

Music of the American Revolution

THE LIBERTY SONG

Article by Scott G. Giltner, Ph.D.

Though the Liberty Song is not well known today, it retains a distinguished place in American history as our earliest known song to champion patriotism. As such, the song blazed a patriotic trail for other songs that soon followed.

The lyrics first appeared on broadsides and in Pennsylvania newspapers in July of 1768 and was simply entitled “A Song”.¹ The song proved extremely popular as within three weeks of its initial publication it also appeared in publications in New York, Boston, Virginia, Connecticut, and Rhode Island.^{2,3} In Boston it was described as being “now much in vogue in North Amerika [sic]”.

The lyrics were written by John Dickinson. John Dickinson should be familiar to students of the American Revolution as he also wrote “Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania” (1767-68), contributed to the Stamp Act Congress Resolution in 1765, and the Olive Branch Petition in 1775. He was a member of the 1st Continental Congress, 2nd Continental Congress, and served in numerous other roles in the founding of the United States. While many people attribute all the lyrics to John Dickinson, Dickinson himself credited Dr. Arthur Lee for writing eight lines of the song. However, Dickinson did not state which lines Lee wrote.⁴

Dickinson wrote the song as a response to the Massachusetts Assembly being dissolved by Gov. Francis Bernard. Bernard dissolved the assembly after it refused to rescind its Circular Letter of 11 February 1768 which protested the Townshend Acts of 1767 and called for a united resistance to the acts by the other colonies (The Townsend Acts at that time were the latest in a series of British taxes levied on the colonies). The dissolution of the assembly left the colonists with no voice in the government or means of addressing their grievances. In a letter to James Otis on 4 July 1768, Dickinson enclosed his “new song for American Freedom”, stating that “songs are frequently very powerful on certain occasions. Cardinal de Retz always enforced his political operations by songs. I wish our attempt may be useful”.⁵

Dickinson wrote the lyrics to fit the tune for “Heart of Oak”, which was well-known as the anthem of the British Navy. The tune was composed in 1759 by Dr. William Boyce as a tribute to victories of the British in the French & Indian War that occurred earlier in the same year. By employing the tune from Heart of Oak, Dickinson was transposing patriotism from a British military song to an American song of liberty.

The publication of Dickinson’s song touched off a heated “battle of the lyrics” in the Boston Gazette and Country Journal. In the 26 September 1768 issue a parody of Dickinson’s song was printed.⁶ The parody, which professes loyalist inclinations, was written by an unknown author. The Boston Gazette and Country Journal identified Castle William in Boston Harbor as the location from which this parody originated. During this period, Castle William was a refuge for British officials seeking protection from the rowdy Boston residents. The rumor at the time was that Henry Hulton, a British Customs Official in Boston who was residing in Castle Williams at that time, was responsible for authoring this parody although Hulton himself publicly denied it.^{7,8} The parody opens with the following stanza and subsequent refrain.

Come shake your dull Noddles, ye Pumpkins and bawl,
and own that you're mad at fair Liberty's call.
No scandalous Conduct can add to your Shame.
Condemned to Dishonor. Inherit the Fame.

Chorus:

In Folly you're born, and in Folly you'll live,
To Madness still ready,
And Stupidly steady,
Not as Men, but as Monkeys, the Tokens you give.

In the subsequent nine stanzas the Patriots are referred to as minions of Satan, villains, drunkards, robbers and knaves amongst other unpleasant monikers. A not so veiled threat of hanging appears in the fourth stanza.

The Tree which the Wisdom of Justice hath rear'd,
Should be stout for their Use, and by no Means be spar'd,
When fuddled with Rum, the mad Sots to restrain,
Sure Tyburn will sober the Wretches again.

(N.B. Tyburn was the main execution site in the area of London).

One may wonder why a patriotic publication like the Boston Gazette and Country Journal would print the parody and its aspersions against the colonists. The answer is simple. The printers, Edes and Gills, intended for the parody to provoke anti-British sentiments in the Americans.

The following week in the same newspaper, a parody of the parody was printed. It was entitled "A Parody Parodized, or the Massachusetts Song of Liberty".⁹ Based on a diary entry by John Adams, the author of these lyrics is believed to be Dr. Benjamin Church.¹⁰ Six years later during the American Revolution, in an unforeseen turn of events, Dr. Church would be convicted of being a spy for the British.

