

DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED in PROVIDENCE,

IN THE

COLONY of RHODE ISLAND,

upon the 25th Day of July, 1768.

AT

The DEDICATION of the

TREE of LIBERTY,

From the Summer House in the TREE.

By a SON of LIBERTY

(SILAS DOWNER)

PROVIDENCE

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A DISCOURSE
DELIVERED AT THE DEDICATION OF
THE TREE OF LIBERTY,
IN PROVIDENCE

Dearly beloved Countrymen.

WE His Majesty's subjects, who live remote from the throne, and are inhabitants of a new world, are here met together to dedicate the *Tree of Liberty*. On this occasion we cheerfully recognize our allegiance to our sovereign Lord, George the third, King of Great Britain, and supreme Lord of these dominions, but utterly deny any other dependence on the inhabitants of that island, than what is mutual and reciprocal between all mankind. It is good for us to be here, to confirm one another in the principles of liberty, and to renew our obligations to contend earnestly therefor.

OUR forefathers, with the permission of their sovereign, emigrated from England, to avoid the unnatural oppressions which then took place in that country. They endured all sorts of miseries and hardships, before they could establish any tolerable footing in the new world. It was then hoped and expected that the blessings of freedom would be the inheritance of their posterity, which they preferred to every other temporal consideration. With the extremest toil, and danger, our great and noble ancestors founded in *America* a number of colonies under the allegiance of the crown of England. They forfeited not the privileges of Englishmen by removing themselves hither, but brought with them every right which they could or ought to have enjoyed had they abided in England. They had fierce and dreadful wars with savages, who often poured their whole force on the infant plantations, but under every difficulty and discouragement, by the good providence

of GOD they multiplied exceedingly, and flourished, without receiving any protection or assistance from England. They were free from impositions. Their kings were well disposed to them, and their fellow subjects in Great Britain had not then gaped after Naboth's vineyard. Never were people so happy as our forefathers, after they had brought the land to a state of inhabitancy, and procured peace with the natives, They sat every man under his own vine, and under his own fig-tree. They had but few wants; and luxury, extravagance, and debauchery were known only by the names, as the things signified thereby had not then arrived from the old world. The public worship of GOD, and the education of children and youth, were never more encouraged in any part of the globe. The laws which they made for the general advantage were exactly carried into execution. In fine, no country ever experienced more perfect felicity. Religion, learning, and a pure administration of justice were exceeding conspicuous, and kept even pace with the population of the country.

WHEN we view this country in its extent and variety of climates, soils, and produce, we ought to be exceeding thankful to divine goodness in bestowing it upon our forefathers, and giving it as an heritage for their children. We may call it the promised land, a good land and a large—a land of hills and vallies, of rivers, brooks, and springs of water—a land of milk and honey, and wherein we may eat bread to the full. A land whose stones are iron, the most useful material in all nature, and of other choice mines and minerals; and a land whose rivers and adjacent seas are stored with the best of fish. In a word, no part of the habitable world can boast of so many natural advantages as this northern part of America.

BUT what will all these things avail us, if we be deprived of that liberty which the GOD of nature hath given us? View the miserable condition of the poor wretches who inhabit countries once the most fertile and happy in the world, where the blessings

of liberty have been removed by the hand of arbitrary power. Religion, learning, arts, and industry, vanished at the deformed appearance of tyranny. Those countries are depopulated, and the scarce and thin inhabitants are fast fixed in chains and slavery. They have nothing which they can call their own; even their lives are at the absolute disposal of the monsters who have usurped dominion over them.

THE dreadful scenes of massacre and bloodshed, the cruel tortures and brutal barbarities which have been committed on the image of GOD, with all the horrible miseries which have overflowed great part of the globe, have proceeded from wicked and ambitious men who usurped an absolute dominion over their fellows. If this country should experience such a shocking change in their affairs, or its despotic sway should succeed the fair enjoyment of liberty, I should prefer a life of freedom in Nova Zembla, Greenland or in the most frozen regions in the world, even where the use of fire is unknown, rather than to live here to be tyrannized over by any of the human race.

