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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

University College

American Culture Studies

**BLUE NOTES FROM THREE SONGS**

**MALLEABLE ARTIFACTS**

**AS RELATED TO EVOLVING CULTURAL IDENTITY**

by

Lou Matthews Lucas

A thesis presented to the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the  
degree of Master of Arts

May 2010

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## Table of Contents

List of Illustrations	iii
Introduction	1
Lyrics, “My Old Kentucky Home”	3
Lyrics, “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny”	4
Lyrics, “The Missouri Waltz”	5
Part I. - Commonalities and Influences	6
Part II. - Observations and Conclusions	38
Bibliography	79

## Illustrations

Stephen Collins Foster	24
Image courtesy of the Foster Hall Collection, Center for American Music, University of Pittsburgh Library System	
James A. Bland, sheet music image	29
Original 1879 sheet music cover. Courtesy of Songwriters Hall of Fame archives	
Sheet music cover, Foster's "Old Black Joe"	42
Original sheet music. Columbian Conservatory of Music, c.1910	
Kentucky Derby Day, Churchill Downs	74
<a href="http://www.gohorseshow.com/Media/4/jpg/2009/5/greathats.jpg">http://www.gohorseshow.com/Media/4/ jpg/2009/5/greathats.jpg</a>	

## Introduction

Artifacts or “objects made or modified by humans” can take the form of horseless carriages or Tiffany brooches, moonshine stills or rolling pins, or, as in the case of this study, songs written by American composers.<sup>1</sup> Artifacts themselves may change, along with our own willingness and, hopefully, expanding ability to interpret them and their cultural meaning and relevance in history. We usually tend to think of artifacts, individual representative examples of “material culture” or “the things that people leave behind,” as static, as permanent objects which remain unchanged unless somehow accidentally damaged – items such as a piece of Native American pottery or George Washington’s false teeth.<sup>2</sup> Other objects don’t change physically, but become artifacts which have been altered as a result of change in their use over time. -- the Flag of the Confederacy for example. While not physically altered in more than 150 years, it has become for many a very different symbol as a result of its different uses over the period of its existence. That piece of cloth, once representative of a portion of our nation trying to split off from the Union and honored by many as representative of lives lost in that attempt, was later carried as a banner by hooded Klan members at the beatings and lynchings of free blacks. The same piece of rectangular fabric has become fused with negative as well as positive associations. The difficulty arises when an object is not viewed as having *both* positive and negative associations, but is seen by different groups of individuals as having one *or* the other. Still other historical artifacts are malleable and actually physically changed by the society using them. The flag of the United States, for

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas J. Schlereth, ed. Material Culture Studies in America, Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1999, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Leland Ferguson, as quoted by Schlereth, 2.

example, has grown in the number of stars it contains as more states have been added to the Union.

This paper will look at three malleable artifacts, three musical compositions whose language appears to reflect cultural change in American society, three songs which have been, over the years, physically altered. They are the three musical compositions “My Old Kentucky Home,” written in the 1850s by “America’s greatest writer of popular songs,”<sup>3</sup> Stephen Foster; “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” written following Reconstruction by James A. Bland, “The World’s Greatest Minstrel Man,” also known as “The Black Stephen Foster;”<sup>4</sup> and “The Missouri Waltz,” the lyrics for which were written by J.R. Shannon<sup>5</sup> around 1914. Common to these three songs: Their lyrics were all written incorporating black or slave dialects and what are now considered to be negative stereotypical labels for African Americans; all three share similar themes; and each was named the official State Song in Kentucky, Virginia, or Missouri. While sharing what would normally appear to be rather unremarkable characteristics, it is, in fact, their very combination that would necessitate the alteration of the artifact, and which would, in turn, both reflect, and participate in, cultural change.

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<sup>3</sup> Edwin N.C. Barnes, The Bard of Pittsburgh (Washington DC: Music Education Publications, 1936), 9.

<sup>4</sup> William R. Hullfish, “James A. Bland: Pioneer Black Songwriter,” Black Music Research Journal, 7, (Chicago: Columbia College, 1987), 1.

<sup>5</sup> The composer James Royce Shannon. Secondary sources claim J.R. (James Royce) added “Shannon” as a pen name, however statements supplied to the Lenawee County Historical Museum by someone who remembered J.R.’s family support a family name of “Shannon.” Genevive Vogt Schwartz, Adrian, MI. An undated statement on file with the Lenawee County Historical Museum, Adrian, Michigan.

“My Old Kentucky Home”  
by Stephen, Foster, Published, 1853

[Verse 1:]

The sun shines bright in the old Kentucky home  
'Tis summer, the darkies are gay;  
The corn-top's ripe and the meadow's in the bloom,  
While the birds make music all the day.  
The young folks roll on the little cabin floor,  
All merry, all happy and bright;  
By'n by Hard Times comes a-knocking at the door,  
Then my old Kentucky home, goodnight!

[Chorus:]

Weep no more my lady  
Oh! weep no more today!  
We will sing one song for the old Kentucky home,  
For the Old Kentucky Home far away.

[Verse 2:]

They hunt no more for the possum and the coon,  
On meadow, the hill and the shore;  
They sing no more by the glimmer of the moon,  
On the bench by the old cabin door.  
The day goes by like a shadow o'er the heart,  
With sorrow, where all was delight;  
The time has come when the darkies have to part,  
Then my old Kentucky home, goodnight!

[Verse 3:]

The head must bow and the back will have to bend,  
Wherever the darkey may go;  
A few more days, and the trouble all will end,  
In the field where the sugar-canes grow;  
A few more days for to tote the weary load,  
No matter, 'twill never be light;  
A few more days till we totter on the road,  
Then my old Kentucky home, goodnight!<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “Kentucky’s State Song: ‘My Old Kentucky Home,’” Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives, Commonwealth of Kentucky, 2004, <<http://www.kdla.ky.gov/resources/KYSong2.htm>>, (10 November 2007).



“Carry Me Back to Ole Virginny”<sup>7</sup>  
by James A. Bland, Published, 1886

[Verse 1:]

Carry me back to old Virginny,  
There’s where the cotton and the corn and tatoes grow,  
There’s where the birds warble sweet in the springtime,  
There’s where the old darkey’s heart am long’d to go.  
There’s where I labor’d so hard for old massa,  
Day after day in the field of yellow corn.  
No place on earth do I love more sincerely  
Than old Virginny, the state where I was born.

[Chorus:]

Carry me back to old Virginny,  
There’s where the cotton and the corn and tatoes grow,  
There’s where the birds warble sweet in the springtime,  
That’s where this old darkey’s heart am long’d to go.

[Verse 2:]

Carry me back to old Virginny,  
There let me live ‘till I wither and decay.  
Long by the old Dismal Swamp have I wander’d.  
There’s where this old darkey’s life will pass away.  
Massa and missis have long gone before me,  
Soon we will meet on that bright and golden shore.  
There we’ll be happy and free from all sorrow,  
That’s where we’ll meet and we’ll never part no more.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Often titled “Carry Me Back to Old Virginia.”

<sup>8</sup> “The Virginia Official Song Emeritus: Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” Netstate – Virginia, <[http://www.netstate.com/states/symb/song/va\\_carry\\_me\\_back.htm](http://www.netstate.com/states/symb/song/va_carry_me_back.htm)> (20 February 2008), 1.

“The Missouri Waltz”  
Lyrics by J. R. Shannon, Published, 1915

[Verse 1:]

Hush-a-bye, ma baby, slumber time is comin’ soon;  
Rest yo’ head upon my breast while Mammy  
    hums a tune;  
The sandman is callin’ where shadows are fallin’,  
While the soft breezes sigh as in days long gone by.  
Way down in Missouri where I heard this melody,  
When I was a Pick-a-ninny on ma Mammy’s knee;  
The darkies were hummin’; their banjos were strummin’;  
So sweet and low.

[Chorus:]

Strum, strum, strum, strum, strum,  
Seems I hear those banjos playin’ once again,  
Hum, hum, hum, hum, hum,  
That same old plaintive strain.  
Hear that mournful melody,  
It just haunts you the whole day long,  
And you wander in dreams back to Dixie, it seems,  
When you hear that old time song.

[Verse 2:]

Hush-a-bye, ma baby, go to sleep on Mammy’s knee,  
Journey back to Dixieland in dreams again with me;  
It seems like your Mammy is there once again,  
And the darkies were strummin’ that same old  
    refrain  
‘Way down in Missouri where I learned this lullaby,  
When the stars were blinkin’ and the moon was  
    climbin’ high,  
And I hear Mammy Cloe, as in days long ago,  
Singin’ hush-a-bye.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> “The Missouri State Song,” Netstate – Missouri,  
<[http://www.netstate.com/states/symb/song/mo\\_mo\\_waltz.htm](http://www.netstate.com/states/symb/song/mo_mo_waltz.htm)> (5 March 2009).

\* Note: Subsequent quotations from “My Old Kentucky Home,” “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” and “The Missouri Waltz” will be shown in *italics* and not individually footnoted. Other song lyrics will also be in *italics*, but will be footnoted.

## Part I.

### Commonalities and Influences

Stephen Foster, James Bland, and J. R. Shannon all wrote song lyrics incorporating each man's version of what he perceived to be the dialect used by slaves or by free blacks. Not one of these three songwriters, however, exclusively used that form of speech himself. Stephen Collins Foster was an educated white, born in 1826 in Lawrenceville, Pennsylvania to a socially prominent, though financially struggling, family. He lived in a household that did not own slaves but did employ black house servants, so he may have had some exposure to black dialect through them. He also grew up hearing spirituals as well as the songs of minstrelsy, that entertainment phenomenon which peaked in popularity in the 1840s. James Allen Bland was a free black, born in 1854 in Flushing, Long Island, New York. He was one of eight children in a family that valued and encouraged education and attended Howard University for at least a period of time prior to writing "Carry Me Back to Old Virginy."<sup>10</sup> Being black himself, Bland probably would have had exposure to various dialects within the black community, despite his own family's exceptional educational history.<sup>11</sup> He would also have been exposed to dialect use in spirituals and in the tunes of minstrelsy, quite popular in Bland's day and with which he himself was enamored.<sup>12</sup> By the time Bland was to write "Carry

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<sup>10</sup> David A. Jasen and Gene Jones, Spreadin' Rhythm Around: Black Popular Songwriters, 1880-1930 (New York: Shirmer Books, 1998), 9.

<sup>11</sup> Bland's father, Allen Bland, was one of the first black men in the United States to receive a college education. Jasen and Jones, 8.

Me Back to Old Virginny” in 1886, earlier Stephen Foster dialect songs like “Old Black Joe,” “Old Folks at Home,” and “My Old Kentucky Home” had been popular for several decades.<sup>13</sup> James Royce Shannon was born in Adrian, Michigan in 1881. His father ran the local St. Elmo Hotel, “popular during Rail Road days,” and his mother ran a boarding house,<sup>14</sup> so he was likely exposed to a variety of speech. While he may not have had as much personal exposure to black dialect as did Foster or Bland, it is likely Shannon had heard various forms, having lived in several urban centers as a songwriter and having toured the United States and Europe with the theatrical company he organized.<sup>15</sup> He would have undoubtedly also been exposed to the mimicked and exaggerated versions of such dialect in the still-popular minstrel performances of the early 1900s, as well as Stephen Foster’s tunes with that songwriter’s interpretation of such speech.<sup>16</sup> Each of the three men would have had ample opportunity to hear several forms of black dialect spoken or sung.

Many of the slave dialects of the Port Royal islands were studied in 1867 by W. F. Allen, C. P. Ware, and L. M. Garrison as part of their study of slave songs.<sup>17</sup> While hearing differences in the dialects, the researchers were able to identify common characteristics, many of which they felt could be applicable to the southeasterly slave

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<sup>12</sup> James Bland left his law studies at Howard to become an entertainer, eventually becoming one of the highest paid performers of all time on the [black] minstrel circuit. Jasen and Jones, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Jasen and Jones, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Genevive Vogt Schwartz, Adrian, MI. An undated statement on file with the Lenawee County Historical Museum, Adrian, Michigan.

<sup>15</sup> “‘Irish Lullaby’ Has Special Ring in Adrian,” The (Toledo) Blade, on file at Lenawee County Historical Museum, Adrian, MI.

<sup>16</sup> Eric Lott, Love & Theft. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 6.

<sup>17</sup> William Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware, and Lucy McKim Garrison, Slave Songs of the United States (New York, 1867).

states as well:<sup>18</sup> There was a usual softening of *th* and *v* or *f* into *d* and *b*, such as we see repeated in *dat* for *that*. Words and syllables routinely became clipped: *lee' bro'* for *little brother* or *plant'shun* for *plantation*.<sup>19</sup> Similar words were often substituted for frequently used phrases, such as *day clean* for *day-break*. “Say” was often added to lines of song. While not extending or changing the meaning, it functioned as “a kind of expletive,” as in “(Say) when you get to heaven (say) you member me.”<sup>20</sup> The letters *n*, *r*, and *y* were used to represent contracted forms of words, such as “He n’a comin’, sir.”<sup>21</sup>

While this and other early studies of dialect may be helpful, the exact form of dialect, its representation in word form on the printed page, was dependent upon the hearing, interpretation, and spelling selections of the researchers – *what writers chose to represent as black speech*. One of the earliest researchers of slave songs and dialect, Thomas Wentworth Higginson, admits to this difficulty, in introducing one of his many articles on this topic in the Atlantic Monthly: “The words will be here given, as nearly as possible, in the original dialect; and if the spelling seems sometimes inconsistent, or the misspelling insufficient, it is because I could get no nearer.”<sup>22</sup> One wonders how those researchers may have been influenced by the images of blacks which had been portrayed by minstrelsy for more than forty years at the time of the Allen, Ware, and Garrison study – images which mocked their speech and represented blacks as mentally slow, one of

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<sup>18</sup> Allen, Ware, and Garrison, xxiii.

<sup>19</sup> Allen, Ware, and Garrison. xxv.

<sup>20</sup> Allen, Ware, and Garrison. xxvi.

<sup>21</sup> Allen, Ware, and Garrison. xxix.

<sup>22</sup> T.W. Higginson, “Negro Spirituals,” The Atlantic Monthly, Volume 19 Issue 116, June 1867, 685. Cornell University Library Windows on the Past, The Making of America, <<http://digital.library.cornell.edu>>.

many negative stereotypes, or what history professor and author Berndt Ostendorf calls “a series of rigid and fixed social and cultural roles.”<sup>23</sup> Much of the wording and phrasing of black dialect, certain terms used for slaves, or for activities related to them, became associated with the negative stereotypes popularized in minstrelsy.

The writer, poet, or lyricist attempts to represent a pronunciation of a word or phrase in dialect as he or she hears it. The often shortened or changed word or contraction is not to be found in Webster; thus its spelling or exact contracted form becomes subjective and may easily differ among various writers. Mark Twain’s words for the runaway slave Jim in his 1884 Huckleberry Finn<sup>24</sup> and James Whitcomb Riley’s Hoosier dialect for his 1885 poem “Little Orphant Annie”<sup>25</sup> are both the best interpretations of the writer/poet. The dialects recorded on paper as lyrics of a Spiritual or for the words spoken by the slave singing “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” are the particular dialect *as it was heard by the writer* and may or may not have been appropriately distinguished from the dialect used in minstrel performances.

Many representations of black dialect are clearly evident in “My Old Kentucky Home,” especially as it appears in its first version in Foster’s own handwriting in his personal sketch book.<sup>26</sup> Even the original title “Poor Uncle Tom, Goodnight” changed at the time of publishing, with Foster incorporating many fewer representations of black dialect in the second version of the song. That first version included lines and phrases

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<sup>23</sup> Berndt Ostendorf, “Minstrelsy & Early Jazz.” The Massachusetts Review, 20.3, (Autumn 1979) 581-582.

<sup>24</sup> Mark Twain, Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth J. Van Allen, James Whitcomb Riley: A Life (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 2; Donald C. Manlove, ed., The Best of James Whitcomb Riley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), vi.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen Collins Foster, Stephen Foster’s Sketchbook, (June 26, 1851), 25. In the Foster Hall Collection, Center for American Music, University of Pittsburgh Library System. <<http://images.library.pitt.edu>>.

like “*De corn top’s ripe, and de meadows in de bloom,*” or “*By’m by Hard Times comes a knocking at de door. . .*” Foster’s published version, retitled “My Old Kentucky Home,” while still including some of those earlier phrases, cut back on the total amount of dialect. Bland’s “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” used shortened or slightly altered words like “*tatoes,*” “*massa,*” or “*missis,*” while Shannon’s waltz shortened some words, as well, as in “*Way down in Missouri . . .*” and “*Rest yo’ head . . .*”

The use of dialect as seen in the lyrics of all three of these composers had its primary *musical* origins in two forms: the Negro spiritual and minstrel or Blackface music. While all three composers heard and were on some level influenced by both of these forms, the work of Stephen Foster, the earliest of the three, also served as a conduit and example of the use of black dialect for the musical lyrics of both James Bland’s “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” and J.R. Shannon’s “Missouri Waltz.” Foster’s best known works were his compositions incorporating dialect – or his perception of it – and those songs remained popular throughout the working lives of both Bland and Shannon.

