



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Episode 413: "Dr. Joseph Warren and the Battle of Bunker Hill"

Announcer [00:00:00]: You're listening to an Airwave Media podcast.

Christian Di Spigna [00:00:03]: Before Washington becomes Washington, we have to keep in mind this is Boston 1775. It's not this miraculous victory, Yorktown 1781. Washington really has to fill Joseph Warren's shoes. And not to detract from Washington, but we have to give Joseph Warren some credit.

And really, as the years move on, all Warren's colleagues rise to fame in his place, right? They all become governors or presidents, and Warren is sort of left behind because he dies in '75 before—there is no United States of America when Warren dies.

Liz Covart [00:00:43]: Hello and welcome to episode 413 of *Ben Franklin's World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present-day world we live in. And I'm your host, Liz Covart. June 17th, 2025 marks the 250th anniversary of the Battle of Bunker Hill, the first full scale battle of what would become the American War for Independence.

Though technically a British victory, Bunker Hill proved that the colonial soldiers could stand against the might of the British Empire. New England militiamen inflicted 1054 casualties on the British that day. That was fifty percent of their fighting force. The New Englanders sustained 411 casualties, including the man who stood at the heart of this battle, Dr. Joseph Warren.

Now, who was Dr. Joseph Warren and why did he risk his life in this first major battle of the Revolutionary War? What drove this physician, political thinker, and revolutionary leader to become the face of the American Revolution in Boston? Christian Di Spigna, executive director of the Dr. Joseph Warren Foundation joins us to explore these questions and commemorate this important anniversary event, all with details from his book, *Founding Martyr: The Life and Death of Dr. Joseph Warren the American Revolution's Lost Hero*.

Now during our exploration, Christian reveals how Joseph Warren's humble beginnings shaped his revolutionary ideals, why Joseph Warren's relationship with both loyalists and radicals made him a crucial bridge between divided political views, and what Joseph Warren's leadership during this critical sixty day period between Lexington and Concord and the Battle of Bunker Hill tells us about his enduring legacy.

But first, if you're not already following *Ben Franklin's World*, now is the perfect time to do so. You'll find *Ben Franklin's World* in all of your favorite podcast apps, and when you follow, you'll never miss an episode, which is really important these days, especially as we



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

commemorate more of these key milestones from the American Revolution. So please follow *Ben Franklin's World* in your favorite podcast app. Okay. Are you ready to explore the life, leadership, and legacy of Dr. Joseph Warren and details about the Battle of Bunker Hill? Let's go meet our guest historian.

Our guest received his degree in history from Columbia University. He's the executive director of the Dr. Joseph Warren Foundation, serves on the board of the Charlestown Historical Society and is a member of the Bunker Hill Monument Association. Our guest is dedicated nearly three decades to the study of Dr. Joseph Warren and the American Revolution in Boston. He's also authored a book on these subjects, *Founding Martyr: The Life and Death of Dr. Joseph Warren the American Revolution's Lost Hero*. Welcome to *Ben Franklin's World* Christian Di Spigna.

Christian Di Spigna [00:03:45]: Oh, thank you so much for having me, Liz. I've been really looking forward to this.

Liz Covart [00:03:50]: So have we, Christian, and I know this topic is long overdue, but I am glad we're going to have this conversation today so that we can celebrate and commemorate the 250th anniversary of the Battle of Bunker Hill and the death of Dr. Joseph Warren, which took place on June 17th, 1775.

Now, the Battle of Bunker Hill was the first full scale battle of what would become the American War for Independence. Christian, would you tell us about your interest in this battle and its most famous casualty, Dr. Joseph Warren?

Christian Di Spigna [00:04:21]: Yeah. I always had a fascination with Paul Revere's ride, and then when I discovered that Joseph Warren had dispatched Revere and Dawes on that midnight ride, I became obsessed. And really, Bunker Hill kind of spoke to me because that was where obviously Joseph Warren gets killed in action, and it really is the first major pitched battle that launches the American Revolution.

I've always firmly believed if there's no battle of Bunker Hill, there might not be a Declaration of Independence, and I don't wanna dabble in the speculative history, but it was just that much of an important battle. And learning about the battle—and I'm not a military historian, you know, I can't tell you about right flanks and left flanks—but when you read about the battle, the human element to it, that it was just such a brutal and bloody battle and it descends into hand to hand combat.

And just, it produces the most casualties of any other battle throughout the entire American Revolutionary War. It really sets the gauntlet at that point, and really there's no turning back from this moment. The die is cast. I think there could have been a comeback from Lexington and Concord with olive branches, but once Bunker Hill, the die is cast.



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Liz Covart [00:05:27]: What I found really interesting about your book, *Founding Martyr*, is that if we want to understand the battle of Bunker Hill, then all we really need to do is look at the life and times of Dr. Joseph Warren. So would you tell us what your research about Warren's life revealed about Warren's childhood and his early days as a young adult?

Christian Di Spigna [00:05:47]: Yeah, that was one of the things, everything I had read about Dr. Joseph Warren really starts from his adult life. You can really sum up his first twenty-one years to maybe a page of history, and that's what wanted me to delve into the primary source documents, do the research.

Warren grows up in Roxbury, Massachusetts to somewhat of a humble farming family, and that was always kind of the push and pull. Were they wealthy? We know that his father was considered a gentleman, he was a selectman, but he wasn't considered one of Massachusetts's elites. And Warren had to work particularly hard on the farm.

It's almost this quintessential rags to riches story, right? Like how does a humble son of a farming family grow up and become one of the big mover and shakers in the Bay Colony? You know, how does he rise to these top positions politically, socially, economically? And really the story begins on the farm where Warren is learning these lessons of industry hard work, scripture. Obviously they're a very religious family. So Warren is being taught these lessons of industry.

Later on he's referred to as a legged milk boy who furnishes the Boston market by one of the Olivers. And that's a job at their lower economic status and the fact that Warren is sort of pedaling these farm goods in Boston at the markets on Thursday.

But I really think if we wanna update the language and try and get maybe some kids interested in it, you almost see Warren as this hustler growing up with not only book smarts, but also street smarts. So he's learning how to hustle. This is where he's making connections at these markets and meeting other people. And then the real answer to how does Warren rise to these heights of social, political, economic power? It's education.

Liz Covart [00:07:29]: Boston, of course, doesn't seem to have a shortage of these rags to riches stories. Benjamin Franklin, right, he's another prominent example. Franklin was born the son of a chandler, someone who made soap and candles. And yet Franklin rose to great wealth and political prominence through his reading, his self-education and his hard work.

And I will say, that it seems that the humble origins of both of these men, Franklin and Warren, they ended up benefiting from these origins throughout their lives because they were able to interact and connect with a wealthy, but they were also able to connect with farmers, laborers, and others who shared their humble origins. And Warren's ability to cross these social, economic and cultural lines really seemed to pay off in a big way for the revolutionary cause.



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Christian Di Spigna [00:08:15]: Yeah, you hit it on the head. And I think this is what makes Warren such a valuable commodity, so to speak, that he's got a foot on both sides of the political divide. So he's able to be just as comfortable swilling rum in a tavern as he is with rubbing elbows with the elite of the Bay Colony. And this is something really special.

I'll bring this up. *Paul Revere's Ride* by David Hackett Fischer, my favorite book, at the end he does a great historiography and he puts these lists in the appendix and he's listing all these clubs and he's listing all the names and people who are part of these clubs and organizations, and it's really Warren and Revere who belong to the most clubs and institutions in Boston.

So you can really see that Warren is, again, not to overstate it, but he has a foot on each side of the political divide. And really both loyalists and patriots are trying to win him over to their side.

Liz Covart [00:09:07]: We've discussed how Warren came from humble origins, the oldest son of a Roxbury farmer. But his parents seemed well to do enough that they were able to send Warren and his brothers for formal education. What did a formal education look like for Warren, and what was he able to do with this education?

