Conquer or Die

The 1776 New York Campaign

by Mark Maloy and Dan Welch

Robert Orrison, series editor
Mark Maloy, chief historian

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Unedited Excerpt

SB
Savas Beatie
California

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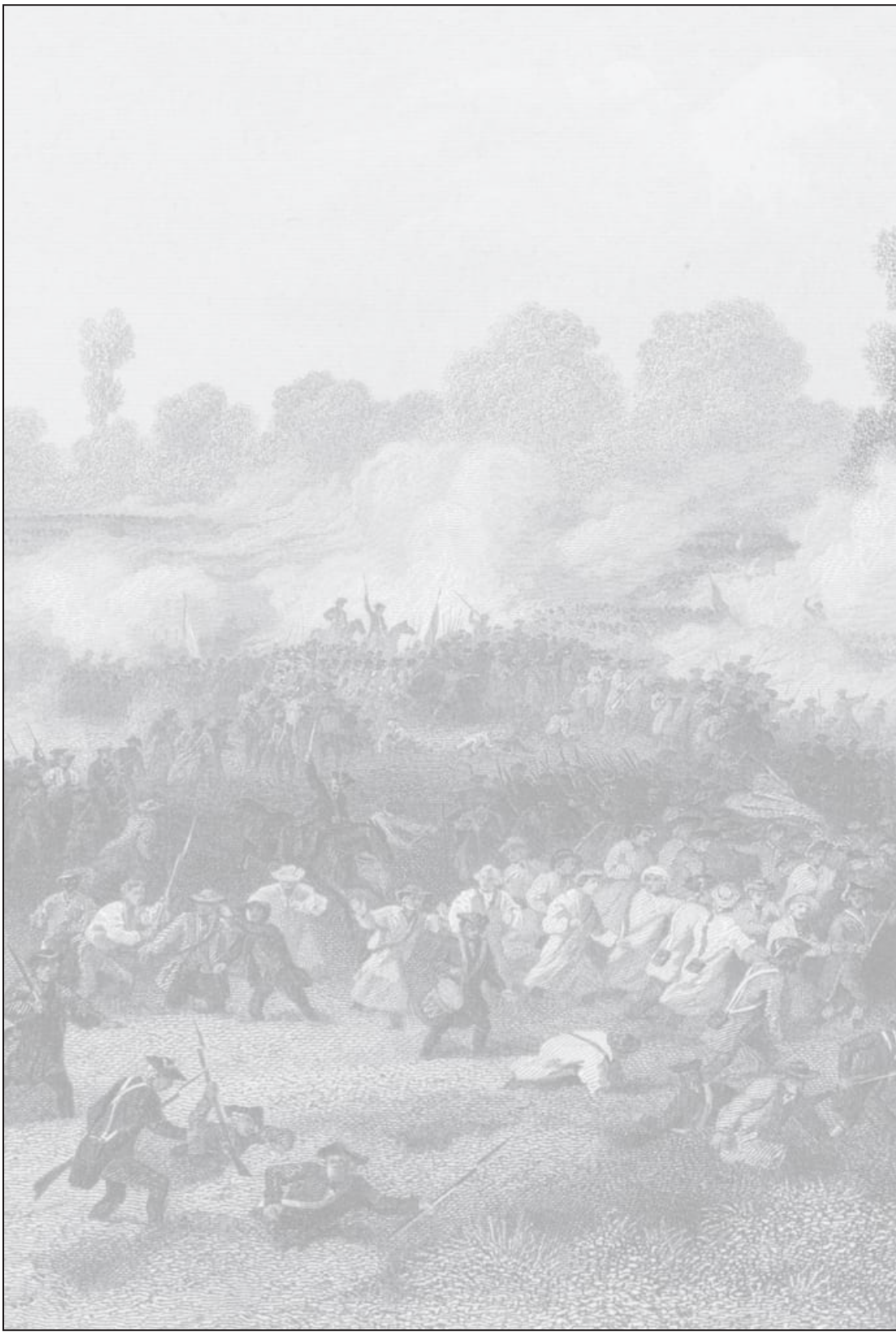
