

# Dr. Joseph Warren: leader in medicine, politics, and revolution

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**D**r. Joseph Warren (*Figure 1*) was one of the remarkable men of the Enlightenment who defies single labels. He was a man of demonstrated physical and moral courage, an intellectual leader in medicine and political theory, a provocateur, propagandist, administrator, spymaster, governor, and, at the last, a soldier.

Dr. Warren's family had been in Massachusetts for a century and a half at the time of the Revolution (1). The Warren family was a representative New England middle-class colonial family that farmed and played a role in minor local politics. Joseph Warren was raised thinking and feeling as an American. This "American" outlook is seen in his education and practice of medicine. He was educated at Harvard while the French and Indian War raged, graduating in 1759. Harvard alumni provided a fertile group of American radicals: Sam Adams, 1740; James Otis, 1743; Samuel Cooper, 1743; James Bowdoin, 1745; John Hancock, 1754; and John Adams, 1755.

Upon graduation, Warren apprenticed with the leading Boston doctor, James Lloyd, who provided him with access to both the most advanced medical practices and to the prominent Boston families (2). Medicine, as practiced at the time in England, was highly segmented and subject to social and class distinctions. A physician was considered to be a gentleman and a professional; however, a surgeon or apothecary was not. This led to exclusiveness and rigid practices at the expense of learning and experimentation. In America, these distinctions were rarely if ever exercised, the emphasis being upon what is practical in a distinctive Yankee "can do" manner. Because of the educational requirements of the profession, physicians became closely aligned with the clergy. Unlike their English counterparts, American physicians saw themselves as having, along with the clergy and government officials, an important role in protecting the public welfare (3).

Warren clearly demonstrated that he recognized and accepted his civic role in his work in public clinics and heroic work conducting smallpox vaccinations and administering to its victims in Boston. It was while practicing medicine that Warren met both the Boston aristocracy and the radical colonial leaders who would shape his future path and define his sense of purpose as a political figure. He remained in Boston during the 1763 smallpox epidemic, administering to the ill, and opened an inoculation hospital at Castle William in Boston Harbor. The success



**Figure 1.** Dr. Joseph Warren. Portrait by John Singleton Copley, 1765, on permanent loan to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; gift of Buckminster Brown, MD, through Carolyn M. Matthews, MD, trustee.

of the inoculations in reducing deaths established Dr. Warren's reputation in Boston, and his practice expanded from the poor end of Boston to include the wealthy and influential. His patients included both future Whig leaders such as John Adams and Tories such as Thomas Hutchinson, the Colony's lieutenant governor. The names of Paul Revere and William Dawes also

appeared on his medical ledgers, along with long lists of the poor and common laborers (4). Dr. Warren learned the value of direct action in providing public service while practicing medicine for a broad spectrum of the citizens of Massachusetts.

His political involvement grew as his contact with the Boston leaders expanded. His warmth, charm, and intelligence were widely noted by those who knew him, including his political enemies. His profession provided easy access to all classes of society, and he soon found himself a popular figure throughout Boston.

Dr. Warren also became a leader in the Masonic lodges. This leadership became an important factor in his revolutionary activities, providing another secret yet powerful organization with which to expand his political and intelligence network. Warren's leadership and popularity were recognized in 1769, when, at the age of 28, he was commissioned the "Grand Master of Masons of Boston, New England, and within one hundred miles of same" (5). The Earl of Dumfries, the Grand Master of

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Scotland, issued another appointment to Warren, dated March 7, 1772. This made Warren “Grand Master of Masons for the Continent of America,” thus installing Warren as the senior Mason in all of the colonies.

Joseph Warren’s political activism began with his writings about the Stamp Act, and he began to be noticed as a public figure in 1766. Warren maintained and expanded his medical practice while becoming a political leader and propagandist. The Sons of Liberty had grown out of the Stamp Act, and Warren developed his ties with this hotbed of grassroots activism. Dr. Warren appears to be unique in his ability to move freely between these groups. He was trusted and respected by the common citizenry and admired by the intellectuals.