Christian Di Spigna [00:09:23]: So Warren does attend Roxbury Latin School, which is really one of the precursor institutions to Harvard. This is where Warren's learning how to read Latin, Greek, learn how to write Latin, Greek, the classics, rules of grammar, all these things that are preparing him for his oral examinations, for entrance to Harvard.

And this is where kind of the push and pull happens. Because you think, okay, so they're farmers, his father is considered a gentleman, but again, they're not part of this top elite class of wealthy merchants or politicians. And so when Warren takes his oral examinations, it's advertised in the newspapers throughout Boston usually it is mid-July that these examinations are gonna be offered and you can go take your oral examinations. And Warren does that and is accepted.

Just to point out the social standing. So when you are accepted to Harvard—and Warren does his oral examinations in front of his tutors and is accepted—but social ranking is based on the social standing of your parents, so is class rank in Harvard. Warren's ranking is thirty-one of forty-five. Just for example, the number one student is the son of Connecticut Governor Jonathan Trumbull.

So Warren really isn't even middle ranked. He's lower ranked. So while Warren's parents did have the means to send him to Roxbury Latin and to send them to Harvard, it's sort of the middling sort. He's not part of this Boston elite socially stratified society.

Liz Covart [00:10:46]: You note in your book *Founding Martyr* that Warren's time at Harvard played a really important role in what was to come for Warren. So would you tell us



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

about Warren's experiences at Harvard and who he was intermixing with during his college days?

Christian Di Spigna [00:11:02]: So when you're ranked lower socially, you are gonna be rooming with other students who are ranked lower. Now, movement within the ranks is possible, if new information comes to light. But when Warren's there, this becomes his social oasis. This is where he's rubbing elbows with the sons of the elites, right?

The Hutchinsons, the Hallowells, the Olivers. And what's amazing about Warren is that by his junior and senior year, he's rooming with the top scholars, which is really unheard of. I believe it was the number six and number eight ranked scholars at Harvard that Warren is rooming with. But again, this is where he starts to flourish.

This is where he's learning how to deliver orations. This is where he's mingling with his professor John Winthrop. And this was an amazing thing because his graduation year, Haley's Comet. So it's almost this world of sorcery versus science that's coming to light. And I would have to say that one of Warren's early mentors was Professor Winthrop.

And again, this is where he's flourishing and I can't overstate the importance of his education because without this education, Warren is not meeting these future movers and shakers of the Bay Colony, these future powerful figures. But again, he's also mingling with other students. And during his time at Harvard, there's a horrendous measles outbreak. His freshman year, his father dies, so he's experienced a lot of struggle at Harvard when he's there. So these are the main formidable years of his life.

Liz Covart [00:12:28]: Why did Warren ultimately decide to study medicine and become a doctor? It seems like most of the revolutionaries we study who had formal college educations went on to become lawyers or men of business merchants, but Warren went into medicine.

Christian Di Spigna [00:12:45]: Right, Warren's maternal grandfather was a physician. And they are early involved in the smallpox inoculations. So there is a history of medicine in the Warren family, but I also think, and again, we don't wanna speculate too much, but Warren's freshman year, his father dies.

He's picking apples at the height of the harvest in October. We found out that Warren was there on the property helping as the oldest of four sons. This was the first vacation from Harvard. It was a busy time on the farm.

So Warren would've been there and saw his father fall off a ladder about fifty feet in the air. He breaks his neck, he dies. And I think this is one of the reasons, in addition, with his family having careers in medicine, that this catapults him towards a career in medicine.



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Liz Covart [00:13:26]: How did Warren prepare for his career in medicine? Because he graduated from Harvard before Harvard had a medical school.

Christian Di Spigna [00:13:36]: Back then, there's no medical schools in the colonies. So if you had the means, you could travel to the glittering capitals in Europe and do your apprenticeship under a doctor there. If you didn't have the means, you would complete your apprenticeship with a doctor who did complete his apprenticeship over in the glittering capitals of Europe.

And Warren chooses wisely. He chooses as his mentor, Dr. James Lloyd. So James Lloyd is socially connected, deep pockets. And here's the difference. We don't want to discount the relationship between Warren and Adams, but Warren's father dies when he is fourteen. He continues his education at Harvard. Okay? He takes a loan from Lloyd to help continue his studies. Now, this is where Warren is learning how to not only become a doctor, but how to become a gentleman. He's learning how to master the nuances of a bedside manner. He's learning how to entertain. Lloyd hosts lavish parties. Lloyd is friends with men like General Howe, Lord Hugh Percy. Lloyd remains a staunch loyalist throughout the entire American Revolutionary War.

So it's somewhat ironic that Warren's real mentor, Dr. James Lloyd, is a loyalist. And Warren is being exposed to both sides of this political debate. One of his professors at Roxbury Latin is William Cushing, who becomes one of the future Supreme Court justices, but he's got an exposure to both sides of the political world. And to me, it's amazing that Warren does cast his lot with the patriots when so much of his early exposure was with loyalists sentiment and men who remain staunch loyalists.

Liz Covart [00:15:08]: Yeah. Let's talk about Warren the revolutionary, because as you mentioned, as he was studying medicine with Dr. James Lloyd, the early and at times, very violent protests of the American Revolution broke out in Boston. So how did Warren experience these early protests and what do we know about how they might have started to shape his thinking?

Christian Di Spigna [00:15:30] : Yeah, and I think that's one of the things, we always cast Warren as this sort of puppet of Samuel Adams. And not to detract anything from Samuel Adams, he is the father of the American Revolution. But when Warren enters this orbit of Whig radicalism, he's already heavily entrenched in his radical political philosophies.

And historians have pointed to this saying, Samuel Adams becomes such a vehement radical because of this Land Bank controversy; which is a very complicated issue, but basically it boils down to some merchants get together because there's a lack of coin, and they put together notes of paper that are backed by land. The wealthy merchants come out against this. They reach out to Parliament for help in dissolving the Land Bank and it ruins so many of these land bank proponents.



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

One of them is Samuel Adams's father. He suffers heavy financial losses due to this. But what we didn't know, that one of the principal investors in the Land Bank is Joseph Warren's grandfather who he becomes very close with after his father dies. And we see these primary source documents where Samuel Stevens, Warren's grandfather, is pleading for mercy with the court because he's selling land, some of his farm animals, his possessions, clothing, just to pay off this Land Bank debt.

So this was an early example of Warren seeing British Parliament dipping their fingers into the colonists' pockets. And it really affected Warren's family. And I think this is one of the reasons why he cast his lot with the Whigs and joins this Patriot movement because of the effect on his family.

Now when all these protests are, right, Stamp Act, Sugar Act, Warren is a physician at this point. And I think one of the things, when you read Warren's medical ledgers, he's got such a diverse list of clientele. He's treating the royal governor, he's treating slaves, ship captains, merchants, farmers. He's got every rung of the social ladder.

But he starts to use his position as a physician towards the benefit of the Whigs. And as we know, every November 5th, there's these Pope Day riots where the North End and the South End duke it out, and the leaders of Henry Bass, Ebenezer Mackintosh. So there is a hatter who gets indicted named Samuel Richardson. And Warren writes basically a doctor's note for him, sort of excusing his behavior. So it's an early example that you see that Warren is now starting to use his profession to the advantage of the Whigs and the patriots.

Liz Covart [00:17:48]: How did Warren get involved with the revolution and its movement? We've talked a bit about Warren's ideas, and we know men like Paul Revere, who was a tradesman, he'd go out and he'd serve in the mob. But someone like Warren, who aspired to become an elite person, a gentleman, people like Warren wouldn't have acted and worked within mobs.

