

Music of the American Revolution

THE AMERICAN HERO: A SAPPHICK ODE

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Throughout history music has been used to inspire people towards great accomplishments. At times, the music was in response to great blessings while at other times the music was a reaction to dire circumstances. The opening phase of the American Revolution was a critical time for the American colonists. Despite having driven the British back to Boston after the battle at Concord on 19 April, 1775 the colonists suffered a tactical defeat at the battle of Bunker Hill [properly referred to as Breeds Hill, but for consistency with the prevailing popular name, Bunker Hill will be used in the following text.] and the concurrent burning of Charlestown. Though defeated, the high level of casualties inflicted on the British in the battle was a clear indication the American colonists were up to the fight.

A Patriot by the name of Nathaniel Niles wrote the poem, “The American Hero: A Sapphick Ode” in response to the events at Bunker Hill and in Charlestown. Niles’ poem was written in 1775 as an ode to inspire the Patriots in their struggle against Britain. It has been purported that Niles wrote the poem at his home in Norwich, Connecticut the evening he received the news of the battle at Bunker Hill.¹ Interestingly, the British had their own song to commemorate the Battle on Bunker Hill. Fittingly named “The Battle of Bunker Hill” it was alleged to have been composed by an unknown British soldier shortly after the battle and was printed in both Britain and the American Colonies. While the British song extolls the virtue and martial skill of the British forces, it also acknowledges the resilience and steadfastness of the American Colonists in the battle. It is not known which of the two songs appeared first in print or if one song was written in response to the other.

Nathaniel Niles, a native of New England and graduate of Princeton, was a classic renaissance man. Amongst his many occupations, he was a doctor, lawyer, preacher, poet, inventor, abolitionist, and politician. At the time of the American Revolution, he was living in Connecticut although he resided at several other locations during his life.

“The American Hero” was written as a poem, printed as a broadside, and promptly set to music. Poems printed on broadsides were frequently meant to be sung as the name of a specific tune or a phrase, such as “to a new tune” or “to be sung”, often followed the title on the broadside. Notwithstanding, if no tune was indicated, or if the tune suggested was not known, it was understood that one might improvise a tune or choose a fitting, familiar tune obtained from oral or written tradition.² The poem subsequently appeared in five colonial newspapers between 2 Feb and 26 April 1776.³

There is some dispute over who wrote the music for Niles’ poem. Initially the tune was credited to Andrew Law, a fellow Connecticut resident.⁴ More recently some historians have attributed the melody of Sylvanus Ripley.⁵ The strongest, although speculative, evidence for Andrew Law as the writer of the tune is the hymnbook he published in 1781.^{6,7} This is the earliest known printing of the music for the song but it has been accepted music was applied to the poem much earlier.

The tune applied to the lyrics was an original composition despite the controversy over who was the composer. “The American Hero: A Sapphic Ode” is unique among early American patriotic song as both the lyrics and tune are original but were created by two different individuals. At this

point in time patriotic American songs either applied original lyrics to an existing tune, or if the lyrics and tune were both original, they were created by the same individual.

The original poem was reportedly inspired by the Battle of Bunker Hill however for some curious reason none of the lyrics provide a direct account of or reference to the battle. In fact, the only reference to associate the song with the battle is that some of the early printings of the poem included the subtitle "Made on the battle of Bunker Hill and the burning of Charlestown". After the poem was put to music, the new song was more commonly referred to as "Bunker Hill: A Sapphick Ode".

The lyrics consist of fifteen stanzas that can be separated into three sections. The first two stanzas address death and its inevitability. Simply stated these stanzas declare all mortals to be faced with death, the only question is under what circumstances will it occur and how will it be faced. The next five stanzas focus on God and the colonists' relationship with Him. Individually these five stanzas call the colonists to submit, praise, thank, rejoice, and commit to God.

The remaining eight stanzas outline the characteristics defining the American hero and what they should anticipate in the upcoming war. These stanzas employ mythological references to war and the suffering to be expected. The last three stanzas encourage trust in God and offer inspiration to overcome challenges with a reminder that the final reward is worth the sacrifice. The concluding stanza declares one's life to be a trifle to part with for one's country and freedom.

The song became fairly popular and reportedly was sung frequently by soldiers in the Continental Army and the general populace.^{8,9} Over time various lyrics were applied to the tune - even as late as 1831.^{10,11} One historian has referred to "The American Hero: A Sapphick Ode" as "the war song of the Revolution".¹²

The American Hero: A Sapphick Ode¹³

Why should vain Mortals tremble at the Sight of
Death and Destruction in the Field of Battle,
Where Blood and Carnage clothe the Ground in Crimson,
Sounding with Death-Groans?

