

Music of the American Revolution

LIBERTY TREE

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Thomas Paine is well known for his authorship of “An American Crisis” and “Common Sense”. Both were influential pamphlets that promoted the American Cause in terms with which the average colonist could identify. What is less known about Thomas Paine are his endeavors in creating Patriotic poems and songs. One such song penned by Thomas Paine is the “Liberty Tree”. [N.B. It should be noted that this “Liberty Tree” song bears no connection beyond the title to the Liberty Tree song made famous in the 1957 Disney movie “Johnny Tremain”.] Paine was a prolific writer having produced over 14 poems and songs, including the Liberty Tree, 18 essays on the American Revolution, 26 major works, and numerous letters promoting liberty.

The “Liberty Tree” was first published in the Pennsylvania Magazine in July 1775, prior to Paine’s more famous publications of “Common Sense” (Jan 1776) and “The American Crisis – No. 1” (Dec 1776).¹ (Paine was the editor of this magazine and used the pseudonym Atlanticus for the song, which he frequently did for his submissions in the publication.) The ballad Paine wrote paid tribute to the then 130 year old American elm that stood near Boston Commons.

The original Liberty Tree was planted in 1646, 16 years after the founding of Boston along Orange Street which was the only road in and out of Boston at the time. Today the location of the Liberty Tree would be identified as being on Boylston Street near its intersection with Washington Street. The tree received its moniker as it was a favorite location for the defiant citizens of Boston to express their grievances and demonstrate against British policies towards the American colonies.

After the Stamp Act protests of 1765, and in the years preceding the American Revolution, the Liberty Tree was the venue for numerous rallies, protests, patriotic declarations, and notifications denouncing British policies, thereby establishing the tree as an iconic symbol of revolt. As an indication of the relevance of the tree to the citizenry, the funeral procession for the Boston Massacre victims intentionally passed by the Liberty Tree. Because of the tree’s connection to actions opposing British policies, images of the Liberty Tree became common throughout not only New England, but the other colonies as well. Similar Liberty Trees were established across many of the colonies.²

As one would envision, the tree was not popular with the loyalists and British officials. One local British official wrote in his account of the American Revolution that “This tree stood in the town and was consecrated as an idol for the mob to worship”.³ In August 1775 during the British occupation of Boston and four months after the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the Liberty Tree was cut down by the British and Loyalists, leaving only a stump. It was reported the tree was used for firewood and produced 4 cords of wood.⁴ After the evacuation of the British from Boston in March 1776, a Liberty Pole was erected where the Liberty Tree had once proudly stood.

The cutting down of the Liberty Tree, along with Paine’s song, inspired the establishment of additional Liberty Trees and Liberty Poles throughout the colonies. Some of the better known locations for other Liberty Trees include: Lexington and Roxbury, Massachusetts; Providence and Newport, Rhode Island; Norwich, Connecticut; Annapolis, Maryland; and Charleston, South Carolina.⁵

Paine chose the tune from the song “The Origin of English Liberty”, also known as “Once the gods of the Greeks [in ambrosial feast]”, as the melody for his new song.^{6,7} “The Origins of English Liberty” was written by George Alexander Stevens and published in 1772.⁸ Tunes were frequently selected to induce the mood or intent of a song based not only on the music, but also through associations with the original lyrics to the tune. Paine’s selection of this tune was no exception.

The lyrics to “The Origin of English Liberty” is a mythological retelling of the creation of the earth and mankind. In this version of creation, the English were bestowed with the gifts of the four cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance) along with common sense and liberty.⁹ It must be imagined that Paine’s usage of this tune, looking beyond the irony explicit in the title, was in part to convey the subtext that the English had squandered these gifts. Subsequently, these gifts were removed from the British and then bestowed upon the American colonists who embraced the gifts and utilized them to the fullest. It is also interesting that approximately six months later, whether intentional or not, Paine would appropriate one of the gifts, common sense, as the title for one of his pamphlets.

