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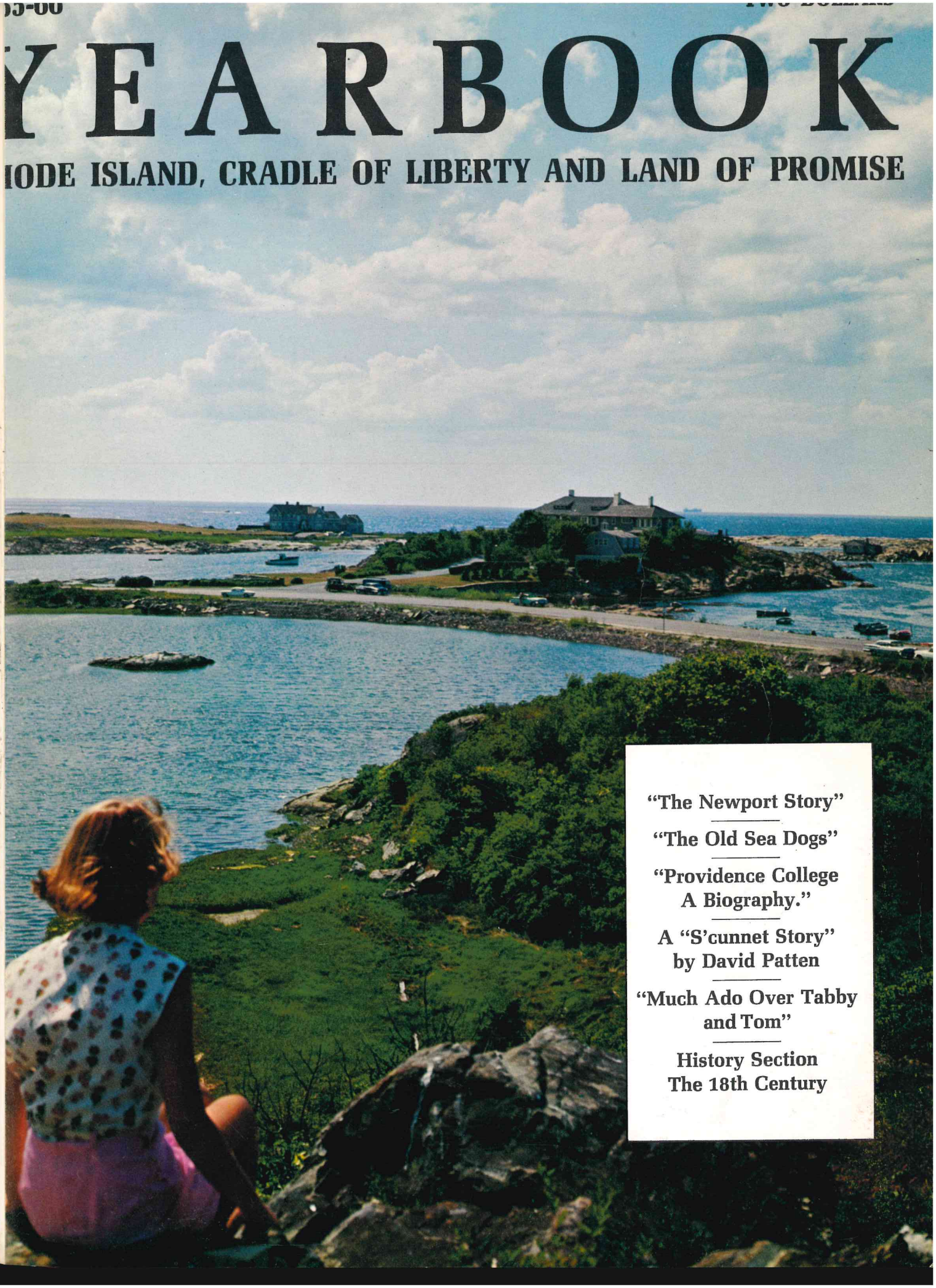
YEARBOOK

IODE ISLAND, CRADLE OF LIBERTY AND LAND OF PROMISE



"The Newport Story"

"The Old Sea Dogs"

"Providence College
A Biography."

