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**Bunker Hill Refought: Memory Wars and Partisan Conflicts,
1775-1825**

By

Robert E. Cray, Jr.

The Battle of Bunker Hill, fought on June 17, 1775, resulted in a dearly-bought British victory. Led by General William Howe, British infantry assaulted the entrenched redoubt of the American forces on the Charlestown peninsula, twice repelled with heavy losses before capturing their objective. The patriot defenders, their ammunition spent, reeled before British bayonets: some died at the hands of the attackers; many more retreated to safety. Nevertheless, the King's men had achieved a Pyrric victory -- the carnage produced hundreds of British dead and wounded, with fewer American casualties. If Dr. Joseph Warren, a leading patriot, had indeed been slain, other American officers such as Israel Putnam, John Stark, William Prescott, and Henry Dearborn survived to fight again. Resistance to Britain continued. Although driven from the field, patriot forces had acquitted themselves bravely before British professionals, and later generations of Americans proudly recalled their effort.¹

Years later, in 1818, another less celebrated yet still significant battle erupted over Bunker Hill. The American combatants this time

¹ See Robert Middlekauf, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York, 1982), 282-292; Timothy Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, Barbara Miller Solomon, ed., 4 vols. (rept. ed., Cambridge, MA, 1969): I: 339-343.

fought with pens instead of swords. Aging Revolutionary veterans, their offspring, and assembled supporters clashed loudly over the remembered events of June 17, 1775. The fight started when Major General Henry Dearborn, a former cabinet official and War of 1812 commander, recalled his experience as a young captain at Bunker Hill in the *Port Folio*, a leading journal. Dearborn accused General Israel Putnam, a popular patriot icon, of incompetent, cowardly leadership for failing to support the retreating Americans. Putnam's son, Colonel Daniel Putnam, angrily rallied to his deceased father's defense in a later issue of the *Port Folio*. Colonel Henry A. S. Dearborn the General's son; responded by assisting his father's defense efforts. Both families collected veterans' depositions to validate their claims. Even Daniel Webster, a rising political star, entered the verbal fray, publishing a pro-Putnam essay in the *North American Review*, while Massachusetts Governor John Brooks, a Bunker Hill veteran, toured the battle site to refute General Dearborn's account of patriot defenses. The ongoing debate produced a "sensation throughout the country" in pamphlets, journals, and newspapers, demonstrating a poignant testimony to the nation's interest in the Revolution.²

When Dearborn questioned Putnam's actions at the Battle of Bunker Hill, he challenged a popular symbol of military republicanism: a man affectionately dubbed "Old Put" and admired as the New England Cincinnatus. In so doing, Dearborn prompted Americans to debate the social context of their Revolutionary memories and their commemoration of military heroes. Who was the hero and who the poseur -- Putnam or Dearborn? -- roiled people's recollections of Bunker Hill, complicated further by Putnam's heroic aura and Dearborn's public prominence. The ensuing memory debate featured officers and common soldiers, politicians and editors, men of different rank and class, scrambling to set the past to rights. Generations weaned on republican precepts esteemed virtuous Revolutionary leaders who placed the public good above private concerns. Prominent patriots became national heroes, persons of unusual parts and substance, because their dedication to liberty merited

² George Washington Warren, *The History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association* (Boston, 1877), 31-35; quotation is on 32. For the articles from the *Port Folio*, I have relied on the republished versions in Henry Dawson, ed., "Bunker Hill," *The Historical Magazine*, Vol. III (June, 1868), 321-442, passim.

remembrance. Military figures such as Israel Putnam ideally embodied selflessness and valor, prepared to sacrifice themselves on the battlefield by displaying their courage under fire. Dearborn's assertions countered Putnam's heroic persona and left in question his Revolutionary character.³

Fighting over Bunker Hill, a defining symbol of Revolutionary virtue, compelled Americans to re-evaluate their patriotic icons, confronted by discordant memories and threatened historical revision. Recent work by Michael Kammen, Simon Newman, David Waldstreicher, and others have revealed that the Revolution often stimulated partisan rancor during the early national period, seized upon by Federalists and Republicans as a weapon to club adversaries and smash opposition. What the "Spirit of '76" represented to these parties, and what it meant to ordinary Americans, spurred marches and demonstrations, orations and speeches during the early republic. Yet, after the War of 1812, the Revolution increasingly served nationalist ends, celebrated as a unifying force in concordance with the Era of Good Feelings, a period that witnessed the Republican triumph over the Federalists. Partisan debate over the Revolution seemingly held no place in the political forum.⁴ Or did it? The Dearborn/Putnam fracas reveals

³ Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (New York, 1979), provides a fine account of military ideals, honor, and republicanism. On republicanism, consult Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1992); Richard Buel, *Dear Liberty: Connecticut's Mobilization for the Revolutionary War* (Middletown, CT, 1980).

⁴ For the growing literature on public memory, see Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Invention of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1991); idem, *A Season of Youth: The American Revolution and the Historical Imagination* (New York, 1978). On the conflicted meaning of the Revolution and the subsequent rise of Revolutionary consensus pushed after the War of 1812, consult Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theater in Nineteenth Century Philadelphia* (1986; rept. Berkeley, 1988); John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ, 1992), 21-38; Simon Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia, 1997); Len Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth: Independence Day and the Rites of Nationalism in the Early Republic* (Amherst, 1997), 198-208; David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American*

the powerful currents that churned beneath the surface calm. For Dearborn, a recently defeated Republican gubernatorial candidate, Bunker Hill provided a forum to right electoral setbacks; for Federalists, it furnished a way to vilify Dearborn, embrace Putnam, and trumpet their party. Past memories and present politics had collided.

This conflict over public memory further established the terms of remembrance and the criteria of admission into the national pantheon. Churning up Revolutionary recollections about Putnam's actions at Bunker Hill demonstrates both New Englanders' fractured sense of the past and the means by which they recalled their history. Discordant memories stimulated attacks and counter-attacks, as partisan forces attempted to imprint their version of events upon the public. To prevent the past from becoming a continual battlefield, New Englanders also sought to resolve the memory conflict. They could not agree about individual contributions at Bunker Hill -- too many contradictory accounts had surfaced -- but people could acknowledge the overall significance of the event. This at least furnished common ground for political combatants. At this juncture, the memory debate sidestepped the Dearborn/Putnam situation to embrace a monument to the Battle of Bunker Hill by the early 1820s. Memorials to an event, rather than a particular person, could permit partisans to close ranks, and promote the "sectional nationalism" that validated New England's identity as a torchbearer of the American Revolution.⁵

Few Revolutionary battles elicited more attention or controversy than the conflict upon the hills of Charlestown, Massachusetts. Even the name, Bunker Hill, hinted at the ambiguity to come, since the fighting

Nationalism, 1776-1820 (Chapel Hill, 1997). For a look at how class contours memory, see Alfred F. Young, "George Robert Twelve Hewes (1742-1840): A Boston Shoemaker and the Memory of the American Revolution," *William & Mary Quarterly*, 38 (October, 1981): 561-623.

⁵ Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 19, 55, 71. On Revolutionary monuments in general, see Sarah J. Purcell, "Sealed with Blood: National Identity and Public Memory of the Revolutionary War, 1775-1825," Ph. D. diss., Brown University, 1997, Chapter 5. The concept of "sectional nationalism" is detailed in Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, Chap. 5, and Harlow Elizabeth Walker Sheidley, "Sectional Nationalism: The Culture and Politics of the Massachusetts Conservative Elite, 1815-1836," Ph. D., diss., University of CT, 1990.

arose on neighboring Breed's Hill. Confusion over which hill to fortify - the patriots had deployed at Breed's Hill instead of Bunker Hill -- underscores the disjointed politics of command in the American ranks.⁶ As Bernard Knollenberg has shown, the battle can be subtitled "A Study in the Conflict of Historical Evidence": simple questions about the number of combatants, duration of fighting, number of casualties, and weather conditions remain shrewd estimates at best, the result of differing, incomplete accounts. Who commanded the patriot forces is also problematical. British participants and Americans in Boston believed Joseph Warren to be the commander; those behind the American lines thought Israel Putnam in charge; and those in the battlefield denied Putnam held command. In truth, the disjointed structure of the fledgling American army comprised of different provincial militia units precluded a single overall field marshal.⁷

Popular tradition did establish Israel Putnam (1718-1790) as a leading figure in the fray. "Old Put" inspired attention and reverential awe: Massachusetts-born, Putnam had settled in Connecticut and distinguish himself in the French and Indian War. Putnam's service as a ranger, his capture and torture by Indians, his shipwreck and exploits during the British invasion of Cuba won him military laurels. British General Jeffrey Amherst valued him highly, and both Britons and Americans hailed Putnam as one who "dared to lead where any dared to follow."⁸ His second marriage in 1767 to Avery Gardiner, widow of John Gardiner, proprietor of Gardiner's Island, further improved his social position as he became active in local politics. According to folklore, when Colonel Putnam heard the news of Lexington in April, 1775, he left his plow in Brooklyn, Connecticut, and rode one hundred

⁶ On Bunker Hill, see Allen French, *The First Year of the American Revolution* (1934; rept., New York, 1968), 215-217; George F. Scheer and Hugh Rankin, *Rebels and Redcoats* (1953; rept., New York, 1972), 55-64.