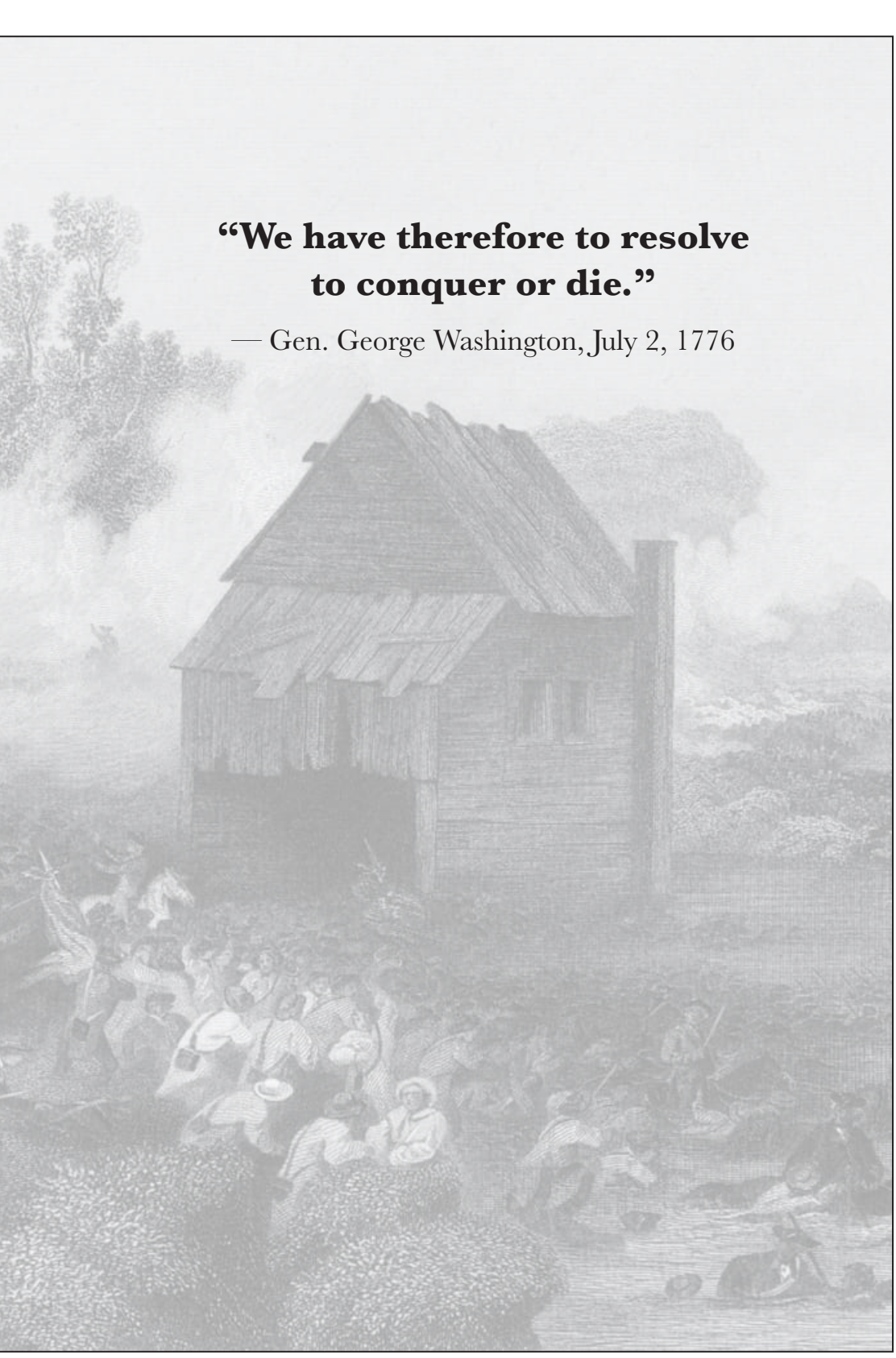
To my wife, Lauren, thank you for your unwavering support as I co-wrote this book, even while we welcomed our third child. This book would not have been possible without you. You are truly the "best of wives and best of women."