Death will invade us by the Means appointed,
And we must all bow to the King of Terrors;
Nor am I anxious, if I am prepared,
What Shape he comes in.

Infinite Goodness teaches us Submission;
Bids us be quiet under all his Dealings:
Never repining, but forever praising
GOD our Creator.

Well may we praise Him, all his Ways are perfect;
Though a Resplendence infinitely glowing
Dazzles in Glory on the Sight of Mortals,
Struck blind by Lustre!

Good is Jehovah in bestowing Sunshine,
Nor less His Goodness in the Storm and Thunder:
Mercies and Judgments both proceed from Kindness —
Infinite Kindness!

O then exult, that GOD forever reigneth.
Clouds, which around him hinder our Perception,
Bind us the stronger to exalt his Name, and
Shout louder Praises!

Then to the Wisdom of my Lord and Master,
I will commit all that I have or wish for:
Sweetly as Babes sleep will I give my Life up
When call'd to yield it.

Now, Mars, I dare thee, clad in smoky Pillars,
Bursting from Bomb-shells, roaring from the Cannon,
Rattling in Grape Shot, like a Storm of Hailstones,
Torturing Aether!

Up the bleak Heavens, let the spreading Flames rise,
Breaking like Aetna through the smoky Columns.
Low'ring like Egypt o'er the falling City,
Wantonly burnt down.

While all their Hearts quick palpitate for Havock,
Let slip your Blood Hounds, nam'd the British Lyons,
Dauntless as Death-stares, nimble as the Whirlwind,
Dreadful as Demons!

Let Oceans waft on all your floating Castles,
Fraught with Destruction, horrible to Nature:
Then with your Sails fill'd by a Storm of Vengeance,
Bear down to Battle!

From the dire Caverns made by ghostly Miners,
Let the Explosion, dreadful as Volcanoes,
Heave the broad town, with all its Wealth and People,
Quick to Destruction!

Still shall the Banner of the King of Heaven
Never advance where I'm afraid to follow:
While that precedes me, with an open Bosom,
War, I defy thee!

Fame and dear Freedom lure me on to Battle,
While a fell Despot, grimmer than a Death's-Head,
Stings me with Serpents, fiercer than Medusa's,
To the Encounter.

Life, for my Country and the Cause of Freedom,
Is but a Trifle for a Worm to part with;
And if preserved in so great a Contest,
Life is redoubled.

¹ Norwich Jubilee: A Report of the Celebration at Norwich, Connecticut on the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the Settlement of the Town. J. Stedman, 1859, p. 84.

² Smith, C. S. 'Broad-sides and Their Music in Colonial America.' Colonial Society of Massachusetts, <https://www.colonialsociety.org/node/2012>. Accessed 17 Oct. 2025.

³ 'The American Hero: A Sapphic Ode.' Connecticut Gazette and Universal Intelligencer, Vol. XIII, Numb. 638, 2 Feb 1776, p.4.

⁴ Bowman, Kent A. The Muse of Fire: Liberty and War Songs as a Source of American History. North Texas State University, 1984, p. 62.

⁵ Isaiah Thomas Broadside Ballads Project: Verses in Vogue with the Vulgar. American Antiquarian Society, <https://collections.americanantiquarian.org/thomasballads/items/show/176>. Accessed 20 Oct. 2025

⁶ Law, Andrew. A Select Number of Plain Tunes Adapted to Congregational Worship. 1781, p. 8.

⁷ Law, Andrew. A Select Number of Plain Tunes Adapted to Congregational Worship. 1781, pp. 17–18.

⁸ Norwich Jubilee: A Report of the Celebration at Norwich, Connecticut on the Two Hundredth Anniversary of the Settlement of the Town. J. Stedman, 1859, p. 84.

⁹ Duyckinck, Evert A., and George L. Duyckinck Cyclopaedia of American Literature. Vol. 1, Charles Scribner, 1866, p. 441.

¹⁰ Temperley, Nicholas. The Hymn Tune Index. University of Illinois, <https://hymntune.library.illinois.edu/search/tunes/>. Accessed 20 Oct. 2025.

¹¹ Leavitt, Joshua. The Christian Lyre. Vol. 1, 5th ed., 1830–31, p. 204.

¹² Baldwin, A. M. The Clergy of Connecticut in Revolutionary Days. Yale University Press, 1936, p. 18.

¹³ Niles, Nathaniel. The American Hero: A Sapphick Ode. Library of Congress, <https://loc.getarchive.net/media/the-american-hero-a-sapphick-ode-by-nath-niles-a-m-norwich-connecticut-october>. Accessed 16 Oct. 2025.