MAST TREES
In the years preceding the American Revolution, people in Manhattan politically measured their place by marking their relation to the tallest things in the urban landscape. Between 1766 and 1776, five liberty poles—pine ships’ masts that were refashioned into political symbols—were successively erected by colonial New Yorkers and destroyed by British forces at a green space called the Commons (also known as the Fields, and now occupied by City Hall Park). Initially raised to celebrate and memorialize the repeal of the Stamp Act, the first parliamentary taxation act to excite widespread protest in the American colonies, the poles grew to signify colonial resistance as tensions with Britain escalated during the 1770s. Their inflated meaning was matched by their formal expansion: crowned by topmasts, signs, and flags, and fortified with iron to deter the soldiers’ attacks, the poles increased in size to the point that William Tryon (1729–1788), the British governor who ordered the demolition of the last pole, could grandiosely critique the offending object as a “monument of insult to the Government, and of licentiousness to the people.”

Notions of scale informed this cycle of creation, signification, and destruction from beginning to end. The efficacy of the liberty poles as political “monuments” derived in part from their origin as giant white pines, majestic trees valued by the British navy for shipbuilding. Regarded as monarchs of the American forest, white pines exercised other sorts of human attributes when they were raised at the Commons
as liberty poles. Reaching heights of up to eighty feet, the soaring posts were imagined to speak by their admirers—and likened to the corrupted bodies of radical protestors by their detractors. Notably, the latter (mainly British soldiers and loyalists) also mobilized English rhetorics of idolatry to condemn the liberty poles. Triggered by age-old anxieties about the enchanting allure of columnar forms, iconoclasts sought to undercut the poles by minimizing their agency—both verbally and, when that failed, with the destructive tools of axes, saws, and gunpowder.

For all concerned, scale was both a representational and a material practice. Scale is action, as cultural geographers have observed, “a network, or strategy linking local struggles to regional, national, or global events.” At the same time, scale is stuff: the objects that make space and influence human behavior. New York’s liberty poles—totemic things born of a transatlantic rift—demonstrate the importance of attending to evidence both discursive and physical in understanding historical constructions of scale.

They also invite us to consider the relations between scale and iconoclasm. Iconoclasm may be understood as an intervention in the worlds that scale represents. In art-historical usage, scale often refers to something with presence and matter. Scale quantifies the relation of material objects, spatial entities, and historical events. Indeed, to describe the scale of something is to imply the existence of that thing. Iconoclasm, on the other hand, produces absence and loss. Acts of political and religious destruction vary enormously in motive and execution; but many target highly visible and very large things, and most such acts fundamentally alter the appearance of objects and their environments. In the case of three-dimensional objects, like public statues of political leaders, iconoclasm may demolish, dismember, shatter, scatter, and/or displace artistic forms.

Yet rather than fully erase such forms, iconoclasm often reifies their agency, as numerous scholars have observed. It thereby involves a mediation, not an obliteration, of the worlds that scale represents. Iconoclasm is ritualized and performative, reverberating backward and forward in time, and the things it assails “persist and function by being perpetually destroyed,” as Joseph Koerner has emphasized. Moreover, although iconoclasm signifies “image breaking,” in practice it often compels remaking: it creates new forms out of the memories or material detritus of the old things, occasionally at sizes surpassing the originals, as if to redress the crimes of destruction with something bigger and better. James Simpson has underscored the seeming
paradox of this phenomenon. “Iconoclasm initiates its own tradition,” he observes; “each attempt to stop the process feeds the process, refreshes energies, and, in many cases, produces new materials for the iconoclastic wave.” In the language of scale, the logic of iconoclasm is downsizing and reenlargement. We can see this logic at work in one of the earliest and most dramatic episodes of monument making and monument breaking in British North America.

While the liberty pole is often linked to the history of the American Revolution, it arose from the grounds of earlier transatlantic conflicts involving Great Britain and the prized colony of New York. The Seven Years’ War (1756–1763), in which Britain successfully fought France for control of North America, strengthened New York’s power as a mercantile and military center. But its conclusion brought decline. Unemployment and poverty followed the army’s withdrawal. To make matters worse, the war had effectively emptied the British treasury; the national debt doubled during the war to £146 million.

To improve its finances, Parliament introduced the series of taxation acts that would disastrously set Britain on a course to civil war with its American colonies. The Stamp Act was the first tax to incite outrage. Introduced by Parliament in March 1765, and scheduled to take effect the following November, the Stamp Act levied a duty on a range of everyday and official papers, from playing cards and almanacs to mortgages and licenses. In London, William Pitt the Elder (1708–1788)—who, as prime minister during the late 1750s, had led the war effort from Parliament to New York’s great benefit—vociferously argued against the act in January 1766, reinforcing colonial protests against taxation without representation. A renowned orator, Pitt became a hero to the colonials, celebrated at New York’s liberty pole and elsewhere in the colonies. His reputation was registered more skeptically at home. In 1766, one satirist measured the outsized influence of the “Great Commoner” in an etching that cast Pitt as a giant bestriding the Atlantic with the aid of stilts and crutches (Pitt suffered from gout that affected his mobility). The stilt that dangles over New York represents his capacity to stir up trouble proportional to his size: labeled “Sedition,” it drops a fishing line into the harbor, angling for colonials who bite hungrily at the fishhooks (fig. 1). A few years later, marble statues of Pitt—commissioned by the New York and South Carolina colonial assemblies and carved in London—likewise evoked...
the description “colossal” from admiring viewers, even though they measured only a head or two taller than the man himself. Like the etching, the statues registered a period tendency to figure popular politicians as larger than life. In the case of Pitt, whose speeches in the House of Commons were known to reach epic lengths, big also signified something unflattering: the braggadocio of a bigmouth.9

The satire of Pitt registers the angry actions that New Yorkers were already taking against the Stamp Act. Colonial responses ranged from legal resistance, including an intercolonial congress and local nonimportation agreement, to organized violence. On November 1, 1765, the day the act went into effect, a large crowd paraded from the Commons down Broadway with effigies of the devil and the despised lieutenant governor, Cadwalader Colden (1689–1776).10 Reaching Fort George, where Colden was nervously holed up, the protestors rattled the gates before regrouping at the nearby Bowling Green, where they demolished Colden’s carriage, built a massive bonfire, and fed it with the shards and effigies. Significantly, this was the same site where radical Whigs would propose locating a statue of Pitt in 1766, and where a huge, gilded, equestrian statue of King George III would be erected in 1770 and destroyed six years later, an act of violence

revisited by numerous artists (fig. 2).\textsuperscript{11} From the size of the advancing crowd to the physical exertions required to bring down the statue, colonials measured the scale of their political actions in terms of their spatial occupation and interventions.

