



## The Revolutionary War Battle America Forgot: Chelsea Creek, 27–28 May 1775

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Should I name my subject to-night “A Forgotten Battle” it would hardly be a misnomer. . . . I speak to you to-night about an event important in the annals of New England, important in the affairs of the Revolution, and yet to all intents and purposes as forgotten as one of the many prehistoric conflicts which must have happened in and around these shores prior to 1620. It is indeed most remarkable that an event bearing so strongly upon the affairs of the siege of Boston should have entirely passed from notice. . . . It has been known in circles taking an interest in local history that there was a fight up Chelsea Creek, but what it was and where it was have well nigh passed from the minds of the present generation.

—Hon. Albert D. Bossom

**A**FTER the weary soldiers of the King’s army retreated from the bloody events at Lexington and Concord on 19 April 1775, militiamen warned from throughout New England began systematically encircling the city of Boston, placing the English garrison commanded by Governor-General Thomas Gage under siege. British forces in the province’s capital city had a navy stationed in Boston Harbor, but provisioning men from seaward was a tricky business. The British military had a longstanding practice of supplementing troops’ rations with fresh meat and produce that it purchased from local farmers. If these supplies

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were interdicted, Gage would be forced to depend upon a long and tenuous line of communication to British possessions in Nova Scotia and, ultimately, back to England. Provincial leaders understood that it was unlikely that they could entirely cut off the flow of supplies to the British army, but if they could significantly stanch it, they might starve the English out of Boston.

Thus was the reasoning of Revolutionary leaders, who quickly realized the importance of the large supplies of livestock and fodder that lay unsecured on the Harbor's islands and coastal farms, within easy reach of British vessels. Sandwiched as it was between the epochal events at Lexington and Concord and the Battle of Bunker Hill (17 June 1775), the Battle of Chelsea Creek (27–28 May 1775)<sup>1</sup> has been overshadowed and is still largely forgotten, despite Judge Bossom's *cri de coeur* when he addressed the Old Suffolk chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution on the occasion of the battle's 123rd anniversary.<sup>2</sup> In 2009, recognizing that crucial gap in the historical record of the American Revolution, the Board of Underwater Archaeological Resources (BUAR; under the leadership of Victor Mastone) of the Massachusetts Office of Coastal Zone Management, funded by a grant from the National Park Service's American Battlefield Protection Program, set out to examine the battle scientifically, using a KOCOIA Military Terrain Analysis in tandem with

<sup>1</sup>It is also known as the Battle of Noddle's Island.

<sup>2</sup>Albert D. Bossom, "The Battle of Chelsea," *Register of Old Suffolk Chapter, Sons of the American Revolution* (Boston: Press of Wallace Spooner, 1900), pp. 21–66, quotation p. 21. Two local histories were the first to give the battle the singular attention it deserves. See Robert D. McKay, *The Battle of Chelsea Creek: An Account of the Second Engagement of the American Revolution, May 27, 1775* (Chelsea, Mass.: Chelsea Evening Record, 1925), and Vincent Tentindo and Marylyn Jones, *Battle of Chelsea Creek, May 27, 1775 (Graves' Misfortune)* (Revere, Mass.: Revere Historical Commission, 1978). Paul Lockhart, *The Whites of Their Eyes: Bunker Hill, the First American Army, and the Emergence of George Washington* (New York: Harper, 2011), and James L. Nelson, *With Fire and Sword: The Battle of Bunker Hill and the Beginning of the American Revolution* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2011) give a general account of the action on Noddle's Island, although neither work expends much ink in doing so. Lockhart describes the affair as having "more the character of a schoolboy prank than of a regular military operation" and claims Bunker Hill as the "first honest-to-goodness battle of the Revolution" (pp. 163, 7). We shared some of our insights during a tour with Nathaniel Philbrick, who treats the Battle of Chelsea Creek on pp. 183–87 of his *Bunker Hill: A City, a Siege, a Revolution* (New York: Penguin, 2013).

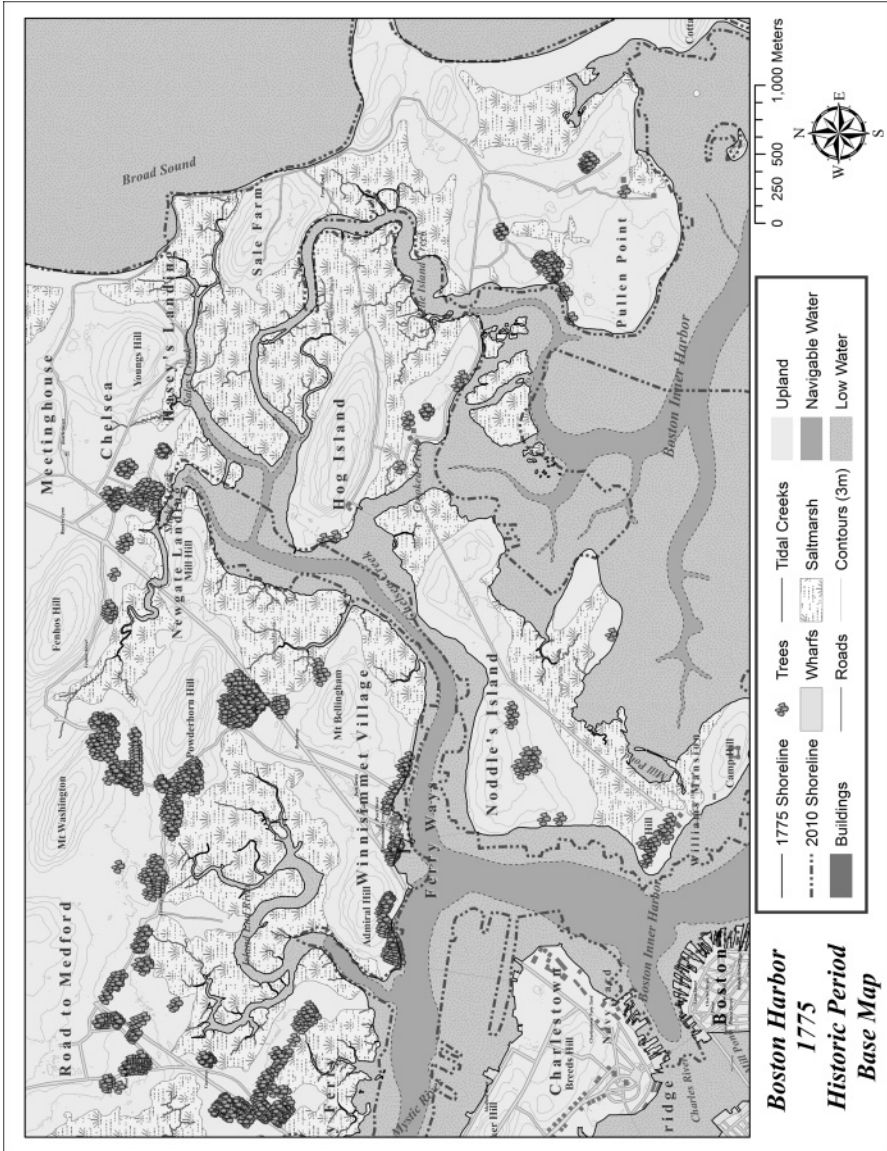
a reconstruction of the historical landscape (see Base Map). The project resulted in a technical report that was a launching pad for our current study, which refines earlier interpretations of the battle in light of our ongoing research.<sup>3</sup>

The Battle of Chelsea Creek is the umbrella designation for a series of military actions on Noddle's Island (present-day East Boston), Hog Island (Orient Heights), and along the Chelsea (Chelsea and Revere) shoreline.<sup>4</sup> The affair began on 27 May when provincial militia (American) conducted a large-scale raid on livestock, and then, as Royal Marines (British) moved to intercept, it developed into what military analysts term a meeting engagement.<sup>5</sup> This action culminated in a vicious encounter during the early morning hours of 28 May at Winnisimmet Ferry, where the HMS *Diana* ran aground and was burned. Provincial militia returned to Noddle's Island on subsequent occasions between 29 and 31 May to remove remaining livestock and render the island unfit for use by the Royal Army and Navy. In the process, the fine mansion house occupied by Henry Howell Williams, who was serving as a quartermaster in the provincial army, was razed and the family left destitute. An attempt by provincial forces to occupy and fortify Noddle's Island on 3 June failed under bombardment from the Royal Navy. Both sides decided to quit the island after an inconsequential skirmish on 10 June. Neither the provincials nor the regulars attempted to take possession of Noddle's Island again

<sup>3</sup>Victor T. Mastone, Craig J. Brown, and Christopher Maio, *Chelsea Creek – First Naval Engagement of the American Revolution Chelsea, East Boston, Revere, and Winthrop, Suffolk County, Massachusetts GA-2255-09-018* (Boston: Massachusetts Board of Underwater Archaeological Resources, 2011). See also C. V. Maio et al., "Application of geographic information technologies to historic landscape reconstruction and military terrain analysis of an American Revolution Battlefield: Preservation potential of historic lands in urbanized settings, Boston, Massachusetts, USA," *Journal of Cultural Heritage* (2012), available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.culher.2012.08.002>.

<sup>4</sup>For a dissenting point of view, see Michael A. Laurano, "Historical Record on the Battle of Chelsea Creek Challenged," <http://www.eastboston.com/Archives/History/10-0716LauranoTheBattle.html>, accessed 13 November 2010.

<sup>5</sup>A "meeting engagement" is defined as a combat action in which a moving force, incompletely deployed for battle, engages an enemy at an unexpected time and place. See United States Department of Defense, *JP1-02 Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, as amended through 2010 (Washington, D.C.: Department of Defense, 2010), p. 295.



during the Siege of Boston, and the island became something of a no-man's land between the contending parties.

