

Siege of Boston

Following the battles of Lexington & Concord the British Army retreated to Boston. Militia units, assembled from men throughout Massachusetts, besieged the town. Fortifications in Somerville, then known as "Charlestown beyond the neck," were constructed around the central and strongest position of the American fortifications, Prospect Hill. Posting of the guards and the fortification of Union Square convinced the British a siege was on. General William Burgoyne described Somerville's part this way: "...Invested by a rabble in arms, who, flushed with success and insolence had advanced their sentries to pistol shots of our outguards, the ships in the harbor exposed to, and expecting a cannonade or bombardment." On June 17, 1775 the greatest battle during the siege was fought at Bunker Hill. After the battle, American troops retreated back and increased the strength of its fortifications on Winter and Prospect Hills. These fortifications defined the line from the Mystic River to Cambridge, including all Somerville land within. Two of General Washington's best commanders oversaw these key positions -- Winter Hill under the command of General Sullivan and Prospect Hill under General Greene. The strongest defenses in Somerville were: a redoubt on Ten Hills farm; the Winter Hill fort; the "French Redoubt" on Central Hill; the "Citadel" on Prospect Hill; and Union Square's Fort No. Three.

On June 14, 1775, the Second Continental Congress authorized the forming of a Continental Army of militia units, and subsequently appointed General George Washington as its Commander. As Commander, he organized militia from men throughout New England and all of the Colonies and directed a 76 foot mast as flag pole to be erected on top of Prospect Hill, the highest point of the fortifications. Throughout the siege, the fortifications in Somerville played a pivotal role in supporting military operations against the British. In November 1775 Cobble Hill was fortified in spite of a famine in all of the towns in the region. In December 1775 the soldiers of the Cobble Hill fort were successful in driving away menacing British ships of the in the harbor. Later that month, Winter Hill troops made a daring attempt to capture English pickets in adjacent Charlestown. Unfortunately, an accidental musket discharge during the crossing alarmed the British and the mission was abandoned.

First Flag Raised on Prospect Hill in Defiance of Great Britain

By December 1775, "The Siege of Boston" had gone on for eight long months without any clear outcome. Winter arrived. Reconciliation with the King had been unsuccessful. The soldiers had not been paid and they wanted to go home. Morale was low. The future was in doubt. How was it possible for a new Continental Army to be established in January 1776 and survive in front of the British lines, as most enlistment ended on December 31, 1775?

No flag existed at that time to represent **all** the Colonies as a young American nation. To symbolize colonial unity, in conjunction with the reorganization of the militia Army into a Continental Army, General Washington requested and Congress authorized the creation of a new national flag. The first national flag, the "Great Union" Flag, was authorized by Congress and sent to General Washington in December 1775.

In one short month, everything changed. General George Washington directed the new flag be flown at the most visible point on the fortifications -- Prospect Hill, at the beginning of the new year. Washington's correspondence states "we had hoisted the Union Flag in compliment to the United Colonies... on the day which gave being to the New Army." This flag was clearly visible to all, especially the British garrison in Boston, and its display reminded the British we are very much here to stay. The Colonists had been transformed from being angry British citizens to independent Americans!

By Monday January 1, 1776 the "Great Union" Flag, also known as "Continental Colors," waved proudly atop Prospect Hill. Many soldiers had re-enlisted and decided to stay the course. In spite of all obstacles, the Continental Army was successfully created. The arrival of Knox's artillery in January 1776 enabled the Continental Army to drive the British out of Boston-- the first major American military victory of the Revolution!

The "Great Union," now called the "Grand Union" flag, displayed thirteen stripes of alternating red and white symbolizing the thirteen colonies. The Union Flag of Great Britain was placed at the upper left, as our independence had yet to be declared. A tablet was erected in 1896 at the corner of Munroe Street and Prospect Hill Drive which commemorates this flag-raising event.

With us today, 235 years later, are members of two militia organizations, The Gardner's Regiment and the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company of Massachusetts. Both of these companies served in the Continental Army during the Siege of Boston and witnessed the first flag raising on January 1, 1776.

Prospect Hill-- and its Early History

From "A History of the Hill" by William Preble Jones

Few spots throughout the length and breadth of this country have as many incidents in their history as Prospect Hill.

In its connection with the American Revolution chiefly lies the fame of Prospect Hill. Close to its foot the British marched on their way to Concord and Lexington on the night of April 18, 1775, and again they skirted its base late in the afternoon of the following day, when they received the hottest fire during their disastrous retreat. A month later Col. Paterson's regiment occupied an unfortified breastwork at the foot of the Hill. On the evening of June 16, 1775, Col. Prescott marched from Cambridge, with one thousand men, along the foot of the hill to fortify Bunker Hill, and during the memorable struggle of the seventeenth the hill was occupied by the American reserves. Retreating from Bunker Hill, the Americans took a defiant stand on Prospect Hill, and immediately began to fortify it, under the orders of Gen. Israel Putnam, who superintended the work in person. From then till the British were driven out of Boston, March 17, 1776, it was the strongest and most important fortification in the American lines and a constant menace to the enemy. Nearly four thousand American troops, under the immediate command of General Nathaniel Greene, were encamped here during the Siege of Boston. At a later period two thousand three hundred British Troops from General Burgoyne's surrendered army were quartered in the barracks on the hill for about a year.