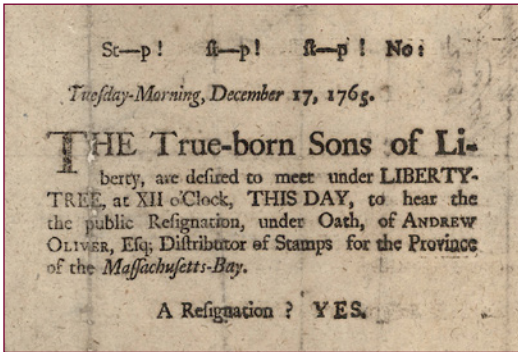


# 'Sons of Liberty': Physicians Fought for Independence on Bunker Hill and the High Seas

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Sons of Liberty Broadside, 1765  
[MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, PUBLIC DOMAIN, [HTTPS://COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG/W/INDEX.PHP?CURID=11558332](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=11558332)]

Party, one of the key events that led to the Revolutionary War.

The Sons' most prominent leader was Samuel Adams; others included Paul Revere and John Hancock, legends in the annals of American history. Less well-known are the physicians among the Sons' ranks, notably **Dr. Joseph Warren**, a friend and compatriot of Samuel Adams.

He was born in Roxbury, Massachusetts, on June 11, 1741, one of four children of Joseph Warren, a farmer, and his wife, Mary. He graduated from Harvard College in 1759, and over the next four years apprenticed himself to Dr. James Lloyd of Boston. Afterwards, he opened his own practice of medicine and surgery. In 1764, he married Elizabeth Hooton, who brought with her a dowry of considerable fortune. The couple would have four surviving children.

His practice and reputation as a physician grew, as did his civic-minded activities. Following the egregious Stamp Act of 1765, his participation in the Sons of Liberty and other political organizations to challenge British rule expanded. After the Boston Massacre in 1770, when British troops fired into a rebellious crowd of protesters, killing five, Warren regularly attended town meetings, arguing for the rights of the American colonies, and wrote of their efforts in numerous Boston newspapers.

In 1775, he was elected to the presidency of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, a provisional governing body, and then commissioned as major general in the state's militia. And it was Warren who directed Paul

They called themselves the Sons of Liberty, at first clandestine cells of Colonial patriots fighting taxation and tyranny by the British government, notably in battling the Stamp Act in 1765. Their most famous and provocative act was destroying 92,000 pounds of tea in Boston Harbor in December 1773, what would come to be known as the Boston Tea



Portrait of Dr. Joseph Warren (1741-1775)

[NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, BOSTON NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK]

## Doctors of the Declaration

On July 4, 1776, 56 delegates to the Second Continental Congress in Philadelphia unanimously adopted the Declaration of Independence, drafted by Thomas Jefferson. It began:

*When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.*



Front of the original Declaration of Independence [LIBRARY OF CONGRESS]

The original parchment document was signed on August 2, 1776. Among the signatories were the following five physicians:

**Benjamin Rush** was born on Christmas Eve, 1745, Pennsylvania. He attended the College of New Jersey

(later called Princeton), and chose medicine as his career. He apprenticed for six years, and then went to Scotland and the University of Edinburgh School of Medicine, where he was awarded the doctorate in 1768. Upon his return, he set up practice in Philadelphia.

Rush was active in the Sons of Liberty and in June 1776, he was elected to represent Pennsylvania in the Continental Congress.

During the war he was briefly the surgeon general to the Continental armies in the middle states and



Dr. Benjamin Rush



Photograph of "The Death of Gen. Warren at the Battle of Bunker's Hill, June 17, 1775." Painted by artist John Trumbull, oil on canvas, and commissioned by the Warren family and gifted to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, 1977, by Howland S. Warren. [CREATIVE COMMONS, WIKIMEDIA, IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN]

Revere and William Dawes to sound the alert that British soldiers were heading towards Lexington to arrest Samuel Adams on April 18, 1775, and fight the American militia. The news of the skirmishes at Lexington and Concord, the following day, on April 19, 1775, propelled Warren to leave his patients in the care of his assistant and join the fight, tending to many of the wounded on the battlefields.

Two months later, on the morning of June 17, 1775, Warren learned that British forces had landed at Charlestown, north of Boston. He rode over to the American fortifications on Breed's Hill and Bunker's Hill, and joined the 1,200 militia defenders as a regular volunteer. The British infantry was twice repelled. But on the third and final British assault, when the militia, depleted of ammunition, began a retreat, a British officer shot him with a musket or pistol ball between the eyes. He died instantly at age 34, on the first day of organized warfare of the Revolutionary War, a true Son of Liberty.

His body was stripped of his uniform, bayoneted by British soldiers, and thrown unrecognizable into a shallow grave. A year later, after the British retreat, it was found by his brothers, Dr. John Warren, Ebenezer Warren, and Paul Revere, a silversmith, who recognized Warren by the gold wire which secured the front eye-tooth. Forensics much later confirmed the circumstances of his death.