In many ways, the events of 27 May–10 June 1775 are as integral as Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill to understanding the Siege of Boston, which is properly defined as evolving through three distinct but overlapping phases. The first phase was largely organizational, beginning when General Artemas Ward took command of the provincial forces following Lexington and Concord and ending with the appointment of George Washington as commander-in-chief and the creation of the Continental Army after he arrived in Cambridge on 2 July.<sup>6</sup> The second phase marks both armies' realization that the British garrison trapped within Boston needed the vital stores that lay unsecured on the Harbor islands to survive; it encompasses as well the conflicts that ensued when the British attempted to procure and the provincial militia to block access to those supplies.<sup>7</sup> The final phase dates from the military envelopment of Boston during the Battle of Bunker Hill, the Americans' subsequent occupation of Dorchester Heights, and, finally, the British evacuation of the city on 17 March 1776.<sup>8</sup> Within that range of activities, the Battle of Chelsea Creek stands out as the moment when, for the first time, military units from different colonies fought together to achieve their military goals. The competence with which operations along Chelsea Creek were carried out and their ultimate success demonstrate that, even at this early juncture, the provincials were better prepared and ready to fight than has previously been assumed. Indeed, had the British had adequate reserves of food and fodder, they may well have contested control of Dorchester Heights more vigorously than they did, and so the

<sup>6</sup>Samuel B. Griffith, *The War for American Independence* (1976; repr. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002); Bruce Lancaster, *The American Revolution* (1971; repr. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987).

<sup>7</sup>Richard Frothingham, *History of the Siege of Boston, and of the Battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill. Also, An Account of the Bunker Hill Monument. With Illustrative Documents* (1849; 4th ed. Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1873).

<sup>8</sup>Richard M. Ketchum, *Decisive Day: The Battle for Bunker Hill* (1974; repr. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999); Allen French, *The Siege Of Boston* (1911; repr. Memphis: General Books, 2010); Frothingham, *History of the Siege Of Boston*.

Battle of Chelsea Creek should be seen as a crucial stratagem in bringing the Siege of Boston to a triumphant conclusion.<sup>9</sup>

*Preliminary Words and Actions, 7–24 May 1775*

On 7 May 1775, eager to interdict supplies that might nurture the enemy, the Massachusetts Committee of Safety passed a resolution ordering the selectmen and Committee of Correspondence for the town of Chelsea “to take effectual methods for the prevention of any Provisions being carried into the Town of *Boston*.”<sup>10</sup> The resolution presented something of a problem. The selectmen and Committee of Correspondence for Chelsea lacked the authority to call on the provincial army for assistance in implementing the directive, and without it they could do little more than issue threats and appeal to the greater good. Local farmers were in a quandary. William Harris, manager of Oliver Wendell’s farm on Hog Island, confided to a friend that he felt

very uneasy, the people from the Men of War frequently go to the Island to Buy fresh Provision, his own safety obliges him to sell to them, on the other Hand the Committee of Safety have threatened if he sells anything to the Army or Navy, that they will take all the Cattle from the Island, & our folks tell him they shall handle him ruffly.<sup>11</sup>

British authorities in Boston knew full well what the provincials were up to, and they took measures to respond. There is evidence that General Gage contemplated a move toward Chelsea as early as 10 May. On that date, a man named Elijah Shaw testified before the Massachusetts Committee of Safety that he had overheard Gage say that “the Troops would soon make a

<sup>9</sup>R. Arthur Bowler, *Logistics and the Failure of The British Army in America, 1775–1783* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), and David C. Hsiung, “Food, Fuel, and the New England Environment in the War for Independence, 1775–1776,” *New England Quarterly* 80 (December 2007): 614–54.

<sup>10</sup>Minutes of the Massachusetts Committee of Safety 1775, in *American Archives: Fourth Series*, 6 vols., comp. Clarke M. St. Clair and Peter Force (Washington: U.S. Congress, 1837–46), 2:753.

<sup>11</sup>William Harris quoted in H. Prentiss to Oliver Wendell, 12 May 1775, *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, vol. 13 (Salem: Essex Institute, 1877), p. 181.



push either towards *Dorchester Neck* or *Chelsea*.” Shaw went on to report that the British had visited his farm and liberated a large number of animals and five tons of hay.<sup>12</sup> Gage was, in fact, sending out small detachments of fifty men on foraging details at this time.<sup>13</sup>

The Massachusetts Committee of Safety revisited the issue at its session of 14 May 1775. The best way to prevent the animals and hay from falling into enemy hands, they decided, was to remove them altogether. Hence, the committee instructed “that all the live-stock be taken from *Noddle’s Island*, *Hog Island*, and *Snake Island*, and from that part of *Chelsea* near the sea-coast, and be driven back.” The mission was entrusted to the “Committee of Correspondence and Selectmen of the Towns of *Medford*, *Malden*, *Chelsea*, and *Lynn*, and that they be supplied with such men as they shall need, from the Regiment now at *Medford*.”<sup>14</sup> The new proviso brought military might to what had hitherto been largely a civilian undertaking.

The regiment then at *Medford* was the First New Hampshire, 590 men under the command of Colonel John Stark. Stark, a longtime confederate of Robert Rogers and a ranger captain during the French and Indian War (1754–63), was a frontiersman of some note. When Stark heard of the actions at Lexington and Concord, tradition holds, he “without a moments delay . . . shut down his mill, repaired to his house, took his gun and ammunition, mounted his horse in his shirt sleeves . . . and rode on to meet the enemy.”<sup>15</sup> Along the way he called for volunteers, and by the time he reached Lexington, he had drawn a large following. Stark was directed to Cambridge, where, on 21 April, he presented himself to General

<sup>12</sup>Shaw enumerated the loss of “eleven cows, three calves, a yearling heifer, forty-eight sheep, sixty-one lambs, four hogs and poultry, hay five tons, and almost all his furniture” (Minutes of the Massachusetts Committee of Safety 1775, *American Archives: Fourth Series*, 2:753–54, which also includes the quotation).

<sup>13</sup>Lieutenant John Barker, *The British in Boston, Being the Diary of Lieutenant John Barker of the King’s Own Regiment, From November 15, 1774 to May 31, 1776*, annotated by Elizabeth Ellery Dana (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924).

<sup>14</sup>Quotations from Minutes of the Massachusetts Committee of Safety 1775, *American Archives: Fourth Series*, 2:757–58.

<sup>15</sup>Clifton La Bree, *New Hampshire’s General John Stark: Live Free or Die: Death Is Not the Worst of Evils* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Peter E. Randall Publisher, 2007), p. 55.

Ward, who commissioned him in the Massachusetts militia until such time as New Hampshire's provincial authorities had organized their forces.<sup>16</sup> Although Stark was drawing his orders from Massachusetts, the responsibility for equipping and paying his men remained with New Hampshire. By 18 May, New Hampshire was still remiss. "I humbly pray that you would maturely consider our defenceless situation," Stark wrote, "and adopt some measure or measures whereby [the men] may be equipped."<sup>17</sup> Stark, in other words, lacked the fire power to enforce the 14 May resolution as instructed.

Taking advantage of the disarray, Gage continued to send out foraging parties. On Sunday, 21 May, he enlisted the support of Vice Admiral Samuel Graves, commander of the North Atlantic Squadron, who dispatched an armed schooner and two sloops to Grape Island, along with a detachment of one hundred troops who had been charged with seizing the livestock and hay stored there. The island, incorporated within the town of Hingham, was owned by Elisha Leavitt, a wealthy loyalist who had previously offered or sold the supplies to Gage. The vessels' approach alarmed the neighboring towns. General John Thomas, in command of the provincial militia at Roxbury, sent three companies to a point of land across from Grape Island, but they were obliged to wait there lest they be vulnerable to the British while crossing the barren mudflats at low tide. They opened fire on the island but, given the range, had little effect beyond drawing a response from the ships' cannons. Eventually, with the rising tide, the militiamen were able to cross in small boats, but by then the regulars had escaped, taking with them what they could. The militiamen contented themselves with setting Leavitt's barn ablaze, some eighty tons of hay still inside, and with removing the remaining livestock.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup>Caleb Stark, *Memoir and Official Correspondence of Gen. John Stark* (1877; repr. Bowie: Heritage Books, 1999), pp. 28–29; La Bree, *General John Stark*, p. 55; Frederic Kidder, *History of the First New Hampshire Regiment in the War of the Revolution* (Albany: Joel Munsell, 1868), p. 2.

<sup>17</sup>Colonel John Stark to New Hampshire Provincial Congress, 18 May 1775, *American Archives, Fourth Series*, 2:639–40.

<sup>18</sup>Frothingham, *History of the Siege of Boston*, and Thomas T. Bouvé et al., *History of the Town of Hingham, Massachusetts*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: John Wilson and Son, 1893), 1:288–89.



Provincial leaders scrambled to find a way to prevent further such raids from the British. The Massachusetts Committee of Safety drafted a resolution in session on 23 May 1775, not this time to the selectmen or Committees of Correspondence of the individual towns but to the Provincial Congress, urging it to use its authority to secure resources on the Harbor Islands and sea-coast.<sup>19</sup> Answering immediately, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress issued a resolution of its own, which read much like the Committee of Safety's 14 May resolution.<sup>20</sup> Not satisfied, the Committee of Safety drafted another, stronger statement on 24 May: "*Resolved*, That it be recommended to Congress immediately to take such order respecting the removal of the Sheep and Hay from *Noddle's* Island, as they may judge proper, together with the stock on adjacent islands."<sup>21</sup> There is no written record of an order being sent to the army at Cambridge, but this time action followed on words.

### *Opening Movements, 24–26 May 1775*

In compliance with the Committee of Safety and Provincial Congress resolutions of 23 and 24 May, Major General Artemas Ward, commander-in-chief of the provincial militia, convened a council of war to discuss removing or destroying all supplies on Noddle's and Hog Islands.<sup>22</sup> There is no contemporary record of this meeting, but it must have taken place during the evening of 24 May, following the Committee of Safety's strongly worded resolution, or in the early hours of 25 May, before the British discovered that morning that plans were afoot. The council was likely attended by general officers and senior colonels then in and around Cambridge, among them Colonel Stark and Colonel John Nixon, who would be

<sup>19</sup>Minutes of the Massachusetts Committee of Safety 1775, *American Archives: Fourth Series*, 2:762.

<sup>20</sup>Minutes of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress 1775, in *American Archives: Fourth Series*, 2:818.

<sup>21</sup>Minutes of the Massachusetts Committee of Safety 1775, *American Archives: Fourth Series*, 2:763.

<sup>22</sup>"General Israel Putnam's Declaration September 28, 1786," quoted in Tentindio and Jones, *Graves' Misfortune*, pp. 140–41.

charged with carrying out the raid. Overall command devolved to Connecticut General Israel Putnam.