The Stamp Act crisis galvanized action on the part of both laboring and elite New Yorkers. Groups of artisans, mechanics, and maritime workers raged against the Stamp Act and the succession of levies imposed by Parliament in the years that followed. Powerful politicians warily allied themselves with the middling merchants and former privateers who led an emerging group called the Sons of Liberty, also known as the “liberty boys.” Political might and physical brawn made for a powerful combination, and with each new tax introduced by Parliament, the liberty boys responded with actions ranging from civil (such as printing broadsides and backing non-importation agreements) to aggressive (sparring with British troops and intimidating suspected loyalists).\textsuperscript{12}

Parliament retracted the Stamp Act on March 18, 1766, and when the news reached New York on May 20, the city erupted in booz
celebration. The next day, the Sons of Liberty raised their first liberty pole at the Commons. According to the British officer John Montresor (1736–1799), the grand revelry included two bonfires, a twenty-one-gun salute, and a “flagstaff” capped with a “large board” honoring “George 3rd, Pitt—and Liberty.”\textsuperscript{13} About two weeks later, on June 4, New Yorkers gathered again at the Commons to celebrate the King’s birthday.\textsuperscript{14} As huge oxen roasted and crowds raised mugs of beer and grog, a “St. George Flag” (a red cross on a white ground, symbolic of British union) was raised up the pole, together with “with the same large board as before ‘George, Pitt and Liberty.’ The word Pitt,” Montresor observed, “the most distinguished.”\textsuperscript{15}

Although the precise size of this “flagstaff” was not recorded, it surely matched the magnitude of the other events staged at the Commons, presiding over the occasion like a declarative beacon. Like the later poles, moreover, which were procured from wharves on the East River, this first one began life as an unused ship’s mast, and before that, it was a white pine or “mast tree” harvested in a northeastern forest. Pine was a key commodity in the colonial trade with Great Britain, especially the old-growth trees of Maine and New Hampshire; as Britain’s commercial and naval empire expanded, so did its need for timber to construct every aspect of its seagoing vessels. Straight, light, and exceptionally tall, white pines were valued for fashioning masts, beams, bowsprits, and yards.\textsuperscript{16} The British navy measured the utility of white pine masts in terms of scale: “small” masts were eight to twelve inches in diameter; “middling” ones extended up to eighteen inches; and “great” masts measured upward of eighteen inches.\textsuperscript{17}

The extraordinary height of the white pine—so-called because of “the perfect whiteness of its wood when freshly exposed”—inspired wonder as well as commodity desire among early settlers to the Northeast.\textsuperscript{18} Jeremy Belknap (1744–1798) described them as the giants of the forest: “Another thing, worthy of observation, is the aged and majestic appearance of the trees, of which the most noble is the mast pine. This tree often grows to the height of one hundred fifty, and sometimes two hundred feet. It is straight as an arrow, and has no branches but near the top. It is from twenty to forty inches in diameter at its base, and appears like a stately pillar, adorned with a verdant capital, in form of a cone.”\textsuperscript{19} Belknap’s account of white pines as “straight as an arrow” was doubly apt. Beginning in the 1690s, Parliament regulated the logging of mast trees from Maine to New Jersey, stipulating that pines twenty-four inches in diameter and larger could be harvested only for the use of the British navy. Royal surveyors used hatchets to mark
the trees with the shape of a “broad arrow”; the regulations prevented colonials from “Felling Cutting or Destroying” the trees and became known as “broad arrow laws.” Although the rules were seldom enforced, colonials took offense at the steep penalty (£100) and resented what they perceived as British control over local property.20

In the process, mast trees became politicized. Colonials politely pleaded their case in correspondence to London but also actively repossessed and cut the trees into planks. In 1764, two years before a mast tree was first remade into a liberty pole, Massachusetts men protested the Crown restrictions and seized more than seven hundred mast trees for their sawmills.21 When a similar incident happened in New Hampshire in 1772, colonial officials reclaimed the logs and levied fines; the townspeople of Weare responded by taking pine switches to the backsides of the sheriff and his deputy and running them out of town.22 Little wonder that when Continental vessels sailed from Massachusetts ports in 1776, they flew flags picturing pine trees, thereby

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aligning the cause of liberty with one of the most contested commodities in the British imperial world.\textsuperscript{23}

The size of mast trees presented practical challenges as well as political ones. After carefully felling or “bedding” a tree to prevent damage to the valuable trunk, lumbermen roughhewed it into the shape of a mast. The width at the base determined the length; masts were cut “in the proportion of three feet in length to every inch of its diameter,” so that a “stick” measuring twenty-four inches wide would yield a mast seventy-two feet long, suitable for use as the mainmast of a large gunship.\textsuperscript{24} A lithograph published in 1823 demonstrated how to cut such a form out of a mast tree in order to fashion a beam (fig. 3). It is a more complex lesson in resource extraction than it initially seems. The artist, Henry Stone (what an apt name for a lithographer!), borrows the pictorial convention of the blank background from natural history illustration to isolate his specimen from its surroundings and cross-section it for study, rendering visible the commodity at the heart of the wood. Peter Guillet, the author of the timber manual in which this print appeared, featured several such images with the intent of demonstrating better logging practices; he hoped to prevent ecological devastation and ensure the continued growth of mast trees into maturity.\textsuperscript{25} Nevertheless, the image underscores the environmental costs of making masts—and making mast trees into liberty poles.\textsuperscript{26} The construction of colossal things, as Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby has observed about the Eiffel Tower and other engineering marvels, “demanded the extraction of masses of material” from the earth.\textsuperscript{27} What went up on the Commons as a political symbol left a void in a natural place elsewhere.

