<sup>51</sup>

Washington’s timeless leadership principles still resonate with the Army he helped found. Imposing good order and discipline among the troops remains as important as ever, and, to this end, judge advocates serve as a commander’s primary weapon. Promoting officers based on merit rather than nepotism ensures that the most capable officers are placed in leadership positions, maximizing the force’s opportunities for continued success. Army battle uniforms now bear the updated American flag, uniting soldiers from various geographic backgrounds just as the Union flag first did more than two centuries ago atop Prospect Hill.

## VI. Conclusion

As the prescient Josiah Quincy foresaw, storms—complete with the thunder and lightning of discharging cannon—did indeed fall upon his land. Boston would be divided, besieged, evacuated by the British, and then reclaimed. Philbrick has delivered on his promise to show how a restless patriot presence in Boston effectively galvanized Massachusetts citizens to defend their liberties at Lexington, on the Concord bridge, and at bloody Bunker Hill, which transformed the conflict into a national war for independence under General Washington and the newly forged Continental Army.

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<sup>48</sup> *Id.* at 243–44.

<sup>49</sup> *Id.* at 244–46.

<sup>50</sup> *Id.* at 265.

<sup>51</sup> *Id.* at 275, 277–78, 280.