

Music of the American Revolution

A SONG

COMPOSED BY A SOLDIER IN THE CONTINENTAL ARMY

Article by Scott G. Giltner, Ph.D.

During the years leading up to and throughout the American Revolution, newspapers frequently printed patriotic poems and songs submitted by readers. Most appeared without formal titles; editors simply labeled them “A Poem,” “A Song,” or “A New Song.” Only over time did these pieces acquire unique names. The song examined here deviates from that pattern: despite multiple printings, it was not known to have received a distinct title.

The lyrics first appeared in December 1775 in the *New England Chronicle or Essex Gazette* and the *Essex Journal and New Hampshire Packet*. The timing was significant. The song was almost certainly intended to encourage Continental soldiers to re-enlist before their terms expired on 31 December. Although the subtitle attributes the lyrics to a soldier engaged in the siege of Boston, this was likely a pseudonym. Whether pseudonymous or not, the author remains unknown.

The lyrics celebrate the successes of the Continental Army and emphasize the adequacy of soldiers’ provisions and supplies. More than most songs of the era, this piece contains a remarkable number of references to contemporary events and personalities. These references are summarized below.

Stanza 1: Repeated at the end of each stanza is the phrase “take t’other touch”. This phrase is an 18th-century colloquialism that means taking another turn or making another attempt at fighting the enemy. In the context of the American Revolution, “t’other” is a contraction for “the other,” and “touch” refers to a bout of combat or engagement with British forces.

“Congress” was the name of a 13 inch brass mortar, taken from the British by Captain John Manley, an officer in the Continental Navy.

Stanza 2: “The term “Poltoons” was used to describe individuals lacking resolve and was commonly employed as a derisive label for cowards.

Stanza 3: The “big talker” refers to Burgoyne, known for bold and arrogant remarks about the American forces. In the spring of 1775 he dismissed the American forces surrounding Boston as “A rabble in arms, flushed with success and insolence”.

“Haldimand” refers to General Frederick Haldimand, a Swiss officer serving as a General for the British in the Seven Years War and the American Revolution. He commanded British troops in Boston during the Lexington & Concord battles and later served as governor of Quebec from 1778-1786.

“Gage” was the military governor of Massachusetts at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. He enforced the Coercive Acts, ordered troops to Lexington and Concord initiating the American Revolution, and commanded British troops at Breed’s Hill.

“Howe” refers to General William Howe, commander-in-chief of British land forces in North America during the initial years of the American Revolution.

Stanza 4: This stanza is likely a taunt to the British troops in Boston. At the time Boston suffered a severe lack of provisions and fuel for fires. While the British had resorted to cutting down nearly every tree in Boston, the lyrics portray the Americans troops as being amply supplied in sea coal, a highly regarded coal, from Scotland.

Stanza 5: The stanza encourages Patriots not to relinquish the hard-won gains they have achieved. It urges continued perseverance despite setbacks or personal losses.

Stanza 6: This stanza alludes to an immensely valuable prize, the British brigantine Nancy, taken by Captain John Manley on the 29th of November 1775; the vessel was carrying a large supply of ordnance and military stores intended for the British troops in Boston. Its capture was one of the most significant logistical American victories of the early American Revolution. The mortar “Congress,” mentioned in Stanza 1, was taken from the Nancy.

“North” refers to Prime Minister Lord North, whose administration imposed a series of deeply unpopular policies on the American colonies, that contributed significantly to the growing tensions leading to the Revolutionary War.

Stanza 7: “Bute” in the Revolutionary War era refers to John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute, an unpopular British Prime Minister whose policies (like the Treaty of Paris ending the Seven Years’ War and taxation) inflamed American resentment.

“Hutch” refers to Thomas Hutchinson, the Loyalist Royal Governor of Massachusetts whose enforcement of British policies, especially the Tea Act, made him a primary target of Patriot anger and ultimately forced him into exile.

The “conquering general I’ve forgot his hard name” refers to American General Montgomery. The line humorously reflects the public’s difficulty trying to keep track of the newly appointed and unfamiliar leaders of the revolution.

Stanza 8: The phrase to “beat the Dutch” was an American idiom meaning to do or say something remarkable or startling. It was often used as “that beats the Dutch”, meaning that beats everything or something extraordinary. The phrase was derived from a rivalry with the Dutch where surpassing them became a benchmark for exceptional feats.¹

The newspapers noted that the lyrics were to be sung “to the tune of the Black Sloven”. Like many colonial melodies, “The Black Sloven” was a British import and was in common use among American musicians, primarily wind instrument players, from the pre-Revolutionary period through the early 19th century.

