



The Siege of Boston and the Civilians Trapped Behind Enemy Lines

Introduction

- Over the years, historians have written countless works on the military and political aspects of the Siege of Boston.
- Unfortunately, little attention has been given to the impact of the siege upon the residents of Boston.
- As British military and political authorities attempted to recover from the disaster of the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the residents of Boston found themselves trapped inside a town that was on the verge of social and economic collapse.

What We'll Discuss Today

- The Aftermath of the Battles of Lexington and Concord
- Attempts to Flee Boston
- The Effects of Rebel Supply Interdiction Tactics on the Civilian Population
- Rising Tensions and the Abuse of Civilians and Loyalists
- The Physical and Psychological Impact of the Siege
- The Evacuation of Boston
- The Aftermath



“I Know Not What to Do, Not Where to Go”
The Aftermath of the Battles of Lexington and
Concord



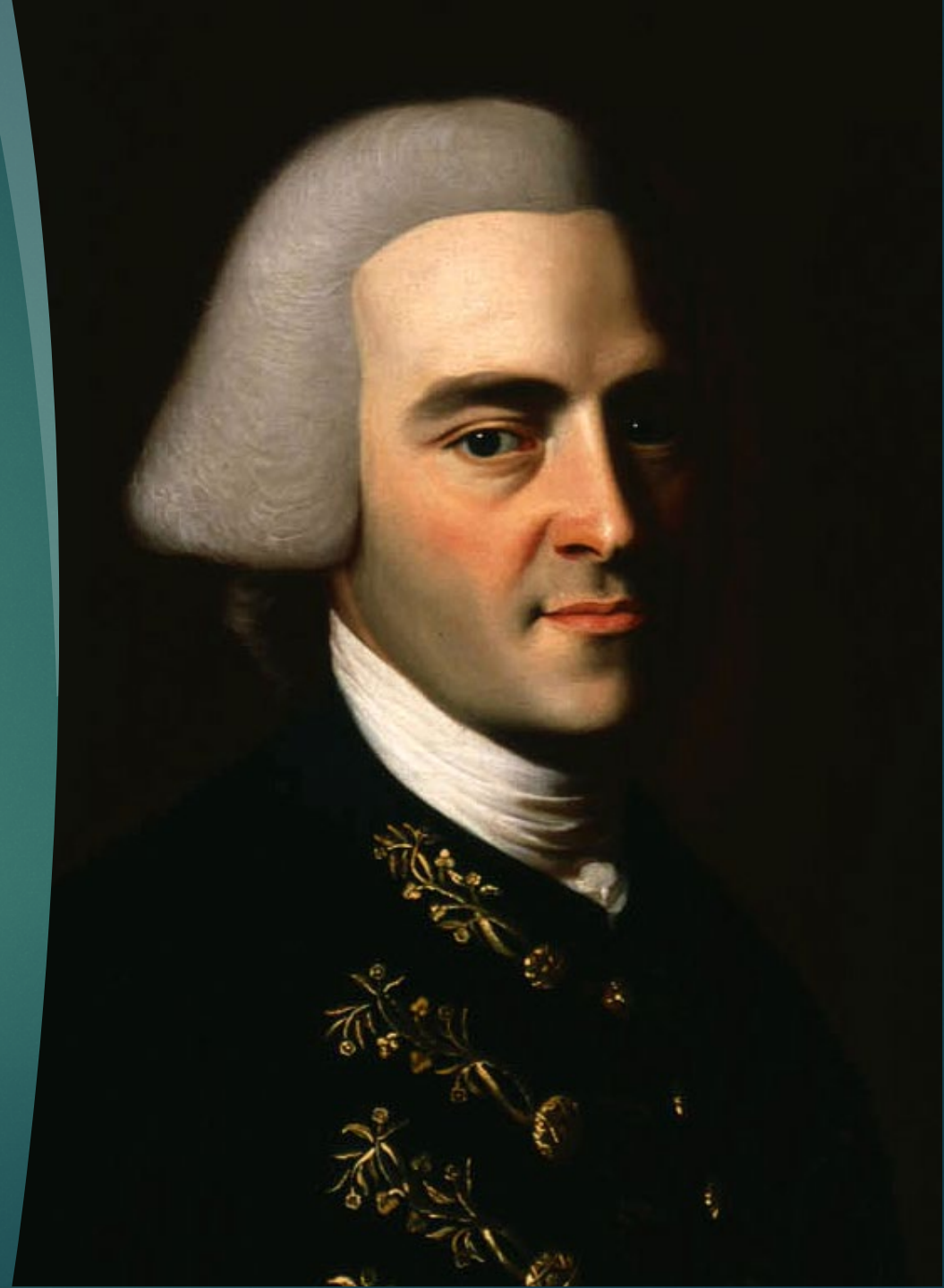
The Aftermath of the Battles of Lexington and Concord



