

GIS Newsletter Article

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Music in the American Revolution

(Yankee Doodle)

Music played an important role in the American Revolution. In the days prior to electronic communication, music served not only as a form of entertainment, but communication as well. Future issues of the Gov. Isaac Shelby newsletter will explore some of the 18th century music relevant to the American Revolution.

This issue will cover what is considered the most iconic tune from the American Revolution, Yankee Doodle. Today Yankee Doodle is considered a patriotic air for children as that is when most of us learned this song. (To be honest it is probably the only song from the American Revolution that most Americans know.) While its whimsical and apparently silly lyrics appeal to children of today, back in the American Revolution the lyrics delivered a more serious political and cultural message.

The tune for Yankee Doodle dates back well before the American Revolution and even the French & Indian War. The exact date for the origin of the tune is unknown, but some believe it to be from the 15th century. The tune was well known across much of Europe with a wide variety of lyrics applied. There are at least 190 different verses currently associated with the tune.

In the context of the American Colonies, the first known usage of the tune was by British Officers to mock the “uncouth” and “disorganized” colonists (Yankees) with whom they served during the French & Indian War. The title and lyrics used by the British were written around 1755 and are attributed to British Army surgeon Richard Shuckburgh. These lyrics were meant as insults which in today’s vernacular we do not recognize. The main implication of these lyrics was that the American colonists were rude towards the British and cowards in warfare.

Although the lyrics originated during the French and Indian War, they remained popular with the British for many years. When the British arrived to occupy Boston in 1768, the British musicians played the song to taunt the American colonists as they marched down the streets. Early in the American Revolution the British and Loyalists frequently played the song to ridicule the Continental soldiers, but the Americans soon adopted it as their own and played it proudly.

The lyrics commonly employed by the British in 1775 describe the visit of a colonial farmer and his son to a military encampment. The lyrics, written from the viewpoint of the son, portray the two visitors as being country bumpkins completely ignorant of the military and life in camp. In the course of the song’s narrative, the farmer and his son mistake a drum for a barrel with leather heads (which is knocked upon with little clubs) and interpret a cavalry charge as being a horse race. In addition, reference is made to “Captain Washington”, an obvious slight to General Washington, as being vain in his manner and dress. At the end of these lyrics the son is frightened, runs home, and hides in his mother’s room.

Another insult towards the Americans is provided in the phrase “Yankee doodle dandy”. At the time the word “doodle” meant fool or simpleton, while a “dandy” was a man who placed an inappropriate amount of time and attention to his appearance in order to impersonate someone

of wealth and social standing. Therefore, “Yankee doodle dandy” was stereotyping the American colonists as effeminate fools.

The lyrics applied to the tune were fairly fluid on both sides during the war. During the war the Americans substituted lyrics that mocked the British and praised General George Washington. Eventually the song was transformed into a very anti-British message of defiance as the “uncouth and disorganized” colonists turned the tide of the war. By 1781 Yankee Doodle had become a favorite patriotic song for the colonists.

An eyewitness of the British surrender at Yorktown wrote that General Lafayette ordered the American musicians to play Yankee Doodle as the British troops marched past¹. According to this account of the surrender, as the British marched past they turned their heads towards the French troops and refused to acknowledge the presence of the Americans. Angry at this disrespectful act, Lafayette had his fifers and drummers strike up Yankee Doodle which caused the British troops to turn towards the Americans. After the surrender, the Americans then added the following verse as a taunt to the British:

*Cornwallis led a country dance
The like was never seen, sir
Much retrograde and much advance
And all with General Greene, sir.*

Interestingly, the Yankee Doodle verse best known today was a late addition to the tune. This verse, namely:

*Yankee Doodle went to town,
Riding on a pony,
Stuck a feather in his hat,
And called it macaroni,*

did not appear in print until 1842 when it was published in the book, “The Nursery Rhymes of England”. No earlier reference to these lyrics is known.

Even at this late date after the war, it appears there was still some British animosity towards Americans. The lines “stuck a feather in his cap, and called it macaroni” comes across today as a somewhat bizarre and silly line. However, at the time, the meaning was well understood. The term “macaroni” referred to a style of high fashion popular in 18th century Italy and across Europe. Macaroni fashion involved wearing brightly colored and flamboyant clothing as well as ornate ribbons, extravagant wigs, and makeup – even by men. Therefore, this verse implied that the Americans were simpletons who believed the addition of a single feather to their hats would transform their common appearance into a state of high fashion.

Since the American Revolution, numerous sets of lyrics have been set to this tune. Some of these lyrics have been purely for entertainment while others have expressed serious political views. Despite its ever-changing lyrics, the lively and endearing nature of the tune ensures it will be around for quite some time to come.

¹ Camus, R. Military Music of the American Revolution, Integrity Press, page 163.