

Patriotic Ceremony Speech
Bristol Rhode Island 4th of July Celebration, 2013
Rear Admiral Robert Wray

Patriots! Welcome to this wonderful American day in this fabulous American town, to celebrate our American birthday. Close your eyes for just a moment and travel with me back in time to that first American day.

Act 1. It is late June 1776. I am Nelson Miller, a patriot, age 21, born in Warren but now from Bristol. Our Rhode Island is 140 years old, with 60,000 people. My Bristol is nearly 100 years old, with over a thousand citizens.

So much has happened in the past year. Last spring in Massachusetts, the British were out on a hunting party looking for munitions, and then fired upon the militia assembled in Lexington. Boy, those other militias in Concord and nearby towns showed em something, and drove them back to Boston. That's when I enlisted, although Mother wasn't happy about it. Then a few months later, in June, it was a real battle, face-to-face on Bunker Hill, and we showed em again! General Washington took Boston under siege and when he finally got enough guns and cannon surrounding the city, the British just this past spring gave up and left Boston completely. Hopefully for good!

Last fall, while I was gone in Massachusetts, the war came to Rhode Island and our town of Bristol. The British came up the Bay in several ships, looking for supplies for their army. Since we're one of the bigger and richer towns, they told us to give them 200 sheep and 30 cattle. Can you imagine? You know what we told them, and they started firing on the town with their cannon. Lieutenant Governor Bradford rowed a boat out to talk with them, and negotiated down to just 40 sheep, which Father said was a lot cheaper than having to rebuild the town.

In May of 76, just last month, our colony of Rhode Island formally declared our independence—we were the first colony to do so. And now I hear the Continental Congress is thinking about declaring independence for ALL the colonies. Wonder if that could ever happen. As I said, it's been quite a year.

Act 2. It is 1783, and I am William Coggeshall, patriot, and Bristol Native. They did write that independence document, and signed it on July 4. "We hold these truths to be self-evident," they wrote, "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness -- that to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed—that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government." As for me, William Coggeshall, those words are why I served in the war. We didn't know about that signing that first July 4th, since it took time for the news to reach us, but every July 4th since then, we try to shoot our guns and wave the flag and raise a glass to celebrate the day.

The war came to Bristol again, in 1778. This time it was by land; some 500 Redcoats and Hessians marched down from Warren and burned 30 houses and buildings, including St. Michaels Church. Pastor John Burt thought they were coming for him, and while he was running away, his old heart gave out, the poor man. They took a lot of us and imprisoned us for a time on ships out in the bay, including my

friend Peter Church, cause he was a Colonel in the Bristol Militia. It's been five years and we're still rebuilding from that fire.

The war lasted seven long years. Little Bristol, with barely 300 grown men of military age, had 160 wear the uniform of our new country. I was an officer in the Picket Guard, and fought in the battle of Rhode Island; my father Newby Coggeshall was over fifty years old and he served, though it worried my wife Hannah Fales nearly to death!

We Bristolians certainly played our part, in the militia, in the RI Regiments, or out at sea harassing the British. My friends Stephen Talbee, Nathaniel Fales, Henry Wight, Simeon Potter all served. Oh, and young Nelson Miller did okay—discharged after Valley Forge, he walked all the way home from Philadelphia. We're all glad to be home.

Act 3. It is 2013, and we are all patriots. Now, two hundred years later, patriots Nelson Miller and William Coggeshall are still in Bristol, at rest in Juniper Hill and North Cemeteries, along with the other Bristol patriots whose efforts and risk and sacrifice bought us the independence we hold so dear. Those patriots of 1776 included family names like Bosworth, Church, Coggeshall, Drowne, Easterbrook, Fales, Gladding, Munro, Reynolds, Salisbury, West. Different names from different places, Americans not by race or color or country of origin, but by choice, by determination, by beliefs. America was the first country in the history of mankind to be created not by or for any particular tribe or race or group of people; no, one could become an American simply by pledging allegiance to the principles of equality and liberty on which America was founded. The concept was revolutionary, in every sense of the world.

Now, both Bristol and the state of RI have 20 times the population they had then. Our names have changed; we are indeed the melting pot: Esposito, Andrade, Sullivan, Ozawa, DuBois, Salid, Cabral, Bruno, Castillo, Torres, Kim, O'Kelly, Colt, Silva, Khan, Lombardi, Nguyen. We are from Portugal, Spain, France, Ireland, Germany, Italy, across Europe, and now also from the Caribbean, from Africa, from central and South America, from the Middle East, from the Pacific islands, from Vietnam, Korea, China, India, Japan. But we come to America and we pledge allegiance to the very same concepts that animated those Bristol patriots so long ago.

Act 3 of 2013 is our time as patriots on the American stage, but the play is not over. And how it ends is not up to Nelson Miller or William Coggeshall—it is up to us. It is up to you, and you, and you and you and you. All of us, regardless from where we're from, or how long we've been here. The American experiment has proven to be the greatest bastion of freedom and liberty in the world, but it works only as long as we remain dedicated to those original ideals. Are we? Do we measure up to those original Bristol patriots? We can if we choose. They were not superheros, they were ordinary citizens, just like us. They did not possess certainty about the future; they were often unsure, just like us. They were worried about their homes and their children and how to make ends meet, just like us. But despite their ordinariness, despite their unsureness, despite their responsibilities, they took the time and energy and dedication to make their town, their state, their world just a little better. Do we do that?

In 1863 Abraham Lincoln was at Gettysburg. He was at a new cemetery in which Rhode Island patriots of another era had been recently buried. He said that those assembled that day couldn't make the place special, because those who had fought there previously had already done so. He said there was only one course for those gathered going forward. He said "It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated to the unfinished work which they who fought here have... so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us."

Patriots on this Bristol day in 2013, we have that same great task still before us—it is Acts 4, and 5, and 6 of this great American Patriotic Play—and the role we play, and how we play it, will determine how the drama ends. Let us on this special day re-dedicate ourselves to the patriotism that animated Nelson Miller. Let us gaze at the headstones of William and Hannah Coggeshall and remember that they passed to us the liberty we cherish, but also the responsibility to keep it alive. Let us look at burned and rebuilt St. Michaels church and remember that nothing important happens without sacrifice and devotion. Let us, every day, thank our God for the country we live in, and the patriots past and present who have collectively given it to us, and let us every day, determine that we will devote our own best energies, our own full measure of devotion, to ensure, as Mr. Lincoln said, that this American endeavor “of the people, by the people, and for the people shall not perish from this earth.”

God bless Bristol on this happy day, God bless you American Patriots, and God Bless the United States of America.

Thank you.