

**The Historical Significance of the Longfellow House as Washington=s Headquarters,  
During the Siege of Boston, 1775-1776.**

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At the beginning Revolutionary War, George Washington, the newly-appointed Commander-in-Chief of the army of the "United Colonies" came to Cambridge where he assumed command of the Siege of Boston which lasted from April 1775 to March 1776. His residence and headquarters for all but two weeks of this period were in what we now call the Longfellow House, then known as the Vassall House after its previous owner.

Washington was serving as a delegate from Virginia to the Second General Congress when that body voted to appoint him the commander of the army of New England militias besieging Boston. He hastened to Cambridge arriving in the rain on the afternoon of Sunday, July 2, 1775. That evening he was received by the officer corps, all of them New Englanders and all strangers to him including Massachusetts General Artimus Ward whom he was to replace as Commander-in-Chief. The next day, July 3, he officially assumed command of the army. While the legend of his taking formally taking command under the "Washington elm" is a myth<sup>1</sup>, we know from several contemporary diaries that the troops scattered across the front lines from Charleston to Roxbury prepared to receive him. The small unpublished soldier=s diary found in the Longfellow House archives bears its modest witness to this event. The writer, most likely John Sleeper from Newburyport, was no speller nor one to expound on the day=s events, but his accounts for July 2 and 3, 1775, have a concreteness and immediacy that help us to imagine the situation:

*Sunday July 2 the Gageites [British troops] fired upon our people At Roxbury and have a number of carcasses and burns but did no damage Only burnt one house In the Afternoon Rain till Knight General Washington Came into the Camps*

*Monday July 3 turned out Early In the Morning Got in Redinefs to Receive the General New Orders Given out by General Washington<sup>2</sup>*

His entries for the next two days capture the army=s response to rumors of a sudden attack by the well-trained British army in Boston:

*Tuesday 4 ...Afternoon heard that the Regulars were Coming out at night Sent of a party to Entrench on Leachmores point Which they did and Returned Before morning*

*Wednesday July 5 Still all day Alarmed at night and Layd on our arms all night*

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Francis Batchelder, "The Washington Elm Tradition," *Cambridge Historical Society Proceedings for 1925*, Vol. 18.

<sup>2</sup> *Diary of a Soldier of the Revolution, June 6, 1775 to September 7, 1776*, transcribed by Frances Dickinson Ackerly at the Archives of the Longfellow National Historic Site, p. 3.

The Massachusetts Provincial Congress, which was meeting in nearby Watertown, arranged for the new commander and his second in command, Major General Charles Lee, to live in the Harvard University President's house (still standing, known today that as Wadsworth House). Eighteenth Century generals used their residences as their headquarters. This meant Washington needed a conveniently located house large enough to accommodate staff meetings and councils of war, provide work space for his small group of aides, and have room for his large number of daily visitors. Wadsworth House could not accommodate these uses. The Vassall House could.

It is true that the Vassall (Longfellow) House is only one of many houses<sup>3</sup> that served as Washington's headquarters for at least a couple of days during the eight year war of independence. But of all the extant headquarters, the Longfellow House must be counted the most significant because of the length of his residence and the paramount significance of his activities there. Washington lived in the House longer than anywhere else during the active phase of the war<sup>4</sup>. His time in the Longfellow House came at the beginning of the conflict, a formative period filled with uncertainty and danger. There he struggled to create a Continental army in the face of many obstacles, including inter-colony jealousies and the constant threat of an attack by the strong British army in Boston. His frustrations with this task were such that at one point he confessed to a friend in a private letter, "Could I have forseen what I have experienced, and am like to experience, no consideration upon earth should have induced me to accept this command." (Washington to Reed, Nov. 28, 1775) By way of excusing his failure to pay politic calls on the Massachusetts Congress then meeting nearby in Watertown, some months later he told this same correspondent that his labors were so time consuming that "I never go out of my own lines" (Washington to Reed, Jan. 14, 1776).

The house that became his headquarters had been built in 1759 for Major John Vassall who was forced to flee with his family from Cambridge to Boston in September 1774 because of his Tory sympathies. After the battle of Lexington and Concord it was commandeered for hospital use until June 22, 1775, when it was assigned to Captain John Glover's newly arrived (and later fabled) regiment of Marblehead Mariners. According to Dorothy Troth Muir<sup>5</sup>, the Marbleheaders "pitched their sailcloth tents on the lawns".<sup>6</sup> The only scrap of information we have about Washington's actual move to the Vassall House comes from his account book: "Cash paid for clearing the House which was provided for my Quarters & had been occupied by the Marbleh.= Regimt." -- the amount was two pounds ten shillings and ninepence.<sup>7</sup> Muir says the cleaning took eight days.

In the eighteenth century a general's staff was referred to as his "family", no doubt because they lived and dined with him daily. Washington's "family" in Cambridge was remarkably small and consequently overworked. It consisted of no more than several young aides and General Horatio Gates, who served as adjutant general. When Martha Washington arrived on 11 December 1775 with a small

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<sup>3</sup> "Mabel Lorenz Ives, *Washington's Headquarters* (1932) includes descriptions of the 24 headquarters buildings still standing. See also Muir (1977). Both volumes contain chapters on the Longfellow House.

<sup>4</sup> Although he spent two years in the Hasbrouck House (Newburgh, NY), they were after the decisive victory at Yorktown that essentially ended the conflict.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Troth Muir, *General Washington's Headquarters 1775-1783* (1977), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> When the decision was made to give Washington the use of the house the Marbleheaders are said to have moved to an appropriately named tavern, "The Ship," located about a mile out of town.

