

The Bronze Minuteman

by Jack Valleli

The roar of artillery has long accompanied historic occasions in America. The weapons of war are ceremonially applied to commemorative celebrations. Too often, a gout of flame and a haze of smoke have marked the occasion of wartime efforts. From the siege of Boston in 1776 during the American Revolution to the clash at Gettysburg in 1863 during the Civil War, Boylston men and their cannons have defended their cause. All over the country, cannons will sound this year to celebrate the semi quincentennial anniversary of the founding of the United States of America.

Following the conclusion of the Revolutionary War, America was offered the opportunity to invest in itself by fostering the latest in machine technology in the service of commerce, leisure, and defense. Machines previously bought from the French, Spanish or British were now being developed as American products built with American ingenuity. Powered by the numerous fast-moving rivers that passed through the area, central and western Massachusetts proliferated in machine shops, foundries, and factories.

Artillery was a high-investment, high-cost technology at that time, so the economy of Boston provided much of the capital that would become the largest and most advanced foundries, among them the United States Armory and Arsenal at Springfield and the private Ames foundry in Chicopee. Only the largest furnaces and facilities could accommodate the huge castings necessary for the production of cannons and other military firearms, which had to be precisely monitored and controlled during heating and cooling cycles. Poor metallurgy would result in exploding cannons and lost contracts. Massachusetts foundries were entrusted with some of the largest and most complex contracts, from cannons and muskets to railway equipment, jet aircraft, and precision instruments.

Boylston at the Forefront

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, U.S. Federal census records have listed the occupation of many a Boylston resident as a “machinist”. These men and women were the skilled laborers constructing the most advanced technology of the day. These complex technological professions have continued to this day, with Boylston serving as the hub of multiple companies that specialize in precision machining and metalwork.

Up to and during the Civil War

Up to the 19th century, the majority of artillery was muzzle-loading. The cannon was a large-caliber gun which launched a projectile using an explosive chemical propellant. A cartridge which contained black powder was rammed down the barrel of the artillery, followed by a projectile. The projectile could have been anything from the classic spherical iron shot to an explosive shell or a canister of small pellets. This powder charge is then ignited with a friction primer or a linstock with a burning length of slow match, sending the projectile downrange. This dangerous and delicate operation was handled by a crew of around seven men and with the artillery supported by draft horses and mules.



18TH CENTURY BRITISH TWO-POUND NAVAL CANNON AND TOOLS

(TOOLS: left to right)

Linstock used to hold a fuse to fire cannon

Rammer used to drive home powder and projectile

Ladle carried the powder

Wad Screw used to extract the wad from the breech

Photograph courtesy Wikipedia Commons

Boylston's Cannon

The cannon currently residing in Boylston's Town Hall is a ¾ scale replica of a Revolutionary-era British 6-pounder bronze field gun which was commonly used by the Continental Army. The Boylston cannon was obtained in the 1970s by the Robert Andrews Company of Militia in advance of the bicentennial. Marked with the "GR" of King George (*George Rex*), it bears a family resemblance to the captured guns hauled from Fort Ticonderoga to the Dorchester Heights by Henry Knox, passing through Shrewsbury, of which Boylston was a part at the time.



BOYLSTON'S ROBERT ANDREWS RE-ENACTMENT REGIMENT – 1976

*Historical Society is seeking to learn the identities of these re-enactors
please email us at info@boylstonhistory.org or call 508-869-2720*

if you can identify any of them

Photograph by William Richardson Jr.

On the other hand, our cannon, unlike a museum piece, is fully operational. Not only is it tried and tested in firing blanks for ceremonial displays, it is fully capable of firing solid shot and explosive shells. In fact, due to its modern addition of a steel bore liner, our cannon is considerably safer to the operator than its eighteenth-century forebears, and due to modern manufacturing precision, more deadly to anyone facing the muzzle. Though we do not today expect to arm ourselves to fight the Redcoats, Boylston's cannon remains ready, our Bronze Minuteman.

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