To my sons, Sam, Thomas, and Charlie, I hope you will come to share my love of the history and places of New York City. More than that, I hope you will carry forward the principles for which those patriots fought and died 250 years ago.



“We have therefore to resolve to conquer or die.”

— Gen. George Washington, July 2, 1776



Foreword

By Benjamin L. Carp

Walk the streets of most East Coast cities in the United States, and you can find the eighteenth-century seaports. Savannah, Charleston, Williamsburg, Philadelphia, Newport, and Boston all know how to show off their roles in the fight for American Independence. Ships menaced these harbors. Cannon blasts echoed in their inlets. Armed men marched through the streets. Behind the forts and breastworks, conquering armies raised new flags above the wharves and streets.

Visitors to New York City, however, will have the most trouble reconstructing the feel of the eighteenth-century city and calling to mind the dramatic events of 1776. New Yorkers have mostly chosen to forget this part of the city's past. They have built over the hills and streams in the quest for new economic opportunities. They have blushed, perhaps, at the sites where George Washington and his men fought so many losing battles; later generations may have wanted to leave behind this landscape of retreat, defeat, and a seven-year British occupation. New Yorkers have also welcomed millions of immigrants who transformed the city into a powerhouse of ceaseless labor and cultural creativity, emphasizing bright lights, industriousness, and new fashions at the expense of a sepia-toned past.

As a result, only three colonial structures survive in Manhattan: the Morris-Jumel Mansion, St. Paul's Chapel, and the fence around Bowling Green. Today,

One World Trade Center stands at the site once occupied by the World Trade Center that was destroyed on September 11, 2001. It is the tallest building in the United States of America, rising to the symbolic height of 1,776 feet. In 1776, the United States declared independence, but it was also the year of one of the largest and bloodiest campaigns during the Revolutionary War: the 1776 New York campaign. (mm)

the giant skyscrapers of the Financial District dwarf Lower Manhattan. Pavement, concrete, steel, and masonry hold up eight million people in five boroughs that were once pastures, fields, and forests. Bridges now span the waterways that once required wind, cables, or strong backs to cross from one land mass to another.

We need careful guidance, then, to travel backwards in time to see the places where men and women suffered and bled in the year of American Independence. Dan Welch and Mark Maloy have provided us with a concise and sharply rendered account of the New York campaign, helping us to unearth what we have buried. This book contains a careful account of the battles of Long Island (or Brooklyn), Kip's Bay, Harlem Heights, Pell's Point, White Plains, and Fort Washington, as well as other major events of the summer and fall of 1776.

Both sides understood that New York City was a key strategic position. Whoever controlled the seaport at the mouth of the Hudson River would command access to Long Island, Manhattan, northern New Jersey, western Connecticut, and the Hudson Highlands. From there, ships could get as far as Albany, potentially allowing access to Iroquois country, Lake Champlain, northern New England, the St. Lawrence River, and the Great Lakes. This landscape would one day make New York the Empire State, and New York City would be the commercial and financial link between the American interior and the rest of the world. In 1776, the British coveted New York City as a headquarters, naval base, and a marketplace where Loyalists could rally and help reestablish royal control.

Almost 60,000 men were engaged in the campaigns of 1776, far more than the number of inhabitants in New York City itself (only 25,000 on the eve of the Revolution). When the brothers Lord Richard, Admiral Howe and General William Howe arrived in New York harbor to lead the massive British expeditionary force, they were dismayed to find that the Americans had already declared independence. They were prepared to convince the people of the Middle Colonies to return to their royal allegiance, either voluntarily or by force.

When the Continental Congress issued the Declaration of Independence, New Yorkers and the rebel troops occupying their city pulled down a gilded statue of King George III in Bowling Green. Yet they also knew that mere words wouldn't win the new nation its independence. Indeed, within a few months of the Declaration, British and German forces would occupy most of Long Island and Manhattan, and it would hold those positions for the remainder of the Revolutionary War.

The new United States had its first clash with the soldiers of the mother country in Brooklyn. Over the next four months, the Howes pursued Washington and his army up Manhattan, into Westchester, through New Jersey, and across the Delaware River. A Virginian led an army (the plurality of whom were New Englanders) that appeared to dwindle almost to the point of destruction, only for Washington to redeem himself at Trenton and Princeton.

