

**WHAT FLAG FLEW
AT BUNKER HILL?**



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WHAT FLAG FLEW AT BUNKER HILL?

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(with Dorothy Claybourne)

The annual convention of the North American Vexillogical Association, meeting in Cleveland, Ohio, from 10 to 12 October 1975, appointed a committee to look into the design of the flag allegedly flown at the Battle of Bunker Hill, 17 June 1775. Its findings, reported at the succeeding convention of the association (Toronto, 8-10 October 1976), are contained in this article.*

At the outset, this committee surveyed the political system and the structure of the American military organization existing on 17 June 1775. At that time the thirteen colonies were still legally and constitutionally dependencies of Great Britain; the Declaration of Independence was over a year in the future. Few people in public life had even advocated independence. There was no government of the thirteen colonies as a unit; therefore the thirteen colonies could have no flag. There was not even a government of New England; the last attempt to set up such a government failed in 1689, so there could be no flag of a governmental entity of New England.

Similarly, there could be no army of the united American colonies, much less a commander or a flag. Each colony had its own militia, which it had been accustomed to call out in cases of emergency. There were Minute Men, but these had a loose organization. A Continental Congress, without legislative authority, was functioning in Philadelphia and it had taken steps to set up a military establishment; but since the resolution for the army was passed on 14 June 1775, it could hardly have had any effect on the relatively small body of men who fought at Bunker Hill three days later. When Congress set up (on paper) the Continental Army it made no provision for its flag.

From all reports the colonial forces about Boston in June 1775 constituted a very disorganized lot. There was a question as to who was in command and who was responsible for military strategy. The executive of the Colony of Massachusetts-Bay at the time was the Committee of Safety, which was elected anew at every session of the Provincial Congress.² General Artemas Ward had been commissioned on 21 May 1775 as commander in chief of the Massachusetts forces,³ but the difficulty with his position was that militia units and volunteers from three other colonies had converged upon Boston at this time (though men from only three colonies participated in the battle). Any military authority exercised by Ward therefore had to receive the formal acceptance, or at least the acquiescence, of units from the other colonies and this was not always forthcoming.⁴

To repeat what is generally known: the Battle of Bunker Hill was fought not on Bunker Hill but on Breed's Hill in Charlestown, Massachusetts. It represented an effort by the British forces then in Boston to smash an attempt of the Americans to occupy a commanding eminence overlooking the city and thereby force a British evacuation or (at best) a surrender. It was part of what might be called a British struggle to avoid an encircling movement. Theoretically the American move was sound strategy, although by seizing Breed's Hill the Americans exposed themselves dangerously in the rear. Breed's Hill and Bunker Hill were both on a peninsula formed by the Charles and Mystic Rivers and the neck of the peninsula, connecting it with the mainland, was so narrow that the colonists ran a serious risk of being cut off. In retrospect, one wonders why the British did not try to seize the neck and engage in a throttling operation, rather than stage a frontal uphill attack upon the Americans, who already had a geographical advantage.

So poorly were military records kept at this period that it is not easy to determine which companies under whom did what. On the basis of the best information available, the backbone of the colonial forces consisted of Massachusetts militiamen and volunteers; Connecticut men, many of them under General Israel Putnam,⁵ came in later and two New Hampshire regiments also eventually appeared on the scene. It was Massachusetts men who occupied the hill during the night of 16 June 1775. Numerous other New England forces were stationed in the neighborhood, but it is clear