So how did Warren get involved with the Revolution's actions without participating in a mob?

Christian Di Spigna [00:18:13]: Yeah, and I think it goes back to his time at Harvard, and one of the things I didn't mention is that Warren becomes a Freemason. So when he leaves that social oasis at Harvard. He's kind of in no man's land in Roxbury. So he gravitates to the world of Freemasonry, the Loyal Nine, the secret political club. Most of the members of the Loyal Nine are either patients, Freemasons, or friends of Dr. Joseph Warren. So he's already connected to these important powerful patriot cells.

He's also a man of the people. This is not someone who's just content to sit behind a desk and he's making all these house calls. So he's mingling amongst the Boston population and people are placing themselves in his care and also starting to listen to his political beliefs. He's there for the most intimate moments of people's lives. The death of a child, the birth of a child, the death of a loved one. So people are now starting to place themselves in his confidence.



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

And when he hooks up with Samuel Adams, the relationship, it's a little bit more on an equal footing. And again, not to detract from Samuel Adams, but they're both Harvard graduates. Samuel Adams is viewed as this rabble-rouser who's a failed businessman. You know, Warren is seen as a gentleman revolutionary who looks and plays the part. Warren actually helps bail Samuel Adams out of his tax debt, where him and twenty-four other patriots donate money to Samuel Adams. I believe the figure is Warren donates thirteen pounds to Samuel Adams.

So again, Warren's not this tabula rasa who's entering the patriot movement with no political ideas or philosophies, they're courting him as well, as the loyalists who are courting Warren. So again, he's this valuable commodity to both of them. So when he enters again this orbit of Whig radicalism, this is when things are starting to heat up, right?

This is when we're starting to see the effect of the Seven Years War and the financial drain that this took on Britain. So they start with these economic boycotts. And Warren is one of the first families when his grandmother dies, they do away with the fancy horse and carriages, the white gloves, the mourning jewelry, and they make this a very monastic ceremony.

And Samuel Adams writes a piece in the Boston Gazette praising Warren and his family for this economic boycott, not buying these English goods and products. When the non-importation agreements come out in 1767 Warren is one of the people who sign it. This is where you start to see this rise to power. And then fast forward 1770 Boston Massacre, this is where things really start to heat up.

Liz Covart [00:20:37]: Wow, thirteen pounds. That's a lot of money. And I think it speaks to the point that Warren was on the rise. He'd become very successful in his medical practice, and he was also a close friend with Samuel Adams, because otherwise he wouldn't have donated thirteen pounds.

And as you mentioned, Christian, in your book, *Founding Martyr*, many people assume that the closeness between Adams and Warren reflected a mentor-mentee relationship; that Adams served as Warren's political mentor and Warren as Adams' protege. Still, you write that this wasn't really the case, that the men were more like peers. So would you tell us more about the relationship between Samuel Adams and Joseph Warren and how they began working together to further the revolutionary movement?

Christian Di Spigna [00:21:22] : I've almost considered them the one-two punch of the revolution. And Samuel Adams, he's older, he's got a visible hand tremor, and Warren is sort of this Errol Flynn type figure of the revolution that becomes the frontline leader, right? He almost becomes the poster boy for the Sons of Liberty. So as they're working together, Adam sees the value in Warren.

Keep in mind that Warren has a very close relationship with Royal Governor Thomas Hutchinson. He helps settle the probate estate of his father after he dies. Hutchinson is giving



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

him a lot of patronage. Warren becomes the alms house physician from 1769 to 1772 where he earns almost a thousand pounds. And this was the amazing thing because when I first came to the research, I thought, “why would Warren, by all rights, when you look all the documents, everything he's receiving, he should have become a loyalist.” So he basically is committing financial suicide by casting his lot with the patriot Whigs.

I have no doubt that Samuel Adams was a mentor to Dr. Joseph Warren in certain ways, and that he is a political master. But it's Warren who's a mason, Samuel Adams is not. Warren is helping Adams financially, but Warren's also cooking up all these articles under these pseudonyms, “B.W., Paskalos, A True Patriot.”

You're starting to see this fiery language, and we hear years later from Tory Peter Oliver that Warren is talking independence as early as 1768. This unheard of. This is at a time when no one is talking independence, and this is where you start to see Warren's vehement radicalism. The language in the newspapers, the language in his orations, his actions, things he's saying, it's extremist language. “I hope I shall die up to my knees and blood.” When the Stamp Acts are at its height, he's calling it “oppression,” “servitude.” He's writing all these letters to colleagues. He's writing letters to people in London, Canada. He, along with Samuel Adams, starts these Committees of Correspondence.

I've often heard this story of John Hancock and Samuel Adams as the odd couple of the revolution, and I really think that Samuel Adams and Joseph Warren, who were the one-two punch of this rebellion.

Liz Covart [00:23:32] : Well, now that we know about the working relationship between Adams and Warren, let's talk more about the structure of the revolutionary movement in Boston. You mentioned earlier that the Loyal Nine and Sons of Liberty were the men who helped organize the protests.

But I wonder if you could tell us more about these groups. Were they clubs? Were they formal organizations or informal organizations? How did they work to keep the revolution going forward, and how did they deal with the fact that there seemed to be multiple leaders involved in these actions?

Christian Di Spigna [00:24:03] : These are powerful patriot cells, and Boston was somewhat of a dangerous place. We know about the Stamp Act riots, what they did to Thomas Hutchinson's house, the whole Liberty affair with John Hancock. So there is an organization. What happens is the Loyal Nine Sons of Liberty, they're engaging help from these mob leaders, right?

Ebenezer Mackintosh from the South End and Henry Swift from North End, and we had referred to this earlier with Pope's Day, but it's this organized crowd action. After the Stamp Act riots there's peace in Boston. And Samuel Adams alludes to this saying that they were



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

very proud of the fact that after this supposedly wanton recklessness, that there's peace in the streets. So there is this control.

It's really a top down, bottom up structure where you do have these roving mobs that are duking it out and fighting and being violent. But there is control coming from the top leaders of the Sons of Liberty, Loyal Nine, that are keeping it somewhat under wraps, and they're receiving their orders from guys like Samuel Adams, Joseph Warren.

And we always talk about John Adams, Samuel Adams, John Hancock. But let's also keep in mind that in the early 1770s, both John Adams and John Hancock recede from the rebellion and they say, "we want spend more time practicing law and my merchants affair and time with my family." And really, that leaves Samuel Adams and Joseph Warren as these frontline leaders of the revolution. And that's why you almost have Adams taking a back seat and it's Warren, who's this face of the revolution. He's the one out there writing these articles, cooking up these political pamphlets, delivering these fiery Boston Massacre orations. Again, he becomes this young, bold, dashing figure of the revolution and the Sons of Liberty.

But while still keeping these contacts with the loyalists, I mean, you really don't start to see this divide until really early 1770s where this chasm starts to deepen and widen between Warren and these loyalists. He's still a figure that's trying to bring both groups together. With the Liberty affair Warren has chosen to try and bring peace to this situation. Before the Boston Tea Party, one of the merchants, Richard Clark, Warren is the one who's trying to negotiate some kind of deal before the Tea Party explodes. So again, Warren is the central figure in all these groups and Venn diagrams from both sides of the political divide.

Liz Covart [00:26:21]: You raised a really important point when it comes to the textbook version of the revolution in Boston, we have the Stamp Act, then the Townsend Duty protests, then the Boston Massacre. It's just bam, bam, bam, bam, one event right after the other. But what this textbook version misses is that there were periods of peace in between these events. There was a period of peace after the repeal of the Townsend Duties again, after the Boston Massacre.

Men like Joseph Warren and Samuel Adams, they don't really like these periods of peace. So they write articles, they give speeches, they create holidays with their Boston Massacre orations, staunch revolutionaries like Warren, they want to keep the movement going and they wanted to keep it top of mind for people during these periods of common peace.