Getting the trees to market necessitated Brobdingnagian equipment and effort. Mechanics devised carts with oversize wheels, specialized axles, and strong chains. Lumbermen hitched the logs to several teams of oxen and cut straight roads through thick forests, leveling many other trees in the process, to move the pines to the nearest river. Once immersed, the logs were floated downriver to be hauled onto specialized “mast boats” bound for other ports and England.\textsuperscript{28} The spectacle of the massive trunks spinning downstream attracted crowds in southern New England, where onlookers gathered on riverbanks to marvel at waters dense with wood.\textsuperscript{29}

Mast trees possessed significant value as commodities, but they were meaningful as signs of nature’s sublimity, too. Belknap’s architectural metaphor conveyed his awe: the mast tree was “a stately pillar, adorned with a verdant capital,” a description that mapped the cultural
authority of Classicism onto the American wilderness. Elsewhere Belknap saw human likenesses: the “veteran” white pine of the wilderness shared its territory with beings of lesser stature, saplings covered in moss that hung grotesquely “in tufts, like long hair, from the branches.”

He was hardly alone in discerning similarities between trees and human beings. Trees have long “fed the flames of creative thought,” as Douglas Davies notes, “because they possess not only a variety of parts”—roots, branches, trunk—“but because they stand over and against human generations in a way which demands acknowledgment.”

Not surprisingly, then, for eighteenth-century writers raised in imperial worlds, mast trees suggested the stature of monarchs. To Belknap, the white pine was the “prince of the American forest”; to François André Michaux (1770–1855), it seemed “ancient and majestic”; to Timothy Dwight (1752–1817), it was the “noblest of all vegetable productions.”

The ligneous matter of the mast tree, like its epic height, also elicited admiration and analogies to human beings. Belknap waxed poetic about the bright yellow “farina” that white pines exuded like dry skin cells, “so subtil [sic] that it is exhaled with vapor from the earth, ascends into the clouds and falls with rain, forming a yellow scum on the surface of the water.”

Guillet likewise relished the “crimson or reddish” turpentine that healthy trees oozed like blood. A diseased tree, on the other hand, spelled doom. In a passage that likened mast trees to bodies both human and political, Guillet advised that “a ship built of timber improperly selected and prepared, is, beside its original cost and the probable loss of many brave men from its premature dissolution, rather a disadvantage to the nation to which it belongs, as its sickly constitution must needs have its concomitant train of expenses for repairs, &c., like a man brought to an untimely grave by an inborn physical defect, that consumes his substance for medical aid, to prolong a miserable precarious existence.”

Guillet was not exaggerating. A weak mast could cripple a ship. During a winter storm in 1678, the mainmast of an English vessel split from top to bottom, striking seventeen sailors and killing five of them.

Even intact, a great pine posed danger because of its formidable size and weight. A mast tree speeding downriver in New England killed a boy when it hit a rock, pitched vertically, and smashed head over heels into the spectators packing the riverbank.

Such accounts help demonstrate what the political theorist Jane Bennett might call the mast tree’s “thing-power,” the uncanny energy emanating from its vivacious materiality. A white pine could turn a
pond yellow, exude precious liquids, break a limb, and take a life. Colloquially, we might call it a “force of nature”; in thing theory, it is a non-human actant, capable of rousing human affects and effecting change on its surroundings. “Thing-power gestures toward the strange ability of ordinary, man-made items to exceed their status as objects and to manifest traces of independence or aliveness,” Bennett explains. The term describes “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.” Mast trees mobilized the power of the sublime in exercising such effects. Their very “greatness of dimension,” as Edmund Burke (1729/30–1797) described one cause of the sublime in his influential treatise on the subject, triggered human responses of astonishment, reverence, and apprehension.

I want to suggest that mast trees conveyed this thing-power to New York when they were appropriated for use as liberty poles. Their scale endowed the poles with meaning and shaped the rituals of iconoclasm enacted at the Commons. The mast tree was already political to its core; it quite literally embodied the imperial pressures of the sawmill, the shipyard, and the British Empire. Thus when the Sons of Liberty transported the masts from East River wharves to the Commons, they carried much more than a plain hewed timber. They brought along all that the mast tree had signified in the forest, all that it had enacted when it crashed to the ground, charged down a river, struck a body, and sailed into port.

In the rituals of making and destroying liberty poles at the Commons, the scale of the pole mattered both materially and rhetorically. Its columnar shape evoked other kinds of symbolic forms in British culture; its swelling appearance, altering over time from a minimalist splinter to a bricolage of ribbons, flags, topmasts, and iron, matched the expansive and contradictory range of meanings mapped onto it. New Yorkers measured its visual resonance in a range of representations, sensing bodily analogies in its upright vertical form and conjuring the metaphors of political authority that mast trees had inspired in their native environments.

The liberty pole’s height — more specifically, its visual presence — was a source of contestation from the moment the first “flagstaff” went up on the Commons. The Sons of Liberty deliberately erected the pole near a barracks that housed British soldiers; in a drawing of 1770, the barracks stretch horizontally across the background as the pole...
vertically bisects the sky (fig. 4). To the eyes of soldiers charged with enforcing taxation acts, the pole was an inescapable assertion of colonial will. When the notoriously unruly British regiment of the Twenty-eighth Foot moved into the barracks in early August, they chopped it down.  

