

Music in the American Revolution

THE NEW MASSACHUSETTS LIBERTY SONG (AKA FREE AMERIKA)

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Leading up to and during the American Revolution, a common practice for songwriters was to borrow the tune from a well-known song and apply new lyrics conveying a completely different message. This was the case with the song commonly known today as “Free America”.

Though the song is now commonly known by the title “Free America” or alternatively “Free Amerikay” it was originally entitled “The New Massachusetts Liberty Song”. Joseph Warren is traditionally credited as being the author of this song.¹ Although this is plausible, there is no documentation to substantiate this claim.

The earliest known reference to this song is from an announcement of a concert given by Josiah Flagg on 13 February 1770 in Boston.² In this announcement the song was described as “A New Song composed by a Son of Liberty [To the Tune of the British Grenadier]”. No other indication of the author is provided. Warren, having died in 1775 while covering the American retreat from Breed’s Hill, left no indication regarding his authorship of the lyrics.

The origins of the “British Grenadiers”, one of the most famous of English martial tunes, is thought to be traced to a country dance and tune called “New Bath” published by John Playford in 1686, however it may be even older.³ The tune for British Grenadiers also bears a striking resemblance to the Dutch march “Mars vande jonge prins van Friesland” from the early 18th Century which itself can be traced back to another Dutch tune, “Wilhelmus van Nassouwe” which is from either the 16th or 17th century. So as with many tunes of this period, the origin of the tune for British Grenadiers is subject to debate. By the time of the American Revolution, British Grenadiers was quite well known and had been popular for nearly a century; popular enough certainly to have fostered many 18th century parodies.⁴

On 5 March 1770, less than a month after the concert by Josiah Flagg, a group of British soldiers, which included six British Grenadiers, fired into an angry crowd in Boston. This event quickly became known as a massacre, the Boston Massacre. Due to the role of the British Grenadiers in this deadly act of violence upon the colonists, and the subsequent public outrage, association with the grenadiers appears to have quickly become taboo amongst the Patriots. Circumstantial evidence indicates this included the New Massachusetts Liberty Song due to its connection to the British Grenadiers tune. The lack of extant publications or references to the song in the first years following the Boston Massacre supports the axiom that it was dropped from polite Patriot usage for several years.

The next known printing of the New Massachusetts Liberty Song did not occur until 6 January 1774 when it appeared in the Poets Corner of the Virginia Gazette.⁵ This printing of the song was shortly after the Boston Tea Party which had occurred a few weeks earlier. Whether the timing of these two events is coincidental or causal is unknown.

In this printing the song is described as “A Song on Liberty, made by a Bostonian, to the Tune of The British Grenadiers”. The lyrics of this printing deviated slightly from those printed in 1770, mainly in the refrains. In the original each verse ended with “Brave America”. To this the new version also used “North America” and “Free America” as endings to the verses. After the resurfacing of the song in January 1774, it then appeared in the Massachusetts Spy on May 26,

1774, Connecticut Gazette of New London on 24 February 1775, and in the Connecticut Courant on May 8, 1775.^{6,7,8}

According to some historians, the lyrics were penned as a response to the “Intolerable Acts” the British government imposed on the American colonies in the spring of 1774. Amongst these acts was the closing of the port of Boston as punishment for the Boston Tea Party. However, as previously stated, the song appeared in print in 1770, four years before the Intolerable Acts. From the timeline it appears the Boston Tea Party in conjunction with the Intolerable Acts may have brought about renewed interest in the song rather than having been the original impetus for the song’s composition.

The general message of the song, which urges Americans to resist the British, became a popular anthem of encouragement to American soldiers during the American Revolution. In the opening stanza the lyrics remind the listener of the great ancient civilizations of Athens and Rome that had collapsed upon themselves leaving little evidence of their existence. The Patriots are then advised to assert themselves to avoid suffering a similar fate. The subsequent stanza focuses on “Proud Albion” (N.B. Albion was the ancient name for the island of Britain) pointing out that Britain has been conquered several times. In contrast to this, the lyrics note that America has never been conquered.

The ensuing lyrics describe the manner in which the colonists introduced freedom into the new world where it took root, flourished, and created a paradise which no force on earth can take away. Praise is bestowed upon the Patriots for their persistence in maintaining their freedoms and fighting against those that would betray or enslave them. The “Land of Liberty” created by the Americans is described as being in stark contrast to a world otherwise governed by tyrants.

