American symbol returns from obscurity: Boston's Liberty Tree

On the night of January 14, 1766, John Adams stepped into a tiny room in a Boston distillery to meet with a revolutionary secret society. “Spent the Evening with the Sons of Liberty, at their own Apartment in Hanover Square, near the Tree of Liberty,” Adams wrote.

Over punch and wine, biscuits and cheese, and tobacco, Adams and the Sons of Liberty discussed their opposition to Britain’s hated Stamp Act. The law required that American colonists pay a tax on nearly every document they created. Mortgages, deeds, contracts, court papers and shipping papers, newspapers and pamphlets – all had to be printed on paper with tax stamps.
Massachusetts' Most Important Symbol Of Revolt

Throughout these early years before the revolution, the ancient elm tree across from the distillery became Massachusetts' most important symbol of revolt. In the decade before the Revolutionary War, images of the Liberty Tree, as it became known, spread across New England and beyond.

Yet unlike Boston’s other revolutionary monuments, the Liberty Tree is nearly forgotten today. Maybe that’s because the British army chopped down the tree in 1775. Or maybe it’s because the Liberty Tree symbolizes the violent, mob-uprising, tar-and-feathers side of the American Revolution – a side of American history that’s still too extreme for comfort.

The tree was planted in 1646, just 16 years after Boston’s founding. Though no measurements of the tree survive, one Bostonian described it as “a stately elm … whose lofty branches seem’d to touch the skies.”

The tree was almost 120 years old in March 1765, when the British Parliament passed the Stamp Act. After years of several other slights, the colonies resisted. In Boston, protesters wanted to go beyond the arguments taking place in newspapers and meeting halls. So, they staged a moment of political theater that anyone could understand.

"A Stampman Hanging On A Tree"

Early in the morning of August 14, Bostonians discovered a human dummy hanging from the tree. The initials "A.O." were pinned to the dummy. They stood for Andrew Oliver, the Boston merchant who had agreed to collect the stamp tax. Next to him dangled a boot, a reference to Lord Bute, the former British prime minister whom many colonists blamed for the act. A small devil figure peeked up from inside the boot, holding a copy of the law. “What Greater Joy did ever New England see,” read a sign hanging from one of the dummy's arms, “Than a Stampman hanging on a Tree!"

Hundreds of Bostonians gathered under the tree, and a sort of party atmosphere broke out. The sheriff came to cut down the dummy, but the crowd wouldn’t let him.
"Liberty, Property, And No Stamps!"

Later that day, several protesters put the dummy in a coffin and paraded it through Boston’s streets. “Liberty, property, and no stamps!” cheered the crowd of several hundred as they passed a meeting of Massachusetts’ governor and council. On the docks, some of the crowd found a battering ram and destroyed a building that Oliver had recently constructed. Others went to Oliver’s house, broke his furniture and a giant mirror, and raided his liquor supply. Oliver, who had fled just in time, sent word the next day that he would resign as stamp commissioner.

The tree’s importance as rally site and symbol grew. Protesters posted calls to action on its trunk, and towns in New England and beyond named their own liberty trees.

Celebrating The Stamp Act's Repeal

When news of the Stamp Act’s repeal reached Boston in March the following year, crowds gathered at the Liberty Tree to celebrate. The bell of a church close to the tree rang, and Bostonians hung flags and streamers from the tree. As evening came, they tied lanterns to its branches.
For a decade, as tensions between the colonies and Britain grew, Boston’s angriest demonstrations took place at the Liberty Tree. In 1774, colonists tarred and feathered Captain John Malcom, a British customs official. Then they took him to the Liberty Tree, where they threatened to hang him.

**The Liberty Stump**

In August of 1775, four months after the first battles of the Revolutionary War, British troops and loyalists cut the tree down.

After the British evacuated Boston on March 17, 1776, revolutionary Bostonians tried to reclaim the site. They erected a “liberty pole” there, and in the following years newspapers occasionally mentioned the site of the Liberty Stump. But it didn’t last as a landmark.

Today, the spot where the Liberty Tree stood is marked by a bronze plaque lying at ground level in an underwhelming brick plaza. The site was left out of Boston's Freedom Trail, a path that includes more than a dozen historic locations. According to historian Alfred F. Young, the exclusion wasn’t an accident. It's one thing to celebrate military victory and let the Boston Tea Party symbolize revolutionary mischief, Young argued in his 2006 book "Liberty Tree." It's another thing to celebrate mobs who threatened hangings, ransacked houses and tarred and feathered people.

**Boston Plans An Upgraded Liberty Tree Park**

Today, Boston’s Old State House museum displays part of the flag that flew above the Liberty Tree. It also houses one of the lanterns that decorated the tree at the Stamp Act repeal celebration on March 19, 1766. Last August 14, on the 250th anniversary of the Liberty Tree’s first protest, several history and activist groups gathered at Washington and Essex, carrying lanterns. And next year, the city of Boston hopes to start construction of an upgraded Liberty Tree Park at the site – and plant a new elm there.