Thus began a furious cycle of new poles erected by determined liberty boys and attacked by British footmen. The King’s troops soon cut down a second pole that the colonials had raised to replace the first one. Within days, a third pole went up in its place. It came down six months later, following celebrations marking the anniversary of the Stamp Act’s repeal. When New Yorkers raised their fourth pole on March 19, 1767, they took special care to ensure against its destruction. Sinking it deep into the ground, they surrounded the base with iron rings to discourage the blows of axes and saws. The extra fortification worked. Despite attempts to fell it, dig it out, and blow it up, the fourth liberty pole stood intact on the Commons for nearly three years (soldiers’ efforts to bring down the pole were often preempted by vigilant colonials).  

Then another act from Parliament, one that enforced colonial payment for the quartering of British troops, ended the calm. On January 16, 1770, soldiers bored a hole through the iron spurs and stuffed the pole with gunpowder. Unable to set it afame, they hacked it into pieces
under cover of night and dragged the parts to a nearby tavern. For the horrified colonists who gathered on the Commons the next morning, the sight of the liberty pole in so many pieces may have recalled a scene of corporeal disintegration in a recent engraving by Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790). Much as Franklin had amputated the limbs of Britannia to suggest the economic ruin that would befall England as a result of the Stamp Act, the British had dissected an icon of colonial unity (fig. 5). The appearance of broom-topped masts in the background of Franklin’s print—a conventional symbol signifying the cessation of trade, in anticipation of the results that the act might produce—further underscores the transatlantic politics of the pine tree.

The graphic violence of Franklin’s print, which draws its force from a visual culture of political dismemberment, also helps underscore the physical nature of iconoclasm.42 It took exceptional will to level a structure as large as a liberty pole. Owen Chase (1797–1869), who labored with his crewmen to cut away the masts of their sinking vessel, the Essex, after it was rammed by a whale, recounted the desperate work of trying to saw through thick timbers with inadequate tools.43 The brutal urgency of hacking away at a mast—whether to save a

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![Image of Franklin's engraving](image-url)
ship or secretly bring down a pole—offers an ironic contrast to the exacting technique used to harvest mast trees in the forest. The dismantled liberty poles were effectively trees twice felled: once with care, once with vehemence.

Yet this violence followed a certain performative script. Rituals developed with the raising of each successive pole: colonials obtained a mast, paraded it to the Commons, added flags and signs, lifted it into position, chanted huzzahs, and proclaimed its meanings in print. The demolition of the poles inverted these practices: evading detection by colonial sentries, soldiers snuck to the Commons, pulled the pole to the ground, dispersed the parts, fled the scene, and disavowed responsibility in broadsides.44 In a cyclical process that Simpson has called the “kinesis of iconoclasm,” the elevation of each liberty pole created the very conditions for its own destruction—which in turn begat the making of a new pole.45

The genesis of the fifth and final liberty pole illustrates this process. The destruction of the fourth pole instigated mass meetings at the Commons and armed clashes that ensued for two days in an area known as Golden Hill. When Isaac Sears (1730–1786), a leader of the Sons of Liberty, petitioned the city for permission to erect a new pole, uneasy councilmen denied his request. Undeterred, Sears purchased a plot of land adjacent to the Commons and oversaw the installation of the biggest pole yet. Its size merited an equally inflated celebration. The fanfare began at Crommelin’s Wharf on the East River, where the liberty boys decorated two massive pine masts with ribbons and flags painted “Liberty” and “Property.” One pole measured fifty-eight feet; the other, twenty-two feet. Hitched to six strong horses, the long contraption passed thousands of cheering spectators on its slow passage to the Commons. “In solemn Pomp, amid the shouting Throng, / The Courser drew the massy Pole along,” one satirist rhymed in a poem entitled The Procession, with the Standard of Faction: A Cantata.46 Upon arrival, laborers readied the masts for elevation with the ceremony usually reserved for placing a public statue on a pedestal. To the background noise of French horns piping “God Save the King,” they affixed the small mast to the large one, hoisted it into place, and secured it atop a platform of lumber, stones, and dirt. “No Sort of Disturbance,” the New-York Journal gratefully noted, “happened during the whole Affair.”47

Indeed, the fifth pole remained in place until the British army took New York in September 1776 and Governor Tryon ordered its destruction. It owed its durability to its substantial girth as well as its height.
Like the fourth pole, the lower two-thirds of the fifth pole was encased in an armature of iron bars, hoops, and rivets. During the colonial revival of the early twentieth century, Charles Lefferts (1873–1923) imagined this framework as a neat and slender sleeve that accentuated the triumphant verticality of the pole (fig. 6; note that Lefferts includes two small figures to enable viewers to assess the pole’s scale at a glance). In 1770, however, the New-York Journal described the ironwork as an uneven patchwork of shapes, densely layered and fitted together, with nails furiously banged into every cranny still visible through the metal skin. The spare tree trunk had become a mixed-media thing, a plastic form with the sculptural qualities of volume, texture, and mass. Alex Potts’s definition of sculpture as “a physical thing intervening in our space” helps us to further imagine its material effects. Round, so it could be circled, and encrusted with metal surfaces that looked different from every angle, the ironclad pole mobilized the crowds gathered at its base. Its “impacting force,” as David F. Martin describes the spatial vitality of sculpture, prickled the fidgety energy of the liberty boys, provoking behavior appropriate to its sharp metalwork.