Many chroniclers have referred to these four months as the darkest days of the American Revolution. Patriotic readers might be forgiven, therefore, for wanting to fast-forward this period, perhaps by taking in Emanuel Leutze's painting of Washington crossing the icy Delaware at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. For Americans, the "ten crucial days" make for a more uplifting story than the series of defeats that Washington suffered in almost every battle he fought in 1776.

But we do ourselves no favors by skipping to the end. Welch and Maloy remind us that the battles around New York City are filled with tremendous strategic and tactical achievements as well as fire, espionage, and civil war. Washington did his best to rally his men, but his army was plagued by desertion, disease, and dismal discipline. Civilians followed the latest news nervously, unsure whether either side could secure a lasting triumph. The 250th anniversary of these events is a good occasion to remind ourselves that the hard-won achievement of American victory was by no means assured.

Like the other books in this series, the authors offer the reader opportunities to explore the locations where these events took place. The dedicated visitor

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will be rewarded with the opportunity to see New York City and its environs in a new light. What is now a world-class metropolis was once a world of farms and waterways. For a time, the lands and rivers were battlefields where Americans fought to preserve their fragile independence. Thousands died, and many more were imprisoned and left to rot away. The Americans were, by the end, down and defeated, not knowing that their failures wouldn't last.

A Note About Terminology

We have generally used the modern names of locations around New York, such as the Hudson River, though it was called the North River in 1776. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, we have done this unless specifically quoted. Throughout the book we use the terms "Americans" and "Patriots" to describe those who were fighting for the cause of American independence, although most Americans at that time identified more with their states, and the armies were often made up of diverse arrays of people from different countries. Many Americans also sided with the Crown's forces; we describe these people as "Loyalists," even though many of them simply saw themselves as patriots. For the Crown's forces, we use the term "British," even though their armies often included German and American soldiers. We use these terms for simplicity and style reasons. However, as any historian knows, history is always much more complicated than seen on the surface.

Although New York City is rarely associated with the Revolutionary War, it was the site of some of the conflict's largest and most important battles. In 1776, a series of engagements across Brooklyn, Manhattan, the Bronx, and Westchester County pitted more than 32,000 British and Hessian troops against 24,000 American soldiers in George Washington's first major campaign against the British. The fighting included the battles of Long Island, Kip's Bay, Harlem Heights, Pell's Point, White Plains, and Fort Washington,

resulting in thousands of casualties and prisoners. Despite featuring dramatic events such as daring retreats, night marches, espionage, and fierce combat, the New York campaign is often overlooked in both popular memory and historical literature. Today, much of the battlefield landscape has been absorbed into the modern city, yet numerous markers, monuments, and historic sites still commemorate these events. This book seeks to provide both an overview of the campaign and a guide to visiting the surviving locations, helping readers explore one of the Revolutionary War's most significant yet underappreciated urban battlefields."

