CHESTNUT HILL, MA (3-17-09) As a young historian, I looked for ways to differentiate fact from fiction, truth from legend, while researching the history of my home-town neighborhood of South Boston. In the process I was often advised by knowledgeable old-timers not to let facts get in the way of a good story. The annual celebration of St. Patrick’s Day is one of those events where the idea of a good story brushes up against the facts of the case.

Most people assume that on March 17 they are commemorating the battle of Dorchester Heights. When General George Washington arrived in Cambridge in July 1775 to take over command of the Continental Army, he was determined to drive the British forces out of Boston. This was especially true after Colonel Henry Knox arrived in Cambridge in January 1776 with a number of heavy cannon he had dragged through the deep snows all the way from Fort Ticonderoga.

Giving up his original idea of sending his troops across the ice-choked waters of Boston harbor, Washington agreed on a much safer overland assault. Under cover of a diversionary bombardment, the American troops made their way secretly and silently from Roxbury, through Dorchester, and into the peninsula of South Boston, then known as Dorchester Neck.

By daybreak on March 5, the Rebels had constructed fortifications on the crest of Dorchester Heights overlooking the town of Boston. To the consternation of the British, the American cannon not only menaced the red coats, but also the numerous British warships riding helplessly at anchor. In return for a British promise not to burn the town behind them, General Washington agreed not to fire upon their vessels as they sailed out of Boston harbor, carrying off the 9,000-man British garrison along with some 1,100 American Loyalists.

Twelve days later, on March 17, 1776, Washington’s troops prepared to liberate Boston, spearheaded by a special contingent of soldiers who had already had smallpox – a precaution against the dread disease that had plagued the British occupying force. From his headquarters in Cambridge, the general dispatched the order that the password for the day would be “Boston,” and the countersign would be “St. Patrick” in honor of the feast day of that well-known saint. Once assured that there was no danger of an epidemic, the American troops entered the town and marched triumphantly through the streets of Boston.

The “good story” is the daring and successful fortification of Dorchester Heights by Washington’s troops on March 5. The historical fact is that on March 17 we actually celebrate the evacuation of the British, the liberation of Boston, and the acknowledgement
of the patronage of Saint Patrick. But this is a case where the story and the facts really come together to mark an important page in the annals of American history. They are both sides of the same shamrock.

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