The soaring linearity of the liberty pole was just as meaningful. Yi-Fu Tuan has underscored the significance attached to upraised things: “whatever is superior or excellent is elevated, associated with a sense of physical height.” In this regard the pole’s importance was culturally determined, a function of its loftiness and sheer distance from the ground. Yet we should also consider how its scale mattered within the particular material world of late colonial New York. At the Commons, the pole centered vision within the open field and pulled the eyes upward. In 1783, poet Phillip Freneau (1752–1832) likened this uplifted gaze to political salvation: “When from some whimsical colours you waved,” he wrote about New York’s liberty pole, “we had nothing to do, but look up and be saved.” Height made the liberty pole into a public object; indeed, its visibility and accessibility helped constitute a certain public. Some of those in the crowd surrounding its base may have appreciated the way that the pole fostered spatial connections across the city. The pole echoed the steeple of Trinity Church, a stone’s throw to the south, evoking a different sort of salvation, and it linked the Commons to the masts of the seagoing vessels docked along the East River wharves, uniting two sites of popular political activity. Bigness in early America, as Jennifer L. Roberts has argued, was intimately connected to matters of transmission; it was “the boost or amplification needed to convey impact over distance.” The pole’s meaning was contingent on its visibility, place, and size.
Moreover, while critics dismissed the liberty pole as a mere “stick of wood,” referencing its origin as a piece of commercial timber, its form recalled objects rife with political and memorial significance in British culture. It was an extended version of the telltale staff (or vindicta, an ancient Roman emblem), capped by a pileus, that figures of Liberty displayed in allegorical images. It also resembled the maypoles of English folk culture, which functioned as political barometers as well as signs of courtship and spring. Samuel Jennings’s (act. 1787–1834) pro-abolition painting of 1792, *Liberty Displaying the Arts and Sciences*, features both types of objects (fig. 7). Notably, the background scene of emancipated slaves circling a pole recalls one Englishman’s description of maypoles as “standards of justice.” In earlier centuries, maypoles marked places where “the people, if they saw cause, deposed or punished their governors, their barons, their kings.” Maypoles, like liberty poles, hence aroused certain anxieties. In England, they were banned and destroyed during the Protestant Reformation, and in New York, the satirist who critiqued the “massy Pole” drew this telling analogy in *The Procession:*

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Let ev’ry Body laugh and sing,
And be a very gay Soul;
For we have got another POST
As big as any MAY POLE.

Liberty poles were also allied, semiotically and functionally, to other vertical forms in the landscape of colonial activism. In Massachusetts, residents of Dedham raised an eight-foot “pillar of Liberty” topped with a wooden bust of Pitt to celebrate the Stamp Act’s repeal; in nearby Boston, Paul Revere (1734–1818) crafted a temporary obelisk covered on every side with dedications, portraits, and allegorical scenes of leading actors in the Stamp Act crisis (fig. 8). One panel pictured the symbol of colonial resistance to which liberty poles have most often been related: the liberty tree. Like liberty poles, liberty trees marked places of community meeting and protest; they also antagonized loyalists and British soldiers, including the troops who took axes to Boston’s famous elm in 1775.

None of these objects quite matched the scale of New York’s liberty poles, however, and this difference may help account for the poles’ semiotic elasticity. The poles’ mnemonic association with the Stamp Act repeal was persistently reiterated at the Commons by
the lettered boards and flags that honored Pitt, the King, and liberty. Yet by late January 1770, the New-York Journal could also describe the pole in more ambiguous terms as a generalized “Memorial of Freedom” that showed “the laudable Spirit of Liberty, that prevails among the Inhabitants.” A week later, the same newspaper asserted that the pole, “sacred to Constitutional Liberty,” connoted “the Triumph of Constitutional Liberty over the Attempts of arbitrary Power to destroy it” and served as “a Monument of Gratitude to his Majesty, and the British Parliament who repealed the Act, and to those worthy Patriots, both in and out of Parliament, by whose Influence the repeal was obtained.” The symbolism of the pole had swelled in proportion to its increasing height. Like Pitt the Colossus, connecting New York and London in one giant stride, the liberty pole amplified the dimension of the growing transatlantic crisis.

Another sort of text illustrated the pole’s significance as a political actor, linking its affective agency to its vertical form. In the drawing of 1770 (see fig. 4) that pictured the Commons, the fifth pole features as a humanlike presence that speaks and feels. The small image emphasizes the scale of the liberty pole: it dominates the scene, stretching from ground to sky before the British barracks and other buildings clustered along the northern boundary of the Commons. To the left, a diminutive figure garbed in a tricorn hat remarks, “A fine Prospect of Liberty”; in the background, a figure leans against a smaller pole labeled “Scrubbing post” as a sentinel announces, “All is well.” Yet all is not well according to the people crowded into the building at right, a jail housing imprisoned members of the Sons of Liberty. From a second-story window, one of them pleads to the pole: “Is there no Other road to thee, Sweet Liberty?” The road in question snakes out the front door, through a pillory, across the field, and circles up the pole to the vane inscribed “LIBERTY.” From this declarative high point, the pole answers: “I am encompas’d with a ton and half of Iron, therefore can’t relieve thee.” The height and shape of the liberty pole enabled this fantasy of an embodied, speaking actor. The speech balloon evokes a person standing upright with a head and mouth; it even suggests a helping hand extending toward the words uttered by the jailed man. Endowing the liberty pole with bodily attributes and abilities, the drawing summons the natural dimensions of the mast tree, its power to center spatial environments and provoke human affects.

Critics of the liberty pole proved adept at turning these same qualities to their advantage. The loyalist poet who satirized the parade of the “massy Pole” in The Procession saw the depravity of his enemies
embodied in the pole near the Commons. “Its Bottom, so artfully fix’d under Ground, Resembles their schemeing [sic], so low and profound,” he suggested.

The VANE mark’d with FREEDOM, may put us in mind,  
As it varies, and flutters and turns with the Wind;  
That no Faith can be plac’d in the Words of our Foes,  
Who change as the Wind of their Interest blows.

The Iron clasp’d round it so firm and so near,  
Resembles too closely their Fraud and Deceit;  
If the Outside’s but guarded, they care not a Pin,  
How rotten and hollow the Heart is within.

From the top to the bottom and the iron in between, the liberty pole manifested the fickle politics and duplicitous nature of the Sons of Liberty. Notably, the writer stopped short of calling for the pole’s destruction: “Leave the Pole for the Stroke of the Lightning to sever,” he advised. Others were less circumspect in recommending the pole’s removal. In worried critiques that likened the liberty pole to a devotional idol, matters of shape and size figure as sources of the pole’s thing-power—and as incentives to iconoclasm.

