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Remembering an impossible journey

250-mile trek ended in Boston

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Roxbury Street, rising from Columbus Avenue to the white spire atop John Eliot Square, is paved now, its pitch hardly noticeable in a car. But the agony it holds is clear when one imagines hauling a 5,500-pound cannon up the steep hill.

Which is what Bostonians did a few weeks after Henry Knox pulled off one of the toughest missions in American history — one that ended 225 years ago this week.

Knox, a 25-year-old Boston bookseller turned artillery officer, had pushed, pulled, and cajoled 60 tons of heavy artillery on sledges across rivers, snow-filled fields, and woods in his 250-mile trek from eastern New York to Boston.

Heavy snow, achingly long inclines, raw blisters that left a trail of red in the snow, and a sudden muddy thaw almost stopped the convoy. One cannon fell in the Hudson. Some men he hired turned back.

But on Jan. 24, 1776, Knox, aided by oxen, hired hands, and farmers who helped along the way, delivered the cannons that General George Washington so badly needed.

Hauled from Cambridge through Roxbury and put on Dorchester Heights, the cannons empowered the Colonists to force the British out of Boston, on March 17, known as Evacuation Day.

Knox's impossible trip from Fort Ticonderoga in New York to Cambridge still amazes those who study it today.

"Think of it, dragging this heavy artillery 250 miles through the woods, trudging with their feet wrapped in bloody rags because their boots had busted or given out, leaving a trail of red on the white snow — this trek was a monumental feat," said Sean P. Hennessey, a researcher and public affairs officer for the Boston

William Fowler, director of the Massachusetts Historical Society, said few people recognize the importance of Knox's feat. It was a "slow, steady accomplishment over the course of weeks" rather than a single epic action, which may account for it not being well known, he said, "but it certainly won the Battle of Boston."

And it gave Washington his first major victory, galvanizing his leadership, Fowler said. "Washington was untried, really untested, and if this had not happened, I doubt the Revolution would have continued."

Today, the Knox Trail, which stretches from the eastern side of the Adirondacks in New York to Boston, is identified by 56 stone markers.

Although highways mark the route today, the roads of 1776 were often little more than rutted, poorly marked paths. Winter was, in fact, the best time for the journey because it allowed oxen to haul sledges on the snow and ice.

The iron cannons ranged from 100 to 5,500 pounds in weight, with the bigger ones 11 feet long. As bad as poor roads were, hills were worse; the unforgiving inclines of the Berkshires were particularly trying for Knox and his crews.

Halfway between New York and Springfield, Knox wrote in his diary: "Went 12 miles through the woods to Blandford. It appeared to me almost a miracle that people should be able to get over such hills with anything of heavy loads."

His trek came during the first winter of the Revolutionary War. The British were bottled up in Boston, surrounded by hostile forces. But they were well trained and well supplied, and Washington lacked the firepower to drive them out.

Then he had an idea: Send Knox to Fort Ticonderoga to fetch the cannons that Americans had captured from the British.

Knox, who knew Washington, had just become an artillery officer. He learned artillery from the books he sold as a clerk, then owner, of the London Bookstore, at the corner of today's Washington and Court streets, said Michael Bradford, a Boston Na[illegible]

guide who specializes in the events at Dorchester Heights. "British officers would come in to buy the books, and he would ask them, 'How do you do this?' or 'How do you do that?' "

Knox went to New York to get supplies and help. By mid-December, he had begun the long trek back to Boston.

For all the brute force it took to get the cannons to Boston, it took additional cunning to get them to Dorchester Heights, located in what today is South Boston. That final step involved 2,000 men and 400 oxen.

Herb Troumbley, leading his oxen along the Knox Trail in Schuylervil N.Y., last month.

The trick was crossing Dorchester Neck, a marshy area near present-day Andrew Square that linked the peninsula of Dorchester Heights to Roxbury.

"They had to be very silent because they were about 150 yards from the British position on Boston Neck," said Bradford.

They put hay on the road, built hay sight-barriers, and even wrapped hay around the wagon wheels to muffle noise.

"Then Washington ordered an artillery barrage from the other cannon positions as a distraction, and it all worked," he said.

Knox remained Washington's artillery chief for the rest of the war and later became secretary of war. Though few people recall his amazing cannon run, he is well remembered for the Tennessee fort named for him that became America's gold bullion depository.

"I'm not sure he knew what he was getting into when he accepted this," said historian Warren Little of Cambridge, "but once he took the job, he wasn't going to quit."