GOVERNMENT is necessary. It was instituted to secure to individuals that natural liberty which no human creature hath a right to deprive them of. For which end the people have given power unto the rulers to use as there may be occasion for the good of the whole community, and not that the civil magistrate, who is only the people's trustee, should make use of it for the hurt of the governed. If a commander of a fortress, appointed to make defence against the approaches of an enemy, should breach about his guns and fire upon his own town, he would commence tyrant, and ought to be treated as an enemy to mankind.

THE ends of civil government have been well answered in America and justice duly administered in general, while we were governed by laws of our own make, and consented to by the Crown. It is of the very essence of the British constitution, that the people

shall not be governed by laws in the making of which they had no hand, or have their monies taken away without their own consent. This privilege is *inherent*, and cannot be *granted* by any but the Almighty. It is a natural right which no creature can give, or hath a right to take away. The great charter of liberties, commonly called *Magna Charta*, doth not *give* the privileges therein mentioned, nor doth our Charters, but must be considered as only declaratory of our rights and in affirmance of them. The formation of legislatures was the first object of attention in the colonies. They all recognized the King of Great Britain, and a government in each was erected, as like to that in England as the nature of the country and local circumstances would admit. Assemblies or parliaments were instituted, wherein were present the King by his substitutes, with a council of great men, and the people by their representatives. Our distant situation from Great Britain and other attendant circumstances, make it impossible for us to be represented in the parliament of that country, or to be governed from thence. The exigencies of state often require the immediate hand of government; and confusion and misrule would ensue if government was not topical. From hence it will follow that our legislatures were *complete*, and that the Parliamentary authority of Great Britain cannot be extended over us without involving the greatest contradiction: For if we are to be controuled by their Parliament, our own will be useless. In short, I cannot be perswaded that the Parliament of Great Britain have any lawful right to make *any laws whatsoever* to bind us, because there can be no fountain from whence such right can flow. It is universally agreed amongst us that they cannot tax us, because we are not represented there. Many other acts of legislation may affect us as nearly as taking away our monies. There are many kinds of property as dear to us as our money, and in which we may be greatly injured by allowing them a power in, or to direct about. Suppose the Parliament of Great Britain should undertake to prohibit us from walking in the Streets and highways on certain

Saints' days, or from being abroad after a certain time in the evening, or (to come nearer to the matter) to restrain us from working up and manufacturing materials of our own growth, would not our liberty and property be as much affected by such regulations as by a tax act. It is the very spirit of the constitution that the King's subjects shall not be governed by laws, in the making of which they had no share; and this principle is the great barrier against tyranny and oppression? If this bulwark be thrown down, nothing will remain to us but a dreadful expectation of certain slavery. If any acts of the British Parliament are found suitable and commensurate to the nature of the country, they may be introduced, or adopted, by special acts of our own Parliaments, which would be equivalent to making them anew; and without such introduction or adoption, our allowance of the validity or force of *any* act of the *English* or *British* Parliament in these dominions of the King, must and will operate as a concession on our part that our fellow subjects in another country can choose a set of men among themselves, and empower them to make laws to bind us, as well in the matter of taxes as in every other case. It hath been fully proved, and is a point not to be controverted, that in our constitution the having of property, especially a landed estate, entitles the subject to a share in government and framing of laws. The *Americans* have such property and estate, but are not, and never can be represented in the British Parliament. It is therefore clear that that assembly cannot pass *any* laws to bind us, but that we must be governed by our own parliaments, in which we can be in person, or by representation.

BUT of late a new system of politics hath been adopted in Great Britain and the *common people* there claim a sovereignty over us, although they be only fellow subjects. The more I consider the nature and tendency of this claim, the more I tremble for the liberties of my country. For although it hath been unanswerably proved that they have no more power over us than we

have over them, yet relying on the powerful logic of guns and cutlery-ware, they cease not to make laws injurious to us; and whenever we expostulate with them for so doing, all the return is a discharge of threats and menaces.