A "S'cunnet Story"
by David Patten

"Much Ado Over Tabby
and Tom"

History Section
The 18th Century

RHODE ISLAND "OBSERVES" THE SIEGE OF BOSTON

BY DAVID R. RANSOME

FOR THE Rhode Islanders it was "the third Wednesday in April," election day; but for the inhabitants of Massachusetts it was 19 April 1775, and politics were wearing a more serious expression. By nightfall, when the polls were closed in Rhode Island, and the British were stumbling back into Boston from Lexington and Concord, riders had brought the news of fighting to Providence. From Providence the news traveled rapidly through the colony, and by dawn next day Rhode Island was on the march to Boston. In the early hours the Kentish Guard passed through Providence, and in all there were about a thousand men headed for Boston. At the colony's border at Pawtucket, however, their journey ended; expresses from Boston informed them that the British were back in the city, and orders from their own Governor Wanton ordered them not to leave the colony. It is not altogether clear which message was more instrumental in turning them back.

The march on Boston was merely delayed, however. The political crisis, which had begun sixteen months ago with the Boston Tea Party and grown more acute as Britain tried to coerce Massachusetts into submission, had ended in bloodshed. In this emergency the General Assembly met immediately, and unusually, in Providence on April 21. The following day it sent Nathanael Greene and William Bradford to consult with the colonists of Connecticut, and the same day it voted to raise 1500 men, in the King's name, to act as an army of observation, and to march out of the colony to her neighbors' assistance. Ten days or so later, sitting once again at Providence, the General Assembly gave further thought to this army. It was to form a single brigade, composed of three regiments, and the command of it was given to Nathanael Greene. The choice of Greene was not then as obvious as it seems now. Firstly, he limped; secondly, he had been until recently a Quaker; thirdly, he was merely a private in the Kentish Guard. He was, however, a member of the Assembly, and his political connection with the powerful Ward clan appears to have been at least as relevant to his appointment as his recent interest in military matters. At all events, the coming years were to vindicate his selection as the commander of the Rhode Island brigade. The brigade's three regiments were to be raised by Colonel Varnum in Kent and King's counties, by Colonel Hitchcock in Providence county, and by Colonel Church in Bristol and Newport counties. Each regiment was to consist of eight companies, one of which was to be an artillery company.

The rest of the month of May was taken up with preparations. Officers were commissioned, men enlisted, and equipment and supplies collected. It was June 2 before Greene left for the Rhode Island encampment at Jamaica Plains, and upon his arrival there he found it "in great commotion." Moreover, Varnum's regiment had not yet arrived. Greene rapidly learnt that mere commissions, enlistments, and supplies did not make an army. The officers had little control over their men, some of whom were preparing to march home again. In his exasperation, Greene termed them "a factious set."

If the Rhode Island brigade was not to disintegrate, it had to be given confidence in itself and competence in the field. The month of June was therefore dedicated to drilling the men. Their appearance in the early days can be judged from the orders which it was necessary to issue. Col. Hitchcock had to remind his officers that they were not only to appear on parade in uniform, but they were also to see that the men were clean, and as neat as possible, since they, of course, had no uniforms. Moreover, the men were not to be permitted to parade in trousers if they had breeches, nor were they to come on parade without stockings and shoes. It was also necessary to forbid talking on parade.

The brigade's appearance on parade was not the only matter in need of correction. Inefficiency was to be found at many levels; Greene complained that the

subordinate officers neglected their duty, "some through fear of offending their soldiers, some through laziness, and some through obstinacy." A corporal in Hitchcock's regiment was reduced to the ranks for repeated neglect of duty and disobedience to his captain. And of course there was drunkenness; Peter Young of the Providence regiment was "at ten o'clock at night . . . found in liquor; who, when confined, behaved himself in a very indecent and contemptuous manner; damning the man that confined him, and also the man that kept him in confinement, throwing his hat about the guard-house." For this incident Young was sentenced to ride the wooden horse, for fifteen minutes with two guns tied at his feet, and for ten minutes without. Not surprisingly, therefore, at the end of June Greene still found the men "raw, irregular, and undisciplined." Nevertheless he thought them "under much better government than any round Boston."