As would be expected, the rebuttal is just as sharp in language as the original parody. Not to be outdone with personal insults, the loyalists are referred to at various points as tyrants, minions, rogues, and pimps. The first of the ten stanzas opens with the following.

Come swallow your Bumpers, ye Tories and roar,
That the Sons of fair Freedom are hamper'd once more;
But know that no Cut-throats our Spirits can tame,
Nor a Host of Oppressors shall smother the flame.

Chorus:

In Freedom we're born, and like Sons of the brave,
Will never surrender,
But swear to defend her,
And scorn to survive, if unable to save.

Appropriately, the fourth stanza of "A Parody Parodized" directly addresses the threat of hanging made in the original parody with a Biblical reference to the Book of Esther.

The Tree which proud Haman for Mordecai rear'd,
Stands recorded, that Virtue endanger'd is spar'd;
That Rogues, whom no bonds, and no Laws can restrain,
Must be stript of their Honours, and humbled again.

As tension grew between Britain and the colonies, the lyrics of Dickinson's original song were revised to reflect the changing socio-political environment. In 1769 a new version of the song was published in Bickerstaff's Almanack under the title of "The Liberty Song".¹¹ It was in this publication of the song that the sheet music was provided for the first time. (*N.B. In later years there would be other songs bearing the title "The Liberty Song". These songs employed different lyrics set to different tunes. They are not to be confused with this song. The song by Dickinson is the earliest known song bearing this title in the American Colonies.*) In addition to the obvious association of the title to the strife with Great Britain, some historians believe the title is also a reference to a ship named "Liberty" that was owned by John Hancock.¹² John Hancock's ship had been seized by the British authorities for smuggling in June just prior to the initial printing of the song in July 1768.

The lyrics "Come join hand in hand brave Americans all" and "In freedom we're born and freedom we'll live" in the first stanza and chorus, respectively, served as propaganda for the patriots. The seventh stanza contains the line "By uniting we stand, by dividing we fall". This is believed to be the first modern usage of this phrase which originated in one of Aesop's Fables.¹³ The phrase became a standard for anti-British sentiment and quickly became a clarion call for patriotism which remains today. The phrase was later condensed to "United we stand, divided we fall" which now appears on the flags for the Commonwealth of Kentucky and State of Missouri.

The last stanza provides a tempered ending. A toast is made to King George's health with a tribute to Britain's fame and prosperity. Then in the very last line a qualification is applied to this toast: Britain must deal with the colonies in a just manner and give them their freedom.

The defiant, anti-British lyrics coupled with the volatile environment in the colonies ensured the popularity of the song. The Liberty Song was sung throughout the colonies at political meetings, protest meetings, dedication ceremonies for liberty trees, patriotic celebrations, dinners, for pure enjoyment, and also as a nuisance to irritate the British and their American supporters.^{14,15}

As one of the first, if not the first, songs of American Patriotism, the Liberty Song set a standard for subsequent Patriotic songs to emulate. The popularity of the song prior to and during the American Revolution is a testament to its musical adeptness in expressing the Patriotic zeal of the colonists. As John Dickinson had hoped, his new song for freedom did prove useful in bringing about liberty to the American colonies.

The Liberty Song (1768)¹⁶

COME, join Hand in Hand, brave AMERICANS all,
And rouse your bold Hearts at fair LIBERTY's Call;
No tyrannous Acts shall suppress your just Claim,
Or stain with Dishonour AMERICA's Name.

Chorus:

*In FREEDOM we're BORN and in FREEDOM we'll LIVE.
Our Purses are ready. Steady, Friends, steady;
Not as SLAVES, but as FREEMEN our Money we'll give.*

Our worthy Forefathers - let's give them a Cheer -
To Climates unknown did courageously steer;
Thro' Oceans to Deserts, for Freedom they came,
And dying, bequeath'd us their Freedom and Fame.

(Chorus)

Their generous Bosoms all Dangers despis'd,
So highly, so wisely, their *BIRTHRIGHTS* they priz'd;
We'll keep what they gave, we will piously keep,
Nor frustrate their Toils on the Land and the Deep.

(Chorus)

The Tree their own Hands had to LIBERTY rear'd;
They liv'd to behold growing strong and rever'd;
With Transport then cry'd, "now our Wishes we gain,
For our Children shall gather the Fruits of our Pain."

(Chorus)

How sweet are the Labors that Freemen endure,
That they shall enjoy all the Profit, secure.
No more such sweet Labors AMERICANS know,
If Britons shall reap what Americans sow.