It is now an established principle in Great Britain that we are subject to the *people* of that country, in the same manner as they are subject to the Crown. They expressly call us their subjects. The language of every paultry scribler, even of those who pretend friendship for us in some things, is after this lordly stile, *our colonies—our western dominions—our plantations—our islands—our subjects in America—our authority—our government*—with many more of the like imperious expressions. Strange doctrine, that we should be the subjects of subjects, and liable to be controuled at their will! It is enough to break every measure of patience, that fellow subjects should assume such power over us. They are so possessed with the vision of the plenitude of their power, that they call us rebels and traitors for denying their authority. If the King was an absolute monarch and ruled us according to his absolute will and pleasure, as some kings in Europe do their subjects, it would not be in any degree so humiliating and debasing as to be governed by one part of the King's subjects who are but equals. From every part of the conduct of the Administration, from the acts, votes, and resolutions of the Parliament, and from all the political writings in that country and libels on *America*, this appears to be their claim, which I think may be said to be an invasion of the rights of the King, and an unwarrantable combination against the liberties of his subjects in America.

LET us now attend a little to the conduct of that country towards us, and see if it be possible to doubt of their principles. In the 9th of *Anne*, the post office act was made, which is a tax act, and which annually draws great sums of money from us. It is true that such an establishment would have been of great use, but then the regulation ought to have been made among ourselves.

And it is a clear point to me that let it be ever so much to the advantage of this country, the Parliament had no more right to interfere than they have to form such an establishment in the electorate of *Hanover*, the King's *German* dominions.

THEY have prohibited us from purchasing any kind of goods or manufactures of Europe except from Great Britain, and from selling any of our own goods or manufactures to foreigners, a few inconsiderable articles excepted, under pain of confiscation of vessel and cargo, and other heavy penalties. If they were indeed our sovereign lords and masters, as they pretend to be, such regulations would be in open violation of the laws of nature. But what adds to this grievance is, that in the trade between us they can set their own prices both on our and their commodities, which is in effect a tax, and of which they have availed themselves. And moreover, duties are laid on divers enumerated articles on their import, for the express purpose of a revenue. They freely give and grant away our monies without our consent, under the specious pretence of defending, protecting and securing America, and for the charges of the administration of justice here, when in fact we are not indebted to them one farthing for any defence or protection from the first planting the country to this moment, but on the contrary, a balance is due to us for our exertions in the general cause; and besides, the advantages which have accrued to their trade with us hath put millions in their pockets. As to the administration of justice, no country in the world can boast of a purer one than this, the charges of which have been always cheerfully provided for and paid without their interposition. There is reason to fear that if the British people undertake the business of the administration of justice amongst us it will be worse for us, as it may cause an introduction of their fashionable corruptions, whereby our pure streams of justice will be tainted and polluted. But in truth, by the administration of justice is meant the keeping

up an idle sett of officers to rob us of our money, to keep us down and humble, and to frighten us out of our undoubted rights.

AND here it may be proper to mention the grievances of the custom house. Trade is the natural right of all men, but it is forestrained, perplexed and fettered, that the officers of the customs, where there happens a judge of admiralty to their purpose, can seize and get condemned any vessel or goods they see fit. They will seize a vessel without shewing any other cause than their arbitrary will, and keep her a long time without exhibiting any libel, during all which time, the owner knows not on what account she is seized, and when the trial comes on, he is utterly deprived of one by a jury, contrary to the usages among our fellow subjects in Britain and perhaps all his fortune is determinable by a single, base, and infamous tool of a violent, corrupt, and wicked administration. Besides, these officers, who seem to be born with long claws, like eagles, exact most exorbitant fees, even from small coasting vessels, who pass along shore and carry from plantation to plantation, bread, meat, firewood, and other necessaries, and without the intervention of which the country would labour under great inconveniencies, directly contrary to the true intent and meaning of one of the acts of trade by which they pretend to govern themselves, such vessels by that act not being obliged to have so much as a register. It is well known that their design in getting into office is to enrich themselves by fleecing the merchants, and it is thought that very few have any regard to the interest of the Crown, which is only a pretence they make in order to accomplish their avaricious purposes.

THE common people of Great Britain very liberally give and grant away the property of the *Americans* without their consent, which if yielded to by us must fix us in the lowest bottom of slavery: For if they can take away one penny from us against our wills, they can take all. If they have such power over our properties they must have a proportionable power over our persons; and from

hence it will follow that they can demand and take away our lives whensoever it shall be agreeable to their sovereign wills and pleasure.