His task of governing them was made no easier, moreover, by the defects in his men's provisions. At the beginning of July he wrote home to Deputy-Governor Cooke, pointing out that some barrels of supplies were only half or two-thirds filled, that bread sent from Providence was mouldy, and that the meat supplied for the men was in large part horse-flesh. Greene asked the Governor to prevent such impositions upon his men, for, as he pointed out, it made his attempts to discipline the men of little worth. "If the troops are comfortably subsisted, (and) if they don't do their duty, they can be punished, with great justice; but if they are not well fed, and properly clad, they excuse all their misconduct from one or the other reason."

In the middle of June the battle of Bunker's Hill had been fought by the troops of the colonial left wing. Consequently the Rhode Island brigade, which formed part of the colonial right, was not engaged. (Indeed, Greene that day was at home, and, on receiving news of the battle, had to ride through the night to rejoin his brigade.) The battle had left the British in command of the Charlestown peninsula, and it became at once necessary for the colonists to throw up defenses to command the two roads leading from it. On June 18, the day after the battle, men were set to work at Winter Hill and Prospect Hill, and among the thousand at the latter were 100 Rhode Islanders from Varnum's regiment, led by Major Christopher Greene, Nathanael's younger brother.

The arrival of George Washington at the beginning of July caused changes in the army about Boston. Together with the other provincial generals, Greene, who had been appointed a Brigadier-General in the Continental Army on June 22, now placed his troops under the Continental commander, and for a time they were in separate encampments. By July 10, one of the Rhode Island regiments, together with the New Hampshire troops, was occupying Winter Hill, which commanded the more northerly road from Charlestown, while the other two were at Sewall's Farm in Brookline, where they were strengthening the defenses against a possible British landing. At this time also it is possible to learn the true numbers of the Rhode Island brigade. A return made early in July reveals that the three Rhode Island regiments in fact comprised 1085, rather than 1500, men. Of the 1085, 107 were officers, 108 were non-commissioned officers, and the remaining 860 were rank and file. Of these last, 2 were then on furlough, and 42 were sick, 18 of them home. Moreover, the six additional companies, of 60 men each, which the General Assembly had authorized on June 28, had not yet joined their regiments.

By July 22 Washington was sufficiently acquainted with the situation around Boston to reorganize the army in three divisions. Major-General Charles Lee, an irascible British professional soldier who had previously served the King of Poland as well as King George before settling in the colonies and espousing their cause, was given command of the two brigades that formed the left wing and guarded the way from Charlestown. Under him, Brigadier-General Sullivan took over the responsibility for Winter Hill, and Greene was assigned to Prospect Hill, guarding the road to Cambridge. Greene now had command of seven regiments, the three from Rhode Island and four from Massachusetts. A little later, as they arrived from the south, the Riflemen were also assigned to Prospect Hill.

It was in July, too, that the Rhode Island camp received favorable notice. After commenting upon the various other colonial encampments, some of whose tents

General Nathanael Greene, youngest of the Revolutionary Generals and the son of a Quaker minister.

"are thrown up in a hurry and look as though they could not help it," the Reverend William Emerson continued that "some are your proper tents and marquees, and look like the regular camp of the enemy. These are the Rhode-Islanders, who are furnished with tent equipage from among ourselves and everything in the most exact English taste." The description suggests moreover that the broadsides which the colonists dispersed among the British sentries in July were not wholly a product of propagandist exaggeration:

PROSPECT HILL	BUNKER'S HILL
I Seven dollars a month	I Three pence a day
II Fresh provisions and in plenty	II Rotten salt pork
III Health	III The Scurvy
IV Freedom, ease, affluence, and a good farm	IV Slavery, beggary, and want

Rhode Islanders were now in contact with the enemy for the first time. On July 15 Washington had once again forbidden unauthorized conversations with the British, but to little effect. On July 28 Lieutenant-Colonel Miller of the Newport regiment noticed that the British were cutting trees and removing fences between the lines. He at once went out to meet their officers and asked them to stop, since "felling the timber so near our sentries created a jealousy." The British replied that "they had not interrupted our men in cutting hay close to the lines," but nevertheless agreed to stop. Not all exchanges with the enemy were conducted with such gentlemanly courtesy and faith in the enemy's good intentions, however. Within a day or so of this incident, Captain Christopher Gardner of Varnum's regiment showed his mistrust of the British, and was consequently found guilty of abandoning his post (the original indictment also mentioned charges of cowardice, and deserting his men). For his crime he was dismissed from the army.

