

Turning the Tables: How Colonists Reclaimed “Yankee Doodle”

cThumanities



*Yankee Doodle went to town,
Riding on a pony,
Stuck a feather in his cap,
And called it macaroni*

What is a protest song?

- Protest = a public act of objection, disapproval
- Protest songs can:
 - call out issues in society
 - express disapproval
 - create change
 - inspire unity

The Story

- From 1754 to 1763, France and Great Britain fought each other in the French and Indian War, which **gave Britain control** over most of the colonies in North America.
- Volunteer soldiers from Norwalk, Connecticut traveled to help the British army.
- These men were not professional soldiers; they were **farmers and villagers** who arrived with their own horses and tools, wearing their everyday work clothes.
- A group of local young women saw that they didn't have uniforms and insisted they use chicken feathers as plumes in their hat bands.

When the red-coated British soldiers saw the Connecticut men arriving with feathers in their hats and mismatched clothes, they didn't see brave allies. Instead, they saw a group of fools, calling them "dandies" and "macaronis."



The British Insults

Word	What it meant to the British
Dandy	A man who cares too much about his clothes and tries to look fancy but fails.
Macaroni	A person who follows silly, over-the-top European fashions. The British were joking that putting a feather in a hat didn't make a colonist fashionable.
Doodle	A fool. Someone who is easily tricked or doesn't know what they are doing.

Turning the Tables

- Later during the Revolutionary War, the American soldiers began playing the tune to celebrate their own victories.
- During the **British retreat** from the Battles of Lexington and Concord, the **American musicians played “Yankee Doodle” right back at them!**

By taking a song meant to mock them and turning it into a patriotic anthem, the colonists showed they were **no longer afraid** of British insults.

Activity: Word Flip

1. Think of a “school-appropriate” nickname or word that might be used to tease someone (e.g., “Bookworm” or “Techie”).
2. Write the word on one side of a piece of paper.
3. On the other side, write a reason why that word could actually be a “superpower” or a badge of honor.
4. Discuss how the Connecticut soldiers did exactly this by playing “Yankee Doodle.” What effect do you think reclaiming the song had on the colonists individually and as a larger group? How does singing your enemy’s mocking song back to them change who has the power?

The State Song

- Even though “Yankee Doodle” was a famous song from the American Revolution, it didn’t become the official state song until the 1970s!
- Governor Thomas Meskill decided he wanted a new anthem. He was tired of hearing the Yale University fight song every time he arrived at a public event. Twenty different songs were played in the lobby of the Capitol building.
- William A. O’Neill, who was a representative at the time, supported the song. He famously said: **“I think that everybody in Connecticut, no matter what their national origin was, are Connecticut Yankees and considered such.”**

Closing Questions

- Let's look at William A. O'Neill's quote. What do you think he meant by saying everyone in the state is a "Connecticut Yankee"?
- "Yankee Doodle" started as a song meant to insult and make fun of colonists. Do you think a song that started as an insult is a good choice for a state symbol? Why or why not?
- Do you agree that this song represents all people in Connecticut today? Why or why not?

Sources

“Yankee Doodle”: The Connecticut State Song

“French and Indian War”

A Macaroni Dressing Room, print, I.W, after Captain Minshull (MET, 19.71.564.7) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Wikimedia Commons.

Clay, Cosack & Co., Lithographer, Archibald M Willard, and James F Ryder. Yankee doodle/ A.M. Willard. United States, ca. 1876. Cleveland, Ohio: Pub. by J.F. Ryder. Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2004673466/>.