The Summer Soldiers

Chapter One

March 17–June 4, 1776

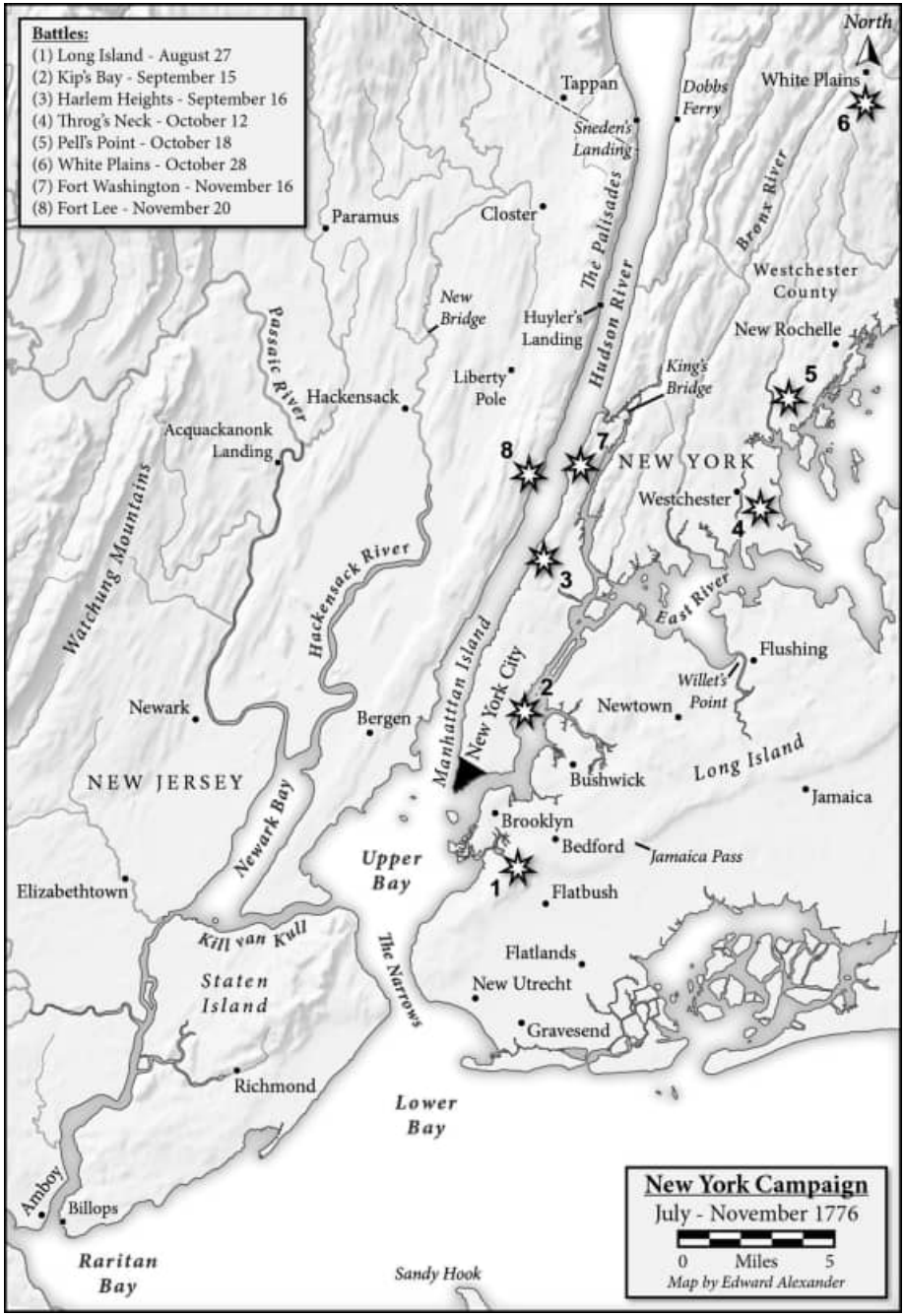
"We expect a very bloody Summer of it at New York."

— Gen. George Washington, June 4, 1776

After nearly a week of preparation and bad weather, and despite only having 78 transport ships available, British army commander Lt. Gen. William Howe, on March 16, 1776, ordered, "The whole Garrison to be under Arms at 4 O'Clock in the morning, & to be in readiness to embark when ordered." By 9:00 a.m. on March 17, St. Patrick's Day, with all available transports loaded, Howe—with 11,000 British soldiers, women, children, and Loyalist citizens of Boston—set sail for Halifax. Over the next several days, the Continental Army reclaimed Boston and Charlestown, Massachusetts. The British occupation of Boston was finally over, the Patriot siege lifted, and the stage for the next great military campaign in the burgeoning war for American Independence was set.

