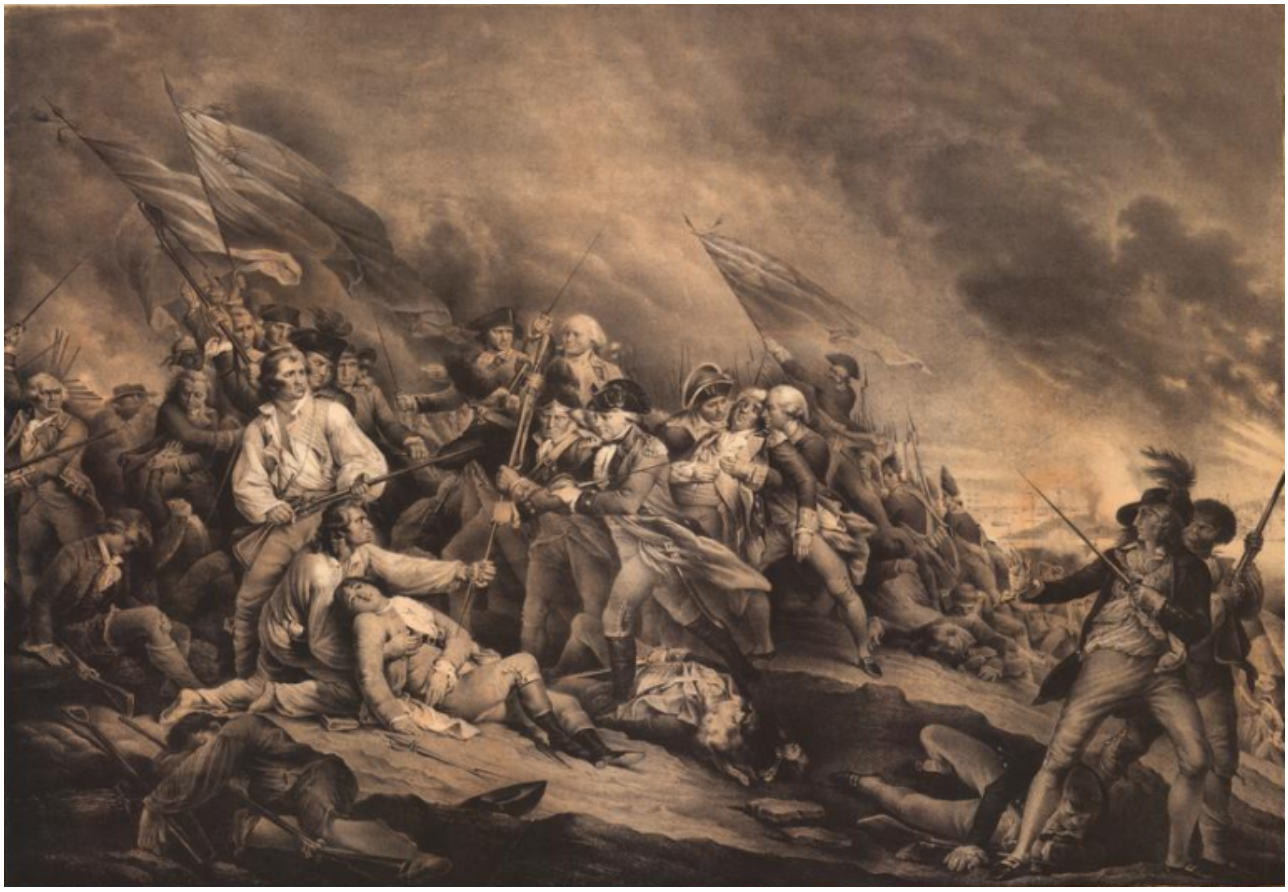
Dr. Warren’s Ciceronian Toga



Performing rebellion in Revolutionary Boston

On the morning of March 6, 1775, Joseph Warren, a physician-turned-revolutionary leader, stopped his one-chair carriage in front of Boston’s Old South Church. Warren climbed down from the carriage, followed by a servant holding a small bundle. The two men crossed the street and entered an apothecary’s shop. When Warren came out of the store he wore a Roman toga. He now crossed the street once more and burst into the swarming Old South to deliver the fourth annual Boston Massacre oration.