Putnam, like Stark, was a former ranger who had served with Robert Rogers during the French and Indian War as well as during Pontiac's Rebellion (1763–66). "Old Put" had already endeared himself to the citizens of the besieged town. When Gage closed the Port of Boston in compliance with the Intolerable Acts, Putnam drove a flock of sheep from his Pomfret, Connecticut, farm over fifty miles to help alleviate Bostonians' suffering. He was hard at work in his fields when he received news of Lexington and Concord. He put up his plow, prepared instructions for his regiment to follow, and rode on to Cambridge, where he arrived on 21 April.<sup>23</sup> Putnam is the only man who left a written account of the war council, but he did not do so until more than a decade had elapsed. He wrote: "it was unanimously agreed among the general officers that it was absolutely necessary to remove the Stock and Effects from said Island in order to prevent the Enemy receiving any Supplies of provisions &&c. And accordingly a party of troops were Detached for the above purpose and put under my Command."<sup>24</sup>

British spies quickly gathered intelligence and passed it on to Gage. In a note to Vice Admiral Graves dated the morning of 25 May, Gage wrote

I have this moment received Information that the Rebels [intend] this Night to destroy, and carry off all the Stock & on Noddles Island, for no reason but because the owners having sold them for the Kings Use: I therefore give you this Intelligence that you may please to order the guard boats to be particularly Attentive and to take such Other Measures as you may think Necessary for this night.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup>Increase N. Tarbox, *Life of Israel Putnam ("Old Put"), Major-General in the Continental Army* (Boston: Lockwood, Brooks, and Company, 1876), and William Farrand Livingston, *Israel Putnam; Pioneer, Ranger, and Major-General, 1718–1790* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1901).

<sup>24</sup>Putnam, "Declaration," pp. 140–41.

<sup>25</sup>General Thomas Gage to Vice Admiral Samuel Graves, 25 May 1775, in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, ed. William Bell Clark, 11 vols. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Navy Department, 1964–2005), 1:523.

Graves concurred. In addition, he recommended landing “A Guard upon the Island [as] the Most probable Means of preserving the Hay from being destroyed.”<sup>26</sup> It may have been this force that Lieutenant John Barker of the King’s Own Regiment in Boston referred to when he recorded: “50 Men order’d last night; did not go on account of the tide not serving.”<sup>27</sup> Graves, to be sure, was not concerned with livestock and hay alone; he had to protect the naval storehouse he had set up on the island. At any rate, these precautions were in vain.

### *The Battle of Chelsea Creek, 27–28 May 1775*

Gage had accurate intelligence about the provincials’ plan, but he had been misinformed about the date. The provincials did not move until 26 May, and when they did, it was with a professionalism one would not normally expect from a large body of amateur soldiers from different colonies who were working together for the first time. At 6:15 A.M., a scouting party drawn from several companies of Colonel Samuel Gerrish’s regiment was dispatched to Chelsea.<sup>28</sup> Gerrish was another militia officer who had seen action during the French and Indian War, and although he hailed from Newbury, his regiment was a mishmash of men drawn from Essex, Middlesex, and Norfolk Counties as well as from New Hampshire.<sup>29</sup> The scouting party’s assignment was not to find the route of march to Hog Island and Noddle’s Island—Captain Sprague’s company in Chelsea knew the way, if no one else did—the group’s mission was to secure it. This contingent of thirty-two men was to act as a picket force; in other words, it was to warn the main column that would follow of any approach by the regulars and to ensure that no civilian was allowed to tip off the British.

That night, a force of 200–300 men under the command of Colonel John Nixon, a seasoned veteran of the Massachusetts

<sup>26</sup>Graves to Gage, 25 May 1775, *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 1:523–24.

<sup>27</sup>Barker, *Diary*, p. 50.

<sup>28</sup>Bosson, “The Battle of Chelsea,” p. 51.

<sup>29</sup>Frank A. Gardner, “Colonel Samuel Gerrish’s Regiment,” *Massachusetts Magazine*, October 1911, pp. 221–43.

militia,<sup>30</sup> marched out of the provincial camp at Cambridge and proceeded to Medford, where they joined another 300 men under the command of New Hampshire Colonel John Stark. The choice of Nixon's regiment is somewhat surprising. Just that morning, four full companies, protesting the replacement of certain elected officers, had mutinied.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, to fulfill the mission to Hog and Noddle's Islands, the regiment had to be augmented with small detachments of 10–15 men drawn from other regiments. Eleven men with Corporal Amos Farnsworth were from Captain Henry Farwell's company, Colonel William Prescott's Massachusetts regiment; 16 men with Major Thomas Poor were from Colonel James Frye's Massachusetts regiment.<sup>32</sup>

Nixon left Cambridge along the Old County Road, crossed the Mystic River at the old bridge and ford, and proceeded on to Medford (Mystic), where he rendezvoused with Stark. Together, the 600-man contingent of Massachusetts and New Hampshire militiamen marched out along the Old County Road (the road to Salem), through Malden, and on to the meetinghouse in Chelsea.<sup>33</sup> Precisely how long it took the men to reach Chelsea is not known, but it is likely that Stark and Nixon came upon the meetinghouse during the early morning hours of 27 May. There they probably met up with a portion of the 59-man "Chelsea Company," under Captain Samuel Sprague, the rest of the force being positioned throughout Chelsea, with a fair

<sup>30</sup>Colonel John Nixon, of Sudbury, Massachusetts, had served in the provincial militia since 1735; he took part in King George's War (1744–48) and in the French and Indian War (1754–63).

<sup>31</sup>The leaders of the four companies in question were identified in a petition. See Petition of Captain Benjamin Bullard, Captain Thomas Drury, Captain John Leland, Captain Thadeus Russell, 26 May 1775, quoted in Frank A. Gardner, "Colonel John Nixon's Regiment," *Massachusetts Magazine*, July 1914, pp. 100–101.

<sup>32</sup>Amos Farnsworth, "Diary Kept by Lieut. Amos Farnsworth of Groton, Mass., during Part of the Revolutionary War, April 1775–May 1779," in vol. 32 of *The Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, ed. Samuel A. Green (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1897–99), pp. 80–81.

<sup>33</sup>The route of march correlates with the original route to and from Boston for those living in Chelsea and points east. Provincial forces would have been screened from the British by a series of hills and broad marshes with numerous stream cuts along the Chelsea shore, which enabled them to travel the entire route undetected. See Farnsworth, "Diary," pp. 80–81.

number at Winnisimmet Ferry. All paused to rest and to eat breakfast before moving on to Sale Farm.<sup>34</sup>

The 27th of May happened to be a special occasion for British Vice Admiral Samuel Graves, commander of His Majesty's North Atlantic Squadron. Having recently been promoted to Vice Admiral of the White, he was raising his new colors for the first time. When the white flag was run up at 8:00 A.M., the squadron issued a salute of thirteen guns.<sup>35</sup> That morning, too, the HMS *Diana*, commanded by Graves's nephew Lieutenant Thomas Graves, returned from a cruise to Maine.<sup>36</sup> Graves, who had no children of his own, was known to promote his nephew's interests whenever possible.<sup>37</sup> Once the *Diana* was safely moored off Noddle's Island, Lieutenant Graves reported to his uncle aboard the HMS *Preston*.

At about the same time as Graves was receiving his salute, Stark and Nixon's forces were departing Chelsea meetinghouse. Following a small lane leading away from it, they reached Sale Farm between nine and ten o'clock. At the farm, Stark and Nixon made their final arrangements while waiting for low tide, and at 11:00 A.M., they crossed Belle Isle Creek to Hog Island.<sup>38</sup> Once there, Stark and Nixon divided their men into smaller detachments to round up the livestock and set fire to any stores of hay they could find. The work progressed slowly, but some 411 sheep, 27 horned cattle, and 6 horses were herded back to the mainland.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup>Mellen Chamberlain, *A Documentary History of Chelsea, Including the Boston Precincts of Winnisimmet, Rumney Marsh, and Pullen Point, 1624-1824*, 2 vols. (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1908), 2:432-52; McKay, *The Battle of Chelsea Creek*, p. 17; Tentindo and Jones, *Graves' Misfortune*, pp. 26-28.

<sup>35</sup>Vice Admiral Samuel Graves to Philip Stephens, 25 May 1775, and Captain John Robinson, "Journal of His Majesty's Ship *Preston*, Captain John Robinson Commanding, 27 May 1775," in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 1:523, 546.

<sup>36</sup>Sailing Master William McCreight, "Master's Log of His Majesty's Ship *Mercury*, 27 May 1775," in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 1:547.

<sup>37</sup>Farnsworth, "Diary," p. 80.

<sup>38</sup>"Count De Guines to Count De Vergennes, 7 July 1775," in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 1:607.

<sup>39</sup>Farnsworth, "Diary," and Anonymous, "The Following Extract of a letter, dated the first of June instant, in the Provincial Camp, at Cambridge, from a gentleman of undoubted veracity," *New York Journal*, 15 June 1775.

Sometime during the mid-afternoon hours, a small, thirty-man detachment was sent across Crooked Creek to Noddle's Island (see Phase 1 Map). Amos Farnsworth was a member of the party, and his journal is the only primary source we have for the initial phase of the Battle of Chelsea Creek. Farnsworth relates that the men "sot one Hous and Barn on fiar Kil<sup>d</sup> Some hoses and Cattel Brought of[f] two or three Cows one horse."<sup>40</sup> General Putnam explained the rationale for the action: "And it was agreed among the General Officers that if the Stocks and provitions . . . could not be got off the said Island without grate hazzard and loss of the American troops, that in that case, it would be Expediant to Desstroy or Consusme the farme, which was Accordingly Done."<sup>41</sup>

The columns of smoke rising above the burning house and barn were British forces' first indication that something was afoot on Noddle's Island. Captain John Robinson of the HMS *Preston* noticed those signs shortly after 2:00 P.M. and alerted Graves, who issued orders to intercept the provincials.<sup>42</sup> "Upon observing the Rebels landed on Noddles Island," Graves wrote, "I ordered the *Diana* to sail immediately between it and the Main [mainland], and get up as high as possible to prevent their Escape, and I also directed a party of Marines to be landed for the same purpose."<sup>43</sup> Given the tidal patterns then occurring—technically, a spring tide—Lieutenant Graves, who was not familiar with the upper reaches of Chelsea Creek, faced some tricky navigating. On 27 and 28 May, tides ran ten to eleven feet, two to three feet higher than normal, which would allow the *Diana* to ascend higher up the creek than she would normally be able to go, and currents were stronger than usual as well.<sup>44</sup> At 3:00 P.M. the signal was given to land a squadron

<sup>40</sup>Farnsworth, "Diary," p. 81.

