

Historical Study Guide



Light A Candle Films presents
“THE BATTLE OF BUNKER HILL”
Historical Study Guide

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To be used with the DVD production of **THE BATTLE OF BUNKER HILL**



The Battle of Bunker Hill

Historical Study Guide

First, screen the 60-minute DocuDrama of THE BATTLE OF BUNKER HILL, and the 30 minute Historical Perspective. Then, have your Discussion Leader read through the following historical points and share your ideas about the people, the timeframe and the British and Colonial strategies!

“Stand firm in your Faith, men of New England”

“The fate of unborn millions will now depend, under God, on the courage and conduct of this army. Our cruel and unrelenting enemy leaves us only the choice of brave resistance, or the most abject submission. We have, therefore, to resolve to conquer or die.” - George Washington, August 27, 1776

When General Thomas Gage, the British military governor of Boston, sent one thousand troops to arrest Samuel Adams and John Hancock at Lexington in April of 1775, he could not know the serious implications of his actions. Nor could he know how he had helped to set in motion a major rebellion that would shake the very foundations of the mightiest Empire on earth.

General Gage was a military man who had been in North America since the 1750s, and had more experience than any other senior British officer. He had fought in the French and Indian War alongside a young George Washington, with whom he still had a friendly relationship. Gage had married an American woman from a prominent New Jersey family, and 10 of their 11 children had been born in the Colonies. When he arrived in Boston on May 17, 1774, Gage was greeted with celebration, and a banquet in his honor was attended by John Adams, John Hancock and Samuel Adams. But now, as he tried to do the King's will while also keeping the lid on growing American displeasure, his options were few. His own soldiers, angered by Gage's willingness to constantly compromise with the more radical elements in Boston, had taken to derisively calling him “Tommy” Gage.

After the British battled the Minutemen at Lexington and Concord, they were forced to fight their way back to Boston, while being constantly fired upon by groups of Colonials as well as individual snipers. Once back in Boston, the British troops hunkered down, while American General Artemas Ward's New England volunteers surrounded the city, cutting off the roads and effectively laying siege to Boston. General Gage would be reinforced by ship in May with fresh troops, and three new Generals: William Howe, Henry Clinton, and John Burgoyne. General Gage planned to use his army to break the Siege of Boston by taking the high ground of Charlestown Heights, as well as the strip of land called the "Charlestown Neck".

But, Colonial spies would learn of Gage's plan and alert General Ward. With this warning, Ward would order Colonel William Prescott and some 1,200 of his men to take and fortify the critical high ground before the British had a chance to move there. Since early 1775, militias outside of Boston and in the whole New England area had become more serious in their training; drilling several times a week in preparation for conflict. In many ways, they were becoming as well-trained as the British. The "Minutemen", so named because they were to be ready at a minute's notice, were the "first responders"; and they certainly needed to be ready on this day. Colonel Prescott and his men would set out around 9:00 pm on the night of June 16, 1775, marching as silently as possible, bringing shovels and pick axes which they would need to construct fortifications on the high ground. It should also be noted that between 20 - 25% of the brave men who helped to build these defenses, and who would stand tall against the British Army the next day, were of African descent. Both slaves and freemen like Peter Salem, Salem Poor, and Barzillai Lew had joined the fight for freedom, and would distinguish themselves in battle.



The Charlestown peninsula was about a mile long, and on the point of this peninsula lay the small village of Charlestown. Behind the village were two main hills. One of them, Bunker Hill, rose to a height of about 110 feet. But, several hundred yards closer to Boston, at a height of only about 75 feet, was Breed's Hill.

When the militia arrived, they followed their initial orders from General Ward and started building fortifications on Bunker Hill. But then, there was a lengthy disagreement between Colonel Prescott, Major General Israel Putnam and Colonel Richard Gridley that Breed's Hill, though smaller, would allow the American artillery closer range to sleeping Boston, and have a better opportunity to shell the British positions. After much precious time was spent in digging on Bunker's Hill (and in arguing over the orders), it was finally decided to move closer, and set up the defensive position on Breed's Hill. This explains the confusion that, even though almost all of the fighting would take place on Breed's Hill, the action would always be mistakenly referred to as "The Battle of Bunker Hill".