Christian Di Spigna [00:27:08]: And I think that's the point. During these periods of peace and calm, it's really Warren and Samuel Adams who are still behind the scenes pushing this agenda. You don't really see a lull from them. You see the lulls from guys like Hancock and John Adams, but again, Warren, and this is why he develops this reputation as a vehement radical because he just doesn't stop. Neither does Samuel Adams. They just keep pushing this agenda when these other figures recede from the political rebellion it's Warren and Adams who are on this frontline, this one-two punch.



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

And when you read these articles, he was brought up on charges of libel. When he's talking about Governor Francis Bernard, he's calling him a weak duplicitous villain, and people are outraged by this. Again, people are not using this language and it's due to these letters that Bernard finally leaves Boston. And as he's leaving Boston bells are tolling, people are cheering. He's seen as a villain.

And this is one of the oddities because we've always heard about this London enemies list and Samuel Adams and John Hancock are one and two, but they know that Warren is really this on the ground guy that is just a thorn in their sides constantly. But I think they're also trying to keep him close because he becomes such an important leader within the Sons of Liberty.

Liz Covart [00:28:26]: Do you think Warren just used inflammatory language in support of the revolution to be provocative, or do you think he really believed in these ideas? I'm trying to figure out on a deeper level what was motivating Warren to support the revolution in this way, especially when you see men like John Hancock and John Adams taking steps back and trying to moderate their ideas in between these intense periods of revolution. And yet Warren seemed to be growing more radical and more radical than Samuel Adams.

Christian Di Spigna [00:28:58]: Yeah. And it really is amazing. And that's why I kind of look back to what happened to his family, that financial turmoil and ruin. And I really think that had an effect on Warren seeing that growing up. I think it had an effect on Samuel Adams.

So this is something they really have in common, that Land Bank scheme that just is a financial catastrophe for their families. And John Adams writes this quote where he's talking about Warren above the Green Dragon Tavern cooking up these political arguments and diatribes and Adams says "that way lies madness, and I was hassled to go to these club meetings by Warren and a few others," but he says he will not do it.

Within the Sons of Liberty, Warren is developing a reputation as a radical. So you can imagine outside those constraints, how people are starting to view him. And again, Warren delivers those two Boston Massacre orations in '72 and '75. The one he delivers in '75 it's under threat of assassination. Can you imagine that day before he delivers this Massacre oration on March 6th, 1775, he's met with death threats. It's going around the town that anyone who delivers this oration is gonna be assassinated. Warren is accosted in the street. He's being threatened to be hung. He's being threatened to be shot. He actually gets into a physical altercation with a British soldier.

But that's the push and pull he's also opening masonic lodges for British soldiers. So it's almost like a love-hate relationship where they all know what's going on, but he also does have contacts and relationships that he's had for decades with guys like Hutchinson, with the Olivers, with the Hallowells. This is why all these Stamp Act merchants, he's either friends



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

with them, he's gone to school with them, or they're patients of his. So it's just like all roads start leading through Warren at these points.

Liz Covart [00:30:40]: I was thinking about this as well. As I read *Founding Martyr*, I was thinking about how Thomas Hutchinson could just dismiss what Warren was writing, this inflammatory language because they were friends in a way. You know, as you pointed out, Christian, Warren is a doctor and he was there for these elite loyalist families at their most vulnerable moments. He visited and took care of them when they were sick, and they were so low that they wouldn't have allowed anybody else to see them. But there was Warren taking care of them.

My read on it is, is that Warren was repeatedly choosing to try and thread this needle between growing his elite medical practice and fueling the revolutionary movement and its rhetoric with his inflammatory language, hoping that he could have it both ways. He could be a revolutionary and continue to treat loyalists and grow his medical practice.

Christian Di Spigna [00:31:27]: It's surprising that he has the audacity, the nerve to keep doing what he's doing so publicly. And again, when we call him this frontline leader, it's really true. And one of the reasons he rises to prominence, Liz, is because in 1764, this horrendous smallpox outbreak, I mean there's a mortality rate of thirty-three percent.

Warren inoculates over a hundred patients, none of them died. So he becomes one of the heroes. There's no rock stars and movie stars at this time. So the heroes in the colonies are either military, nobility, figures, and now it's these physicians who have saved the town of Boston. I mean, it would've been like in the dog days of COVID all of a sudden they come out with this miracle cure and everybody's great.

So again, this aura starts to envelop Joseph Warren. And I think that's part of the tragedy of Warren, right? He spends his entire adult life as a healer, but whenever we remember him, it's as this fighting general.

Liz Covart [00:32:20]: Yeah. And I know we want to talk more about Warren's seeming dismissal of life by putting himself in harm's way, but before we move into the military aspects of his life, we should finish discussing his political role. So Christian, you mentioned earlier that while we often think of John Hancock and Samuel Adams and John Adams, when we think of revolutionaries of Massachusetts—these men being of course, the representatives that Massachusetts elected to serve in the First and Second Continental Congresses—we often don't think about Joseph Warren, the man, the Bay Colonists opted to keep it home to run the revolution.

Would you tell us more about Joseph Warren's work with the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, which she served as president of, and about all the other committee and office positions that he held in 1775?



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Christian Di Spigna [00:33:07]: Yeah. So he becomes the president of the Provincial Congress, head of the Committee of Safety, as you alluded to. So this is his zenith of power. Not to jump ahead too much, but they always call this period between Lexington and Concord, the sixty days. And this is when Warren reaches the zenith of his power and his capacity as president of the Provincial Congress.

He's doing things like he's obtaining a copper plate to print money. He's suggesting surgeons to the army. He's helping to form this provincial army. He's making military discharges to appoint military commissions. So I mean, he's writing letters and trying to form an alliance with the Six Indian nations.

One of the most important things he does though, and this is really generally not known, is that right after Lexington and Concord, Benedict Arnold shows up in Boston and he approaches Warren as the president of the Provincial Congress and tells him about this scheme to go capture these cannon at Fort Ticonderoga. So Warren provides him with arms, ammunition, and sends him on his way to go capture these cannon, and eventually Arnold hooks up with Ethan Allen. And these are the canon that Henry Knox brings back that eventually breaks the siege of Boston. But this is a strong connection between Arnold and Warren.

And this will have major consequences later on because I came across this document and in 1780 long after Warren's gone, there's a letter that shows that Arnold donated three thousand pounds of his own money to help with Warren's children. So I'm not exonerating Arnold, but you have to put Arnold in a new light and realize that this man who's been accused of putting coin over country donates three thousand pounds of his own money. And this letter is dated five weeks before Arnold's treason is uncovered.

Warren's position as president of Provincial Congress is having consequences that we haven't even thought about before. It's not that he's this title holder, but you wanna talk about moving and shaking. He's just back to these hustling days at the farmer's markets. I mean, he is everywhere mingling with all these people, and people are coming to him because he's developed this great reputation, right? I mean, he's canceling fees for his patients who can't afford it. So he develops this reputation as being generous and wanting to help. And so his actions have such far recent consequences that we never even knew about before.

Liz Covart [00:35:14]: As you researched Warren, did you ever have a chance to consider why Massachusetts placed him in a leadership role given that he was on the radical end of the political spectrum? A lot of other colonies, they really appoint more moderate people to their leadership.

Christian Di Spigna [00:35:29]: I thought why they didn't send him as a delegate to the Continental Congress. And then to your point, I thought having two delegates, so vehemently radical like Samuel Adams and Joseph Warren, that's not gonna work. But I also think that as much as Warren has his reputation as such a vehement radical, there's a gentler side to him.



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He is viewed as a gentleman, he does have a family, and I think sometimes we forget about the personal lives of these individuals that Warren did go through personal struggle. He becomes a widower in 1773 and he's left behind with four orphan children. So there is this softer side to him.