The prompt punishment of Captain Gardner appears to have made an impression upon the troops. There is no report of cowardice on the night of August 26, when some 3400 seized Ploughed Hill, midway between Winter Hill and Charlestown Neck, and "within point-blank shot of the enemy." By morning the entrenchments on the hill were sufficiently advanced to withstand a heavy cannonade which began about 9 a.m., but in the course of the bombardment Rhode Island suffered its first battle casualty, when Augustus Mumford, the adjutant of Varnum's regiment, had his head carried off by a cannonball.

At the beginning of September there was much bustle on Prospect Hill, for some 250 Rhode Islanders and three companies of Riflemen were chosen to go with Benedict Arnold up the Kennebec on his expedition against Quebec. The whole force consisted of two battalions, and Christopher Greene, promoted Lieutenant-Colonel, was given command of the first. Under him were seven companies, of which three, and possibly four, were composed of Rhode Islanders led by John Topham of Church's regiment, Simeon Thayer of Hitchcock's, and Samuel Ward of Varnum's. Various obstacles delayed the expedition's departure until September 14, the most dramatic being the mutiny of the Riflemen on September 10.

These Riflemen from Pennsylvania and Virginia had done almost entirely as they pleased since their arrival in camp. They had been excused from all working parties, camp guards, and camp duties, and they had obeyed their officers only when they found it convenient to do so. Now, on September 10, the adjutant had confined a sergeant to the guardroom for neglect of duty and "murmuring." When some of the riflemen threatened to free him, the adjutant promptly seized the ringleader, put him in the guardroom also, and went to report to the colonel. The riflemen then freed the ringleader, and the colonel was forced to arrest him once more, this time sending him off to the Main Guard at Cambridge. Twenty minutes later, some 32 riflemen set off to free him once more. By the end of the day, Hitchcock's regiment, and others under Greene's command, had been ordered under arms, and it had needed the personal intervention of Washington, Lee, and Greene to quell the mutiny. The following day, the riflemen were instructed

to take their share of all guard duties and fatigues in future, and on September 12 the 33 mutineers were fined 20 shillings each, only the ringleader suffering six days imprisonment in addition.

The second half of September was considerably quieter. On September 17 the Rev. Mr. John Murray was appointed Chaplain to the Rhode Island regiments, despite the protest of every other chaplain in the army, and Greene told his wife later in the month that Murray's sermon was the first that he had heard since the time of her visit to the camp at Jamaica Plains. Moreover, there was time for Greene to dine with Washington, taking Murray with him.