The anniversary of the Boston Massacre provided an occasion for oratory, and Warren participated in this event annually. In 1772, Dr. Warren was the featured speaker, and his oration followed a format that would be reflected throughout most subsequent American revolutionary prose: a statement of political philosophy, a list of grievances against the British, and the actions that must be taken to ensure liberty (6). References to sacrifice and spilling of blood were made and became stronger when he again made the anniversary oration on March 6, 1775 (7).

In September 1774, Warren penned the Suffolk Resolves, which were adopted on September 9th. The document, the most radical statement of colonial intent to date, was rushed to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia by Paul Revere, arriving on the 16th.

The Second Continental Congress was scheduled for May 1775 in Philadelphia. The British Commander, General Gage, had to demonstrate that he was in control of the colony, in response to the royal harsh policy towards the radicals in Boston. The militia ammunition and cannon stored in Concord provided Gage with an opportunity to make a dramatic show of force and seize the supplies in a 1-day operation. The reports that Sam Adams and John Hancock were in Lexington made the operation more irresistible to Gage if these two radical leaders could be captured. Warren’s spy network worked well, and on the evening of April 18th, he dispatched Revere and Dawes on their famous missions to alert the rebels.

Warren participated in the harassment of British troops retreating from Lexington and Concord on April 19th as both a soldier and doctor ministering to wounded rebels. He was subsequently selected to be the president of the Provincial Congress and thus the Rebellion’s executive leader of the colony. He knew the value of garnering support for the American cause in Britain, so he convinced Congress to charter a speedy packet boat to deliver his account of the April 19th events to Benjamin Franklin in London. His letters did reach England far ahead of



Figure 2. The death of General Warren. Painting by John Trumbull.

British General Thomas Gage’s account and were widely distributed by Franklin, causing quite a stir and extreme domestic embarrassment to the British government. He requested that Franklin tell the British citizens that the Americans would sell their liberty “only at the price of their own lives” (8).

Joseph Warren was elected president of the Third Provincial Congress, which met on May 31, 1775. On June 14, 1775, the Congress appointed Warren a major general. He now had to balance this commission with his political duties and re-establish his relationships with the military leaders in light of this new position.

Just a few days after his appointment, Warren voluntarily joined the militia defending Breed’s Hill (a turning point in the war that is often mistakenly described as the Battle of Bunker Hill). When Warren arrived on the hill that overlooked Boston, Colonel William Prescott had lost many men during the night that had gone to the rear for any number of reasons and had not returned. The remaining soldiers were tired after a night’s digging and were looking for supplies and reinforcements. The British had landed and were forming ranks. Warren met Putnam at General John Stark’s position along the rail fence. David Putnam records the following conversation in his 1818 publication. After Putnam offered command to Warren, Warren replied, “I am here only as a volunteer. I know nothing of your dispositions; nor will I interfere with them. Tell me where I can be most useful” (9). Putnam directed him to Prescott’s redoubt on Breed’s Hill.

As the final British assault breached the walls of the redoubt, Warren remained with the covering force. A musket blew apart his head as he protected the last soldiers fleeing the exit of the redoubt. The famous Trumbull painting of the battle features Warren as the central figure, dying with a gunshot wound in the forehead and surrounded by Prescott, Putnam, and Stark (Figure 2). Paul Revere identified his own silver bridgework and teeth on Warren’s skull when he was dug up after the British evacuated Boston. His body was reinterred several times in the

ensuing years, the final time in 1856 when he was moved to the Forest Hills Cemetery in Jamaica Plain.

“If he had survived the war,” wrote Hugh Hussey in *Journal of the American Medical Association*, “he undoubtedly would have become a foremost leader in medicine and medical education” (10).

Joseph Warren’s younger brother, John Warren, appointed senior surgeon of the Continental Army at age 22, went on to help organize the Boston Medical Society in 1780 and was instrumental in founding Harvard Medical School.

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