⁷ Bernhard Knollenberg, "Bunker Hill Reviewed: A Study in the Conflict of Historical Evidence," *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 72 (1963): 84-100.

⁸ Middlekauf, *Glorious Cause*, 282; David Humphreys, *An Essay on the Life of the Honorable Major General Israel Putnam* (Hartford, 1788); James Thacher, *Military Journal of the American Revolution* (1862; rept, New York, 1969), 400-405.

miles to Massachusetts to volunteer, not stopping to change his farm attire. Putnam shortly thereafter assumed the rank of Major General in the Connecticut Provincials. Compared to other early patriot generals, Putnam was *sui generis*, a rough-hewed warrior whose resplendent military aura commanded notice.⁹

Yet Putnam's persona had unintended consequences. In an army with an informal command structure divided by provincial loyalties, strong personalities exerted influence, and the thickset, energetic Putnam asserted himself forcefully, as evidenced during an exchange with Colonel William Prescott. The Colonel had supervised the digging of trenches atop Breed's Hill. When Putnam requested the excavation tools, Prescott protested his troops would disappear, tools in hand, never to return. General Putnam believed otherwise. Prescott's men conveyed the tools and melted away, exhausted from night work and fearful of the approaching British, leaving fewer soldiers to defend the redoubt. Prescott bore the brunt of the British assault, supported by Captain William Knowlton and Colonel John Stark, who had positioned themselves alongside a rail fence and hastily constructed stone wall below the hill. As the British renewed their assault a third time, Prescott ordered a retreat. Putnam had stayed atop Bunker Hill, close to Breed's, during the fight, when not dashing across the field to Cambridge for reinforcements, expecting a British assault in his direction. An outraged Putnam berated the retreating soldiers who swept over his position, unable to stop the American exodus.¹⁰

Many patriots questioned the American retreat, and the Massachusetts Provincial Congress sent a committee to investigate. Bitter about the outcome, Captain John Chester, a Connecticut officer,

⁹ Kenneth Silverman, *Cultural History of the American Revolution* (New York, 1987), 286-287; Thacher, *Military Journal*, 405; *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v., Putnam, Israel; Humphreys, *Major General Israel Putnam*; William Farrand Livingston, *Israel Putnam: Pioneer, Ranger, and Major General* (New York, 1905), 154-155.

¹⁰ Christopher Ward, *The War of the Revolution*, ed., John R. Alden, 2 vols., (New York, 1952), 1: 75-76, 80-82, 92-93; French, *First Year of the American Revolution*, 215-218, 225-228; Middlekauff, *Glorious Cause*, 283-292; Richard Frothingham, *History of the Siege of Boston and the Battles of Lexington, Concord, and Bunker Hill* (1903; rept. New York, 1970), 159-169.

wrote a friend to blame unreliable officers, convinced only Prescott's men had fought well. John Pitts, a member of the Provincial Congress, echoed this opinion to Samuel Adams several weeks after the battle. Young Captain Dearborn kept any misgivings about Putnam to himself. Instead, other Bunker Hill officers, notably Colonel Samuel Gerrish, faced court-martial and disgrace for incompetence. Putnam escaped public censure and continued to command Continental forces. Yet the general's rustic appearance and eccentric persona increasingly clashed with the army's growing professionalism. As one soldier, Alexander Graydon, later recalled, the sight of Putnam on horseback "riding with a hanger belted across his brawny shoulders, over a waist coat without sleeves (his summer costume)," caused many soldiers to think the general "much fitter to head a band of sicklemen or ditchers, than musketeers." Both George Washington and Alexander Hamilton, his aide-de-camp, found Putnam slow to obey orders, and a court of inquiry called in 1777 over the loss of Fort Montgomery in New York, while absolving Putnam of blame, illustrates the general's faded luster. Washington refused to trust Putnam with a significant command, and a stroke in 1779 ended his military career.¹¹

Yet Putnam's popularity increased due to David Humphreys's glowing 1788 biography. A military aide to Putnam, Humphreys belonged to a contingent of Yale literati that included Timothy Dwight and Joel Barlow, men intent on charting the cultural boundaries of the young republic. All three men also served under Putnam. Humphreys's biography touted Putnam as the personification of civic virtue. The

¹¹ Scheer and Rankin, *Rebels and Redcoats*, 61-62; Ward, *War of the Revolution*, 97; Royster, *Revolutionary People at War*, 11, 44-45, 83; French, *First Year of American Independence*, 228-229, fn., 244, 302; Lloyd Brown and Howard H. Peckham, eds., *Revolutionary War Journals of Henry Dearborn* (1937, rept., New York, 1971), 141-142, 146, 148; *Correspondance and Journals of Samuel Blachley Webb*, ed. Worthington C. Ford, 3 vols., (1893; rept., New York, 1969) 1: 87-89, 384-391, 2: 113-114; Charles Martyn, *Life of Artemus Ward: The First Commander in Chief of the American Revolution* (New York, 1921), 139-143; Alexander Graydon, *Memoirs of his Own Times: With Reminiscences of the Men and Events of the Revolution*, John Stockton Liltell, ed., (Philadelphia, 1846), 179; Justin Winsor, ed., *Narrative and Critical History of America*, 8 vols. (Boston and New York, 1884-1889), 6: 189-90; *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v., Putnam, Israel.

legend of Putnam -- the man who fought with Rogers's Rangers, the villager who single-handedly confronted a wolf in the cave, the farmer who dropped his plow to fight -- emerged as staples of folklore. The association with Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, a classical Roman figure called from his farm to save the republic from invasion, linked Putnam to a venerable republican icon celebrated by early republic Americans. Not surprisingly, Putnam's death in 1790 produced an impressive funeral cortege in Brooklyn, Connecticut, while the Reverend Dr. Whitney's sermon trumpeted Putnam as the commander of patriot forces at Bunker Hill. John Bernard, a British traveler to the United States in the 1790s, commenting upon the extent of Putnam's classical persona, acknowledged that the Continental Army had numerous officers who fit the Cincinnatus ideal:

but no one so strikingly akin to that celebrity as the patriarchal Putnam, whose whole life was such an alteration between fighting and farming that one would suppose he could scarcely have had time to bend his sword before he was required to thump it straight it again.¹²

An adamant character cast in a republican mold helped anchor Putnam's pedestal in the national pantheon.

