

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Ode for Washington's Birthday

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES SR.

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Unlike Wheatley's poem before it, this poem by prominent physician and author Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. (1809–94), written for the Boston Mercantile Library Association's celebration of Washington's birthday on February 22, 1856, has us look back and remember the hero Washington and consider what it means to honor the nation's "Father." Writing just a few years before the outbreak of the Civil War (in which his son, the future Supreme Court justice and author Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. would fight), Holmes warns his readers to "doubt the patriot whose suggestions / strive a nation to divide!" These patriotic themes were common among a group of New England writers known as the Fireside Poets (whose members included Holmes, William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, and James Russell Lowell) who wrote for ordinary citizens and raised 19th century American poetry to the same level of popularity as that coming from England.

Why does Holmes believe that Washington's birthday is "Dearer still as ages flow"? Three times he invites us to "see" images of Washington, from birth to death. What picture of Washington does he create for us? More important than these "seeings," he asks us to "Hear the Father's dying voice." What, according to Holmes, is Washington's final teaching? And what should be the current generation's relation to Washington and his words? As 21st-century Americans bid "Welcome to the day returning," can we still hearken to our Father's counsel and heed his warning against national division?

Welcome to the day returning,
Dearer still as ages flow,
While the torch of Faith is burning,
Long as Freedom's altars glow!
See the hero whom it gave us
Slumbering on a mother's breast;
For the arm he stretched to save us,
Be its morn forever blest!

Vain is empire's mad temptation!
Not for him an earthly crown!

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He whose sword has freed a nation
Strikes the offered scepter down.
See the throneless conqueror seated,
Ruler by a people's choice;
See the patriot's task completed;
Hear the Father's dying voice:

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“By the name that you inherit,
By the sufferings you recall,
Cherish the fraternal spirit;
Love your country first of all!
Listen not to idle questions
If its bands may be untied;
Doubt the patriot whose suggestions
Strive a nation to divide.”

Father! we, whose ears have tingled
With the discord notes of shame;
We, whose sires their blood have mingled
In the battle's thunder-flame,—
Gathering, while this holy morning
Lights the land from sea to sea,
Hear thy counsel, heed thy warning;
Trust us while we honor thee.