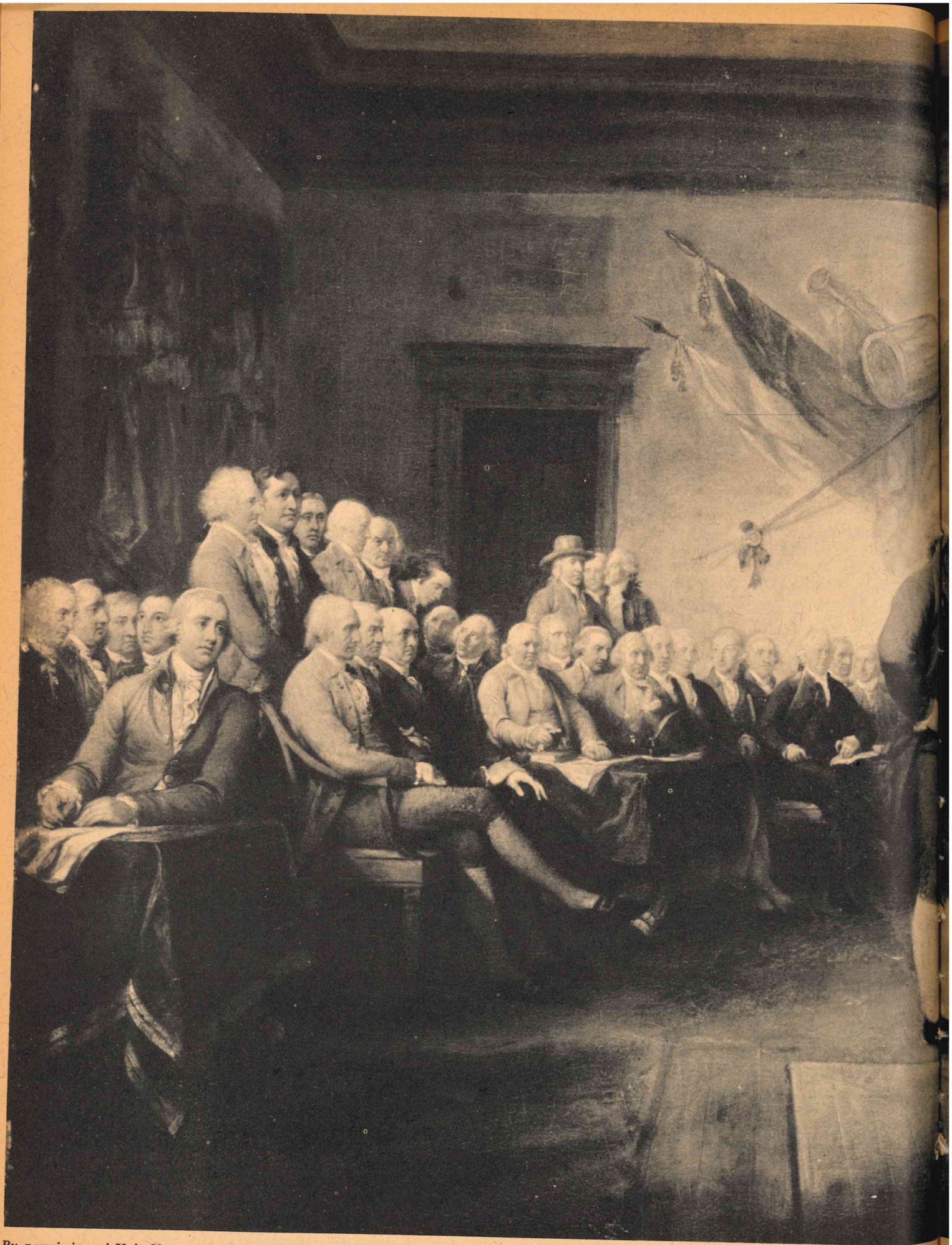
By October the problems confronting the army had changed, but they still did not include the British. Already on September 23 Greene was complaining of the cold, and throughout the winter inadequacies of clothing and fuel were to present the officers with headaches, and were in turn to aggravate the problem of enlistments. Like other contingents, the Rhode Island brigade had enlisted only until December 31, and the boredom of camp life, the lack of furlough, the delays in receiving pay, the discomforts of winter, and the reorganization of the army in 26 rather than 38 regiments, all contributed to the men's reluctance to re-enlist. Men were not eager to serve under officers that they did not know, were even less eager to serve in mixed colonial regiments, and were encouraged in their attitude by officers who would lose their present commissions when the New Army came into being.

From mid-October men from the brigades were out cutting wood, but even this measure, together with the purchase of wood from the local inhabitants at exorbitant prices, was not enough. On November 2 Washington reported that the army had only four hours' stock of fuel, and that "different Regiments were upon the point of cutting each others throats for a few Standing Locusts near their Encampments," and at the year's end Greene was writing, "Many regiments have been obliged to eat their provisions raw, for want of fuel to cook it; and notwithstanding we have burnt up all the fences, and cut down all the trees, for a mile round the camp, our sufferings have been inconceivable."

Uncooked food was only one consequence of the lack of fuel. Another was the misery of the cold. From the beginning of November the army had begun to move from tents to wooden barracks, but even after Christmas, when there had already been "a considerable fall of snow," Greene admitted that "many of the troops are yet in tents, and will be for some time, especially the officers."