Foreshadowing the British departure and the location of the next campaign in a letter written two days before they set sail, Col. Joseph Reed, later George Washington's adjutant-general, correctly asserted, "If Howe should leave Boston, we expect he will make for New York; and, at all events, we look upon that as one of the scenes of the summer business." Both Washington and Howe had looked to New York as the

A mob tore down the statue of King George III at Bowling Green on July 9, 1776, after hearing the Declaration of Independence read for the first time. The statue was melted down and turned into 42,000 musket balls for the Patriot cause. A recent elemental analysis of a musket ball found on the Monmouth battlefield compared with surviving pieces of the statue shows that even in 1778, the Patriots were using these musket balls to fire into the British redcoats. (nypl)



NEW YORK CAMPAIGN—This map shows the area in and around New York City in 1776 with the main battle locations marked.

next theater of operations long before the British fleet sailed out of Boston Harbor that March morning. Indeed, Howe's predecessor, Gen. Thomas Gage, the British military governor of Massachusetts in 1775, by whose orders the debacles at Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill transpired, also looked to New York.

But why New York? For Gage, and thus Howe, the new campaign would have two distinct aspects, both of which would shift momentum and the recognition of power back to the Crown. First, and most importantly, New York would have the ability to provide logistical support for an army. Lack of supplies and food—particularly meat—and bouts of illness continued to deplete the combat effective strength of the British army during the Siege of Boston. All of these ills could be remedied from a new base of operations and supply—particularly one with more Loyalist support as could be found in New York.

The second major thought behind a new campaign in New York would be England's ability to regain control of the wayward New England colonies. By March 1776, British power in the colonies was flagging. They had been defeated at Lexington and Concord, and Bunker Hill was only a pyrrhic victory. Coupled with the months-long Siege of Boston, the united colonies proved this was not just a simple uprising. As Prime Minister of Britain, Lord North wrote to King George III in July 1775, a new strategy was required as this was now "a foreign war."

Shifting strategic and tactical operations to New York would allow British forces to cut supplies and support from the middle and southern colonies that flowed to New England. To accomplish this, two separate British commands, Howe's and Maj. Gen. Sir Guy Carleton's in Canada, would be used. Howe would push northward, up the Hudson River Valley from New York while Carleton and his men pushed south along the same valley from Canada. Once they secured the Hudson River, further actions against the rebellious New England colonies could occur. That only left Washington's army to contend with, a seemingly minor detail, but necessary to maintain complete control of the Hudson River and respective

Joseph Reed was incredibly active in the fight for independence, serving as Washington's aide-de-camp, and later, as adjutant general of the Continental Army, and is also credited with designing the Pine Tree Flag (Appeal to Heaven) that was used during the war. (loc)

Both commanding officers, Washington and Howe, understood the key strategic assets of New York. And, while the Siege of Boston dragged on, both generals looked to it as the next step in the war. Pictured here, lower Manhattan as it looked in 1776. (nypl)

valley. Aiding all of these operations would be the British control of New York harbor.

The road to a new campaign in New York, however, had far earlier beginnings than March 1776. Indeed, General Gage was already planning this strategic and operational shift as early as the summer of 1775. It took time for that new military direction to be approved, however. The new orders cut by the British cabinet did not arrive until October 4, 1775—and with that new strategic direction also came a new British commander in North America. As one historian wrote, the Battle of Bunker Hill in June 1775 "was the occasion rather than the cause of his [Gage's] dismissal," and "indicates that he had powerful enemies in London." This, despite Gage's constant request for more men and material as a means to achieve British objectives during the events of 1775. Indeed, a cabal against Gage in London had been afoot for some time before the arrival of his dismissal orders.

Historian Troyer Anderson argued in his 1936 book on the Howe brothers that the American Revolution "was won and lost during the first three years," and, since William Howe, pictured here, was in command during much of this time frame, "Any explanation of British failure during these years thus becomes a verdict upon the conduct of the two brothers." (nypl)

Gage's recall to England prompted the promotion of William Howe to commander-in-chief of British forces "within the Colonies on the Atlantic Occean from Nova Scotia to West Florida Inclusive," on October 10.

Howe had been born in August 1729 into a family with connections to the Crown and courts thereof. His mother, Charlotte, was the illegitimate half-sister of King George I, and thus was a frequent visitor of the courts of George II and George III. Her blood relations coupled with the connections of his politician father aided in William's rise through

the British military. Entering the army at age 17 in 1746, William's military career before the American War of Independence included the War of Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War. In the latter, he gained significant combat experience at the Battles of Beauport, the Plains of Abraham, Sainte-Foy, and the Siege of Quebec.