Henry Dearborn (1751-1829) attained prominence through different means. Unlike Putnam, Dearborn inspired no classical metaphor, no comparison to legendary Romans. Yet the New Hampshire doctor-turned-soldier had led sixty men under his command to Cambridge, Massachusetts, twenty four hours after hearing about the Battle of Lexington, which was a creditable feat. He served capably under Colonel John Stark, invaded Canada alongside Benedict Arnold, suffered imprisonment, participated bravely at the battle of Saratoga, and worked on George Washington's staff at Yorktown. After the war, Dearborn

¹² Humphreys, *Major General Israel Putnam; Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v., Putnam, Israel; Silverman, *Cultural History of the American Revolution*, 403-404; Kammen, *Season of Youth*, 99-100, figures 28-30; (New London) *Connecticut Gazette*, June 11, 1790; Thacher, *Military Journal of the American Revolution*, 410-411; Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, 3: 96-97, fn; John Bernard, *Retrospectives of America, 1797-1811* ed., Bayle Bernard, (New York, 1887), 96, 110; quote is on 110.

moved to Maine, then a part of Massachusetts, where he shepherded the Republican interests in Congress. Dearborn became Jefferson's Secretary of War in 1801 and later Collector for the Port of Boston in 1809. James Madison tabbed Dearborn to be the Senior Major-General during the War of 1812, expecting him to lead the attack on British Canada. Dearborn fumbled the opportunity--his invasion fizzled, leading to the torching of York (Toronto) and a subsequent withdrawal across the border. Dearborn lost his command in 1813 and subsequently coordinated New England coastal defenses. Madison's attempt to appoint Dearborn Secretary of War in 1815 raised congressional hackles that forced the President to scuttle the nomination. An unofficial casualty of war, Dearborn retired to Massachusetts.¹³

Yet Dearborn lacked neither friends nor admirers. His exploits in the War of 1812, although criticized, did not detract from his Revolutionary achievements, and Massachusetts Republicans rallied around Dearborn as their candidate for Governor in 1817, anxious to defeat John Brooks, the Federalist standard-bearer. Brooks had been a Revolutionary War hero and moderate Federalist during the War of 1812. War-time service often catapulted candidates into Massachusetts state office. Nevertheless, Dearborn had what Ronald Formisano labeled a "me-too" quality, perceived by voters as a transparent Republican effort picked primarily for his service record. Federalists, in turn, would question Dearborn's contributions.¹⁴

The ensuing newspaper battle between Republicans and Federalists targeted the respective war records of the two candidates. Republican papers, notably the *Boston Patriot and Morning Advertiser*, highlighted

¹³ *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v., Dearborn, Henry; Daniel Goodwin, Jr., *The Dearborns: A Discourse* (Chicago, 1884), 9-17; Richard Alton Erney, *The Public Life of Henry Dearborn* (New York, 1979), 20-23, 301-304, 318-319, 328; Paul Goodman, *Democratic Republicans of Massachusetts: Politics in a Young Republic* (Cambridge, MA, 1964), 120-121; John S. D. Eisenhower, *Age of Destiny: Life and Times of General Winfield Scott* (New York, 1997), 54-55, 62-63; *Boston Independent Chronicle*, March 3, 1817.

¹⁴ Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York, 1983), 57-58, 63-64, 79; *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v., Brooks, John; Erney, *Public Life of Henry Dearborn*, 333-335.

Dearborn's Revolutionary service, in particular, the Battle of Saratoga, where he had assisted Daniel Morgan, another war hero, in assaulting the British line and capturing enemy cannons. The Federalist *Columbian Centinel* challenged this scenario: they claimed that Dearborn's exploits at Saratoga had been overstated and embellished; in fact, the paper cited historical texts authored by John Marshall, Hannah Adams, and William Gordon that never mentioned Dearborn's achievements at Saratoga. Amidst the charges and countercharges, links to classical figures appeared, with the Federalist *Salem Gazette* intoning that Brooks had "modestly retired like Cincinnatus" prior to the War of 1812, whereas Dearborn had "showered the highest offices and richest emolument on himself and his family." Republicans decried Federalist efforts linking Brooks to prior worthies, and the pro-Dearborn *Boston Independent Chronicle* wondered when the opposition would cease "bolstering up their favorites with the honors and merits of others?" Come Election Day, Massachusetts voters chose Brooks and kept the state in the Federalist fold.¹⁵

An election dominated by Revolutionary symbolism, focusing upon whether Brooks or Dearborn had served more gallantly, cut across the grain of the emerging politics of consensus. Revolutionary nostalgia increasingly engulfed the nation after the War of 1812. Orators seized upon July 4th to trumpet themes of nationalism and patriotism, and elections reaffirmed Revolutionary values and principles. Revolutionary sentiments had been highly partisan in the 1790s, yet the period after 1815 saw a more intense surge of patriotic nostalgia, fueled by the nationalistic fervor of the Second War of American Independence.

¹⁵ *Boston Patriot and Morning Advertiser*, February 8, 1817; (Boston) *Columbian Centinel*, March 5, 1817; *Salem Gazette*, March 25, 1817; *Boston Independent Chronicle*, February 23, March 3, March 17, March 31, April 7, 1817; Erney, *Public Life of Henry Dearborn*, 335-337; Henry A. S. Dearborn, *Manuscript on the Life of General Dearborn*, 7 vols., 1822-1824, Maine Historical Society, Portland, ME, Vol., 6, passim; *Boston Daily Advertiser*, March 1, 1817; *Boston Patriot and Daily Chronicle*, February 26, 1817; *Boston Commercial Gazette*, March 10, 1817; (Boston) *New England Palladium and Commercial Advertiser*, March 7, March 28, April 1, 1817. John Fellows, *The Veil Removed: Reflections on David Humphrey's Essay on the Life of Israel Putnam* (New York, 1843), 140, mistakenly placed the accusations using Putnam against Dearborn in 1818.

James Monroe's tour of the eastern states in 1817, for instance, lessened sectional and political divisions by providing audiences with a Revolutionary veteran attired in plain clothes and wig, who called to mind times past and instilled a glow of unity. Even previously ignored Continental soldiers reaped rewards, attaining federal pensions based upon need in 1818. A Revolutionary consensus loomed ever larger as the standard of political reference, except among Massachusetts Federalists and Republicans. These individuals still fought memory wars to further partisan gain.¹⁶

Prominent patriots and obscure veterans felt keenly the pull of the past after 1815 -- they represented, after all, a dwindling band of survivors, people whose shared experience had elevated them into ex-officio custodians of Revolutionary lore. If many Revolutionaries basked in the limelight accorded them, participating in parades, processions, and celebrations, some worried about the Revolutionary legacy bequeathed to the early republic generation. John Adams fretted about history's judgments, believing himself overshadowed by George Washington and Benjamin Franklin. Thomas Jefferson worried over Federalist efforts to rewrite the Revolutionary past. And Light-Horse Harry Lee, true to Jefferson's fears, sought to craft such a history. Victimized by a Republican mob in 1812, an ailing Lee spent his final years authoring a manuscript that praised Federalists and berated Republicans, particularly Jefferson. Memories emerged as highly potent weapons for aging revolutionaries' intent on shaping the nation's past.¹⁷

¹⁶ Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: The Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana, IL, 1989), 305-306; Davis, *Parades and Power*, 59-60, 64; Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 298-302; Travers, *Celebrating the Fourth*, 201-205; John P. Resch, "Politics and Public Culture: The Revolutionary War Pension Act of 1818," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 8 (Summer, 1988): 139-158.

¹⁷ Alfred F. Young, "'Common Sense' and the 'Rights of Man' in America: The Celebration and Damnation of Thomas Paine," Kostas Gavrouglu, John Stachel, and Max W. Wartofsky, eds., *Essays on Science and the Humanistic in Art, Epistemology, Religion and Ethics in Honor of Robert S. Cohen* (Dordrecht; Boston, 1995), 3: 411-439, especially 430-431; Joanne B. Freeman, "Slander, Poison, Whispers, and Fame: Jefferson's 'Anas,' and Political Gossip in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 15 (Spring, 1995): 25-26; Charles Royster, *Light Horse Henry Lee & the Legacy of the American Revolution* (New York, 1981), 171-227; Lazer Ziff, *Writing in the New Nation:*

Concerns about the past, in particular the way citizens and soldiers remembered events, triggered strong emotions for Henry Dearborn. His war time role had been gallant, yet Dearborn suffered from Federalist attacks during the gubernatorial election, derided for his Revolutionary contributions. Dearborn refused to run against Brook in 1818, despite Republican prompting, outraged by the prior assaults on his character. More significantly, Dearborn's Federalist adversary, John Brooks, had benefited from links to Revolutionary and classical figures, portrayed as another Cincinnatus, a code word that evoked images of Israel Putnam, a well-known Revolutionary Cincinnatus familiar to the public. Dearborn could neither undo his past nor unseat Governor Brooks, but he could summon memories of Bunker Hill -- a battle where Dearborn, Brooks, and Putnam had fought -- to wage a campaign by proxy against Brooks by targeting Putnam. Since Bunker Hill represented a keystone event in the New England public memory, ranking alongside Lexington and Concord, it furnished a fitting venue to undermine Putnam and hence Brooks. The *Port Folio*, a high-toned publication for discriminating readers, provided Dearborn with the means to put his memories in print.¹⁸

Dearborn firmly stated his opinions in the March issue of the *Port Folio*. The movement of American and British troops and the sequence of events, in particular, the actions of leading officers, formed the foundation of the essay. Dearborn praised Colonel John Stark's cool courage, mourned Major Andrew M'Clary's tragic death, and condemned General Israel Putnam's incompetence. Stark had calmly ordered his men into battle, positioned beside Breed's Hill, and M'Clary's untimely demise supplied a poignant memory of war's

Prose, Print, and Politics in the United States (New Haven, 1991), 107-112; Kammen, *Season of Youth*, 17-21; idem, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 48-49.