And again, we can't forget the point that he is viewed as this healer who's trying to help the people of Boston. His patient list, when you look through his medical ledgers at Mass Historical, he's treating everyone. He's treating British soldiers, royal Governors, officials. So I think he's in a very unique position having these close relationships to so many people. Thomas Flucker the third highest position in the Bay Colony, he's the Royal Secretary Warren treats his family for years; his children, his slaves. Not to belabor the point, but I think he is positioned in a very unique place that he can have such connections from all sides in Boston, and he gains this respect and admiration begrudgingly from the loyalists and lovingly from the Whig patriots.

Liz Covart [00:36:53]: Now, before we move into the military side of Joseph Warren's life, including the prominent role he played at the battles of Lexington in Concord, let's just take a moment to thank our episode sponsor.

Ad Break [00:37:03] Do you ever find yourself wanting to talk more about what you just heard on this show? Perhaps you have a burning follow-up question or your own "Time Warp" question that you'd love to ask and have others think through. Well, good news. There's a place for that.

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Dynamic Ad Break [00:37:46] : Audio varies and may shift timestamps in the second half of this episode by 1-2 minutes. Thank you for supporting *Ben Franklin's World*.

Liz Covart [00:37:47]: Now to move into the military side of Joseph Warren's life, Warren played a very prominent role in the battles of Lexington and Concord in April, 1775. Christian, what role did he play in those battles?

Christian Di Spigna [00:37:59]: Here's another thing we don't really associate with Warren, but he's at the head of a vast spy network. We know there's all kinds of intelligence information filtering in through his office. His medical office becomes a clearing house for information from all rungs of the social ladder.



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There was just a book published in 2015 talking about Governor Hutchinson's niece delivering intelligence papers to Joseph Warren. We know that Paul Revere, when he gives his deposition, he's talking about him and thirty other mechanics giving intelligence information to Dr. Joseph Warren and others.

Here's another thing we often overlook, the very, very close relationship between Revere and Warren, and a lot of these top Sons of Liberty leaders kind of look down their nose at Revere because he is not educated. He is not part of this educated elite. He is not a gentleman, but Warren and him have a lot in common. They both lose their wives within a week of each other. They both lose infant children. Both their fathers die when they're teenagers. While Warren becomes part of the elite, he never becomes an elitist.

And so he is giving Revere a lot of patronage, and I think that's one of the reasons that Revere sort of drops out of this movement after Warren's death, because that was his direct conduit to these top patriot leaders.

Because of this vast intelligence network, Warren received this intelligence, and so he dispatches Revere and Dawes on these epic midnight rides. And I've always questioned, why do we call it Paul Revere's midnight ride? It's Warren's intelligence that leads him to send them.

And when Warren hears that eight militiamen have been killed on Lexington green, he doesn't go to his medical office to start writing letters to the Continental Congress. He rides out and he goes to Menotomy which is where the worst part of the fighting happens that day. And Warren is literally helping wounded soldiers, militia units, and he's almost killed when a British musket ball knocks out the hairpin from his wig.

I remember that famous quote, Washington is writing a letter to his brother, and he talks about the bullets whizzing by him, and he said "there's something charming in the sound." And I almost think that that's when this aura of invincibility starts to envelop Warren, because you're thinking, "this is the top Sons of Liberty leader left in Boston, and he's fighting on the battlefield?"

It's almost like his men, there's such admiration that he's there putting himself on the front lines, but he really had no business being there. He's so important that he should not have been risking his life on the battlefield, but he participates in this battle. He's helping the militia units drive the British back towards Charlestown. This is when the siege of Boston begins. But really, if it wasn't for Warren's espionage activities, there might not have been a shot heard around the world.

Liz Covart [00:40:39]: What about this period after the battles of Lexington in Concord, but before the Battle of Bunker Hill, he pointed out that this is about a sixty day time span. What was Warren's life and work like during this specific period?



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Christian Di Spigna [00:40:53]: I'll point to the personal tragedy of this. Once he leaves his office on the morning of April 19th, he doesn't know what's gonna happen, but now the siege of Boston begins. He can't get back into Boston. So his entire medical practice collapses. All his possessions are left in Boston. He has no access to Boston, and now it's the standoff. Nobody knows what's gonna happen.

We know that these two skirmishes slash battles happen at Noddles Island and Grape Island, which the British Army's attempts at getting hay and supplies because they're bottled up in Boston. So it becomes this incredibly tense standoff, and they're trying to figure out what's gonna be the next move.

And this is where these espionage circles really come into play. And one of their own, Benjamin Church is acting like a double agent. So it's this game of chess between Warren, the other leaders left in Cambridge, in Charlestown, and Thomas Gage. And this is when the tension really starts to build up because they know the day is coming. They just don't know when, but they know at some point it's gonna hit the fan and it's gonna be explosive.

Liz Covart [00:41:58]: Something else that I thought was interesting about this sixty day period is, this is when Warren seems to have developed an invincibility complex, even though he was a physician and he knew all about the fragility of life.

In fact, it seems that out of respect for the fragility of life, he sent his family to Worcester to ride out the rest of the conflict. So it seems like Warren was a man who knew about the dangers of the revolution. He accepted those dangers for himself, but he really didn't want his family to experience these dangers,

Christian Di Spigna [00:42:27]: Right, and he doesn't know what's gonna happen. We know how it all turns out now, but back then, as he's getting death threats, he doesn't know if some mercenary is going to have it in for him. So that's why he sends his family. And this is weeks before Lexington and Concord. He sends his new fiance, Mercy Scollay and his four orphan children under the care and protection of his friend Dr. Elijah Dix of Worcester Massachusetts.

And we see these letters going back and forth between Elijah Dix and Joseph Warren. And one of the things when people come up to me and say is "Oh, Warren had this death wish, right? He wanted to die up to his knees in blood." And it's like, "no, we're forgetting the human element." We're forgetting that Warren is acutely aware that he has four orphan children and he hasn't married Mercy Scollay yet.

So he knows the danger surrounding him. He has become a target. Again, we talked about these threats of assassination. So he's sending his family out there, and when you're reading these letters, he's writing to Elijah Dix talking about buying more farmland because he wants to keep getting involved in more agricultural pursuits.



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So it's not like Warren is marching off because he wants to die in battle. I don't think anyone wants to die in battle, but I think this is part of this legend that starts to form these rings around Warren, that he's this hothead and because he's this vehement radical, he has this death wish and he was rushing to meet his fate at Bunker Hill. And really nothing could be further from the truth as far as this supposed death wish he has to go fight at Bunker Hill.

Liz Covart [00:43:53] Christian, you mentioned that during the sixty day period between Lexington and Concord and the Battle of Bunker Hill, no one knew what was going to happen, but they all seemed to know that another military confrontation was in the air.

So would you tell us about the lead up to the Battle of Bunker Hill and when Joseph Warren decided to send New England militiamen up to Breed's Hill to start fortifying it?

Christian Di Spigna [00:44:15]: And this is part of his role as president of the Congress, that he's helping to form these New England militia units that form into this provincial army. One thing I wanted to mention that is generally not known, that in May Warren writes a letter to the Continental Congress addressed to Samuel Adams. Because when you read these letters between Warren and his colleagues that are in Philadelphia, they're all writing to Warren saying, "what's going on? What can we do for you? Give us the situation." He's the on the ground leader.

And Warren writes this seminal letter saying, "you need to form a national army and you need to appoint a generalissimo." So how prophetic is this that all of a sudden the next month they form the Continental Army and they nominate General George Washington to be its commander in chief. Before they know Warren is killed, they're writing letters to Warren saying, "we want you to give him his charge in front of the army and announce his arrival."