The type of song known as “The Negro Spiritual” was the creation of American black slaves. It grew out of African musical influences and the suffering and sorrows of slavery. The term “spiritual” has come to mean songs with at least religious overtones, if not clearly Biblical content. Some spirituals, however, combined religious sentiment or story with the slave’s personal suffering or desire to be free: “. . . *And before I be a slave, I be buried in my grave, And go home to my Maker and be free.*”<sup>27</sup> There are some slave songs which in the 1800s were called “spirituals” while having no religious

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<sup>27</sup> “Oh, Freedom” in Kerran L. Sanger, “When the Spirit Says Sing!”: The Role of Freedom Songs in the Civil Rights Movement. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995, 179.

connection at all, but were more what we today might call folk songs.<sup>28</sup> James Weldon Johnson calls spirituals America's "only folk songs . . . with sentiments . . . for the most part, taken from the Bible . . . and melodies . . . weirdly sweet and others so wonderfully strong."<sup>29</sup> Johnson suggests ". . . whereas the chief character of Ragtime is rhythm, the chief characteristic of the 'spirituals' is melody. The melodies of 'Steal Away to Jesus,' 'Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,' 'Nobody Knows de Trouble I See,' 'I Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray,' 'Deep River,' 'O, Freedom Over Me,' and many others of these songs possess a beauty that is –what shall I say? Poignant. . . . in the 'spirituals he [the Negro] voiced his sense of beauty and his deep religious feeling."<sup>30</sup>

Inspiration for the spiritual came from many places. Frederick Douglass said, "The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart."<sup>31</sup> Spirituals were inspired by his woes, his fears, his misery over loss, his hopes for an end to his plight, or a moment of happiness or wonder. In the words of New Orleans school principal and writer on African American folklore A. E. Perkins, in "Negro Spirituals from the Far South," spirituals were

. . . composed in the fields, in the kitchen, at the loom, in the cabin at night, and were inspired by some sad or awe-inspiring event. The death of a beloved one, even one of the master's family, the hardness of a master or his cruelty, the selling of friends or relatives, and heart-rending separations, a camp-meeting, a great revival, the sadness and loneliness of old age, unusual phenomena such as the bursting of a comet, -- any of these might be sources of inspiration.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> James Weldon Johnson, Book of American Negro Poetry, New York, 1922, 17.

<sup>29</sup> James Weldon Johnson, 17.

<sup>30</sup> James Weldon Johnson, 18.

<sup>31</sup> Frederick Douglass, Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, in Frederick Douglass: Autobiographies, (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1994), 24.

<sup>32</sup> A.E. Perkins, "Negro Spirituals from the Far South" Journal of American Folklore, XXXV (July-Sept. 1922), 223.



Some early spirituals served as a secret method of communication: Lines like “*Dere’s a meeting here tonight*”<sup>33</sup> or “*Sister, carry de news on, Master’s in de field*”<sup>34</sup> served as notices of secret meetings, or warnings to slaves to beware of a cruel master nearby, not just songs about the church or God. This type of double message was often possible with the use of words with double meanings, such as “home” or “heaven” for the North or freedom.

Some have suggested that spirituals also “closely resemble West African song style, particularly in their strong call-and-response patterns.”<sup>35</sup> The following description of this form of singing was given by Allen, Ware, and Garrison in their 1867 study of slave songs:

There is no singing in parts, as we understand it, and yet no two appear to be singing the same thing – the leading singer starts the words of each verse, often improvising, and the others who “base” him, as it is called, strike in with the refrain, or even join in the solo, when the words are familiar. When the “base” begins, the leader often stops, leaving the rest of his words to be guessed at, or it may be that they are taken up by one of the other singers. And the “basers” themselves seem to follow their own whims, beginning when they please and leaving off when they please, striking an octave above or below (in case they have pitched the tune too low or too high), or hitting some other note that chords, so as to produce the effect of a marvelous complication and variety, and yet with the most perfect time, and rarely with any discord . . . they seem not infrequently to strike sounds that cannot be precisely represented . . . slices from one note to another, and turns and cadences not in articulated notes.<sup>36</sup>

One student conducted research in which he interviewed former slaves during the 1890s and compared the songs of American slaves with African music. When asked about the

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<sup>33</sup> Allen, Ware, and Garrison. Slave Songs, 9.

<sup>34</sup> Perkins, Spirituals, 229.

<sup>35</sup> John F. Szwed, “Musical Adaptation among Afro-Americans.” Journal of American Folklore Vol.82, No.324, (April-June 1969) 115.

<sup>36</sup> Allen, Ware, and Garrison, v.

origin of spirituals, one interviewee is reported to have responded: “I’d jump up dar and den and holler and shout and sing and pat, and dey would all cotch de words and I’d sing it to some old shout song I’d heard ‘em sing from Africa, and dey’d all take it up and keep at it, and keep a’addin’ to it, and den it would be a spiritual.”<sup>37</sup> The researcher here has provided us with not only descriptive information related to spirituals, but has chosen to relay it in his own interpretation of the dialect used – something not necessary to present his findings and possibly misleading as to the speech itself.

Slave songs, many of which we label “spirituals,” differed from place to place, as did slave dialects. Early researchers found songs differed from region to region and “even upon adjoining plantations.”<sup>38</sup> It was the “custom at Port Royal to repeat the first part of the tune over and over, it may be a dozen times, before passing to the ‘turn,’ and then to do the same with that. [ . . . ] In the Virginia songs . . . the chorus is usually sung twice after each verse – often the second time with some such interjaculatory expression as ‘I say now,’ [or] ‘God say you must.’”<sup>39</sup> Regional differences as well as the latitude taken by the singer to change or alter the words of individual songs have contributed to the rich array of American spirituals.

Many historians agree that white church music of the time had only “a limited influence” on spirituals. T. W. Higginson wrote about the songs that he heard during the

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<sup>37</sup> Jeanette Robinson Murphy, “The Survival of African Music in America,” Popular Science Monthly (September 1899), in Jazz in Print: An Anthology of Selected Early Readings in Jazz History, ed. Karl Koenig, (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002), 55. Note: In transcribing his words to describe a spiritual, the student chose to use his own interpretation of the accent or dialect of the former slave he was interviewing. This attempt to represent dialect would seem to indicate a fascination with black speech, not just with musical comparisons.

<sup>38</sup> Allen, Ware, and Garrison, xi.

<sup>39</sup> Allen, Ware, and Garrison, xxii. The popularity of slave songs differed regionally as well. At the time of the 1867 study, “Roll Jordan” was “sung in Florida, but not, . . . in North Carolina.” Allen, Ware, and Garrison, xxii.

Civil War that were sung by former slaves: “As they learned all their songs by ear, they often strayed into wholly new versions, which sometimes became popular, and entirely banished the others. . . . they sang, reluctantly, even on Sunday, the long and short metres of the hymnbooks, always gladly yielding to the more potent excitement of their own ‘spirituals.’”<sup>40</sup> According to historian John Blassingame, “. . . white hymns were too cold and static to allow for the full expression of the slave’s religious sentiments. [. . .] The emphasis, words, phrases, structure, and call-and-response pattern of the spirituals differ so strikingly from the songs of whites, that one must look outside the white church to discover their origin.”<sup>41</sup> This difference is underscored by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s comments on the religious music of whites: “. . . solemn, dull and nasal, consisting in repeating two lines of a hymn and then singing it, and then two more, *ad infinitum*.”<sup>42</sup>

By the mid 1800s, when Stephen Foster wrote “My Old Kentucky Home” and other dialect pieces, the populace at large had become comfortable with the use of black dialect in songs not so much from its use in spirituals – viewed by most whites in the 1800s and even the early 1900s as music “owned” by blacks – but from its use in minstrel music. Minstrelsy, the performing of comic songs, dances, and “plays” by, initially, white performers in blackface, and later by black entertainers as well, had become popular in this country in the early 1800s and mocked the ways in which blacks were different. Some would argue it really began in the 1700s with a performance of “The Gay Negro Boy” by Gottlieb Graupner, “in character . . . accompanying himself with the

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<sup>40</sup> Higginson, 693.

<sup>41</sup> John W. Blassingame, The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Ante-Bellum South, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 67.

<sup>42</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe in Watchman and Reflector, April, 1867, as quoted in Slave Songs, Allen, Ware and Garrison, xx.

banjo” in the play Oroonoko at the Federal Street Theatre in Boston in 1799.<sup>43</sup> The use of black dialect in songs served to spotlight the differences in the speech of slaves and pointed up their comparative lack of formal education -- of which speech had become a societal indicator. Mocking the slave’s mode of speech became a comic cornerstone for minstrelsy, serving to create and reinforce another negative black stereotype.<sup>44</sup>

“Backside Albany” is generally acknowledged as the first notable song in blackface dialect. It was written in 1814 just a few days before Francis Scott Key penned “The Star Spangled Banner.” While it would never become as well known, it would initiate an entire genre of American music and performance which would, in turn, influence, and be reflective of, American culture for years to come. “Backside Albany” was written by Micah Hawkins, a New York City musician, innkeeper and grocer. (Obviously New York musicians and entertainers had to hold a “day job” even then.) According to minstrelsy historian William J. Mahar, Hawkins wrote the humorous song “Backside Albany,” to describe the Battle of Plattsburg, which took place September 11, 1814 on, and on the shores of, Lake Champlain, a battle credited with blocking a British invasion of the “North Country” of New England (New York, Vermont, and New Hampshire).<sup>45</sup> First performed in 1815, this song was written as though sung by a black sailor in the “Black English dialect” typically associated with slaves of the period, yet sung to an Irish ballad.<sup>46</sup> While describing the British defeat with sarcasm, much of the

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<sup>43</sup> Waldo Selden Pratt, ed., Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920), 227.

<sup>44</sup> Lott, 217.

<sup>45</sup> William J. Mahar, “‘Backside Albany’ and Early Blackface Minstrelsy: A Contextual Study of America’s First Blackface Song,” American Music 6, no.1 (Spring 1988): 10.

song's humor is derived from the exaggerated dialect used.<sup>47</sup> The song "has been criticized for its degradation of the black sailor's role in the War of 1812 and for its portrayal of blacks as illiterate."<sup>48</sup> This portrayal of a black stereotype was not new, but such a negative representation presented in a comic blackface format certainly was. Not only was "Backside Albany" a hit with white New England audiences, but its popularity spread throughout the country. The song, in fact, "remained popular nationally well into the 1850s."<sup>49</sup>

Whatever its beginnings, this theatrical form called minstrelsy, labeled by historian Constance Rourke a "white masquerade,"<sup>50</sup> was itself the birthplace of a new type of music in black dialect that began to be noticed in this country around the time of the War of 1812. Its songs were labeled variously "Negro melodies," "slave melodies," "Ethiopian music," "coon songs," and, later, "plantation melodies." Blackface music was "born and nurtured in the Northeast and the Ohio River Valley" and was, according to author Ken Emerson, ". . . more than an expression, however direct or displaced, of racial anxiety, economic insecurity, and class resentment. . . . It was also a rejection of the

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<sup>46</sup> Mahar, 1, 15.

<sup>47</sup> Mahar, 9. Ken Emerson also notes, "From 10 to 20% of the American naval force at Plattsburg was black, so it was not inappropriate that Hawkins put his comic account into the mouth of a black man. But the dialect is so puerile - . . . - that it's unclear how much of the laugh is on the British and how much on the African American sailor." (Ken Emerson, Doo-Dah! Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture, [New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997], 58-59).

<sup>48</sup> Mahar, 2.

<sup>49</sup> Mahar, 16.

<sup>50</sup> Constance Rourke, American Humor: A Study of the National Character (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1953), 87.

femininity, the foreignness, and the effete affectations of parlor ballads” -- that other vastly popular type of music then present in most 19<sup>th</sup> century American homes.<sup>51</sup>

In 1829 in New York City, George Washington Dixon, “a Virginian by birth,” had performed a song called “Coal Black Rose.”<sup>52</sup> The very opening of the song

. . . announced the arrival of full-blown blackface: “Lubly, Rosa, Sambo cum / Don’t you hear de Banjo, tum, tum, tum. . .” . . . Sambo, the banjo, the phonetic spelling, and vagrant consonants became stock-in-trade of the “Ethiopean delineators,” as the blackface entertainers who followed Dixon were initially called. (There were Yankee delineators, too, and specialists in backwoods Kentuckian roles, in this era when America was sorting out and cementing some of its most durable regional and racial stereotypes.)<sup>53</sup>

Dixon’s songs like “Long Tail Blue” and “Zip Coon” “ridiculed the effrontery (as white folks considered it) of the African Americans up North who emulated their urbane superiors.”<sup>54</sup> The stereotypical “uppity” character that developed was “the black dandy, sporting his flashy attire and projecting a slick, urbane persona (this, of course, within the overall demeanor of the ignorant black buffoon mimicking the manners of sophisticated white folks).”<sup>55</sup> Along with the rise in the popularity of minstrelsy, songs celebrating this stereotype followed for many decades, like J.S. Putnam’s popular 1883 “New Coon in Town”:

There’s a bran new coon in town  
He came de other day

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<sup>51</sup> Ken Emerson, Doo-Dah! Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 65-66.

<sup>52</sup> Dale Cockrell, Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 25.

<sup>53</sup> Emerson, 59, crediting Constance Rourke, American Humor: A Study of the National Character (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1931; reprint, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 98.

<sup>54</sup> Emerson, 60.

<sup>55</sup> James H. Dorman, “Shaping the Popular Image of Post-Reconstruction American Blacks: The ‘Coon Song’ Phenomenon of the Gilded Age,” American Quarterly 40 (1988): 451.

A reg'lar la-de-dah,  
Dat's what de girls all say.<sup>56</sup>

Dixon's mimicry of the Northern dandy was joined on the American stage in the 1830s by its complimentary southern stereotype: "a Kentucky cornfield negro" in the character of an old black slave called "Jim Crow," performed by Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice.<sup>57</sup> Rice's song and dance routine became immediately popular, and as the first person to present an entire act around a blackface performance, Rice was labeled "the father of American minstrelsy."<sup>58</sup> Rice soon became so popular a circus and staged minstrel show entertainer in the United States, that, by the mid 1830s, he was performing abroad as well, and "'jumped Jim Crow' in two English theaters nightly." He was ". . . creating such a stir with his grotesque gyrations . . . that the celebrated Shakespearean actor William Charles Macready cut short his London engagement." – having been upstaged by Rice!<sup>59</sup>

During the 1830s, this genre of uniquely American music started to sweep the country, and its songs even became popular abroad. Minstrel tunes were written in an upbeat, syncopated style, originating as dance music, what author James Dorman called, "in a word *happy* music, despite the grossly offensive lyrics."<sup>60</sup> Until this time the rest of the globe – most particularly England – had paid very little mind to all things American.

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<sup>56</sup> Dorman, 452.

<sup>57</sup> Emerson, 61.

<sup>58</sup> Alan W. C. Green. "Jim Crow," "Zip Coon": The Northern Origins of Negro Minstrelsy." The Massachusetts Review 11.2 (1970) 390. Note: "Daddy" Rice was probably the most famous performer of the minstrel show genre from the 1830s to the 1850s. "One of his costumes, which wrapped him in red, white, and blue stripe, was purported to have inspired the caricature by Thomas Nast that to this day is our image of Uncle Sam." (Emerson, 101)

<sup>59</sup> Emerson, 58.

<sup>60</sup> Dorman, 453.

Said one British critic: “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book? goes to an American play? or looks at an American statue?”<sup>61</sup> By 1836, however, “the world was pricking up its ears to American popular music. It was this year that the United States began trafficking in its most successful cultural export before the movies.”<sup>62</sup>

In viewing the popularity of minstrelsy in the white community, Berndt Ostendorf commented, “Minstrelsy was most popular when the black group seemed most threatening . . . In minstrelsy America buried a deep fear under laughter.”<sup>63</sup> For some, the performances of minstrel troops, so popular in the early 1830s, seem to suggest a form of white escape from fears of rebellion or retaliation by a population that had been wronged. For some, this “blackface mechanism of cultural control,” appears to be a form of repression against the advancements of a struggling or less-empowered group within the existing society and of blacks in particular.<sup>64</sup>

Historian Eric Lott maintains that the white community was secretly fascinated by black culture. He suggests in Love and Theft, that minstrelsy, where “white men caricatured blacks for sport and profit, was less an instrument of black subjugation, than a fascination with ‘blackness,’ expressed in “a simultaneous dressing up and crossing of racial boundaries.”<sup>65</sup> Seeing his own position as a departure from “most other writers on

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<sup>61</sup> “Adam Seybert. “Statistical Annals of the United States of America. Philadelphia, 1818.” Edinburgh Review 33, (January 1820): 79.

