

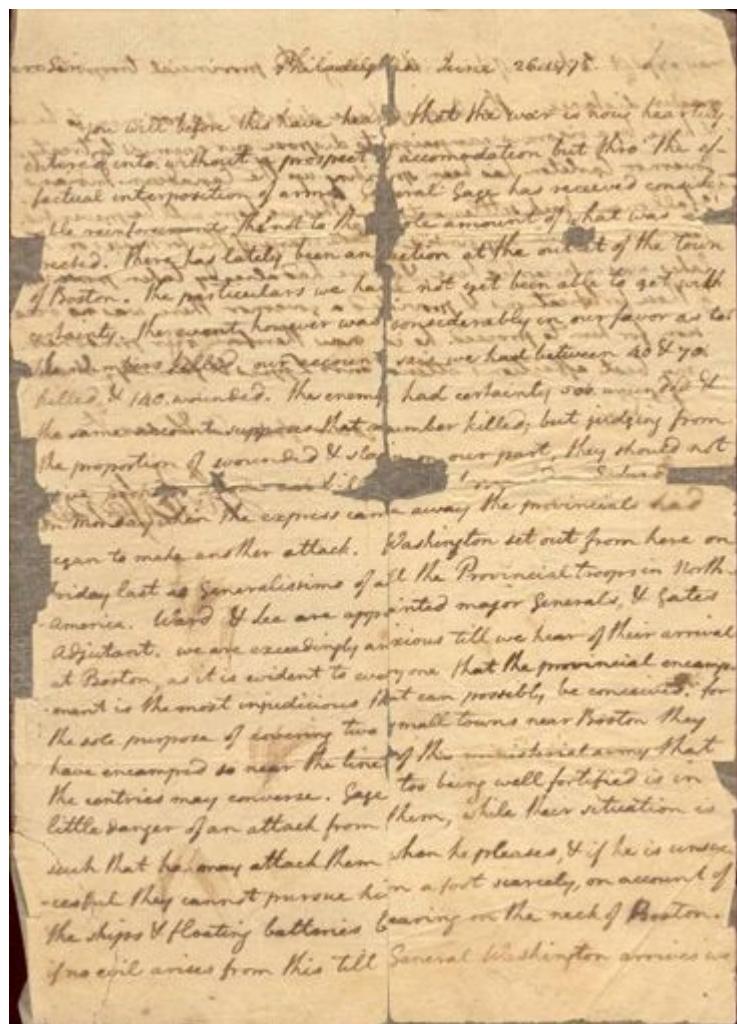
# The Battle of Bunker Hill in the Archives

by Lisa Francavilla - June 17, 2014

One summer I visited New Jersey, to do some work in the repository at the Morristown National Historical Park (<https://www.nps.gov/morr/index.htm>). Morristown served as the winter quarters for the Continental Army during the winter of 1777-78 and again during the “Hard Winter” of 1779-80 and the site is now part of the national park system.

The park’s library and archives are the home of the immense Lloyd W. Smith Manuscript Collection, which has about 64 letters – a very small percentage – written to or by Jefferson during his retirement years, 1809-1826. It was my task to visit the site and create digital images of each of these documents for our use here at the Retirement Series.

It was beyond the scope of what I was supposed to be working on, but one of the park’s staff brought me this



(<https://monticello->

Thomas Jefferson, just thirty-two at the time, was in Philadelphia serving on the Continental Congress when he sat down to write this letter to his brother-in-law Francis Eppes. On 26 June 1775 – after hearing the first reports of what would later become known as the Battle of Bunker Hill – Jefferson wrote:

“You will before this have heard that the war is now heartily entered into, without a prospect of accommodation but thro’ the effectual interposition of arms... There has lately been an action at the outlet of the town of Boston. The particulars we have not yet been able to get with certainty. The event however was considerably in our favor as to the numbers killed. Our account sais we had between 40 & 70 killed & 140. wounded. The enemy had certainly 500. wounded & the same account suppose that number killed... Washington set out from here on Friday last as Generalissimo of all the Provincial troops in North America. Ward & Lee are appointed major Generals, and Gates Adjutant...”

The generals appointed by the Continental Congress were George Washington, Artemas Ward, Charles Lee, and Horatio Gates. Jefferson then goes on to say that Congress directed that 20,000 troops be raised and that colonial governors loyal to the crown were rumored to be stirring up the “Canadian Indians” to attack the backcountry settlements.

I really like this letter. It makes me think about that moment, in the close quarters of the meeting hall, when the members of the Continental Congress first learned that there had “lately been an action” and realized that there was no turning back. I imagine the tension in the room as they faced each other. British colonists – Americans – had taken up arms against their government. This “action,” coming just weeks after Lexington and Concord, was big. Many men had been wounded and killed on both sides. And the men in Philadelphia were mobilizing an army and appointing commanders. Anyone who agreed to serve – in both the Continental Congress and the army – risked everything by doing so. Their decisions, and every decision made from this point forward, had incredibly dangerous and far-reaching consequences for all of them. This was exciting and terrifying stuff!

Because we know how the story ends, we sometimes forget how it all began. What was it like to be there, during that hot summer in 1775 Philadelphia, not knowing what the next day would bring, what new details would come in, and trying to decide how best to proceed?

I am so glad this letter – dated well before the retirement-era documents I was supposed to be working with – was brought to me. Look at its condition! It was microfilmed about 40 years ago but that image doesn't come close to accurately representing its state. On the film the tears and holes look like ink stains and the words that remain are not nearly so clear. The letter is literally falling to pieces. I asked if I could scan the letter, preserving a digital image of it for the park's collection, because it may disintegrate further. For a number of reasons, the document may eventually disappear. Fortunately a full transcription appears in the Papers of Thomas Jefferson, 1:174–5 (<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-01-02-0107>).

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