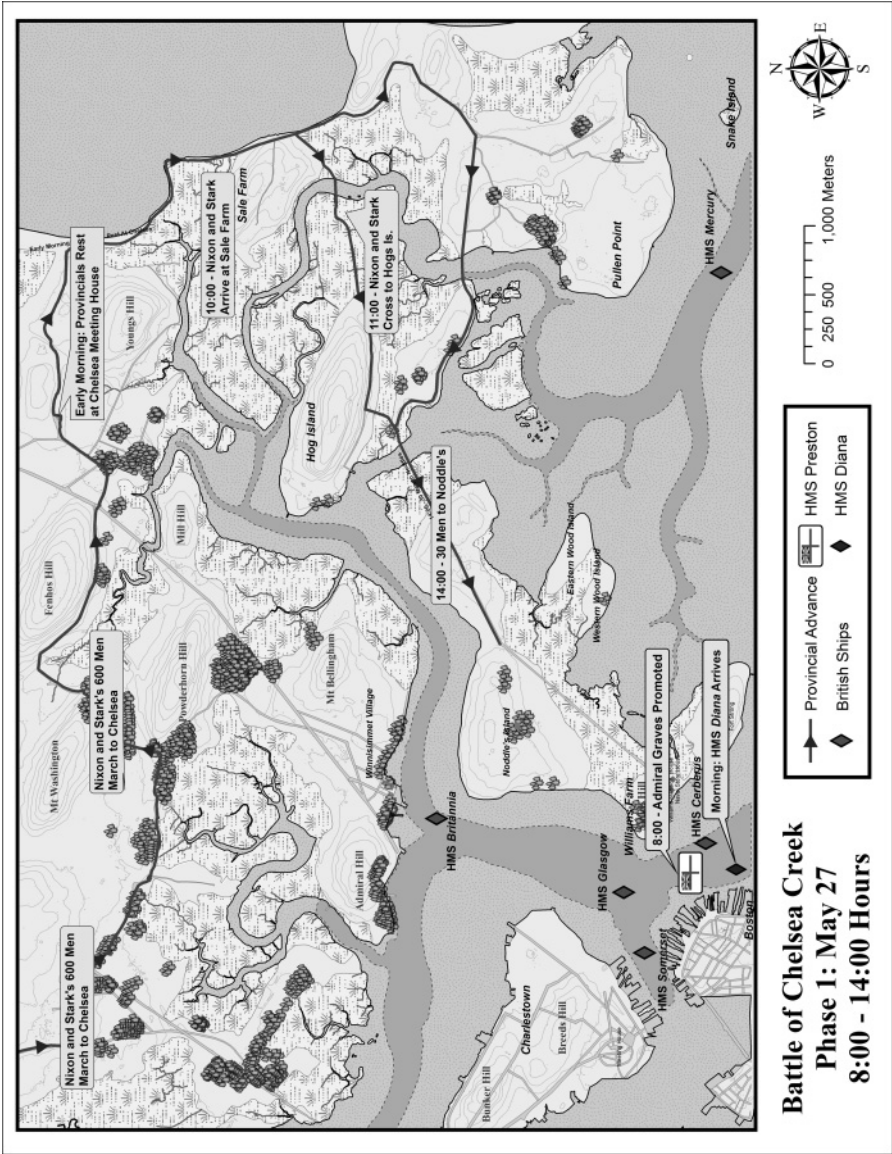
<sup>41</sup>Putnam, "Declaration," pp. 140–41.

<sup>42</sup>Robinson, "Journal of His Majesty's Ship *Preston*."

<sup>43</sup>HMS *Diana*, Lieutenant Thomas Graves commanding, was a 120-ton schooner carrying four four-pound cannon and twelve swivel guns. She was crewed by thirty men. See Vice Admiral Samuel Graves to Philip Stephens, Boston, 7 June 1775, in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 1:622–23.

<sup>44</sup>Todd Ehret, "Tidal Predictions May 1775," NOAA's Center for Operational Oceanographic Products and Services, Personal Communication, 29 June 2010.





of marines, approximately 170 men who served, variously, on the HMS *Somerset*, HMS *Preston*, HMS *Cerberus*, and HMS *Glasgow* (see Phase 2 Map).<sup>45</sup> As the marines formed on the beach, the HMS *Diana* entered Chelsea Creek, followed by ten or twelve longboats, and began to make her way upstream to cut off the provincials' avenue of retreat. As soon as she entered Chelsea Creek, the *Diana* began taking small-arms fire from Sprague's Company, positioned in buildings and behind stone walls at Winnisimmet Ferry.<sup>46</sup> The time was around four o'clock.

The thirty provincials on Noddle's Island were as yet unaware that the British were moving in on their position, but when they began withdrawing livestock back toward Hog Island, the *Diana*, which had reached the mouth of Crooked Creek and had a clear line of sight downstream, began firing grapeshot at them.<sup>47</sup> The Royal Marines arrived at the crossing point as the last few provincials were making their way to Hog Island. Half of the Americans' thirty-man contingent, acting as a rearguard, took up a position in a ditch, while the rest herded off the livestock. "Before we got from Noddels island to hog island we was fir<sup>d</sup> upon by a Privatear Schooner," Farnsworth wrote, "But we Crost the river and about fifteen of us Squated Down in a Ditch on the mash and Stood our ground. And thare came a company of Regulars on the marsh on the other side of the river And the Schooner: And we had a hot fiar until the Regulars retreated."<sup>48</sup> During this exchange, two marines from the HMS *Somerset* were wounded.<sup>49</sup>

Having failed to corral the Farnsworth detachment, the Royal Marines withdrew with their stricken brothers, which left the

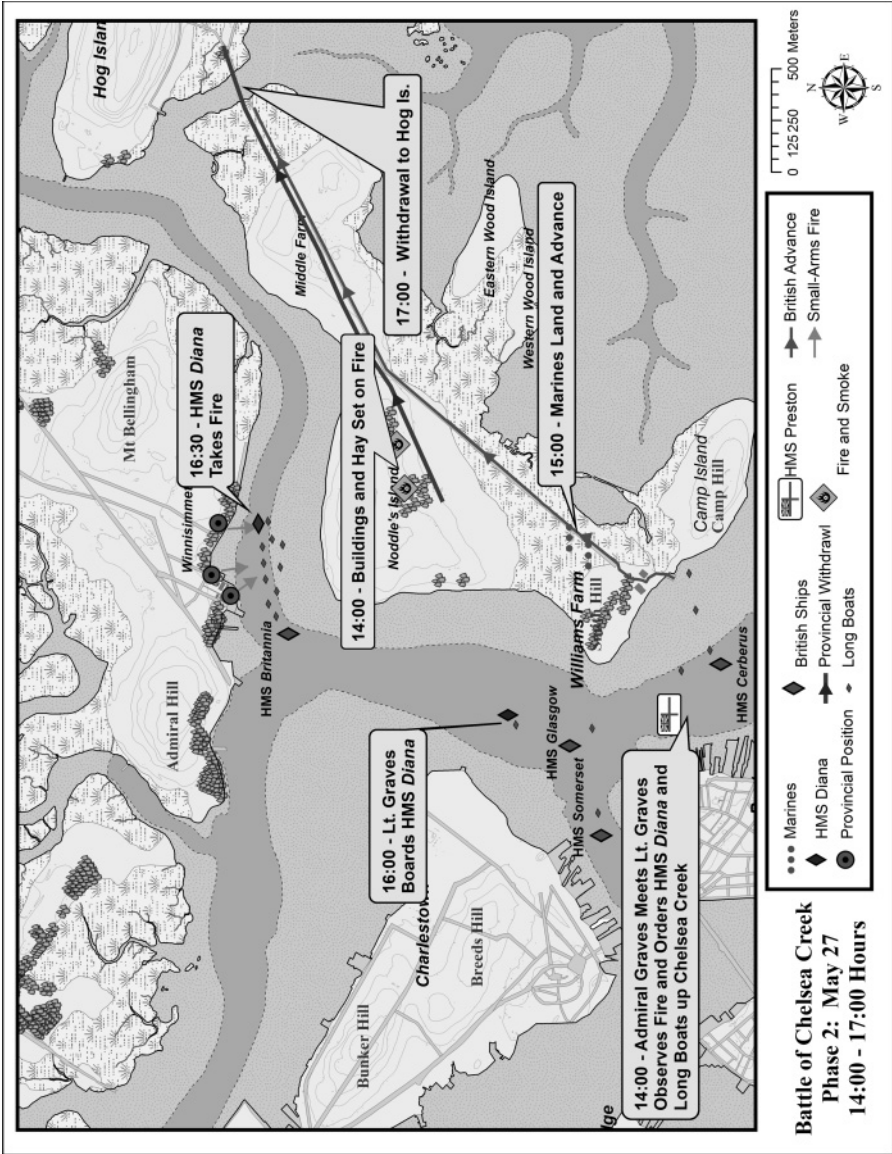
<sup>45</sup>Captain Edward LeCras, "Remarks &ca. Onboard the *Somerset* May 27, 1775," in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 1:547; Robinson, "Journal of HMS *Preston*"; and James Chads, "Journal of His Majesty's Ship *Cerberus*, James Chads, Commanding May 27, 1775," and Tyringham Howe, "Journal of His Majesty's Ship *Glasgow*, Tyringham Howe, Commanding May 27, 1775," in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 1:546, 547.

<sup>46</sup>Testimony of Dashwood Bacon, ADM 1/5307, Court Martial Papers (1775-1776), Court Martial of Lieutenant Thomas Graves, in relation to the loss of the HMS *Diana* held on 6th June 1775. National Archives of England, Kew.

<sup>47</sup>Court Martial of Lt. Thomas Graves.

<sup>48</sup>Farnsworth, "Diary," p. 81.

<sup>49</sup>LeCras, "Remarks &ca. Onboard the *Somerset*."