- On the evening of April 18, 1775, many of the residents knew a military operation into the countryside was in motion and thus, got little sleep.
- According to one resident, “I did not git to bed this night till after 12 o'clock, nor to sleep till long after that, & then my sleep was much broken, as it had been for many nights before.” (1)
- Many Bostonians were oblivious of plans to seize and destroy a supply depot located in Concord, Massachusetts. Instead, most believed the British objective was the arrest of Samuel Adams and John Hancock.

The Aftermath of the Battles of Lexington and Concord

As Sarah Winslow Deming recalled “the main was to take possession of the bodies of Mesrs Adams & Handock, whom they & we knew where were lodg'd. We had no doubt of the truth of all this.” (2)





The Aftermath of the Battles of Lexington and Concord



- Shortly after dawn, word of the Battle of Lexington reached Boston residents. Predictably, fear set into the populace.
- One woman would later write “Early on Wednesday the fatal 19th April, before I had quited my chamber, one after another came runing up to tell me that the kings troops had fired upon & killed 8 of our neighbors at Lexington in their way to Concord. All the intelligence of this day was dreadfull. Almost every countenance expressing anxiety & distress.” (3)
- As the day progressed, Boston broke into a state of panic.



The Aftermath of the Battles of Lexington and Concord



- Many residents wandered about aimlessly, unsure of what the future held.
- In a letter to his son, the Reverend Andrew Elliot stated “I know not what to do, not where to go . . . poor Boston, May God sanctify our distresses which are greater than you can conceive - Such a Sabbath of melancholy and darkness I never knew . . . every face gathering paleness - all hurry & confusion - one going this way & another that - others not knowing where to go - What to do with our poor maid I cannot tell - in short after the melancholy exercises of the day - I am unable to write anything with propriety or connection . . . Everything distressing.” (4)

The background image shows a grassy hill in the foreground. In the middle ground, there is a wooden palisade fence made of vertical wooden stakes. The sky is a clear, solid blue. The text is centered over the image.

“I Was Genl Gage’s Prisoner”
Trapped Behind Enemy Lines

Trapped Behind Enemy Lines

- Over the next few days, as the American army surrounded the town and settled into a siege, scores of Bostonians discovered they were prohibited from fleeing the town.
- General Thomas Gage was fearful that if the residents were permitted to leave, they would provide material assistance to the American army. As a result, he issued orders barring residents from leaving Boston.
- One Boston resident openly complained “I was Genl Gage's prisoner -- all egress, & regress being cut off between the town & country. Here again description fails. No words can paint my distress.” (5)

Trapped Behind Enemy Lines

- According to merchant John Rowe, Boston's economy immediately collapsed. Businesses stopped operating and fresh provisions for market stopped coming into town. "Boston is in the most distressed condition." (6)
- Similarly, Boston resident John Andrews, Esq. noted in a letter to his brother-in-law "Its a fortnight yesterday since the communication between the town and country was stop'd. Of consequence our eyes have not been bless'd with either vegetables or fresh provisions, how long we shall continue in this wretched state - God only knows - but that no more blood may be shed is the earnest wish and prayer of your affectionate friend." (7)



