

AN APPEAL TO HEAVEN

In 1775, the year before the Declaration of Independence and the Revolutionary War, the movement toward national independence had almost stalled. If the hope of freedom had died, there would be no America. How close we came to not knowing this grand land as America, the home of the free and the brave, the greatest nation on the face of the earth.

The Tea Act and the Party

Two years before, in 1773, the heavy-handed English Parliament had passed the Tea Act, revealing their unwillingness to negotiate with the colonies or give them a voice in Britain's Parliament. The phase that emerged is now famous, "taxation without representation," an English monopoly on the American market, preventing less expensive global goods from being sold in the colonial market. Britain's economic stability was in peril as was the stability of the globe's dominant corporation, the East India Trading Company, accounting for half the world's trade. They were failing in their contractual annual obligation to the British government, and coming out of the War with France, England needed money. The solution? The colonial market.



Image: Credit to *Britanica.com*

The Sons of Liberty used the occasion to send a not-so-subtle message to England. On December 16, 1773, they boarded English ships and dumped 45 tons of tea into the Boston Harbor, coloring its waters. They would give up drinking their beloved tea if it meant a toast to tyranny.

In all, seven ships with 500 chests of tea, 250 tons, had been on the ships that had sailed for the colonies, one each to New York, Charleston, Philadelphia, and four to Boston. Three ships perished or were turned away due to resistance by the colonial leaders. They were making a statement to Britain. It was an economic protest – a boycott. But three ships, the *Beaver*, *Dartmouth*, and *Eleanor*, with 340 chests of British East India Company Tea, weighing over 92,000 pounds, about 45-46 tons, were dumped into the harbor. The raid took over three hours and involved more than a hundred men, Samuel Adams and John Hancock among them. Later, the *Fortune* was raided and 30 chests of tea was destroyed in Boston's harbor. The Sons of Liberty made sure that cargo, English tea, never made it to the market.

It was a million-dollar-rout, a lot of money in that era. And England reacted. They shut down the local self-government of Massachusetts, proof of their unrelenting heavy hand, and they interrupted commerce in Boston. All thirteen Colonies felt the heat of pressure from England and protested.

The Forced Choice

Suddenly the question of the colonial relationship to England had to be settled.

It is estimated that only about thirty percent of those in the colonies yearned for an independent nation; another thirty percent were deeply loyal to England. In the end, most of the loyalists packed up and went home. The remaining forty percent were neutral, except for the fact they did not want war. Seventy percent favored the status quo. The nation was divided. It is quite surprising to many that the revolution was not supported by the majority of colonialists. We have this nation, America, because of a fervent minority with a vision to be self-governed, moral, and free.

From September 5 to October 26, 1774, at Carpenters' Hall in Philadelphia, 56 representatives from twelve of the thirteen colonies met. They discussed the economic boycott, rights, and grievances. They petitioned King George for a redress of those grievances, but with no effect.



Image: Credit to Britannica.com

They gathered again for the Second Continental Congress the following year. Not everyone wanted an independent nation. Men we now admire, like Patrick Henry, Roger Sherman, John, and Samuel Adams, American heroes, were considered radical by their peers. Fewer were ready for the drastic position of Roger Sherman. He declared the need to develop a completely new system of governance, independent from Great Britain.

For some, such ideas were too much. The unity and resolve of the Congress were being tested. Voices of reconciliation and compromise called for a more temperate response. They were concerned that such talk would deepen the divide between the colonies and the Britain they loved. They wanted peace, but not at the hand of oppression. Up and down the coast, colonialists held their breath. They hoped Britain would repeal the Intolerable Acts legislation and tender a kinder response. Drinking English tea became a sign of loyalty to Britain and a sign of discontent among other colonialists. Coffee increasingly became America's beverage of choice.

On May 10, 1775, the Second Continental Congress was in session. Samuel Adams came under fire for his alleged role in the Boston Tea raid. No one knew for sure who was involved. The stir was no small affair. As the controversy raged, and tensions escalated, some 7000 gathered at one point to consider the next steps. That was incredible since Boston's native population was 6,753, and with troop populations, about 20,000. Adams called the tea party action "a principled protest." England wanted the colonialists punished. The conservative colonialists only wanted England to ensure free market access to global goods. Benjamin Franklin, wanting to appease England and diffuse the monetary strain proposed restitution – a 1.7 million-dollar (today's economy) payment. Amazingly, England refused the offer. They wanted blood.

Tensions ran high. Divisions were deep. Most did not want to provoke British wrath. How could the colonialists defend themselves against the greatest power on the planet – Britain? English soldiers occupied Boston, Philadelphia, and other cities up and down the coast.

An Appeal to Heaven – Only God Can Help Us

George Washington sensed the political stalemate and recognized that the actions of the Sons of Liberty, rather than emboldening, had engendered fear and revealed a lack of colonial courage. Washington took bold and unthinkable action. As the nation's military leader, he decided to intercept incoming British ships. Sensing the need to keep the dream of an independent nation alive, he privately commissioned six schooners and started a Navy. The small craft would be no match for the commanding sea power of the British; they were the wonder of the world. Nevertheless, the schooners might worry the mighty Britains a bit. Moreover, they would

symbolize the colonial desire for independence, at least among a minority.