Largely sympathetic to the colonies in the years leading up to the Revolutionary War, it did not stop him from jockeying privately for a command there as the crisis between the two hurtled closer to war in 1775. In March 1775, he sailed for the colonies, arriving in May. He fought at Bunker Hill and navigated the complexities presented to the British forces during the Siege of Boston before he took over as commander-in-chief of British land forces in America in October 1775.

Following Howe's promotion, but before General Gage sailed for England, both generals met to discuss the prospects of starting a new campaign in New York. Gage suggested to Howe to wait until the spring to execute the change of base and operations. By then, Gage argued, more ships, men, and supplies would be at hand. Furthermore, Gage did not believe there was any real threat of offensive movements by George Washington's army—particularly so due to the strength of the British's own defensive line. Howe waited out most of the winter, but in March 1776, the fall of Dorchester Heights on the southern side of Boston and the placement of Continental artillery there hastened Howe's movements towards Halifax.

Now, sailing for Nova Scotia, Howe needed time to rest and reorganize his army, and await the arrival of more men and boats from England to carry out the campaign against New York.

* * *

In the two weeks that followed the departure of Howe's army from Boston, the Continental Army prepared to leave the city they had surrounded for almost a year. Indeed, several smaller units of the army were on the march toward New York as early as March 20, just three days after the British flotilla passed out of view on the distant ocean horizon. On

The Continental Army commander, George Washington, faced numerous strategic challenges during the New York Campaign. Despite his storied image today, Washington rarely rose to the occasion of a great military commander during the summer and fall of 1776. However, in 1783, he returned to New York, now as victor of the war. (loc)

April 4, 1776, the commander-in-chief himself left Boston for the new front. George Washington had won at Boston and, as biographer Douglas Southall Freeman wrote, "he believed he could do it again."

By April 1776, man and moment had finally met. From his earliest beginnings in Virginia, to his experience in the Virginia militia during the French and Indian War, Washington's ability as a military tactician, although not perfect, had demonstrated much growth by the spring of 1776. The 44-year-old Washington had also developed into a leader of men, and in the face of constantly challenging situations with men and material in the new Continental Army, he created an indelible bond and loyalty among the rank-and-file. He understood how to keep the flame of liberty lit in the souls of those in the army even during their darkest of days. His physical presence, his shared suffering with his men, and his courage under fire were all ways in which the quiet, reserved Washington inspired his men. Dr. James Thacher, a surgeon in the Continental Army, witnessed how "The serenity of his countenance, and majestic gracefulness of his deportment, impart a strong impression of that dignity and grandeur which are his peculiar characteristics, and no one can stand in his presence without feeling the ascendancy of his mind, and associating with his countenance the idea of wisdom, philanthropy, magnanimity, and patriotism." And when the outcome at Boston was still undecided, Washington correctly gambled the next theater of operations at New York, sending Gen. Charles Lee to that front in January 1776.

Major General Charles Lee, a British and Polish Army veteran who saw service with Washington, Horatio Gates, and even Thomas Gage during the French and Indian War, reached New York in February 1776. Despite Lee's vast military experience, he admitted to Washington in a letter on February 19 that the challenge of defending New York vexed him. "[W]hat to do with the City," he questioned, "it is so encircle'd with deep navigable water, that whoever commands the Sea must command the Town." Lee did, however, assure both the Committee of Safety and a second special committee from Congress that, although

he could not convert the city and its defenses into a "tenable fortification," he could make them strong enough to be "a most advantageous field of battle" that would "cost the enemy many thousands of men to get possession of it."

Lee's plan called for a stout defense of the East River between Long Island and Manhattan Island. The defense of the East River would stretch from the Battery on Manhattan northward along the river to Hell Gate. In between, a series of forts would be constructed on both sides of the river. These forts—in theory—would limit the British navy's access, and thus control, to just New York harbor and the Hudson River (then called the North River). Limiting the use of the superior British navy would thus force any combined operation to come from the south or west. To combat this threat, Lee proposed to fortify those possible approaches as strongly as possible.

