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ROXBURY HISTORICAL SOCIETY
BUNKER HILL DAY

JUNE 17, 1918

REVERENCE is the measure not of others but of ourselves. This assemblage on the one hundred and forty-third anniversary of the Battle of Bunker Hill tells not only of the spirit of that day but of the spirit of to-day. What men worship that will they become. The heroes and holidays of a people which fascinate their soul reveal what they hold are the realities of life and mark out a line beyond which they will not retreat, but at which they will stand to overcome or die. They who reverence Bunker Hill will fight there. Your true patriot sees home and hearthstone in the welfare of his country.

Rightly viewed, then, this day is set apart for an examination of ourselves by recounting the deeds of the men of long ago.

What was there in the events of the seventeenth day of June, 1775, which holds the veneration of Americans and the increasing admiration of the world? There are the physical facts not too unimportant to be unworthy of reiteration even in the learned presence of an Historical Society. A detachment of men clad for the most part in the dress of their daily occupations, standing with bared heads and muskets grounded muzzle down in the twilight glow on Cambridge Common, heard Samuel Langdon, President of Harvard College, seek divine blessing on their cause and marched away in the darkness to a little eminence at Charlestown, where, ere the setting of another sun, much history was to be made and much glory lost and won. When a new dawn had lifted the mists of the Bay, the British, under General Howe, saw an intrenchment on Breed's Hill, which must be taken or Boston abandoned. The works were exposed in the rear to attack from

land and sea. This was disdained by the king's soldiers in their contempt for the supposed fighting ability of the Americans. Leisurely, as on dress parade, they assembled for an assault that they thought was to be a demonstration of the uselessness of any armed resistance on the part of the Colonies. In splendid array they advanced late in the day. A few straggling shots and all was still behind the parapet. It was easier than they had expected. But when they reached a point where 't is said the men behind the intrenchments could see the whites of their eyes, they were met by a withering fire that tore their ranks asunder and sent them back in disorder, utterly routed by their despised foes. In time they form and advance again but the result is the same. The demonstration of superiority was not a success. For a third time they form, not now for dress parade, but for a hazardous assault. This time the result was different. The patriots had lost nothing of courage or

determination but there was left scarcely one round of powder. They had no bayonets. Pouring in their last volley and still resisting with clubbed muskets, they retired slowly and in order from the field. So great was the British loss that there was no pursuit. The intensity of the battle is told by the loss of the Americans, out of about fifteen hundred engaged, of nearly twenty per cent, and of the British, out of some thirty-five hundred engaged, of nearly thirty-three per cent, all in one and one half hours.

It was the story of brave men bravely led but insufficiently equipped. Their leader, Colonel Prescott, had walked the breastworks to show his men that the cannonade was not particularly dangerous. John Stark, bringing his company, in which were his Irish compatriots, across Charlestown Neck under the guns of the battleships, refused to quicken his step. His Major, Andrew McCleary, fell at the rail fence which he had

held during the day. Dr. Joseph Warren, your own son of Roxbury, fell in the retreat, but the Americans, though picking off his officers, spared General Howe. They had fought the French under his brother.

Such were some of the outstanding deeds of the day. But these were the deeds of men and the deeds of men always have an inward significance. In distant Philadelphia, on this very day, the Continental Congress had chosen as the Commander of their Army, General George Washington, a man whose clear vision looked into the realities of things and did not falter. On his way to the front four days later, dispatches reached him of the battle. He revealed the meaning of the day with one question, "Did the militia fight?" Learning how those heroic men fought, he said, "Then the liberties of the Country are safe." No greater commentary has ever been made on the significance of Bunker Hill.

We read events by what goes before and

after. We think of Bunker Hill as the first real battle for independence, the prelude to the Revolution. Yet these were both after-thoughts. Independence Day was still more than a year away and then eight years from accomplishment. The Revolution cannot be said to have become established until the adoption of the Federal Constitution. No, on this June day, these were not the conscious objects sought. They were contending for the liberties of the country, they were not yet bent on establishing a new nation nor on recognizing that relationship between men which the modern world calls democracy. They were maintaining well their traditions, these sons of Londonderry, lovers of freedom and anxious for the fray, and these sons of the Puritans, whom Macaulay tells us humbly abased themselves in the dust before the Lord, but hesitated not to set their foot upon the neck of their king.