*Diana* and the longboats to continue the fight. The sun was beginning to set, but both parties seemed unwilling to call it a day. Stark and Nixon appear to have divided their forces again. While some of the men herded the livestock across Belle Isle Creek, along the Beach Road, and back to the Chelsea meetinghouse, it appears that another group moved through the marshes, shadowing the *Diana* as she continued to make her way upstream. When the *Diana* reached a point opposite Hasey's Landing, Stark and Nixon's forces attacked with muskets.<sup>50</sup> At a subsequent court martial of Lieutenant Graves, the crew of the *Diana* testified only that they had proceeded to Hog Island, where they engaged a large number of provincials until they dispersed around eight or nine o'clock in the evening; other historical sources, however, as well as artifacts recovered in the vicinity of the Newgate House, near the Tide Mill in Revere, make it clear that the *Diana* had continued upstream.<sup>51</sup>

At 5:00 P.M., the HMS *Cerberus* landed her quarter-deck guns, two three-pounder artillery pieces, which the Royal Marines then hauled up West Head and positioned so as to command the channel and cover the area of Winnisimmet Ferry.<sup>52</sup> Together with nearby ships, the artillery began to bombard the provincial position.<sup>53</sup> What role the HMS *Britannia* played at this stage is unclear. Primary sources do not indicate that she followed the *Diana* upstream, so she probably maintained her position off Winnisimmet Ferry and exchanged fire with Captain Sprague's men (see Phase 3 Map).<sup>54</sup>

In Cambridge, General Israel Putnam heard the cannonade commence around five o'clock. A short time thereafter,

<sup>50</sup>Graves to Stephens, 7 June 1775; McKay, *The Battle of Chelsea Creek*, pp. 16–17; Tentindo and Jones, *Graves' Misfortune*, p. 35.

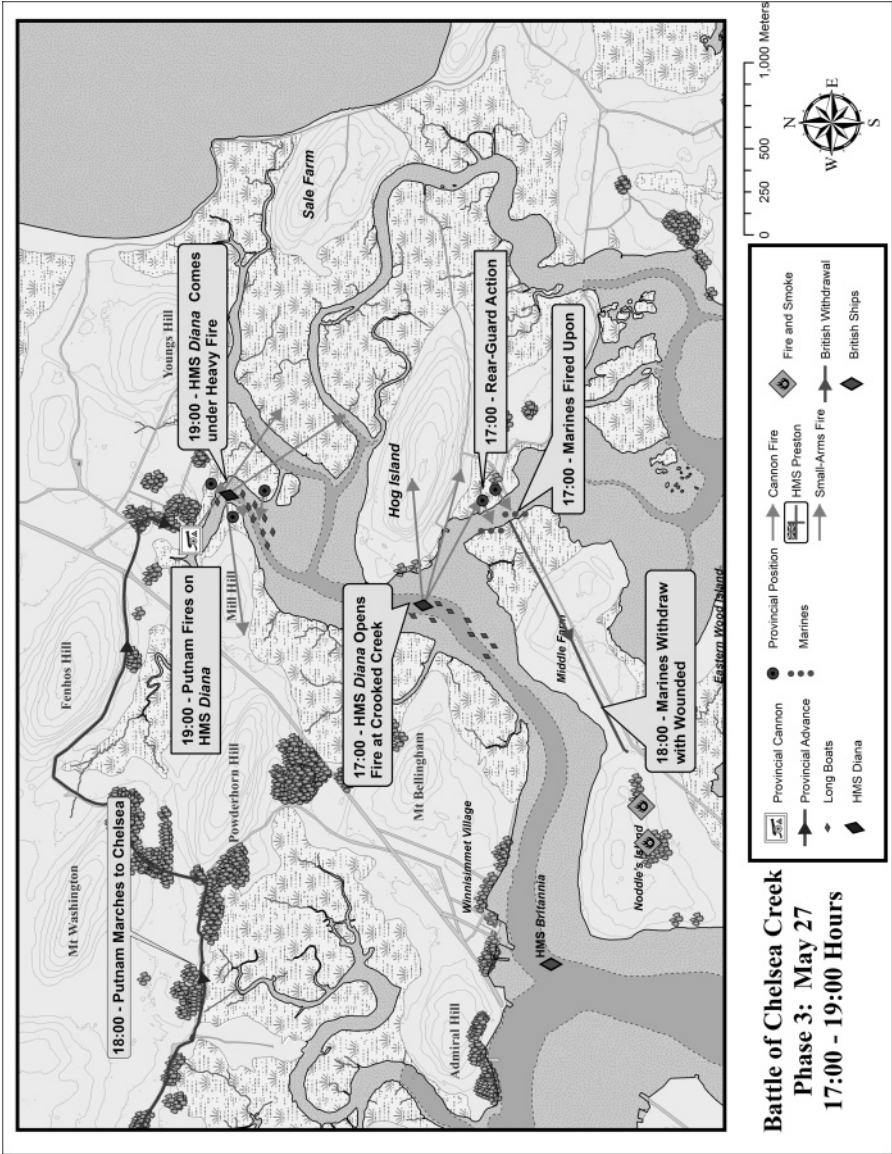
<sup>51</sup>Court Martial of Lt. Thomas Graves. William T. Hall recorded that he had dug up small cannon balls from the yard of the Newgate/Yeaman House. See Bossom, "The Battle of Chelsea," p. 26, and Chamberlain, *A Documentary History of Chelsea*, p. 443.

<sup>52</sup>Chads, "Journal of HMS *Cerberus*."

<sup>53</sup>"A Circumstantial Account of the Late Battle at Chelsea, Hog Island, &c.," Chads, "Journal of HMS *Cerberus*"; Graves to Stephens, 7 June 1775; Robinson, "Journal of HMS *Preston*," 1:554.

<sup>54</sup>Farnsworth, "Diary," pp. 80–81.





an express rider arrived carrying a request for reinforcements from Stark and Nixon. Putnam wasted no time. He marched his force first to Mystic, having heard that the regulars were landing there; discovering that that intelligence was erroneous, he double-quickened his men to Chelsea. Accompanying Putnam were Colonel James Frye's Massachusetts regiment and a two-gun section of three-pounder artillery pieces under the command of Captain Thomas Waite Foster.<sup>55</sup>

It was now approximately eight o'clock in the evening. Darkness was closing in, and the crew of the *Diana* found themselves in a precarious situation. Lieutenant Graves had proceeded up Chelsea Creek almost as far as the Tide Mill. The wind had calmed, and a strong tide threatened to beach him on the mainland, within easy reach of the provincials. Stark and Nixon established a defensive position on the elevation of Chelsea Neck, a rise running easterly from Powderhorn Hill around toward present-day Winthrop, adjacent to the Tide Mill.<sup>56</sup> Some provincials may have been assigned to Mill Hill, directly across Chelsea Creek from Chelsea Neck, a location Putnam occupied when he arrived with reinforcements. Lieutenant Graves thus found himself stranded in a sort of cul-de-sac, taking small-arms fire from both shores. In order to extricate the *Diana*, he called in the longboats and ordered them to take the ship under tow, which made the sailors manning the boats ready targets for the provincials.<sup>57</sup>

Putnam arrived with the requested reinforcements at around nine o'clock and set up Foster's artillery at the Newgate House. Eyewitness Elizabeth Hasey related that their firing was so intense that it arrested the *Diana's* withdrawal.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Foster may have initially unlimbered his artillery at the site, because before the house was destroyed to make way for the Revere

<sup>55</sup>James Stevens, "The Revolutionary Journal of James Stevens of Andover, Mass. [1775-76]," *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, vol. 48 (Salem: Essex Institute, 1912), pp. 41-71; "A Circumstantial Account of the Late Battle at Chelsea, Hog Island, &c."

<sup>56</sup>"A Circumstantial Account of the Late Battle at Chelsea, Hog Island, &c."

<sup>57</sup>Court Martial of Lt. Thomas Graves; Chamberlain, *A Documentary History of Chelsea*, p. 443.

<sup>58</sup>Chamberlain, *A Documentary History of Chelsea*, p. 443.



Beach Parkway, Chelsea residents reported digging up spent cannon balls from its yard.<sup>59</sup> James Stevens, a private in Captain Benjamin Farnum's company of Fyre's regiment, said simply, "we got dow[n] within a quarter of a mile of the fery & then halted & our ofisers went to louk out to place the canon thay went round by the water while thay come in sight of the sconer when as son as the regerlers saw our men thay fired on them then the firing Begun on boath sides & fired very worm." Stevens's description seems to be referring to an action taking place not at Chelsea Neck but at Mill Hill. He goes on to say, "there come a man & ordered us over a nol rit into the mouths of the canon we got on top of the nol & the grap shot & canon bauls com so thk that we retretd back to the rode & then marcht down to the fery."<sup>60</sup> The identity of the man Stevens mentions is not known; perhaps it was Stark, Nixon, or another officer on the scene, but some have speculated that it may have been Dr. Joseph Warren, who was rumored to be accompanying Putnam.<sup>61</sup> In any case, the provincials' retreat offered the *Diana's* crew, and especially the sailors in the longboats, a brief respite (see Phase 4 Map).

At about 10:00 P.M., as the slowly moving *Diana* came abreast of Winnisimmet Ferry, she took heavy small-arms fire once more. The withdrawing provincials, afforded some cover by the broad marshes at the base of Mount Bellingham, had quickly redeployed from Chelsea Neck and Mill Hill to the village and ferry landing. Within the buildings and behind the stone walls lining this stretch of Chelsea Creek they now lurked. The longboats' sailors were particularly vulnerable, and two, George Williams and William Crocke, both from the HMS *Somerset*, were killed.<sup>62</sup> With no other option but slaughter, the longboats' men cast off and left the *Diana*.<sup>63</sup> Caught in the tide, she drifted toward the Chelsea shore and came aground on