The home of Archibald Kennedy, pictured on the left, as it looked before the Revolution. *The New York Times* wrote that the home, "was virtually an imported building, all the materials, including bricks, tiles, carved mantels, doors, windows, and other things entering into its construction having been brought from Holland." Charles Lee, George Washington, Lord Stirling, and many others occupied the home as their headquarters in 1776. (nypl)

North of the city, Lee also proposed works to be built in case the British navy was able to slip past the land defenses and land above the Patriot position along the Hudson River. Lee wanted to establish as many points of fortification as possible on Manhattan Island to oppose any landing parties or cover any potential retreats the Continental Army might have to make from the island.

Lee also recognized the significance of what today is known as Columbia Heights on Long Island. These heights, if captured by the British and turned into an artillery platform, would make the city of New York untenable.

By the time Washington and the Continental Army arrived in New York on April 13, Lee had accomplished much of his defensive plan. However, the commanding general sought to extend and strengthen those defenses. Washington wanted to close the passage of the Hudson River and also make the East River more secure. To achieve the latter, he directed General Israel Putnam to station 1,000 men on Governor's Island, and he directed Nathanael

Greene to build and man Fort Defiance at Red Hook in Brooklyn.

Frankly, that army was not equipped to successfully defend New York, but given the political pressure not to abandon it, Washington was left with little choice other than to continue to fortify these positions. Certainly, New York had a strategic importance that made many in the army and in Congress voice their opposition to abandoning it. Being a central location along the Atlantic coast, as well as the conduit of communication and supplies between New England and the southern colonies via the Hudson River, it was widely considered the "key to the continent."

Furthermore, the Hudson River/Lake Champlain corridor remained a vital passage to Canada and the Great Lakes. All of this came on top of the economic activity of the colonies' second-largest city, whose port, shipbuilding, and deep-water harbor carried immense naval and trade value.

Beyond New York's military and trade importance, the Continental Congress considered its high political and psychological value. Many representatives in Philadelphia feared that abandoning New York would not only demoralize the Patriot cause, but also swell morale within the Loyalist population of not just the city but in the entire colony—not to mention in other colonies. When Washington would later propose not only abandoning the city, but also burning it to deny the British of its use of numerous buildings as winter quarters, Congress believed the wanton destruction of private property would further damage Patriot morale both at home and on the front lines.

Indeed, the frenzy in which those in New York, like Washington, urged Congress to provide direction on the matter, and the speed at which these conversations were being pushed through Congress—alongside the larger question of independence—caused several to question the urgency at all. "Why all this Haste?" asked James Duane, a representative from New York. "Why this Urging? Why this driving?"

Duane's concern was that the haste in both matters might fracture the unity in Congress and colonies, and for those on the homefront and the front lines, which seemed rash and reckless. Duane also strongly believed

that Congress had no right to dictate state governance or force radical measures like abandoning or burning the city of New York. His insistence that governing bodies limit their own authority was a reaction to the specter of Congress acting like a sovereign legislature.

But that was not the only specter in the room. Some leaders still held out hope for reconciliation with England and the Crown. And so, with such momentous issues consuming most of its oxygen, Congress left the question of New York unanswered for the time being, and Washington was left to expand his defenses.

To begin, Washington looked to change and enlarge the defense at Brooklyn Heights on Long Island, adding five redoubts and connecting lines in which General Greene would position his command. Protecting possible lines of retreat, if necessary, was also added to the list of defensive fortifications to be constructed. Once completed, Fort Washington and Fort Independence, later renamed Fort Lee, served various strategic and tactical roles in Washington's plans for the coming defense of New York.

Despite all this effort, the Continental Army's stance in New York was precarious at best, and Washington was forced to split his army over two large islands, Long Island and Manhattan, as well as numerous smaller ones with no naval support or cavalry and a numerically inferior army. This necessity was a direct result of Washington's lack of intelligence on which direction an attack by the British might come against his lines. Thus, he needed to try and cover with his infantry as many of the possible British landing sites as he could. Writing to his brother, John Augustine Washington, between May 31 and June 4, 1776, he confessed, "We expect a very bloody Summer of it at New York . . . & I am sorry to say that we are not, either in Men, or Arms, prepared for it."

End of Unedited Excerpt