



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on May 22, 2014

Liberty Poles: Symbols of Freedom From Tyranny — Ancient and Modern

On May 21, 1766, the Sons of Liberty erected a liberty pole in the commons of New York City, celebrating the repeal of the Stamp Act.

Although little is ever spoken of the liberty pole today, at the time of the American War for Independence and decades prior, they were the symbol of self-government and freedom from tyranny.

Typically, wherever they were formed, Sons of Liberty gathered in town commons under a large tree. These trees-turned-meeting-places were soon known around the colonies as “Liberty Trees.” Some of the greens in towns with Sons of Liberty branches did not have trees large enough to meet under, so patriots would do the next best thing: They would erect a pole, calling it the “Liberty Pole.”

Since it is so unknown, it’s helpful to understand exactly what a liberty pole looks like.

A liberty pole is a tall wooden pole, topped with a liberty cap — a type of Phrygian cap. These standards, visible symbols of defiance to perceived British despotism, were planted throughout the colonies in the years after Parliament’s passage of the Stamp Act in 1765.

As tensions between the colonies and the crown escalated, Sons of Liberty planted the liberty poles throughout the 13 would-be-independent republics, from upstate New York to Savannah, Georgia. British troops, savvy as to the purpose of the poles, would tear them down, only to see them piercing the patriot sky the next morning.

On Boston’s Prospect Hill, the liberty pole was 76 feet high and was a formerly a ship’s mast taken from the captured British warship *HMS Diana*.

The pole mentioned above that was raised in New York City on May 21 was topped with a golden vane with one word on it — Liberty!

Occasionally, the liberty poles were topped with flags (in many American towns, a red flag flying on the liberty pole meant it was time for the people to gather and vent their frustrations over British rule), but typically, a Phrygian cap was lofted atop these totems of republicanism.

A website devoted to the history of the liberty pole planted in Rochester, New York recites a brief chronology of the uses of the Phrygian cap:

The Phrygian cap is a soft, red, conical cap with the top pulled forward, worn in antiquity by the





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inhabitants of Phrygia, a region of central Anatolia. In paintings and caricatures it represents freedom and the pursuit of liberty.

The Phrygian cap has two connotations: for the Greeks as showing a distinctive Eastern influence of non-Greek “barbarism” (in the classical sense) and as a badge of liberty among the Romans. The Phrygian cap identifies Trojans like Paris in vase-paintings and sculpture, and it is worn by the syncretic Hellenistic and Roman saviour god Mithras and by the Anatolian god Attis. The twins Castor and Pollux wear a superficially similar round cap called the pileus.

In Byzantium, Anatolian Phrygia lay to the east of Constantinople, and thus in this late 6th-century mosaic from Sant’Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna (which was part of the Eastern Empire), the three Magi wear Phrygian caps, identifying them as generic “easterners.”

In vase-paintings and other Greek art, the Phrygian cap serves to identify the Trojan hero Paris as non-Greek; Roman poets habitually use the epithet “Phrygian” to mean Trojan. The Phrygian cap can also be seen on the Trajan’s Column carvings, worn by the Dacians, and on the Arch of Septimius Severus worn by the Parthians.

The Macedonian, Thracian, Dacian and 12th century Norman military helmets had a forward peaked top design resembling the Phrygian cap. The same soft cap is seen worn by an attendant in the murals of a late 4th century Thracian tomb at Kazanlak, Bulgaria (illustrated).

In late Republican Rome, the cap of freedmen served as a symbol of freedom from tyranny: a coin issued by Brutus in Asia Minor 44-42 BCE, posed between two daggers. During the Roman Empire the Phrygian cap (Latin, pileus) was worn on festive occasions such as the Saturnalia, and by former slaves who had been emancipated by their master and whose descendants were therefore considered citizens of the Empire. This usage is often considered the root of its meaning as a symbol of liberty.

In the fateful days following the Ides of March, 44 B.C., the Roman senators responsible for the assassination of Julius Caesar met a mob gathered in the Roman Forum. The leaders of the conspiracy topped a pole with a Phrygian cap taken from a freed slave, symbolizing the Roman people’s liberation from the despotic rule of a would-be dictator for life.

The Phrygian cap’s association with resistance to tyranny was well-known to the Sons of Liberty and others of the Founding Generation. The Founders’ familiarity with facts of Roman and Greek history is legendary.

In the annals of history — particularly that of the Greek and Roman republics of antiquity — the Founders believed they could find the key to inoculating America against the diseases that infected and destroyed past societies. Indeed, it has been said that they were coroners examining the lifeless bodies of the republics of the past, trying to discover the diseases that killed them so they could prevent the American Republic from perishing from those same maladies.

The Founders learned very early in life to venerate the illuminating stories of ancient Greece and Rome. They learned these stories, not from secondary sources, but from the classics themselves. And from these stories they drew knowledge and inspiration that helped them found a Republic far greater than anything created in antiquity.

American use of the liberty pole did not cease with the Treaty of Paris that ended the War for Independence.

Decades after the end of the war that secured the freedom of the states, the liberty poles reappeared as



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symbols of opposition to perceived tyranny during the domestic conflict known as the Whiskey Rebellion.

Citizens in western Pennsylvania protesting the federal government's imposition of taxes on distilled spirits planted liberty poles, lining roads that led to town centers hoping to remind observers of the despotism of days past and the successful shuffling off of the yoke of a burdensome and tyrannical tax and the government that imposed it.

Today, Americans determined to demonstrate their resistance to an increasingly powerful and tyrannical central government need not plant liberty poles as an ensign for the gathering of likeminded patriots.

Like modern-day liberty poles, local chapters of The John Birch Society can be found throughout the United States, providing patriots with the organization, education, and opportunity for action that was once offered by the courageous Sons of Liberty meeting around the legendary liberty pole.

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