After moving to Breed's Hill, the Americans would start digging around midnight, creating a redoubt (a rectangular-shaped fort) about 130 feet square with a V-shaped "redan" or protrusion at the front. Wooden platforms would also be added for the men to stand on, as well as providing support to hold the American cannons. The men took turns, with half of them working, while the other half rested or stood guard. They needed to dig quickly, but also as quietly as possible, so that the sound would not travel over the water and alert British sentries in Boston. Some men of the militia were sent down to Charlestown and the shoreline to keep watch, to make sure that no movement was detectable on the British side. Nothing could happen until the rays of dawn would illuminate their handiwork.

"The rebels upon the heights were perceived to be in great force, and strongly posted. A redoubt, thrown up on the 16th at night, with other works, full of men, defended with cannon, and a large body posted in the houses in Charles-Town, covered their right flank; and their center and left were covered by a breast-work, part of it cannon-proof, which reached from the left of the redoubt to the Mystich or Medford river." - General Thomas Gage from a letter describing the Battle of Bunker Hill

Once the sun came up, the British were shocked to see the Colonials already dug in and adding to the redoubt on top of Breed's Hill. Almost immediately, the guns aboard the British warship *H. M. S. Lively* began to fire in an attempt to slow the progress of the digging, as well as pinning down Colonel Prescott and his brave men. British batteries would also open fire from Copp's Hill on the Boston side of the Charles River. Undaunted, Colonel Prescott would actually be seen by the British walking the top of the redoubt, courageously encouraging his men, while all around deadly cannon balls bounced.

As the Americans built the redoubt on top of Breed's Hill, they saw that their left "flank", or side, was still uncovered with a stretch of about 600 yards from the top of the hill to the beach by the Mystic River. As the redoubt/fort was nearing completion, the Americans began to dig a "breastwork", to run down past the bottom of the hill, to add extra protection for their flank. A breastwork is an earthen wall about breast-high to provide protection for soldiers firing over it. Also, Colonel Prescott posted Captain Thomas Knowlton and his Connecticut troops along a rail fence in the same area about 600 feet back behind the redoubt. Later, as the British began to land, Colonel John Stark came up with his New Hampshire frontiersmen, and they would reinforce the 200 yard long fence line with rocks and dirt for better protection against musket fire. This defensive line would be the key in halting the first British attacks.



General Gage ordered 2,300 troops under the personal command of General Howe to attack the American position on Breed's Hill. However, they still had to cross from the Boston side of the Charles River, over to the Charlestown Peninsula where the Colonial fortifications were. And since there were no proper fortified military landing craft available to General Howe, he had to use unprotected navy rowboats to ferry his men across the Charles River. As such, Howe could not move until after 2:00 pm when the tide was favorable, and he chose to land at Morton's (Molton's) Point as far away from the enemy muskets as possible. Still, Colonial sharpshooters in Charlestown began to fire at the British troops, making their crossing more dangerous. The answer from the British, was to use hot cannon shot to set the town ablaze, and drive back the snipers. To the men on Breed's Hill, as well as the citizens watching from the rooftops of Boston, this was an unbelievable act of barbarism. In fact, many residents of Boston, fearful of what might happen to their city in an upcoming battle, had already moved many of their possessions, including clothes and furniture, into areas of Charlestown which they thought would be safer. Now, as Charlestown burned, and the British dodged musket balls, tensions on both sides increased to a fever pitch.

“This appearance of the rebels strength, and the large columns seen pouring in to their assistance, occasioned an application for the troops to be reinforced with some companies of light infantry and grenadiers... the whole, when in conjunction, making a body of something above 2000 men.” - General Thomas Gage from a letter describing the Battle of Bunker Hill

It is thought that General Howe firmly believed that the “untrained” citizen's militia would not be able to hold the line when they saw the British troops advancing up the hill. Just the sight of the King's professional army, their bayonets glistening in the sun, would cause the Americans to bolt in a panic. But the Colonials were steeled in their resolve, and they stayed low behind their barricades, as they watched the British move into position, ready for the attack.



On the order, the British Regulars began to move up the slope of Breed's Hill, advancing from the Mystic River side of the peninsula. Marching in the intense heat was difficult enough, but the British also wore their famous bright red, wool jackets, and carried their equipment. They also wore standard, heavy backpacks, which on this day, contained not only their personal items, but also a three-day supply of food. The extra food was needed for a possible march on the Colonial headquarters in Cambridge, after the anticipated rout at Breed's Hill. In addition, the tall grass hid the uneven terrain, which made the going tough and treacherous. There were many unseen holes and gullies, as well as old fences and walls, broken kilns and large rocks.