(Chorus)

Swarms of Placemen and Pensioners soon will appear,
Like Locusts deforming the Charms of the Year;
Suns vainly will rise, Showers vainly descend,
If we are to drudge for what others shall spend.

(Chorus)

Then join Hand in Hand, brave AMERICANS all,
By uniting we stand, by dividing we fall;
IN SO RIGHTEOUS A CAUSE let us hope to succeed,
For Heaven approves of each generous Deed.

(Chorus)

All Ages shall speak with Amaze and Applause,
Of the Courage we'll shew IN SUPPORT OF OUR LAWS;
To DIE we can bear, but to SERVE we disdain.
For SHAME is to Freemen more dreadful than PAIN.

(Chorus)

This Bumper I crown for our SOVEREIGN's Health,
And this for BRITANNIA'S Glory and Wealth;
That Wealth and that Glory immortal may be,
If She is but just, and if we are but free.

(Chorus)

-
- ¹ The Pennsylvania Chronicle, Numb. 78 No. 24 of Vol. II, 4-11 July, 1768. Retrieved 20 March, 2024, from <https://liverpooluniversitypress.manifoldapp.org/projects/using-primary-sources/resource/pennsylvania-chronicle-4-july-1768-1-august-1768>.
- ² Virginia Gazette, No. 896, 21 July 1768, page 2. Retrieved 17 April, 2024, from <https://research.colonialwilliamsburg.org/DigitalLibrary/va-gazettes/VGSinglePage.cfm?issueIDNo=68.PD.32&page=2&res=LO>.
- ³ The Boston Gazette and Country Journal, No. 694, 18 July 1768. Retrieved 18 April, 2024, from <https://www.masshist.org/dorr/volume/2/sequence/188>.
- ⁴ John Dickinson to James Otis, July 4, 1768, in *The Complete Writings and Selected Correspondence of John Dickinson: Volume 4* ed. Jane E. Calvert (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, forthcoming 2025).
- ⁵ Lawrence, Vera Brodsky, Music for Patriots, Politicians, and Presidents, Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc. First Edition, 1975, page 27.
- ⁶ The Boston Gazette and Country Journal, No. 704, 26 September 1768. Retrieved 20 March, 2024, from <https://www.masshist.org/dorr/volume/2/sequence/274>.
- ⁷ Bell, J. L., The Parody and the Parody Parodized, www.Boston1775.blogspot.com, 17 January 2018.
- ⁸ The Boston Gazette and Country Journal, No. 704, 26 September 1768. Retrieved 20 March, 2024, from <https://www.masshist.org/dorr/volume/2/sequence/274>.
- ⁹ The Boston Gazette and Country Journal, No. 705, 3 October 1768. Retrieved 10 April, 2024, from <https://www.masshist.org/dorr/volume/2/sequence/280>.
- ¹⁰ Diary of John Adams, Volume 1, Monday 14 August 1769, Massachusetts Historical Society. Retrieved 23 May, 2024, from <https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-01-01-02-0013-0001-0005>.
- ¹¹ Bickerstaff's Boston Almanack, 1769, page 33. Retrieved 20 March, 2024, from <https://fau.digital.flvc.org/islandora/object/fau%3A99124#page/34/mode/2up/search/33>.
- ¹² Lawrence, Vera Brodsky, Music for Patriots, Politicians, and Presidents, Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc. First Edition, 1975, page 28.
- ¹³ Aesop, . (1867). "The Four Oxen and the Lion". *Aesop's Fables* (Lit2Go edition). Retrieved 02 June, 2024, from <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/35/aesops-fables/392/the-four-oxen-and-the-lion/>.
- ¹⁴ Diary of John Adams, Volume 1, Monday 14 August 1769, Massachusetts Historical Society. Retrieved 23 May, 2024, from <https://www.masshist.org/publications/adams-papers/index.php/view/ADMS-01-01-02-0013-0001-0005>.
- ¹⁵ Lawrence, Vera Brodsky, Music for Patriots, Politicians, and Presidents, Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc. First Edition, 1975, page 27.
- ¹⁶ The Pennsylvania Chronicle, Numb. 78 No. 24 of Vol. II, 4-11 July, 1768. Retrieved 20 March, 2024, from <https://liverpooluniversitypress.manifoldapp.org/projects/using-primary-sources/resource/pennsylvania-chronicle-4-july-1768-1-august-1768>.