

SONGS OF THE REVOLUTION

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We know that songs have always been a part of wars, but we may not stop to wonder what ones, how, and why they played an important role in telling the story of the American Revolution. Song lyrics served many purposes - from propaganda pieces to inspirational ones. They were the living newspapers of an age when there was a scarcity of printed material and so many wouldn't have had access to, or the ability to read, a newspaper. They gave information about

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important events and addressed the purpose of life in a revolutionary age.

The British and American forces were fighting each other but they had a shared musical heritage of melodies and lyrics. However, the patriotic songs of the revolutionary era had a message that was

uniquely America's own. They expressed the love of country and hatred of oppression, the right of human beings everywhere to live freely and to shape their own destinies. Music created during the war was more functional than artistic. Instrumental music was made for marching, dancing or entertainment and secular vocal music was performed at home or in small gatherings. Popular British melodies were given new verses for the purpose of transmitting propaganda, cultivating patriotic feeling, or for expressing sarcasm. Since the tunes were already familiar, the new verses could circulate more quickly. Most of these patriotic ballads were not written down but transmitted orally. Sometimes, when possible, the new words were printed in newspapers stating which tune they should be sung to.

Music served as a weapon of sorts in these battles as both sides created songs to encourage either rebellion or loyalty to the crown. Ballads carried the news of the day, especially important to those who could not read. A brief history of some of the most popular songs of the era follows:

YANKEE DOODLE: This is probably the most familiar song. Some scholars suggest that the melody dates back to 16th century Holland. The lyrics we know today were penned in 1755 by a British Army doctor names Richard Shuckburgh. Originally intended to mock the 'uncouth' American colonists who fought alongside the British troops during the French and Indian War, the song became popular by the people it was intended to ridicule. 'Yankee' was a derogatory term attached to New Englanders. 'Macaroni' did not refer to food but to a foppish or effeminate hair style. In the song, Shuckburgh was basically calling the colonist unmanly and stupid. In spite of this, the Colonists loved the song, adopting 'Yankee Doodle' with pride and it soon gained popularity on both sides during the war. There were at least sixteen verses plus the choruses. It begins:

*Yankee Doodle went to town
Riding on a Pony
Stuck a feather in his hat
And called it macaroni.
Yankee Doodle keep it up
Yankee Doodle Dandy
Mind the music and the step
And with the girls be handy.*

CHESTER: After 'Yankee Doodle', the most popular song of the Revolution was perhaps this one by William Billings. Originally a psalm tune, it appear in 1700 and was republished in 1778 with new, revolution inspired lyrics that Billings had penned, demonstrating the righteousness the Patriots felt in their cause. It became the unofficial anthem of the American cause, encouraging the Patriots to be strong, because God was standing on their side against the British.

*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.*

THE LIBERTY SONG: John Dickinson wrote the text in 1768 which he set to the British patriotic song 'Heart of Oak' by William Boyce. The original words, written by David Garrick tell of the strength of the British Royal Navy's ships and the strength of the men's convictions. It was originally sung in 1759 to celebrate the victories of the British over the French in The Seven Year's War. It still serves as the Royal Navy's official march. When the Colonists protested the Townshend Acts of 1767, Dickinson's words were published in two colonial newspapers the next year. Although it isn't as familiar a song as some, the line 'By uniting we stand by dividing we fall' found in verse four, is a familiar phrase that has become a patriotic motto throughout American history.

*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.*

ADDRESS TO THE LADIES: The ladies were not forgotten. This song was also known as 'Young Ladies in Town' and encouraged colonial women to boycott British goods and urged women to wear homespun cloth, avoid imported teas and choose local products. The song promoted political resistance through their economic chores. The lyrics appeared in the Boston Newsletter of 1767.

*Young ladies in town and those that live around
Wear none but your own country linen,
Of fancy to please, and your pride to appease,
And to show that you're in the right spinning.*

LAMENTATION OVER BOSTON: Composer William Billings was a singing teacher and leather tanner from Boston who published the first collection of entirely American music. He composed original music specifically commemorating the events of the Revolution. In this song, he commemorates the British occupation of Boston between the Battle of Bunker Hill in June 1775 and their evacuation in March 1776.

*By the River of Zion we sat down and wept
We wept when we remembered Old Boston
Lord God of Heaven, preserve them, defend them
Deliver and restore them unto us again.*

There were several other popular songs during the Revolutionary War. Among them were: Free America - written by Joseph Warren, an active member of the Sons of Liberty, to the tune of 'The British Grenadiers'. The World Turned Upside Down - sung at the British surrender at Yorktown. John Has Gone for a Soldier - also familiar as the tune 'Buttermilk Hill', was a popular ballad reflecting on the human cost of war.

Songs, now forgotten by most, have become an important part of our history, telling of the many challenges faced by the Colonists as they formed a new nation.