Washington's Secret Navy set sail under an unusual flag – a green pine tree against a white background with the words, "*An Appeal to Heaven*." The declaration was a prayer and a legal declaration as well. A few months after they set sail, a British Brigantine named the "Nancy" was captured by the "Lee," one of Washington's schooners. "Nancy" was loaded with munitions - muskets, flint, and gun powder in abundance, a year's supply of weaponry. It was the first and greatest capture of the entire Revolution. Without that capture, there could have been no revolutionary war.

These small schooners, with their "*Appeal to Heaven*" flags, continued to capture British ships. In April 1776, Massachusetts adopted the flag for its own navy of 25 vessels. The uniform of the officers matched the colors of the green and white flag. The flag began to appear on floating batteries, riverbanks, towns, and battlefields like Bunker Hill. Even the nation's capital in Philadelphia sported an Appeal to Heaven flag.

It was the nation's first flag – and it was a prayer flag. An "Appeal to Heaven." We need to fly it again. O how we need God's intervention.



Image: Credit to *Britanica.com*

The White Pine Tree

The Pine Tree that appeared on the flag was sacred to the Iroquois Indians and known as the "*Tree of Peace*." During the Second Continental Congress, the Iroquois Indians inspired the colonialists with this story. Six great Indian tribes had forged a lasting peace, and in a symbolic act of their unity, they had buried their weapons of war at the base of the giant tree, making it a 'peace tree.' The Iroquois "*Tree of Peace*" became our "*Liberty Tree*," appearing on flags as a symbol of the fight for freedom. Our phrase, "bury the hatchet," is an echo of that reconciliation. Early images reveal the tree being guarded by a bald eagle clutching six arrows, the number of tribes who made peace. We borrowed that imagery. Our eagle clutches 13 arrows, the number of original colonies. Both the tree and the peace covenant were well known to the colonialists. They wanted peace as well, a mutual peace with England, but not one forced by their complicity.

These White Pines were abundant and massive, towering above the natural tree line reaching heights of 150 – 230'. Their trunks, 6-9' in diameter, were ideal as mastheads for ships. Knowing the tree's rare value, the king of England declared all these trees as the property of England, even if such trees were on private property. They became known as the King's Trees. The act constituted a confiscation of colonial wealth without compensation. This was as heavy-handed as the tea act! The tree became a symbol of the colonial desire for peace on the one hand, and on the other, a reminder to England of its overreach. And yet, it was also a prayer, like a pointer to the sky.

The phrase "*An Appeal to Heaven*" came from the writings of John Locke. From his analysis of "*Natural Law*," Locke reasoned that a system of justice could be derived from nature and was common to all humans. And behind nature, Locke argued, was "nature's God," the Creator. Thus, the phrase in the Declaration, "the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and nature's God entitle them." According to Locke, nature's laws were the source of unalienable rights, the foundation on which the United States was formed.

The phrase "*An Appeal to Heaven*" describes the point at which all judicial options have been exhausted, and the only alternative is prayer, an "Appeal to Heaven." This was precisely the untenable position of the colonialists.

Their rights had been stripped away by the tyrannical disposition of King George. Their avenues for recourse had been narrowed, if not shut down. Countless attempts to resolve the conflict had failed. So, they ‘Appealed to Heaven,’ to God, as the Sovereign, the Judge, before breaking ties with the crown.

The Last Resort

The “Appeal to Heaven” flag is then a prayer flag, a symbol of the desperate plea to God by a people for intervention in their national dilemma. It is a declaration of judicial and legislative powerlessness.

As you read the *Declaration of Independence*, you discover that it too is an “*Appeal to Heaven*,” a last-resort, final ultimatum document delivered to England! Jefferson was highly influenced by John Locke's work. The *Declaration of Independence* takes the form of a legal appeal, an official and judicial complaint. It notes the breach of a covenant, itemizes the grievances, and the basis for the dissolution of the union. Yet, it was not merely a lateral appeal to England detailing the reasons for independence. It was also a plea to God, a *brief* filed in the Courtroom of Heaven, meant to justify the action they saw as inevitable. Before heaven, they wanted God to see and recognize that theirs was no ignoble rebellion against appropriate order. These colonialists were not leading an irrational rebellion; theirs was not a passionate, hot-blooded reaction, but a reasoned and logical separation, based on the unwillingness of England to consider their status as free and equal.

George Washington was commander in chief of the Continental Army. Around October 1775, he ordered the Appeal to Heaven flag flown as a symbol of solidarity, conviction, and encouragement in the fight for liberty. It became a symbol of strength, the tallest tree in New England, a pointer to heaven, a protest against the overreach of the English government. The prayer flag rallied the colonialists to unity, under God, under the one who would assure equity, liberty, and justice for all.

“The people have no other remedy in this, as in all other cases where they have no judge on earth, but to appeal to heaven ...” John Locke stated succinctly.

Colonel Joseph Reed, Washington’s aide, suggested the white flag with the green pine and the words ‘Appeal to Heaven.’ Astonishing, isn’t it? The first official US and Navy flag was a prayer flag. The rag-tag band of colonialists were up against the greatest military and naval power on the earth, England, and she was sitting atop a global empire.

All they had was a prayer! Their only hope was in their “Appeal to Heaven.”

So, it is with us.

AN APPEAL TO HEAVEN