<sup>62</sup> Emerson, 58.

<sup>63</sup> Ostendorf, 581-82.

<sup>64</sup> Lott, 6.

<sup>65</sup> Lott, 3.



minstrelsy, who have based their analyses on racial aversion,” Lott claims “the vagaries of racial desire as fundamental to minstrel-show minstrelsy.” He contends, “It was cross-racial desire that coupled a nearly insupportable fascination and a self-protective derision with respect to black people and their cultural practices, and that made blackface minstrelsy less a sign of absolute white power and control than of panic and anxiety, terror, and pleasure.”<sup>66</sup> Lott also maintains minstrelsy comprised the “theft” of black culture, calling it “little more than cultural robbery, a form of . . . expropriation, which troubled guilty whites all the more because they were so attracted to the culture they plundered.”<sup>67</sup>

As minstrelsy further grew in popularity, it expanded to include performances by black artists. As noted by W.E.B. Dubois, “Negroes themselves began to appear as principals in minstrel companies after a time and indeed as early as 1820 there was an ‘African company’ playing in New York.”<sup>68</sup> Rice’s Jim Crow character from the country was often celebrated in song, as in “Coon’s Salvation Army,” a dialect piece still being performed in 1884 by the black performer Sam Lucas:

De melon patch am safe today,  
No Coons am dar in sight,  
De chickens dey may roost in peace  
Wid in der coops tonight.<sup>69</sup>

Such songs provided further descriptors to expand the country Negro stereotype by suggesting that most could be expected to participate in small-time thievery in the form

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<sup>66</sup> Lott, 6.

<sup>67</sup> Lott, 8.

<sup>68</sup> W.E.B. Dubois, The Gift of Black Folk, (Millwood, New York: Kraus-Thomson Organization Limited, 1992), 309-310.

<sup>69</sup> Dorman, 452.

of stealing chickens. This kind of performance content by black entertainers like Lucas did little to help the image of the freed black; but for the entertainer, black or white, who needed work, minstrelsy was popular and paid the rent. Whatever the underlying premise for its popularity, and whether performed, as was more frequently the case, by whites in blackface or by black entertainers, the music of minstrelsy provided many years of popularity for songs sung in the dialect first identified with the blacks of antebellum slavery.<sup>70</sup>

The popular genre of American Blackface music existed simultaneously in the 1830s and 40s with both classical music and with that form of music which came to be known as the parlor tune. Performed in the parlors of white America, these tunes were, most often, gentle songs of nostalgia, grief, or longing. They grew in popularity in the 1800s, along with the adoption of a tradition which had originated in Europe. In much of Europe, Smith College music professor and writer Ruth Solie tells us, it had become the accepted norm that “every well-bred girl, whether she has talent or not, must learn to play the piano and sing.” In America it, similarly, became one’s “duty as a good daughter to play for the pleasure of her family and their friends.”<sup>71</sup> The songs popularized along with this practice were most often sentimental tunes including a “predominance of romantic ballads.”<sup>72</sup> Early in the 1800s songs had begun to appear “based on the lore of medieval chivalry.” Author Richard Crawford contends that Stephen Foster would later become “a

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<sup>70</sup> Minstrelsy maintained some popularity until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The author remembers attending a fund-raiser minstrel show in the early 1950s, presented by the local (white) Lions Club in Chatham, a small southern Virginia town.

<sup>71</sup> Ruth A. Solie, Music in Other Words: Victorian Conversations (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 89-90.

<sup>72</sup> Chase Gilbert, America’s Music From the Pilgrims to the Present (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 151.

leading American master of the translated courtly love song,” with such songs as “Open Thy Lattice Love.”<sup>73</sup> He labels Foster’s songs of courtship, such as “Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair,” as “a gentle, sublimated reverie of a soul almost purged of passion.”<sup>74</sup>

Parlor tunes had other themes as well as romance. Home, yearning, and loss were the topics of many favorite parlor songs: “I’ll Take You Home Again, Kathleen;” “Listen to the Mockingbird;” “Sweet Genevieve;” “When I Saw Sweet Nelly Home;” and “When You and I Were Young.”<sup>75</sup> According to music historian Chase Gilbert, during these years there was the “omnipresent theme of the dear, departed maiden.” Just as Poe had written of that “rare and radiant maiden whom the angels named Lenore,” Stephen Foster was writing of “Gentle Annie” and “Eulalie.”<sup>76</sup> Also popular in the parlor were “heartrending” ballads of “sorrowful sentiment” such as Henry Clay Work’s “My Grandfather’s Clock” and dramatic ballads, narratives “that aimed to stir the emotions with a blend of pity and terror.”<sup>77</sup> An example of the latter might tell the tragic story of lives lost at sea, for, according to Gilbert, “the imminent perils of a sea voyage were very much in the minds of Americans during the nineteenth century.”<sup>78</sup>

According to Crawford in A History of America’s Musical Life, “nineteenth-century American parlor culture was not much concerned with issues of art or musical substance. Publishers were anxious above all to sell their products. With the help of the

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<sup>73</sup> Richard Crawford, A History of America’s Musical Life (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 242.

<sup>74</sup> Crawford, 245, 248.

<sup>75</sup> Crawford, 253.

<sup>76</sup> Gilbert, 149.

<sup>77</sup> Gilbert, 158, 152.

<sup>78</sup> Gilbert, 153.

piano industry, they tailored a growing repertory of piano sheet music for what they took to be the taste of mostly female amateur pianists to play in the parlor.”<sup>79</sup> While some were more complex and called “parlor arias,” the majority of parlor ballads were simply written, relatively easy to play, and easy to obtain. In addition to the ready availability of sheet music, many such parlor tunes were published in periodicals like Godey’s Lady’s Book or the Columbian Lady’s and Gentleman’s Magazine.<sup>80</sup>

Foster biographer John Tasker Howard suggests young Stephen Foster had been exposed to such parlor ballads from the time of his infancy and, indeed, would write many himself, yet he loved the tunes of minstrelsy.<sup>81</sup> As a child in the 1830s, Stephen and a bunch of neighborhood boys performed in their own thespian troop – with Stephen as the star performer. His choice of music for these performances did not include his songwriter sister’s favorites, like “There’s Nothing True But Heaven”<sup>82</sup> or other parlor tunes. Foster chose instead to perform popular comic songs in blackface dialect like: ‘Long-Tail Blue,’ ‘Zip Coon,’ ‘Coal Black Rose,’ and ‘Jim Crow.’ His performance

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<sup>79</sup> Crawford, 239.

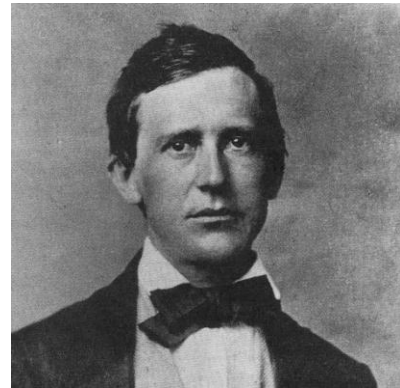
<sup>80</sup> Gilbert, 161. Note: Parlor tunes as well as other forms of popular music experienced tremendous growth at this time primarily as a result of that new mode of distribution, sheet music, made possible by America’s progress in so many different arenas. Sheet music was “. . . a home delivery system that was expedited by innovations in transportation, communications, and printing. The canal, the steamboat, the railroad, the telegraph, the high-speed rotary steam press, the paper-cutting machine, color lithography, new ways to convert rags into paper – all these forces converged in Stephen Foster’s childhood to revolutionize Jacksonian America and make popular culture in general, and pop music in particular, possible.” Emerson, 43.

<sup>81</sup> John Tasker Howard. Stephen Foster, America’s Troubadour (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1953), 41.

<sup>82</sup> Oliver Shaw, composer. Russel Sanjek, American Popular Music and Its Business: From 1790 to 1909 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 102.

actually guaranteed him money each week, with the troupe usually making enough “to buy tickets to the old Pittsburgh Theatre on Saturday nights.”<sup>83</sup>

These songs in dialect that Foster was to hear and to perform as a child seem a world away from parlor tunes, yet he grew up in a world of these dual musical forms. The tunes for which he would first become known and those for which he is best remembered were compositions which used elements of both of these musical forms: slave melodies and stories in dialect and white parlor tunes. According to Gilbert, “Foster’s so-called plantation melodies were as popular on the minstrel stage as they were welcome in the parlor. Any sentimental song with a sufficient number of high notes would find a lyric tenor in blackface ready to give it an ‘Ethiopian’ presentation.”<sup>84</sup> The sheet music for Foster’s songs, with their dual heritage from both black and white American cultures, would fill the parlors of American homes in the mid-1800s and well into the first part of the next century, to influence both Bland and Shannon. It is this new style of music, combining black and white influences, that brought Foster the title, “America’s First Composer.”<sup>85</sup>



Stephen Collins Foster

Some thirty years after Stephen Foster’s childhood minstrel song performances, James Bland was embarking on his own childhood dream of becoming an entertainer. Bland had been born in New York in 1854 to a family that valued and encouraged

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<sup>83</sup> Howard, 83-84.

<sup>84</sup> Gilbert, 150.

<sup>85</sup> “Stephen Foster,” Songwriters Hall of Fame, <<http://www.songwritershalloffame.org/exhibits/C10>> (1 April 2008).

education. While likely encouraged to pursue more traditional academics, James Bland loved music. Supposedly, when he was a child, after having heard an old black man playing a banjo on the street, he constructed one himself and taught himself to play.<sup>86</sup> He began entertaining others at fourteen, began composing at fifteen, and eventually redesigned the banjo to include a fifth string, gaining it the new label, “the Bland Banjo.”<sup>87</sup> Bland was educated at Howard University, and subsequently joined “the Georgia Minstrels, the most successful black troupe, managed by white impresarios George B. Callenda and later J. H. [Col. “Jack”] Haverly. . . . When the troupe went to Britain, as Haverly’s Genuine Colored Minstrels, in 1880, Bland stayed there.”<sup>88</sup> He remained abroad for twenty years, touring Europe and earning among the highest salaries ever paid a minstrel performer.<sup>89</sup> According to Jasen and Jones, co-authors of Spreadin’ Rhythm Around, Bland, “was neither the first nor the biggest of the African-American minstrel stars, but among the hundreds of black minstrels, his name is the only one recognized today. He alone left a body of work that still matters.”<sup>90</sup> James A. “Jimmy” Bland would be credited with more than 700 songs and become known to many as “the greatest Black writer of American Folk Song.”<sup>91</sup> The music he wrote, played, and sang was often not

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<sup>86</sup> Lauren Hall, James Allen Bland, <[http://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitimay/bios/Bland\\_James.htm](http://pabook.libraries.psu.edu/palitimay/bios/Bland_James.htm)> (24 March 2008).

<sup>87</sup> “A Short History of James A. Bland,” Carry Me Back to Ole Virginny. <<http://www.valions.org/Bland.htm>> (1/25/08), 1.

<sup>88</sup> William W. Austin, “Susanna,” “Jeanie,” and “The Old Folks at Home,” The Songs of Stephen C. Foster from His Time to Ours, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 312. Note: Sources differ as to whether Bland completed his degree at Howard or dropped out to join a minstrel troupe.

<sup>89</sup> “A Short History of James A. Bland,” 2.

<sup>90</sup> Jasen and Jones, 8.

<sup>91</sup> “A Short History of James A. Bland,” 1.

typical minstrel music, but seems more of a hybrid, much like the tunes of Stephen Foster. Legendary blues and jazz musician W.C. Handy wrote of meeting Bland in 1897, calling Bland's songs "second only to the work of Stephen Foster in the same field."<sup>92</sup> The composer would, indeed, also be called "the black Stephen Foster." According to black music historian William R. Hullfish, Bland is "generally acknowledged to be the first commercially successful black songwriter."<sup>93</sup> The influence of the music of minstrelsy – so important to both Foster and Bland – would continue to be felt into the next century. By the time James Royce Shannon was to write the lyrics for *The Missouri Waltz* in 1915, minstrel shows had been a common part of the American landscape for more than eighty years.

In addition to dialect, "My Old Kentucky Home," "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny," and "The Missouri Waltz" also shared a common theme. Foster's dialect songs, as those of many other writers who would follow him, like Bland and Shannon, were written to be sung by a voice speaking in dialect, but with a major difference from the voices of minstrelsy. Foster's singer was most often a kindly and lovable black, sentimentally defined as non-threatening to whites, as had been Jim Crow or Zip Coon; yet, rather than comic, he was serious, singing a song of nostalgia and love for home. In "My Old Kentucky Home," and later in "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" and "The Missouri Waltz," the singer pines for his homeland; he sings of his love or heartfelt longing for a *place*. The singer in Foster's classic tune loves his old Kentucky home and laments the sorrow of "Hard Times" ahead, coming to separate him from those joys he

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<sup>92</sup> W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues: An Autobiography*, ed. Arna Bontemps (New York: Macmillan, 1947), 42.

<sup>93</sup> Hullfish, 1.

associates with summertime at home: the beauty of ripening corn in the fields, meadows filled with fragrant blossoms, the sounds of birds singing and happy slave children playing, gay “darkies” hunting possum and coon on warm summer nights, or singing in the moonlight down in the slave quarters – a beautifully romanticized Disney/Uncle Remus picture of life on the plantation – a list of scenes that omits any negative images related to the life of a slave. The nostalgia expressed in the chorus is almost a toast to happy days gone by: “*We will sing one song for the old Kentucky home, For the Old Kentucky Home far away.*”

Love of home appears to have had its origins, for Foster, not just in some parlor tune, but in his own early life. Just two months before Stephen’s birth in a small town near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, his family had lost their home to foreclosure. The family would live as tenants on the foreclosed property for a time, later living in small rentals or with kin. As a boy Stephen was “. . . shunted from rentals to boarding houses to relatives, from Pittsburgh and Allegheny City to Youngstown and Coitsville, Ohio.” States Ken Emerson, “Stephen Foster would compose so many songs about home in part because he seldom knew one for long.”<sup>94</sup> Even after his marriage to Jane McDowell in 1850 and the birth of their one child nine months later, Foster’s life would remain “settled” for only short periods.<sup>95</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> century American cultural propensity for what was proper may well have added to Foster’s personal longing for the warmth and security of a real home. It was a struggle for Foster’s family to maintain its prominent civic role,

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<sup>94</sup> Emerson, 29.

<sup>95</sup> Jane was the daughter of the prominent physician Dr. Andrew McDowell, who had tutored Martin Delany in medicine. (Emerson, 149) Note: The Foster family’s economic struggle, and a similar one experienced by the composer throughout most of his life, would be echoed, along with the “hard times” experienced by slaves and former slaves that Stephen would later write about, in such pieces as “Hard Times Come Again No More.”



due to a continual financial struggle, and keeping up appearances was vital to Stephen's mother, Eliza.<sup>96</sup> In the first half of the 1800s families "had a front to their lives as to their houses [with a proper parlor in the front], where the rough ways of work and family intimacy were concealed, and that they could appear as polished beings capable of grace, dignity and propriety."<sup>97</sup> Like so many of Foster's pieces, "My Old Kentucky Home," echoes the nostalgia and longing for the romanticized home the composer missed himself.

While we know less of James Bland's early years, we do know that he grew up as a free black, in a home with two parents present. His father was intelligent and hard working, advancing himself through education at a time that had to require exceptional emotional and physical self discipline and perseverance. James Bland's father, Allen Bland, was one of the first black men in the United States to receive a college education. He also attended law school at Howard University and was the first black to be appointed examiner in the United States Patent Office.<sup>98</sup> While we don't know how happy the Bland home was, it appears the future songwriter's father modeled the wise use of his professional time and talents.

James (Jimmie) Bland was visiting his girlfriend, Mannie Friend, at her grandmother's home in Tidewater, Virginia when he wrote what would become that state's official song, "Carry Me Back to Ole Virginy." We are told he wrote it to

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<sup>96</sup> Stephen's father William lived in what some have called a "vicious cycle of debt and litigation." According to Emerson, he was "... so preoccupied with suing for money that was owed him that he neglected to ever earn any." (Emerson, 31)

<sup>97</sup> Richard L. Bushman, The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 251.

