

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Liberty Tree

THOMAS PAINE

Page | 1

Thomas Paine (1737–1809), English-born American author, political theorist, and revolutionary, is still best known for his 1776 pamphlet, Common Sense, which made the case for declaring independence from Britain. In this ballad, written in 1775, Paine memorializes a famous 130-year-old elm tree that stood near Boston Common, under whose canopy defiant colonists rallied to discuss and demonstrate their discontent, and which was cut down by the British that same year. Thanks in no small part to Paine, the liberty tree lives on, figuratively and literally. “Liberty trees” were subsequently planted in hundreds of towns in every colony, liberty poles were erected that flew flags bearing images of the liberty tree, and the tree itself became (and remains) an international symbol of freedom.

What, according to Paine, is the source and origin of the Liberty Tree? Who, or what, is the “Goddess of Liberty”? What, does the song suggest, is the relation between freedom and peace or brotherhood? What kind of “religion” regards the Liberty Tree as its temple? What, according to the song, are the many gifts of the Liberty Tree? What makes a tree such an apt symbol of liberty?

For a recording, see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAbNFF39MLw>.

In a chariot of light, from the regions of the day,
The Goddess of Liberty came,
Ten thousand celestials directed her way,
And hither conducted the dame.
A fair budding branch from the gardens above,
Where millions with millions agree,
She brought in her hand as a pledge of her love,
And the plant she named Liberty Tree.

The celestial exotic stuck deep in the ground,
Like a native it flourished and bore;
The fame of its fruit drew the nations around,
To seek out this peaceable shore.

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Unmindful of names or distinctions they came,
For freemen like brothers agree;
With one spirit endued, they one friendship pursued,
And their temple was Liberty Tree.

Page | 2

Beneath this fair tree, like the patriarchs of old,
Their bread in contentment they ate,
Unvexed with the troubles of silver or gold,
The cares of the grand and the great.
With timber and tar they Old England supplied,
And supported her power on the sea;
Her battles they fought, without getting a groat,
For the honor of Liberty Tree.

But hear, O ye swains ('tis a tale most profane),
How all the tyrannical powers,
Kings, Commons and Lords, are uniting amain
To cut down this guardian of ours.
From the East to the West blow the trumpet to arms,
Thro' the land let the sound of it flee;
Let the far and the near all unite with a cheer,
In defense of our Liberty Tree.