The text of the “Liberty Tree” employs symbolic imagery and opens with a theme mirroring the Greek myth of Prometheus. In this myth, Prometheus benefitted mankind with the gift of fire. In the “Liberty Tree”, the goddess of liberty blessed the colonists with the gift of liberty. The subsequent lines depict liberty as a tree that was planted and flourished in the colonies. The fruit borne of the Liberty Tree is described as having attracted people from nations around the world who sought freedom while shedding the outdated titles and social status of the old world.

The third stanza is an account of how the Liberty Tree provided everything the colonists needed to succeed. The stanza continues with the colonists having shared their blessing with England through commerce and support during war.

The last stanza describes how an ungrateful England responded to the colonist’s support with tyranny and attempted to strip the colonists of their liberty. Paine closed his composition with a call to all those devoted to liberty to unite and safeguard their freedom.

Thomas Paine’s song “Liberty Tree” is an excellent example of how allegory was used to promote the Patriot Cause during the American Revolution. The song also demonstrates how symbolic imagery can be an effective means to rally people of sundry interests to be of one accord towards a mutually beneficial goal.

Liberty Tree (1775)¹⁰

In a chariot of light, from the regions of the day,
The Goddess of Liberty came,
Ten thousand celestials directed her way,
And hither conducted the dame.
A fair budding branch from the gardens above,
Where millions with millions agree,
She brought in her hand as a pledge of her love,
And the plant she named Liberty Tree.

The celestial exotic stuck deep in the ground,
Like a native it flourished and bore;
The fame of its fruit drew the nations around,
To seek out this peaceable shore.
Unmindful of names or distinctions they came,
For freemen like brothers agree;
With one spirit endued, they one friendship pursued,
And their temple was Liberty Tree.

Beneath this fair tree, like the patriarchs of old,
Their bread in contentment they ate,
Unvexed with the troubles of silver or gold,
The cares of the grand and the great.
With timber and tar they Old England supplied,
And supported her power on the sea;
Her battles they fought, without getting a groat,
For the honor of Liberty Tree.

But hear, O ye swains ('tis a tale most profane),
How all the tyrannical powers,
Kings, Commons and Lords, are uniting amain
To cut down this guardian of ours.
From the East to the West blow the trumpet to arms,
Thro' the land let the sound of it flee;
Let the far and the near all unite with a cheer,
In defense of our Liberty Tree.

¹ Atlanticus, Liberty Tree, The Pennsylvania Magazine or American Monthly Museum, Volume I, 1775, pages 328-329.

² Trickey, Erick, The Story Behind a Forgotten Symbol of the American Revolution: The Liberty Tree, 19 May 2016, Retrieved 21 February 2025 from www.smithsonianmag.com/history/story-behind-forgotten-symbols-american-revolution-liberty-tree-1809591621/

³ Oliver, Peter, *Origin and Progress of the American Rebellion, A Tory View*. Edited by Douglass Adair & John A. Schutz, Huntington Library Publications, 1961, page 54.

⁴ Trickey, Erick, The Story Behind a Forgotten Symbol of the American Revolution: The Liberty Tree, 19 May 2016, Retrieved 21 February 2025 from www.smithsonianmag.com/history/story-behind-forgotten-symbols-american-revolution-liberty-tree-1809591621/

⁵ Moore, Frank, Liberty Tree, American Revolution War Song, Retrieved 17 February 2025 from www.samericanrevolution.org/liberty-tree-song/.

⁶ Schrader, Arthur, *Songs to Cultivate the Sensations of Freedom*, 2017, Retrieved 21 February 2025 from Colonial Society of Massachusetts, <https://www.colonialsociety.org/node/2011#rch03>, pages 108-109.

⁷ Atlanticus, Liberty Tree, The Pennsylvania Magazine or American Monthly Museum, Volume I, 1775, pages 328-329.

⁸ Stevens, George Alexander, *Songs, Comic, and Satyrical*, Oxford, printed by the author, 1772, pages 1-4.

⁹ Stevens, George Alexander, Origin of English Liberty, In the digital collection Evans Early American Imprint Collection. <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/N12361.0001.001>. University of Michigan Library Digital Collections. Accessed 21 Feb. 2025.

¹⁰ Atlanticus, Liberty Tree, The Pennsylvania Magazine or American Monthly Museum, Volume I, 1775, pages 328-329.