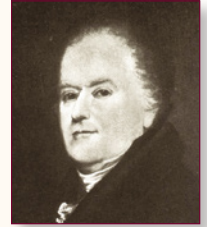
### RI Surgeons on the High Seas

In Rhode Island, intrepid surgeons took to the sea on privateers, merchant ships engaged in maritime warfare, deemed necessary to the war effort since the Continental Navy was small and fragmented. In 1775 an Act of the Continental Congress authorized "the capture and confiscation of all British armed vessels, transports and supply ships, and directed the issuance of commissions to captains of cruisers and privateers."

It was a daring and dangerous enterprise. **Dr. Stephen Vigneron** of Newport was lost at sea. **Dr. Usher Parsons**, in his Sketches of Rhode

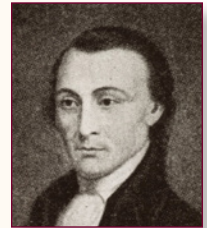
he participated actively in the battles of New Jersey. Following the war, he resumed his practice in Philadelphia, taking on many apprentices while increasing his role as a professor of chemistry and medicine.

**Josiah Bartlett** was born in Amesbury, Massachusetts, in 1729. He apprenticed in medicine and at age 21 began a successful practice in Kingston, New Hampshire. He concurrently served in the state legislature and was also a colonel in the militia. Despite a lack of formal legal training, he was chosen to be New Hampshire's Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and then governor. Bartlett never interrupted his practice of medicine. He also served as first president of the New Hampshire Medical Society.

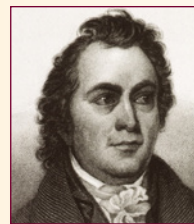


Dr. Josiah Bartlett

**Matthew Thornton** was born in Ireland in 1714, migrating at an early age with his family to New England. He apprenticed in medicine, establishing a practice in New Hampshire, and served as a physician to the troops. He was chosen to enter the Continental Congress in November 1776 and was permitted to sign the Declaration at that time, the last to do so.



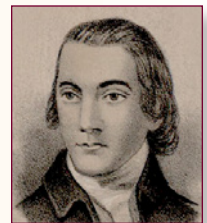
Dr. Matthew Thornton



Dr. Oliver Wolcott  
[ABOVE PHOTOS:  
NATIONAL LIBRARY  
OF MEDICINE]

**Oliver Wolcott** was born in Connecticut in 1726. He graduated from Yale and entered the military. After returning from an unsuccessful raid against New France, he completed the study of medicine and then studied law, holding numerous posts before representing Connecticut in the Continental Congress.

**Lyman Hall** was born in Wallingford, Connecticut in 1724. He attended Yale and, in 1752, began an apprenticeship in medicine, establishing his practice in his home town. He ultimately migrated to Georgia to practice. In 1775 he was chosen to participate in the newly formed Continental Congress and was later elected governor of Georgia. ❖



Dr. Lyman Hall  
[LIBRARY OF CONGRESS]

Island Physicians, wrote of their perilous adventures. **Dr. Levi Wheaton**, after completing a surgical apprenticeship in Providence, signed on as surgeon to a privateer. But, “in the autumn of 1782, while cruising off the Southern coast, he was taken prisoner and carried into New York Harbor by the British frigate *Vestal*,” Parsons wrote. “He was put in charge of the prison hospital ship *Falmouth*.” In retrospect, Parsons noted, “this event was recalled with much pleasure, as having afforded him an opportunity of rendering some good offices to his imprisoned countrymen.”

**Dr. Solomon Drowne** served as surgeon in the Continental Army from 1776–1780. He then signed on with the privateer sloop *Hope* out of Providence, under the command of Capt. James Munro.



Dr. Levi Wheaton served as a surgeon on a privateer during the War of Independence and was taken prisoner by the British and sent to a prison hospital in New York City to work.

hauls her wind and stands from us; sails very heavy, and Capt. Munro is sanguine in the belief we shall make a prize of her. She hauls up her courses and hoists English Colours.

“I take my station in the Cabin; where remain not long before I hear the Huzza on deck...Send our boat for the Captain & his papers...She has ten men on board and four excellent four pounders (cannons)...

Her cargo from Kingston, Jamaica consists of 149 puncheons, 23 hogsheads, 3 quarter casks and barrels of rum, and 20 hogsheads muscovado sugar.

“Have our pistols hung up in the cabin, to be in readiness for the prisoners, should they take it in their heads to rise upon the watch in the night.”

The British crew and cargo were impounded and the ship towed. On Oct. 23, the victorious *Hope* arrived in Providence with its prize, “firing 13 cannon.” Drowne then returned to terra firma. After the French allied with the Colonists, he cared for the wounded soldiers in the regiments of the Marquis de Lafayette and Comte de Rochambeau, at the hospital set up in University Hall at the College of Rhode Island, now Brown University, which also served as a barracks during the Revolutionary War.

In the formative years of this country, the British branded these physicians traitors and pirates. They proudly called themselves the Sons of Liberty. ❖

Drowne describes a typical day at sea in his diary, which he later published: “Oct. 15. A pleasant day. See a sail to windward... give chase. On approaching, discover her to be a *Snow* (type of sloop). She

Dr. Solomon Drowne later published his diary of working on the high seas as a surgeon on a privateer.

[BROWN UNIVERSITY PORTRAIT COLLECTION]

