

## The Knox Trail - General Henry Knox



Henry Knox was born in Boston to William Knox and Mary Campbell Knox in 1750. His parents were pioneers from North Ireland.

Henry was the seventh of ten children. William Knox was a shipmaster, carrying on trade with the West Indies. Suffering from financial difficulties and all the mental stress and burdens that go with money woes, William died at the age of fifty. Henry gave up school and became the sole support for his mother. He became a clerk in a Boston bookstore, and eventually opened one himself. He was an avid reader, fond of history, but his main interest later settled on artillery.

Knox supported the American cause, and as early as 1772, he became a member of the Boston Grenadier Corps. He was a volunteer in June 1775 at the Battle of Bunker Hill. He served under General Ward, in charge of the colonials around Boston. In 1775, Washington arrived in Boston, taking command of the army. There he met and developed a friendship with Knox, a friendship that would last a lifetime.

Washington realized the need of artillery in the American forces and found Knox to be well versed on the subject. Washington asked his opinion on what the army should do. The thought of Knox was to use the cannon from the captured Fort Ticonderoga. Thus, Knox was commissioned a colonel, placed in charge of artillery, and given the task to bring cannon from Ticonderoga to Boston. By way of ox sleds, Knox successfully brought fifty cannon to the city.

In March 1776, Washington seized Dorchester Heights (the key to Boston) and Knox placed the cannon in position there. Howe realizing the danger of an impending American bombardment, withdrew his troops from the city. On March 17, he embarked his troops for Halifax. Boston was entered the following day by triumphant Americans.

After the capture of Boston, Knox helped place Connecticut and Rhode island in proper defense, in preparation for the return of the British. Washington took his forces to defend New York. Knox joined the army there, as the British fleet arrived in New York, with men numbering 30,000. The American forces numbered about 18,000 with very little experience.

The American forces were so outnumbered, they were forced to retreat which did not end until the crossing of the Delaware River at Trenton on December 8, 1776. The Americans had seized all the boats along the Delaware, so the British were unable to follow.

Washington did not give up hope, and Knox followed his lead. It was on Christmas night that Washington made his famous trip across the Delaware, directed by Knox, to surprise the Hessian forces at Trenton, capturing 1000 men as well as supplies. The American army of 2500, the captives and stores were all carried back across the Delaware.

This event gave a much needed boost to the American morale. Knox, himself, was promoted to brigadier-general as a result of his service.

On January 3, 1777, Washington attacked the British army, but they were driven back. Washington rallied the troops...and the British in turn, were driven back and defeated. Knox and his men rendered aggressive service, earning him a commendation from the Commander-in-Chief. The American army went into winter quarters at Morristown, New Jersey.

Knox had a commission while the army was in winter quarters at Morristown: he was sent to Massachusetts to raise a battalion for the artillery. He was also given the task of creating an arsenal, and Knox did so at Springfield. It became a valuable source in the production and repair of arms for the remaining years of the Revolution.

Knox was almost displaced of his position in charge of artillery by a Frenchman named Ducondray, secured by Silas Deane, the American Minister to France. Ducondray interviewed with Washington and then headed to lay his credentials before Congress. Washington wrote Congress on behalf of Knox on May 31, 1777:

"General Knox, who has deservedly acquired the character of one of the most valuable officers in the service, and who combating almost innumerable difficulties in the department he fills has placed the artillery upon a footing that does him the greatest honor; he, I am persuaded, would consider himself injured by an appointment superseding his command, and would not think himself at liberty to continue in the service. Should such an event take place in the present state of things, there would be too much reason to apprehend a train of ills, such as might confuse and unhinge this important department."

Generals Green and Sullivan supported Washington, and Ducondray was permitted to join the troops under Washington as a volunteer.

Knox was involved in fighting at both the battles of Brandywine and Germantown. He had a limited number of cannon. At Brandywine he placed them well near Chadds Ford, but the British forced a retreat. The Americans held them in check at Birmingham Meeting House and were able to retreat to Chester.

At Valley Forge, Knox was invaluable in organizing and erecting forts to safeguard the winter encampment from British attack.

Knox was given permission to leave Valley Forge for a time to visit his family in Massachusetts, but particularly to speed supplies for the army from the New England states. Knox returned and immediately began to assist Steuben in his drilling of the troops, particularly the artillery men. The troops left Valley Forge on June 19 and headed for battle at Monmouth.

Much later, Knox was sent as a representative of Washington to secure aid from the northern states in what Washington hoped would be the last campaign of the war. January 1, 1781, from New Windsor, Washington wrote Knox:

"...You will generally represent to the supreme executive powers of the States, through which you pass, and to gentlemen of influence in them, the alarming crisis to which our affairs have arrived, by a too long neglect of measures essential to the existence of the army, and you may assure them, that, if a total alteration of system does not take place in paying, clothing and feeding the troops, it will be in vain to expect a continuance of their service in another campaign."

Knox was successful.

Eventually, the British army was forced in seige at Yorktown. Knox had placed the artillery in fine strategic position. After the surrender of Cornwallis on October 19, 1781, Knox was advanced to major-general, an honor well earned.

In 1782, Knox was stationed at West Point and remained there with the troops until the agreement was made for the British to evacuate New York. In the fall of 1783, Knox was able to leave as they followed the British out of New York. On December 4, the officers assembled at Fraunces Tavern to take final leave of their Commander-in-Chief. Knox stood by Washington. Washington withdrew and Knox returned to Boston, well-received.

Knox was elected Secretary of War by Congress in 1785, and in 1789 he was appointed Secretary of War in President Washington's new cabinet. Knox found his service as Secretary of War to deal with growing unrest in the western frontier of the little country. When a treaty was finally reached, the leadership of Knox was manifested in his aid in promoting law and order.

Knox officially wrote to the President on December 28, 1794:

"After having served my country nearly twenty years, the greatest portion of which under your immediate auspices, it is with extreme reluctance, that I find myself constrained to withdraw from so honorable a station. But the natural and powerful claims of a numerous family will no longer permit me to neglect their essential interest. In whatever situation I shall be, I shall recollect your confidence and kindness with all the power and purity of affection, of which a grateful heart is susceptible."

Washington accepted Knox's resignation with regret.

General Knox and his family settled on an estate at Thomaston, Maine in 1796, which he called "Montpelier." He was engaged in various types of businesses during the latter part of his life such as: brick-making, cattle-raising and ship-building. He entertained numerous guests and gave

some time in service to his state in General Court and Governor's Council. Washington desired to appoint Knox as a Commissioner to St. Croix, but Knox declined.

Knox died unexpectedly in 1806. He was buried in Thomaston.

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