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Storyteller &c

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The Courts-Martial following the Battle of Bunker Hill (Part 1 of 3)

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 11, 2012 | 1775

This story of the colonial cannon at the Battle of Bunker Hill is a bleak one. First, **Capt. Samuel Gridley** abandoned his two field artillery. Then **Capt. John Callender** did the same. And finally, **Maj. Scarborough Gridley** failed even to join the battle, fearful as he was of crossing Charlestown Neck. If it were not for **Capt. Samuel Trevett**, who disobeyed the orders of his superior, Maj. Gridley, and so crossed Charlestown Neck with his two guns regardless, there would be no examples of good officership and conduct for the entire Massachusetts Artillery Regiment. After **the Battle of Bunker Hill**, the senior military leadership began to inquire as to the causes of the American loss. Soon, there were several courts-martial underway regarding the failure of the colonial cannon. Capt. Callender would have the dubious distinction of being sentenced first.



The Adams 3-pounder field cannon mounted inside the top of the Bunker Hill Monument obelisk. However, this cannon probably did not serve at the Battle of Bunker Hill.

First, pending the various investigations into the conduct of the artillery officers, the Massachusetts Provincial Congress ordered on June 23, 1775:

That the Committee of Safety be directed to make out a new list for Officers of the Train of Artillery, and that no person unworthy of the office be appointed.

In consequence, Maj. Scarborough Gridley, though nominated for the first major position in the artillery by his father Col. Richard Gridley, was knocked down a peg and confirmed as second major. Even so, his investigation was on-going.

Next came the courts-martial of Capt. Samuel Gridley and Capt. John Callender, both having the undesirable distinction of being party to the first trials after the Battle of Bunker Hill. Capt. Gridley's hearing was postponed for a time, but Callender's went quick. As it finished, Gen. Washington arrived and took command of the various provincial armies. Callender thus had the dishonor of being party to one of Washington's first acts as commander-in-chief. As given in Washington's General Orders, July 7, 1775:

It is with inexpressible concern that the General, upon his first arrival in the Army, should find an officer sentenced by a General Court-Martial to be cashiered for cowardice a crime of all others the most infamous in a soldier, the most injurious to an Army, and the last to be forgiven; inasmuch as it may, and often does happen, that the cowardice of a single officer may prove a destruction of the whole Army; the General, therefore, (though with great concern, and more especially as the transaction happened before he had the command of the Troops,) thinks himself obliged, for the good of the service, to approve the judgment of the Court-Martial, with respect to Captain John Callender, who is hereby sentenced to be cashiered. Captain John Callender is accordingly cashiered, and dismissed from all further service in the Continental Army as an officer.

The General having made all due inquiries and maturely considered this matter, is led to the above determination, not only from the particular guilt of Captain Callender, but the fatal consequences of such conduct to the Army and to the cause of America.

However, the story of Callender does not end there.

Quoting from Swett's *Bunker Hill* 57–58 (first and third paragraphs below)¹ and Frothingham's *Siege* 185 (second paragraph below),² this is what happened next:

Notwithstanding this, our hero resolved to compel the world to acknowledge, by his future conduct, that his past had been mistaken. He continued with his corps as a volunteer, and desperately exposed himself in every action. The brave and beneficent Knox [Col. Gridley's replacement as head of the Artillery] extended to him his friendship. At the battle on Long Island, the Capt. and Lieut. of the artillery company, in which he served, were shot; he assumed the command, and refusing to retreat, fought his pieces to the last; the bayonets of the soldiers were just upon him, when a British officer, admiring his chivalrous and

desperate courage, interfered and saved him.

He was taken prisoner by the enemy, August 27, 1776. He remained over a year in the hands of the British. A touching petition, dated September 15, 1777, was addressed to the government of Massachusetts by his wife, in his behalf. 'Your petitioner,' it says, 'with four helpless infants, is now, through the distress of a kind and loving husband, a tender and affectionate parent, reduced to a state of misery and wretchedness and want, truly pitiable.' Her devotion had found a way of relief, by an [prisoner] exchange, and it was successful.

Washington expressed the highest approbation of his conduct, gave him his hand and his cordial thanks; ordered the sentence of the court martial to be erased from the orderly book, and restored him his commission. He held this during the war, and left service at the peace, with the highest honour and reputation.

Meanwhile, Capt. Samuel Gridley's court-martial was inexplicably stretched on for months. But Maj. Scarborough Gridley's fate in the artillery was soon coming to an end... (Part 2 of this 3-part series in 3 weeks!)

1. Samuel Swett's ***The History of the Bunker Hill Battle, With a Plan*** (Boston: Munroe and Francis, 1826, 2nd ed. [orig. 1818]).
2. Richard Frothingham's ***History of the Siege of Boston*** (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1872, 3rd ed.).



Derek



Derek's Book

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*6 Responses to The Courts-Martial following the Battle of Bunker Hill
(Part 1 of 3)*



J. L. Bell Wednesday, January 11, 2012 at 20:57

I have a different take on Capt. Samuel Gridley's court-martial, which indeed came much later than Capt. John Callender's. It appears to have been prompted by a dispute with a lieutenant in his company, and I suspect Gridley demanded the trial to restore his standing. Callender appears to have been the sole scapegoat offered by Col. Richard Gridley's artillery regiment in the month after the battle. Of course, his last name wasn't Gridley.

Reply



Derek Beck Thursday, January 12, 2012 at 01:02

On Callender becoming a scapegoat: you nailed it right on the head: it was because he was not a Gridley. I'll touch on the dispute with the lieutenant in the coming posts, but I never considered that it might have been due to that dispute which caused Capt. Gridley's trial to stretch on. Sadly, the official record is lacking on the details. But your theory definitely holds water, and I appreciate you sharing it here!

Reply



Gavin Peacock Sunday, February 26, 2012 at 00:58

John Callender was not the only scapegoat from Col. Richard Gridley's regiment. Captain **Edward Crafts** was also court-martialed. **But Edward was acquitted.** The court ruled that "no part of the charge against the prisoner is proved, except that of using abusive expressions to Major Gridley". **Edward** had been in Paddock's artillery and in charge of the artillery at Worcester. Apparently he didn't think much of Major Gridley's choices that day. **Edward's** penalty was to be given a reprimand from the lieutenant colonel and that he ask pardon from Major Gridley.

Later, Major Gridley was court-martialed and his majority was offered to **Edward's** older brother, Thomas Crafts. John Adams singled out **Edward** in his letter to James Warren recommending Thomas. Thomas turned down the position **as J.L. Bell has written.** **Edward** went on to serve as first Captain under Knox.

Reply



Derek Beck Sunday, February 26, 2012 at 02:15

Thanks for the insights Gavin! I added the link above to JL Bell's post on the subject.

Reply