The lyrics end with the prediction that America will become a great country whose laws and freedoms will spread across the world. In retrospect the lyrics were quite prophetic for at the time of their writing in 1770, the colonies were still over six years away from declaring their independence from Britain.

While “The New Massachusetts Song of Liberty”, or “Free America”, is not well known today, it serves as a lyrical time capsule as to where we have been as a nation and where our potential can lead us. While the song entreats the Patriots of the 1770’s to jealously safeguard their liberty against tyrants and lawlessness, the substance of the lyrics is no less applicable to all of us today. So let all Americans take to heart our proud legacy of liberty recounted in this song and remain vigilant against suffering the same fate as the great societies of antiquity.

A New Song (1770)⁹
(aka “The New Massachusetts Liberty Song”)
(aka “Free America”)

That Seat of Science Athens,
And Earth’s great Mistress, Rome,
Where now are all their Glories
We scarce can find their Tomb.
Then guard your Rights, Americans,
Nor stoop to lawless Sway,

Oppose, oppose, oppose, oppose
My brave America.

Proud Albion bow'd to Caesar,
And numerous Lords before,
To Picts, to Danes, to Normans,
And many Masters more;
But we can boast Americans,
We never fell a Prey,
Huzza, huzza, huzza, huzza,
For brave America.

We led fair Freedom hither,
When lo, the Desert smil'd,
A Paradise of Pleasure
Was open'd in the Wild;
Your Harvest, bold Americans,
No Power shall snatch away,
Assert yourselves, yourselves, yourselves,
My brave America.

Torn from a World of Tyrants
Beneath this western Sky
We formed a new Dominion,
A Land of Liberty;
The World shall own their Masters here,
Then hasten on the Day,
Huzza, huzza, huzza, huzza,
For brave America.

God bless this maiden Climate,
And thro' her vast Domain
Let Hosts of Heroes cluster
who scorn to wear a Chain.
And blast the venal Sycophant
Who dares our Rights betray;
Preserve, preserve, preserve, preserve
My brave America.

Lift up your Heads, my Heroes,
And swear with proud Disdain,
The Wretch who would enslave you
Shall spread his Snares in vain;
Should Europe empty all her Force,
Wou'd meet them in Array,
And shout, and shout, and shout, and shout
For brave America.

Some future Day shall crown us,
the Masters of the Main,

And giving Laws and Freedom,
To subject France and Spain;
When all the Isles o'er Ocean spread,
Shall tremble and obey,
Their Lords, their Lords, their Lords, their Lords,
Of brave America.

¹ Schrader, Arthur, Songs to Cultivate the Sensations of Freedom: Music in Colonial Massachusetts, Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1980, page 130.

² Edes & Gill's North-American Almanack, and Massachusetts Register, For the Year 1770. Retrieved 21 May, 2024 from <https://www.abaa.org/book/1467537149>.

³ Kerr - Merry Melodies, vol. 3, No. 380 (c. 1880's) page 42.

⁴ Kerr - Merry Melodies, vol. 3, No. 380 (c. 1880's) page 42.

⁵ Virginia Gazette, No. 1161, 6 January 1774, page 4. Retrieved 5 July, 2024, from <https://research.colonialwilliamsburg.org/DigitalLibrary/va-gazettes/VGSinglePage.cfm?issueIDNo=74.PD.02&page=4&res=LO>

⁶ Massachusetts Spy, Vol. IV, No. 173, 26 May 1774, page 4. Retrieved 5 Aug, 2024 from https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ndnp/mb/batch_mb_artemis_ver01/data/sn83021194/00517172169/1774052601/0591.pdf

⁷ Vorwald, Gary & Lichack, Erik, Military Music of the American Revolution, The Brigade of the American Revolution Press, 2007, page 100.

⁸ The Further Evolution of "The New Massachusetts Liberty Song", 23 February 2018, Retrieved 26 October, 2024 from <https://boston1775.blogspot.com/2018/02/the-further-evolution-of-new.html>

⁹ Edes & Gill's North-American Almanack, and Massachusetts Register, For the Year 1770. Retrieved 21 May, 2024 from <https://www.abaa.org/book/1467537149>.