¹⁸ Henry Alexander Dearborn claimed that his father was incensed by the Federalists misrepresentation of his role at Saratoga; see Dearborn, *Manuscript on the Life of Henry Dearborn*, Vol. 6; Erney, *Public Life of Henry Dearborn*, 339. For the *Port Folio*, see Linda Kerber, *Federalists in Dissent: Image and Ideology in Jeffersonian America* (Ithaca, 1970), 15, note; Royster, *Revolutionary People at War*, 11-12. The *National Union Catalogue* list at least ten editions of the Humphreys's biography of Israel Putnam published before 1818.

cruelty. By contrast, Putnam faced Dearborn's withering scorn, described as a man whose "universal popularity" was such that "no one can at this time offer any satisfactory reasons why he was held in such high esteem." Dearborn reported that Putnam failed on three occasions to answer Colonel Prescott's requests to take charge. In addition, according to Dearborn, Prescott afterwards remarked to Governor James Bowdoin that Putnam's "whole conduct was such both during the action and the retreat that he ought to have been shot." Putnam had never engaged his forces or covered the retreating Americans. Dearborn further claimed that Colonel Gerrish, the cashiered officer who had stood alongside Putnam during the fighting, became a convenient scapegoat to save the American army the embarrassment of court-martialing the popular Putnam. For Dearborn, the essay satisfied his obligation "to posterity and the character of those brave officers who bore a share in the hardships of the Revolution."¹⁹

Dearborn's memories undermined a revered Revolutionary icon. He had summarily judged, and found wanting, Israel Putnam's battle-field actions, challenging them much as his own Revolutionary exploits had been assailed. Such sniping dramatized the Revolution as memory battle; it revealed that sharp differences over the past existed. While nationalists glossed over partisan squabbling to proclaim the Revolution a sacred, unifying event, Dearborn and his electoral opponents clung to a fractured past, righting perceived historical wrongs. Federalists had questioned Dearborn's past; now Dearborn would criticize Putnam, the Cincinnatus of the Revolution.²⁰

Dearborn habitually judged people. As a junior officer in the Revolution, Dearborn served on court-martials. As Secretary of War, he oversaw a peacetime military peopled by dueling officers sensitive to any slight. During the War of 1812, General Dearborn condemned General William Hull for surrendering Fort Detroit to the British. The court-martial board, over which Dearborn presided, sentenced the hapless Hull

¹⁹ Henry Dearborn, "An Account of the Battle of Bunker Hill," in Dawson, *Historical Magazine*, III: 402-407.

²⁰ See Royster, *Light Horse Harry Lee*, Chapter 6., for Lee's attempt to use history to deride his opponents. Dearborn may have been motivated by similar feelings due to his political setbacks. For a different perspective on the Putnam/Dearborn dispute, see Purcell, "Sealed with Blood," 221-230.

to death in 1814. President Madison remanded the sentence, citing Hull's valorous Revolutionary record, but the action blackened the general's reputation. Dearborn also expected others to judge and vindicate his character. When removed from command in 1813, Dearborn requested a court of inquiry to clear himself, a request that went unanswered. Dearborn's sensitivities about his name and honor were hardly unique: army and navy officers jealously guarded their reputations during the early republic, employing letters, pamphlets, and newspapers to vindicate themselves. William Hull protested his innocence in 1814, for example, intent on redeeming his good name, and General Winfield Scott, a rising star of the American military, developed a bombastic tendency to explain his actions, offering point by point justifications. Protecting honor remained paramount for military men.²¹

Dearborn's allegations prompted Colonel Daniel Putnam to muster the aggrieved fury of a loyal son. Putnam had served alongside his father during the Revolution, later becoming a prosperous diary farmer in Brooklyn, Connecticut. Angrily, Putnam questioned Dearborn's overall veracity in the July issue of the *Port Folio* and wondered what tempted the former commander "to impose on the public such a miserable libel on the fair fame of a man who 'exhausted his bodily strength and expended the vigor of a youthful constitution in the service of his Country?'" The son pointedly queried Dearborn's statements about the father remaining stationary atop Bunker Hill, noting how Dearborn had General Putnam riding off with picks and shovels, an apparent contradiction in terms. The alleged remarks by Colonel Prescott, Putnam opined, should be left

²¹ *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v., Dearborn, Henry; *Ibid.*, s.v. Hull, William; Brown and Peckham, eds., *Revolutionary War Journals of Henry Dearborn*, 120, 134, 153-154; Edward M. Coffman, *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784-1898* (New York, 1986), 32, 68; Lawrence J. Friedman and David Curtis Skaggs, "Jesse Duncan Elliott and the Battle of Lake Erie: The Issue of Mental Stability," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 10 (Winter, 1990), 493-516; Marshall Smelser, *The Democratic Republic, 1801-1815* (New York, 1968), 238-241; Samuel Adams Drake, *Old Landmarks and Historic Personages of Boston* (Boston, 1873), 106. For a useful discussion on the concept of honor, reputation, and public approval, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "Honor and American Republicanism: A Neglected Corollary," in Ciaran Brady, ed., *Ideology and the Historians*, Historical Studies, XVII (Dublin, 1991), 49-65.

to the public to judge -- they should decide if Prescott uttered them or if they were fabrications.²²

Daniel Putnam also broadened the field of attack against Dearborn. Whereas Dearborn relied upon personal memories of Bunker Hill, Putnam recruited allies to vouchsafe his father's honor and furnish a seemingly more objective history based on expert testimony. A letter of thanks from George Washington to Israel Putnam at the close of the war enabled Daniel Putnam to shroud his father with a protective mantle from the illustrious commander-in-chief. Would Washington thank a man without merit? Surely not was the implied answer. Two recent statements from Colonel John Trumbull and Judge Thomas Grosvenor fortified Putnam's defense. A soldier turned historical painter, Trumbull supplied an account told him in 1786 by John Small, a British colonel, which praised General Putnam's chivalry upon the redoubt. Putnam had stopped his men from shooting Small, recognizing him as a beloved comrade-in-arms from the past. Not only was Putnam in the thick of the fight, but he showed mercy to a foe, an admirable trait.

Judge Grosvenor from Connecticut offered a more straightforward account. He lauded Putnam's zeal at Bunker Hill and ranked him with Prescott and Knowlton as among the three most active officers. After alluding to Dearborn's recent difficulties in the War of 1812, Putnam wrote:

It has been reserved for you, Sir, after a lapse of forty-three years, and when you probably suppose the grave had closed on all who would contradict your bold assertions, that you have thus, like an assassin in the dark, cowardly mediated this insidious blow against a character as much above your level as your base calumny is beneath a gentleman and officer.²³

²² Colonel Daniel Putnam, "Reply to General Dearborn's Account of the Battle of Bunker's Hill" in Dawson, ed., *Historical Magazine*, 407-414. This essay originally appeared in the July issue of the *Port Folio*. Also see Daniel Putnam, *Account of the Battle of Bunker Hill, with a letter to Major General Dearborn* (Boston, 1818). Information on Daniel Putnam is available in Dwight, *Travels in New England and New York*, II: 93.

²³ Putnam, "Reply to General Dearborn," 407-414. The standard source for John Trumbull is Irma B. Jaffe, *John Trumbull, Patriot Artist of the American Revolution* (Boston, 1975). Also see Kammen, *Season of Youth*, 79-80.