<sup>98</sup> Jasen and Jones, 8.

impress his girl. As the legend goes, as they sat on the bank of the James River, he played and sang while Mannie wrote down the words. Those words are filled with nostalgia and love for the Virginia countryside: “*That’s where the birds warble sweet in the Springtime . . . That’s where this old darkey’s heart am longed to go.*” While sung in the voice of an old black slave, the sentiment is still one of longing for one’s homeland. (One presumes it was more respectful or acceptable – or perhaps safer – to write a love song about your girl’s homeland, rather than directly about the girl.) When Bland returned to Washington, someone, who had recently overheard him singing (again to Mannie), introduced him to George Primrose, a well known minstrel performer who would become a top manager of his own minstrel troupe. Bland’s new song, with its nostalgic theme, was such a hit with Primrose and his stage partner Billy West, that “within a week they opened their new show [with it] in Baltimore.” – and Bland was on his way to a life as a professional writer and minstrel performer.<sup>99</sup> Nostalgia was popular, and while Bland may have enjoyed it and employed it as a theme, nostalgia would also sell. Many of Bland’s later songs, such as his well-loved “In the Evening By the Moonlight” and “Oh Dem Golden Slippers” would be reminiscent of a more contented or joyous earlier time.



James Bland, sheet music image

We have little to indicate J. R. Shannon’s personal experience of home beyond his growing up in a small Midwestern town, attending church, and receiving encouragement for his musical talent. He was certainly aware of the power of reminiscence and warm

<sup>99</sup> ““A Short History of James A. Bland.” Carry Me Back to Old Virginny. <<http://www.valions.org/Bland.html>> (25 January 2008), 2.

memories of home, however, as he wrote the lyrics for Eppel's tune. The lullaby that became the state song of Missouri, J. R. Shannon's "Missouri Waltz," reminisces over by-gone days. Shannon incorporated nostalgic references to pleasant earlier times, ". . . while the soft breezes sigh, as in days long gone by" at the end of verse 1. The second verse is entirely devoted to a childhood memory: "*Way down in Missouri where I heard this melody, when I was a Pick-a-ninny on my Mammy's knee . . .*" While the words eventually become "*a little child upon my Mommy's knee,*" the encouragement is still there to look back and remember an earlier, simpler time, a time without worry or trouble, a time of contentment.

Love of home and nostalgic dreaming of better days had filled the Negro spirituals Foster would have heard as a child, many of which would likely have been later heard by Bland and Shannon. When Foster was growing up, he had had opportunities to hear music actually being performed in African American churches, for according to W. E. B. Dubois, Foster "accompanied a mulatto maid often to the Negro church and heard the black folk sing."<sup>100</sup> Many early spirituals spoke of the love of home, -- even if the meaning of "home" may have really been "heaven" or "freedom": "*I Want to go Home,*" "*I'se gwin-en home, my Lord . . .*," "*Brother, Guide Me Home,*" or ". . . *I wish I was a child of God, I'd get home bime by*".<sup>101</sup> While nostalgia is usually seen as a sentimental yearning for an older, more pleasant time, it's association with "homesickness" reminds us of the Spirituals that yearn for better times coming, that look ahead to heaven, the eternal home. Blassingame reminds us that slaves "sang of their search for God in the wilderness, rocks, storms, and valleys in order to obtain relief from the pain, weariness,

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<sup>100</sup> DuBois, 275.

<sup>101</sup> Allen, Ware, and Garrison, Slave Songs, #61, 46; #63, 47-48; #107, 86; #93, 72.

and troubles of the world or patience to bear them”<sup>102</sup>: *Soon-a will be done-a with the troubles of the world . . . Goin’ home to live with God.*<sup>103</sup> The themes of spirituals most often revealed feelings of sorrow or of hope, rather than of protest.<sup>104</sup> Such hopeful themes extended to family and the strength to be found in home and community. This was “indicated by frequent references to relatives and friends by name.”<sup>105</sup> There were rarely direct references to slavery in the lyrics, and when they did appear, they were usually couched in Biblical references or stories. A typical image found in numerous spirituals is that of “meeting fathers, mothers, relatives, and friends in Heaven.”<sup>106</sup> Such writings were often written in response to the grief of seeing a family member sold off. Jacob Stroyer writes of hymns that were sung by the slaves remaining behind on the plantation to help console those being sold away:

*When we all meet in Heaven,  
There is no parting there;  
When we all meet in Heaven,  
There is no parting more.*<sup>107</sup>

We see such religious sentiment and the hope of going “home” appearing in the second verse of “Carry Me Back to Old Virginy.” The singer, apparently a slave, sings in verse one of his Virginia home, but in verse two, of approaching death and of the expected joy of meeting his owners in his heavenly home, expressing the belief of

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<sup>102</sup> Blassingame, 74.

<sup>103</sup> African American Heritage Hymnal (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2001), #587.

<sup>104</sup> Blassingame, 66.

<sup>105</sup> Blassingame, 74.

<sup>106</sup> Blassingame, 69.

<sup>107</sup> Jacob Stroyer, My Life in the South, (Salem: Salem Observer Book and Job Print, 1885). <docsouth.unc.edu/neh/stroyer85> (10 April, 2009) 43.

Virginia's early Christian churches, both white and black, of a reward in the hereafter, where all earthly troubles and suffering will be over:

*Massa and Missis have long gone before me,  
Soon we will meet on that bright and golden shore.  
There we'll be happy and free from all sorrow,  
That's where we'll meet and we'll never part no more.*<sup>108</sup>

Whether Bland actually believed in the closeness and affection of slave for master, or, beyond impressing his girlfriend, recognized a positive image for a white purchasing public, we shall never know. His songwriting talents may well have served both purposes.

One reading of the last verse of "My Old Kentucky Home" suggests a slave singing not only of his love for home, but of his impending death and the relief it will bring from labor and suffering:

*A few more days, and the trouble all will end,  
In the field where the sugar-canes grow;  
A few more days for to tote the weary load,  
No matter, 'twill never be light;  
A few more days till we totter on the road,  
Then my old Kentucky home, goodnight.*

These lines also appear as part of Foster's earlier version of the song under its former title "Poor Uncle Tom Goodnight," where they appear to be more clearly about the death of an older slave. We are reminded of that same focus in spirituals and the early African American churches in this country: All troubles end with death, and the believer may look toward the rewards and happiness of a heavenly home, the only real source of hope for the slave.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> The phrase "no more" has come to be associated with Foster, appearing frequently in his work, but shows up in the songs of many later songwriters as well, including Bland. Emerson, 195-198.

<sup>109</sup> Blassingame, 75.

In addition to dialect and theme, all three of these songs were given special status. These declarations of love or longing for the state, or for one's home within a particular state, made these songs perfect selections to officially represent their respective regions. There were years during which it was particularly popular to adopt state symbols such as birds, flowers, mottoes, or songs; they helped people feel good about being part of a larger community. To feel pride in one's home area or region helped people want to maintain it, see it prosper, and, in turn, feel a part of that prosperity – something the nation craved, especially during the 1930s. Over half of the states selected an official State Bird in the late 1920s or early 1930s, and about one third of the states adopted an official State Song.<sup>110</sup>

“My Old Kentucky Home,” the oldest song of the three, was the first to be adopted as an official “State Song.” This occurred in 1928, only two years after the adoption of Kentucky's official State Bird and State Flower.<sup>111</sup> The second song to be written, “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” was also the second to be adopted. In 1940 the Virginia General Assembly passed House Joint Resolution No.10, declaring it Virginia's official State Song.<sup>112</sup> It was not until 1949 that the Missouri State Legislature named “The Missouri Waltz” as that state's official State Song. It was also at the time of

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<sup>110</sup> Benjamin F. Shearer and Barbara S. Shearer, State Names, Seals Flags, and Symbols, A Historical Guide (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 149-176. M. J. Bristow, ed., State Songs of America (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2000). Groups also gathered during this period not just for members to feel support for one another, but to accomplish tasks collectively for which they might experience individual feelings of accomplishment, while functioning as a member of the larger body.

<sup>111</sup> “Kentucky State Symbols, Songs, and Emblems,” Netstate - Kentucky, 1998-2009. <[www.netstate.com/states/symb/ky\\_symb.htm](http://www.netstate.com/states/symb/ky_symb.htm)> (4 March 2008).

<sup>112</sup> “The Virginia Official Song Emeritus,” Netstate - Virginia, <[http://www.netstate.com/states/symb/song/va\\_carry\\_me\\_back.htm](http://www.netstate.com/states/symb/song/va_carry_me_back.htm)> 2.

its adoption, however, that changes were made to its lyrics. The last of the three songs to receive special state status would thus be the first to be altered.

“My Old Kentucky Home” and “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” had each been composed, melody and lyrics, by one individual – Stephen Foster and James Bland, respectively. Such was not the case with the “Missouri Waltz.” The original waltz melody was written, it is thought, around 1914 and its lyrics added later; arranger Frederick Knight Logan of Oskaloosa, Iowa, hired songwriter James Royce Shannon to write the lyrics, and the song “appeared in 1915 as the ‘Hush-a-Bye Ma Baby’ song with ‘Missouri Waltz’ printed as a substitute in parenthesis.”<sup>113</sup> There has been considerable debate over the identity of the melody’s original composer. It is generally agreed that Logan had not written the tune but was the first to arrange and publish it around 1912.<sup>114</sup> Many historians agree that Logan most likely got the tune from John Valentine Eppel, an orchestra leader from Fort Dodge, Iowa; however, there are numerous accounts of its origins prior to, or exclusive of, band leader Eppel.<sup>115</sup> The multiplicity of composers that have been credited with the original melody for the “Missouri Waltz” serves as a clear

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<sup>113</sup> “Missouri History: What is Missouri’s State Song?” Missouri Secretary of State, Robin Carnahan, <<http://www.sos.mo.gov/archives/history/song.asp>> (23 January 2008).

<sup>114</sup> “About 1000 copies were published in Chicago and distributed to various music dealers and orchestra leaders.” “Missouri History: What is Missouri’s State Song?”

<sup>115</sup> “Missouri History: What is Missouri’s State Song?” One version of the song’s origin reports that “Eppel learned the melody from an African American man in Missouri who had been taught the tune by his mother.” According to many of the residents of Moberly, Missouri, “the original composer was Dab Hannah, an African American piano player . . .” In Oskaloosa, the story goes that “Henry Clay Cooper, an African American dance instructor, gave the melody to Logan.” Yet another tale of the tune’s origin claims that “. . . piano player Edgar Lee Settle of New Franklin, Missouri, obtained the tune from the DiArmo sisters, a musical team on his theatrical circuit, who in turn, had been given it by an old African American man from the South. Settle’s brother claimed that [“Jelly”] Settle composed the piece, which he called the ‘Graveyard Waltz,’ and was playing it one evening when John Valentine Eppel heard it and used it with his orchestra.” (“Jelly Settles,” according to Dr. Howard Marshall, Professor Emeritus of Art History & Archaeology and former Director of the Missouri Cultural Heritage Center at University of Missouri-Columbia.)

reminder of the difficulties Foster and other mid-nineteenth-century musicians faced prior to copyright protection with the tendency of musicians to “adopt” tunes they overheard, – something obviously problematic well into the first part of the twentieth-century.

Logan’s lyricist of choice, James Royce Shannon (1881-1946), had been born in Adrian, Michigan. Apparently musically talented as a child, Shannon “mastered the organ. . . became proficient in playing the cello . . . and sang in the church choir of Christ Episcopal Church.”<sup>116</sup> Like Foster, he had organized and performed in a theatrical company, but, unlike Foster’s childhood project, Shannon had done this as a young man, touring Europe and the United States with its productions. He also “directed and managed musical shows and stage productions for a decade,” and, later, served as “dramatic critic for the Detroit Free Press.”<sup>117</sup> Shannon was a productive musician and composer and was considered to be quite talented. He was responsible for many popular ragtime pieces and songs for musicals. His most well-known work is “Too-Ra-Loo-Ra-Loo-Ra;” originally written for a 1912 Broadway musical, it gained fame when it was sung by Bing Crosby in the 1944 film “Going My Way.”<sup>118</sup>

The bill to make the “Missouri Waltz” the official state song of Missouri was introduced by Representative Floyd Snyder of Independence. We are told House Bill No.2 was passed, “amidst protests . . .,” for some members of the legislature found that “some of the lyrics were offensive;” others did not.<sup>119</sup> According to one of the bill’s

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<sup>116</sup> “Music World Notes Career of Adrian Man,” Adrian Daily Telegram, May 5, 1949, 15, Column 4.

<sup>117</sup> “Music World Notes Career of Adrian Man,” Adrian Daily Telegram, May 5, 1949, 15, Column 4.

<sup>118</sup> Robin Lucie, “Irish Favorite is Lullaby from Adrian,” Adrian Daily Telegram, (18 March 1981); Shannon had originally written it for the 1914 New York musical “Shameen Dhu.”  
<<http://www.geocities.com/lenaweemi/famous.html>>.



opponents, Representative Noel Cox, Republican Representative of Ozark, Christian County, Missouri, “It does not portray the life of Missouri. It may be popular in Independence and Southeast Missouri, but songs like these are passing fancies. It does not link up any great historical event of the state.” On the other hand, Representative Baxter Waters said, “This is a period of racial consciousness. There are some phrases and nicknames in the song that have been handed down and are not meant to be objectionable.”<sup>120</sup> (It is interesting to note that the comment made, “This is a period of racial consciousness,” appears to defend the debated wording; later the same comment would be most often used by individuals wanting to object to racist words or phrases, not when defending the use of them.) Prior to the song’s final adoption, however, the lyrics were altered by an amendment. Negative stereotypes previously associated with blacks were removed and replaced with more generally acceptable, less racially specific labeling: “*Mammy*” was changed to “*Mommy*,” “*Pick-a-ninny*” to “*little child*,” and “*darkies*” to “*old folks*.” Under the title “The Missouri Waltz,” the song, with its altered wording, became the official state song of Missouri on June 30, 1949.<sup>121</sup>

Shannon’s Original Lyrics:

[Title:] Hush-a-Bye Ma Baby  
 [Verse 1:]  
 Hush-a-bye, ma baby, slumber time is comin’ soon;  
 Rest yo’ head upon my breast while **Mammy**  
   hums a tune;  
 The sandman is callin’ where shadows are fallin’,  
 While the soft breezes sigh as in days long gone by.  
 Way down in Missouri where I heard this melody,  
 When I was a **Pick-a-ninny on ma Mammy’s** knee;

Version altered at time of adoption as State Song:

[Title:] The Missouri Waltz  
 [Verse 1:]  
 Hush-a-bye, ma baby, slumber time is comin’ soon;  
 Rest yo’ head upon my breast while **Mommy**  
   hums a tune;  
 The sandman is callin’ where shadows are fallin’,  
 While the soft breezes sigh as in days long gone by.  
 Way down in Missouri where I heard this melody,  
 When I was a **little child upon my Mommy’s** knee;

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<sup>119</sup> “FAQ: Did Truman Like the Missouri Waltz?” Harry S. Truman Library & Museum. <<http://www.trumanlibrary.org/trivia/waltz.htm>> (1-25-2008).

<sup>120</sup> “Index to Politicians: Cox” The Political Graveyard. <<http://politicalgraveyard.com/bio/cox/html>>. “FAQ: Did Truman Like the Missouri Waltz?” 1.

<sup>121</sup> “Missouri History: What is Missouri’s State Song?”

The **darkies** were hummin’; their banjos were  
stummin’;  
So sweet and low.

[Chorus:]  
Strum, strum, strum, strum, strum,  
Seems I hear those banjos playin’ once again,  
Hum, hum, hum, hum, hum,  
That same old plaintive strain.  
Hear that mournful melody,  
It just haunts you the whole day long,  
And you wander in dreams back to Dixie, it seems,  
When you hear that old time song.

[Verse 2:]  
Hush-a-bye, ma baby, go to sleep on **Mammy’s** knee,  
Journey back to Dixieland in dreams again with me;  
It seems like your Mammy is there once again,  
And the **darkies** were strummin’ that same old  
refrain  
‘Way down in Missouri where I learned this lullaby,  
When the stars were blinkin’ and the moon was  
climbin’ high,  
**And I hear Mammy Cloe**, as in days long ago,  
Singin’ hush-a-bye.<sup>122</sup>

The **old folks** were hummin’; their banjos were  
stummin’;  
So sweet and low.

[Chorus:]  
Strum, strum, strum, strum, strum,  
Seems I hear those banjos playin’ once again,  
Hum, hum, hum, hum, hum,  
That same old plaintive strain.  
Hear that mournful melody,  
It just haunts you the whole day long,  
And you wander in dreams back to Dixie, it seems,  
When you hear that old time song.

