"Twas Not a Time For New England to Dance"

Mr. Moodey, 1685

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A Second Endeavor

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The Connecticut Courant, January 3, 1799: Solomon Porter has for sale at his store on State Street, Hartford, an extensive assortment of dry goods, hardware, etc., on the most reduced terms for cash or short and approved credit. Also, at York prices, a large variety of musical instruments, suitable for church, military bands, or private amusement, with books of instruction, reeds, strings, mouth pieces, bows, bridges, etc.

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, folk music and dance had become an important part of life in New England. Itinerant dancing and music masters made their way from town to town, opening schools and offering instruction in country dancing and a wide variety of musical instruments. Stores stocked books of folk and popular songs, instruments, strings, and sheet music. Song books were often printed without written music, with only the name of a tune in parenthesis alongside the song, inferring that many people knew the same tunes. Towns held dancing assemblies to the sounds of the fiddle, and military bands played the same well known tunes on public occasions.

These shared traditions helped to create a group identity for New Englanders in the new nation. Old ways and lifestyles were rapidly changing, and folkways provided a sense of stability amidst the tumult. An examination of the music itself shows that much of it came from the Scotch-Irish, whose traditions became a vital force in the shaping of an American folk culture.

It appears, however, that the folk culture of New England of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries had few roots in the previous century. In the seventeenth and early
eighteenth centuries, there is little evidence of music of any sort, aside from religious music, in most of New England. Although it is possible to consider that art music had no place in Puritan New England, it is more difficult to believe that, for the most part, there was no folk music, neither what would be considered English, nor what would be considered American. The Puritans came from a place supposedly rich in folk music, and to many, it would seem unlikely that these traditions would have been entirely ignored. As a result, much effort has gone into proving that the Puritans in New England did play music, when, in fact, most of the evidence points against it.

It is curious why so many people feel the need to insist that the Puritans were involved in folk music. Notions of the "folk" have been romanticized to the point where a tradition has to reach back through the centuries for it to be considered valid. Folk music is seen as a relic of a traditional, community based society that has no true place in a modern world. Therefore, for American folk music to be considered real, it had to have begun to develop with the first settlers.

A folk group is usually defined by a set of cultural or geographic boundaries. The "folk" share common values, beliefs and backgrounds, which, in turn, influence their lifestyle. These folkways provide both internal and external control for the group, defining their lives within the context of other groups of people.
Religion was the primary influence on the Puritans. Rules and structures which were dictated by religious attitudes controlled their lives. The first generation of settlers might have been aware of English folk traditions, having come directly from England, but they chose not to participate in them. They took the folkways they were used to in England, including music, and substituted new traditions, which were based on religious thought. Succeeding generations did not grow up with the English folk culture, and therefore did not miss it. The Puritan's primary reason for coming to the American wilderness was to build a society based on their religious beliefs. It is reasonable that the "folk" music of that society should have been religious music.

Much has been written in recent years concerning the Puritans and evidence that a secular music culture did exist. This work has concentrated almost solely on the Boston area, and has little to say about folk music. The rest of New England is generally ignored, and proofs of music in Boston are used to make judgements about lifestyles in the entire area.

This practice seems unwise, as Boston was unlike the rest of Massachusetts, and very different from Connecticut, the other major New England colony. Boston was the largest city in the area, and it rapidly became an important center for business and commerce. The Puritan clergy lost their power to the merchants of Boston fairly early on, enabling Boston to become secularized before many other places, especially Connecticut.
Although Boston was similar to the rest of New England in that there appears to be no folk music, it is interesting to examine the reasons why there was some sort of secular music. There was more religious heterogeneity in Massachusetts than in Connecticut, enabling the Anglicans to develop into an important group. They built their first church in Boston in 1689, and contributed a great deal towards secular music.

The first successful dancing master in Boston was Edward Enstone, who was hired by the Anglican church, King's Chapel, as an organist in 1714. In addition to his duties as organist, he was also required to provide dancing music. In 1716, assuming the approval of the Anglican church, he applied to the Boston selectmen for permission to open a dancing school. He was refused, but the school opened anyway, and apparently was successful.

Congregationalists were also playing music, however, showing that religious authority was not very strong. A survey of the Suffolk County probate records for one hundred years, starting form the time of colonization, includes forty men listed as owning musical instruments when they died, a significant number considering that instruments had to be imported. Few of the instruments could be considered "folk" instruments.

Edward Enstone opened a music store a few years after he started his dancing school. He sold instruments, musical supplies, and sheet music. People learned music by hiring
teachers, or from printed instrumental tutors, or sheet music, a process very unlike that of oral/aural transmission. The expense of such items was prohibitive to most people.