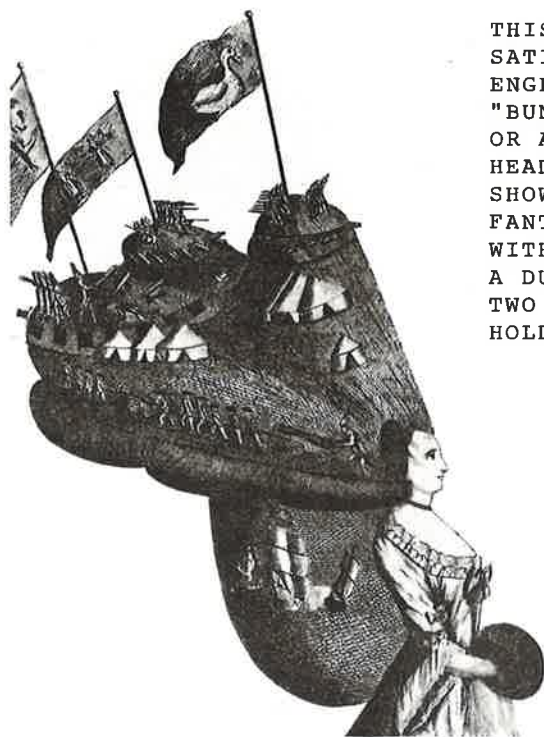


THE FAMOUS PINE TREE SHILLING
OF THE MASSACHUSETTS-BAY COLONY

that the full strength of the continental forces was not used at Bunker Hill. A Rhode Island regiment under General Nathanael Greene was nearby,⁶ but no Rhode Island troops participated in the battle.

Troops in the battle were nominally organized into regiments, but those regiments were not up to official strength and many were only skeleton forces. In some instances the ranks were not yet determined; some of the men were still serving as Minute Men and not as regular militia members and a number of regiments had not yet received commissions. The commissariat and quartermaster's department had not yet been organized, the neighboring towns sending provisions to the troops--with resultant irregularity and waste.⁷ Not only was there no commander of the whole force, but each platoon officer in the battle allowed his men to fire as they wished. No officer or soldier in the force was in uniform and one participant even related that there was no officer on horseback.⁸ Recruits and stragglers were coming in at all times and even as late as June 1775 there was not a rollcall.⁹ A military force without organization, uniforms, or even satisfactory means of supplying food could hardly have been expected to give serious consideration to a flag.

Much of the confusion about the Bunker Hill flag arises from a painting of the battle by John Trumbull in which are shown two flags flown by the Americans, one of them a red flag with a green pine tree in a white canton. This painting is often used to bolster



THIS 1776
SATIRICAL
ENGRAVING,
"BUNKER'S HILL
OR AMERICA'S
HEAD DRESS,"
SHOWED
FANTASTIC FLAGS
WITH A MONKEY,
A DUCK, AND
TWO WOMEN
HOLDING ARROWS.

an argument that the Bunker Hill flag was red. Trumbull's depiction has been denounced by John H. Fow (a vexillologist earlier in this century) who deserves the gratitude of his countrymen for another iconoclastic act: he was one of the first to demolish the Betsy Ross legend. In 1908 Fow wrote,¹⁰ relative to Trumbull, "He depicts the American flag carried in that battle as something which no one ever saw or even heard of, to wit: a red flag with a white union, having in it a green pine tree." Fow's denunciation warrants an analysis of the circumstances in which the painting was done.

Trumbull at the time of the battle was a 19 year old adjutant of the First Connecticut Regiment, commanded by General Joseph Spencer,¹¹ and was stationed on the day of the battle at Roxbury, four miles [6.5 km.] away from Breed's Hill. He could hear the sound of the battle and saw smoke, but he did not see the battle itself.¹² Later in life he journeyed to England, where

he studied painting under the American expatriate Benjamin West, and began his famous work in the autumn of 1785.¹³ The painting was therefore based on what Trumbull, reaching back into his memory, thought other people had told him. Inaccuracies could be expected; in fact when Trumbull had almost finished the picture a Colonel John Small, who had fought on the British side during the battle, examined it and criticized the positions of Generals Putnam and Warren (the latter of whom had died in the battle).¹⁴

Vexillologists have therefore doubted the Trumbull depiction. Quaife, Weig, and Appleman thought that Trumbull could not be relied upon in all details¹⁵ and R.C. Ballard Thruston also had doubts.¹⁶ On the other hand, it is known that as early as 1686 there had existed a red flag of New England with a St. George's cross on a white canton and a green pine tree in the upper square next to the staff. It had flown on forts and in military formations,¹⁷ but it is not the Trumbull flag. It just *might* have been used at Bunker Hill; precise documentation is lacking.