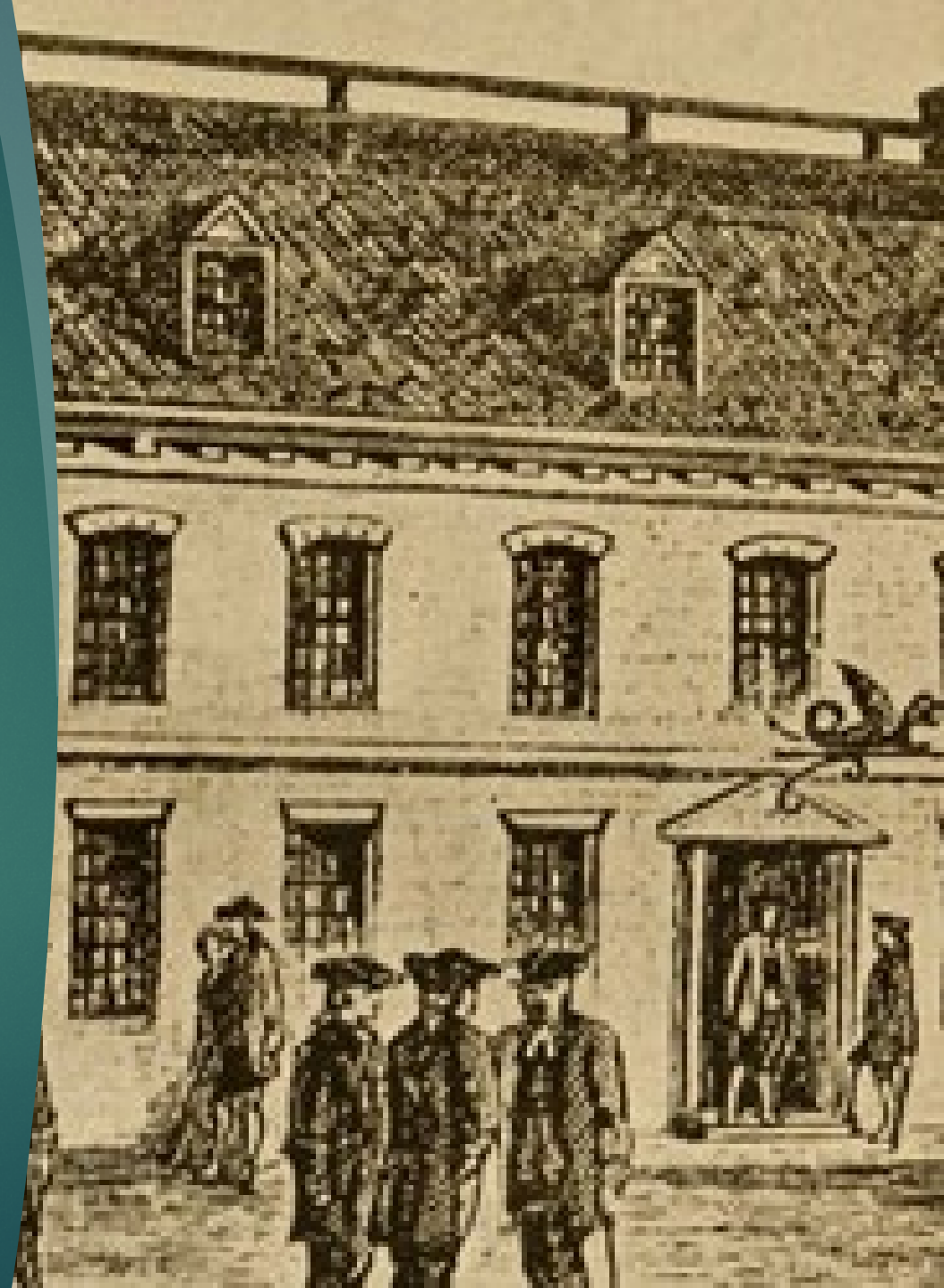
Trapped Behind Enemy Lines



- Residents gathered at a town meeting on April 22, 1775, to address their declining situation.
- A resolution was drafted to General Gage and it highlighted the level of desperation they felt with the town being shut off to the outside world. “Inhabitants cannot be Supplied with provisions, fewell & other Necessarys of Life by which means the Sick & all Invalids must Suffer greatly, & Imediatly & the Inhabitants in general be distressed espesically Such which is by much the greatest party as have not had the means of laying in a Stock of provisions but depend for daily Supplies from the Country for their daily Support & may be in danger of perishing unless the Communication be opened.” (8)

