



Navigation

[Historical Eras](#)[Information Tables](#)[Maps](#)[Glossary](#)

The Great New York City Fire

On September 15, 1776, British forces under General William Howe occupied New York City. George Washington had recognized the inevitability of this event and had withdrawn the bulk of his army from harm's way. Washington and Congress rejected the counsel of some that the city be set on fire by departing soldiers as a means to deny a comfortable home to British soldiers during the coming winter. Instead, the Continental Army left the city intact and marched north to Harlem Heights at the far end of Manhattan Island, about 10 miles from the enemy. In the early hours of September 21, however, fire broke out in the city, most likely in the Fighting Cocks tavern in Whitehall. Strong winds quickly spread the flames among tightly packed homes and businesses. Residents poured into the streets, clutching what possessions they could, and found refuge only on the grassy town common. The fire raged into the daylight hours and eventually consumed between 400 and 500 buildings – about one-quarter of the city. British forces, which had occupied the city less than a week, immediately speculated that the New York City Fire had been deliberately set by their rebel opponents. Indeed, there was much evidence of arson – fire alarm bells had

mysteriously disappeared, fire buckets were found with their handles cut off and water had been emptied from the some of the town's cisterns. Much savagery occurred the night of the fire; those suspected of complicity were shot, bayoneted or thrust back into the flames. Dozens of people were detained for questioning by British authorities, including the unfortunate Nathan Hale. No final verdict has been rendered on the question of who set the New York fire. However, even Washington speculated that Patriot arsonists may have been at work.

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