In numerous texts, loyalists characterized the liberty pole as a false god and the liberty boys as enchanted idolaters. The subtitle and early verses of The Procession underscore the pole’s mischievous allure: it is variously described a “Standard of Faction,” a “Play Thing,” and a “MAY POLE.” In April 1770, following the tumult surrounding the raising of the fifth pole, a New-York Gazette writer ridiculed the crowd at the Commons for “Assembling in the open Air, and performing Idolatrous and vociferous Acts of Worship, to a Stick of Wood, called a Liberty Pole.” Tellingly, he suggested that a blind fixation on material things characterized the liberty boys: “the harmless IDOLATER OF THE POLE . . . will be inattentive to every Thing but his favourite Bauble.”64 Liberty poles continued to excite association with idols during and after the Revolution. In 1775, a liberty pole raised by the “sons of licentiousness” in New Jersey was decried as a “deity” and removed.65 Likewise, in heated response to the Alien and Sedition Acts of the late 1790s, Anti-Federalists in New York raised “wooden gods of sedition”; upstate,
“almost every town” was exhibiting “a liberty pole, as they falsely term it, which these sons of Belial have erected to the idol faction.”66

Even before the Revolution was over, the Federalist poet John Trumbull (1750–1831) derided liberty poles as idols in his lengthy satire M’Fingal: A Modern Epic Poem, in Four Cantos. The poem imagined an elite loyalist named M’Fingal brought to the liberty pole to forswear his politics. In a verse narrating M’Fingal’s trial at the hands of his townspeople, Trumbull contrives a half-dozen different metaphors to describe the towering form of the liberty pole and to suggest how it commanded attention:

When sudden met [M’Fingal’s] angry eye,
A pole ascending thro’ the sky,
Which num’rous throngs of Whiggish race
Were raising in the market-place;
Not higher school-boy kites aspire,
Or royal mast or country spire,
Like spears at Brobdignagian [sic] tilting,
Or Satan’s walking-staff in Milton;
And on its top the flag unfurl’d
Wav’d triumphant o’er the prostrate world,
Inscrib’d with inconsistent types
Of liberty and thirteen stripes.67

Elsewhere, Trumbull likens the liberty pole to a “May-pole of sedition” and compares its political force to that of Old Testament symbols:

Will this vile pole, devote to freedom,
Save like the Jewish pole in Edom,
Or like the brazen snake of Moses,
Cure your crack’d skulls and batter’d noses?68

Then, eager to distinguish his village from the unrest suffered, notably, by the “loyal city of New-York” (where “all the rabble well cockaded” conspired like “witches, with clay-images”), M’Fingal poses a challenge to the crowd that reiterates the pole’s devilish sway:

But in this loyal town and dwelling,
You raise these ensigns of rebellion?
’Tis done; fair Mercy shuts her door;
And Vengeance now shall sleep no more,
Rise then my friends, in terror rise,
And wipe this scandal from the skies!
You’ll see their Dagon, tho’ well jointed,
Will sink before the Lord’s anointed,
And like Jericho’s proud wall,
Before our ram’s horns prostrate fall.69

In rallying his fellow townsmen to demonstrate their loyalism, M’Fingal deploys language that recalls the actions taken against the liberty poles at the Commons: rise, wipe, sink, fall. This linguistic sequence follows the temporal progression of iconoclasm and evokes the material consequence of a very large thing brought to the ground.

The biblical references in Trumbull’s text suggest how colonial American perceptions of the liberty pole as an idol were grounded in early modern English culture and the historical memory of the Protestant Reformation. By the mid-eighteenth century, Britain, like much of northern Europe, had endured more than two centuries of violence against religious architecture, rituals, and imagery. Motivated by fears of “popery”—meaning Roman Catholicism—and a lingering, pre-Reformation tendency to sense qualities of aliveness in devotional objects, iconoclasts struck at things large and small, from monastery complexes to the figural objects in parish churches.70 Although anti-idolatry treatises defined the forms and meanings of “idol” in varying ways, most sought to downplay the material scale of such objects by emphasizing their spiritual emptiness. Yet such efforts ironically highlighted the formal qualities often associated with idols, such as gilding and, notably, columnar shape. Henry Ainsworth (1569–1622), for example, insisted in 1640 that idols were “things of naught; because they have nothing of that which fools think they have, that is, of the divine power and God head, or of true Religion.”71 Like his contemporaries, he pointed to examples of “false resemblances” and “dead images” in the Old Testament, including the golden calf, the brazen serpent that capped the staff of Moses and, notably, the altars, groves, and pillars of the Canaanite “high places,” which the faithful were commanded to break.72 Hence M’Fingal’s comparison of his town’s liberty pole to the “Jewish pole in Edom”—and Ainsworth’s warning not to raise “any statue . . . monument or pillar . . . anything graven or molten.”73

Such cautions not only reiterated prohibitions against likenesses of the divine. They also registered a pervasive unease about the phenomenological pull exerted by pillar-like forms.74 “An image,
and especially a totem pole, concentrates energy in one place at the expense of others,” Simpson explains. Certainly this was true of the liberty poles in New York, which served as the departure and endpoints for political parades around the city. The poles drew liberty boys to the Commons. They even organized soundscapes of colonial protest: the British general Thomas Gage likened the Commons to the Roman Forum, observing that the pole attracted a crowd “on all Occasions of Public Concern. . . . And Orators,” he added, “harangue on all sides.”

The iconoclasts of New York followed English precedent in affirming as well as negating the potency of idols. When loyalists accused the Sons of Liberty of “performing Idolatrous and vociferous Acts of Worship, to a Stick of Wood, called a Liberty Pole,” they at once acknowledged the pole’s affective draw and imaginatively reduced its scalar significance—insisting, in fact, on its semiotic emptiness (it was a mere “Stick of Wood,” a timber bereft of life). While some liberty boys may have welcomed this wary acknowledgement of the pole’s political agency, at least one expressed similarly contradictory thoughts—and did so, notably, in terms of scale. In February 1770, the New-York Journal writer who so fulsomely described the pole as a polyvalent, even “sacred” monument, also sought to shrink its size and significance. The pole was “in itself a Trifle,” he insisted after making the case for its symbolic proportion, one that had “answer’d the temporary Purpose for which it was erected” and “would perhaps have been little thought of, till it had fallen by natural decay; but being destroyed by Way of Insult, we could not but consider it as a Declaration of War against our Freedom and Property, and resent it accordingly.” The word “trifle” is important here. Then as now, it meant a “bauble” or a “thing of no moment,” as Samuel Johnson (1709–1784) wrote in his Dictionary (1755). It is no coincidence that this definition resonated with the very ideas used by early modern Englishmen to describe idols (“things of naught”). In downplaying the pole as a “trifle,” the New-York Journal author registers the same anxious ambiguity about idolatry that another writer would articulate two months later when dismissing the pole as a “bauble.”

