

# RELUCTANT GENERAL

— By Jeff Walter —

*Artemas Ward helped launch the Revolution before fading into the background*

**S**hort, plump and sickly, Artemas Ward might seem an unlikely candidate to help launch the Revolution. But, as one of the first major generals of the Continental Army, he was in the right place at the right time, and he commanded the respect of those he led.

## Outspoken Patriot

Ward was born November 26, 1727, in the Worcester County, Mass., town of Shrewsbury. He graduated from Harvard in 1748 and briefly taught there. He married Sarah Trowbridge in 1750 and went on to father eight children.

He wore many hats over the next half-century: farmer, store-keeper, township assessor, justice of the peace and politician. But it was his military career that established his name. In 1755, during the French and Indian War, he was made a major of the Massachusetts militia, charged with protecting Massachusetts' western frontier. In 1757 he was promoted to colonel.

By 1762 he was back in Shrewsbury. Serving with Samuel Adams and John Hancock on the taxation committee of the Massachusetts Bay Colony's General Court, he became an outspoken critic of the British Parliament, leading to the revocation of his military commission in 1767. Nevertheless, he continued to rail against unfair taxation. On October 3, 1774, the entire Massachusetts Third Regiment

resigned from British service and unanimously elected Ward as its leader. Soon after, a colony-wide Committee of Safety named him general and commander in chief of the colony's militia.

## Protecting Boston

After the Battles of Lexington and Concord on April 19, 1775, sparked the Revolutionary War, Ward's militiamen

trained their efforts on protecting Boston. In June, having learned of a British plan to attack Bunker Hill, he ordered forces to fortify the area, leading to the Battle of Bunker Hill on June 17.

Three days earlier, the Second Continental Congress had created a Continental Army with four major generals: Ward, Charles Lee, Philip Schuyler and Israel Putnam, with Ward second in command under General George Washington. Ward, 47, questioned his own suitability for the post. In a June 30, 1775, letter to the Continental Congress, accepting his commission, Ward wrote: "I... do heartily wish that the honor had been conferred upon a person better qualified to execute a trust so important. ... I always have been, and am still ready to devote my life, in attempting to deliver my native country from insupportable slavery."

The Siege of Boston continued until March 17, 1776, when the British evacuated after being unable to advance on the city.



George Washington and others, Lee included, expressed a low opinion of Ward and his soldiers' lack of discipline. But Ward's ragtag group, confronting the world's most formidable army, largely consisted of volunteers eager to return to their farms. Ward earned their loyalty to do what needed to be done. Unfortunately, he was plagued by ill health and resigned from the army on March 20, 1777.

He apparently nurtured a quiet dislike for Washington, according to an article by Rebecca Anne Goetz for the April 2003 Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society, 1880–2008. Ward never forgave Washington for remarks made in 1775 that were "injurious to the Reputation of General Ward," wrote Artemas Ward II in a January 22, 1819, letter to Christopher Gore.

## Later Life and Reputation

Ward remained an active public servant after his retirement from military life. He was a state court justice, a state representative and speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, a delegate to the Continental Congress and a U.S. representative. Ward died on October 28, 1800. John Adams declared he was "universally esteemed, beloved and confided in by his army and his country."

After his death, many of his descendants worked to revive his historical reputation, Goetz writes. One of Ward's great-grandsons—a seventh-generation Artemas Ward—"bequeathed the Ward homestead and a substantial endowment to Harvard University, from which funds were taken in the 1930s to erect a statue to the general." (The statue is now in Ward Circle at American University in Washington, D.C.) This Artemas also commissioned a biography of his ancestor in 1921 and erected numerous plaques and paintings dedicated to him throughout Massachusetts. ☀