

Amid immigration raids and a military parade, a reenactment at Bunker Hill aims to recall the values a young nation fought for

Actors, musicians, and orators on Monday will re-create a daylong celebration of the Bunker Hill Monument's first stone 200 years ago, seeking to cement the ideals of democracy

By [A.Z. Madonna](#) Globe Staff, Updated June 13, 2025, 1:12 p.m.



Illustration of the Bunker Hill Monument from 1848. PUBLIC DOMAIN

The celebratory crowd that gathered in downtown Boston on June 17th, 1825, was perhaps 100,000 strong, around double the city's population. People had come from near and far. President John Quincy Adams and his entire Cabinet were there, along with musicians, poets, and orators.

In a procession over two miles long, the tide of civilians and military companies marched to Charlestown, to the site where the Colonial militia 50 years before had faced down a larger and better equipped British force at the crucial Battle of Bunker Hill.

The crowds had come because a slab of stone was to be laid, the ceremonial first step in the 18-year project of building the Bunker Hill Monument. The stone was anointed with oil and corn and wine, and all day long the crowd listened to speeches, poetry,

music, and toasts. It was a moment of celebration. But it was also intended, as was the new monument, to remind the nation of the values it had fought for in the Revolution.

On Monday, amid a tumultuous season in American democracy, a group of historically minded musicians, artists, and members of the public are staging an elaborate re-creation, with parades, toasts, and music to match. Their goal is to celebrate the bicentennial anniversary of the cornerstone, and perhaps in the process recall what all those people came to celebrate that day.

“The laying of the cornerstone reminds us of the long work of remembering this battle,” said historian Nat Sheidley, who leads the nonprofit [Revolutionary Spaces](#), which stewards Old South Meeting House and the nearby Old State House. The monument only exists in the first place, he said, because a group of people thought “remembering that moment could help in the world they lived in 50 years later.”

Lee Eiseman, a longtime Charlestown resident, has been the driving force behind the event. A musical impresario who also edits the Boston Musical Intelligencer online journal, Eiseman said he was asked to join the Monument Association in 2023 to arrange the commemoration because he had also organized a similar event in 1993. That was for the 150th anniversary of the 221-foot obelisk’s 1843 dedication.

Numerous regional newspapers covered the cornerstone laying in detail, and that documentation allowed Eiseman to piece together the music and poetry that the crowd would have heard there. “It was an all-day affair that lasted through dinner,” he said.

When Eiseman read the speeches delivered at the event, he found passages “talking about how the cornerstone is plumb and level, the way our behavior should be: moral and upright,” he said. “The sentiments are lofty, and I’m happy to be involved in celebrating those ideals.”

The 200th anniversary features several free events Monday, beginning with a 9:30

a.m. procession from the Charlestown Navy Yard to the Bunker Hill Monument. That will be followed by a reenactment of the ceremony, with actors portraying orator and famed lawmaker Daniel Webster and the Marquis de Lafayette, the French hero of the Revolutionary War who laid the cornerstone. The professional Dee Opera Orchestra and Chorus, led by conductor Stephanie Beatrice, will perform some of the music known to have been heard at the original event.

There's one intentional and significant change: Webster's morning speech at the original event lasted 45 minutes, but at the reenactment, it'll be abridged to five. "Imagine addressing 60,000 people and being heard without any amplification," Eiseman said. "You really needed to have a trumpet for a voice."

Later that day at 6 p.m., Old South Meeting House will host an event Eiseman is calling a "civic exercise and grand monumental celebration," featuring ceremonial toasts paired with apropos period music, which was collected by Eiseman and arranged by several other musicians. A few of those selections will be familiar to modern ears, Beatrice said — "Yankee Doodle" was played, for one, as well as "The Anacreontic Song," which modern Americans know as "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Beatrice said she grew up in Massachusetts and "being able to supply historic tunes to this reenactment is really special for me." Across the morning and evening events, Beatrice and the ensemble will be responsible for around 25 pieces. "Each one is paired with a toast or an ode tied to a historical figure, and this all shows the relationship between the ideology of their words and the music that would have rallied the forces," she said. "It's going to be fun."

Sheidley often finds it a challenge to make the history of the founding era feel approachable, because it's "saturated in mythology, and it's divisive," he said. "We currently are having a national argument about how we should remember our founding history ... people can be on opposite sides of a political divide on that question, and we want them to be in dialogue with each other."

Art and music can help guide that dialogue Sheidley wants to foster, because when people take part in a common experience, he said, it's easier for them to see themselves “as part of writing that story.”

At heart, whenever Americans talk about the nation's founding era, they're never “just having a conversation about history,” said Sheidley. It's also “a conversation about where we are now and who we want to be.”

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