

POLE CAPPING 2026

Long before Yankee Doodle went to town, or Paul Revere said “Giddy-up” to his borrowed horse, there was tension in the North American British colonies. The cause? In 1763, Britain had just won what’s known as the French and Indian Wars. Now it had to pay off a huge war debt. To get the money, Parliament decided to levy taxes on the colonies.

An ever-growing number of colonists said “no!” It wasn’t the money. It was the principle. You know their slogan: “No taxation without representation!” They demanded a boycott of anything that carried Parliament’s tax.

Liberty poles like this one began to appear all over the colonies; not just in Massachusetts, but in Connecticut, New Jersey, Maryland -- as far away as Savannah, Georgia.

They were raised by rebels who called themselves “Sons of Liberty.” Why? The image is obscure nowadays, but the protesters knew that, in the ancient world, Roman slaves were given red caps when they were freed. Thus, red caps meant “No man is my master! I claim my rights!”

In 1766, a liberty pole appeared near the British army barracks in New York City. The Regulars chopped it down. Two days later, the Sons of Liberty erected a new one. The Regulars cut it down. The Sons of Liberty replaced it. Neither side would give up. The fourth liberty pole was girded with iron bands, to keep it from being cut. The opposition drilled a hole in it and filled it with black powder,

thinking to blow it up. That failed to destroy the pole, so they got their axes out again. The struggle went through five liberty poles before the Redcoats finally gave up and let the last one stand.

That despised tax ended after less than a year. But Parliament hadn't learned a thing. It immediately decided to levy new taxes on a long list of imported products ---- including tea.

Well!! You are familiar with the “million-dollar pot of salty tea” that the Sons of Liberty brewed in Boston Harbor. But did you know that that was not the only protest over the tea tax? During the next two years, there were at least 14 “tea parties” in the colonies. East India tea was confiscated, thrown overboard, or burned, and colonial women made tea from their garden herbs instead. One very polite tea protest happened in Wilmington, North Carolina. The Patriot women of the town brought out all the despised imported tea they could find, lined up and one by one ceremonially tossed it into a fire. A bystander observed that it was a *tiny* fire... Well, it may not have been a bonfire, but the symbolism was clear!

Yet the icon that has come down in history as the symbol of resistance to tyranny is not the teapot. It is that red cap atop the liberty pole that insists “I will not let my rights be taken away.” It has appeared across the world in works of art, coins, flags, and coat of arms. (It hangs in the United States Senate Chamber. Their official seal pictures a shield with 13 stars and 13 vertical stripes. The words *E Pluribus Unum!* Above it – yes! - a crimson liberty cap.)

Annually since 1965, the Bedford Minuteman Company has re-enacted the 18th century protest against Parliament and King George

III. This year, Mark Bailey has accepted the challenge. He told me that climbing thirty feet of smooth pine is no easy thing — *but then*, he adds, *neither is freedom!* As he ascends, he asks you to remember that *sometimes the bravest thing a patriot can do is simply refuse to let go.*

And now ---

Mr. Bailey, we are with you! Proceed!"

**Sharon McDonald
Bedford Town Historian**