Other evidence of music in Boston includes this letter to a Harvard student, an elite group even then, from his uncle in London, after he had asked him to send him a violin:

"Musick I had almost forgot. I suspect you seek it both too soon and too much. This be assured of, that if you be not excellent at it, it is worth nothing at all; and if you be excellent, it will take up so much of your time and mind, that you will be worth little else."  

Although there is evidence of art music in Boston, it is still possible to find examples of the power of the Puritan clergy, which was even stronger in other areas, such as Connecticut. In 1685, Mr. Francis Stepney tried to open a dancing school on lecture day. He did not have the backing of the Anglican church, as did Enstone. He also had the audacity to try and take people away from the meetinghouse on lecture day, which raised the ire of the Puritan authorities. Judge Samuel Sewall wrote in his diary:

Thursday November 12, 1685 - After, the Ministers of this town came to the Court and complain against a Dancing Master who seeks to set up here and hath mixt dances, and his time of meeting is Lecture-Day; and tis reported he should say that by one play he could teach more divinity that Mr. Willard or the Old Testament. Mr. Moodey said twas not a time for New England to dance. Mr. Nather struck at the root, speaking against mixt Dances.

Thursday December 17, 1685 - Mr. Francis Stepney, the Dancing Master, desired a Jury, so he and Mr. Shrimpton Bound in £50 to Jan' Court. Said Stepney is ordered not to keep a Dancing School; if he does will be taken in contempt and be proceeded with accordingly. Mr. Shrimpton muttered, saying he took it as a great favour that the court would take his bond £50.
The conception of a life based on religious precepts was and ideal for which the Puritans strove. As shown by the evidence of art music in Boston, there were some people who had a more worldly view, who did not want to live under such strict religious controls. Though Connecticut was less cosmopolitan than Boston, there might have also been people with the same attitudes. The Puritan authorities, however, had greater control in Connecticut, and kept their power longer. They officially discouraged secular music, enabling religious music to survive as the sole important musical outlet for the people for a long time.

People in Connecticut generally lived in small towns and villages, where life centered around work and the church, community and family. An examination of the court records of the period show the vast amount of influence that the church held. People were brought to court for a wide variety of reasons, including theft, fighting, blasphemy, counterfitting, rape, fornication, speaking poorly of a neighbor, and not attending church. The family was the other major governing structure within the community.

In 1731, Samuel Peters wrote a History of Connecticut, including what he called Connecticut's Blue Laws. They were a long list of rules that the Puritan leaders had dictated to keep the people in a godly order. The rules were never distributed in published form, so Peters has been doubted by many. A great number of them, however, can also be found in
the actual written laws of early Connecticut. One of the Blue Laws deals with rules concerning music:

No one shall read Common Prayer, keep Christmas or Saints Days, make minced pies, dance, play card or play any instrument of music, except the drum, trumpet, and jews harp.6

The probate records of seventeenth century Connecticut show that the people lived with very few material items. The vast majority of people owned little beyond the necessities of life: a few items of clothing, some rudimentary furniture, kitchen utensils, and farm implements. There was no place in these people's lives for luxury items such as musical instruments. Even the more wealthy, such as Governor Winthrop, had no instruments.

The combination of Puritan disapproval of secular music, and the fact that instruments were hand made, expensive, and had to be imported makes an absence of instruments reasonable. There would be no market for a native instrument builder. It is possible that the current expectation for musical instruments to be widespread is a product of the present technological age, where instruments are relatively cheap and available.

The instruments that were important parts of the culture were, as Peters states in his Blue Laws, drums and trumpets. They were used in the militia, and used as signals for the town, in place of a church bell, which most towns could not afford, as they had to be imported. Drums and trumpets are traditionally used as military instruments, and they were
also suitable for signals, because their sound carried well.

Evidence of drums can be found in the colonial records of Connecticut, where it is listed:

Gyles Whiteing is dismissed fro trayneing and is content to pay 12d every trayneing day to the clarke of the land toward the maytenaunce of drums...

In the action betweene John Steele plt. and Nathanell Kellock defendt. the courte adijudgeth those of Farmington that have not yet paide the plt. their proportion for the drum hee sould them.

It is important to consider military music as a part of a musical culture. By the Revolutionary War, militia bands included fifes, and sometimes other wind or reed instruments, such as oboes. The bands played a wide variety of marches and tunes, many of which were the same as popular dance or song tunes of the time. Because the bands played on public occassions, it can be assumed that many people were familiar with these tunes, making military music a part of the folk culture.

Though little is known about seventeenth century military music, what information there is leads to the theory that there were few tunes, and these were primarily used for military signals. They were not of the reel, march, or hornpipe variety, and would not be suitable for dancing or singing. Therefore, in the seventeenth century, military music existed on its own, apart from other types of music, and can not be considered a form of folk music.
There is some evidence that people played Jews harps, though it would be hard to say what was played on them. These tiny instruments are easily portable, and inexpensive. The one instrument found in a survey of the early Connecticut probate records was a Jews harp, belonging to Mr. William Whiting, who died in 1649. His estate was valued at $2854.00.00.

