

Dragging cannon from Fort Ticonderoga to Boston, 1775

Introduction

On March 17, 1776, George Washington stood on Dorchester Heights alongside fifty-nine captured cannon high above the city of Boston, Massachusetts, and watched as British troops peacefully evacuated the city after an eleven-month siege.

It was a remarkable moment for many reasons. The siege had begun in April 1775, in the days after the Revolution's opening battles at Lexington and Concord, when local militias cut off the peninsular city from surrounding towns. A twenty-five-year-old Continental Army officer and former Boston bookseller named Henry Knox suggested that cannon might be used to drive the British from the town. Washington sent Knox to Crown Point and the recently captured Fort Ticonderoga in northern New York to retrieve fifty-nine cannon and mortars and bring them to Boston.

On December 17, 1775, Knox wrote to Washington from Lake George, New York, describing the difficulty of transporting the cannon and mortars: "It is not easy [to] conceive the difficulties we have had in getting them here over the Lake owing to the advanc'd Season of the Year & contrary winds, but the danger is now past; three days ago it was very uncertain whether we could have gotten them untill next spring, but now please God they must go – I have had made forty two exceeding Strong Sleds & have provided eighty Yoke of oxen to drag them as far as Springfield."

Knox and his men dragged the cannon 300 miles in fifty-six days and, with the help of oxen and ice sledges, arrived outside Boston on January 25, 1776. When powder for the cannon finally arrived, the Americans began firing on Boston on March 2, and on March 4 mounted the largest guns on Dorchester Heights. British fire couldn't reach Washington's forces, and the British loaded their ships and withdrew to Halifax, Nova Scotia, on March 17.

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Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction, view the image of the letter, and read the transcript. Then apply your knowledge of American history and evidence from the letter to answer the following questions:

1. Why was Henry Knox an unlikely hero?
2. Access Google Maps or another reputable Internet map site and create a map that approximates the route traveled: Ticonderoga (NY) to Fort George (near Lake George NY) to Saratoga (NY) to Kinderhook (NY) to Great Barrington (Massachusetts Bay, now MA) to Springfield (MA) to Dorchester Heights (MA).
3. Describe the obstacles and challenges that faced Knox and his soldiers.
4. What role did the winter weather play in the transportation of the cannon from Ticonderoga?
5. How did the delivery of the cannon help the Revolutionary forces achieve an early and important military victory?

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Image

To Washington
 Fort George Dec 17. 1775. II-43 3668
 ment at 87
 May it please your Excellency
 I return ^{on the 11} to this place & brought with me the
~~the~~ cannon ~~the~~
 being nearly the time I committed it would take us
 to transport them to ~~the~~ ^{concerning} it is not easy ^{to estimate} the
 difficulties we have had getting them ~~to~~ ^{over the lake} away to the
 advanced season of the year & contrary winds, but
 the danger is now past & ~~that~~ ^{three days ago} it was
 very uncertain whether we could have gotten them
 this season until next spring, but now please God
 they must go. I have ~~gotten~~ ^{made} forty two excellent
 strong sleds & have provided eighty yokes of oxen to
 drag them as far as Springfield where I shall get
 fresh Cattle to carry them to Camp - the route will
 be from here to Kinderhook from thence into Great
 Barrington Massachusetts Bay & down to Springfield
 There will be ^{scarcely} any probability of getting ^{conveying} them pass
 here to Albany or Kinderhook but on sleds the roads
 being ~~so~~ much gullied there is good ~~stead~~ ^{stead} ~~to~~ ^{to}
 this at present the sledging is tolerable to Saratoga
 about 20 miles; beyond ^{that} ^{is} there is none. I have sent for
 the sleds & teams to come here & expect ^{begin} to move them
 to Saratoga on ^{Wednesday} ~~Thursday~~ next trusting that between
 this & then we shall have a ^{fine} fall of snow which
 will ^{enable us to proceed further} make the carriage easy - if that should
 be the case I hope in 16 or 17 days time to be able to
 present to your Excellency a noble train of artillery
 as will appear by the Inventory which I have
 enclosed. I also send a list of those stores which I
 desired Col M^r Douglas to send from New York -
 I did not know then of any 13 Inch mortars which
 was the reason of my ordering but ^{of the shells of}
 that size I now write to him for 500 ^{17. June} yokes
 in 200. 3/4 & 400 - 4 1/2 ^{yards for the carriage} - ^{not being} of that size would be