A further worry which possessed the general officers was the lack of gunpowder, and this worry they were forced to keep to themselves, lest the British

Knox's guns on Dorchester Heights drove the British from Boston in March 1776.



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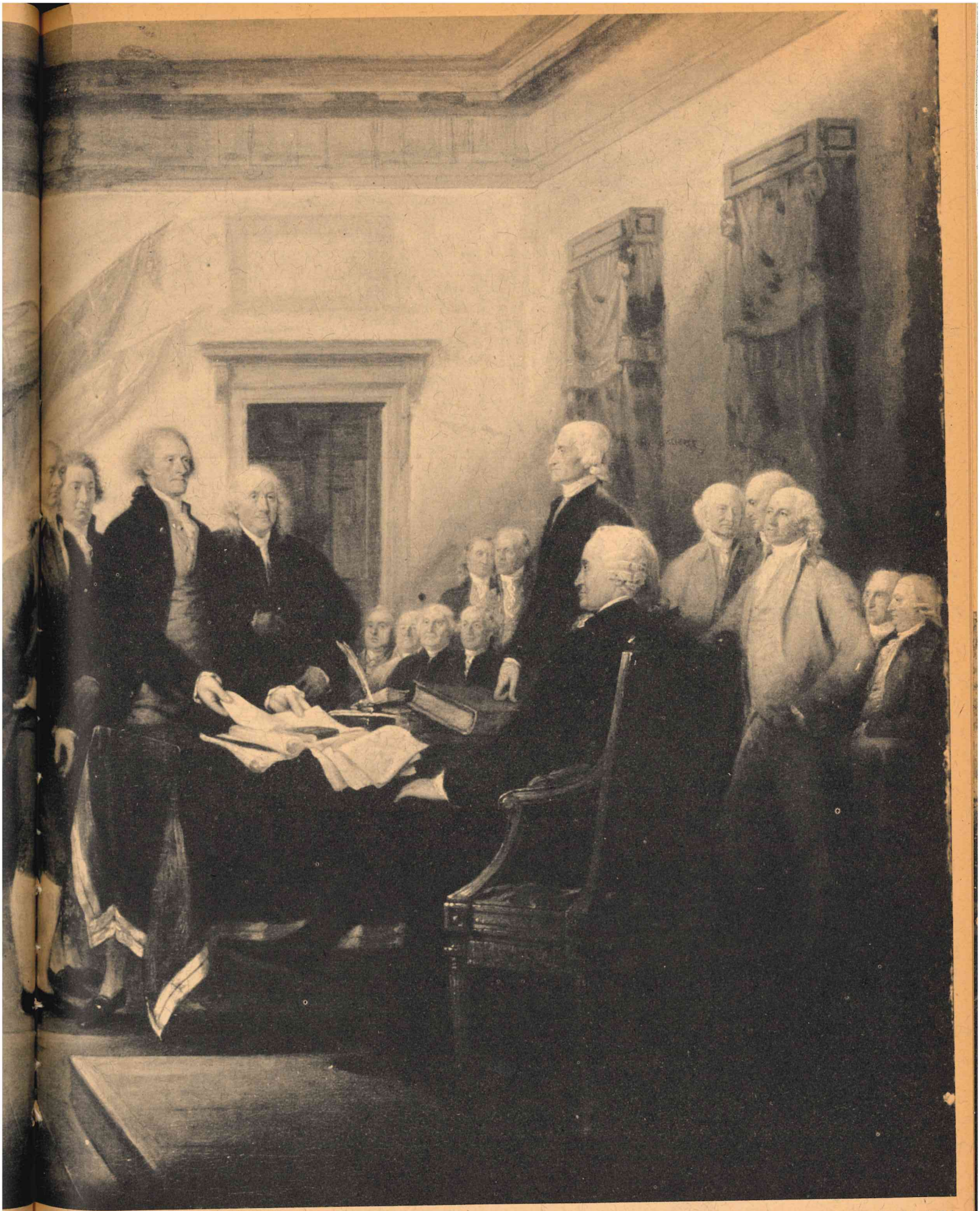
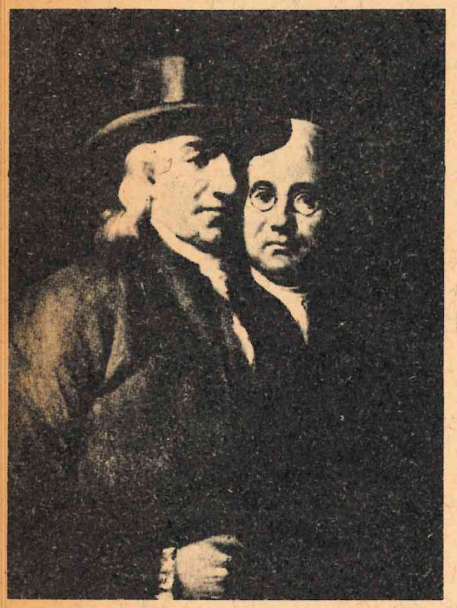