Few events of the Revolutionary era offered a more stark reminder of the failures of the mother country than the Boston Massacre. In the course of that event on March 5, 1770, British soldiers shot and killed five Bostonians. The massacre was probably not the result of murderous intentions of the British sentries, as Americans claimed, nor an American plot, as some English did. The traditional patriot fear of standing armies, combined with the ominous ratio of four thousand armed redcoats to fifteen thousand Bostonians, led to the fateful clash, almost immediately named “massacre.”

In March 1771, the year following the massacre, a committee on which Joseph Warren sat suggested an oration to commemorate the fateful event. James Lovell,

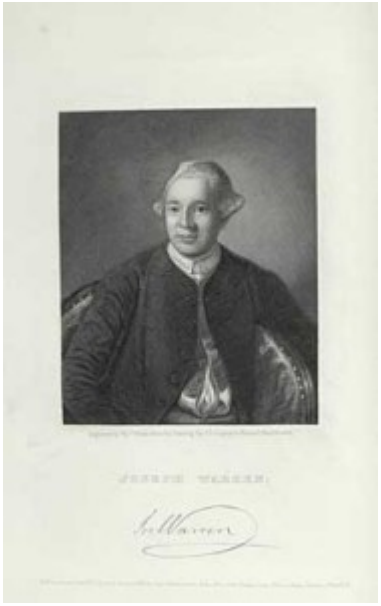
a distinguished Bostonian, was chosen as the orator. Thus began a sequence of annual orations, remaining unbroken until its suspension after the Fourth of July celebration of 1783. These orations, according to Warren's contemporary, the physician and historian David Ramsay, were administered by "eloquent orators" in order to keep the revolutionary fire "burning with an incessant flame" for thirteen years (they were displaced by national Fourth of July celebrations after 1783). The orations were always published soon after their delivery and, according to John Adams, they were read "scarcely ever with dry eyes." Indeed there were "few men of consequence," as Adams further pointed out, "who did not commence their career by an oration at the 5th of March." The orators included illustrious names such as John Hancock, Samuel Adams, and Benjamin Church. Only Dr. Joseph Warren was chosen to deliver the speech twice, in 1772 and 1775.

Warren was born at Roxbury, Massachusetts, in 1741, the second generation of Roxburites, descended from a family that had settled in America nearly a century earlier. He was educated in his hometown school and acquired an unusual command of Latin. After graduating from Harvard in 1759, he studied medicine and soon became one of the outstanding doctors of Boston. Warren's political inclinations surfaced during the Stamp Act crisis of 1765. In a series of newspaper columns, he sharply attacked Massachusetts governor Francis Bernard and played an important role in the governor's resignation from office. After becoming a member of the Committee of Safety, a board of selectmen who dealt with security issues, Warren delivered the second annual massacre oration in March 1772. "The fervor" of the orator, remarked Warren's political foe and Bernard's eventual replacement as governor, Thomas Hutchinson, "could not fail in its effect on the minds of the great concourse of people present." The doctor was coming into his own as one of Revolutionary Boston's great orators. As the *Boston Gazette* reported, Warren's words were celebrated with "unanimous applause."

Warren's reputation was built on much more than simply oratorical talent. He also had a gift for sharply worded revolutionary rhetoric, much like that of the still unknown Philadelphia pamphleteer, Tom Paine. In September of 1774, when the towns of Suffolk County met in convention, Warren delivered a paper, afterwards known as the *Suffolk Resolves.* These resolutions denounced the Coercive Acts, enacted by Parliament following the Boston Tea Party, as unconstitutional and therefore moot. They also called for the establishment of Massachusetts as a free state (until the repeal of the Coercive Acts) and the preparation of local militias for armed resistance. Warren's *Resolves* were forwarded to the Continental Congress, which readily adopted them. Early in 1775, the last year of his life, Warren became chairman of the committee of safety, charged with organizing the militia and collecting military stores. This physician was asked, metaphorically, to preside over an ailing body politic, providing it with the patriotic nourishment and the military arsenal needed for its restoration.