THIS claim of the Commons to a sovereignty over us is founded by them on their being the Mother Country. It is true that the first emigrations were from *England*; but upon the whole more settlers have come from Ireland, Germany, and other parts of Europe, than from England. But if every soul came from England, it would not give them any title to sovereignty or even to superiority. One spot of ground will not be sufficient for all: As places fill up mankind must disperse, and go where they can find a settlement; and being born free, must carry with them their freedom and independence on their fellows, go where they will. Would it not be thought strange if the commonalty of the *Massachusetts-Bay* should require our obedience, because this colony was first settled from that dominion? By the best accounts, Britain was peopled from Gaul, now called *France*, wherefore according to their principles the Parliaments of *France* have a right to govern them. If this doctrine of the maternal authority of one country over another be a little examined, it will be found to be the greatest absurdity that ever entered into the head of a politician. In the time of Nimrod, all mankind lived together on the plains of Shinar, from whence they were dispersed at the building of *Babel*. From that dispersion all the empires, kingdoms, and states in the world are derived. That this doctrine may be fully exposed, let us suppose a few *Turks* or *Arabs* to be the present inhabitants of the plains of Shinar, and that they should demand the obedience of every kingdom, state, and country in the world, on account of their being the *Mother Country*: would it be one jot more ridiculous than the claim made by the Parliament of Great Britain, to rule and reign over us? It is to be hoped that in future the words *Mother Country* will not be so frequently in our mouths, as they are only sounds without meaning.

ANOTHER grievance to be considered, is the alarming attempt of the people of *Old England* to restrain our manufactures. This country abounds in iron, yet there is an act of Parliament, passed in the late King's reign to restrain us from manufacturing it into plates and rods by mill-work, the last of which forms are absolutely necessary for the making of nails, the most useful article in a new country that can be conceived. Be astonished all the world, that the people of a country who call themselves Christians and a civilized nation, should imagine that any principles of police will be a sufficient excuse for their prohibiting their fellow subjects in a distant part of the earth from making use of the blessings of the God of nature! There would be just as much reason to prohibit us from spinning our wool and flax, or making up our cloaths. Such prohibitions are infractions on the natural rights of men, and are utterly void.

THEY have undertook, at the distance of three thousand miles, to regulate and limit our trade with the natives round about us, and from whom our lands were purchased—a trade which we opened ourselves, and which we ought to enjoy unrestricted. Further, we are prohibited by a people who never set foot here from making any more purchases from the *Indians*, and even of settling those which we have made. The truth is, they intend to take into their own hands the whole of the back lands, witness the patents of immense tracts continually solicited, and making out to their own people. The consequence will be shocking, and we ought to be greatly alarmed at such a procedure. All new countries ought to be free to settlers; but instead thereof every settler on these patent lands, and their descendants forever will be as compleat slaves to their landlords, as the common people of *Poland* are to their lords.

A standing army in time of profound peace is cantoned and quartered about the country to awe and intimidate the people—Men of war and cutters are in every port, to the great distress of

trade. In time of war we had no station ships, but were obliged to protect our trade, but now in time of full peace, when there are none to make us afraid we are visited with the plague of men of war, who commit all manner of disorders and irregularities; and behave in as hostile a manner as if they were open and declared enemies. In open defiance of civility, and the laws of Great Britain, which they profess to be governed by, they violently seize and forcibly carry on board their ships the persons of the King's loving subjects. What think ye my brethren, of a military government in each town?—Unless we exert ourselves in opposition to their plan of subjecting us, we shall all have soldiers quartered about upon us, who will take the absolute command of our families. Centry boxes will be set up in all the streets and passages, and none of us will be able to pass, without being brought to by a soldier with his fixed bayonet, and giving him a satisfactory account of ourselves and business. Perhaps it will be ordered that we shall put out fire and candle at eight of the clock at night, for fear of conspiracy. From which fearful calamities may the GOD of our fathers deliver us!