<sup>7</sup> George Washington and John Clement Fitzpatrick, *George Washington's Accounts of Expenses while Commander-in-Chief of the Continental Army, 1775-1783* (1917), p. 7.

party that included the commander's step-son Jackie Custis, and Mrs. Gates, the family increased in size. The household was served by, among others, a steward, Ebenezer Austin, whose monthly pay of 7 pounds 10 shillings included the services of himself, his wife and daughter; a French cook, Adam Foutz; Mrs. Morrison, kitchen-woman; Mary Kettel, washerwoman; Dinah, Aa negro woman@; Peter, Aa negro man@; and William Lee, Washington's body-servant and slave from Mt. Vernon who served him throughout the war.<sup>8</sup>

Thanks to Jared Sparks, the historian and Washington specialist who was Longfellow's colleague on the Harvard faculty (and a tenant of the Longfellow House before the poet acquired it), we know something about how Washington used the house. Sparks solicited the information from the aging Jonathan Trumbull, the last of Washington's living aides from the siege. According to Trumbull's letter, the Commander used the ground floor room to the right of the entrance as his dining room and there entertained numerous official and unofficial visitors.<sup>9</sup> From other sources we know that he used the same room as his office, just as Longfellow did later on.<sup>10</sup>

During Washington's councils of war his major generals and their aides presumably crowded into this room to debate strategy. In this same room Washington gave Benedict Arnold command of a small army to attack Quebec from the rear, over the Maine mountains. And in late September 1775, it was in this room that Washington confronted Dr. Benjamin Church, one of the most trusted Massachusetts patriot leaders, with evidence that he was a spy for the British.

In the southwest corner of the house to the left of the entrance was Washington's Reception room@, which Martha Washington used as her parlor after her arrival at the end of 1775. Quite possibly, this room was the scene of the gala party the Washingtons gave that winter to celebrate their wedding anniversary. In the northeast corner of the house, behind Washington's study, was Athe General's writing room", according to Trumbull. There his aides were kept busy drafting orders, maintaining Washington's extensive correspondence, and keeping his accounts. As to Washington's bedroom, Trumbull's wrote in his spidery hand: AI never knew. I occupied a Chamber at the back of the house". From other sources, however, we know that Washington slept in the southeast room above his office.

During the Siege of Boston Washington struggled mightily with numerous problems. Foremost among them was how to defend an extensive coastline against an attack by the well-trained British troops located only a few miles away in Boston and supported by a squadron of British ships of the line. In July 1776 Washington's army consisted of about 30 regiments of varying sizes, a total of about 17,000 officers and men of whom about 3,000 were on the sick list. We are told that:

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<sup>8</sup> Washington and Fitzpatrick (1917), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> The original of Trumbull's letter of June 12, 1843 is in the Longfellow House archives. Sparks= made his request, he said, because Acertain inquisitive ladies of this town...are amazingly curious to know what particular rooms were occupied by Gen. Washington." Whether there were in fact inquisitive ladies or only an inquisitive historian is lost to history.

<sup>10</sup> At one point in his occupancy Longfellow, desperate for more bookshelf space, blocked off one of the room's four windows. For the first time in more than one hundred years we can see this window, familiar to Washington and containing panes of glass from his period, because it has been temporarily unblocked as part of the current renovation project.

*Muskets were common in some regiments and altogether missing in others, though pole weapons and tomahawks were everywhere. Most of the regiments had been recruited for short-term duty, and few soldiers expected to be serving beyond the end of the year.*<sup>11</sup>

The Commander was kept awake at night worrying about the army's lack of discipline and training, the officer corps' suspicions of him as an outsider and Southerner, an unexpected and extremely serious shortage of powder, insufficient troops to man his extended lines, and the ever-pressing need to find salary, supplies and arms for the troops under his command. With the enlistments of many of his men ending and fewer than hoped for willing to reenlist, December 1775 found Washington wondering how he could maintain a credible force. By spring 1776, however, the army under Washington's leadership had achieved a remarkable turnaround. It was reasonably disciplined with a stable command structure, and new enlistments brought its strength back up to 14,000 men. On March 4 Washington was able to place cannon on Dorchester Heights and force the British to evacuate Boston. The Siege of Boston was won without a battle that would have cost many lives and probably demolished Boston. For this Congress voted him a medal and Harvard an honorary degree.

Among his many other achievements while in the House, Washington put in place a secret network of patriot spies in Boston to stay ahead of British plans. With this act he inaugurated America's intelligence services. Soon after taking command of the army he approved the building and arming of ships to prey, with some success, on British ships supplying Boston; in this sense, he inaugurated the United States Navy. More important still for the future of the nation was the crucial precedent he set in this initial stage of the war of deferring to civilian authority in all important matters, even when this was inconvenient or worse.

Washington wrote numerous letters in the Longfellow House, some headed "Camp in Cambridge" but most headed "Cambridge Head Quarters". He wrote the Congress in Philadelphia and individual Members; state governors and provincial congresses on whom he relied for troops and supplies; his commanding officers who were engaging the enemy in other places such as Quebec; Lund Washington, his distant cousin who served as his business manager for Mount Vernon, and Martha before she joined him for the duration of the siege.

The many famous people who came to see Washington during this period entered through the same front door we see today. For example, in late October 1775 a three-person committee appointed by Congress and headed by Benjamin Franklin arrived for ten days of meetings with Washington and New England state officials. Abigail and John Adams, his cousin Sam Adams were among the many local gentry who were entertained at the Commander's table. Phyllis Wheatley, the well-known African-American poet, may have taken tea with General and Mrs. Washington in the parlor.

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<sup>11</sup> Muir (1977), p. 6.