By March of 1775 unmistakable signs of a gathering storm were apparent. After

the 1773 Boston Tea Party, in which 150 Bostonians threw 342 crates of tea from British vessels docked in Boston harbour, relations between Massachusetts and Britain deteriorated swiftly, until the colony was finally declared to be in a state of open rebellion. By early spring of 1775, war seemed inevitable. Warren thus staged his second massacre oration at a time when even the smallest spark would have inflamed revolutionary sentiments. And if the timing is any indication—the oration preceded the fateful battle of Lexington and Concord by a little more than a month—Warren's oration represented just such a spark. Nonetheless, it remains a largely forgotten moment in the story of the Revolution's early days. In part, this may be owing to the fate of the orator himself. Warren was killed by a British musket ball during the Battle of Bunker Hill several months after delivering his powerful words. Unlike Samuel Adams or Thomas Jefferson or any of the other familiar Revolutionary luminaries, Warren's role ended before independence was actually declared. And unlike so many other Revolutionaries, he did not survive to play a part in the creation of a new American nation. Whatever Warren's own fate, there is no doubt that the words he delivered in March of 1775 were a crucial ingredient in Boston's Revolutionary moment. There is also little doubt that they resonated for Bostonians for many years after the orator himself passed from the scene.



Joseph Warren, engraved by Thomas Illman from the painting by J. S. Copley in Fanueil Hall, Boston. This image is the frontispiece for a chapter on Joseph Warren's life from The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans, by James B. Longacre and James Herring, Vol. II, 1835 [-1839]. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Revolutionary oratory was about much more than spoken words; it was also about a delicately formulated theatrical apparatus whose purpose was to transform mere speech into moving performance. For if there was one thing Revolutionary orators knew, it was that if you wanted to move people to action, you had to touch something deep within them. Taking their cues from the tradition of great

Roman orators such as Cicero, they thus deployed a range of imagery designed to excite listeners' passions. Only in doing so, these orators came to believe, could the disagreement with Britain be transformed from a legal and constitutional matter to a matter for the passions—a matter of injustice, of dishonor, and of familial disgrace. As the reception of his oration suggests, Warren was a master of these techniques.

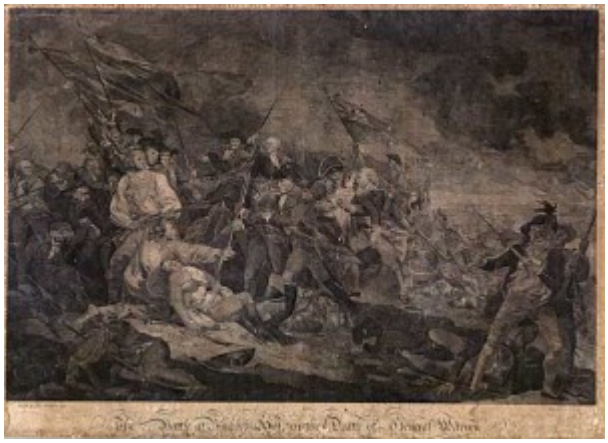
Unfortunately, it is difficult to know just what Warren's oratorical arsenal consisted of. Even though thousands attended the massacre oration, and we have several accounts of Warren's performance, reconstructing the event remains difficult. Nonetheless, there is much to be learned about Boston's mobilization for revolution from the events surrounding this singular act of public speaking.

"This day," the *Boston Evening Post* informed its readers on March 6, 1775, "an Oration will be delivered by Joseph Warren Esq., in commemoration of the bloody tragedy on the 5th of March 1770." But observant Bostonians recognized that this would not be just another commemorative address. The British forces now stationed in the city, Samuel Adams noted, were likely to resent any insinuation that their actions had been barbaric and would surely "take the occasion to beat up a Breeze." A later account reported that there was a "threat uttered by some of the British officers, that they would take the life of any man who should dare to speak of the massacre on that anniversary."

In his diary, Massachusetts royal governor Thomas Hutchinson recalled a larger assassination plot during Warren's oration. An English officer, according to Hutchinson, reported that if during the meeting Warren would say "anything against the King, etc., an officer was prepared, who stood near with an egg, to have thrown in his face; and that it was to have been a signal to draw swords; and that they would have massacred Hancock, Adams, and hundreds more." The *Virginia Gazette*, reprinting a report in a London newspaper, elaborated on the awkward egg episode, claiming that "this scheme was rendered abortive in the most whimsical manner, for he who was deputed to throw the egg fell in going to church . . . and broke the egg." Tensions clearly ran high as March 6 approached.

