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from our collections



The Bullet that Killed Joseph Warren

Above right: Bullet that killed General Joseph Warren. NEHGS Fine Art Collection. *Below:* Brenton Simons showing the bullet at the Massachusetts Society of the Sons of the Revolution's General Joseph Warren Dinner, June 21, 2018, Boston, Mass. The Sons of the Revolution (srmass.org) was founded in 1876 by members of the Society of the Cincinnati wishing to broaden participation in preserving American heritage. Its mission is to promote knowledge and appreciation of the achievement of American independence and to foster fellowship among its members. As a 501(c)3 nonprofit educational organization devoted to the principles and ideals of its founders, the Society maintains headquarters in Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, and has 28 societies in the United States and Europe.



In 1884, one of our founders, William Henry Montague (1804–1889), donated a unique item to our collections: the musket ball taken from the body of patriot Joseph Warren, who died at Bunker Hill. (Artist John Trumbull depicted this scene in *The Death of General Warren at the Battle of Bunker's Hill, 17 June, 1775*, shown on the magazine cover and page 24.)

Montague had acquired the ball from his father, the Rev. William Montague (1757–1833), a veteran of the Revolutionary army and an Episcopal clergyman who became rector of Christ Church (Old North Church) in Boston. Rev. Montague appeared before a justice of the peace on March 5, 1833 to swear to the truth of his account:

“I, William Montague, County of Norfolk, State of Massachusetts, certify to whom it may concern that in the year 1789 or 90 I was in London and became acquainted with a Mr. [Arthur] Savage, formerly an Officer of the Custom of the port of Boston and who left there when the Royalists and Royal troops evacuated that town in 1776.

“When in London Mr. Savage gave me a leaden ball which is now in my possession with the following account of it. Viz.: On the morning of the 18th of June 1775 after the battle of Bunker & Breeds Hill I with a number of other Royalists and English Officers among whom was Gen. Burgoyne went over from Boston to Charlestown to view the battle field. Among the fallen we found the body of Dr. Joseph Warren with whom I had been personally acquainted. When he fell he fell across a rail and this ball I took from his body and as I shall never visit

Boston again I will give it to you to take to America where it will be valuable as a relic of your Revolution.”

Our interest in this “Revolutionary relic” is enhanced by its connection to the founding of our Society. In December 1843 William Henry Montague encountered an acquaintance, Charles Ewer, who asked if he could view the famed musket ball. Montague invited Ewer to his home for that purpose, and they reminisced about the pleasant gatherings they had attended in previous years with other gentlemen interested in New England history. Montague then asked Ewer, “What is the reason that we cannot get up an institution, have it incorporated, so that it will live after us[?]” To which Mr. Ewer replied, “Yes, we can and we will, what is to hinder us doing so[?]” Paper, pen, and ink were brought . . . and the men began a list of potential members. NEHGS was incorporated in March 1845.

In 1884, William Henry Montague took pride in the growth of the society he had helped found, which had “spread its branches over the whole country, and cast its shadows across the Atlantic.” Montague noted that “Great results sometimes follow the most trivial causes . . . thus the curiosity which prompted Mr. Ewer to wish to see the musket ball that terminated the life of that ardent and noble Patriot whose name will live in American History as long as the Granite Monument stands erected to commemorate that great event, the battle of Bunker Hill, together with the suggestion of the writer of this letter [Montague], was the immediate cause of bringing into existence the New England Historic Genealogical Society.” ♦