Honor and character -- the *sine qua non* of an officer's identity as a gentleman -- had been flung back at Dearborn. The war of words had become a battle of historical truthfulness; the *causa bella*, Revolutionary reputation, igniting the conflict.

Another Putnam relative, Samuel Putnam Waldo, grandson of Israel, also pressed home the family attack. A lawyer who had recently become a writer, Samuel Waldo's pen allegedly furnished a "pound of rhetoric to an ounce of fact." Waldo fairly shouted his outrage across the page, hammering Dearborn for slandering the memory of the deceased Israel Putnam:

General Dearborn the history of the second war from American Independence is yet to be written. The part you took in it will be detailed. If the impartial historian shall place you in the temple of fame, and you should be called to the congregation of the dead, imagine to yourself now what would be the feelings of your grandchildren when your reputation should be assailed, as you have assailed that of Israel Putnam.²⁴

Family pride, once roused, demanded these sorties. Anything less would have called into question the memory of Israel Putnam, a memory that his son and grandson defended with a flourish.

Henry Alexander Scammell Dearborn responded more calmly in orchestrating his father's defense. A man of letters and politics, H. Dearborn served as Port Collector for Boston, his father's old job, when not indulging a love of history that would lead him to become President of the Massachusetts Historical Society in 1829. For the present, however, the younger Dearborn assisted his father in procuring affidavits and accounts from Revolutionary war veterans, intent on proving Putnam's culpability and upholding his father's statements. This meant writing and canvassing; it also showed a generational divide, as the younger Dearborn let others talk for him, reliant upon their recollections of times past in the submitted depositions. Like Daniel Putnam and S.

²⁴ See *Salem Gazette*, May 26, 1818, for Waldo's remark. The best account on Waldo is in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v., Waldo, Samuel Putnam. Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*, 300-302.

Putnam Waldo, Henry A. S. Dearborn defended the family's honor; also like Putnam, he relied upon expert testimony to create a more impartial narrative of events, an "objective history" to borrow Sarah Purcell's phrase, to reinforce his father's statements.²⁵

Newspapers avidly followed the Dearborn-Putnam debacle. In early May, the New York *Daily Advertiser*, edited by Theodore Dwight, a staunch Federalist, sharply rebuked Dearborn's account of Putnam -- the paper criticize inconsistencies within the *Port Folio* essay, and wondered how Dearborn, a junior officer in 1775, could match the insight of a senior officer overlooking the battle ground. Rank conveyed perspective, in other words. The paper also praised Colonel Grosvenor for his character and "unsullied probity." Connecticut papers such as the *Hartford Courant* and the *Mirror* repeated the *Advertiser's* assertions in support of Putnam, a favorite son, over Dearborn. Since Dwight hailed from Connecticut -- he was the older brother of Timothy Dwight, President of Yale -- and since he previously edited both papers, we can observe a Federalist newspaper network gearing for battle against the Republican Dearborn.²⁶

In Massachusetts, the press often followed party lines too -- Federalist papers stood behind Putnam while Republican journals gathered around Dearborn. The *Massachusetts Spy*, published in Worcester, first questioned Dearborn's assertions in early May and later reprinted the *Advertiser* essay, while the (Boston) *Columbian Centinel* ran several essays in July, allegedly written by Daniel Webster, praising Putnam and criticizing Dearborn. By contrast, a reviewer in the *New England Galaxy* in Boston disagreed with Daniel Putnam's assertions:

²⁵ *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v., Dearborn, Henry Alexander Scammell; Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Cultivating Gentlemen: The Meaning of Country Life Among the Boston Elite, 1785-1860* (New Haven, 1989), 112, 169-170, 220-221; William Bentley, *Diary of William Bentley*, 4 vols., (1905; rept., Gloucester, MA., 1962), IV: 520-521. Purcell, "Sealed with Blood," 104-110, for a discussion on "objective history."

²⁶ *New York Daily Advertiser*, May 6, 1818, May 7, 1818, May 8, 1818; *Connecticut Courant*, May 19, 1818, May 26, 1818; *Connecticut Mirror*, June 1, 1818. On Dwight, see David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York, 1965), 296-297.

“we recollect for twenty-five years past, even from our infancy, that our good friends who were on the battle ground that day were not satisfied with the conduct of General Putnam.” The *Boston Patriot*, reprinting accounts culled by Henry A. S. Dearborn entitled “Major General Dearborn’s Vindication,” questioned Putnam’s contributions. General Michael McClary, a United States Marshal in New Hampshire and Bunker Hill participant, had no recollection of Putnam; if “Putnam had been there,” wrote McClary, “I should have known it.” Samuel Lawrence of Groton, Massachusetts, a member of Colonel Prescott’s regiment, never saw Putnam at the redoubt during the fighting. The Reverends Daniel Chaplin of Groton and John Bullard of Peppernell, moreover, recalled Colonel Prescott’s irritation at Putnam. After encountering Putnam during the retreat, Prescott asked him: “Why did you not support me, General, with your men?” Putnam replied: “I could not drive the dogs on.” Prescott retorted: “if you could not drive them, you might have led them up.”²⁷

Testimony from deceased worthies such as Prescott heightened the memory conflict unleashed by Dearborn. Everyone had praised Prescott’s leadership at Breed’s Hill, his valor in the redoubt remained unquestioned. Prescott’s statements, if true, reinforced Dearborn’s assertions about an inept Putnam who exercised little authority and even less judgment. The Reverend Chaplin was a respected minister and Prescott’s son-in-law, part of the extended family circle, and Bullard ministered to Prescott’s home community. Both seemed ideally positioned to verify Prescott’s statements. Yet Prescott’s alleged remarks constituted second-hand testimony, dependent upon Chaplin and Bullard’s memories, since neither man had been at Bunker Hill, nor had they cited Prescott’s account publicly before. Critics questioned the ministers’ memory, challenging the remarks. Even so, the ministers’ statements added further grist to the memory mill.²⁸

²⁷ (Worcester) *The Massachusetts Spy*, May 13, May 20, 1818; (Boston) *Columbian Centinel*, July 4, 1818, July 15, 1818; (Boston) *New England Galaxy*, May 22, 1818; *Boston Patriot*, June 13, 1818. On Webster’s alleged authorship of the *Centinel* essays, see Charles M. Wiltse, ed., *Papers of Daniel Webster*, 7 vols., (Hanover, NH., 1974-1986), 1: 226, note.

²⁸ William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 9 vols., (1866-1869; rept., New York, 1969), 2: 149-150; *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v.,

Evidence does buttress some of Dearborn's criticisms about Putnam, regardless of the alleged Prescott statements. Humphreys's glowing biography notwithstanding, Putnam had attracted criticism after Bunker Hill, some of it private and some quite public. A curious letter exists from Captain John Chester, the man who praised Prescott's unit that may perhaps finger Putnam. On August 11, 1775, Chester wrote to Samuel Blankley Webb, a close friend and Putnam aide, that "A certain big bellied General will make the most of his great doings, I very well know. I wish his conduct could be fully known." Was this a reference to Putnam? Did it pertain to Bunker Hill? We cannot be certain except to note that Putnam's robust physique fits the description.²⁹ As a young boy, S. J. Prescott, nephew to Colonel Prescott, recalled his uncle and father criticizing Putnam's behavior at Bunker Hill as "unofficerlike and even cowardly." A more explicit criticism came from Major-General William Heath, whose 1798 memoirs praised Prescott and chided Putnam for removing the entrenching tools from the redoubt. In this instance, Prescott, not Putnam, proved the "best judge of mankind" according to Heath, for the General's request had left the redoubt in a weakened state. Heath further asserted that Prescott was the "proper commanding officer at the redoubt," not Putnam, despite claims to the contrary by Putnam admirers.³⁰

Colonel John Stark, an admired Revolutionary patriot, offered a more critical assessment of Israel Putnam. Stark had won praise from Presidents Jefferson and Madison as an icon of republican virtue.³¹ The retired New Hampshire warrior also impressed William Bentley, a

Prescott, William. See footnote 35 for an example of how critics handled the ministers' disclosure.