The chief argument for a blue flag appears to be based on a 1860 work by Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution*. According to him, at about noon on 17 June men in the redoubt on Breed's Hill ceased work, hoisted the New England flag, and prepared to fight. No source for this claim is cited, but Lossing presents a sketch of a blue flag with a red St. George's cross in a white canton, and a green pine tree in the upper left-hand corner. He states that this is "copied from an old Dutch work, preserved in the library of the New York Historical Society"--which he does not identify in any other way.¹⁸ The chairman of the Bunker Hill flag committee inquired of the New York Historical Society if it possessed a book of this meager description and was gratified to learn that the society still had the book, 115 years after Lossing had written about it. That book, *L'Art de Bâtir les Vaisseaux, et d'en perfectionner la Construction*,¹⁹ was published by David Mortier in Amsterdam in 1719 and contains sketches of a number of flags then in use, including one called "*Pavillon de la Nouvelle Angleterre en Amerique*" ("ensign of New England in America").

But the flag of New England, so depicted, while of blue with a red St. George's cross on white, had not a pine tree but a globe in the upper corner. Lossing²⁰ simply replaces the globe with a pine tree, with the



JOHN TRUMBULL'S
 "THE DEATH OF GENERAL WARREN
 AT THE BATTLE OF BUNKER'S HILL"

unsupported statement that the flag in the battle had had the pine tree device. He refers to one Mrs. Manning, an "intelligent old lady," who had told him that her father, who was in the battle, had assisted in hoisting it; but he adds that the question was still unsettled, since contemporaries were silent on the subject. It must be stated, therefore, that the argument for a blue flag is very weak.

There have been reports that other flags, presumably regimental or company ones, were used. The Italian historian Botta referred to a flag with the words "An Appeal to Heaven" on one side and "Qui transtulit sustinet" on the other.²¹ Lossing attacks this as fictional,²² but no authority is given for either the positive or the negative.



THE NEW ENGLAND FLAG.

ILLUSTRATION
 FROM BENSON
 J. LOSSING,
*THE PICTORIAL
 FIELD-BOOK
 OF THE
 REVOLUTION*

It is possible that Connecticut troops used such a flag, but if so it was inconspicuous and certainly not recognized by the Massachusetts and New Hampshire troops as their own. Richard Frothingham²³ quotes from an unidentified letter of 23 April 1775 in respect to Connecticut troops:

We fix on our standards and drums the colony arms, with the motto, "qui transtulit sustinet" round it in letters of gold, which we construe thus: "God, who transplanted us hither, will support us."

But there is no record that Connecticut troops ever carried this flag into the battle of Bunker Hill with them.²⁴

Frothingham also records that at a patriotic demonstration in 1825 a flag was borne which was said to have been unfurled at Bunker Hill, a half century before. Tradition said that it was raised at the redoubt and that General Gage, the British commander, and his officers were puzzled to read its motto with their glasses. A Whig told them the inscription was "Come if you dare!"²⁵

The Geography and Maps Division of the Library of Congress has a 1776 map of the Boston area, *Carte du port et havre de Boston avec les côtes adjacentes*. . . , the cartouche of which shows a Tory trying to take away from another man--presumably an independence-minded colonist--a flag with a pine tree on it while the colonist resists with a long dagger. But the pine tree flag, while one might logically associate it with Massachusetts, is not identified as having flown at Bunker Hill and bears no resemblance to either the blue or red design.

There is extant a one-year diary by Caleb Haskell, who fought with a Massachusetts regiment. His entry of 18 July 1775 (one month and one day after the battle) relates that at 6 a.m. a manifest of the Continental Congress was read to troops assembled on or about Prospect Hill, near Boston, and a standard was presented bearing the motto "Appeal to Heaven with the American arms." Presentation was by the chaplain of General Putnam's forces, who offered a brief prayer, and then the troops were dismissed with three cheers and the firing of a cannon.²⁶ One may assume that if the standard was presented with such fanfare it could not have been used at Bunker Hill, since the troops would already have been familiar with it. Also, it

"THE FLAG OF BUNKER HILL."



The battle of Bunker Hill was fought under a red flag, bearing the motto "Come, if you dare!" At the battle of Saratoga, the Stars and Stripes were unfurled for the first time.

ILLUSTRATION
FROM A
PICTORIAL
ENVELOPE
PUBLISHED
c1860

is not too much to suppose that the reason for presenting the standard was that the lack of any kind of standard had been felt during the battle. Or could this new flag have replaced an earlier one?