BUT after all, nothing which has yet happened ought to alarm us more than their suspending government here, because our Parliaments or Assemblies (who ought to be free) do not in their votes and resolutions please the populace of Great Britain. Suppose a parcel of mercenary troops in England should go to the Parliament house, and order the members to vote as they directed under pain of dissolution, how much liberty would be left to them? In short, this dissolving of government upon such pretences as are formed, leaves not the semblance of liberty to the people. We all ought to resent the treatment which the *Massachusetts-Bay* hath had, as their case may soon come to be our own.

WE are constantly belied and misrepresented to our gracious sovereign by the officers who are sent hither, and others who are in the cabal of ruining this country. They are the persons who

ought to be called rebels and traitors, as their conduct is superlatively injurious to the King and his faithful subjects.

MANY other grievances might be enumerated, but the time would fail.—Upon the whole, the conduct of Great Britain shews that they have formed a plan to subject us so effectually to their absolute commands, that even the freedom of speech will be taken from us. This plan they are executing as fast as they can; and almost every day produces some effect of it. We are insulted and menaced only for petitioning. Our prayers are prevented from reaching the royal ear, and our humble supplications to the throne are wickedly and maliciously represented as so many marks of faction and disloyalty. If they can once make us afraid to speak or write, their purpose will be finished.—Then farewell liberty.—Then those, who were crouded in narrow limits in England will take possession of our extended and fertile fields, and set us to work for them.

WHEREFORE, dearly beloved, let us with unconquerable resolution maintain and defend that liberty wherewith God hath made us free. As the total subjection of a people arises generally from gradual encroachments, it will be our indispensable duty manfully to oppose every invasion of our rights in the beginning. Let nothing discourage us from this duty to ourselves and our posterity. Our fathers sought and found freedom in the wilderness; they cloathed themselves with the skins of wild beasts, and lodged under trees and among bushes; but in that state they were happy because they were free. Should these our noble ancestors arise from the dead, and find their posterity trucking away that liberty, which they purchased at so dear a rate, for the mean trifles and frivolous merchandize of Great Britain, they would return to the grave with a holy indignation against us. In this day of danger let us exert every talent, and try every lawful means for the preservation of our liberties. It is thought that nothing will be of more avail, in our present distressed situation, than to stop our

imports from Britain. By such a measure this little colony would save more than 173,000 pounds lawful money, in one year, besides the advantages which would arise from the industry of the inhabitants being directed to the raising of wool and flax, and the establishment of manufactures. Such a measure might distress the manufacturers and poor people in England, but that would be their misfortune. Charity begins at home, and we ought primarily to consult our own interest; and besides, a little distress might bring the people of that country to a better temper and a sense of their injustice towards us. No nation or people in the world ever made any figure, who were dependent on any other country for their food or cloathing. Let us then in justice to ourselves and our selves and our children, break off a trade so pernicious to our interest, and which is likely to swallow up both our estates and liberties.—A trade which hath nourished the people, in idleness and dissipation. We cannot, we will not, betray the trust reposed in us by our ancestors, by giving up the least of our liberties. We will be freemen, or we will die. We cannot endure the thought of being governed by subjects, and we make no doubt but the Almighty will look down upon our righteous contest with gracious approbation. We cannot bear the reflection that this country should be yielded to them who never had any hand in subduing it. Let our whole conduct shew that we know what is due to ourselves. Let us act prudently, peaceably, firmly, and jointly. Let us break all off trade and commerce with a people who would enslave us, as the only means to prevent our ruin. May we strengthen the hands of the civil government here, and have all our exertions tempered with the principles of peace and order, and may we by precept and example encourage the practice of virtue and morality, without which no people can be happy.

It only remains now, that we dedicate the *Tree of Liberty*.