It took Boston until 1716 to have an established dancing master. In Connecticut, there is no evidence of dancing until many decades later. Dancing in the eighteenth century was generally an elite form, borrowing from English court traditions made popular by John Playford, who published a book of tunes and dances in London, in 1650. Other dance forms were more obviously rooted in folk tradition, but they were still mostly taught by a paid dancing master, and were too genteel and socially oriented to be suitable to the wilderness, and religious Connecticut.

Connecticut lagged behind Boston in other ways, too, showing that secularization could also come more slowly. Religious music in Boston underwent a veritable revolution in the 1720’s, when it was decided that the method of lining out the tunes, where the leader sings a line and the congregation repeats it, was not producing music of suitable quality. Instead, it was decided that people should learn to sing and read music, and singing schools were established.

In Middletown, Connecticut, the Congregational church did not advocate "regular singing," as it was called, until
the 1780's. Prior to that, the church periodically chose someone to "tune the psalm", that is, to lead the lining out. A committee was formed to examine the state of psalmody in the congregation, and they had the following conclusions:

Your committee would further observe, that Psalmody is an important part of public worship in all countries and societies professing Christianity; and that both honor and duty direct that the same should be performed in such decent and orderly manner as not to expose that part of worship to reproach and contempt, your committee would not be understood to censure any person, but unless some Measures are Taken to revive and promote Psalmody it must be either wholly omitted in the society, or be performed in a manner which will give uneasiness to many persons and perhaps excite the ridicule of others; your committee therefore submit it to your consideration, whether it would not promote and encourage psalmody, if schools for that purpose were kept in different parts of the society...

Middletown was founded in 1650, so the Congregationalists sang in the old style, with little regard to musicality, for one hundred and thirty years. It does not seem that Middletown residents, who are typical of other Connecticut towns, had much interest in music, at least until after the American Revolution.

There came a time in Connecticut, however, when the power of the Puritan leaders also began to wane. By the mid eighteenth century, merchants had become an important group, and religion had to be reconciled with new economic needs. Other religious sects became progressively more popular, and the Congregationalists lost their power to control them. The increasing secularization was given a major boost by the Revolutionary War, and the political and economic changes it brought.
The eighteenth century also saw an increasing number of Scotch-Irish immigrants, who came to America primarily for economic reasons. The culture of the Scotch-Irish was different from that of the more staid English, as evidenced by occasions such as the ones described in the History of Londonderry, New Hampshire, where there was a lot of music, drinking, dancing, and general gaiety. The Scotch-Irish brought many traditions with them, including songs, ballads, and dance tunes. Their music was a primary influence on what later came to be considered American folk music.

A brief examination of American folk music shows the extent of that influence. The Puritans were English, and there is little in American music that stems from English traditions. Variants of the English "Child Ballads" (a collection of ballads catalogued by Francis J. Child in the late nineteenth century) were collected in America, but these ballads can also be found in Scotland and Ireland. The most famous collection of Child ballads in this country was done in the early twentieth century by Cecil Sharp, who had primarily informants of Scotch-Irish descent. Other American ballad types have little in common with English ballads. Dance tunes and instrumental music in America can also be considered to come from Scottish and Irish folk music, and not English.

By the late eighteenth century, the lifestyles of the people in Connecticut were changing. As religion lost its
overiding influence, the accompanying importance of the community and the family also began to break down. Land became increasingly more scarce, and fathers could no longer provide a guaranteed way of earning a living for their sons. Many were forced to migrate west, or enter new trades, and sense of continuity in the community was lost.

As the old structures of society began to fall, new ones were necessary to take their place. The old traditions of the Puritans were gone, and the people needed new folkways and values so they could reorder their lives amidst the increasing confusion and alienation. A new group identity with new shared traditions had to be established. A native American folk music began to develop, borrowing liberally from Scottish and Irish traditions, and also developing regional distinctions.

It is interesting that this music became a viable part of American culture only after traditional, community based society had already broken down. Thus, this "folk music" was created after the "folk", as they are commonly defined, had ceased to exist.
Footnotes

1. The Connecticut Courant Hartford, Ct. January 3 1799
2. Norman Benson *Itinerant Dancing and Music Masters of 18th Century America* p.335
5. Samuel Sewall, Diary
6. Samuel Peters *History of Connecticut*
8. Raoul Camus *Military Music of the American Revolution*
9. Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut p.496
10. Records of the First Church Middletown, Ct.
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5. Dickson, R.J. Ulster Emigration to Colonial America Routledge and Kegan Paul London 1966


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21. Winstock, Lewis *Songs and Music of the Redcoats*
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