So again, you realize how important and central Warren has become within this conflict. And during these sixty days with these skirmishes, Warren's receiving intelligence. So he receives intelligence that General Gage is planning to attack Bunker Hill, and this is so that he can have the high ground. So we know that this warship, the Cerberus comes bringing Generals Howe, Burgoyne, and Clinton, and this is, I believe it's May 14th, and they're bringing troops with them. So now they know that now that this warship has arrived, it's getting real. So it's just a matter of time.

And this is when they're doing all kinds of reconnaissance in Charlestown. And once Warren receives intelligence that Gage is planning to attack June 18th, on the night of the 16th, this is when Colonel William Prescott goes over to Breed's Hill and they start digging all these entrenchments under a star lit sky to get ready for this battle.

Liz Covart [00:45:58]: Now, when he worked with the National Park Service at the Boston National Historical Park, this was years ago, we interpreted the battle of Bunker Hill by showing people a map of Boston. Now remember in 1775, Boston is a peninsula, and that peninsula could easily become an island if the Roxbury Neck flooded.



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

So to show you what I mean, stick out your right hand and forearm, keep your fingers closed and your thumb open. Your hand approximates the Shawmut Peninsula. That's the peninsula that made up the city of Boston. The gap between your thumb and your forefinger, that's Mill Pond, your wrist and arm, imagine that's the Roxbury Neck, that's the road that connects the Shawmut Peninsula, Boston, with the mainland in Massachusetts. Now to the left side of your forearm, that is where Cambridge is, and to the right side, that's where Dorchester is. And imagine that there's another landmass just to the top of your fingers. That's Charlestown.

Now, as you imagine Boston and the surrounding area on your makeshift map, imagine hills. Beacon Hill is a hill, but that's in Boston where the British are. There's another hill around your fingers that's Copp's Hill. But around the city you also have Bunker and Breed's Hill in Charlestown and Dorchester Heights and Dorchester.

Now, my research and understanding are that Joseph Warren and the militia commanders chose to fortify Breed's Hill in Charlestown because they wanted to engage the British in Charlestown because they wanted to distract the British from Dorchester Heights and the Roxbury Neck. After all the revolutionaries already occupied Cambridge, they're there, and that's to the left of the neck.

So the thought was that if the revolutionaries could engage the British, at Charlestown, they could buy themselves enough time to get enough manpower to occupy Dorchester, and that would give them command of both sides of the Roxbury Neck, and they could use that command to cut the British off from supplies via land.

Christian, did you find evidence in Warren's papers or the papers to and from Warren about whether the revolutionaries use Breed's Hill as a diversionary tactic?

Christian Di Spigna [00:47:59]: Yeah, I couldn't agree more because they also know how outnumbered they are, so they have to do something. And I've also wondered, they always talked about fortifying Bunker Hill, why did they wind up at Breed's Hill? And if you think about it, Bunker Hill was, I think it was like 110 feet high. Breed's Hill is about 62 feet wide. But think about the vantage point that you're gonna have on Breed's Hill, right? You can actually see what's going on. You can see when these two thousand troops are being ferried over by boat to land on the Charlestown Peninsula.

So I think all these factors sort of played into it. I know Jeremiah Gridley and Richard Gridley had a part in this, Colonel William Prescott, General Israel Putnam. So Warren's not isolated in this, as you know, he's part of these decisions. But again, Warren's not a military veteran. It's these older figures like Putnam and Prescott, who are these grizzled French and Indian war veterans who are much more experienced than Warren. But again, Warren has been nominated at Major General by the Provincial Congress three days before the battle. Now all of a sudden, he's catapulted into this top military position as well.



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Liz Covart [00:49:04]: Another interesting fact about the Battle of Bunker Hill is that Joseph Warren dispatched men to fortify Breed's Hill on the night of June 16th. They dig out an earthen fortwork at the top of the hill called a redoubt and two-sided triangle mounds called fleches, right in front of the redoubt. And these were designed to provide the revolutionaries with a high ground and to give them cover why they reloaded their muskets and were fired upon by the British army.

Now, a sailor on one of the British naval vessels patrolling Boston Harbor, noticed and heard activity on Breed's Hill at 3:00 AM. The vessel even fired a cannon shot that killed one of the men in the redoubt. But the British army do not launch their assault until about 2:00 or 3:00 PM on June 17.

Christian, why did the British Army wait so long to launch their attack?

Christian Di Spigna [00:49:50]: Obviously, I think they're caught off guard, right? And they start their planning about how they're gonna attack. When you think about this battle, you know when you see it in your mind's eye, it's almost like high spectacle. There's thousands of people watching what's unfolding from rooftops, and this is why they start their cannonade launch.

And as you pointed out, that first cannon ball that took off a patriot's head, which was right next to Colonel William Prescott, and he talks about grabbing handfuls of dirt to get the blood off his hands and his clothing. So this was a really sobering moment for anybody around there seeing this. And after that happens, a lot of the militia guys hightail it out of there.

But again, I don't know why it took so long. It's such a great question because you think, wait a minute, you see this is happening at three, four in the morning and you're waiting twelve hours to launch this attack, which gives them more time to finish what they're doing and prepare, but when they finally do attack, it's just a scene of devastation. And I can't even imagine what's running through these militia units' minds as they're seeing the glint from these bayonets and all these regal soldiers in these uniforms being rode over. And they're seeing this battery on Copp's Hill and the warships launching and then Charlestown is completely bombarded.

And basically the whole town of Charlestown is ablaze, and it hadn't rained for weeks. So everything is dry. It's a hot day, there's no wind. The smoke that just starts from the firing of the muskets, from the burning of Charlestown, from the cannonade, it's almost not even visible. The dust clouds are so thick and the British start making these assault charges up towards the redoubt

It's guerrilla warfare, it's patriot target practice. And just think about the mindset of the British. The greatest fighting force in the world has just been humiliated at Lexington and Concord. So you can imagine the sentiment of these British soldiers, and again, they don't know what's waiting for them behind that redoubt. They don't know that the patriots are



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

gonna run out of ammunition, which they do. But these British soldiers are watching their comrades and commanding officers being picked off one by one as they make these charges up.

And think about the terrain. I mean, you pointed this out, Liz. The grass is like three feet high because it hasn't been cut, so they can't see the uneven terrain. You have all these fleches, the redoubt. It's just a scene of devastation.

And after that first assault, they retreat. When they make the second assault charge, there's dead bodies strewn all over. There's one account where one of the British soldiers says he hid behind some of these bodies so that the musket balls are hitting the bodies and not him.

Think about the wounded. It's just such a scene of devastation and going into the third assault charge now, or do we wanna talk about something else?

Liz Covart [00:42:26]: Oh yeah, we should talk about the third assault. Now the British launched three assaults at Breed's Hill with the goal of dislodging the revolutionaries. And we should remember that as Christian described, these assaults are really intimidating. Imagine you're just a merchant or a farmer or trades person, and the best most professional army in the world is lining up in front of you and accordance with linear tactics. So imagine companies of men in these bright red coats, they're forming straight horizontal lines that are three to six rows deep, and they're marching up at a steady pace, and they stop only briefly to fire volleys of musket fire.

And then of course, you can see how this battle starts out as organized, but then the fighting turns really grizzly and violent and hand-to-hand affair by the third assault. So yeah. Christian, now that we're all caught up, let's talk about the battle in more detail and find out what happened to Warren.

Christian Di Spigna [00:53:18]: So Joseph Warren, he's in the Hastings House in Cambridge, hears what's happening. Hears the cannonade. Rushes to the scene of battle, meets up with General Israel Putnam, who he's friends with. Putnam says, "General, the command of the field is yours." And Warren says, "no, I'm here to fight as a volunteer. Let me know where the worst part of the fighting is going be, and that's where I'll go."