²⁹ *Correspondence and Journals of Samuel Blochley Webb*, 1: 91.

³⁰ S. J. Prescott's deposition to Major William Stackpole, May, 1818, copied by Henry A. S. Dearborn, in Dearborn, *Life of Henry Dearborn*, vol. 1; William Heath, *Heath's Memoirs of the American War*, introd., Rufus R. Wilson (1904; rept., Freeport, NY, 1976), 27-28.

³¹ See Howard Parker Moore, *Life of the General John Stark of New Hampshire* (privately published, 1949); Caleb Stark, *Correspondence of General John Stark* introd., George Athan Billias (1860, rept., Boston, 1972); Bentley, *Diary of William Bentley*, 3: 187-188, 454, 471-472.

visiting Massachusetts minister, in 1805 with his “simple truths” about the past. A story in the *New Hampshire Patriot* on May 1, 1810 publicized Stark’s disenchantment with Putnam: as Stark proceeded to the rail fence in full view of Putnam, seen conversing with Colonel Gerrish, the Connecticut General supplied “no direction” to Stark. Hence, Putnam exercised no command function and took no initiative, a view roughly resembling Dearborn’s comments. Several weeks later, the Reverend Bentley renewed his acquaintance with Stark. Although Stark’s historical researches were meager and his “memory of them careless,” Bentley firmly upheld Stark’s “deep sincerity.”³²

No uproar attended Stark’s criticism of Putnam, although several newspapers reprinted the story, perhaps because the allegations appeared less than damaging. Lack of command did not equal rank cowardice. The continued reprinting of Putnam’s biography also suggests no shortage of admirers. Nevertheless, the debacle between Dearborn and Putnam brought Stark’s name more forcefully into the memory war. As William Bentley consoled Henry A. S. Dearborn over his father’s tribulation, he noted in his diary that Stark had considered Putnam a “poltroon,” who missed an opportunity to defeat the British. The *Boston Patriot* subsequently featured a story from Bentley about Stark’s assertions. In regard to Putnam, Bentley quoted Stark as telling him: “My chaplain ... you know my opinion of that man. Had he done his duty i.e. would have decided the fate of his country in the first year.”³³ Such testimony seconded accounts of Putnam’s ineptitude. What Dearborn alleged publicly had indeed been discussed and remembered by other persons.

Political concerns dominated the memory dispute between Dearborn and Putnam. If Dearborn wanted to savage his electoral foes by targeting Putnam, he nonetheless exposed himself to a withering barrage of Federalist artillery. William Bentley remained convinced that partisan divisions fueled the dispute. A steadfast Republican, Bentley noted on May 21, 1818, that Henry A. S. Dearborn “feels all the force of party against his father in justifying General Putnam’s son. The truth is

³² Bentley, *Diary of William Bentley*, 3: 160-161, 518; *New Hampshire Patriot* (Concord), May 1, 1810.

³³ Bentley, *Diary of William Bentley*, 4: 520-521; *Boston Patriot*, June 13, 1818.

D/earborn/ must be taken out of the way for the party always had a contempt of Putnam.” Several days later Bentley wrote in his diary that “All the doggerel and insult of party vengeance are poured upon General D for what I never heard doubted.” The Era of Good Feelings did not eliminate partisan disputes over Revolutionary figures and episodes; instead, Massachusetts Federalists and Republicans fought fierce memory battles, with the temple of Revolutionary heroes their arena. As Bentley observed, while visiting Groton, Massachusetts in April of 1819: “Dearborn and Putnam were upon the lips of talkers and parties had been high. I saw many things. From some a warm reception, from others doubts seemed mixed with civilities. I am persuaded that I did that which is right.”³⁴

Federalists had a substantial stake involved. The Republican Dearborns still represented the opposition, with Putnam a convenient battering ram to use against them, and leading party members wished to imprint their version of the past upon the electorate. Governor John Brooks felt a decidedly personal interest in the affair. Brooks had been compared to classical greats during the campaign, hence the attack upon Putnam became by extension an attack upon himself. The Massachusetts governor entered the fray when William H. Sumner, Adjutant-General of the commonwealth militia, showed him a map of the battle lines at Bunker Hill in the *Port Folio* article, personally approved and corrected by Dearborn. The map’s configurations disturbed Brooks, for he remembered the battle lines differently. Visiting the site in June, 1818, his first trip there since the Revolution, Brooks plumbed his memories, convinced Dearborn had erred. The discovery of the original breastworks proved to Brooks’s satisfaction that Dearborn had depicted the British, not the American encampment after the battle. If Dearborn’s memory proved faulty on terrain, it could conceivably fail him on Putnam.³⁵

Daniel Webster fired louder volleys on Putnam’s behalf. A former New Hampshire congressman, Webster had recently moved to Boston,

³⁴Bentley, *Diary of William Bentley*, 4: 521, 523, 526-527, 588. See George Dangerfield, *The Era of Good Feelings* (New York, 1952).

³⁵ Warren, *History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association*, 33-35. Brooks apparently made no public statement about this visit; instead, the account Warren published came from W. H. Sumner.

developing cordial links with such Federalists as Harrison Gray Otis, Francis Cabot Lowell, and John Brooks. The American Revolution especially fascinated Webster: his father, Ebenezer Webster, a Revolutionary veteran, paralleled Putnam's early career path, since both men had been uneducated Indian fighters, and Colonel John Stark had once quipped that the young, swarthy Daniel resembled his father covered with gunpowder stains. Webster appreciated the paternal comparison.³⁶ As such, Webster's defense of Putnam in the *North American Review*, a publication esteemed by the conservative New England elite, struck a personal chord. Lawyer Webster, in the words of one biographer, Irving H. Bartlett, "carefully disposed of the testimony designed to discredit Putnam's role in the famous battle," unearthing inconsistencies in Dearborn's account. Webster further questioned Dearborn's ability to level broad judgments against a commanding officer. A platoon leader such as Dearborn, preoccupied with ordering his men to load and fire, lacked the perspective of a general scanning the field of battle. For junior officers to condemn superiors would destroy military discipline. As Webster pointedly observed, "Among military men, we imagine, nothing will be esteemed worse than this appealing downward on questions of military behavior. According to this process, a captain is to decide how well his colonel, (or in this case, a general officer.) executes his command and performs his duty; -- and the captain himself must find a voucher for his own good behavior, in the certificate of some soldier in a platoon." Such judgments violated the hierarchy of command and mocked military protocol.³⁷

Webster also supplied depositions to support Putnam. Along with the oft-times presented Trumbull and Grosvenor accounts, Webster provided testimony from obscure Bunker Hill soldiers, who remembered a different Putnam from Dearborn and Stark. Abner Allen of western Massachusetts stated he saw General Putnam on horseback urging his

³⁶ Robert V. Remini, *Daniel Webster: The Man and His Time* (New York, 1997), 144-146; Irving H. Bartlett, *Daniel Webster* (New York, 1978), 82-83.

³⁷ Bartlett, *Daniel Webster*, 82; Daniel Webster, review, H. Dearborn, "An Account of the Battle at Bunker Hill," and Daniel Putnam, "Letter to Major General Henry Dearborn," in *North American Review*, 7 (July 1818): 225-256, quote on 234; See Sheidley, "Sectional Nationalism," 201-207, in *North American Review*.

men to fight while exposed to enemy gunfire. Reuben Kemp from Brooklyn, Connecticut, Putnam's home, asserted that a man people called General Putnam "seemed to have the ordering of things." Isaac Bassett of Killingley, Connecticut, went even further: he not only remembered Putnam with drawn sword encouraging his men to fight, but believed Putnam to be at the breastworks below Breed's Hill as the "enemy scaled the walls of the redoubt." Even two soldiers from Stark's regiment, Ebenezer Bean and Amos Barns, recalled seeing Putnam on horseback giving orders. If Webster proved reluctant to challenge Stark's assertions regarding Putnam -- he glided past them -- he did counter the Reverends Chaplin and Bullard's statements, claiming that some "misapprehension or misrecollection exists ..." Webster thought the Prescott's remarks delivered in the heat of battle had a "tartness, and an air of wit, which would seem to render a later origin of the remarks probable." As for Prescott's damning statements to Governor Bowdoin, this had come from Dearborn himself, a less than impartial source, and Webster noted that the Putnam and Prescott's sons remained friendly, an unlikely scenario if Prescott truly criticized Putnam. Webster concluded by warning readers about the importance of reputation since "character is power."³⁸

The question of character, the crux of Dearborn's charges against Putnam, powered the Federalist memory of the American Revolution. For them, the Revolution signified the climax of American liberties, an evolutionary process completed by the break from Britain and the establishment of a new national government in 1789. Their conservative interpretation of the Revolution relied heavily upon the protective mantle of great patriots or "Fathers of the People," in particular, George Washington, who had vouchsafe independence by sheer force of character. Noble deeds and actions constituted the basis of the Founders' reputation. They bequeathed an important legacy to the early republican generation that could neither be lightly dismissed nor criticized. Putnam benefitted from such thinking. After all, Putnam represented an iconic figure embossed in classical imagery: both he and Washington remained linked by their respective connection to Cincinnatus, the virtuous Roman, since both had left their farms to take up arms, which was a powerful and appealing image to the young republic. To question

³⁸ Webster, *North American Review*, (July, 1818): 238-240, 242-243.