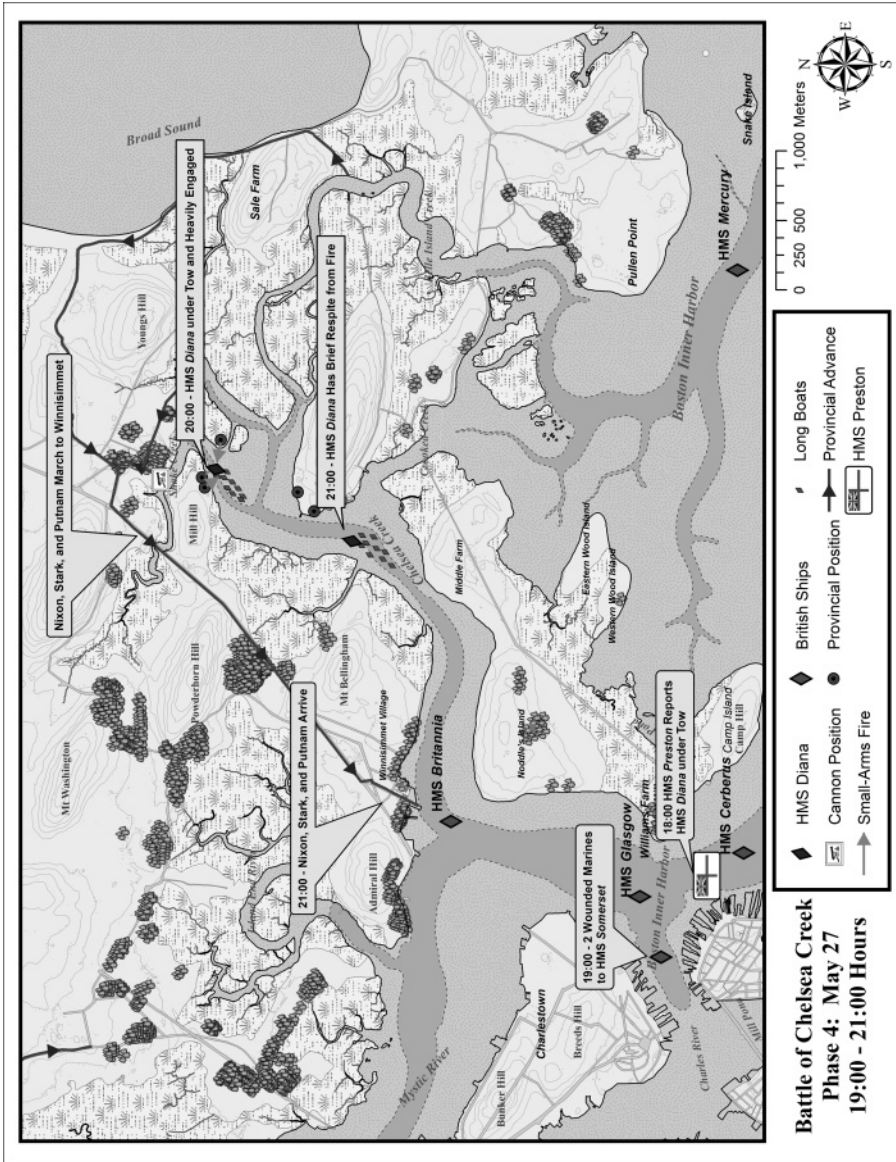
<sup>59</sup>Bossom, "The Battle of Chelsea," p. 26; Chamberlain, *A Documentary History of Chelsea*, p. 443.

<sup>60</sup>Stevens, "Revolutionary Journal," pp. 45-46.

<sup>61</sup>Tentindo and Jones, *Graves' Misfortune*, p. 39.

<sup>62</sup>LeCras, "Remarks &ca. Onboard the *Somerset*," 1:554.

<sup>63</sup>Court Martial of Lt. Thomas Graves.



the ferry ways about sixty yards from the landing shortly after 10:00 P.M.<sup>64</sup> Lieutenant Graves gave the order to deploy the kedge anchor to drag the ship back into water. The crew connected the chain to the hawser, a cable or rope used in mooring or towing a ship, but the *Diana* would not budge. When she began to heel over, Graves ordered her braced. The tide continued to recede, and the bracing failed. When she rolled onto her beam ends and it was no longer possible to keep the deck and fire the guns, Graves ordered the *Diana* abandoned. The *Britannia*, which was now within supporting distance, came alongside to receive the crew (see Phase 5 Map).<sup>65</sup>

Graves was determined to continue the fight from the *Britannia*. With daylight and high tide, he planned to reboard the *Diana*, but the provincials did not intend to allow him that opportunity. They set about plundering the ship of its valuables, including its four-pound cannons, twelve swivel guns, rigging, sails, ammunition, money, and clothing. Just after midnight, now 28 May, the crew of the *Britannia* noticed fire and smoke rising from the *Diana*'s companionway.<sup>66</sup> A party of twelve provincials, including Captain Isaac Baldwin of Stark's regiment and Sam Pratt of Chelsea, had piled hay under the ship's bow and set her on fire.<sup>67</sup> Graves gamely mounted an attempt to retake his vessel but was easily repulsed.<sup>68</sup> At approximately 3:00 A.M., the fire reached the magazine, and the ship exploded (see Phase 6 and Phase 7 Maps).<sup>69</sup>

<sup>64</sup>Court Martial of Lt. Thomas Graves; Barker, *Diary*; Stevens, "Revolutionary Journal."

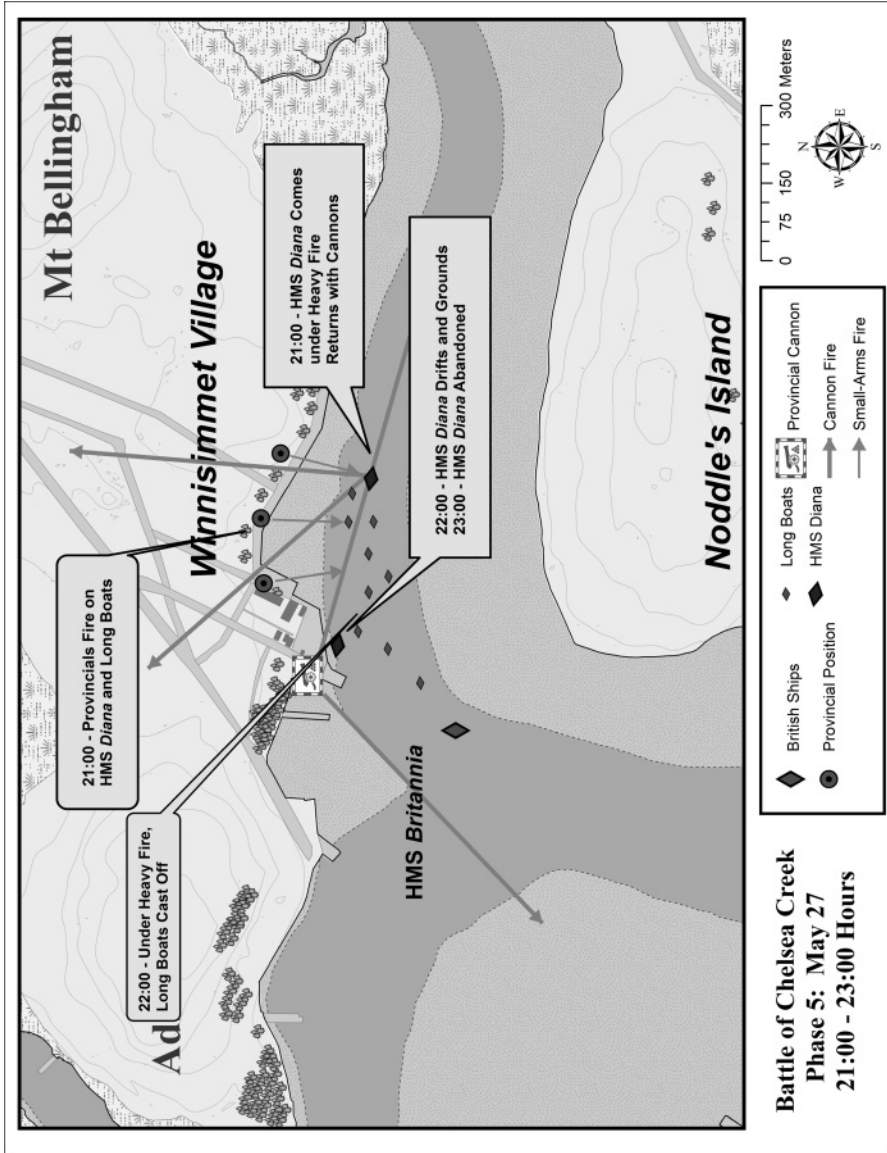
<sup>65</sup>Court Martial of Lt. Thomas Graves, and Stevens, "Revolutionary Journal."

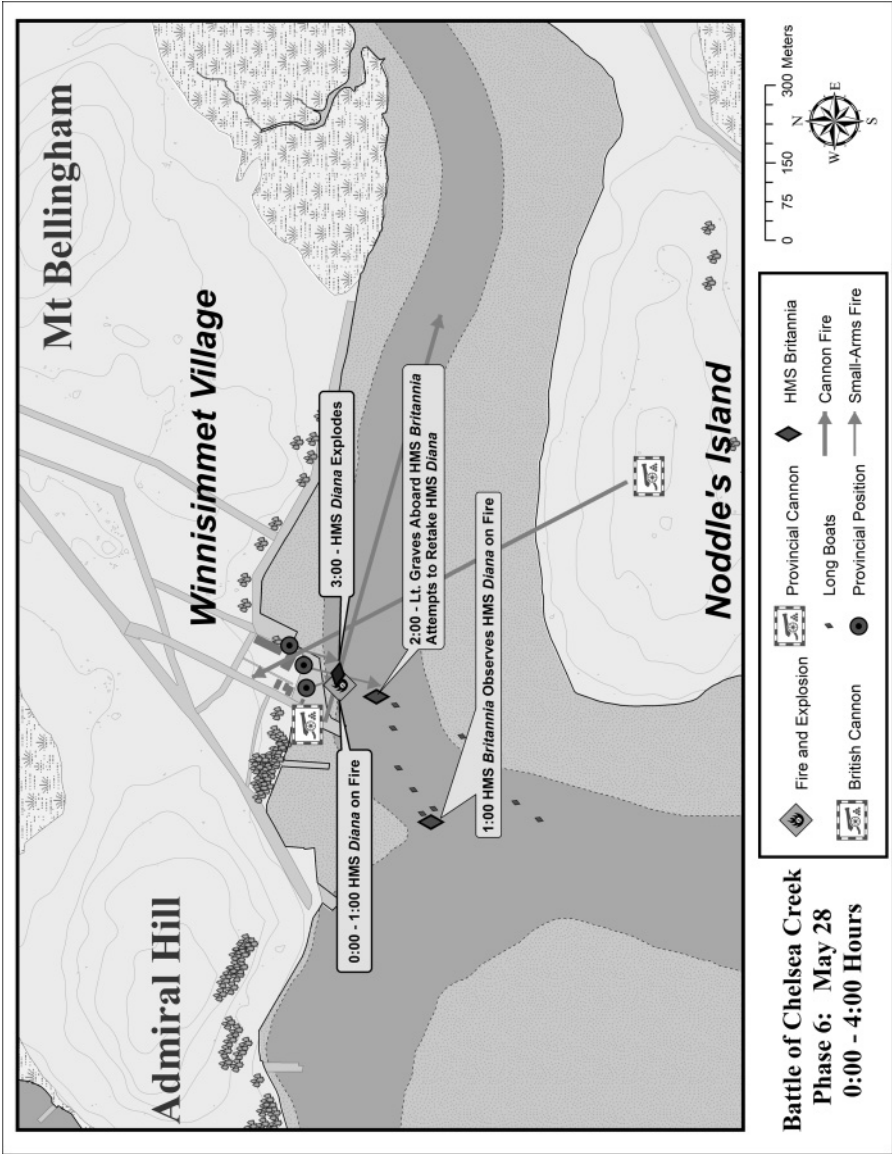
<sup>66</sup>Court Martial of Lt. Thomas Graves.