[Verse 2:]  
Hush-a-bye, ma baby, go to sleep on **Mommy’s** knee,  
Journey back to Dixieland in dreams again with me;  
It seems like your Mommy is there once again,  
And the **old folks** were strummin’ that same old  
refrain  
Way down in Missouri where I learned this lullaby,  
When the stars were blinkin’ and the moon was  
climbin’ high,  
**Seems I hear voices low**, as in days long ago,  
Singin’ hush-a-bye.<sup>123</sup>

As the song gained exposure and grew in popularity, most of these changed lyrics were incorporated when it was performed elsewhere in the country. The Bing Crosby sheet music (mentioned above) would indicate, however, that in 1949, and probably into the early 1950s, while some of the dialect lyrics had been changed, the popular crooner was still singing about “*Mammy*.” Attempts to correct offensive wording in the lyrics of “My Old Kentucky Home” would not be made until the 1980s, when “*people*” would finally be substituted for “*darkies*.” It would be into the 1990s before a similar attempt to change the lyrics of Virginia’s State Song would take place.

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<sup>122</sup> “FAQ: Did Truman Like the Missouri Waltz?”

<sup>123</sup> “The Missouri State Song,” [Netstate - Missouri](#).

## Part II.

### Observations and Conclusions

A consideration of the characteristics shared by these three songs and the changes made to each, lends itself to several observations regarding these artifacts and their related cultures:

*It is the very combination of the use of dialect and negative stereotypes, with special societal status impacting identity, that necessitated the alteration of the three musical artifacts we are considering.*

Stephen Foster, James Bland, and, later, J. R. Shannon, wrote numerous songs employing representations of what was popularly perceived as black dialect in the lyrics. As we moved beyond the days of minstrelsy and early twentieth-century performances by Al Jolson and others, the songs of minstrelsy as well as other songs employing black dialect came to be seen as degrading and therefore unacceptable and inappropriate to sing.<sup>124</sup> Those types of songs could have been thrown away, tucked into a drawer and forgotten, or left to gather dust on some un-played record; yet the roles these three songs played in American culture prevented their being discarded and, indeed, made it necessary to alter them.

What was considered slave dialect often included names or terms which we now associate with racial categorizing or stereotyping. In “Carry Me Back to Ole Virginny” the terms *Massa* and *Missis* were the white-accepted titles of respect for a slave’s owners. Although the terms may be accurate as indicators of ownership, the slave’s

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<sup>124</sup> Doug McClelland. *Blackface to Blacklist: Al Jolson, Larry Parks, and “The Jolson Story”* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 259.

positive attitude toward his *Massa* and *Missis* represented in that song's lyrics is not. While there may have been slaves who had some genuine positive feelings for their owners, the ownership of people as chattel added an ever-present and oppressive element to relationships where only one side could freely choose to be a participant. The mere mention of such ownership in the song's lyrics would become over the years, for African Americans, a further reminder of their historic subservient position in American society. The term "*darkey*," appearing in "My Old Kentucky Home" and in "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny," was, for many whites merely reminiscent of an earlier time, part of the song's sentimental appeal. For most African Americans the term was heard quite differently, becoming offensive as a result of its association with the many years of slavery endured by ancestors, as well as the subsequent treatment of free blacks by a racist society.

One African American woman, Marion Maux Robinson, who grew up in St. Louis, Missouri during the 1930s and 1940s was asked about her memories related to these dialect songs. Regarding her own state's song, "The Missouri Waltz," she recalled, "I didn't really care to sing it." She spoke about her memories of other dialect tunes popular when she was young, like "My Old Kentucky Home" or "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny": "[In school] we sang whatever was in the music books – Stephen Foster songs." When asked if it bothered her to sing them, Mrs. Robinson laughed and replied, "I'd think of the music more than the words." While the children never complained to the teacher, she said, "We'd say things to each other about it. Whenever we didn't have to, we didn't sing it." After her elementary school days, the songs became less of an issue: "In high school they never sang those songs." A decade later, however, when she went to

live in New Jersey, [where her own child would attend school and she herself would teach] “back there they were still singing those songs,” though, she added, “most teachers would try to avoid them.” Mrs. Robinson appeared to particularly relish one recollection from those early years, however; with the hint of a smile, she said, “Dr. Fuller, Director of Music at Lincoln University, refused to let his choir sing “The Missouri Waltz.”<sup>125</sup>

Minstrelsy, with its trademark Blackface music, had publically introduced and popularized negative stereotypes of American blacks and degraded their speech. Dixon’s early songs “Coal Black Rose” and “Long Tail Blue” “standardized the two comic types which were to reign throughout the long career of Negro minstrelsy: the plantation or field hand darky and the citified dandy.” According to historian and author Alan W.C. Green, within a few years these images “were even more definitively represented” . . . by T.D. Rice’s “Jim Crow” and Dixon’s “Zip Coon.”<sup>126</sup> On the minstrel stage T.D. Rice’s “Jim Crow,” the watermelon-eating plantation slave, was musical, happy, mentally slow, and easy to trick, avoiding work and forever getting himself into trouble. Dixon’s dandy, “Zip Coon,” in trying to mimic urban whites, was presented as making a fool of himself in his dress, language, and manner. Probably the most widely known black stereotype, Uncle Tom, may have originated in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, but, according to Mel Watkins, writing in “American Experience” for PBS Online, it was minstrelsy that was responsible for the negative elements in this character’s image.

Watkins declares the minstrel show “under-rated historically in terms of its influence on American society.” He attributes the stereotype of Uncle Tom to blackface entertainment rather than to Stowe’s book, for the “shuffling toady,” who was “ignorant,” “a coward,”

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<sup>125</sup> Marion Maux Robinson, Interview by Author, St. Louis, MO, 21 January 2010.

<sup>126</sup> Alan W. C. Green, 390.

and “somewhat comical” came not from the “relatively intelligent” old man, the “example of Christian morality” in Uncle Tom’s Cabin, but from the minstrel stage.<sup>127</sup> Early black stereotypes popularized by minstrelsy were derogatory, insulting, and demeaning. Their entertainment value depended upon the humor whites found in mocking and belittling slaves and free blacks. Writer Berndt Ostendorf explains the rise in minstrelsy as stemming from the need by whites to feel culturally and socially superior. “If social difference could not be found, it had to be invented.”<sup>128</sup>

According to Ostendorf, “Apologists of slavery, Jefferson among them, saw slaves as children. . . . After emancipation the stereotype shifts from safe [child-like] to unsafe, and blacks are increasingly seen as uncontrollable animals with emotions that need to be disciplined.” Early minstrel shows had featured “banjo-picking, heel-kicking blacks.” By the 1860s, this form of entertainment showcased “uncontrollable, spine-chilling primitivism . . . the animalism of blacks.” “Both “articulated the fear of difference by exaggerating it and by fixing or “domesticating” the difference in a stereotype.”<sup>129</sup> Foster, along with Bland and Shannon, appears to have aided in such a “domestication” through the use of stereotypes in their song lyrics.

While Stephen Foster had grown up hearing blackface music, filled with blatant as well as more subtle negative images, his own music included altered forms of black stereotypes. Foster wrote songs, not in the comic, mocking vein of minstrelsy, but in the modes of nostalgia, grief, or love for home, songs which presented the emotions and

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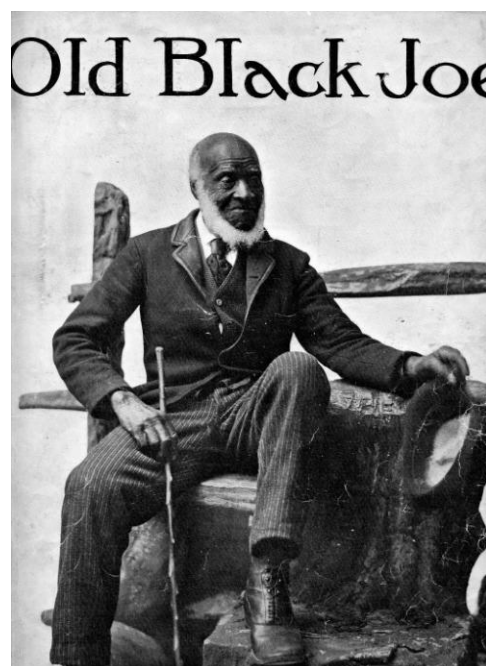
<sup>127</sup> Mel Watkins. “Blackface Minstrelsy,” American Experience, PBS Online. <[http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/foster/sfeature/sf\\_minstrelsy\\_5.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/foster/sfeature/sf_minstrelsy_5.html)>.

<sup>128</sup> Ostendorf, 582.

<sup>129</sup> Ostendorf, 582.

humanity of blacks. Many of his songs were about the sorrow and suffering of slaves, as in “Old Black Joe” and “Hard Times Come Again No More.” His song “Nellie was a Lady” was the first time a black woman had been treated as a subject of respect in this culture’s popular music.<sup>130</sup> While many of these representations were still paternalistic and prejudicial, they are suggestive of many of the feelings of African Americans and the hardships they endured. Foster was using the voice of the slave in his “plantation songs,” but, for the first time in popular music, expressing the feelings of *a person who happened to be black and a slave*. In doing so, though it may never have been his intention, Foster helped to alter the older stereotypical images believed by whites to represent blacks.

Foster’s musical characters like “*Uncle Ned*,” “*Old Black Joe*,” and “*Mammy*” were the type of loyal, kindly, “*good old darkey*,” who often even expressed love for his “*master and missis*,” and could be experienced by whites as non-threatening. Foster’s incorporation of this kind of black character in his songs led Frederick Douglass to call his music helpful in encouraging sympathy for the plight of the slave. In addressing the Rochester [NY] Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society in 1855, Douglass said,



Sheet music cover, Foster’s “Old Black Joe”

It would seem almost absurd to say it, considering the use that has been made of them, that we have allies in the Ethiopian song . . . “Lucy Neal,” “Old Kentucky Home,” and “Uncle Ned,” can make the heart sad as well as merry, and can call

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<sup>130</sup> Emerson, 146.

forth a tear as well as a smile. They awaken the sympathies for the slave, in which anti-slavery principles take root and flourish.”<sup>131</sup>

Ironically, Foster’s songs, which would later be found to be objectionable because of the dialect he employed, were praised by W.C. Handy. The famous musician’s remarks in his autobiography dealing with Foster and his music compliment the work of the songwriter, while suggesting Foster’s songs were heard differently than those of other composers:

It is my belief that ‘Old Kentucky Home’ and ‘Old Black Joe’ touched the heart of Lincoln and thus helped to make this book possible. . . . The well of sorrow from which Negro music is drawn is also a well of mystery. It’s strange how the blues creep over you. I suspect that Stephen Foster owed something to this well, this mystery, this sorrow. ‘My Old Kentucky Home’ makes you think so, at any rate. Something there suggests a close acquaintance with my people.<sup>132</sup>

Foster’s music opened the way for whites to experience blacks, not as the comic figures of minstrelsy, but, while still relatively one dimensional and sentimentalized, as human beings with sorrows and joys like their own.

It was Foster’s version of a black stereotype that Bland – who was himself African-American – chose as the voice for his song of Foster-like nostalgia and love for home, “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny.” In his singing of Virginia: “*There’s where this old darkey’s heart am long’d to go.*” It was where the singer “*labored so hard for old massa,*” and he sings of meeting “*massa and missis*” in heaven (“*on that bright and golden shore*”). The type of black stereotype here is the kindly, loving Foster-version of the slave who loves his white owners (at least whites could choose to hear it that way),

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<sup>131</sup> Frederick Douglass, “The Anti-Slavery Movement lecture delivered before the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society, January, 1855, The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, ed. Philip S. Foner, Vol 2, Pre-Civil War Decade, 1850-1860 (New York: International Publishers, 1950): 356-57, as quoted in Emerson, 107.

<sup>132</sup> W. C. Handy, 112,149.



for the line suggesting the happiness of heaven and of meeting there to “*never part no more*” suggests feelings for someone we might care for as dearly as family. That “trusted, old member of the family” part of this particular stereotype is reinforced by familial nicknames like “Uncle Ned.” (It is interesting to note that the term “trusted” would never be attached when describing an actual family member. One might assume “Uncle Ned” or “Uncle Ben” was actually “trusted” not to revolt, run away, or steal the family silver.)

This familial pattern of address continued into the twentieth century, as seen with “*Mammy Cloe*” in “The Missouri Waltz.” The singer of Shannon’s song reminisces about the time “*When I was a Pick-a-ninny on ma Mammy’s knee.*” Foster’s songs had been so well known and loved, and his sheet music so popular, that other songwriters, like Bland and, later, Shannon, seem to have followed his example. Black dialect became so widespread in popular songs of nostalgia and love of home, that other composers were drawn to incorporate those same black stereotypes that made the white buying public, the purchasers of sheet music, most comfortable. At least for Shannon, hired to write lyrics for this already popular waltz tune, the choice was probably easy – Foster’s stereotypes would sell.

Labels for African Americans, both the blatantly negative stereotypes and those seen by some as perhaps slightly less offensive, continued to be used by the population at large well into the twentieth century. The inclusion of the terms “*Mammy*” and “*Pick-a-ninny*” in “The Missouri Waltz” 1915 lyrics is indicative. While the stereotypical black “*Mammy*” was represented as overweight, often outspoken, and usually comic, the image also carried the connotation of a maternal figure and a good cook. During the first half of

the 1900s, “Aunt Jemima” became the public symbol for good pancakes; she continues to work as a logo (in a slimmer version) for a company still selling its pancakes today in the twenty-first century. The old, kind, and trustworthy “Uncle Ben,” the butler, image sold rice. Early black stereotypes were still being perpetuated in 1939, in fact reaching the pinnacle of their popularity and white public acceptance that year, with the American film epic Gone With The Wind. The black actress Hattie McDaniel won an Oscar with her portrayal of “Mammy.” Her loving, outspoken character and the film’s ignorant, country bumpkin types, all of whom were presented as loving their masters, were projected with great fanfare on the big screen by white writers. Such “domesticated” stereotypes served only to make whites more comfortable. They were still insulting to people of color, increasingly so as the Civil Rights Movement expanded during the second half of the twentieth century.

Over the years many song lyrics have incorporated these stereotypes, but, with the expansion of racial consciousness associated with the education and dialogue that accompanied the Civil Rights Movement, those songs have faded away with disuse. Each of the three songs here considered, however, attained special societal status as an official State Song. As a result, each came to represent or symbolize an entire state and its citizenry. Therein lies the rub. These songs, despite the inclusion of terms and images found to be racially offensive, became intertwined with “identity.”

We all have a personal investment in those things which represent us to others – objects, characteristics, or ideals – in those things which reflect something of our individual or group identity to the rest of the world. The concept of identity as attached to a state or region is a complex and encompassing expression for those attributes and

qualities of a place and its people. It is important to the residents – and was especially so during the first half of the twentieth century, often becoming part of the personalities and make-up of those residing in or hailing from a region, often an excuse for personality traits, and often a source of pride or of embarrassment.

Following our formation from thirteen colonies into one nation, there were conscious and unconscious efforts to unify thirteen individual entities into a cohesive national unit. The very wording in our founding documents underscores this intention: “. . . to form a more perfect union.”<sup>133</sup> Historian and author Joyce Appleby suggests, “. . . inheriting a revolutionary tradition had thrust upon an entire generation of Americans the responsibility for explicit articulation of what the United States stood for.”<sup>134</sup> Well into the nineteenth-century and beyond, the new nation was trying to come up with a sense of “identity,” what writer and historian James Cobb called, “. . . a way to think about [itself].”<sup>135</sup>

While words on paper and symbolic and artistic representations of one government and one people perhaps helped the United States citizenry of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries feel more unified, the development of national and regional identities took time. In trying to fashion a national identity, Cobb suggests

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<sup>133</sup> Thomas Jefferson. The Declaration of Independence. Philadelphia. 1776.

<sup>134</sup> Joyce Appleby. Inheriting the Revolution. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000), 265.