Meanwhile, the Colonials waited patiently behind the earthen walls of the redoubt, the breastworks, and behind the reinforced rail fence. Aware of their inadequate supply of ammunition, the men were cautioned to make every shot count by allowing the British to come in as closely as possible before starting to shoot. The order, "Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes", which is said to have been given by Colonel Prescott, was one way of making sure that the Royal Troops were close enough to be accurate targets. Colonial marksmen were told to "aim low" and to "aim for the cross belts" as ways of trying to hit their targets in the biggest possible area of body mass. And, they were told to hit the officers as much as possible, knowing that doing so would leave the British ranks leaderless. Peter Salem, one of the Black Freemen fighting that day, would become famous for personally shooting British Major John Pitcairn.

Part way up Breed's Hill, the British stopped and fired a full volley at the American defenses. We can guess that this was the moment that General Howe was certain would cause the undisciplined militia to bolt and run back across the Charlestown Neck. But, in a display of bravery and fierce determination, the Americans held their ground, and when the British were within 50 yards of the redoubt, the order was given: "Fire!". Within seconds, a large swath of the attacking force was cut down by Colonial musket balls. The firepower unleashed by that first volley stunned the British, and halted their advance. Meanwhile, the Redcoats attacking the American's flank at the rail fence, met a similar fate.

Colonel John Stark had put a marker out about fifty yards in front of the rail fence as an indicator for when the militia could start firing. And when the British light infantry hit the mark, the Americans began shooting into their packed-together forces and annihilated the first three British light infantry companies. With this flanking maneuver stopped, the rest of General Howe's attack collapsed. His troops would halt their advance, and in some cases began to reload instead of going in with the bayonet. This only made them a better target, and the Americans continued to fire into them, until the broken British line began to fall

back in disarray, ending the first assault. And, as the British forces withdrew from the field, leaving many of their fallen comrades behind, the militiamen angrily continued to fire into their retreating ranks.



As the heat of the day burned hotter, the American forces began to run low on water, as well as ammunition. For the second attack, General Howe shifted his light infantry against the rail fence, and sent the rest of the army against the barricades between the breastworks and the redoubt under the leadership of General Robert Pigot. Again, the British would ascend the slope of Breed's Hill. Again, Howe's troops would stop to fire a volley, and again, they would be halted by withering Colonial firepower before they got to their objective. Battered and beaten, the British would once more withdraw. Boston citizens, watching from their rooftops, would report a continuous fire coming from the American lines blasting back the British advance. Some of General Howe's best troops were lying dead or dying, and some companies had lost all of their officers and were being commanded, ineffectually, by privates. The time had come for the British to change their battle tactics, if they still had any hope of winning the day and driving the Americans from the high ground.

"These orders were executed with perseverance, under a heavy fire from the vast numbers of the rebels; and, notwithstanding various impediments before the troops could reach the works, and though the left under Brigadier- General Pigot was engaged also with the rebels at Charles-Town, which at a critical moment was set on fire, the Brigadier pursued his point, and carried the redoubt... The rebels were then forced from other strong holds, and pursued till they were drove clear off the peninsula." - General Thomas Gage from a letter describing the Battle of Bunker Hill

After the first two unsuccessful attacks, the British soldiers were ordered to dump their heavy backpacks and conduct a full bayonet charge against the Americans in the redoubt. General Howe realized that he needed to force the Americans off Breed's Hill before they could spend another night fortifying their positions. Against the wishes of many of his soldiers, Howe would order a third attack. This time, Howe's artillery had come up, and he would take what was left of his light infantry and send them in open order against the men at the rail fence to keep them occupied, while his cannons began to fire against the breastworks. General Pigot's forces would come up behind the redoubt, while Howe attacked the front in a "pincer movement", catching the American position between them.

While the Colonial forces ran out of ammunition, they began to abandon the breastworks and evacuate the redoubt, retreating back toward the Charlestown Neck. The British were coming over the earthen walls now, and fierce hand to hand combat ensued. The smoke from musket fire, and dust kicked up from the dirt floor of the redoubt, combined to create a choking fog. British bayonets were finding their marks and the Americans were falling back – all the while being chased and fired upon by the British soldiers. Most of the Colonial casualties were inflicted at this time, when the English fired into the backs of the retreating Americans. And it was here that some wounded Americans were captured; it was here that some wounded Americans were bayoneted to death.

