



'The Greatest Incendiary in All of America'

Major General Joseph Warren took his Harvard education to the streets and the battlefield.

by DANIEL B. CUNNINGHAM

Had circumstances unfolded differently, American history might have immortalized Joseph Warren, A.B. 1759, A.M. '62, in the pantheon of Revolutionary War heroes. Warren was the physician who tended to the victims of the Boston Massacre. He was the colonial leader who sent Paul Revere and William Daves on their midnight ride to Lexington and Concord. In the decades after his death at the Battle of Bunker Hill, more towns and streets across the new nation were named after him than George Washington himself.

Warren was born on May 30, 1741, in Roxbury, Massachusetts, the son of a devout farmer. He began his first year at Harvard in 1755, at age 14—one of the four youngest students at the College. (His brother, John Warren, A.B. 1771, A.M. '74, later co-founded Harvard Medical School.)

The mid-eighteenth-century Harvard education, under President Edward Holyoke, was rich in the Enlightenment themes that would inspire the revolutionary set: ancient Greek and Latin authors; the classic civic virtue of citizen leadership; scientific method and inquiry; moral philosophy.

As a doctor, Warren built trust and respect by treating everyone from poor and common laborers to Whig leader John Adams and Tory Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson. But his political leanings were clear. He joined organizations that rallied Massachusetts residents against British policies, including the Committee of Correspondence (the Facebook of the day), the Committee of Safety (a militia-CIA combina-

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tion), and the Sons of Liberty, where he became a close friend of Samuel Adams, A.B. 1740, A.M. '43. In 1774, Warren was the primary author of the Suffolk Resolves, a precursor to the Declaration of Independence.

Joseph Warren
by John Singleton Copley,
about 1765

But it may have been his rhetorical skills that cemented Warren's reputation as what one British lord dubbed “the greatest incendiary in all of America.” Speaking at Boston's Old South Meeting House on the fifth anniversary of the Boston Massacre, Warren declared a moral imperative to fight tyranny. He arrived dressed in a flowing white Roman toga—a throwback, perhaps, to his undergraduate days, when he acted in a play about a Roman senator willing to surrender his life for liberty. “On you depend the fortunes of America,” he told the crowd.

“You are to decide the important question, on which rest the happiness and liberty of millions yet unborn. Act worthy of yourselves.”

A month later, in April 1775, Warren learned of General Thomas Gage's order for 800 British troops to march to Concord. He responded by ordering

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