

The Persistence of Henry Knox

November 1775 ended quite bitterly for American Revolutionaries in Boston. The British occupation of the Boston Harbor enabled them to enforce an embargo, preventing any supplies from reaching the Americans. While the Americans greatly outnumbered the British, George Washington lacked the artillery needed to drive them out, which severely reduced morale among the troops. The Americans needed a way to import weapons to end the military stalemate. What followed was a story of ingenuity and perseverance characteristic of America's success both in the American Revolution and beyond, reminding us that persistence can turn challenges into victories.

Finding available weapons was not a challenge in itself. Fort Ticonderoga—captured in New York in May 1775, and representing the first offensive American victory of the Revolution—had lots of artillery. However, the 300-mile journey seemed almost impossible: the roads were covered in snow and ice, and the rivers were coated in ice too thick to steer a boat through and yet too thin to safely carry heavy cannons over. Despite the challenges, Henry Knox instantly volunteered. As a bookseller, he was not the average choice for a military officer. Although he had studied military science extensively on his own, he never received a formal military education. However, Washington saw potential in Knox's plan and appreciated his enthusiastic attitude.

Knox decided to make sleds to transport the cannons over the snowy roads. In especially steep areas, he attached chains to trees to slow down the sleds. On the river section, Knox broke the ice, allowing the water to flow over it and freeze back even stronger. At one point, they lost a cannon to the water but were able to recover it. Knox experienced some weather-related delays but still made it to Boston. Once all of the artillery arrived, Washington ordered it moved

overnight. This also created challenges as the ground was too frozen to dig into. Instead, the Revolutionaries built artificial earthworks by filling boxes with rocks and soil and propped the cannons in the windows of barns. They pointed these cannons straight down at the Boston Harbor, where the British troops resided.

On March 17th, 1776, General William Howe woke up to cannons pointing at his ships. He quickly promised Washington that he would evacuate Boston peacefully, and that, in exchange, the Americans would not fire. Washington agreed, and the 11,000 British soldiers and loyalists quickly left. However, many historians believe that although Washington had the cannons, he didn't have the ammunition to fire them.

Without Knox's plan, Boston probably would have remained under British control for much longer, potentially altering the outcome of the Revolutionary War. Importantly, Knox's ideas were likely possible only because of his unique background with extensive personal study of military history, demonstrating the value of self-education and literacy. In a time ripe with new technology, many modern-day Americans put books on the back burner in the name of innovation. However, Knox's creative problem-solving shows that reading and the study of history can unlock new possibilities when technology fails. By engaging with the work of past generations, we can study what worked and what didn't, and apply these lessons to our time. Independence, adaptation, and persistence—these are American traits.

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