Trapped Behind Enemy Lines

- Representatives from the town voted to approach General Gage to secure his permission for Americans to evacuate Boston.
- After a tense meeting, the general ultimately agreed to let the residents vacate to the countryside on the condition they surrender their personal weapons so they would not end up in the hands of the Massachusetts Grand Army surrounding Boston.
- Reluctantly the Bostonians agreed.



Attempts to Flee Boston

- A Boston minister recalled the state of the civilian populace on the eve of the evacuation.
- “I not impelled by the unhappy Situation of this Town . . . all communication with the Country is cut off, & we wholly deprived of the necessaries of Life, & this principal mart of America is become a poor garrison Town now I am by a cruel Necessity turned out of my House must leave my Books & all I possess, perhaps to be destroyed by the Soldiery; my beloved Congregation dispersed, my dear Wife retreating to a distant part of the Country, my Children wandering not knowing whither to go, perhaps left to perish for Want, myself soon to leave this devoted Capital, happy if I can find some obscure Corner wch will afford me a bare Subsistence.” (9)



The Checkpoint



- Those who chose to flee made their way to Boston Neck, the sole land route out of the town. At least four checkpoints along the neck were set up by the British army.
- Residents were searched for weapons and carriages and chaises were prohibited from leaving Boston.
- Some residents pleaded with family and friends not to leave the “safety” of Boston. Most pleas were rebuffed as many believed once British reinforcements arrived in Boston, the town would become a killing field.
- This belief was only strengthened as rumors of atrocities being committed by soldiers inside Boston quickly spread. Once again panic set in and residents pressed harder to get “out of ye city of destruction.” (10)
- At the height of confusion, British officials closed Boston Neck and the inhabitants were ordered back into the town.

Hostages Inside Boston

- On April 27, 1775, General Gage again reversed himself and gave permission for the remaining American residents to leave Boston.
- Surprisingly however, British authorities undermined Gage and made it difficult, if not impossible, for Bostonians to leave. Passes were now required to cross over Boston Neck and their number was limited.
- “Near half the inhabitants have left the town already, & another quarter, at least, have been waiting for a week past with earnest expectation of getting Passes, which have been dealt out very Sparingly of late, not above two or three procur'd of a day, & those with the greatest difficulty.” (11)



Hostages Inside Boston



- On May 5th, many passes were issued and multiple residents quickly left via Boston Neck. According to one period account, “You’ll see parents that are lucky enough to procure papers, with bundles in one hand and a string of children in the other wandering out of the town not knowing whither they’ll go.” (12)
- The following day General Gage inexplicably revoked all outstanding passes again, declared no more were to be issued and those who wished to leave were prohibited from doing so.
- In a letter to her husband, Abigail Adams chastised Gage and other British officials for the continuous issuing and revoking of passes, repeatedly changing what personal belongings could accompany the refugees and the resulting stress to the Americans trapped inside the town. “The Distresses of the inhabitants of Boston are beyond the power of language to discribe.” (13)

“A Solemn Dead Silence
Reigns in the Streets”

The Aftermath of the
Civilian Exodus



The Aftermath

- By the end of May, Boston more closely resembled a post apocalyptic world than a bustling seaport community. In a letter to a friend in England, Loyalist Ann Hulton wrote, “a Solemn dead silence reigns in the Streets, numbers have packed up their effects, & quited the Town.”
- While many had abandoned the town, others barricaded themselves inside their homes and had private guards watching over their property.
- The Reverend Eliot accurately described the state of Boston on the eve of the Battle of Bunker Hill. “I have remained in this Town much ag: my inclination . . . Grass growing in the public walks & streets of this once populous & flourishing place - Shops & warehouses shut up - business at an end every one in anxiety & distress.” (14)

