

## Music of the American Revolution

### CHESTER

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The second most popular song in the American Colonies during the American Revolution was Chester (the most popular song being Yankee Doodle). One explanation for the popularity of the song during the revolution is its strong religious conviction which aligned with the American view of the revolution as being a crusade. Although Chester was extremely well-liked during the American Revolution, today few people outside the 18<sup>th</sup> century re-enacting community are familiar with the song.

The word “Chester” is from the old English and Latin words for “military camp” or “fortified position”. It was arbitrarily selected for the name of the song as at that time it was a widespread practice to name tunes after a place that had nothing to do with the theme or lyrics of the song. The disconnect between the name and message of the song was intentional so the tune could be applied to different lyrics which was again a widespread practice with music at that time.

Chester was written by William Billings in 1770 and was published in his songbook entitled “The New-England Psalm-Singer”.<sup>1</sup> This songbook was the first book of songs completely composed in America. Chester quickly rose in popularity and became known as the “anthem” of American opposition to British policies in North America.

William Billings, a Boston native, was not only America’s first choral composer but also America’s first professional composer.<sup>2</sup> Billings was a tanner by trade, but more significantly he was a self-taught musician, songwriter, and composer.<sup>3</sup> At the age of 24 he issued his first songbook, the aforementioned “The New-England Psalm-Singer” which contained 124 compositions.<sup>4</sup> Billings was a highly regarded song writer having published six songbooks containing hundreds of songs during his lifetime. Due to the copyright laws of the time, he was unable to financially capitalize on the popularity of his music. Eventually his style of music went out of favor. Tragically, he died in poverty at the age of 53 and was buried in an unmarked grave in Boston.

Chester was the first truly patriotic song with both the tune and lyrics written by an American in the American colonies. The original lyrics for Chester consisted of only two stanzas which were very similar to the Psalms in both form and content. The original 1770 lyrics also applied common Puritan themes of trust in God and God’s protection of the righteous against any foe.<sup>5</sup> This may have contributed to its initial popularity in Puritan New England after which it spread to the other colonies.

#### **Original 1770 Lyrics**<sup>6</sup>

Let tyrants shake their iron rod,  
And Slav’ry clank her galling chains,  
We fear them not, we trust in God,  
New England’s God forever reigns.

What grateful Off’ring shall we bring?  
What shall we render to the Lord?  
Lord Halleluiahs let us Sing,  
And praise his name on ev’ry Chord.

In 1778 Billings revised the song and published it in his second songbook "The Singing Master's Assistant".<sup>7</sup> The revised Chester now consisted of five stanzas which bore a stronger patriotic message than the original. It is the 1778 version that is best known by those familiar with the song today.

The three stanzas added in 1778 were inserted between the original first and last stanzas of the 1770 version. These three new stanzas make references to battles and American triumphs. By this time, the American Revolution was underway in earnest.

In the second stanza of this version, British Generals Howe, Burgoyne, Clinton, Prescott, and Cornwallis were named. These generals were specifically named for as by 1778, when these lyrics were published, the Americans had achieved victories at the Siege of Boston and the battles at Montreal, Saratoga, and Princeton. Each of the British generals named in this stanza was in command for one or more of these battles thereby emphasizing the vulnerability of the British. The stanza continued with lyrics attributing these victories to the virtue of the American Cause.

In the new third and fourth stanzas additional references were made to the American Revolution. These two stanzas provided encouragement to the Americans by describing their cause as just and faithful. The victories of the young, inexperienced American soldiers over the older, experienced British veterans were submitted as evidence of the righteousness of the American cause.

### **1778 Lyrics**<sup>8</sup>

Let tyrants shake their iron rod,  
And Slav'ry clank her galling chains,  
We fear them not, we trust in God,  
New England's God forever reigns.

Howe and Burgoyne and Clinton too,  
With Prescott and Cornwallis join'd,  
Together plot our Overthrow,  
In one Infernal league combin'd.

When God inspir'd us for the fight,  
Their ranks were broke, their lines were forc'd,  
Their ships were Shatter'd in our sight,  
Or swiftly driven from our Coast.