“But if these pacific measures are ineffectual, and it appears that the only way to safety, is through fields of blood, I know you will not turn your faces from your foes, but will, undauntedly, press forward until tyranny is trodden under foot, and you have fixed your adored goddess Liberty, until fast by a Brunswick's side, on the American throne.” - Dr. Joseph Warren, March 6, 1775



As the Colonial militiamen were escaping through the rear of the redoubt, there was a small group of men covering their retreat. This group was led by a prominent physician named Dr. Joseph Warren. A man with a burning devotion to the winning of freedom for the Colonies, Warren was already well-known in the more patriotic circles of the day. It was Warren who had dispatched Paul Revere and William Dawes to Lexington to warn Samuel Adams and John Hancock that “the British were coming” to arrest them. He had even been offered a commission as a major-general by the Provincial Congress. But Dr. Warren turned down the honor, saying that he only wanted to serve as a volunteer. He had fought during the day at Breed's Hill, but now found himself with a few other defenders surrounded by the advancing British. Moving out of the redoubt, fighting only with club and fist, Warren and his fellow Patriots bought many precious minutes covering the retreat of the other militiamen. Finally, he was felled by a British bullet that hit him behind the ear as he turned to rally the men with him. At only 34 years of age, Dr. Joseph Warren became known as the “Hero of Bunker Hill” and he represented the youthful sacrifice which would be needed to form the new nation.

“This action has shown the superiority of the King's troops, who, under every disadvantage, attacked and defeated above three times their own number, strongly posted and covered with breast-works.” - General Thomas Gage from a letter describing the Battle of Bunker Hill

The Americans had been driven from Breed's Hill and Bunker Hill, but it was a costly "victory" for the British. General William Howe, standing at the end of the day surrounded by scores of wounded Royal Soldiers, would sadly realize, "There was a moment I have never felt before..." Of the almost 2,300 British troops who participated in the battle, 1,054 were killed or wounded (including 92 out of 250 officers). For the Americans, about 140 dead and 271 wounded, with 30 wounded men captured.

The Battle of Bunker Hill proved to the Americans that they could compete on the field of battle with the British. And it taught the British a new respect for the fighting spirit and ability of the Americans. General Howe, who would replace General Gage as the British Commander in America during the Revolutionary War, would never again attack a fortified Colonial position. The Americans also learned that if they stayed united, as the Minutemen who came from the surrounding colonies to help Boston had united, they would be able to endure the long, hard fight for independence. They were coming together as a people, and soon would be fighting together as a nation.

On March 2-3, 1776, General George Washington would acquire enough cannons and mortars to threaten Boston, and he was able to seize the Dorchester Heights and compel General Howe to evacuate the British army (along with over 1,000 Loyalists) to New York. Then Boston, and the hills surrounding the city, would fall into American hands.

"Contemplate the mangled bodies of your countrymen, and then say 'what should be the reward of such sacrifices?' Bid us and our posterity bow the knee, supplicate the friendship and plough, and sow, and reap, to glut the avarice of the men who have let loose on us the dogs of war to riot in our blood and hunt us from the face of the earth? If ye love wealth better than liberty, the tranquility of servitude than the animated contest of freedom — go home from us in peace. We ask not your counsels or arms. Crouch down and lick the hands which feed you. May your chains sit lightly upon you, and may posterity forget that you were our countrymen!" - Samuel Adams, August 1, 1776



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Review Questions

1.) *Who was the Commander in Chief of all the British forces in North America at the time of the Battle of Bunker Hill?*

- a.) *Gen. George Washington*
- b.) *Gen. William Howe*
- c.) *Gen. Artemas Ward*
- d.) *Gen. Thomas Gage*

2.) *Who gave the order for Col. William Prescott to take his men to Bunker Hill and build defenses?*

- a.) *Gen. Artemas Ward*
- b.) *Gen. Israel Putnam*
- c.) *Col. Richard Gridley*
- d.) *Capt. Thomas Knowlton*

3.) *TRUE OR FALSE: Breed's Hill was higher than Bunker Hill, and that's why the Colonials built defenses there.*

4.) *How many times did the British need to attack before they drove the Americans off Breed's Hill and Bunker Hill?*

- a.) *one*
- b.) *two*
- c.) *three*
- d.) *none - the Americans surrendered*

5.) *The key defensive position manned by Col. John Stark and his New Hampshire frontiersmen was:*

- a.) *the beach*
- b.) *the rail fence*
- c.) *the wooden palisade*
- d.) *the redoubt*

6.) *Which of these famous American officers was not at the Battle of Bunker Hill?*

- a.) *Gen. Israel Putnam*
- b.) *Col. John Stark*
- c.) *Capt. Thomas Knowlton*
- d.) *Gen. George Washington*