<sup>67</sup>Anonymous, "Report to the Massachusetts Committee of Safety of the Battle on Noddle's Island," in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 1:545-46; Graves to Stephens, 7 June 1775; Stevens, "Revolutionary Journal," p. 46; Farnsworth, "Diary," p. 81; William H. Sumner, *A History of East Boston; With Biographical Sketches of Its Early Proprietors, and an Appendix* (Boston: J. E. Tilton and Company, 1858), pp. 373-74; Tentindo and Jones, *Graves' Misfortune*, pp. 45-46.

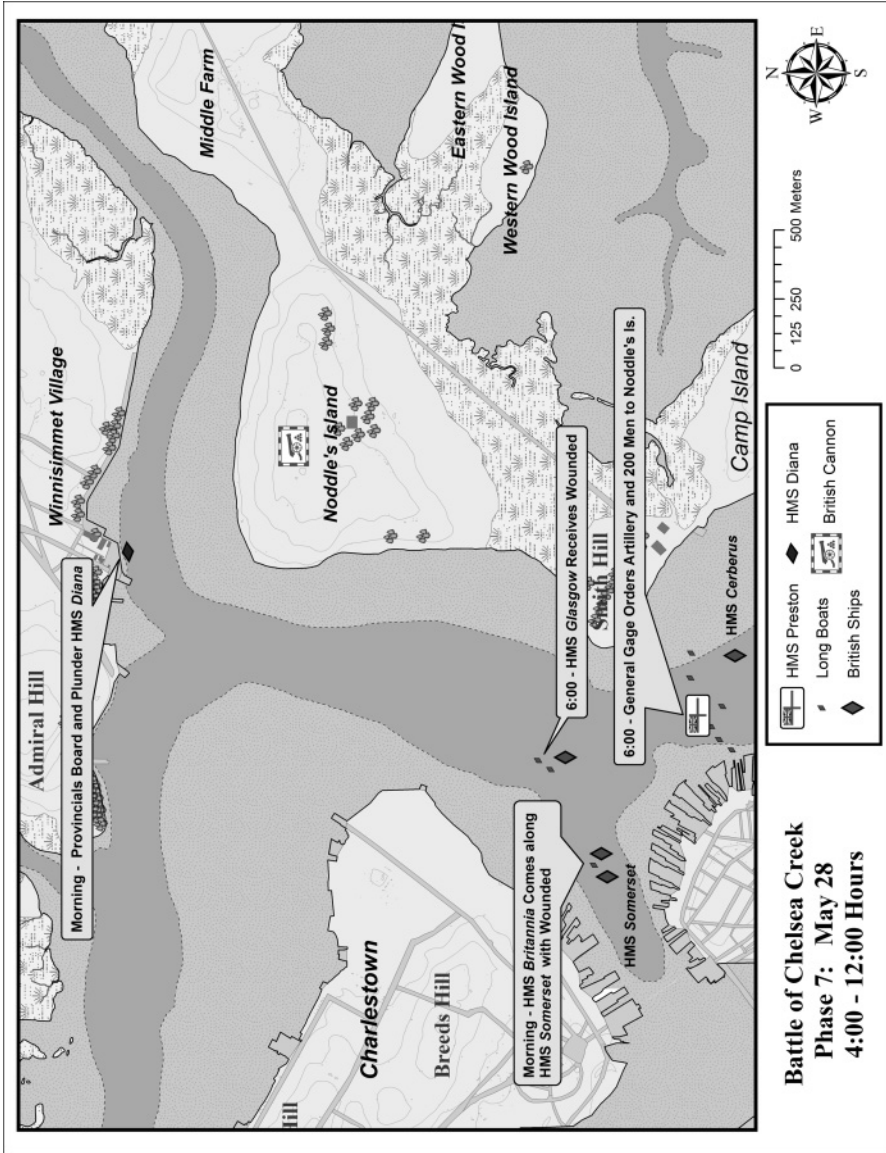
<sup>68</sup>Court Martial of Lt. Thomas Graves.

<sup>69</sup>Court Martial of Lt. Thomas Graves; Stevens, "Revolutionary Journal," p. 46; Farnsworth, "Diary," p. 81; Sumner, *History of East Boston*, pp. 375-76; Bossom, "The Battle of Chelsea," p. 28; Tentindo and Jones, *Graves' Misfortune*, p. 50.











The burning of the HMS *Diana* concluded the major chapter of the Battle of Chelsea Creek. Colonel Ephraim Doolittle arrived during the afternoon of 28 May with his 400-man regiment to relieve Nixon and Stark and to secure whatever was left of the *Diana*.<sup>70</sup> His movements touched off a fresh round of cannon fire from the British ships and the artillery position on Noddle's Island, but for all intents and purposes the fighting was over. Stark and Nixon, having relieved the British of a sizable number of livestock and several tons of hay, withdrew back to their camps. Estimates vary, but in addition to what was taken from the *Diana*, the Americans obtained 300–600 sheep and 40 head of cattle and horses. Losses for the entire action were extremely light: three provincials wounded; two British dead and several wounded.<sup>71</sup> Although the American statistics are reliable, some tantalizing evidence suggests that the British under-reported their casualties. A Maine ship, enroute from Falmouth to New York with a load of spars, was detained at Noddle's Island during the 27–28 May conflict. After the fighting stopped, the vessel's captain related, the *Britannia* came in and tied up to the wharf. "He was shocked to see the blood running out of the scuppers [and] a number of dead and wounded lying on the deck."<sup>72</sup> A denizen of Boston recorded "that Ten Regulars were buried there last Sunday Evening [28 May], who were killed in the Engagement," but more had succumbed. "Tis said they had about 30 killed in the whole, and a greater Number wounded."<sup>73</sup> The casualties from the HMS *Somerset* alone would have accounted for Grave's official tally, which does not include the wounded known from the *Diana*

<sup>70</sup>Colonel William Henshaw, *The Orderly Book of Colonel William Henshaw of the American Army, April 20–September 26, 1775*. Notes by Charles C. Smith (Boston: Press of John Wilson and Son, 1877), and Stevens, "Revolutionary Journal."

<sup>71</sup>The Memorial of Henry Howell Williams, June 12, 1775, in *American Archives: Fourth Series*, 2:971; "Report to the Massachusetts Committee of Safety of the Battle on Noddle's Island"; Graves to Stephens, 7 June 1775; McKay, *The Battle of Chelsea Creek*, p. 28; Tentindo and Jones, *Graves' Misfortune*, p. 50.

<sup>72</sup>Anonymous, "Extract of a Letter from Falmouth, Casco-Bay, Dated June 4, 1775," in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 1:606–7.

<sup>73</sup>Anonymous, "The Connecticut Gazette June 3, 1775," in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 1:602–3.

nor casualties aboard the *Britannia*, which were never reported (see Phase 8 Map).<sup>74</sup>

### *Subsequent Actions, 29 May–10 June 1775*

Although the destruction of the HMS *Diana* was certainly a feather in the provincials' caps, the thirty-man detachment that crossed from Hog to Noddle's Island during the mid-afternoon of 27 May was too small and had too brief a time to do more than initiate the main mission, and so on 29 May a militia party returned to complete the task of clearing the island of its livestock and fodder. Lieutenant John Barker of His Majesty's Own Regiment, quartered in Boston, recorded in his journal that "[today] the Rebels were seen again on the same Island. . . . [T]hey drove all the Cattle and Sheep off to the Main and set fire to four houses; at 8 o'clock a house was set on fire at Hog Island."<sup>75</sup> Henry Howell Williams, owner of the fine mansion house (and livestock being liberated) on Noddle's Island, corroborated Barker's story. In a letter written to the Massachusetts Provincial Congress on 12 June 1775, he complained

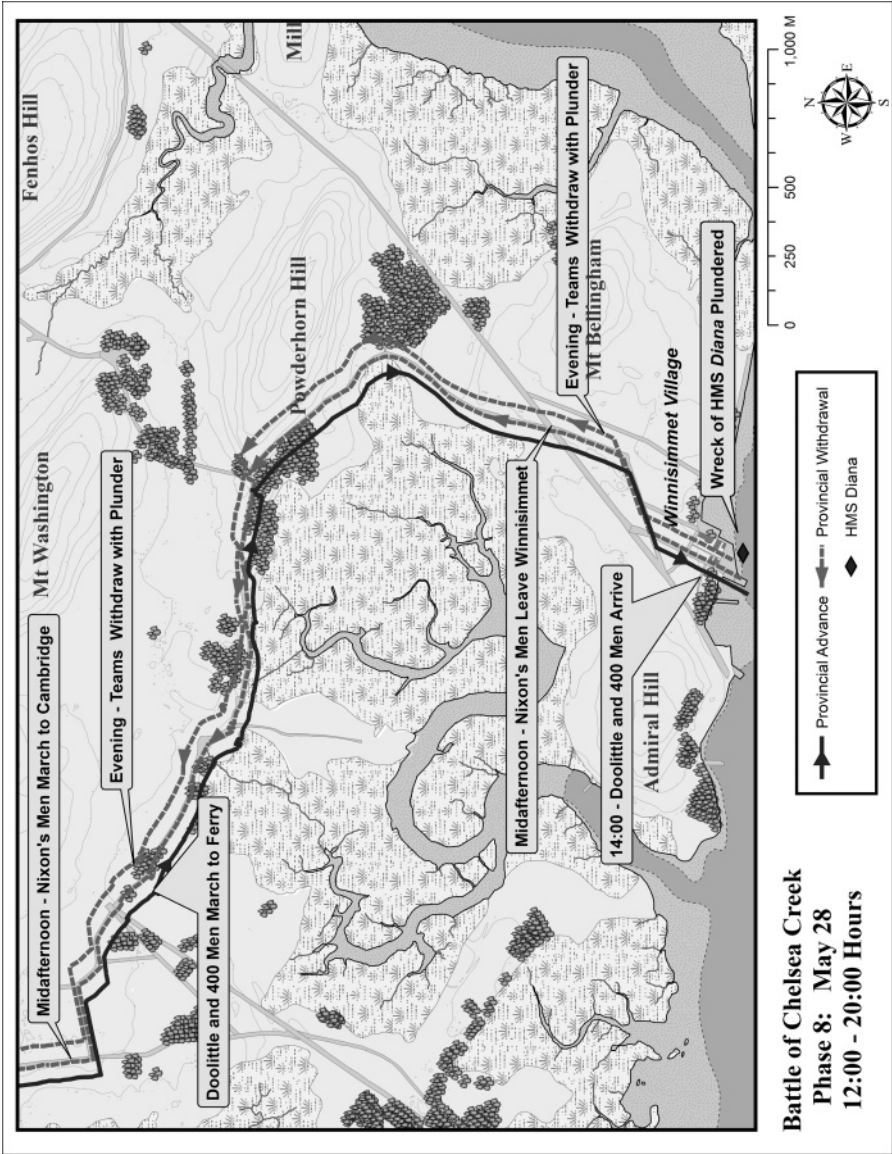
That on *Monday*, the 29<sup>th</sup> of *May*, the same or another number of said armed troops came again on to said island, and then and there did burn and destroy two other dwelling-houses, goods, &c., and three barns; and at the same time did take away and drive off from said island about five hundred old sheep, and about three hundred and forty lambs, with between thirty and forty head of horned cattle, the property of your memorialist, together with a further number of horses, hogs, &c., &c.<sup>76</sup>