In actuality, the pole was no trifle, especially for loyalists who feared the rituals of public humiliation and political discipline they might endure at the Commons. During the 1770s, the pole provided a useful location for the denunciation of men who were thought to be harboring loyalist sympathies or trafficking in goods that had been blacklisted under nonimportation agreements. A hardware merchant
The TORY'S Day of JUDGMENT.
who fell under these suspicions described the terror of being called to answer such accusations. When several men “were deputed from the Liberty-pole to bring me there,” he feared that “the whole body from the cursed Pole would join them.” He took refuge at Fort George, but enduring more “deputations from the Liberty-pole to come up and ask pardon of men that I never injured,” he “thought it best to submit, and bow my neck to their Liberty-pole.” On a lighter note, in M’Fingal, the town constable was ingloriously suspended by his waist from the pole in punishment for his loyalism (fig. 9):

Then upwards, all hands hoisting sail,
They swung him, like a keg of ale;
Till to the pinnacle so fair,
He rose like meteor in the air.

The penalty proved visually corrective rather than politically damning: the constable “thus in purer sky . . . his Tory errors clearly spied.” Iconoclasts figures among the “errors” he swears off; he promises not to “cut your poles down while I’ve breath / Tho’ rais’d more thick than hatchel teeth.” M’Fingal’s “vile pole” stood to see another day.

In many cultures iconoclasm has a long afterlife. American culture is no exception. Liberty poles continued to be erected and destroyed for decades. Historians of the Revolution have represented their rise and fall as indexes of the divisive and changeable politics of independence. Civil War–era writers exploited the metaphors of the liberty pole for similar purposes. When a pole was removed from the corner of Broadway and Grand Streets in 1857, Harper’s Weekly took care to note that it “was not cut down by an Irish mob,” adding, tongue in cheek, that “though the pole is down, liberty may still perhaps have a chance to go up.” A ballad about the liberty pole, composed by Isaac S. Ferguson after sectionalism had devolved into disunion, could not afford to truck in such ironies. The opening verse compelled readers to imagine lifting their eyes upward:

America’s Bird has alighted;
It glories in liberty’s call,
It is perched in both honor and triumph
On top of the Liberty Pole.
Artists, for their part, tended to represent liberty poles both past and present in a singular way: in prints and paintings, the poles always go up and stay up—they are never shown coming down. Moreover, like Ferguson’s song, these images persistently emphasize the immense scale of the poles as a central feature of their capacity to gather and unite communities. For example, a liberty pole at West Broadway and Franklin Street, which served for decades as a meeting place for the city’s Fifth Ward Democrats, also attracted local fire companies who staged spectacular water battles, testing the strength of their hoses against the measure of the liberty pole. The sense of civic triumph conveyed in images of such events also characterizes John C. McRae’s (act. 1850–1880) romanticized engraving of Revolutionary-era liberty poles. In *Raising the Liberty Pole, 1776* (ca. 1875), an agreeable group of gentlemen and laborers effortlessly lift the pole into position as ladies nearby hold hankies and babies aloft in celebration (fig. 10). In the background, others joyously throw up their arms as a signboard with the bust of George III is lowered down. For every iconoclastic action, an opposite, if not quite equal, reaction.
There is still a liberty pole in downtown Manhattan today. It sits at the site of the original Commons, on the west side of City Hall Park. A stone embedded in the adjacent ground remembers the five liberty poles raised “here in the ancient commons of the city”; the present one, it explains, was raised in 1921 in memory “of all lovers of our country who have died that the liberty won on these shores might be the heritage of the world.” Yet few pedestrians stop to look for the pole, and in fact, it is hard to see; the only part clearly visible through the greenery of the park’s mature trees is a gilded vane boldly imprinted liberty (fig. 11). In any case, the modern pole hardly stands a chance of being noticed within the urban landscape of much taller icons of liberty: namely, the Statue of Liberty, looming over New York Harbor; and a few blocks away, the formerly named Freedom Tower — now One World Trade Center — rising a symbolic 1,776 feet high, a postmodern liberty pole born of the terrible iconoclasm of September 11. “The rhetoric of the colossus,” as Grigsby has observed, “has changed little over the centuries.” But in New York, the scale of liberty continues to grow.
View by referring to artistic practices in ancient Rome: “As much as the Statues of the Heroes were increased in their Size, by so much was the merit and abilities of those Heroes, enhanced in the Ideas of the Beholders,” he told South Carolina's colonial agent, Charles Garth. Wilton counted Pitt among his many patrons, and his remarks suggest how classical precedent could be deployed to legitimate the creation of larger-than-life statues of living men. Joseph Wilton to Charles Garth, July 24, 1766, transcribed in Joan Coutu, Persuasion and Propaganda: Monuments and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 337.

On the Stamp Act crisis in New York, see Burrows and Wallace, Gotham, 198–204.


The creator of both Pitt statues, the British sculptor Joseph Wilton (1722–1803), encouraged this view by referring to artistic practices in ancient Rome:

Montresor Journals, 14:371.


Peter Guillet, Timber Merchant’s Guide, also, a Table, Whereby, at one View, May Be Seen the Solid and Superficial Measure of Any Square or Unequal Hewed Logs or Plank, from One to 47 Inches, also, Plates Representing the Figures of the Principal Pieces of Timber, Used in Building a 74 Gun Ship of the Line, in Standing Trees (Baltimore, 1823).