He directs him to the redoubt on Breeds Hill, Warren encounters Prescott, same thing. "General Warren the command is yours." And he says, "no, I'm here to fight alongside my men as a volunteer, not as a major general." And so he enters the redoubt and is sitting there picking off these British soldiers and officers.

But Warren becomes this bullseye because he shows up in his finery wearing his light silk colored waistcoat and his coat. So when Warren arrives, think about the men who have been digging these trenches all night, and why reinforcements from Bunker Hill haven't been sent.



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

So when they see Warren, they immediately start to hazzah and think, “oh my God, if General Warren's here, everything's gonna be okay. He's fighting in the battle with us.”

But again, Warren had no business being at this battle. He's such an important leader. He is taking such a risk. But again, hindsight, even though they're making these charges, no one knew what was gonna actually happen that day. Were they gonna advance? Was it just gonna be setting the stage?

But now he's in the thick of it. And what happens is on this third assault charge, the British start to scale the walls of the redoubt. And just think about the British mentality at this point, what they've been witnessing that day, the humiliation suffered at Lexington and Concord. So this turns into a blood rage. And they're attacking with bayonets fixed.

And so what happens is when they start to scale the walls of the redoubt and the patriots get overrun Patriots start throwing rocks, using their fouling pieces, they're using the butts of the fouling pieces to start swinging at the British. There's different accounts. There's an account that says Warren was wounded in the leg. But what we definitely know is that Warren is the last man in the redoubt. There's one sole route of retreat from the redoubt on the road to Cambridge, and Warren stays in the redoubt to make sure all his surviving men get out of the readout. So he's covering the retreat of his men, but the fighting turns so brutal.

There's accounts where wounded patriots are being run through with bayonets. There's accounts where the British are taking the butts of their guns and beating in the heads of the wounded patriots.

And again, we're not taking sides. We're not trying to vilify the British. I think if anyone was in that position not knowing what to expect in a fight, it becomes survival of the fittest. You're gonna do whatever you can to make sure you survive that battle. And in the last seconds after his men retreat, Warren is shot through the face and killed instantly.

Liz Covart [00:55:56]: I don't think we can overstate that the British army, the best army in the world, suffered a defeat at Lexington and Concord. They were taunted all the way back into Boston. And now by a bunch of merchants and farmers and tradespeople, they've been forced to retreat down Breed's Hill twice. So their third assault becomes very bloody.

The weapons that the British used, they didn't have Geneva Convention rules yet. So we're talking about thick bladed, Tri-Blade bayonets, which were designed so that you could stab them into your enemy and then you'd twist them and you pull it out of the soldier. And this action created a large, gaping, circular wound that's gonna be very unlikely to heal on its own, given the lack of antibiotics.

So the revolutionaries know in this hand-to-hand situation that if they're injured with that bayonet, they might as well be dead. Because if they don't die from the initial wound, they're



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

most certainly going to die from the infection that sets in afterwards. Plus, by the time of the third assault, the revolutionaries, they were out of ammunition.

Christian Di Spigna [00:56:54]: Right? I can't even imagine the scene of devastation. And then to fast forward, when you hear about all the wounded British soldiers being rode out of Charlestown back to Boston, and what that scene would've looked like, just the casualties.

I believe there's over a thousand casualties. This battle produces the most casualties of any other battle throughout the American Revolution, and the British Officer Corps is just decimated. I believe the British Officer casualty is somewhere around eighty-seven.

And we have to keep in mind that we're thinking about, we start thinking Napoleonic Wars numbers from World War II casualties. Just think about the population at this time. So we're throwing around numbers like a thousand. These are big numbers for this time when you consider that it was twenty four hundred British soldiers engaged, and maybe about a thousand Patriots engaged in this. Around four hundred and fifty casualties on the patriot side and over a thousand on the British side. Just sheer devastation.

Liz Covart [00:57:48]: There are many more details about the Battle of Bunker Hill and what happened to Joseph Warren's body in Christian's book, *Founding Martyr*. Christian, jumping forward to after the battle, what happened when people found out that Dr. Joseph Warren was dead, that he died at the Battle of Bunker Hill? Did they think he was a martyr to their cause?

Christian Di Spigna [00:58:08]: Rumor starts circulating, was Warren killed? Did he escape the battle? Is he a prisoner of war? And once the reality starts to set in, I think the best example we have is when word reaches Philadelphia and the Continental Congress, you start seeing these letters being written from Samuel Adams and John Adams.

John Adams writes, "we have to be on guard from our most valuable patriots," and I'm paraphrasing here, and he says, "chairman of the Provincial Congress, head of the Committee of Safety, major general, there's too much for one mortal and we have to safeguard these great men because when we lose them, it's devastating."

And then only think about the political ramifications of this and the leaves in the patriot movement. But you think about when Joseph Warren's mother hears the news and his children and his fiance and his brothers, and how they hear about how his body has been viciously mutilated. And how his body's rotting on Breed's Hill for nine months until the siege of Boston breaks.

But again, Warren's death sends shockwaves throughout the entire Sons of Liberty, Boston. And again, even though Warren was more of a parochial figure in Massachusetts, he never leaves the confines of the state, he's known by so many people from the Suffolk Resolves all



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

the delegates at the Continental Congress, the letters he's writing over to John Wilkes in London, and other figures in Canada.

So it's devastating. And to think when we use these terms, “martyr” Warren is killed in action. He pays the ultimate price on the battlefield defending these notions of freedom and liberty that he's been fighting for for the past decade. He dies as a young man. We use this term revolutionaries, but when you think about the revolutionaries, the majority of them die as old men in their beds, maybe with the exception of Alexander Hamilton. So you have Warren dying on the battlefield days after his thirty-fourth birthday.

Liz Covart [00:59:55]: What would you say to people who do think that Joseph Warren had a death wish and that he made himself a martyr? They do have a strong point in that it was the eighteenth century where political leaders didn't usually go out and fight on the battlefield, but that's exactly what Warren did. He was determined to serve and fight with his men, even when others tried to stop him.

Christian Di Spigna [01:00:16]: I just think it speaks volumes to his character. Warren did not have a death wish. We have primary source documents proving that, that he wanted to be with his fiancée, marry her, raise his children.

We talk about virtue and what that meant in the eighteenth century, and Warren has this obligation to his men, to his political comrades.

I'm challenging you find me another character who so much as Warren; voice, pen, sword, and scalpel he's doing it all. The notion of him showing up at a battlefield was just as ludicrous then as a major politician, senator, governor, showing up to fight in a war now. What are you doing? Why are you here on this battlefield? And it was the same thing with Joseph Warren.

But again, this starts to develop his legends as a martyr. And I think that's why people always challenge me. If this guy's so important, as you say he is, why don't we know more about him? Again, it's this push and pull that he dies so early on and this one day at Bunker Hill, his death wipes out ten years of resistance movements because when we remember him, it says, oh, he's the guy who's killed at Bunker Hill. Or, oh, he's the guy who sends Revere and Dawes on the midnight ride, and he's not remembered for anything else.

He's not remembered as the healing physician, the Boston Massacre orator, writing the political arguments, being in the streets during these protests, organizing the Boston Tea Party, writing the Suffolk Resolves, that's all washed under the bridge, and he's just remembered as his fighting general.

Liz Covart [01:01:44]: And that's if we remember him at all. Because unless you read some of the more in-depth books about Boston during the American Revolution, people just don't come across Warren. They read about Paul Revere and William Dawes who went out on their



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

famous ride. They remember John Hancock, Samuel Adams and John Adams for their political contributions to the revolution. But most people haven't even heard of Joseph Warren.

Now, before we move into the “Time Warp,” what do you think Dr. Joseph Warren's legacy is Christian, and why does he continue to lack the recognition he deserves as a prominent leader during this very important early stage of the revolution?