The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776.

They signed the Declaration for Rhode Island.



in Boston learn of it and take advantage of the shortage to sally out. On November 7, Greene once again forbade his troops to fire at the geese flying over the camp; the following day, he ordered the captains of companies to hold the cartridge issue personally, for emergencies; and the day after that, he promised to punish without mercy those who were in the habit of carrying off cartridges for their own use at home.

The records of these early winter months are filled with references to the lack of powder, fuel, and enlistments. However, there are intermittent reminders that the prime purpose of the army was to beat the British. On November 16, Knox was given his orders for fetching the cannon from Fort Ticonderoga. On the night of November 22-23 Cobble Hill, in advance of Prospect Hill and offering a possible site from which to bombard Boston, was seized and fortified, and within a few days the same was done at several other points on the shore of Back Bay.

December was devoted to the problem of enlistments. The Connecticut troops gave the most dramatic example of the unwillingness to stay, and by the end of the month Washington's army, which had numbered some 14,000 fit for duty in July, consisted only of some 8,000 effective troops aided by 5,000 militia from Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Despite the fact that the General Assembly of Rhode Island had during November authorized the raising of a fourth regiment, of 500 men, together with an artillery company, and had on January 15 increased the regiment to 750 while authorizing a fifth regiment of 750 men, the Rhode Island contingent had clearly shrunk in size by the New Year. Regimental returns, supplied as late as the beginning of March 1776 when matters were a little improved, reveal that Church's regiment had been disbanded, and that Varnum's and Hitchcock's between them numbered only 725, of whom only 587 were fit for duty.

Nevertheless, despite the poor enlistments, the situation began to improve at this time. Shortly after the middle of January, Knox returned from Fort Ticonderoga with the cannon; powder began to reach the camps in sufficient quantities to make an attack on the British possible; and by the end of February it had been decided to seize Dorchester Heights. These would enable the colonists to fire upon Boston, from yet another point, and upon the harbor. Preparations for the seizure and fortification of the Heights were made, and the men were reminded of their duty: the army was "positively forbid playing at Cards, and other Games of Chance. At this time of public distress, men may find enough to do in the service of their God, *and* their Country, without abandoning themselves to vice and immorality."

On the night of March 4 the colonists occupied the Heights, and on the following morning, the sixth anniversary of the Boston Massacre, the British saw the new fortifications threatening them. A proposed British counterattack was foiled by foul weather, and consequently the Rhode Islanders were once again inactive during a major operation. For it had been agreed that 4,000 men under Sullivan and Greene were to attack Boston from Cambridge, if the British tried to drive the colonists from the Heights.

The rest is anti-climax. On March 17 the British evacuated Boston, and on March 27 their fleet left Nantasket Roads. By April 5 Varnum's and Hitchcock's regiments were in Providence. But they were not home from the wars. They were merely en route to New York, and further years of campaigning. They had not yet taken part in a general engagement, but they had done something even more remarkable. They had gone to Boston "a factious set" of men, and they had returned, marching in brigade with men of Massachusetts and New Hampshire, in a new army, which was, "in every point of View," as their Commander in Chief had said on January 1, "entirely Continental."