It is the moral quality of the day that

abides. It was the purpose of those plain garbed men behind the parapet that told whether they were savages bent on plunder, living under the law of the jungle, or sons of the morning bearing the light of civilization. The glorious revolution of 1688 was fading from memory. The English Government of that day rested upon privilege and corruption at the base, surmounted by a king bent on despotism, but fortunately too weak to accomplish any design either of good or ill. An empire still outwardly sound was rotting at the core. The privilege which had found Great Britain so complacent sought to establish itself over the Colonies. The purpose of the patriots was resistance to tyranny. Pitt and Burke and Lord Camden in England recognized this, and, loving liberty, approved the course of the Colonies. The Tories here, loving privilege, approved the course of the Royal Government. Bunker Hill meant that the Colonies would save themselves and saving them-

selves save the mother country for liberty. The war was not inevitable. Perhaps wars are never inevitable. But the conflict between freedom and privilege was inevitable. That it broke out in America rather than in England was accidental. Liberty, the rights of man against tyranny, the rights of kings, was in the air. One side must give way. There might have been a peaceful settlement by timely concessions such as the Reform Bill of England some fifty years later, or the Japanese reforms of our own times, but wanting that a collision was inevitable. Lacking a Bunker Hill there had been another Dunbar.

The eighteenth century was the era of the development of political rights. It was the culmination of the ideas of the Renaissance. It was the putting into practice in government of the answer to the long pondered and much discussed question, "What is right?" Custom was giving way at last to reason. Class and caste and place, all the

distinctions based on appearance and accident were giving way before reality. Men turned from distinctions which were temporal to those which were eternal. The sovereignty of kings and the nobility of peers was swallowed up in the sovereignty and nobility of all men. The unequal in quantity became equal in quality.

The successful solution of this problem was the crowning glory of a century and a half of America. It established for all time how men ought to act toward each other in the governmental relation. The rule of the people had begun.

Bunker Hill had a deeper significance. It was an example of the great law of human progress and civilization. There has been much talk in recent years of the survival of the fittest and of efficiency. We are beginning to hear of the development of the super-man and the claim that he has of right dominion over the rest of his inferiors on earth. This philosophy denies the doc-

trine of equality and holds that government is not based on consent but on compulsion. It holds that the weak must serve the strong, which is the law of slavery, it applies the law of the animal world to mankind and puts science above morals. This sounds the call to the jungle. It is not an advance to the morning but a retreat to night. It is not the light of human reason but the darkness of the wisdom of the serpent.

The law of progress and civilization is not the law of the jungle. It is not an earthly law, it is a divine law. It does not mean the survival of the fittest, it means the sacrifice of the fittest. Any mother will give her life for her child. Men put the women and children in the lifeboats before they themselves will leave the sinking ship. John Hampden and Nathan Hale did not survive, nor did Lincoln, but Benedict Arnold did. The example above all others takes us back to Jerusalem some nineteen hundred years ago. The men of Bunker Hill were

true disciples of civilization, because they were willing to sacrifice themselves to resist the evils and redeem the liberties of the British Empire. The proud shaft which rises over their battlefield and the bronze form of Joseph Warren in your square are not monuments to expediency or success, they are monuments to righteousness.

This is the age-old story. Men are reading it again to-day — written in blood. The Prussian military despotism has abandoned the law of civilization for the law of barbarism. We could approve and join in the scramble to the jungle, or we could resist and sacrifice ourselves to save an erring nation. Not being beasts, but men, we choose the sacrifice.

This brings us to the part that America is taking at the end of its second hundred and fifty years of existence. Is it not a part of that increasing purpose which the poet, the seer, tells us runs through the ages? Has not our Nation been raised up and strength-

ened, trained and prepared, to meet the great sacrifice that must be made now to save the world from despotism? We have heard much of our lack of preparation. We have been altogether lacking in preparation in a strict military sense. We had no vast forces of artillery or infantry, no large stores of munitions, few trained men. But let us not forget to pay proper respect to the preparation we did have, which was the result of long training and careful teaching. We had a mental, a moral, a spiritual training that fitted us equally with any other people to engage in this great contest which after all is a contest of ideas as well as of arms. We must never neglect the military preparation again, but we may as well recognize that we have had a preparation without which arms in our hands would very much resemble in purpose those now arrayed against us.

Are we not realizing a noble destiny? The great Admiral who discovered America

bore the significant name of Christopher. It has been pointed out that this name means Christ-bearer. Were not the men who stood at Bunker Hill bearing light to the world by their sacrifices? Are not the men of to-day, the entire Nation of to-day, living in accordance with the significance of that name, and by their service and sacrifice redeeming mankind from the forces that make for everlasting destruction? We seek no territory and no rewards. We give but do not take. We seek for a victory of our ideas. Our arms are but the means. America follows no such delusion as a place in the sun for the strong by the destruction of the weak. America seeks rather, by giving of her strength for the service of the weak, a place in eternity.