7.) *A "redoubt" is best defined as:*

- a.) *an earthen wall about breast high*
- b.) *a rectangular-shaped fort*
- c.) *a fence line*
- d.) *a series of stone walls*

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8.) **TRUE OR FALSE:** *The Battle of Bunker Hill was fought on Bunker Hill during a cold, windy morning.*

9.) *An army's "flank" is best defined as:*

- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| a.) <i>the left or right side</i> | c.) <i>the way the army marches</i> |
| b.) <i>the rear guard</i> | d.) <i>the front area</i> |

10.) **TRUE OR FALSE:** *The people of Boston went up on their rooftops to watch the British attack Breed's Hill.*

11.) *When American snipers began shooting at the British from Charlestown, what was the British response?*

- | | |
|---|---|
| a.) <i>they attacked New York</i> | c.) <i>they retreated to New York</i> |
| b.) <i>they set Charlestown on fire</i> | d.) <i>they landed troops in Boston</i> |

12.) **TRUE OR FALSE:** *Americans came from many of the surrounding colonies to help during the Siege of Boston and the Battle of Bunker Hill.*

13.) *What was the percentage of Black Freemen and slaves who fought at the Battle of Bunker Hill?*

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|
| a.) <i>10 - 15%</i> | c.) <i>20 - 25%</i> |
| b.) <i>15 - 20%</i> | d.) <i>under 10%</i> |

14.) *The prominent American Patriot who covered the retreat of the Colonials from the redoubt and died by a British bullet was:*

- | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------------|
| a.) <i>Paul Revere</i> | c.) <i>Dr. Joseph Warren</i> |
| b.) <i>Thomas Paine</i> | d.) <i>John Hancock</i> |

15.) *When the British Army marched up Breed's Hill, the on-field Commander, Gen. William Howe, expected the Americans to:*

- | | |
|---|-------------------------------|
| a.) <i>run away</i> | c.) <i>fight to the death</i> |
| b.) <i>stand their ground, then run</i> | d.) <i>join the British</i> |

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16.) *The famous saying most associated with The Battle of Bunker Hill is:*

- a.) *"I have not yet begun to fight!"***
- b.) *"Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes!"***
- c.) *"The British are coming! The British are coming!"***
- d.) *"One if by land, two if by sea!"***

17.) *The Black Freeman who would become famous for personally shooting British Major John Pitcairn was:*

- a.) *Peter Salem***
- b.) *Salem Poor***
- c.) *Crispus Attucks***
- d.) *Barzillai Lew***

18.) *For the final charge, the British soldiers were ordered to:*

- a.) *drop their backpacks and attack with their bayonets***
- b.) *drop their backpacks and fall back***
- c.) *ready their bayonets and eat lunch***
- d.) *fire a volley, then advance***

19.) *Weapons which were used at the Battle of Bunker Hill were:*

- a.) *muskets***
- b.) *bayonets***
- c.) *cannons***
- d.) *all of the above***

20.) *Colonial marksmen on Breed's Hill were told to shoot at:*

- a.) *the tallest men first***
- b.) *the British officers first***
- c.) *the last men in line***
- d.) *the closest men in line***

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Additional Activities

- 1.) Examine the reasons why the Colonists and the British placed such great importance on Breed's Hill and Bunker Hill.**
- 2.) Study the role of Colonial clergy during the American Revolution.**
- 3.) Using reference books and the internet, compile a list of primary source accounts of the battle.**
- 4.) Compose a recruitment letter for the Continental Army.**
- 5.) Assess the impact of the burning of Charlestown on Colonial opinion.**
- 6.) Accept or reject the British strategy at Bunker Hill. Back up your opinion.**
- 7.) Write an account of the Battle of Bunker Hill as it might have appeared in a British newspaper and a Colonial newspaper.**
- 8.) Compose a letter that one of the principal characters or an ordinary soldier could have written to a family member or a close friend on the eve of the battle.**
- 9.) Explain how Christian soldiers and clergy must have felt going into battle. Did this necessarily go against the teachings of their Faith?**
- 10.) Develop a plan for the British to use their warships to capture Breed's Hill.**

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Answer Key

1.) *d*

2.) *a*

3.) *False*

4.) *c*

5.) *b*

6.) *d*

7.) *b*

8.) *False*

9.) *a*

10.) *True*

11.) *b*

12.) *True*

13.) *c*

14.) *c*

15.) *a*

16.) *b*

17.) *a*

18.) *a*

19.) *d*

20.) *b*