Putnam's heroic aura would unleash the terrors of historical revision and change, a veritable Pandora's Box to the Federalists. Equally essential, the early republican generation needed the stabilizing values of the past reinforced, lest the new perspectives offered by Henry Dearborn and other Republicans topple previously accepted titans. Defending Putnam's good name translated into a defense of Federalist brand history.³⁹

Colonel Samuel Swett, senior aide to John Brook, further imprinted the Federalist philosophy of the past. Swett had accompanied Brook to Bunker Hill, well aware of the Governor's discovery. Hence, Swett's authorship in the fall of 1818 of *Sketch of the Battle of Bunker Hill*, attached as an appendix to Humphreys's biography of Putnam, sought to resolve the memory debate along proper Federalist lines by exonerating Putnam. Swett relied upon newspapers, congressional files, and the "scattered surviving veterans of the day," whose testimony he duly filed in the Boston Athenaeum. Much as Humphreys mythologized Putnam, Swett followed suit by lauding Putnam's leadership of troops and overall bravery: during the retreat, for instance, Putnam "seemingly resolved to brave the foe alone," the last man to depart the field according to Swett. If Swett magnanimously saluted Dearborn's distinguished Revolutionary service, he ignored the charges leveled against Putnam; instead, readers learned that both men had acted courageously.⁴⁰ Federalist efforts to codify the past did not totally succeed. A committee charged with procuring testimony from aging Bunker Hill veterans, which may have been where Swett received his information, turned so blatantly partisan

³⁹ See Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York, 1995), 187, 256-257, 262-267; Glenn Wallach, *Obedient Sons: The Discourse of Youth and Generations in American Culture, 1630-1860* (Amherst, 1997), 56-57, 60-61, 90-91; Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago, 1979), 69-95, passim; Sheidley, "Sectional Nationalism," 259-260, and J. V. Mathews, "'Whig History': The New England Whigs and a Usable Past," *New England Quarterly*, 51 (June, 1978): 193-208 for the conservative uses of the past. The Dearborn/Putnam debate provides a preview of the Whig historical perspective.

⁴⁰ David Humphreys, *Essay on the Life of the Honorable Major General Israel Putnam, with an Appendix Sketch of the Battle of Bunker Hill* by S. Swett (Boston, 1818), 252, 270-271; Warren, *History of the Bunker Hill Association*, 35.

that one member, Colonel Samuel L. Knapp, “became disgusted with the manner in which the business was conducted and resigned his place on the commission.” A half-century later, Justin Winsor, a Gilded Age historian, concluded that the veterans’ depositions from 1818 possessed scant value to the “critical student.”⁴¹

Critics remained singularly unimpressed by Federalist efforts. The *Boston Patriot* critically reviewed Swett’s essay, especially his argument that Putnam led men into battle, and deemed it “wholly gratuitous,” reliant upon contradictory veterans’ depositions. Privately, Major Thompson Maxwell concurred. Maxwell had been present at Bunker Hill, and he insisted to his memorialists in 1818 that Putnam was neither present at the redoubt nor engaged in the fighting. Maxwell first spotted Putnam during the American retreat from Breed’s Hill to Bunker, where the sputtering Putnam, according to Maxwell’s account, furiously and ineffectively told the men to stand and fight, before he rode away to Cambridge. Maxwell never saw him again. By 1819, David Lee Child, a Boston Latin School submaster, who had written the *Boston Patriot* review, authored an *Inquiry into the Conduct of General Putnam*, praising Dearborn’s historical contribution and pointedly rebuking Swett’s selective use of veterans’ depositions. He saw no evidence that Putnam led troops into the fray.⁴²

Such arguments and retorts, grounded upon survivors’ testimonies, left seemingly little room for consensus. Both Federalists and Republicans had staked claims to their readings of the past, and both employed Putnam in the guise of Revolutionary icon to make their points. Compromise appeared unattainable. Yet the attendant verbal barrage did focus attention upon the battle, as much as upon the personalities involved, and this stimulated a greater awareness of Bunker

⁴¹ Fellows, *Veil Removed*, 140-142; Winsor, ed., *Narrative and Critical History of America*, 6: 189, fn.2; David Lee Child, *An Enquiry into the Conduct of General Putnam* (Boston, 1819); Child was a political protege of Dearborn; see Purcell, “Sealed with Blood,” 226. *Dictionary of American Biography*, s.v., Knapp, Samuel L.

⁴² *Boston Patriot*, November 17, 1818; “Narration of Major Thompson Maxwell,” *Historical Collections of the Essex Institute*, 7 (June, 1865): 107-108; Child, *An Enquiry into the Conduct of General Putnam*; Frothingham, *History of the Siege of Boston*, 379.

Hill the Event, compounded by the approach of its fiftieth anniversary. No one disputed the significance of Bunker Hill for illuminating patriot valor; instead, they disputed the positioning of notables in the national pantheon. *The Salem Essex Register*, a Republican paper, while reminding readers on June 16, 1819, about a forthcoming celebration of Bunker Hill, cautioned:

But we trust while no blame is cast on the heroes of the day, there will be no allusion to any attempt to estimate the comparative services of that day in the spirit of a dispute which has lately arisen about it. It is our heroism we are to recollect, and the brave men who fought and bled. We are to forget our errors and to recollect that the day was glorious from the true courage, just perseverance, and final event of it.⁴³

Celebrating the battle, instead of airing disputes over Putnam, drew attention to the issue of commemoration, and with it came a means to draw Federalists and Republicans together.

Henry A. S. Dearborn further reconfigured the memory of Bunker Hill in 1822. As one of the original journalistic combatants, Dearborn proved ideally suited to extend an olive branch to all sides, writing an anonymous plea in the *Boston Patriot* in April to urge the purchase of the battlefield currently listed for sale. "Let not the glorious sepulchre of our Revolutionary warriors be profaned," Dearborn proclaimed. The elder Dearborn, appointed Ambassador to Portugal in 1822, removed himself from the debate, leaving the son to chart his own course. William Tudor, founding editor of the *North American Review*, approached Dearborn upon learning his identity, warmly embracing the idea, and he enlisted such Federalists as Daniel Webster, Edward Everett (the Harvard classicist and orator), and Colonel Thomas H. Perkins, a wealthy merchant, to acquire the site and form the Bunker Hill Memorial Association. After Dr. John C. Warren, nephew of the martyred Dr. Joseph Warren, purchased the parcel in November of 1822, the group focused upon procuring the remaining land for a memorial. Federalists

⁴³ (Salem) *Essex Register*, June 16, 1819; *Salem Gazette*, June 17, 1819; *Boston Patriot and Daily Chronicle*, June 18, 1819; Warren, *History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association*, 36-37; Frothingham, *History of the Siege of Boston*, 339-340.

and Republicans together met at the Perkins house to discuss tactics; in fact, when Webster proved unable to present the Association's petition for incorporation, Henry A. S. Dearborn took his place before the legislature. Old combatants had become allies. Even Daniel Putnam, the guardian of his father's memory, joined the group, as people from across the nation contributed money to the cause.⁴⁴