No matter how one surveys the flag situation of June 1775 one invariably returns to the stark fact that no contemporary documentary evidence of a Bunker Hill flag has yet turned up. Although contemporary direct evidence of a flag used at the Battle of Bunker Hill is lacking, statements have been made from time to time--including one from a person who had taken part in the battle--that no flag was used. Probably the most authoritative statement comes from John Clarke, First Lieutenant of the Marines, who published later in the same year in London his *An Impartial and Authentic Narrative of the Battle Fought on the 17th of June 1775*. A British officer present at the battle, he noted that the American army was not yet uniformly clothed and added "nor did I see any colours to their regiments no [sic] the day of action"27

Subsequent writers seem to have shared this view. General Charles Devens, Jr., in a public address on the centennial anniversary of the battle, uttered these somewhat rhetorical words: "No flag waves above their heads; for they are this day without a country, and they fight that they may have one . . ."28 James M. Bugbee, writing in the same year (1875) declared:

It does not appear from any of the official accounts that colors were borne by either side; but some of the survivors in their old age have

imagined that they fought under a blue flag, quartered in one corner by the cross of St. George, the upper quartering next the staff bearing the representation of a pine-tree.²⁹

Also in 1875 appeared a statement by Samuel Adams Drake:

It is not believed that any flag was displayed by the provincial forces at Bunker Hill. No British account of the battle mentions any; and yet it would have been the first thing to which the attention of a [British] soldier would have been directed. If a British color had been seen flying within the American lines, the fact would not have been likely to escape remark; and if any other flag had been flying there, its peculiarity would have attracted the curious observation of the whole British army. It is safe, therefore, in the absence of direct proof to the contrary, to declare that no flag was unfurled by the Americans on that day . . ."³⁰

In an address before the New Hampshire Society of Sons of the American Revolution at Concord in 1902, one Henry M. Baker gave as his opinion, "There was no recognized flag, and it is not probable that any flag floated over either the redoubt or the rail fence³¹ during the battle."³² And in 1961 more modern vexillologists remarked that ". . .we have no real knowledge that any American flag was flown in it."³³

The Bunker Hill flag committee, on the basis of material available to it, and within the restrictions imposed upon it by time and lack of financial and human resources, concludes:

(1) The flag used by the Americans as an integrated fighting unit at the Battle of Bunker Hill was probably not a blue one. Evidence in its favor is not reliable.

(2) Nor is it at all likely that the flag was a red one, with or without a green pine tree, though red is a likelier color than blue given the widespread use of red in earlier British and New England flags.

(3) The lack of contemporary evidence of a positive nature, and the statement of a participant in the battle that no flag was used, leads us to the belief that no flag at all was used by the American forces as a whole. The continental forces were in a

state of such disorganization--being without complete troop rosters, food supply systems, or even commissions for the regiments--that the selection of flags would have ranked very low in their order of priorities. John Adams's comments support this view.

(4) It is possible that individual units employed regimental flags but no evidence of this has come to light, except for a very sketchy reference or two to Connecticut flags.

NOTES

1. The occasion for the creation of the committee was the dissolution of an older committee which had been formed to ascertain whether the Bunker Hill flag had a field of red or blue. A difference of opinion had risen between two members of the Association in 1973-1974 as to the correct color and each was able to point to statements supporting his position. The chairman of the new committee was appointed by the President of the Association and he in turn obtained the consent of three persons present at the convention to serve, but of the four persons constituting the committee only two actually functioned. This report is therefore the product of the efforts of one of the appointees and of the chairman.

2. S. Swett, *Historical and Topographical Sketch of Bunker Hill Battle, with a Plan* (Boston: 1818), p. 6.

3. Swett, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

4. On 19 June 1818, long after the event, former President John Adams wrote to George Brinley that the army at Bunker Hill was not a United States Army, for there were no united colonies. Congress at Philadelphia had not adopted or acknowledged the army at Cambridge. "It was not a New England Army; for New England was not associated. New England had no legal Legislature, nor any common Executive authority, even upon the principles of original authority or even of original power in the People." Each state, he observed, had its own army and commander; ". . . and who was its Commander-in-chief? It had none." Only Artemas Ward of Massachusetts "was subject to the Orders of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress." (Quoted in "Bunker Hill," *The Historical Magazine*, 2nd Series, Vol. III, No. 6, p. 321.)