The presence of a large crowd, including British soldiers, seems one of the few undisputed facts regarding the oration's unfolding. A nineteenth-century biographer of Warren recalled that "many people came to town from the country to take part in the commemoration," and Frederick MacKenzie, a British officer, reported at the time that an "immense concourse of people" assembled at the Old South building for the occasion. Both patriots and loyalists acknowledged the presence of redcoats in the crowd, and both confirmed the obvious point that for them this was a most offensive and most disrespectful occasion. Samuel Adams claimed to treat the "many . . . officers present" with civility as he showed them to their seats, so "that they might have no pretence to behave ill." The *Boston Gazette*, a radical patriot publication, labeled the "party of soldiers" at the Old South "perpetrators," claiming they came to harass the

congregating Bostonians. Frederick MacKenzie claimed that “the troops conceived it was a great insult under the present circumstances, to deliver an oration on the occasion.” Thus “a great number of officers,” which Hutchinson estimated at three hundred, “assembled in the church and seemed determined to take notice of, and resent any expressions made use of by the Orator, reflecting on the Military.” The hall was overcrowded, the audience filling the aisles, while the soldiers occupied the stairs, perhaps hoping to scare Warren into silence. Whether they were “many,” a “party,” or “a great number,” as different accounts claimed, the presence of fuming British redcoats among the packed patriot crowd must have added an ominous sense to the impending drama.



The Battle of Bunker Hill, or the Death of General Warren, by John Trumbull, Esqr., engraved by J. Norman, 1786. John Trumball portrayed Warren’s death at Bunker Hill in neoclassical style and composition, alluding to the patriot’s heroic and tragic death. Perhaps the artist was influenced also by the classical aura that may have been building around his oration in a Ciceronian toga. Taken from the Visual Materials at the American Antiquarian Society. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

But Warren would not be intimidated. In fact, if contemporary accounts are correct, his chosen attire—the plain white Roman toga—established a dramatic contrast between the speaker and his redcoat antagonists. It was almost as if Warren knew they would be there and chose the garment precisely to antagonize them. As they sat stiffly in their heavy red wool coats—the sartorial definition of Britishness—he would hold forth, in the flowing freedom of his billowing white garment—the sartorial definition of ancient, primordial virtue. Of course the garment’s color was not its only distinctive quality. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find clothing more unlike that of these British soldiers.

The toga was the principal garment of a freeborn Roman male citizen. It consisted of a single piece of material of irregular form—long, broad, and flowing, without sleeves or armholes, and covering the whole body with the exception of the right arm. Because it was worn without any kind of fastening device, the wearer had to keep his left arm crooked to support its voluminous

drapery. What could be more unlike the stiff, tightly tailored coat, waistcoat, and breeches of the British soldier? In the toga, there was no artifice, no false front, no deviant concealment; what you saw was what you got. And the only thing that separated the wearer's body from his audience was that bent left arm. To wear such a garment, in other words, was to do away with all that superficial finery with which a corrupt Britain had disguised its designs on American liberty and dignity.

In addition to costume, Warren's stagecraft included a dramatic entry, though there is some dispute about the precise form of that entry. According to one account, he "ascended the Pulpit" from the front of the room, presumably passing through the crowd of soldiers who filled the aisles. According to another, he entered "from the rear by the pulpit window." And still another recalled that he climbed "a ladder at the pulpit window" (try doing that wearing a toga), to avoid pushing through the crowd of hostile soldiers. In any case, we can imagine this man, in his flowing toga, appearing before the packed audience like some kind of apparition. We can also imagine the hush that came over the boisterous crowd as its gaze fell upon the doctor. Before even uttering a word, his appearance would have spoken volumes to a crowd of Americans steeped in the virtues of ancient Rome.

As Warren began to speak, MacKenzie recalled, there were only a "few hisses from some of the officers." Samuel Adams similarly observed that Warren appeared to hold sway over the hostile members of the audience and another witness recalled that when one of the British officers held "up one of his hands in view of Warren, with several pistol bullets on the open palm," Warren silenced the officer by calmly dropping "a white handkerchief upon the officer's hand." It took true mastery of the orator's art form to turn so hostile a gesture to one's advantage. But Warren was obviously up to the task. Far from quieting his claims, the gesture gave the neo-Roman speaker an ideal chance to show that true virtue would be cowed by no threat of mere violence. Such was the way of the great Roman heroes of the day. The celebrated Roman politician Cato, for example, could take on the great and powerful Caesar precisely because he was entirely immune to threats of violence. Virtue, in his lexicon, would always prevail over base power.