The disappearance of partisan memory, or more accurately, the truce over Putnam, also reflected the changed political dynamics. The Federalist Party of Massachusetts had virtually disbanded as a state-wide body after 1823, unable to coax John Brooks into running for re-election. Federalist gubernatorial candidates lost to Republican standard-bearers in 1823 and 1824, signaling the party's doom as an organized electoral force. Federalists became independents, joined the swollen ranks of the Republican party, or retired from politics. Equally important, the Presidential candidacy of John Quincy Adams in 1824, a Republican, prompted the notion of the "Universal Yankee Nation," a reference to Adams's appeal among New Englanders regardless of party identity. Massachusetts Federalists remained divided over Adams, yet the political lines had been radically redrawn to offer the prospect of a new political coalition. By celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Bunker Hill, Massachusetts citizens of different political identities not only reaffirmed their section's contribution to independence, harking back to a time before Republican and Federalist divisions, but they reminded the nation of New England's Revolutionary role. Such messages offset any partisan disagreement over Israel Putnam.⁴⁵

The cornerstone ceremony scheduled for June 17, 1825 heralded the emerging consensus about Bunker Hill along the lines proposed by the *Essex Register*. No controversy clouded the ceremony. No rancor over historical rankings materialized. Although Henry A. S. Dearborn

⁴⁴ Alpheus S. Packard, *History of the Bunker Hill Monument*, Collection of the Maine Historical Society, Vol. 3 (Portland, ME, 1853), 244-249, quote from the *Boston Patriot* is on 244; Carl Seaburg and Stanley Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston: Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854* (Cambridge, MA, 1971), 318-319; Warren, *History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association*, 40-43, 50-53; Frothingham, *History of the Siege of Boston*, 340-341.

⁴⁵ Shaw Livermore, Jr., *The Twilight of Federalism: The Disintegration of the Federalist Party, 1815-1830* (Princeton, 1962), 96-97, 117-118, 138-146.

protested the adoption of a memorial obelisk over a column, he could hardly fault the proceedings: one hundred ninety Bunker Hill veterans gathered at the site, joined by the visiting Marquis de Lafayette and tens of thousands of citizens, to hear Daniel Webster dedicate the memorial cornerstone.⁴⁶ Webster reminded the audience, “We are among the sepulchres of our fathers. We are on ground, distinguished by their valor, their constancy, and the shedding of their blood.” All who died were martyrs, with Warren, M’Cleary and several others specifically named. Israel Putnam received only a single mention, identified with John Stark, John Brooks, and others as among the original survivors of the battle now deceased, while William Prescott received special mention for commanding the redoubt during the British assault. Nor did Webster recount the particulars of the fight, a useful way to skirt the Putnam controversy, since he intoned, “These are familiarly known to all.” The emerging historical memory of Bunker Hill crafted by Webster spurned contentious debate, hence controversy, over Putnam’s role and contributions, deeming them unfit subjects for commemoration ceremonies. Americans across the nation praised the speech.⁴⁷

How would Bunker Hill be remembered? Not as a memory battle entangled by questions of actions and deeds fought over issues of character and reputation. Instead, a collective definition of valor covered the participants, captivating the nation’s attention. Here were heroes aplenty to salute -- all of them courageous. This scripting of public memory, so nicely crafted by Daniel Webster, left Israel Putnam without any defining traits, neither heralded for leadership nor condemned for incompetence. He simply melted into the background. We do not know what the Dearborns thought about the speech, although Henry Alexander

⁴⁶ Seaburg and Paterson, *Merchant Price of Boston*, 320-326; (Salem) *Essex Register*, June 20, 1825; Warren, *History of the Bunker Hill Monument Association*, 120, 159-168. Dearborn’s dislike of the monument design did not prompt him to resign from the Association; Packard, “History of the Bunker Hill Monument,” 251-253.

⁴⁷ Daniel Webster, *The Writings and Speeches of Daniel Webster*, 18 vols., J.W. McIntyre, preface, (Boston, 1903) 1: 235-254; Wiltse, ed., *Papers of Daniel Webster*, 2: 65; Remini, *Daniel Webster: The Man and His Time*, 248-252; Maurice C. Baxter, *One and Inseparable: Daniel Webster and the Union* (Cambridge, MA, 1984), 82-83; Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 24-25.

had recently finished a manuscript history of his father that bemoaned the attacks against him, but Daniel Putnam smoldered in disbelief. Putnam had previously written to Webster about his father's role before the speech; now he responded with a blistering letter to the Bunker Hill Monument Association in August, 1825, insisting that Putnam, not Prescott, held command and hence deserved greater accolades. Daniel Putnam complained: "Had not Putnam superior rank to Prescott? And has it not been sufficiently demonstrated that he was in the battle, and from beginning to end exercising all the properties of command? Why then, should be any disposition manifested to place him somewhere not in the foreground of the picture?" Commemorative rites designed to anchor the public memory of events shunned such controversies, a point Putnam failed to appreciate.⁴⁸

What really happened at Bunker Hill, linked to questions of character, unleashed a memory war among two generations of Americans, Revolutionary participants and their descendants, powered by partisan political attacks and counter-thrusts. The barrage of testimony, commentary, and analysis, played out in public journals, reveals the transition from a divided memory to an emerging historical collective memory. What people such as Dearborn, Putnam, Stark, and others recalled about Bunker Hill occurred as the Revolutionary generation dwindled and declined, replaced by a younger generation for whom the Revolution became the stuff of legends peopled by heroic titans. Men such as Bentley, Webster, and others attempted to craft the historical past, divided by their opinions of Israel Putnam. Unable to agree about Putnam's place, they could praise Bunker Hill as an event of

⁴⁸ "Colonel Daniel Putnam's Letter Relative to the Battle of Bunker Hill and General Israel Putnam," *Collections of the Connecticut Historical Society* (Hartford, 1860), 1: 227-249; Wiltse, ed., *Papers of Daniel Webster*, 2: 425; Dearborn, *Life of General Dearborn*; Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, 55. James Fenimore Cooper, reflecting upon the Battle of Bunker Hill, wrote, "In the course of the movements that preceded the conflict, General Putnam, a well-known partisan officer of the adjoining province of Connecticut, led some small bodies into the peninsula, over whom, he of course exercised a species of authority. But the chief command if it belonged to anyone, was the right of Mr. Prescott, who constructed, and who held the half-finished redoubt." Cooper, *Notions of the American, Picked Up By a Travelling Bachelor*, introd., Robert E. Spiller, 2 vols. (1828; rept., New York, 1963), 2: 310-311.

collective valor. This was an appropriate message to transmit to younger generations. Besides, as Webster so artfully said, the particulars of Bunker Hill, whatever they might be, were already well known.

Visitors to Bunker Hill subscribed to Webster's sentiments. If writers and biographers continued to debate Putnam's role in the battle, alternatively praising or damning him, many subsequent tourists to the battle site remembered something different: the construction of a monument to a great event. This captivated people's attention during the late 1820s and into the 1830s. The memorial, moreover, transcended any particular individual. A visiting New Yorker, Philip Hone, praised the "noble column of granite," being erected in 1828, without reference to particular Revolutionary figures. Later in an 1834 visit, Hone did cite Bunker Hill as the spot where General Warren fell but more importantly he bemoaned the still unfinished monument as an indictment of American indolence. George Templeton Strong, another New Yorker, expressed similar feelings during an 1836 visit. Climbing atop the hill, Strong remarked: "The ground being the whole scene of action lies before you like a map, and it is easy to fancy the aspect it must have presented on the morning of the action. The monument in the middle of the entrenchments will be a superb thing, when it is finished." It was a refrain voiced by others. Enshrinement of a patriotic event went beyond a single individual.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ For the continued ruckus over Putnam and Bunker Hill, see Fellows, *Veil Removed*; Charles Coffin, comp., *History of the Battle of Breed's Hill* (Saco, ME, 1831). On the monument's construction, which dominated attention, see John Hayward, *The New England Gazetteer* (Boston, 1839), Charlestown, Massachusetts, listing; Allan Nevins, ed., *Diary of Philip Hone, 1828-1851*, 2 vols in one, (rept., New York, 1970), I: 5, 131. Strong is quoted in Kammen, *Season of Youth*, 107-108.