THE PINE-TREE FLAG.

The top illustration is a 19th century rendering of the scene depicted in the upper right corner of the map shown below (Johann Carl Mueller's *Carte von dem Hafen und der Stadt Boston...*), based on a map in J.F.W. des Barres's *Atlantic Neptune* (London, 1774-1782).



5. Richard Frothingham, Jr., *The Command in the Battle of Bunker Hill* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1850), p. 47.

6. Swett, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

8. Henry Dearborn, "Account of the Battle of Bunker Hill," in "Bunker Hill," *The Historical Magazine* p. 406N.

9. George E. Ellis *History of the Battle of Bunker's [Breed's] (sic) Hill on June 17, 1775, from Authentic Sources in Print and Manuscript* (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1895), p. 10.

10. John H. Fow, *The True Story of the American Flag* (Philadelphia: William J. Campbell, 1908), p. 15.

11. John Trumbull, *Autobiography, Reminiscences and Letters from 1756 to 1841* (New York and London: Wiley and Putnam; New Haven: B.L. Hamlen, 1841), p. 17.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 19-21.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 93.

14. Charles Coffin, compiler, *History of the Battle of Breed's Hill* (Saco: William J. Condon, 1831), p. 27.

15. Milo M. Quaife, Melvin J. Weig, and Roy E. Appleman, *The History of the United States Flag* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), p. 25.

16. *Ibid.*, 171.

17. Whitney Smith, *The Flag Book of the United States* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1970), pp. 39-40.

18. Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Field-Book of the Revolution* (New York: Harper and Brother, 1860) Vol. I, p. 541.

19. A title the author has considerably abbreviated. Books of this period are noted for their interminably long titles. This particular book does not bear



the name of an author.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Fow, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

22. Lossing, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 542.

23. Richard Frothingham, *History of the Siege of Boston, and of the Battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1903), p. 103.

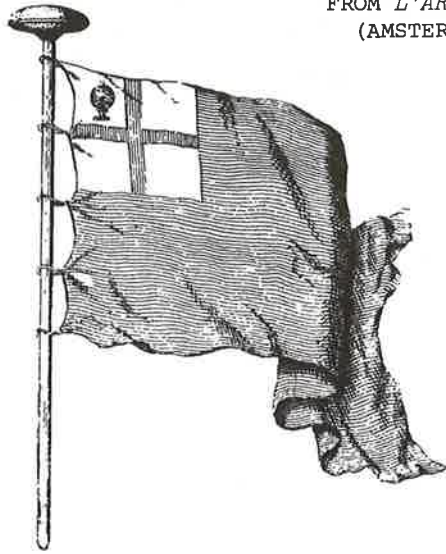
24. See *THE FLAG BULLETIN*, Vol. XVI, No. 1, p. 19, for a picture of a similar flag.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

26. Increase N. Tarbox, *Life of Israel Putnam* ("Old Put"), *Major General in the Continental Army* (Port Washington, New York, and London: Kennikat Press, 1910), p. 228.

27. p. 31.

FLAG OF NEW ENGLAND
FROM *L'ART DE BATIR*
(AMSTERDAM, 1719)



28. *Celebration of the Centennial Anniversary of the Battle of Bunker Hill* (Boston: printed by order of the City Council, 1875), p. 94.

29. James M. Bugbee, *Memorial--Bunker Hill* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1875), p. 11.

30. Samuel Adams Drake, *Bunker Hill: The Story Told in Letters from the Battlefield by British Officers Engaged* (Boston: Nichols and Hall, 1875).

31. A landmark behind Breed's Hill, shown on old maps and mentioned in written accounts of the battle, where the heaviest fighting took place.

32. Henry M. Baker, *New Hampshire in the Battle of Bunker Hill* (Concord, New Hampshire: Rumford Press, 1903), reprinted as a facsimile with Frederic Kidder, *History of the First New Hampshire Regiment in the War of the Revolution* (Hampton, New Hampshire: Peter E. Randall, 1973); p. 5, Baker.

33. Quaife, Weig, and Appleman, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

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