



Southie History Lesson: Thomas Park

By Anna White

Published On: March 17th, 2021

Happy St. Patrick's Day, Southie. I hope you are getting a chance to safely enjoy St. Patrick's Day and don't forget about Evacuation Day! One of our best spots for celebrating Evacuation Day? Thomas Park on Dorchester Heights. Now, we've learned in prior History Lessons, why Dorchester Heights is called Dorchester Heights and not South Boston Heights (refresher – it was part of Dorchester, a separate town from Boston, until Boston annexed it in 1804) but why Thomas? Who was this Thomas? Why is there a park named after him? Keep reading to find out!

We need to go back in time to the American Revolution. The Siege of Boston lasted from April 1775 to March 1776. A siege, according to Google, is a military operation in which enemy forces surround a town or building, cutting off supplies, with the aim of compelling the surrender of those inside. In this case, the American Revolutionaries, or the Continental Army, were the "enemy forces," commanded for most of the siege by George Washington, and they were besieging British-occupied Boston. We are getting closer to "our" Thomas, I promise!

The Massachusetts Provincial Congress (1774–1780) was the provisional government created in Massachusetts early in the American Revolution. They appointed Marshfield-born John Thomas a "General Officer" in February 1775 based on

his successes during King George's War and the French and Indian War. In June of that year, John Thomas was made a Brigadier General by the Continental Congress and was given precedence over all other Brigadiers in the Army.

Thomas, who was also a medical doctor, created and recruited the Second Massachusetts Regiment, the militia for Plymouth County, to fight against the British. Thomas brought these troops from Plymouth County to help the Continental forces in the Siege of Boston against the British.

Overnight on March 4th, 1776, John Thomas led his division in fortifying Dorchester Heights. Thomas was tasked with reinforcing the defenses on the Heights and using the elevation there to threaten the British fleet. The troops menaced the British with the cannons brought to the Heights by Henry Knox, Chief Artillery Officer of the Continental Army and Boston native. Knox brought the cannons from Fort Ticonderoga (in New York) to Boston. The location of the Heights, combined with the long range cannons, were key in ending the British occupation of Boston on March 17th, 1776. The British left, or evacuated, Boston that day which is what we celebrate every March 17th up on the Heights!

After helping to end the siege Thomas was named a Major General of the Continental Army and put in charge of the Invasion of Canada. Unfortunately, there was a smallpox epidemic that decimated the American forces and took the life of General Thomas in June of 1776.

As Boston grew and developed, many of its hills were used as building materials and the landscape shifted and changed. Dorchester Heights, which comprised a few hills, was left with only one: Telegraph Hill. The street around the Hill? Eventually, was named "Thomas" after General Thomas. The city built a reservoir, which was opened on November 20th, 1849, on one side of Telegraph Hill to supply the people of South Boston with fresh water from Lake Cochituate. In the 1850s, the city turned the other side of the hill into a park named after General Thomas. According to the National Park Service, Thomas Park was one of Boston's first ever public parks.

By the 1870s, the reservoir was no longer needed but was kept partially full of water to help fight fires. South Boston might not have needed a reservoir anymore but it did need a high school. The city owned the land already so the reservoir was filled in and Southie High was built there in the beginning of the 20th century. In 1898, the General Court of Massachusetts commissioned a monument for Dorchester Heights to honor the victory over the British and the end of British Occupation. The monument, that we know and love, was completed in 1902, and was designed by Boston architects Peabody and Stearns. The site became a National Historic Site in 1951, and its management was shared by the city and the National Park Service until 1980 when ownership of the monument and the park was officially given to the United States Government.

Every time we talk about going up to Thomas Park to relax or to enjoy the view or to walk our dogs (speaking of dogs please keep them leashed up on the Heights!) we are paying homage to General John Thomas, a man who was vital to ending the Siege of Boston.

Source: [Southie History Lesson: Thomas Park - Caught In Southie](#)