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Honor Roll brings local life to the Battle of Bunker Hill

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LOWELL — The names that retired park ranger Vince Kordak recently displayed on slides at the Pollard Memorial Library became more than that as he told the stories of local men who fought 241 years ago at the Battle of Bunker Hill.

These soldiers of the American Revolution came from Chelmsford, Dracut, Tewksbury and, due to events five decades later, Lowell. Many of their surnames are still familiar. The battle occurred just two months after the Battle of Lexington and Concord, but 51 years before Lowell was incorporated with land carved from Chelmsford, Dracut and, a few years later, Tewksbury.

Kordak was in Lowell Wednesday to help the Lowell Parks and Conservation Trust celebrate the completed conservation of the Bunker Hill Honor Roll, a document on parchment that lists the local men who fought the British in Charlestown on June 17, 1775.

Executive Director Jane Calvin challenged Kordak and copresenter Maria Cole "to make this roll come to life." Cole is a park ranger at the Boston National Historical Park, which encompasses the Bunker Hill Monument, and a former park ranger at the Lowell National Historical Park.

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Retired park ranger Vince Kordak points to a reproduction of the Bunker Hill Honor Roll that greeted visitors Wednesday to Memorial Hall at the Pollard Library in Lowell. Maria Cole, a Boston park ranger, was a co-presenter. SUN/PRUDENCE BRIGHTON

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Kordak, who retired from the Boston park, drew on his decades of research to meet Calvin's challenge. He presented an overview of the battle which the British won after savage hand-to-hand fighting, perhaps the worst of the Revolution.

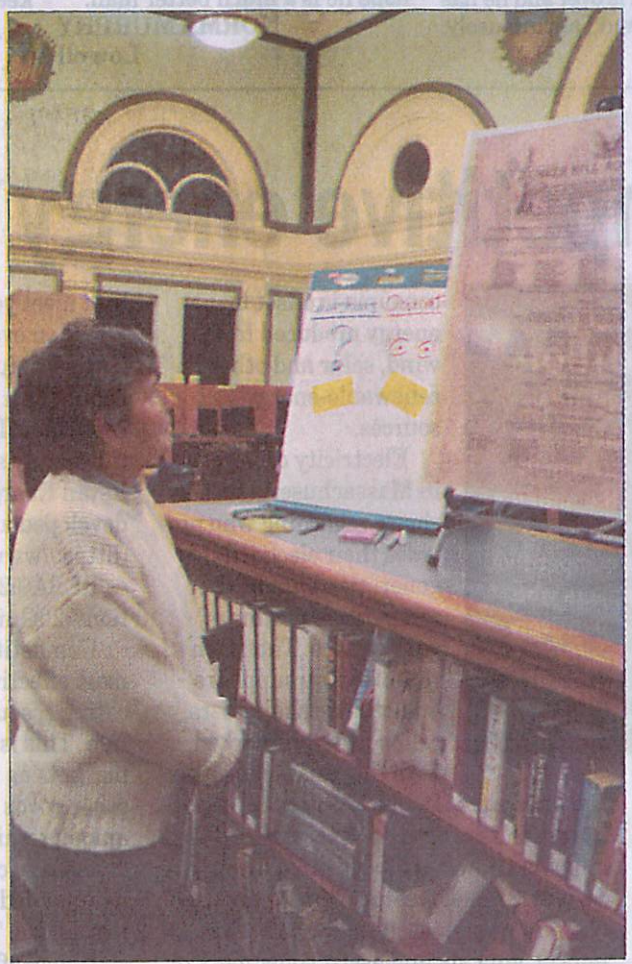
Of 2,200 British troops, 268 men were killed and 828 wounded. American casualties were 115 killed and 305 wounded. Of his victory, British General William Howe said it was a "success too dearly bought."

Speaking to a roomful of 50 local historians, library trustees and town officials, Kordak gave biographical detail to some of them names on the Honor Roll:

• Ebenezer Shed of Chelmsford. He was 22 when he fought at Bunker Hill. He returned home, but later went back to the war and supported the Continental Army as a blacksmith.

• Thomas Bewkel of Chelmsford. He fought at Bunker Hill, but deserted eight days later. Desertions were a common occurrence during the Revolution.

• Benjamin Crosby of Dracut. He enlisted in the Continental Army on April 26, 1775 just eight days after Lexington and Concord. He was killed at Bunker Hill.



Chelmsford Selectman Pat Wojtas looks for names from her town on the Bunker Hill Honor Roll. Wojtas accepted a framed reproduction on behalf of her town. Dracut, Lowell and Tewksbury representatives also received framed reproductions. SUN/PRUDENCE BRIGHTON

• Smith Coburn of Dracut. He was 35 and was listed as a servant. He was called a "patriot of color," defined as someone of African or Native American descent.

• Barzillai Lew, born in Groton and who, at the time of the Revolution, was living in that part of Chelmsford that became Pawtucketville in Lowell. He was 33 at the time of the battle and listed as a cooper. He also was a "patriot of color." His service in the Continental Army merited an entry in Wikipedia, where he is a described as "an African American soldier who served with distinction."

• Daniel Merritt or Merrit or Marrat of Tewksbury. This soldier's last name is uncertain. It is given as Merritt in the Honor Roll, but the name is spelled differently elsewhere.

• Issac Eliphalit and Samuel Manning of Tewksbury. Isaac Manning became a fifer in George Washington's Guard.

Of Kordak's response to her challenge, Calvin said, "I knew this was a special document, but I didn't know how special until tonight."

The names on the Honor Roll were first compiled and organized in 1909. Then presented by Sara Swan Griffin, who in 1913 wrote a tract titled *Quaint Bits of Lowell History: A Few Interesting Stories of Earlier Days*. After the publication of her work, a decision was made to reproduce the names using calligraphy on parchment, and it is this document that is known as the Bunker Hill Honor Roll.

The Honor Roll became the property of the Molly Varnum Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution and stored at its Spaulding House property on Pawtucket Street. In 1996, the house passed from the DAR to the LPTC. As part of the package, the LPTC acquired 900 artifacts, including the Honor Roll. Many of the other artifacts also require conservation work.

The document was in bad condition, but the extent of its deterioration was not known until the New England Document Conservation Center began work on it in 2013. Michael Lee, who supervised the conservation work for NEDCC, explained that parchment is animal skin and, thus, very reactive to changes in moisture levels.

"At some point, this had been exposed to very dry heat," Lee said. The parchment had also been adhered to cardboard. That exposure caused the parchment to tighten and crack over the underlying cardboard. The NEDCC had to chart a very delicate course of action to free the parchment. Cracks were repaired with Japanese kozo paper.

While LPTC has possessed the parchment since 1996, work on its restoration started when the organization received a small grant. Then LPTC persuaded town governments and organizations in the four communities to contribute to the work. Total cost of the conservation effort was $6,598.

The contributors were the town of Chelmsford, the town of Dracut, Mill City Environmental, Trustees of the Pollard Memorial Library, the Lowell Heritage Partnership, the Tewksbury Historical Society and the Tewksbury Public Library.

Each community will receive a framed replica of the original. Lowell and Tewksbury will hang their replicas in their respective libraries. Chelmsford and Dracut have not yet designated a space. The original parchment is considered fragile and sensitive to light. It is contained in acid-free wrapping within an acid-free box.