

John Pitcairn

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This article is about the British marine. For the industrialist, see *John Pitcairn, Jr.*

John Pitcairn ([December 28, 1722](#) – [June 17, 1775](#)) was a [British Marine](#) who was stationed in [Boston, Massachusetts](#) at the start of the [American Revolutionary War](#).

Pitcairn was born in late December 1722 in [Dysart](#), a port town in [Fife, Scotland](#). His parents were the Reverend David and Katherine (Hamilton) Pitcairn. He entered the Marines and was commissioned as a Lieutenant in 1746. He served in Canada during the [French and Indian War](#) as a Captain, and was promoted to Major in 1771. In 1774 he arrived in [Boston, Massachusetts](#) in command of 600 Marines to support the occupation.

Major Pitcairn was respected by the citizens in Boston as one of the more reasonable officers in the occupying force. Nevertheless, he was in command of the advance party when the first shots were fired at [Lexington, Massachusetts](#) on April 19, 1775 starting the [Battle of Lexington and Concord](#). Although villainized by some American accounts, his behavior that day was honorable and valiant.^[*citation needed*] He had a horse shot out from under him, and even lost a pair of matched pistols when the column's baggage was abandoned. American leader [Israel Putnam](#) carried them through the rest of the war.



Trumbull's *Battle of Bunker Hill*.

At the [Battle of Bunker Hill](#) Pitcairn commanded a reserve force of about 300 Marines. They landed at the south end of the Charlestown peninsula. When the first assaults failed, he led his men up the hill toward the American position, only to fall to a musket shot, said to have been fired by a black former slave named [Peter Salem](#). He toppled into the arms of his son, William, also a Royal Marine, who cried, "I have lost my father!" Some of the Marines tried to console the young officer, while others, overcome with emotion, moaned. Pitcairn was carried back to Boston, and died of his wound within hours. He is buried at the [Old North Church](#) in Boston.

[John Trumbull](#)'s famous painting of the Battle of Bunker Hill depicts his death. However, it contains several errors and anachronisms. No known picture of Major Pitcairn survives. Another son, Dr. David Pitcairn was used as a model by Trumbull. The uniform depicted was not adopted by the Marines until the 1780s. Pitcairn is shown lying at the bunker at its capture from the American force, but he was shot while starting the ascent of the hill. Pitcairn is also depicted in the scene of the Battle of Lexington in the U.S. Capital rotunda.

[Pitcairn Island](#) in the South Pacific (known chiefly for its part in the [mutiny on the Bounty](#)) was named for another son, Robert, who was a midshipman in the British navy. While on watch on a voyage led by Captain [Philip Carteret](#), he was the first to sight the unknown island on [July 3, 1767](#).

A daughter, Catherine, married Charles Cochrane, a son of the [8th Earl of Dundonald](#) and a first cousin of Admiral [Thomas Cochrane, 10th Earl of Dundonald](#).

The character, Major Pitcairn, appears in *April Morning*, a 1961 novel by [Howard Fast](#) depicting the [Battle of Lexington and Concord](#).^[1]