What is most interesting about the 29 May provincial incursion is the British response: they did nothing. The marines who had landed on Noddle's during the afternoon of 27 May were still there, at least for a portion of the day, on the 29th. Captain John Robinson of the HMS *Preston*, the man who had alerted

<sup>74</sup>Court Martial of Lt. Thomas Graves.

<sup>75</sup>Barker, *Diary*, pp. 51–52.

<sup>76</sup>Williams, Memorial of June 12, 1775.



Vice Admiral Graves to the provincials' presence on Noddle's on the 27th, recorded no sightings two days later. He noted only that he "made the Signals for all boats, and sent them to take marines off Noddle's Island."<sup>77</sup> General Gage, in Boston, made preparations for a move toward Noddle's but then must have thought better of it. Lieutenant Barker wrote in his diary that all light infantry companies "were immediately order'd to parade. . . . In about 2 hours we were dismissed, and the Rebels left to do their business quietly."<sup>78</sup> The apparent reason for the shift is found in a line of Vice Admiral Graves's journal. That day he wrote, "the Rebels burned the only dwelling house on Noddles Island, which being the property of a notorious Rebel then in Arms, was not much regarded."<sup>79</sup> That disregard was, of course, short sighted. The house of one enemy rebel was lost, to be sure, but an army of rebels was systematically carting off valuable assets for provisioning the English troops.

Once more the provincials returned. Henry Howell Williams, the "notorious Rebel" whose account of the destruction of his property differed from Graves's by one day, stated that "on *Tuesday*, the 30th day of May aforesaid, they entered again on to said island, and then and there proceeded and burnt your memorialist's mansion house, with all barns, corn-houses, and store houses, stores, provisions, goods, house furniture, wearing apparel, liquors, and utensils of all sorts, to a very considerable amount and value."<sup>80</sup> One of the storehouses consigned to the flames was the Royal Navy's cooperage house. Captain Tyringham Howe, of the HMS *Glasgow*, fixed the losses at "Butts twelve, punches fifteen, Hh'ds ten, Barrells twelve, all full hoopd with 134 Iron hoops & all the Coopers tools."<sup>81</sup> This time Graves saw fit to act. Lieutenant Barker reported that while the naval vessels moored in the harbor bombarded the provincials,

<sup>77</sup>ADM 51/720 Captain's Log HMS *Preston* (1774 Feb 2 – 1780 Oct 23), National Archives of England, Kew.

<sup>78</sup>Barker, *Diary*, p. 51.

<sup>79</sup>"Narrative of Vice Admiral Samuel Graves May 29, 1775," in *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*, 1:557; Williams, Memorial of June 12, 1775.

<sup>80</sup>Williams, Memorial of June 12, 1775.

<sup>81</sup>Howe, "Journal of His Majesty's Ship *Glasgow*," 1:575.

“a schooner was also sent to fire along the shore.”<sup>82</sup> The next morning, the Royal Marines were dispatched to Noddle’s Island to retrieve whatever was left in the naval storehouses.<sup>83</sup>

The provincials did not return to Noddle’s Island again until 3 June, when Captain Robinson, on board the *Preston*, reported that he “fired several times at the rebels, to prevent their entrenching on the island.”<sup>84</sup> Might that event, which we have not found recorded elsewhere, have been a prelude to the Battle of Bunker Hill, fought two weeks later?

The last action of the Chelsea Creek Battle period took place on Noddle’s Island on 10 June. On this occasion, Williams wrote that the provincials “entered again, and burnt and destroyed the warehouse, the last building on said island.”<sup>85</sup> This final instance of arson provoked no reaction beyond a brief bombardment from the HMS *Somerset*.<sup>86</sup> Except for the odd, small detail sent to gather up hay, neither the provincials nor the British expressed any further interest in Noddle’s Island for the duration of the Siege of Boston. The livestock and fodder stored there and on Hog Island had been removed, and the islands were denied to the British for the remainder of their time in Boston.



Judge Bossom considered historians’ neglect of the Battle of Chelsea Creek something akin to a criminal cover up. He blamed Richard Frothingham, especially, for deliberately suppressing facts about the May 1775 events to promote the heroism of his friend William Prescott at Bunker Hill. “Therefore, it seems to me,” Bossom wrote, “that an historian who was a partisan of Prescott, in writing of this battle would seek to show that it was not of great importance.”<sup>87</sup> In truth, the real reason

<sup>82</sup>Barker, *Diary*, p. 53.

<sup>83</sup>Robinson, “Journal Of His Majesty’s Ship *Preston*,” 1:575.

<sup>84</sup>Captain’s Log HMS *Preston* (1774 Feb 2 – 1780 Oct 23); Tentindo and Jones, *Graves’ Misfortune*, p. 131.

<sup>85</sup>Williams, Memorial of June 12, 1775.

<sup>86</sup>LeCras, “Remarks &ca. Onboard the *Somerset*,” 1:645.

<sup>87</sup>Bossom, “The Battle of Chelsea,” pp. 31–32.

the Battle of Chelsea Creek has been “forgotten” has more to do with the nature of the historical record and the simple, inexorable passage of time. As historians, we depend on the documentary record to provide the facts necessary to reconstruct historical events. The Battle of Chelsea Creek took place largely at night, with poor visibility, and the terrain blocked the view of many potential eyewitnesses. The participants did not write many accounts of their own, or at least few have survived. The Battles of Lexington and Concord and of Bunker Hill, on the contrary, occurred during the day, in full view of thousands of eyewitnesses, who felt compelled to record their views of the dramatic events that had transpired. Those two battles also spawned investigations, which swelled the documentary file. Although the court martial of Lieutenant Graves is notable, its proceedings were entered into a British, not an American, record. Dedication ceremonies at the respective battlefields produced yet another body of material that contributed to the evidentiary log, but commemorations of the Battle of Chelsea Creek were rarely recognized beyond its immediate environs, even in a neighboring community as intimately connected to and assisted by those late May events as Boston.

The lack of documentation about the Battle of Chelsea Creek has denied the engagement its proper place in the historiography of the American Revolution. Prior to the battle, provincial forces were largely passive. They had dug in; they were awaiting and expected to respond to British movements. The 21 May engagement at Grape Island was such a response; it was a defensive maneuver intended to block the British effort to obtain livestock and fodder to provision the garrison and townspeople trapped within Boston. The Battle of Chelsea Creek, 27–28 May, was different. For the first time, the provincials took the offensive as they commenced operations to remove the livestock and fodder from Hog and Noddle’s Islands. That difference cannot be underestimated. This new, aggressive posture, this willingness to go on the offensive, demonstrates that the provincial militia was surprisingly well prepared less than a month after the hostilities at Lexington and Concord and that its troops were willing to fight to achieve strategic goals. Officers



like General Putnam, Colonel Stark, and Colonel Nixon had gained experience leading men into combat during the French and Indian War, and they brought that experience with them to the Siege of Boston. The operations along Chelsea Creek provided valuable training for the younger men under their command and boosted the provincial army's morale as a whole. Moreover, by neutralizing Noddle's Island as a victualing station, Americans ensured that fresh produce, meat, and fodder could no longer be obtained locally, forcing those trapped in Boston to depend on a diet of salt beef and pork that had to be transported all the way from England. While the British garrison did not starve during its long winter occupation, conditions deteriorated to such a degree that they had a significant impact on the ultimate decision to abandon Boston.

Beyond the impressive achievement of its strategic objectives, the Battle of Chelsea Creek was the first instance in which parties from different colonies cooperated militarily to defend their constitutional rights. When men were selected to carry out the raid on Noddle's and Hog Islands, an obvious choice was Colonel John Nixon and his Massachusetts regiment, but Colonel John Stark and his New Hampshire militiamen were also called up. General Israel Putnam, the raid's commander, was from Connecticut. It was at Chelsea Creek, and not Bunker Hill (although many of the same units would take part), where men from different New England colonies first fought together in the Revolution.<sup>88</sup>

The battlefields of Lexington and Concord were set aside in 1799 and 1835, respectively, to honor those everyday people, farmers, shopkeepers, blacksmiths, and others who on 19 April 1775 defied the oppression of their monarch. The battlefield at Bunker Hill in Charlestown is crowned with a 220-foot obelisk, visible from points throughout greater Boston, which pays tribute to the 17 June 1775 engagement widely credited with galvanizing the military resistance to British tyranny. You will find no such memorial for the 27–28 May 1775 Battle of Chelsea

<sup>88</sup>Bossom, "The Battle of Chelsea," pp. 29–32; McKay, *The Battle of Chelsea Creek*, p. 3; Tentindo and Jones, *Graves' Misfortune*, p. 20.

Creek. The plaques that once dotted the battlefield have been stolen, and the terrain on which it lay has been consumed by the urban sprawl of Boston's East End, Chelsea, and Revere. No physical evidence remains to notify current and future generations that here their ancestors held their ground to ensure that liberty, not the king, would reign over their country. But although "the forgotten battle of the Revolutionary War" still lacks markers and memorials, it is forgotten no longer. With the aid of current technology, its particulars have been uncovered and recorded; and with the aid of current technology (digital distribution as well as print), the events at the Battle of Chelsea Creek can now be broadcast to the world.

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