Christian Di Spigna [01:02:20]: I have developed the end of my PowerPoint. It's a twenty minute ending discussing this issue, this is why we don't remember him. So to put it in a nutshell, he dies very early on, thirty-four years old, and as a spy master, he's destroying a lot of his own papers, his letters. Even his nephew talked about them destroying all of his papers right after his death.

He has no surviving sons, and when we think about the founding fathers, the only one to have a son who survives through adulthood becomes President. John Quincy Adams, who actually witnessed the Battle of Bunker Hill and was a patient of Dr. Warren's.

Again, I think this day overshadows Warren's entire career. And instead of viewing him as this healing physician, that was such an instrumental part of the rebellion, we see him as this martyr who dies at Bunker Hill.

And usually this term founding father, right? That's reserved for someone who signed the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution, or both. And so Warren dies as a traitorous subject to King Georgia the Third, right? He's not part of this later triumphant phase in American history. He dies a year before the Declaration of Independence is declared.

You know, it's ironic to call him a leader of the revolution because he dies just as the revolution is beginning. But there's almost this odd equator moment in history where Warren exits stage and Washington arrives. And so Washington arrives as the general of the Continental Army, and he has to fill Joseph Warren's shoes at this point because Northern-Southern rivalry, nothing new to the Civil War. Washington makes that famous quote, calling the New Englanders a dirty, nasty rabbel.

And how could Washington not help but admire what Warren had just done on the battlefield? The man of Washington's morality, his character, his ethics, he knew who Joseph Warren was. They all knew he left behind four orphan children.

And I think before Washington becomes Washington, we have to keep in mind, this is Boston 1775. It's not this miraculous victory, Yorktown 1781. Washington really has to fill Joseph Warren's shoes and not to detract from Washington, but we have to give Joseph Warren some credit.



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

And really, as the years move on, all Warren's colleagues rise to fame in his place, right? They all become governors or presidents. And Warren is sort of left behind because he dies in '75 before—there is no United States of America when Warren dies. And I think these all contribute to the fact that he gets forgotten over the years.

Liz Covart [01:04:43]: Well, that's actually a great segue into our “Time Warp.” The “Time Warp” is the segment of the show where we ask you a hypothetical history question about what might have happened if something had occurred differently or if someone had acted differently.

Christian, in your opinion, what might have happened if Warren had not shown up for the Battle of Bunker Hill, or if he had shown up and lived? How might the American Revolution, the new nation and Warren's legacy be different if he had lived beyond June 17th, 1775?

Christian Di Spigna [01:05:13]: I know you as historian, don't like dealing in speculative history, so this is the fun part of this segment where we can speculate. And I always get people saying, “oh, you know, surely Joseph Warren would've been president of the United States.” And I always say, “yeah, I don't think so.”

I think Washington's gonna become Washington no matter what. But what I do point to is just think about how helpful Warren could have been to Washington. Because think about it, right? Putnam, Prescott, these are Connecticut guys. No one knew that terrain in that town better than Joseph Warren. He had that respect, and I think he could have made the transition of Washington arriving in Cambridge so much smoother.

I think he could have been such a valuable asset to Washington. And even though there was a part of him that wanted to be connected to these military battles, he's also got a mind on the medicine part because there's a book in his library called *Diseases Incident to Armies* that he's reading before Bunker Hill. So we know that Washington makes that famous decision to get his soldiers inoculated for smallpox, but I just, I can't help but lament how valuable Warren could have been to Washington throughout the entire American Revolution.

But would Warren have insisted on being at Princeton or Trenton or the Battle of Long Island and Yorktown, and would he have just died a few years later on? But I think had he survived, I don't think it would be out of the question to say that he would've become a governor of Massachusetts like Hancock or Samuel Adams or some higher role, or maybe would've gone on to do great things in medicine.

He leaves behind an impressive military and medical dynasty, generations of West Point graduates. I think it's eight generations of Harvard graduates. His brother's a founder of Harvard Medical School, *New England Journal of Medicine*. His nephew performs the first successful operation with ether. His son performs the first successful rhinoplasty.



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

So even though Warren exits stage 1775, his legacy continues to live on through the descendants and just other stories that we haven't been able to get to that make you realize, my gosh, his life had such an effect even after his death. So I guess you'll have to read the book to find out what those other stories are.

Liz Covart [01:07:19]: Well, of course I had to ask that question, because there are those of us from New England who wonder and debate could Joseph Warren have been the first president of the United States? Because he was very, very popular. And of course, we like to think this way because Virginia has four of the first five presidents. So it's really interesting to hear your answer. Now, Christian, your book *Founding Martyr* has been out for a while. So have you been researching and writing something new about Boston and the American Revolution?

Christian Di Spigna [01:07:46]: We're working on a documentary about Dr. Joseph Warren, and we actually had Richard Dreyfuss make the trailer for us. We're working with a Hollywood producer to try and get this documentary done in time for 2026.

I am working on a new book. I was so fascinated by Warren's death and postmortem journey that it made me think, what about some of these other revolutionary figures? How did they meet their end? So I'm working on a book that's related to that now.

Our work in the Dr. Joseph Warren Foundation, that's our main thing right now to try and get this documentary out to hit a national audience, to get people to understand Warren's legacy and how important he was, because I really do think he deserves to seat at that founding father's table, and I think it's a shame that he's kind of fallen into the cobwebs of history, so to speak.

Liz Covart [01:08:31]: Now, if we have more questions about Dr. Warren, the Battle of Bunker Hill, or your new documentary, where should we get in contact with you?

Christian Di Spigna [01:08:37]: Yeah, just go to www.djwf.org, which is the Dr. Joseph Warren Foundation, so djwf.org. You can email there. I'll always get the message. You know, you can see on the website things we're working on, scholarships, future talks, other events, so.

Liz Covart [01:08:55]: Well, Christian Di Spigna, thank you for introducing us to Dr. Joseph Warren and for your help in commemorating the 250th anniversary of the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Christian Di Spigna [01:09:04]: I have to thank you, Liz, because this whole process from beginning to end was so professional and seamless, and your questions were so thoughtful. I appreciate your podcast because you can tell how much work you put into it, so I just, I had to give you some props for that.



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Liz Covart [01:09:19]: Well, thank you very much. Dr. Joseph Warren was a man of remarkable contradictions. He was an elite and an every man, a physician and a firebrand, and an insider and an insurgent.

As we commemorate the 250th anniversary of the Battle of Bunker Hill. It's worth reflecting on how Warren sacrificed at that battle and his leadership leading up to it, helped define the trajectory of the American Revolution from his early days in Roxbury to his work as the president of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, Warren left a powerful imprint on both the revolutionary cause and the community he served.

Warren's ability to operate within elite circles while remaining deeply connected to ordinary Bostonians gave him a rare influence, and it may well have been this very brand of credibility and charisma that made Joseph Warren so dangerous to British authorities. The story of Dr. Joseph Warren and the Battle of Bunker Hill reminds us that revolutions are shaped not only by generals and declarations, but also by thinkers, organizers, and martyrs. By people like Dr. Joseph Warren who risked and gave up everything in the hope of a new political order. You'll find more information about Christian, his book, *Founding Martyr* plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today on the show notes page, benfranklinworld.com/413.

Friends tell friends about their favorite podcasts. So if you enjoyed this episode, please share it with your friends and family. Production assistance for this podcast comes from Joseph Adelman, Karin Wulf, and Morgan McCullough. Breakmaster Cylinder composed our custom theme music. This podcast is part of the Airwave Media podcast network. To discover and listen to their other podcasts, visit airwavemedia.com.

Finally, the story of Dr. Joseph Warren has me thinking, what do you think inspires someone to risk everything, including their life, for a cause? Let me know what you're thinking, liz@benfranklinworld.com.