The gathering ended in disorder. After Warren stepped from the pulpit, Samuel Adams stood up and asked for a volunteer to deliver next year's commemorative oration. Adams apparently took the opportunity to reinforce colonists' sense that the events of 1770 represented an entirely unjust massacre. Not surprisingly, the redcoats, according to MacKenzie, "began to hiss," and someone mistakenly heard the words "Fire! Fire!" A scene of "the greatest confusion imaginable" ensued: amidst the screams of "fire" could be heard the threatening sounds of "drums & fifes of the 43rd regiment which happened to be passing by from exercise." According to another British witness, "the gallerians apprehending fire, bounded out of the windows, and swarmed down the gutters, like rats, into the street. The 43d regiment, returning accidentally from exercise, with drums beating, threw the whole body into the greatest

consternation."

If the events surrounding the speech made for powerful political theater, what are we to make of the speech itself? The text, which was so widely reprinted, suggests that Warren skillfully blended the performative elements of his oration with the spoken elements.

Warren began with a historical account of early settlement, which was intended to "determine with what degree of justice the late parliament of Great Britain has assumed the power of giving away that property which the Americans have earned by their labour." What followed was a Whig interpretation of colonial history. Warren portrayed a Manichean worldview in which "the tools of power in every age" confronted the benign power of liberty, embodied in his case by the Puritan forefathers. Those Puritans, "determined to find a place in which they might enjoy their freedom," exercised liberty in America through a charter obtained significantly from the British monarch rather than Parliament. They "cultivated and defended" the continent "at an infinite expense of toil and blood," and thus contributed vastly to the British Empire's greatness. Their serene prosperity, however, awakened "the madness of an avaricious minister" and brought about "the attempt of the British parliament to raise a revenue from America." These misfortunes "brought upon the stage discord, envy, hatred and revenge, with civil war close in their rear."

The speech, however, did not consist merely of a historical account of New England's settlement. Rather, Warren provided philosophical and ideological argument in defence of the colonists' position. "Personal freedom is the natural right of everyman," he noted, as was the right to hold "what he has honestly acquired by his own labour" and to "pursue that course which is the most conducive" to happiness. Hence, "no man, or body of men, can without being guilty of flagrant injustice, claim a right to dispose of the persons or acquisitions of any other man". Warren continued with a celebration of the ancient Romans, who through self-effacing attitudes, "eminently conduced to the greatness of that state." We can only imagine what a difference it made to hear such classical musings from an orator clad in a toga.

The massacre oration of 1775 was a significant event in the colonies' move toward war. Indeed, the fact that the War of Independence eventually commenced on April 19 at Lexington Green was rather incidental; it could have easily started on March 6 at Boston's Old South. Imagine this: As one of the numerous "gallerians" spots the redcoat that threatened Warren with a fistful of musket pellets, he starts cursing the soldier and his King. What follows is an inevitable, if unintended, altercation between the redcoats and the Bostonians, at the end of which both sides count several dead and wounded. Among the fallen, perhaps, is the orator, lying in a blood stained toga. The news of the "new massacre" would spread fast as armed militiamen start pouring toward the inflamed town. So the war between Britain and her American colonies might have begun.

If this not unlikely scenario would indeed have materialized we would surely witness every March 6 reenactments memorializing a valiant young man preaching the gospel of liberty. The reenactor’s audience would have been a large congregation of plain-clothed patriots peppered with red-coated soldiers. The eloquent orator would have been wearing a flowing, white Ciceronian toga.

Further Reading:

The best survey of the Boston Massacre and its unfolding is Hiller B. Zobel, *The Boston Massacre* (New York, 1996). Sandra Gustafson conveys interesting insights about massacre orations in the context of Revolutionary Boston’s cultural ecology in *Eloquence is Power: Oratory and Performance in Early America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2000). The most recent biography of Warren is already over forty years old: see John Cary, *Joseph Warren: Physician, Politician, Patriot* (Urbana, Ill., 1961). For the texts of the Boston Massacre commemoration speeches, including both of Warren’s addresses, see *Orations Delivered at the Request of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston to Commemorate the Evening of the Fifth of March, 1770; When a Number of Citizens were Killed by a Party of British Troops, Quartered Among Them in a Time of Peace* (Boston, 1785). For the classical influences on revolutionary America see Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994).

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