<sup>135</sup> James C. Cobb. Away Down South: A History of Southern Identity. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005: 4. This effort could be seen in the work of artisans as well as statesmen. It is apparent in Jean-Antoine Houdon’s choice for a life-sized marble sculpture of our first President, now in the Virginia State Capitol Rotunda, Richmond, VA. Houdon sculpted a standing George Washington in his military dress uniform – placing him closer to the populace than would have been the Roman toga traditionally selected as the attire for many rulers and presidents. Houdon also featured Washington leaning on “fasces,” the Roman symbol of civilian authority, here a group of 13 rods to represent the unified 13 colonies. Even in a statue of George Washington, the artist was giving his interpretation of a nation of united smaller entities led by a representative of the people rather than some kind of earth god/king, thereby reinforcing the image of a unified, populace-governed young nation.

the new nation looked more to the Northeast than the South for the attributes and ideals it would select:

. . . [T]he major impediment to constructing an inspiring and credible identity for a nation supposedly committed to the principles of liberty, equality, and democracy was a southern economy, society, and culture shaped and sustained by human bondage. As the leaders of the young republic struggled to gain the acceptance and respect of other nations, northern architects of national identity soon realized that their vision of America would not only be much simpler to construct but also much easier to look at and far more emphatic and unequivocal in meaning if they simply focused on what they saw, or sometimes chose to see, in the states above the recently drawn Mason-Dixon line.<sup>136</sup>

Other historians have stated the choice in similar terms. According to Jack P. Greene in his Pursuits of Happiness, the history of the South and southerners, with the existence of slavery, provided only “a negative example of what America had to overcome before it could finally realize its true self.” Green declared that the formation of our national identity incorporated the “. . . implicit belief that the main line of American political and cultural development ran not from Jamestown but from Plymouth to the present.” It allowed us “. . . the comforting illusion that slavery, that blatant anomaly in republican and egalitarian America had never been central to American culture but had always been only a marginal institution confined to the cultural peripheries of the colonial British American world.”<sup>137</sup>

All three State Songs selected for this discussion were Southern, written, if not *in* that part of the United States known as “The South,” then *about* it. Ferris and Wilson in their Encyclopedia of Southern Culture define the South both geographically and culturally, expanding the area labeled “the South” beyond those eleven states that formed the Confederacy to “wherever Southern culture is found.” They then opt to define

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<sup>136</sup> Cobb, 3.

<sup>137</sup> Jack P. Green. Pursuits of Happiness. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988: 3-4.

“Southern culture,” as did T. S. Eliot in “Notes towards the Definition of Culture,” as “all the characteristics, activities, and interests of a people . . .”<sup>138</sup> While it can be argued that Missouri was a “border state” and not a part of the Confederacy as was Virginia, it was still a slave state; the lyrics for its State Song, “The Missouri Waltz,” were written to incorporate slave dialect and words that had been used by whites to label blacks and by blacks to label each other during the Antebellum years in the slave-holding South. Similarly, “My Old Kentucky Home,” the State Song of that border and slave state, was also written in dialect. Kentucky, like Missouri, had a sizable portion of its population that thought of itself as Southern. Beyond geography, it is the use of slave dialect and imagery in each song which connects them to the Southern, slave-holding culture which preceded the Civil War.

Griffin, Evenson, and Thompson in their essay “Southerners All,” maintain that for most people “southern identity” has equated to *white* southern identity.<sup>139</sup> The dominant historical narrative, formative of identity, becomes the one held by the group in the position of power to legitimize that narrative and associate it with the identity of an entire region.<sup>140</sup> Many historians agree that the primary effort to establish a Southern identity did not take place until the Civil War, and those years immediately following, and employed a “perception of reality,” as opposed to actual historical fact, to form what

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<sup>138</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Notes towards the Definition of Culture,” quoted in William Ferris and Charles Wilson, eds. Encyclopedia of Southern Culture. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), xvi.

<sup>139</sup> Larry J. Griffin, Ranai J. Evenson, and Ashley B. Thompson. “Southerners All?” Southern Cultures. (Chapel Hill: Center for the Study of the South, 2005), 1.

<sup>140</sup> Kathleen Clark, “Celebrating Freedom: Emancipation Day Celebrations and African American Memory in the Early Reconstruction South.” Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity, 109.

would become southern white collective memory.<sup>141</sup> From the start of the Civil War, white attitudes about the South began to incorporate ideas related to the American Revolution. In his essay, “Finding Meaning in History During the Confederacy and Reconstruction,” author and historian Fitzhugh Brundage contends that, while the Confederacy was a nation in existence for only four years, it claimed a long history by connecting back to the Revolutionary period. “White southerners . . . faced the difficult task of making distinctive a past that they shared with their enemy.” They were “united in the reverence of 1776 and the Revolutionary-era patriots.”<sup>142</sup> It was therefore reassuring for white southerners to reach back to the days of the Founding Fathers for attributes and image. The Confederate States of America chose to emphasize the importance of honor and chivalrous behavior toward women, model their officers’ uniforms after those of the Revolutionary period, and remind themselves of that other southerner, George Washington, who was a Virginian and a slave-owner. By pledging themselves to upholding the values fought for by the soldiers of the Revolution, they helped lend support and weight to their own cause. Anne Sarah Rubin asserts in her essay, “Seventy-six and Sixty-one,” “Justification, explanation, inspiration – all could be found in the American past. Confederates mined a rich and familiar vein of symbolism, producing rhetoric that immediately resonated as they sought to make secession and war comprehensible.” In the process, it allowed them to avoid discussing slavery.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Fitzhugh Brundage. “No Deed But Memory,” Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity, ed. Fitzhugh Brundage, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 1-27; Fitzhugh W. Brundage, “Finding Meaning in History during the Confederacy and Reconstruction,” Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 79-83; Cobb, Away Down South, 73.

<sup>142</sup> Brundage, “Finding Meaning,” 82.

Brundage reminds us, “Groups by necessity adapt old traditions to new conditions; familiar practices and symbols – such as folk songs, literary tropes, and rituals – may be modified to serve new purposes.”<sup>144</sup>

Following the Civil War, as white southerners “struggled to re-establish economic and political control,” they were also attempting to “shape regional memory in their own self image” – that is, as it was “remembered” by whites.<sup>145</sup> Generally, it has been accurate to claim, “history is written by the victors.”<sup>146</sup> Not so for the American South.<sup>147</sup> Emory Thomas maintains that it was not until the Confederacy was defeated that the concept of a distinct identity for this region came into being:

[The] . . . most profound effect [of the Civil War] upon southern culture occurred only after the war was lost. . . . The southern response to defeat, reunion, and Reconstruction inspired a myth-history that ennobled the destruction of the southern nation. The Lost Cause mythology held that the southern cause was not only undefiled by defeat but that the bloodbath of war actually sanctified the values and mores of the Old South.<sup>148</sup>

Writer Robert Penn Warren has also argued that for many white southerners it was only after Lee’s surrender at Appomattox that the “conception of Southern identity truly bloomed.”<sup>149</sup> Historian W. J. Cash agreed, “it was the conflict with the Yankee that created the concept of the South as something more than a matter of geography.”<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Anne Sarah Rubin, “Seventy-six and Sixty-one.” Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 101.

<sup>144</sup> Brundage, “Finding Meaning,” 81-82.

<sup>145</sup> Clark, 109.

<sup>146</sup> Attributed to Winston Churchill.

<sup>147</sup> Bradford A. Wineman, “Southern Identity and Memory,” American Studies International, Vol. 42, 2004.

<sup>148</sup> Emory Thomas, “Civil War,” in Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, eds. Ferris and Wilson. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 604-605.

“Identity” incorporates descriptors labeling characteristics which serve to paint a representation of who we are and, more importantly, how we are unique or different from another individual or group of individuals. Cobb calls identity “the condition of being simultaneously both ‘one’s self or itself *and not another.*”” He asserts, “any sort of group identity, be it regional, national, ethnic, or otherwise, has required what historian and author Susan-Mary Grant called ‘a negative reference point,’ against which it may be defined in stark and favorable contrast.”<sup>151</sup> Fitzhugh Brundage maintains, “The recalled part of all societies is inherently relational; no group fashions its memory without reference to others.”<sup>152</sup> Cobb would add, “. . . historically, identities have not existed in isolation, but always in relation to other perceived oppositional ideas, against which they are defined. Hence, there could have been no South without a North and regardless of reality, the perception of significant differences between these two was vital to sustaining the identity of either.”<sup>153</sup>

Southern whites saw themselves and their region as different from the North, their negative reference point, as they formed ideas about themselves and painted an identity for the South. While many of these differences were linked primarily to slavery, against the image of a cold, harsh North, southerners perceived themselves and their region as a softer, gentler reality. Their South was comprised of not only genteel, heroic

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<sup>149</sup> Robert Penn Warren, Jefferson Davis Gets His Citizenship Back (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980), 59.

<sup>150</sup> W. J. Cash, The Mind of the South (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968), 65-66.

<sup>151</sup> Susan-Mary Grant, North over South: Northern Nationalism and American Identity in the Antebellum Era (Lawrence, Kansas, 2000), 35, quoted in Cobb, 3.

<sup>152</sup> Fitzhugh Brundage. “No Deed,” 22.

<sup>153</sup> Cobb, 6.



Revolutionary elements, such as defense of home, flag, and family honor, but of slow, softened speech, gracious welcoming Southern hospitality, beautiful [white] women in ruffles and hoop skirts, and warm summer nights of moonlight and magnolias. This is the *perceived* reality of “the South” – part of the white southern identity stemming from its perceived “southern way of life.” This perception of a world of genteel leisure evolved in the years following the Civil War to be later fully celebrated in the 1939 film Gone With The Wind.<sup>154</sup> Carefully excluded from the perceived white vision of “the Southern way of life,” were the all-too-quickly recognizable negative connections to black southern history, such as slavery, chains, lynchings, and cross burnings by the Ku Klux Klan.

David Blight, in his essay “Southerners Don’t Lie, They Just Remember Big,” calls memory the “experience, knowledge and the stories from which we draw identity.”<sup>155</sup> Collective or social memory, for James Fentress and Chris Wickham, is made up of shared memories that identify “a group, giving it a sense of its past and defining its aspirations for the future.”<sup>156</sup> It is collective memory that then colors, informs, and helps to formulate the identities of a region and, indeed, helps create both black and white southern identities. Memory itself is based on a *perception* of reality rather than indisputable fact. *Unlike* the “Fair Witness” in science fiction writer Robert A. Heinlein’s Stranger in a Strange Land, we do *not* respond to a question about the color

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<sup>154</sup> Earl F. Bargainnier, “Moonlight-and-Magnolias’ Myth,” Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, eds. William Ferris and Charles Wilson. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 1136-1137.

<sup>155</sup> David Blight, “Southerners Don’t Lie, They Just Remember Big,” Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory and Southern Identity, 352.

<sup>156</sup> James Fentress and Chris Wickham, Social Memory, (London: Blackwell, 1992), 25.

of a house on a hill with, “It’s white on this side.”(as the other sides might not be white, or, indeed, that any part might not remain white after our departure.)<sup>157</sup> Accuracy is *not* a requirement for memory. According to Harold Pinter, the English dramatist, “The past is what you remember, imagine you remember, convince yourself you remember, or pretend to remember.”<sup>158</sup> Contrived or imagined “memories” can even derive from what we have read.<sup>159</sup> Brundage calls collective memory “an act of interpretation,” unlike the older notions of the “passive process of storing and retrieving.”<sup>160</sup> He proposes, “within collective memory a dialectic exists between the willfully recalled and deliberately forgotten past” (and the willfully “recalled” might also include the imaginary).<sup>161</sup> Blight reminds us, “unlike most parts of the United States, with Native Americans the obvious exception, the South was conquered and had to be reimagined and re-created.”<sup>162</sup> That region’s identity was recreated with the flair so often associated with good story telling, for as Cobb maintains, “Identity may, of course, be grounded in verifiable fact, but as the case of the South demonstrates all too well, it is often a mixture of the unvarnished and the varnished or even the whitewashed truth.”<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Robert A. Heinlein, Stranger in a Strange Land. New York: Berkley Publishing, 1961, 98.

<sup>158</sup> Harold Pinter, quoted in David Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 193.

<sup>159</sup> Kim Wilson. “The Past Re-imagined: Memory and Representations of Power in Historical Fiction for Children” International Research in Children’s Literature. Vol 1, 111-124. Abstract. Edinburgh University Press. <<http://www.eupublishing.com/journal/ircl>> (1-18-2010).

<sup>160</sup> Brundage, “No Deed,” 5.

<sup>161</sup> Brundage, “No Deed,” 6.

<sup>162</sup> Blight, 348.

<sup>163</sup> Cobb, 6.

Charles Wilson in his essay “Sense of Place” includes an observation originally coming from John Shelton Reed, that “southerners seem more likely than other Americans to think of their region, their states, and their local communities possessively as *theirs*, and as distinct from and preferable to other regions, states and localities.”<sup>164</sup> Southern identity seems intimately bound to the land, to the place of one’s origins. – what famed Southern writer Eudora Welty called “the blessing of being located.”<sup>165</sup> Ties to “the home place” are prevalent and somehow vital to the white and black Southerner’s personal, observable identity. Medgar Evers, who would later be killed by an assassin in the cause of Civil Rights, once said,

It may sound funny, but I love the South. I don’t choose to live anywhere else. There’s land here, where a man can raise cattle, and I’m going to do it some day. There are lakes where a man can sink a hook and fight the bass. There is room here for my children to plan and grow, and become good citizens – if the white man will let them . . .<sup>166</sup>

In the summer of 2008, members of the Mason family, all descendants of an African American man, Federal Mason, of Brunswick County, Virginia, attended a family reunion in that area. Following the formal gathering, family members came to the community formally known as Charlie Hope to look for the home of their ancestor.<sup>167</sup> Even though a chimney in the middle of a now-dense woodland was all that remained, it

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<sup>164</sup> Charles Reagan Wilson, “Sense of Place.” Encyclopedia of Southern Culture. Ferris and Wilson, eds. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989: 1138.

<sup>165</sup> C. Van Woodward, “The Search for Southern Identity,” The Burden of Southern History (Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 24. <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/libproxy.wustl.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=ads;rgn.=full text;id>>.

<sup>166</sup> Medgar Evers, “Why I Live in Mississippi” (as told to Francis H. Mitchell), Ebony, November 1958, The Autobiography of Medgar Evers: A Hero’s Life and Legacy Revealed Through His Writings, Letters, and Speeches. eds. Myrlie Evers-Williams & Manning Marable. (USA: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), 120-121.

<sup>167</sup> Carolyn Williams Hall, Brunswick County, Virginia resident’s conversation with Author, Fall 2008.

was important to these descendants to return to the home place that was part of their roots.

The feeling of pride in one's homeland, and in one's region, conceivably lends itself to more intense feelings for, and associations with, the symbols of that region. Artifacts have symbolized nations and regions since such entities have existed.<sup>168</sup> The song "Dixie," while written by "an Ohioan of Irish descent" and "first performed in blackface on Broadway in 1859," came to represent the South, morphing into "the favorite marching anthem, first of the fire-eating secessionists and then of fire-breathing segregationists. . . ." – showing "the readiness of white southerners to embrace and defend even the most controversial aspects of their region's distinctiveness."<sup>169</sup>

Charles L. Black, a white Southerner teaching at Yale, in an article for the New Republic, had been "pondering my relations with the many Negroes of Southern origin that I have known, both in the North and at home." Black observed, "again and again how often we laugh at the same things, how often we pronounce the same words the same way to the amusement of our hearers, judge character in the same frame of reference, mist up at the same kind of music."<sup>170</sup> What James Cobb has called a "shared sense of a common past"<sup>171</sup> is often considered the most common basis for group identity. While sharing the "place" of the South, however, and sharing many of the same

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<sup>168</sup> More than 3000 years BCE, the vulture represented not only the Egyptian goddess Nekhabit, but, on the Pharaoh's crown, symbolized the territory of Upper (southern) Egypt. Gaston Maspero, The Struggle of the Nations: Egypt, Syria, and Assyria, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1896), 82.

<sup>169</sup> Cobb, 1.

<sup>170</sup> Charles L. Black, Jr., "Paths to Desegregation," New Republic, October 21, 1957, 15, quoted in Charles Reagan Wilson, "The Myth of the Biracial South," The Southern State of Mind, edited by Jan Nordby Gretlund (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 3.

<sup>171</sup> Cobb, 6.

experiences, the past has been experienced very differently by southern blacks and southern whites, facilitating different group identities. – reflected in the way these groups have felt about and responded to the three artifacts we are considering, the State Songs of Kentucky, Missouri, and Virginia.

Cobb maintains that “. . . despite their mutual attachment to the South, black and white southerners clearly differed on how southern history should be represented or remembered.”<sup>172</sup> Before Emancipation, “. . . slaves reinvented ideas of liberty, family and a biblical and racial destiny through oral tradition, genealogy, and collective community building to create memory.”<sup>173</sup> “When emancipation came, African Americans’ celebrations of their freedom and heritage served notice of their determination to offer an alternative version of southern identity.”<sup>174</sup> Following the war whites and blacks “enacted competing versions of history in town squares, on city streets, and at neighborhood graveyards.”<sup>175</sup> “. . . Confederate Memorial Day festivities -- parades of veterans, military drills by local militia, and the marking of graves – represented the past so that participants became, if only temporarily and symbolically, contemporaries with mythical events.”<sup>176</sup> Freed former slaves and free blacks also gathered with banners and flags for picnics, parades, and speeches to celebrate Emancipation. All over the South, black churches most frequently served as the center of

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<sup>172</sup> Cobb, 6.

<sup>173</sup> Gregg D. Kimball, “African, American, and Virginian: The Shaping of Black Memory in Antebellum Virginia, 1790-1860.” Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity, 74.

<sup>174</sup> Cobb, 5.

<sup>175</sup> Clark, 111.