Henry Knox to George Washington, December 17, 1775, p. 1. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC02437.00222)

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had them ^{as I think the case} ~~sent~~ ^{should imagine it would save time}
~~to get them from thence rather than cast~~ ^{them} ~~as for you think~~
~~otherwise or have made provision for them elsewhere you will~~
 please to countermand this order — There is rather news
 of Col: Amols than that from Col: M^r Henry having been the
 other week round Quebec (Col Amols was oblig'd to go to front
 are trouble about 6 miles from the City — That Genl
 Montgomery had gone to join him with a considerable
 Body of men of a good train of Artillery — There are
 some hints of some malicious spirits which make
 this matter worse — but by the different accounts
 which I have been able to collect I have very little
 doubt that General Montgomery has Quebec in
 his possession I Purse with the utmost
 Respect Your Excellency's Most
 Obedt^t M^t Servant

P.S.
 You will please to observe that there
 are no carriages nor implements to the Cannon nor
 beds to the Mortars, all of which must be made in
 Camp

His Excellency General Washington

Henry Knox to George Washington, December 17, 1775, p. 2. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC02437.00222)

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Transcript

Fort George Dec^r 17. 1775 –

May it please your Excellency

I return'd [*struck*: here with the] [*inserted*: to this place] [*inserted*: on the 15] & brought with me the] Cannon [*struck*: on the 15th] being nearly the time I conjectur'd it would take us to transport them to here, [*inserted and strikeout*] It is not easy [*struck*: to relate] [*inserted*: conceive] the difficulties we have had [*inserted*: in] getting them [*struck*: here] [*inserted*: over the Lake] owing to the advanc'd Season of the Year & contrary winds, but the danger is now past & [*struck*: what]; three days ago it was very uncertain whether we could have gotten them [*struck*: this Season] untill next spring, but now please God they must go – I have [*struck*: gotten] [*inserted*: had] made forty two exceeding Strong Sleds & have provided eighty Yoke of oxen to drag them as far as Springfield where [*struck*: we will] [*inserted*: I shall] get fresh Cattle to Carry them to Camp – the rout will be from here to Kinderhook from thence into Great Barrington Massachusetts Bay & down to Springfield There will [*inserted*: scarcely] be [*struck*: any] possibility of [*struck*: getting] conveying them from here to Albany or Kinderhook but on sleds the roads being very much gullied, [*struck*: there is good sledding from this] at present the sledding is tolerable to Saratoga about 26 miles; beyond [*inserted*: that] there [*inserted*: is] none – I have sent for the Sleds & teams to come here & expect to [*inserted*: begin] move them to Saratoga on [*inserted*: Wednesday or] Thursday next trusting that between this & then we shall have a [*struck*: good] [*inserted*: fine] fall of snow which will [*inserted*: enable us to proceed further &] make the carriage easy – if that should be the case I hope in 16 or 17 days time to be able to present to your Excellency a noble train of artillery [*struck*: as will appear by] the Inventory [*inserted*: of] which I have Inclos'd – I also send a list of those stores which I desir'd Col M^cDougal to send from New York – I did not know then of any 13 Inch mortars which was the reason of my ordering but of few shells of that size I now write to him for 500, [*inserted*: 13 Inch] & also for 200. 5 ¾ & 400 – of 4 ½ [*inserted*: inches for the illegible] – [*struck*: as being] if these sizes could be [2] had there [*struck*: I should imag] [*inserted*: as I think they can] I should imagine it would save time [*inserted*: & expence] get them from thence rather than cast

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[*inserted: them*] – if sir you think otherwise or have made provision for them elsewhere you will please to countermand this order – There is no other news of Col^o Arnold than that from Col^o M^cCleans having burnt the Houses round Quebec Col. Arnold was oblig'd to go to point au tremble about 6 miles from the City – that Gen^l Montgomery had gone to join him with a Considerble [*sic*] Body of men & a good train of artillery – there are some timid & some malevolent Spirits which make this matter worse – but by the different accounts which I have been able to collect I have very little doubt that General Montgomery has Quebec in his possession

I am with the utmost
Respect Your Excellency's Most
Obedt Hble Servant

PS

You will please Sir to observe [*struck: Sir*] that there are no carriages nor Implements to the Cannon nor beds to the Mortars, all of which must be made in Camp

His Excellency General Washington

[*docket*]

Copy Letter to
General Washington
Fort George Dec^r 17
1775