The Aftermath

- Even the towns on the outskirts of the Siege Lines were not immune from the effects of the Siege.
- According to one observer, the Town of Roxbury, which served as a forward American outpost during the Siege of Boston suffered a fate similar to Boston.
- “Nothing strikes me with more horror than the present condition of Roxbury: that once busy, crowded street is now occupied by a picket guard. The houses are deserted, the windows taken out, and many shot-holes visible; some have been burnt, and others pulled down, to make room for the fortifications.” (15)

Starve Them
Out: The Effects
of Rebel Supply
Interdiction
Efforts on the
Civilian
Population



Interdiction Efforts

- Following the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the Massachusetts Committee of Safety quickly recognized that in order to drive the British army from the town, it had to starve them out.
- Initially, The Committee urged the Massachusetts Provincial Congress to use its authority to secure resources on the harbor islands and Massachusetts seacoast so British forces could not engage in foraging operations.
- As a result of these interdiction efforts, Gage was forced to rely heavily upon the long and tenuous communication and supply lines to British possessions in Nova Scotia, the West Indies, and ultimately, England.

- The Massachusetts Committee of Safety saw this logistical nightmare as an opportunity to loosen Gage's hold on Boston. Massachusetts had a long history of privateering during the previous French wars and almost immediately turned to the practice as a method to drive His Majesty's troops out of the town.
- Shortly thereafter, fresh provisions and supplies quickly became scarce in Boston.





Lack of Supplies



- Fresh provisions were increasingly scarce and trapped occupants were often forced to survive on food of questionable quality. As one account recalled, “Its hard to Stay coop'd up here & feed upon Salt provissions . . . We have now & then a carcase offerd for Sale in the market, which formerly we would not have pickd up in the Street, but bad as it is, it readily Sells.” (16)
- By August of 1775, Boston resident Timothy Newll noted just how desperate conditions had become. “This day was invited by two gentlemen to dine on rats. A few months later, Newell would bitterly complain that there were “several thousand Inhabitants in town who are suffering the want of Bread and every necessary of life.” (17)

Lack of Supplies

A few months later In January of 1776 Anne Hulton also noted just how dire the situation in Boston was when she stated “Provisions & fuel were scarce & very dear, supplies uncertain.” (18)



Rising Tensions and the Abuse of Civilians and Loyalists



Rampant Abuse of Civilians

- The combination of British troops, Loyalist refugees and Boston residents all occupying a small amount of space only exacerbated a very dangerous situation.
- Press gangs roamed the town looking for civilian men to force into manual labor.
- Inhabitants were arrested for merely being suspected of espionage or providing aid to the enemy.
- Many of the soldiers and camp followers abused the inhabitants, stole from them and plundered their property.

Rampant Abuse of Civilians

- John Andrews complained that the “Soldiery think they have a license to plunder evry ones house & Store who leaves the town, of which they have given convincing proofs already.” (19)
- According to John Leach, Boston had devolved into a complicated “scene of oaths, curses, debauchery, and the most horrid blasphemy committed by the provost martial, his deputy and Soldiers who were our guard ... and Sundry Soldier women.” (20)



The Loyalist Experience



- Nor were Loyalist refugees immune from the hardships of the siege.
- Dorothea Gamsby was ten years old when the war broke out. In a letter written years later to her granddaughter, Gamsby accurately described how tenuous the situation inside Boston had become by the eve of the Battle of Bunker Hill.
- Residents continued to hide in fear and were under constant stress. Most believed that the town would be invaded by the rebels and its inhabitants slaughtered at any moment.



The Loyalist Experience



As Gamsby recalled the Battle of Bunker Hill “then came a night when there was bustle, anxiety, and watching. Aunt and her maid, walked from room to room sometimes weeping. I crept after them trying to understand the cause of their uneasiness, full of curiosity, and unable to sleep when everybody seemed wide awake, and the streets full of people. It was scarcely daylight when the booming of the cannon on board the ships in the harbour shook every house in the city . . . My aunt fainted. Poor Abby looked on like one distracted. I screamed with all my might.” (21)