<sup>176</sup> Brundage, “No Deed,” 9.

activities for these celebrations. “Just as Confederate widows paid tribute to fallen heroes in elaborate graveyard rituals, African Americans honored their own war dead, but also laid the foundation for their own version of the past by commemorating the birth of freedom. On these occasions, people crowded into local churches, paraded through city streets, and rallied in town squares.”<sup>177</sup> These celebrations provided opportunities to discover shared stories of past suffering and hardship, but served primarily for blacks to meet as free people and begin to form the bonds of community. Such celebrations grew in popularity, continued through the last of the 1800s, and “in some cases endured well into the twentieth century.”<sup>178</sup>

The southern identity blacks were creating for themselves also differed tremendously from that of whites, based on very different collective memories. Early white writers “interpreted the common slave expression ‘can’t fool ole Nat’ as a tribute by former slaves to [Nat] Turner’s ability to elude capture.” This interpretation serves as a reminder of such differing memories: While both groups shared the memory of Nat Turner, the “historical figure usually studied and discussed as part of the political controversy over slavery was for many slaves an example of . . . bravery in the real world of day-to-day slave resistance.”<sup>179</sup>

The lyrics for “My Old Kentucky Home,” “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” and “The Missouri Waltz” have engendered very different responses in blacks and whites, each group coming from different southern identity perspectives. The problem with

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<sup>177</sup> Clark, 108.

<sup>178</sup> Clark, 125. Repetition of cultural observances, like the Fourth of July or Bastille Day, “like all ritualized expressions of historical memory, established continuity with the past.” Brundage, “No Deed,” 9.

<sup>179</sup> Kimball, 65.

changing a known or accepted icon or symbol is that people are affected emotionally. Symbols are important because they influence our perception of reality and thus our sense of regional (and personal) identity. These three state songs have reminded many citizens of Kentucky, Virginia, and Missouri of warm memories associated with their home states. For thousands, perhaps millions, who were born in Virginia, the tune and the words of “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” evoke thoughts of childhood, loved ones, and memories of “home,” not, perhaps, because of what is sentimentalized in the song, but because of associating it with their own personal memories of the past. Virginians, historically, like most Southerners, have experienced a strong sense of place, and felt a particularly strong bond to “the land.” *“That’s where the cotton and the corn and taters grow”* suggests, for many, not so much the image of the laboring slave but memories of helping one’s family with a garden, or the taste of home-canned vegetables, or the sight of green corn stalks whose leaves are stirring in the breeze under the sunshine of a summer morning – their own personal, multiple, positive images which are part of both white and black collective memories. At the same time for some black Virginians, the line may bring to mind the image of the slave laboring from dawn to dusk in the field of his master, and serve as a perpetual reminder of the pain and suffering of the slavery endured by their ancestors. The *“sandman calling”* in “The Missouri Waltz” is, for many, reminiscent of a lullaby from their childhood or perhaps a waltz they danced with their first love, contributing to positive warm feelings for both black and white Missourians, despite the inclusion of negative black stereotypes in the song. “My Old Kentucky Home,” sung annually on Derby Day under the sunshine and blue skies of May, has brought tears to the eyes of many a Kentuckian, remembering a “home”

perhaps, or Derbies of an earlier year, effectively ignoring for many years any racially offensive wording in Foster's song.

Language reflects history, yet our perception of that history as white or black Americans underscores and colors our emotional response to that language as well as to the vehicle employing it. A waiting room with the soft, slow strains of "Summertime" can, as a result of the words, evoke for some white southerners images or perceptions of slow, pleasant plantation days: ". . . *yo daddy's rich and yo mama's good look'in . . .*,"<sup>180</sup> while perhaps reminding an African American listener of the historical setting and time when his ancestors were in chains and of all the emotional negatives connected to that thought. "*I labored so hard for Old Massa. . .*" reflects a history, while part of the history of all Virginians, is most directly connected with the black heritage of slavery, not the history which many contemporary black Virginians necessarily wish to celebrate or even of which they wish to be reminded. In 1994, one African American member of the Virginia Legislature, in the midst of debate on the State Song, is reported to have said with some vehemence, "I don't want to be *carried back* to anything!"<sup>181</sup> How words are heard – or a tune received because of well-known lyrics associated with it – influences the reactions in the listener: positive or negative, pleasant or irritating, nostalgic or depressing, celebratory or insulting. Associations of language with one's own identity determine the difference. Stereotypical labels, such as those in these three songs, where offensive and allowed to be continually used, have advertised and perpetuated the position of white political, decision-making power within a symbol of regional identity.

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<sup>180</sup> George Gershwin and Du Bose Heyward, "Summertime," from Porgy and Bess. (Gershwin Publishing Corp., 1935).

<sup>181</sup> Holly Herman, Interview by Author. Legislative Aid to Senator Hanger (R, VA), in charge of the search for a new official State Song, 1 April 2008.



For some, the very tunes themselves, while “cleaned” of negative stereotypes may still carry negative associations. An artifact connected to slavery, that for whites merely evokes nostalgia for a time in history, can also be experienced by African Americans as insulting.

We identify ourselves – and one another – as black, as white, as lawyer, as teacher, as rich, as poor, as loved, as unloved. The categories and labels of language are endless and serve to make us on the one hand members of a group, enabling us to be a part of the larger whole, to belong. (The theme song from Cheers puts it plainly: You want to go “Where Everybody Knows Your Name.”<sup>182</sup>) Yet these same categories also serve to separate and segregate us. As a member of a larger group we have the ability – sometimes the burden – of seeing things from the perspective of that group. Southern identity has been a different identity for blacks and for whites. – and its color is not just what we see in a mirror, but what we see, hear, and experience in society at large. For each of us, whether our label is “black,” “white,” or something else, our identity is affected by the society in which we live and often the artifacts that are part of that society. The traditionally held archeological approach to group identity, where common historical experiences and shared vocabularies differed between black and white groups, would suggest those groups would almost always experience these three State Songs differently – necessitating the alteration of these artifacts selected to represent a region.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> Judy Hart Angelo and Gary Portnoy, “Where Everybody Knows Your Name,” theme from Cheers. National Broadcasting Company. Seasons 1982-1993.

<sup>183</sup> Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and Politics of Black America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 51.

*The nature of and circumstances surrounding the changes in these song lyrics are reflective of change in American culture.*

Both Kentucky and Virginia tunes were named State Songs in the form in which they were originally published. The “blackness” of both of these songs seems to have not presented a problem in Kentucky in 1928, or in Virginia in 1940. The lawmaking bodies for these states were comprised of white representatives either unaware of or unresponsive to the racist nature of these songs’ lyrics. Awareness of racially offensive language would not begin to develop for many whites until the more active years of the Civil Rights Movement beginning in the 1950s. Both of these songs were, additionally, very non-threatening to whites, that portion of the population in the position to decide the fate of these tunes. During these early years, both of these songs also appear to have helped symbolize the love of people for their state and, thus, help facilitate a feeling of belonging in the hearts of Virginians and Kentuckians. Unlike a state bird or flower, a state song was not merely visible; it required the involvement of the citizen’s visual, auditory, *and* kinesthetic senses, garnering greater emotional impact.

The naming of “The Missouri Waltz” as that state’s official song and the changes made to its lyrics at the time seem to have had as much to do with politics as cultural unity of the region. “Hush-a-Bye Ma Baby” was not a popular seller when first published in 1914, however by 1939 it had grown in popularity and had sold 6 million copies.<sup>184</sup> Its “blackness” would become a problem, however. Sheet music which appears to have been printed after 1949, suggests some of Shannon’s original racist lyrics may have been changed as early as 1943.<sup>185</sup> The song, with at least some of its racist wording intact, was

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<sup>184</sup> “State Song,” Kit Bond, <<http://bond.senate.gov/services/song.cfm>> (24 March 2008).

played at the Democratic National Convention in 1944 and throughout the campaign when Missouri native son Harry S. Truman was nominated for Vice President. When Truman then became President in 1945, after the death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the “Missouri Waltz” became more popular still, with the new President playing it occasionally at the White House. In 1949, after Truman’s unexpected win over his popular opponent Thomas Dewey the previous November, it was legislated that the “Missouri Waltz” be adopted as the official State Song.<sup>186</sup> Such national exposure had led, however, to the recognition of offensive language in the song’s lyrics and to the suggestion of formal changes in those lyrics prior to its adoption.

In Missouri at that time, there was apparently enough sensitivity on the part of some legislators to recognize offensive stereotypes -- reflective of what was happening in at least some parts of American society at the time. The more recognized milestones which we traditionally associate with the Civil Rights Movement in this country would not begin for five more years, with the U. S. Supreme Court desegregation of public schools in 1954 under *Brown v. Board of Education*.<sup>187</sup> Less well known events, however, had occurred in the years prior to this judicial decision. Some would argue the movement actually began in the middle of the eighteenth century with efforts to free the slaves, or, at minimum, to encourage their humane treatment.

The white law-makers of Missouri, in any case, could have been well aware in 1949 of the feelings of Blacks, ranging from discomfort to outright insult, by the use of

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<sup>185</sup> J. R. Shannon and John Valentine Eppel, “Hush-a-bye, Ma Baby: Missouri Waltz Song” (Forster Music: Chicago, 1941 and 1943).

<sup>186</sup> “Missouri History: What is Missouri’s State Song?”

<sup>187</sup> Townsend Davis, *Weary Feet, Rested Souls*, (New York: Norton, 1998), 381.

negative stereotypes and racially insensitive language in the public forum. Whether that awareness actually helped to prompt legal action remains debatable. In the ten years since Gone With The Wind had featured slave dialect and blatant racial stereotypes, black participation in WWII and its aftermath had opened the eyes of many whites. While the Armed Services were not yet integrated, black troops had also fought against the common enemy, only to return home to racial prejudice and inequality. Debate had also taken place during the 1940s on the issue of banning the poll tax, one of the traditional ways of restricting voting by blacks. That debate was said to help in “forming one of the first interracial coalitions on civil rights.”<sup>188</sup> While such debate was taking place in various parts of the country, however, Missouri lawmakers did not act to approve a Constitutional Amendment eliminating the poll tax until 1963.<sup>189</sup>

In addition to crediting many Missouri legislators with what may have been a genuine desire not to offend, one must acknowledge that these changes in the lyrics happened to have also been politically expedient. The use of negative black stereotypes was becoming more publically unpopular. President Truman had already created national exposure for the tune, initially increasing the song’s popularity by playing it on the White House piano.<sup>190</sup> Now, in the fall of 1948, after having integrated the Armed Forces,

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<sup>188</sup> Davis, 386.

<sup>189</sup> Congressional Quarterly, “Ban on Poll Taxes Appears Assured,” Tri-City Herald, Pasco, Kennewick, Richland. Washington, 25 April 1963, 11.

<sup>190</sup> Note: When asked whether Truman really liked the song so often called his favorite, the official White House response was “President’s attitude towards the song? He can take it or leave it. Is it really his favorite? No. Does he play it often? No.” In actuality, he grew to dislike it, responding in one television interview, “If you let me say what I think, I don’t give a . . . about it, but I can’t say it out loud because it’s the song of Missouri. It’s as bad as ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ as far as music is concerned.” “Missouri History: What is Missouri’s State Song?”

Truman was elected to his own first full term as President.<sup>191</sup> The nation had been, and apparently would continue to be, reminded of the existence of this little lullaby, for at least another four years. The song was in the national spotlight whether the State of Missouri wanted it to be or not. Whatever the real impetus for the legislative vote, the offensive wording was removed, allowing the state to officially claim “The Missouri Waltz” as its own.

“My Old Kentucky Home” had served as a State Song longest of the three in its original form. At the time it was adopted in 1928 with the lyrics written by Stephen Foster, it had already begun to develop a permanent association with the Kentucky Derby. The first record of that pairing was reported in a 1921 newspaper article on the forty-seventh running of Kentucky’s popular horse race.<sup>192</sup> In addition to the fame of its composer, this long-standing association of Foster’s song with that state’s favorite sporting event may well have contributed to the willingness of legislators to finally, in 1986, make the changes necessary to keep the song’s “official” status and help uphold its cultural importance as part of Derby Day tradition.

As had been the case with Missouri, circumstances surrounding the changes made to “My Old Kentucky Home” were revealing about that state’s culture. There would certainly have been some awareness on the part of Kentucky legislators to recognize offensive racial stereotypes, but by 1986, when the lyrics to Foster’s song were finally changed, there would hardly have been an excuse for there to be otherwise. Since Brown

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<sup>191</sup> “Timeline, 1948-1982” American Experience: Truman. PBS Online, New content 1999-2000. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/truman/timeline/index.html>> (23 June 2008).

<sup>192</sup> . “Kentucky Derby 130,” Churchill Downs Simulcast Network, 2009. <[http://www.kentuckyderby.com/2004/derby\\_experience/the\\_song.html](http://www.kentuckyderby.com/2004/derby_experience/the_song.html)> (3 March 2008).

v. Board of Education in 1954, the vast majority of events traditionally associated with the Civil Rights Movement had already occurred – most of them before 1970. Among the better known, from a chronology prepared by New York lawyer and writer Townsend Davis in Weary Feet, Rested Souls: In May of 1955 the U. S. Supreme Court ordered Brown v. Board of Education implemented with “all deliberate speed.”<sup>193</sup> Fourteen year old Emmett Till was killed three months afterward, in August of ’55, and his killers acquitted barely a month later. In December of ’55, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery bus, triggering the Montgomery bus boycotts. In December of the following year, 1956, The U. S. Supreme Court declared “segregation of public buses unconstitutional.”<sup>194</sup> In 1957 “President Eisenhower sent federal troops to enforce desegregation at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas.” Sit-ins began in February of 1960 in Greensboro, North Carolina and quickly “spread throughout the South.” Freedom Riders, focused on desegregating bus stations, were attacked in multiple southern cities in May of 1961. James Meredith still managed to enroll at Ole Miss in Oxford, Mississippi following rioting there in September of 1962. The following June, 1963, Medgar Evers was assassinated in Jackson, Mississippi.<sup>195</sup> In August of that year, Dr. Martin Luther King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech at the March on Washington. Following violence and the killings of children and civil rights workers in the Fall of ’63 and the early summer of ’64, in July of 1964 the Civil Rights Act was signed into law. In December of that year, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Dr. King. August of the next year, 1965, the Voting Rights Act was passed. Three years

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<sup>193</sup> Davis, 381.

<sup>194</sup> Davis, 381.

<sup>195</sup> Davis, 382.

later, in April, 1968, Dr. King was assassinated; that same Spring Dr. Ralph Abernathy led The Poor People's March to Washington.<sup>196</sup> Four years later, in November 1972, Barbara Jordan (Texas) and Andrew Young (Georgia) became the first two African Americans since Reconstruction to be "elected to Congress from the South."<sup>197</sup>

By the 1980s, Kentucky legislators had to be cognizant of the upheaval and change which had been taking place throughout the nation for more than two decades. A growing awareness of and sensitivity to racial stereotyping, among other prejudicial behavior, had led to societal changes across the nation – changes felt by rural and urban alike, even in the absence of personal investment or loss. Songbooks containing "Uncle Ned" or "Old Black Joe" that had been used in southern elementary school classrooms in the 1950s had disappeared from public schools. The protests of the late '50s and '60s had given way to the moving of blacks into more prominent roles in society. By the '70s, more African Americans were holding better jobs and being elected to public office. In the entertainment industry, available roles for blacks had expanded from servants or members of the supporting cast; blacks were beginning to be placed in lead roles in movies and on television. In 1954, Dorothy Dandridge had become the first African American to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress for her role in the film Carmen Jones. By the 1970s, many African American actors were being cast in starring roles: Sidney Poitier (A Raisin in the Sun, Lilies of the Field, The Defiant Ones, and many other films); James Earl Jones (The Great White Hope); Paul Winfield and

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<sup>196</sup> Davis, 383.

<sup>197</sup> Davis, 384.

Cicely Tyson (Sounder); and Diana Ross (Lady Sings the Blues).<sup>198</sup> In 1969 - 1971 The Bill Cosby Show sitcom had introduced the American public to an average guy trying to earn a living as a public school teacher – only this time, for the first time, he was black.<sup>199</sup> Beginning in 1984, and for the eight years which followed, the American public, again for the first time, got to know, identify with, and love, the Huxtables, “a closely knit, upper-middle-class family who [would] ‘just happen’ to be Black.”<sup>200</sup>

Despite the very public changes which had been occurring in American society over three decades, there was an apparent disinterest or inability in Kentucky to reflect these changes in their State Song until the second half of the 1980s. It took a visit by some Japanese school children in 1986 to create the impetus for Kentuckians to change the lyrics to this Stephen Foster classic. Apparently the students had made arrangements to visit the Kentucky capitol, and, to show their appreciation to their hosts, they sung a specially prepared rendition of Kentucky’s State Song for the members of the State Legislature. “Out of the mouths of babes” was given a legislative stage, as elected members of this august body heard their own state’s official song in its racist entirety. The only African American member of the Kentucky House, Representative Carl Hines (Democrat-Louisville) “was quoted as saying that the lyrics . . . ‘convey connotations of racial discrimination that are not acceptable.’ Within the week, he sponsored a bill which the House passed, House Resolution 159,” changing the lyrics, and “*darkies*” became

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<sup>198</sup> Edward Mapp, African Americans and the Oscar: Decades of Struggle and Achievement (Lanham and Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2008), 11-12, 23, 25, 27, 29.

