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Soapbox

Nutmeg Adds Spice. But is it Nice?

By Walter W. Woodward

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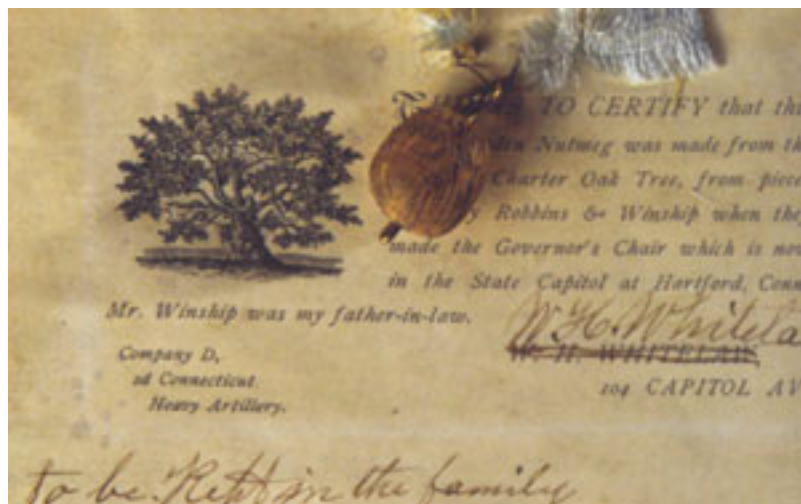
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State historian Walt Woodward tells us the story behind the state's association with nutmeg and sheds some light on an unusual object in the collection of the Museum of Connecticut History: a wooden nutmeg carved from a piece of the famous Charter Oak.

Of all the nicknames people have used to describe the essential character of our state, none has a more colorful—or controversial—history than the “Nutmeg State.” That slogan was born in the early days of the American republic, and it captured in two words much of what was both best and worst about the newly emerging Connecticut Yankee. During the years surrounding 1800, Connecticut sea captains actively traded Wethersfield onions—used largely to feed Caribbean slaves—for much-sought-after nutmeg, a spice grown only on the West Indian island of Granada and in the Mollucas islands of Indonesia.

Also during this time, young Connecticut men ventured in ever-increasing numbers to the American South and Midwest to peddle the clocks, buttons, needles, and other sundries being produced by a host of small, new Connecticut manufactories.

These Yankee peddlers loved having the hard-shelled nutmegs—durable, light, and profitable—among their goods. They were highly desired and always easy to sell. So easy that, so the story goes, some of the craftier—and less ethical—of these Connecticut lads took to mixing wooden nutmegs in with the real ones, simultaneously increasing both their profits and their “nutmeg” supply. They, of course, counted on the fact that the purchaser wouldn't discover the difference until the trader himself was back in the Land of Steady Habits (or was that the Provision State?). As a result of these and similar trickster-like practices, Connecticut Yankees' reputation for clever-but-not-fully-principled trading spread widely and quickly, and the homeland of these likeable but shrewd hucksters became known as “The Nutmeg State.”



Nutmeg carved from the Charter Oak and certificate of authenticity, c. 1890. Museum of Connecticut History. *photo Stephen Dunn*

Just as their forefathers had done when they adopted as their own the song “Yankee Doodle”—a tune originally intended to ridicule Yankees for being crude rustics—Connecticans took to “Nutmeg State” the way “snake oil” took to “salesman.” At an early and quite formal dinner gathering of the Connecticut Historical Society, one of the dignitaries—following a numerous and extended series of toasts preceding his own—offered this salute to the assembled guests, “To the Nutmeg State,” he said, lifting his glass yet again. “Where shall we find a grater?”

Throughout the 19th century, despite the sobriquet’s pejorative connotations, most Connecticans remained pleased with their reputation for cleverness, and it was (and still in some circles is) common for men to wear a wooden nutmeg in their jacket lapels, identifying them as Connecticans. Such approbation was not universal, though, by any means. On several occasions, and especially in 1903, when it endorsed Mrs. Emily G. Holcombe’s efforts to officially name Connecticut “The Constitution State,” The Hartford Courant urged citizens to reject the old nickname. “Do not yourself, and do not let others in your presence,” it exhorted, “allude to Connecticut as the ‘Nutmeg State.’” Continuing to use the phrase, they opined, was “an insult which we give ourselves.” One hundred years later, Connecticans still, though with perhaps a bit less frequency, think of themselves as Nutmeggers, preferring, perhaps, a little spice to a lot of propriety.

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