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American Liberties

Scott Stephenson: Look up! You're standing beneath the recreation of an elm tree that stood in Boston in the 1760s, called the Liberty Tree. It was the first of many Liberty trees in the colonies. This was the place where what would become the American Revolutionary movement was born, and you can actually touch a piece of original wood from the last surviving Liberty Tree. It stood in Annapolis, Maryland until 1999, and it is embedded in the trunk of this tree. In this Gallery, we're exploring a 10-year period from the Stamp Act in 1765 to the eve of the Revolutionary War that breaks out in April of 1775. We're going to take you through a decade in which Britain and British Americans are in a kind of dance, a constitutional debate about what it means to be a British subject in North America and this question of what the relationship is between British Americans and their home government.

This is a debate that begins with the use of the term "British Liberties." By the end of this decade, colonial Americans are beginning to introduce a new term, "American Liberties" and they're asking a new question: To whom would these liberties extend? The problem was not just taxes. Americans had long imposed taxes on themselves through their colonial legislators, but rather a new series of taxes implemented without colonial American consent or representation in Parliament. As you move around the Liberty Tree, explore the different exhibit elements in this room, including an interactive touch screen wall called Posters of Protest. You'll encounter different forms of resistance that colonial Americans employed in the 1760s and '70s to express their dissent from the taxes and policies that British officials were trying to impose on them. Before you move out from underneath the Liberty Tree towards the sound of gunfire in the next room, make sure you find a wall that says "Liberty for All." It has a small case with an open book inside of it.

Phillis Wheatley

Scott Stephenson: Phillis Wheatley was born about 1753 in West Africa and as a child was enslaved and transported to Boston, Massachusetts, where she learned to read and write. When she was about 20 years old in 1773, she became the first woman of African descent to publish a book, titled *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. Now at this time, new ideas about liberty and equality challenged a fundamental assumption behind racial slavery that some people were inherently inferior to others. Phillis Wheatley's poetry demonstrated the literary abilities of an enslaved woman of African descent.

Not only did Wheatley write the poems here, she once held this copy of her book in her hands signing her name on the inside. Why do you think she would have done this? It's a little unusual in the 18th century for an author to inscribe a volume like this. I often wonder as I look at this book if she was proudly proclaiming her authorship by putting her name in her hand inside of it. Wheatley wrote poems on various subjects and, like many colonial Americans in the 1760s, she considered the King to be the source of rights and liberties within the British Empire.

Phyllis Wheatley:

"To the King's Most Excellent Majesty, 1768"

Your subjects hope, dread Sire—

The crown upon your brows may flourish long,

And your arm may in your God be strong!

O may your scepter num'rous nations sway,

And all with love and readiness obey!

But how shall we the British king reward!

Rule though in peace, our father, and our lord!

Midst the remembrance of thy favours past,

The meanest peasants most admire the last.

May George, belov'd by all the nations round,

Live with heav'ns choicest constant blessings crown'd!

Great God, direct, and guard him from on high,

And from his head let ev'ry evil fly!

And may each clime with equal gladness see

A monarch's smile can set his subjects free!