The Foe comes on with haughty Stride;  
Our troops advance with martial noise,  
Their Vet'rans flee before our Youth,  
And Gen'ral's yield to beardless Boys.

What grateful Off'ring shall we bring?  
What shall we render to the Lord?  
Lord Halleluiahs let us Sing,  
And praise his name on ev'ry Chord.

After the American Revolution, the song became the de facto national anthem and remained that way for many years. Eventually Chester slipped away from public consciousness and for the most part was forgotten with the passage of time as more contemporary songs, such as Hail

Columbia (1789), The Star-Spangled Banner (1814), and My Country 'Tis of Thee (1831) displaced Chester.

The music of Billings, and more specifically Chester, were rediscovered by the public in 1956 when American composer William Schumann wrote his “New England Triptych” based on the works of Billings. The third part of this triptych was Chester. Schuman wrote in the preface to his New England Triptych that “The works of this dynamic composer [Billings] capture the spirit of sinewy ruggedness, deep religiosity and patriotic fervor that we associate with the Revolutionary period”.<sup>9</sup>

The popularity of Chester today has not risen to the same level it experienced during the American Revolution. However, it has become well ingrained in the consciousness of 18<sup>th</sup> century reenactors, historians, and students of early American music, establishing its place in history as a uniquely American patriotic song.

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<sup>1</sup> Billings, William, *The New-England Psalm-Singer*, Boston, New-England: Printed by Edes and Gill, 1770, page 91. Retrieved 3 March 2024, from [https://dn720301.ca.archive.org/0/items/newenglandpsalms00bill\\_1/newenglandpsalms00bill\\_1.pdf](https://dn720301.ca.archive.org/0/items/newenglandpsalms00bill_1/newenglandpsalms00bill_1.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> First American published composer of psalms and hymns, Retrieved, 31 August, 2024, from [https://www.songhall.org/profile/William\\_Billings](https://www.songhall.org/profile/William_Billings) .

<sup>3</sup> William Billings – American Composer, Retrieved 31 August 2024, from <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Billings> .

<sup>4</sup> Billings, William, *The New-England Psalm-Singer*, Boston, New-England: Printed by Edes and Gill, 1770. Retrieved 3 March 2024, from [https://dn720301.ca.archive.org/0/items/newenglandpsalms00bill\\_1/newenglandpsalms00bill\\_1.pdf](https://dn720301.ca.archive.org/0/items/newenglandpsalms00bill_1/newenglandpsalms00bill_1.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Cowan, Mimi, “From Puritan to Patriot: John Adams and William Billings’ :Chester”, 2015. Retrieved 10 March 2024, from <https://werehistory.org/puritan-to-patriot/>.

<sup>6</sup> Billings, William, *The New-England Psalm-Singer*, Boston, New-England: Printed by Edes and Gill, 1770, page 91. Retrieved 3 March 2024, from [https://dn720301.ca.archive.org/0/items/newenglandpsalms00bill\\_1/newenglandpsalms00bill\\_1.pdf](https://dn720301.ca.archive.org/0/items/newenglandpsalms00bill_1/newenglandpsalms00bill_1.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Billings, William, *The Singing Masters Assistant*, Boston. Massachusetts: Drafer and Folsom, 1778, page 12. Retrieved 3 March 2024, from [https://dn720209.ca.archive.org/0/items/singingmastersas00bill\\_0/singingmastersas00bill\\_0.pdf](https://dn720209.ca.archive.org/0/items/singingmastersas00bill_0/singingmastersas00bill_0.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Billings, William, *The Singing Masters Assistant*, Boston. Massachusetts: Drafer and Folsom, 1778, page 12. Retrieved 3 March 2024, from [https://dn720209.ca.archive.org/0/items/singingmastersas00bill\\_0/singingmastersas00bill\\_0.pdf](https://dn720209.ca.archive.org/0/items/singingmastersas00bill_0/singingmastersas00bill_0.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Schuman, William, *New England Triptych, Three Pieces for Orchestra after William Billings*, Musical Score, New York Philharmonic Digital Archives, (ID 3290), 1956.