The name “Black Sloven” came from a legendary, potentially apocryphal, hunting mare of reportedly exceptional speed owned by Charles Turner of Clegg Hall, Lancashire. Her fame was well-established by the early 18th century.

There is no doubt “The Black Sloven” was used as a marching air [N.B. in music, the term “air”, derived from the Italian word “aria”, refers to a song that is flowing and melodic.] as it appears in several military fife manuscripts of the period prior to the American Revolution. The tune is also known as “Col. Pickering’s March to Lexington” as the fifers and drummers with Pickering’s militia reportedly played this tune while marching from Salem to Lexington on 19 April 1775.² It was a popular song probably for the same reason it was popular in instrumental tutors. It was a simple tune without any difficult intervals which made it sing-able to nearly everyone.

While the Black Sloven tune is found in two fife tutors from the period, additional evidence that it was a popular tune in the colonies comes from an announcement in a New York newspaper that popular actor-singer Mr. Woolls would be singing the song in a concert at the Vaux Hall Gardens in 1769.^{3,4,5,6} A few years later, lyrics set to the tune of “The Black Sloven” were performed at the April 1771 banquet of the Sons of St. George in New York. The singer, Joseph Stansbury, British born and widely regarded for his political verse, was noted as well for a cultivated voice and an amiable disposition that ensured his welcome at social gatherings.⁷ His lyrics articulated a stance of “loyal opposition” in response to contemporary colonial grievances with an appeal to maintain ties to the mother country rather than to embrace any call for secession:

*Though placed at a distance from Britain’s bold shore,
From thence either we or our fathers came o’er;
And in a will, work, and deed we are Englishman all,--
Still true to her cause, and awake to her call.*

A Song (Composed by a Soldier in the Continental Army) offers a window into the sentiments, humor, and political awareness of Americans at a pivotal moment in the Revolution. Its allusions, paired with the familiar and widely beloved tune of The Black Sloven, reveal how music served not only to entertain but to motivate, unify, and reinforce shared purpose among the troops. As both a cultural artifact and a reflection of wartime morale, it stands as a compelling example of how ordinary voices contributed to the larger narrative of American independence.

A SONG⁸ (1775)

Composed by a Soldier in the Continental Army

Tho’ some folks may tell us, it is not so clever
To handle a musket in cold frosty weather;
By yonder bright Congress, in spite of all such,
I’ll tarry this season, and take t’other touch.

Let poltoons and tories retire from our lines,
We’re stronger without them above fifty times:
Their infamous characters none will begrutch
Who tarry with us, boys, to take t’other touch.

Tho’ Haldimand, Gage, and the big talker too,
Think salty old pork and our sauce will not do;
My brave fellow soldiers, we can’t think it much,
On the strength of roast beef t’give Howe t’other touch.

Our raiment, provisions and pay, is quite good;
We've sea coal from Scotland, & plenty of wood:
How the country must laugh, if our folly is such
As to let the militia obtain t'other touch.

Shall they have our posts, when we've all the works done,
Who for them ha'nt labour'd –ne, none of this fun:
I'll see next campaign out – if 'tis on a crutch;
And here's to the lads, who will take t'other touch.

When North by brave Manly has sent, one wou'd think,
A vessel, whose bottom had all we want in't;
Do ye think I wont stay when th' prizes we clutch?
Yes, faith, that I will – and so here's t'other touch.

The conquering Gen, I've forgot his hard name,
Has made Fort St. John and Chamblee very tame;
And Montreal also – 'twill sweat Bute and Hutch,
When they hear that Qu'bec too has got t'other touch.

And besides all the mortars, bombs, cannon & shells,
And bullets and guns - as the newspaper tells,
Our cargoes of meat, drink & cloths beat the Dutch:
Now who wou'd not tarry, and take t'other touch.

¹ To Beat The Dutch; Origin and Meaning, Word Histories, Retrieved 1 January 2026 From <https://wordhistories.net/2021/01/06/beat-the-dutch/>

² Kuntz, Andrew The Black Sloven, Retrieved 30 December 2025 from https://www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers/Black_Sloven.htm .

³ Gibbs, Giles, *His Book for the Fife (1777)*, Edited from the Original Manuscript by Kate van Winkle Keller, The Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, Connecticut 1974, page 24.

⁴ Thompson, Aaron, *His Book of Notes*, 3rd New Jersey Regiment, 1779, page 38.

⁵ New York Journal or General Advertiser, 29 June 1769, page 4.

⁶ New York Journal or General Advertiser, 1 February 1770, page 4.

⁷ Kuntz, Andrew The Black Sloven, Retrieved 30 December 2025 from https://www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers/Black_Sloven.htm .

⁸ A Song, Composed by a Soldier in the Continental Army, New England Chronicle or the Essex Gazette, 14 December 1775, page 4.