<sup>199</sup> Mary M. Dalton and Laura R. Linder, Teacher TV: Sixty Years of Teachers on Television (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 43.

<sup>200</sup> Linda K. Fuller, The Cosby Show: Audiences, Impact, and Implications (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1992), 1.



“people.” Hines said, “the original lyrics were offensive, showing no respect toward African-Americans.”<sup>201</sup>

Although there is some indication that there was concern about the lyrics to “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” at the time of its original adoption as a State Song in 1940, nothing would be done to change more than the title word “Virginny” to “Virginia” before the 1990s. Not only had the major events of the Civil Rights Movement taken place, but African Americans had been serving as elected members of the Virginia General Assembly for many years. “In 1970, Virginia Senator Douglas L. Wilder objected strongly to the song’s lyrics with their romanticized view of slavery and worked to dethrone the song with little success. After being elected Governor of Virginia (1990-1994), he again initiated legislative efforts to retire the song.”<sup>202</sup> A bill was introduced during his final year in office (1994) to change offensive wording, but it was never passed. Those wording changes had involved: “*Dreamer’s*” instead of “*darkey’s*,” “*My loved ones*” in place of “*old Massa*,” “*Mamma*” to replace “*Massa*,” and “*Papa*” offered in place of “*Missis*.”<sup>203</sup> A House Joint Resolution was also proposed to resolve the issue that same year but failed as well. Subsequent attempts to propose other songs as a replacement also failed, and an attempt as late as February 2008 to change the wording of Foster’s original song was left in Committee.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> “Kentucky’s State Song: ‘My Old Kentucky Home,’” [Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives](#), 3.

<sup>202</sup> “The Virginia Official Song Emeritus: Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” [Netstate – Virginia](#).

<sup>203</sup> “The Virginia Official Song Emeritus: Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” [Netstate – Virginia](#).

<sup>204</sup> “The Virginia Official Song Emeritus: Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” [Netstate – Virginia](#).

“History” and “tradition” have always been vital to Virginia’s identity. That state has always viewed itself as not just one of the original thirteen colonies, but as the sight of “the first permanent English settlement” in the New World, “Cradle of Democracy,” and “Mother of Presidents,”<sup>205</sup> – titles understandable when we consider the number of Virginians among the Founding Fathers, the writers and signers of the Declaration of Independence, and the number of U. S. Presidents she claimed. Virginia’s countryside is dotted with colonial homes and buildings and with Revolutionary and Civil War battlefields. Scattered along her highways and back roads are permanent roadside markers, giving explanations or notations of the birthplaces of historic figures, descriptions of Revolutionary and Civil War battles, and declarations of the importance or relevance of various spots along the road or of a lone chimney standing in a field. For Virginians, history has permeated daily life in advertising, attitudes, and conversation for more than 200 years.<sup>206</sup>

This focus on history by the citizenry may have contributed to the Virginia General Assembly’s actions – or rather inactions - but, for whatever reasons, the Commonwealth’s Representatives were unwilling to change “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny.” An unwillingness on the part of many white and African American members

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<sup>205</sup> Elizabeth Valentine Huntley, Peninsula Pilgrimage (Princeton: The Pyne Press, 1941), 134. Frank B. Atkinson, Virginia in the Vanguard: Political Leadership in the 400-Year Old Cradle of American Democracy, 1981-2006, (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2006). “Virginia Presidents,” Virginia is for Lovers, 2010. <<http://www.virginia.org/Site/features.asp?FeatureID=94>> (10 July 2009).

<sup>206</sup> One well known cookie company, in business since 1899, chose the name “Famous Foods of Virginia,” its “FFV” logo a play on the old colonial aristocracy abbreviation for “First Families of Virginia.” “Famous Foods of Virginia Cookies, Richmond,” Virtual Tourist 20 June 2006. [http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/North\\_America/United\\_States\\_of\\_America/Virginia/Richmond-889403/General\\_Tips-Richmond-Famous\\_Foods\\_of\\_Virginia\\_Cookies-BR-1.html](http://www.virtualtourist.com/travel/North_America/United_States_of_America/Virginia/Richmond-889403/General_Tips-Richmond-Famous_Foods_of_Virginia_Cookies-BR-1.html); George F. Willison, Behold Virginia: The Fifth Crown, Being the Trials, Adventures, & Disasters of the First Families of Virginia, the rise of the Grandees, of the eventual Triumph of the Common & Uncommon Sort in the Revolution (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952).

to accept suggested wording changes, and the inability on the part of a majority to accept some other song in its place, led to the State Song being effectively shelved: In 1994, Virginia lawmakers passed a resolution changing its status to “Virginia Song Emeritus.”<sup>207</sup> In the early 1990s, an exhaustive search was launched for a new state song. To date hundreds of submissions have been reviewed, yet more than a decade later, Virginia’s Legislature has yet to decide upon a replacement.<sup>208</sup>

*A pragmatic view suggests these songs function as “blue notes” in American culture, not only reflectors of, but participants in, cultural change.*

In In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America, Princeton professor and author Eddie Glaude uses the term “blue note” to describe “an unstable cord” in American society. Speaking of black identity he says, “. . . African Americans were forced to create themselves amid the absurdity of a nation committed, at once, to freedom and unfreedom.” Their “song,” to use the imagery of Whitman and Emerson, was a “blue note,” what Glaude called “an unstable cord that called attention to the unbridled chaos at the heart of American democracy.”<sup>209</sup>

The combination of dialect and stereotypes, with special societal status influencing identity, similarly labels our three songs “blue notes.” With the

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<sup>207</sup> “The Virginia Official Song Emeritus: Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” Netstate – Virginia. Note: As a former Virginian, this author would wager that the idea of replacing the State Song was simply too abhorrent for too many in a position to legislate such a change, to effectively abandon “the original article” which had functioned as part of the state’s history for so many years.

<sup>208</sup> Holly Herman, Interview by Author, Legislative Aid to Senator Hanger (R,VA), 1 April 2008.

<sup>209</sup> Glaude, 48.

passage of time, it became apparent that each song incorporated a *dated* dialect reflective of the kind of prejudice and negative stereotypes that first became uncomfortable, later became unpopular, and, finally, would become unacceptable. At the same time, each also functioned as a positive symbol for a state and for those individuals, both black and white, residing there. With the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1871, black males were given the right to vote and, with that vote, received a degree of new power. As racial inequalities and injustices became more exposed and more public with the progression of the Civil Rights Movement during the next century, society at large grew in awareness and sensitivity. These musical artifacts, symbolizing warm memories and feelings of love for a region or for a time in that region's past, came also to serve as reminders of the institution of slavery and the resulting and ongoing racism still existing in American society. They came to represent both equality and inequality, "at once freedom and unfreedom."<sup>210</sup>

The disparate emotional effects of these songs have included a positive range from loving fondness to proud tradition and a negative, from mild discomfort to revulsion. As previously stated, if these songs had never been labeled "State Songs" thereby becoming part of regional and personal identity, their racist content would not have mattered so much; they could have been readily dismissed. They have each, however, become an artifact symbolizing and engendering love for an entire state and its people. The "blue note" quality of each of these songs, their very mixed "unstable" message, in addition to

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<sup>210</sup> Glaude, 48.

serving as impetus for their own alteration may have contributed to the knowledge and evolving attitudes of those individuals involved in making or even observing the changes – the lawmakers of Kentucky, Virginia, or Missouri and that state’s, and the nation’s, citizenry. As such, these “blue notes” become participants in evolving individual and cultural identity, their very existence as “mixed” entities helping to initiate change.

As a result of Shannon’s lyrics incorporating words like “*darkey*” and “*Pick-a-ninny*,” Missouri legislators were forced to discuss the racist quality of the language and address ways to reflect a more desirable state image. “The Missouri Waltz” was being played, upon request, before a national audience by President Truman, Missouri’s piano playing native son. While gaining such national exposure, its racist language was giving the rest of the nation a rather unflattering impression of the state. Not wanting to appear backward and racist, state legislators and other Missouri citizens were thus encouraged in the direction of, and provided a very public opportunity for, discourse on racial stereotypes, as well as the chance to recognize and consider the power of racist language to insult and offend. Admittedly, while the changes to this song’s wording may have been needed and appropriate, the recognition of that need was triggered by political concerns. The mere existence of such a “blue note,” however, in the form of this artifact, drew attention to issues of racism and prompted their discussion.

When Kentucky legislators heard “My Old Kentucky Home” sung by Japanese students in 1986, followed by remarks from the sole African American

member of the House, Representative Hines, pointing out its negative stereotypical content, they were compelled to acknowledge and to alter the offensive language.<sup>211</sup> Whether to change the song's lyrics or discard it was hardly a choice in that setting; the allegiance of Kentuckians to "My Old Kentucky Home" had been around since its creation, but appears to have been further solidified by its association with the Derby.<sup>212</sup> The popularity of the song and its many years of traditional use by the voting public could not be discounted, making any notion that the Legislature might discard it all but impossible – again, a choice influenced by politics. The omission of the negative black stereotypes in the Stephen Foster classic not only made the song more palatable to African Americans but had the added advantage of making it potentially more "available" to all Kentuckians. These changes opened the way, for the first time, for the singer of the piece to be black *or* white. Other descriptors such as "*little cabin*" or "*hard times*" could already apply to the family histories of many Kentucky whites as readily as to those of blacks. With its changes, "My Old Kentucky Home" was no longer written to be sung by a black voice but by any Kentuckian. Previously, the singing of its lines in dialect by whites could have brought echoes of minstrelsy. Eric Lott once commented, "Every time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of Black English, you are in the presence of blackface's unconscious return."<sup>213</sup> Not only

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<sup>211</sup> "The Kentucky State Song," Netstate – Kentucky, 2002-2007,  
<[http://www.netstate.com/states/symb/song/ky\\_my\\_old\\_kentucky\\_hom.htm](http://www.netstate.com/states/symb/song/ky_my_old_kentucky_hom.htm)>.

<sup>212</sup> Events are frequently tied to the traditional use of songs. As at the Kentucky Derby, thousands stand and sing "When I Get Back Home in Indiana" at the Indie 500 Race each year, and the average attendee has been coming there for 40 years. "Fresh Air," National Public Radio, 5/20/09.

were individual Kentucky legislators placed in a position to reflect upon the damage being caused by the use of stereotypes and racist language, they were able to take action to correct it. As observers, ordinary citizens of Kentucky were being asked to change the words to their State Song and were made to think about, and likely discussed, the underlying reasons for that change. Stephen Foster’s song prompted individuals to consider the existence and injustices of racism. Today, there is the sight of whites and blacks, the men standing in their dapper jackets and the ladies in their colorful hats, as they sing “My Old Kentucky Home” on the first of May at Churchill Downs. That vision, along with new song lyrics, serves as a reminder of the former “blue note” quality of the Stephen Foster classic. The song may once again encourage individuals – this time the singers and the millions watching from their homes – to consider and perhaps re-evaluate our history, our own attitudes, and our progress regarding race in this country.



Kentucky Derby Day, Churchill Downs

The General Assembly of Virginia could not agree to changes in the lyrics of “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” – not too surprising considering the state’s reverence for the traditional. The need was still created for black and white legislators to speak *with one another* about the hurt or insult some associated with the lyrics of their State Song, while at the same time to discuss

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<sup>213</sup> Lott, 5.

the value placed in the artifact as a state symbol by others. For it to have taken almost forty years since the recognized beginning of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, for the Virginia lawmakers to broach the subject of racism in one of its state symbols is either a tribute to the discipline of the Virginia General Assembly to deal with the state's pressing economic and social needs, or a comment on that body's ability to postpone the discussion of an uncomfortable agenda item -- what Virginians would call a "touchy" topic. Despite what was surely a valiant attempt by some to *not* deal with the issue for many years, legislators finally agreed to look at the State Song and attempt to identify and alter those portions of its lyrics considered to be racist.

Although attempts to find consensus on new language for the traditional tune failed and "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" was named the "Virginia Song Emeritus," the process still served some constructive purpose.

Traditionalists were, presumably, pleased that James Bland's song could remain unaltered, while those disturbed or insulted by the racist language no longer had to endure its public performance or symbolic representation of their state.

These same state representatives, however, as well as attentive citizens, were forced to address the issue – still present after decades of cultural change – of an artifact symbolic of the state and its people, symbolizing for many all that was most negative in Historic Virginia's past. Today that song, written by James Bland, the "greatest Black writer of American Folk Song,"<sup>214</sup> still functions as a stimulus for the discussion of race, historic perspective, and cultural change, as the search for a new state anthem remains ongoing.

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<sup>214</sup> "A Short History of James A. Bland," 1.



In his discussion of black identity in the American political process, Eddie Glaude talks about a pragmatic approach to identity, which he contends has become more important for blacks than a traditionally accepted archeological approach.<sup>215</sup> That author maintains that, traditionally, “black identity is concerned with uncovering our true selves and inferring from that discovery what we must do.”<sup>216</sup> In his preferred pragmatic approach, “identities are seen as *consequences* of human activity – specifically, our problem-solving activity.”<sup>217</sup> Glaude maintains, “identities are the products of our efforts to overcome problems, then the content and consequences of our efforts impact the content of our character.”<sup>218</sup> We have discussed the role of these three musical artifacts as *reflective* of cultural change, but each *act* involved in their alteration may be seen as contributing to evolving black and white identities. These malleable artifacts have *contributed to* the further change in the identities of the black – and the white – communities participating in that process. The very choices made to change these three State Songs have impacted both the individuals viewing such choices and those directly participating in making them – legislators, their aids, members of the print and electronic media, the public observing the change process, and those of us today exploring the history of those changes. These songs, along with the stories of the form and process of their alteration, are not only items of interest to students of American history

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<sup>215</sup> Glaude, 51.

<sup>216</sup> Glaude, 53.

<sup>217</sup> Glaude, 55.

<sup>218</sup> Glaude, 56.

and culture, but, when viewed from a pragmatic perspective, they may be seen as participants in cultural change and, indeed, as continuing to alter or affect our own identities as black and as white Americans. Viewed as “blue notes,” they contribute to our own questioning and understanding, thereby functioning as a stimulus to individual and to cultural change.

The “blue note” quality to be found in these three songs may also be recognized in other conscious and unconscious uses today. Three young African American musicians who call themselves the “Carolina Chocolate Drops” recently released a string-music album “Genuine Negro Jig.” Interviewed on National Public Radio, they were asked about their choice of language for their album title. While giving a different basic reason for the title selection, they admitted that it should also cause people to think – a conscious use of a “blue note,” an unsettling element acting to stimulate discourse.<sup>219</sup> President Barack Obama, a twentieth-century product of two racial groups and a minimum of two cultural heritages, appears to be viewed by many as a special representative of only one: America’s “first *black* President.”<sup>220</sup> At the launch of his presidential campaign, Jason Carroll of CNN’s American Morning, speaking of what might happen in the upcoming election, used the phrase, “first black to occupy the White House.” Such a remark about a public figure, whose very publically reported parentage was as much white as black, serves as a blatant reminder of the old “one drop” rule for determining not just color, but blackness in particular – suggesting our President may

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<sup>219</sup> “The Carolina Chocolate Drops,” Dom Flemons, Rhiannon Giddens, and Justin Robinson, Interview by Terry Gross, Fresh Air - National Public Radio (1 March 2010).

<sup>220</sup> “Obama’s Statement,” Chicago Sun Times, 17 January 2007, quoted in Jason Carroll, CNN’s American Morning, 9 June 2008.

well be serving as a “blue note” for our society, his very presence and prominence encouraging dialogue on Race in America.

“My Old Kentucky Home,” “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” and “The Missouri Waltz”: Reflectors of cultural change and “blue notes” helping to encourage it. Each of these malleable artifacts was changed physically, either in lyrical content or in title, the latter change altering its societal role. Each evolved from a popular tune of another era, to use as a symbol of nostalgia and love for an entire state, to a representation of racial prejudice with the public recognition of the offensiveness of its lyrics. In addition to reflecting changes in American race relations and black social and political progress, these songs have served as “artifactual blue notes,” their very mixed and unsettling message encouraging us as a people to question and to grow.

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