

Where It Began – The Henry Knox Trail

The gateway to an adventure could be at your doorstep.

We pass them on the road every day. Historical markers in all shapes and sizes.

Do you notice them? I do, but what's written seems always too long or too small to read from my car at a glance. And I'm usually forever, and again every time I pass, intending one day to find a place to pull over and appreciate the story they tell.

Installed to commemorate a person, event or site deemed worthy of recognition by our federal, state or local government, the history behind a marker's erection is often as interesting as the reason it was erected.

One of these markers, a most prominent one - granite, large headstone sized - is located on a grassy peninsula near the traffic lights at the intersection in Wayland, Massachusetts of Cochituate Road and Old Connecticut Path (historically known as the "Five Paths" intersection). It's practically at the end of the street where I moved twenty-some years ago.

Eventually, I walked over to take a look and was delighted by the inscription:

THROUGH THIS PLACE PASSED
GENERAL HENRY KNOX
IN THE WINTER OF
1775 – 1776
TO DELIVER TO
GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON
AT CAMBRIDGE
THE TRAIN OF ARTILLERY
FROM FORT TICONDEROGA USED
TO FORCE THE BRITISH ARMY
TO EVACUATE BOSTON
ERECTED BY THE COMMONWEALTH
OF MASSACHUSETTS 1927



Above it is a tarnished bronze plaque depicting Henry Knox and the oxen train dragging the cannon through the snow - a nice little, artistic vignette.

We'd moved to a contemporary style home in Wayland from a Revolutionary War period one on Federal Street in Salem, Massachusetts. Having lived there for 15 years, once settled in my modern Wayland house I missed the sense of being surrounded by history. And now suddenly I'd discovered us living on the edge of the very history that had saved the Revolution. I couldn't wait to report this to my wife and young son.

Perhaps I should have realized otherwise, but for the next two decades I just assumed this was a one-of-a-kind marker. It didn't occur to me that it could actually be one of 56+ placed from Fort Ticonderoga to Dorchester Heights – at the time of the Declaration of Independence's sesquicentennial - by the states of New York and Massachusetts, creating the Henry Knox Trail, one of our country's earliest heritage trails.

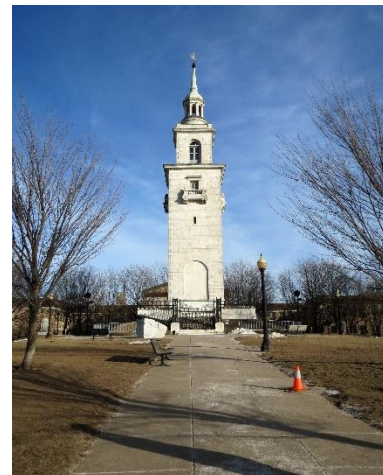
Simple coincidence – and the internet (of course) - led me to its discovery last year. David McCullough, my favorite history author, featured the story of Henry Knox's retrieval of the cannon from Fort Ticonderoga at the beginning of his book *1776*. In suggesting it for summer reading as a kind-of travel guide, I realized that I'd never actually been to Boston's Dorchester Heights where Washington had positioned Knox's furthest shooting cannon.

And so, I found my way to Telegraph Hill, the surviving one of the Heights' twin peaks. (The other was levelled in the second half of the nineteenth century for the landfill which converted an all-but island, Revolutionary War era Boston, into today's sprawling metropolis.)

It's almost a San Francisco like climb to the elliptical-shaped, hilltop Thomas Park under National Park Service supervision. Daytime parking is available around the peak's base from which steep stairs lead up to a large, open grass field. A path (frequented by dog walkers) bisects the park and provides a kind of runway with a 300-degree view of Boston end-to-end. On a sunny day, it's worth the climb up Dorchester Heights just for the view.

From there, like Washington on the morning of March 5, 1776, you can plot the direction and range towards the Custom House off which King George's ships found themselves threatened in the harbor by Knox's cannon.

And from across Boston, you can spot the 115-foot tall, white marble, steeple shaped monument built in 1902 that celebrates Washington's outmaneuvering of the British. It stands most prominently at one end of this park.



But a bit to my surprise - off to its side - I found a duplicate of Wayland's granite Knox marker, bearing the same artistic, bronze plaque but with a slightly different inscription:



AT THIS PLACE
THE CANNON BROUGHT BY
GENERAL HENRY KNOX
FROM FORT TICONDEROGA
TO DELIVER TO
GENERAL GEORGE WASHINGTON
IN THE WINTER OF
1775 - 1776
WERE USED TO FORCE
THE BRITISH ARMY
TO EVACUATE BOSTON
ERECTED BY THE COMMONWEALTH
OF MASSACHUSETTS 1927

Now I was curious. If there were two, nearly identical markers created by the Commonwealth in 1927 to commemorate Henry Knox's cannon train, could there be more? It didn't take much for the Web to connect a search for "Henry Knox and marker" with the "Henry Knox Trail". And that got me rereading the early chapters of McCullough's 1776 and planning our next road trip.

An adventure, started by a marker on my doorstep, had begun!

Steven Glovsky of Wayland can be contacted at TravelsWithTwain.com.

(This is the first in a series of pieces about the Henry Knox Trail leading up to my talk at the Wayland Historical Society's annual meeting at 7:00 P.M. on Wednesday, May 11, 2022. Come prepared to be surprised.)