WE do therefore, in the name and behalf of all the true SONS of LIBERTY *in America, Great Britain, Ireland, Corsica, or whereso-*

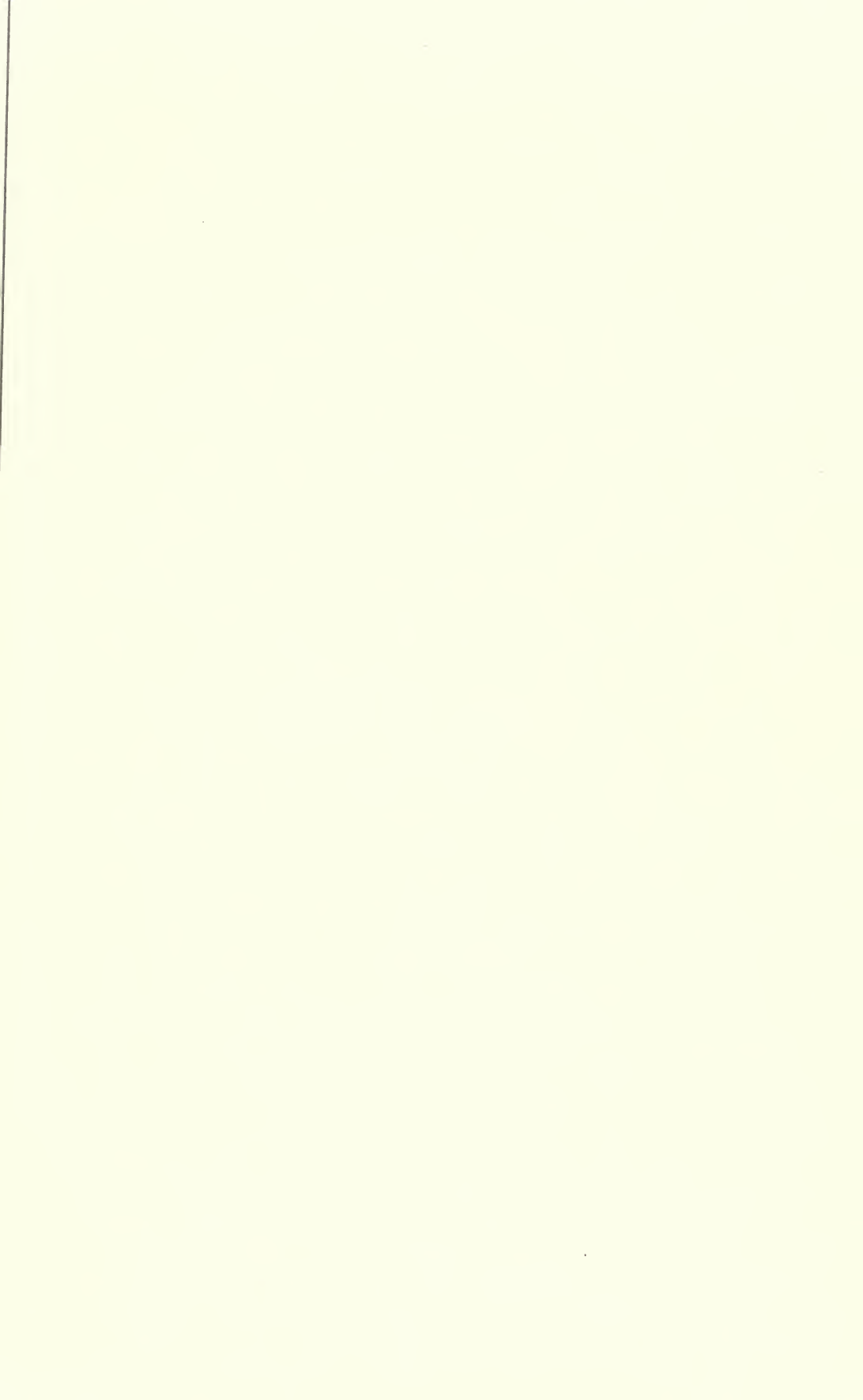
ever they are dispersed throughout the world, dedicate and solemnly devote this tree, to be a TREE of LIBERTY.———May all our councils and deliberations under its venerable branches be guided by wisdom, and directed to the support and maintenance of that liberty which our renowned forefathers sought out and found under trees and in the wilderness.

—May it long flourish, and may the SONS OF LIBERTY often repair hither, to confirm and strengthen each other———When they look toward this sacred ELM, may they be penetrated with a sense of their duty to themselves, their country, and their posterity:———And may they, like the house of David, grow stronger and stronger, while their enemies, like the house of Saul, grow weaker and weaker. AMEN.

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