The Physical and Psychological Impact of the Siege on the Populace





Deteriorating Conditions



- As the siege progressed, conditions inside the town continued to deteriorate.
- Surviving houses of worship were demolished for fuel or converted into riding stables.
- Loyalist Isaac Winslow recalled “Fuel is now the scarcest article, and to supply the troops they take down the oldest houses and buildings in town. 'Tis all a scene of desolation. You would not know your own town scarcely. Dr. Sewall's meeting-house has been gutted of pews and galleries to make a riding school for the Light Horse.”
(22)

Deteriorating Conditions

- As the siege continued, disease and sickness began to spread inside Boston.
- One resident declared “Social life is almost at the last gasp. We have passed favorably through the smallpox.” (23)

OF THE
SMALL-POX
INOCULATED
IN
NEW-ENGLAND,
Upon all Sorts of Persons, *Whites, Blacks,*
and of all Ages and Constitutions.
With some Account of the Nature of the
Infection in the NATURAL and INOCULATED
Way, and their different Effects on HUMAN
BODIES.
With some short DIRECTIONS to the UN-
EXPERIENCED in this Method of Practice.
Humbly dedicated to her Royal Highness the Princess of WALES,
By *Zabdiel Boylston*, F. R. S.
The Second Edition, Corrected.
L O N D O N :
Printed for S. CHANDLER, at the Cross-Keys in the Poultry.
M. DCC. XXVI.

Deteriorating Conditions

- The result was a general sense of despair throughout the surviving civilian population.
- Some of the common emotional descriptions by residents during the siege include such negative words as “anxiety”, “distress”, “forsaken” and “darkness”.
- Some accounts even expressed what only could only be interpreted as hopelessness or borderline suicidal thoughts. One account sadly noted “It is impossible to describe the Distress of this Unfortunate Town . . . I try to do what Business I can but am Disappointed & nothing but Cruelty and Ingratitude falls to my lot.” (23)

The Evacuation of Boston





The Final Humiliation



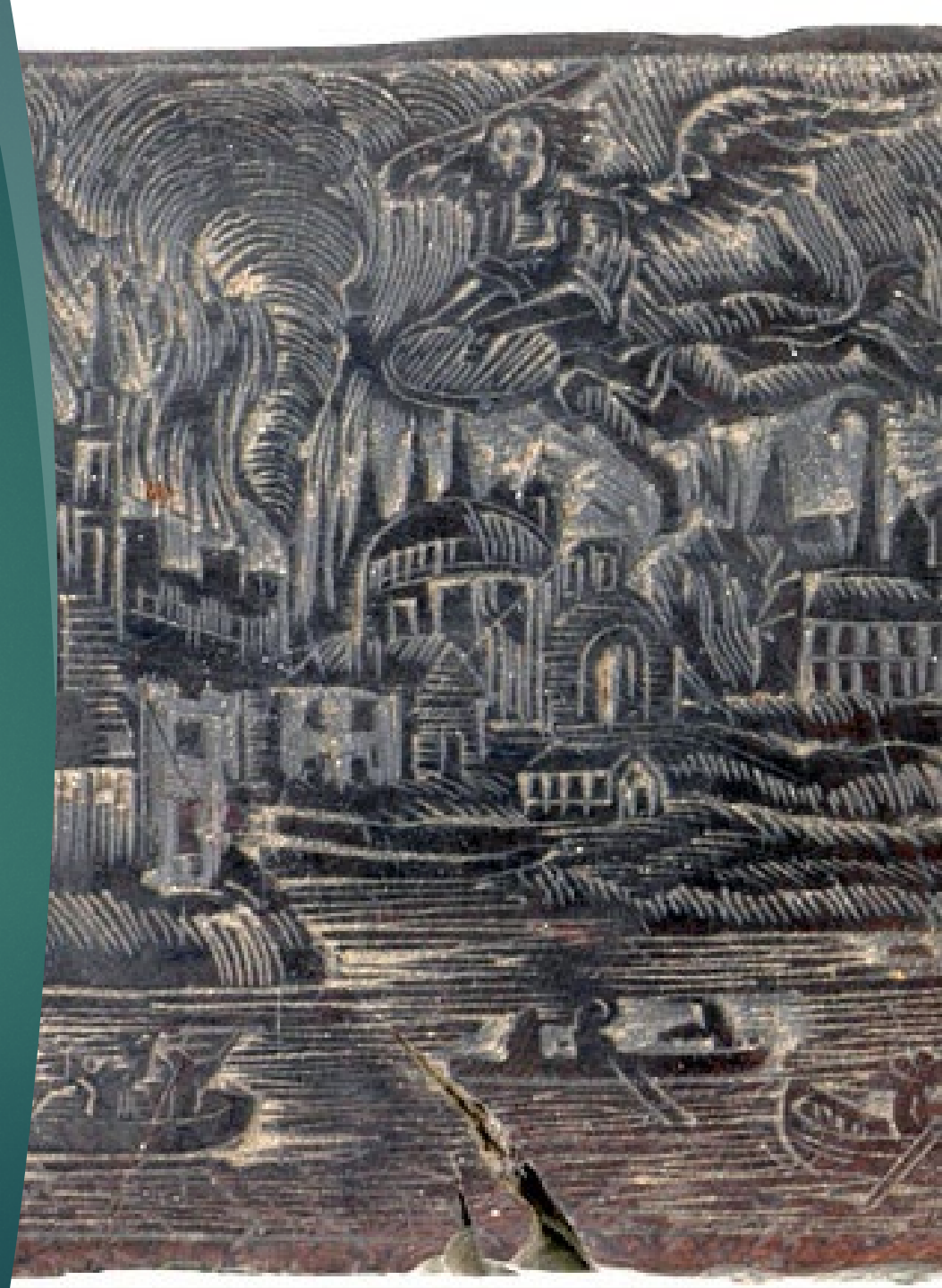
- A final humiliating blow to the occupants came on the eve of the British evacuation of Boston.
- As his majesty's army prepared to evacuate the town, British troops and Loyalist refugees roamed the streets plundering homes, warehouses and businesses of the local populace.
- According to merchant John Rowe, "They stole many things and plundered my store . . . I remained all day in the store but could not hinder their Destruction . . . they are making the utmost speed to get away & carrying . . . everything they can away, taking all things they meet with, never asking who is Owner or whose property - making havoc in every house & destruction of of all kinds." (24)

