

The Origins of “Yankee Doodle”

No one is sure where the song “Yankee Doodle” came from. Some claim the melody is English, Irish, Dutch, or Hungarian, or even from New England, but the American verses are credited to a British military doctor, Richard Schackburg. According to the story, Dr. Schackburg wrote the first verses during the French and Indian War in 1755 when King George III sent British soldiers to protect the American colonists.

The song grew in popularity and was sung by British soldiers poking fun at the American colonists they had been sent to protect. By the 1770s a “Yankee” was another name for an American colonist while a “doodle” was Dutch for a fool or simpleton. Many of the British serving in the colonies believed the colonists were trying to be as cultured as Europeans but were failing miserably. This can be seen in the first verse of the song. For example, in the last line—“stuck a feather in his hat and called it macaroni” — “macaroni” was a term describing men who went to extremes to appear sophisticated and stylish.

The song was well known in the colonies by April 19, 1775, when the Battles of Lexington and Concord occurred. After the patriot colonists soundly defeated the British soldiers, it was often reported that they had sung “Yankee Doodle” to mock the retreating redcoats.

By 1777 “Yankee Doodle” had become the unofficial national anthem of America. Its tune was easy for soldiers to march to and during the American Revolution dozens of different verses were written. It has been documented that the second verse of the song was written at the Battle of Bunker Hill. Other verses praised General George Washington, described life in the army, or poked fun at King George III. “Yankee Doodle” was played after the Americans defeated the British at the Battle of Saratoga and again when General Cornwallis surrendered to General George Washington after the Battle of Yorktown, the last major battle of the American Revolution.