For a related discussion of the ecological costs of the eighteenth-century timber industry as they concerned practices of material culture, see Laura Turner Igoe, “‘Appropriate in a Sylvan State’: William Rush’s Self-Portrait and Environmental Transformation,” American Art 28, 1 (Spring 2014): 78–103.


Ibid., 10; Michaux, North American Sylva, 3:164.


“Strange and Terrible News from Sea” [broadsheet] ([London], 1768).


Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, 6th ed. (London, 1770), 127.

On this point, see Bruno Latour: “What is acting at the same moment in any place is coming from many other places, many distant materials, and many faraway actors.” Latour, Reassembling the Social: An Introduc-

In this sense, the liberty pole was a nascent type of “democratic object,” as Alexander Nemerov has described the large anatomical models carved by William Rush (1756–1833) for use in Caspar Wistar’s medical lectures. Like Rush’s sculptures, which were “made literally to encompass more viewers” and which “call to mind the broader equation in [the early republic] between mammoth objects and populism,” the politics of the liberty pole were implicated in its form. Nemerov, “Great Unknowns: The Anatomical Sculptures of William Rush and the Problem of Democratic Scale,” in Mammoth Scale: The Anatomical Sculptures of William Rush (Philadelphia: The Wistar Institute, 2002), 6.


Phallic connotations also charged columnar objects like the maypole and liberty pole with meaning, as Eric Slauter has observed; Joel Barlow, for example, penned a comical poem on the subject during the 1790s. Slauter, The State as a Work of Art: The Cultural Origins of the Constitution (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 59.

2:40–6. Schlesinger, “Liberty Tree,” 437. connects liberty trees to maypoles—“a sort of denuded tree.” Alfred Young disputes the relevance of maypoles in New York, noting that the city had no tradition of erecting them; however, the functional connections between the two forms are numerous and extend much deeper than their formal similarities. See Young, Liberty Tree: Ordinary People and the American Revolution (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 361–62, 365.

59 On the Dedham pillar, see Fischer, Liberty and Freedom, 99. Fischer appropriately describes Revere’s creation as “a Yankee artisan’s adaptation of a Georgian English version of a neoclassical idea of an Egyptian obelisk, at least four incarnations removed from the original” (100). See also Sally Webster, The Nation’s First Monument and the Origins of the American Memorial Tradition: Liberty Enshrined (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2015), 53.


62 “To the Printer, New-York, Feb. 7, 1770,” The New-York Journal; or, the General Advertiser, Feb. 8, 1770. Monument and memorial were closely related concepts during the eighteenth century. Both meant something that was designed to remember. The word “monument” tended to signify an artifact, like a statue, building, or tomb—something public in nature, worked in form, and grand in meaning or scale (as in the broadly royalist gesture of expressing “gratitude to his Majesty”). A memorial could be a monument to a person, idea, or event, but it could also be something more elusive: a memoir of a place, experience, and idea (such as “freedom”), or a memory represented through language, in a speech or text. For definitions and usage of these terms, see the OED Online, s.vv. “memorial,” “monument,” accessed Nov. 1, 2013. As Kirk Savage explains in Monument Wars: Washington, D.C., the National Mall, and the Transformation of the National Mall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), Americans began to wrestle with the meaning of “monument” and “memorial” in the course of developing the “memorial landscape” of the federal capital and designing public commemorations to George Washington and other national leaders. For example, when the French engineer Pierre L’Enfant (1754–1825) began laying out Washington, DC, during the 1790s, his notions of monuments and memorials were grounded, like his American contemporaries, in European understandings of these terms.

63 As historians have persuasively suggested, the drawing probably represents an important gathering of liberty boys that occurred on February 14, 1770. Nearly two months prior to that date, a writer identifying himself as “A Son of Liberty” had printed a broadside, “To the Betrayed Inhabitants of the City and Colony of New York, “ that criticized colonial leaders as puppets of the British ministry and intimated that rebellion in New York was imminent. Alexander McDougall, a leader of the Sons of Liberty, was charged with authoring the broadside on February 7 and imprisoned for libel. A week later, his supporters visited him at the jail in a ceremony overwrought with allusions to John Wilkes, a radical English Whig, and Wilkes’s seditious publication of 1763, The North Briton, no. 45. The liberty boys capitalized on the symbolic number “45” to choreograph every aspect of their visit: forty-five liberty boys joined McDougall on the forty-fifth day of the year; they imbibed forty-five toasts and consumed forty-five pounds of beef from a forty-five-month-old cow. See Burrows and Wallace, Gotham, 210–12.


67 John Trumbull, M’Fingal: A Modern Epic Poem, in Four Cantos (New York, 1795), 65–66. Trumbull commenced the work in 1775; it was published in 1782, illustrated in 1795, and reprinted numerous times.

68 Ibid., 67.


71 Henry Ainsworth, An Arrow Against Idolatrie ([London?], 1640), 9.

72 Deuteronomy 12:2–3 (NIV); Ainsworth, Arrow Against Idolatrie, 16–17.

73 Ainsworth, Arrow Against Idolatrie, 9.

74 Statues erected atop columns were even more problematic within this religious context. For Britons, this convention was associated with idolatry both at home and abroad. In the 1600s, when maypoles were banned across England, The antiquities of ancient Britain featured numerous illustrations of pagan deities raised on columns; a century earlier, Pope Sixtus V had elevated statues and a cross to the top of obelisks in Rome, nervously cognizant that in doing so, he was risking idolatrous behavior on the part of pilgrims to the city. See Aylett Sammes, Britannia antiqua illustrata, or, The antiquities of ancient Britain (London, 1676); Michael W. Cole, “Perceptual Exorcism in Sistine Rome,” in The Idol in the Age of Art: Objects, Devotions and the Early Modern World, ed. Cole and Rebecca Zorach (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 57–76.

75 Simpson, Under the Hammer, 40.

76 Thomas Gage, quoted in Young, Liberty Tree, 351.