The Final Humiliation

John Andrews recalled how “a party of soldiers got [into a neighbors house] went into his cellar, took liquors from thence and had a revelling frolick in his parlour, carried off and destroy'd of his furniture &ca., to the value of two hundred sterling -which was not to be nam'd with what fifty other houses suffer'd, or I may say a hundred.”
(25)



- By March, 1776, British soldiers were suspected of committing acts of arson in the northern part of town.
- Troops repeatedly threatened, robbed and intimidated the inhabitants.
- To the horror of many Bostonians, even officers participated in the illegal activities.



The Liberators Arrive

- Following the British and Loyalist evacuation of Boston, American troops entered the town and were joyfully greeted as liberators.
- “Thus was this unhappy distressed town . . . relieved from a set of men, whose unparalleled wickedness, profanity, debauchery and cruelty is inexpressible.” (26)





The Aftermath

The Aftermath

- For the next several years, Loyalist and “Patriot” inhabitants of Boston petitioned the Continental Congress and the Massachusetts government for compensation for property lost or damaged as result of the siege.
- Some claims were paid, others were ignored or denied.
- In the weeks after the conclusion of the siege, American troops moved south to New York City. For the remainder of the war, the residents of Boston were never subjected again to the horrors of a military siege or occupation.

The Aftermath

- After its conclusion, the Siege of Boston still haunted many of its civilian victims.
- In 1776, Anne Hulton returned to England to be with her family. In a letter to a relative, she declared “...when a Solitary hour allows room for reflection, it still appears a wonder to Me, that I am here, in my Native Country, escaped from the dangers, & free from fearful alarms. That I can go to bed without Apprehensions of Cannonadings, by which I used to be roused, & rise up without anxious thoughts, for supplies, & safety by day, and walk out & see plentiful markets & easy countenances, instead of deserted Streets, empty market-places, or to meet discontented looks & anxious distress.”



Questions?



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