Old Folks’ Concerts:
The Meaning and Mushrooming of an
Antiquarian Music Craze, 1853-1856

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A little back-story might help set the stage for what follows. The only time I can remember wearing tights in public, they were complimented with a flouncy white shirt of my mom’s, home-made knee breeches and a tricorner hat. My parents were made up to resemble George and Martha Washington, and at some point a bunch of us sang “America’s first national anthem,” which I later learned was William Billings’ Chester. Other than mild embarrassment on my part, it all seemed pretty normal. In my early schooling we were taught to be, not just Americans, but Yankees, and I was used to seeing people in continental regalia on television, in coloring books and standing in line for ice cream at Friendly’s. I had no idea, at the time of the nation’s bicentennial, I was participating in a tradition of American, antiquarian sacred singing that dated at least to the so-called “old folks’ concerts of the 1850s, and wasn’t much younger than the nation itself. In some ways it was even older.

A few years later, at about the time I started playing in punk bands as a teenager living in Suffolk County, New York, I began to pursue an already longstanding interest in early American music, which is how I encountered the music of The Sacred Harp, the storied, shape-note tunebook from Georgia that contains many of the same pieces popular in the old folks’ concerts. It wasn’t love at first listen, but it got my attention, as unaccompanied hymn singing in harmony was something I had always enjoyed. Among my favorite things to sing were Christmas carols, and a craving for modal minor tunes outside of the month of December was at
least partially responsible for my attraction to punk and metal, South Indian music and, eventually, active participation in Sacred Harp singing.

When, as historians and ethnomusicologists, we launch ourselves into unfamiliar periods and places, we bring with us anachronisms and anatopisms that become part of the lens through which we interpret our data. Among the most prominent things I brought to this dissertation you would be hard pressed to find in nineteenth century New England are punk rock, Sacred Harp singing and South Indian music. I rarely center any of the three, but they are there in the wings, and my long history with each is central to the present work in its themes and details, its purposes, structures and methodology. In particular they are there in a hands-on, embodied approach to understanding music, how it works and what it means in individuals and communities.

When I began singing regularly from the Sacred Harp in the late 1980s, the prevailing folk history among enthusiasts was that “it,” (usually a conflation of several related practices), had been born in Revolutionary Era New England, only to be abandoned locally and vanquished southward by the early nineteenth century. But casting aside something of local provenance associated with the Revolutionary Era didn’t sound like the Yankees I’d grown up around. I began to investigate. One of the first things I discovered, at what was then the Northampton (MA) Historical Society, was a pile of mid-nineteenth century antiquarian tunebooks owned by Daniel Russell Clark, 1806-1888, mason by trade, “old school singer,” and leader of one of the very
first old folks’ concerts in 1854. Not long after that I bought, with trembling hands, for three dollars at a flea market, a copy of *The American Vocalist*, 1848, given by prominent agriculturalist and businessman William Clark to his brother Daniel, and passed from him to his daughter Amelia who was, according to a penciled note on a fly leaf, still singing the book’s old hymns in “1944- aged 94- over and over!” This bit of providence is where my research began in earnest.

Answers to my early inquiries about local music in the nineteenth century almost always began with the fact that Jenny Lind, “the Swedish nightingale,” performed at First Church, Northampton in 1851. But one nineteenth century winter’s night, as I soon discovered, large ensembles of local people in the neighboring towns of Northampton and Williamsburg had sung the sacred music of William Billings and other early New England composers in simultaneous old folks’ concerts that attracted audiences rivaling Lind’s in size, despite a blinding snow storm. Why was that not part of our local history? What made the old folks’ concerts so compelling, and what made them so historically invisible? I was equally interested in both questions, although it is to answering the first that I have devoted much of this dissertation.

Around 1989, shortly after falling in love with the Sacred Harp and having played in punk and proto-grunge bands for nearly a decade, I began to see growing potential and interest in both musics in a culture that was largely unaware of them. To the extent that people were aware, the former was widely understood to be the vanishing, last light of a southern, white tradition with roots in early New England.
The latter was seen as, and partly structured around being, transgressive and incompatible with wide popularity. By their practitioners, each was generally understood to be “real” music, unlikely ever to move beyond the small world of its devotees. But as an insider, in the coming years, I was able to participate in some fascinating, popular culture “Eureka moments” for both. These experiences have done much to motivate and inform my research and insights about the old folks’ concerts, particularly my investigation of what made them resonate with the public and how they subsequently mushroomed.

My research was divided rather neatly into two distinct phases by the advent of the internet. During the first ten years of on-and-off research, my work was largely concerned with objects I had to go somewhere to hold. In church basements, historical societies, junk shops and private homes these objects, including tunebooks, diaries, newspapers and concert programs, were typically un-indexed and often uncatalogued. They were organized, variously, according to who made them, who had owned or donated them, the date or provenance of accession, their morphology or just what shelf they would fit on. I learned to look to objects for familiar shapes, textures, wear, handwriting styles and locations, and to pay attention to what was in their physical proximity. I read through a century of two local newspapers. I rarely found anything I was looking for, but I got a good sense of what was around it.

As the internet grew, my research gradually turned largely, from objects in a place, to words I could access anywhere. I found an overwhelming amount of
information, comprised almost entirely of what I was looking for, with comparatively little need for objects and little initial need to search very far beyond the flood of results Google and other tools turned up. I retained my early fascination with actual things: who had used them, how they had been used, what stories they held and how they fit into various personal, social and intellectual puzzles. But this dissertation, as it is, would not have been possible without both methodologies, or circumstances, or eras, being in dialog.
ABSTRACT

In 1853, a group of mostly senior citizens in New Haven, Connecticut staged a novel concert, in which they sang music by New England composers of the Revolutionary and early Federal periods. This was the homegrown sacred music of their youth, although it had long been effectively shunned from public use or even, as was long the prevailing view, virtually eliminated. Dubbed an “old folks’ concert,” the event was met with great public acclaim, starting what would become, perhaps, history’s only musical craze started by seniors. Beginning with western New England “Taylorite” Congregationalists and inspiring an ever-broadening range of imitators of European and African descent, the old folks’ concert became a lively site of innovation and contestation, of political, social and theological engagement, centered in an imaginary New England village of nineteenth century construction.

Taking an on-the-ground, ethnomusicological approach to primary sources including newspapers, concert programs, diaries and “the music itself,” Part I identifies the concert’s origin and the constellation of factors that made it compelling enough to comprise a cultural “Eureka moment.” These include issues surrounding congregational singing, abolition, the changing faces of senescence, nostalgia and nationalism, regional, national, denominational, gender and ethnic identity, and antiquarianism as part of a larger progressive project inspired by the Second Great Awakening.

With breadth and detail impossible before text recognition software, Part II traces the networks and technologies involved in the mushrooming of the practice, and a
gradual accretion of elements including costume, humor and instrumental accompaniment. It concludes by establishing “ancient harmony” as part of the lost soundtrack of the antislavery movement. Part III presents the first substantial biography of the concerts’ best-known leader, Robert “Father” Kemp, concluding with an exploration of relationships between musical antiquarianism, postmillenialism and science fiction in nineteenth century New England.

No merely nostalgic entertainment pioneered by one man, the embodied, rich and usually communal practice of the old folks’ concert made it a potent site for the construction and performance of identity, place, meaning and memory in the context of tremendous cultural, theological and demographic change, brewing national crisis and the so-called “colonial revival.”
INTRODUCTION

The story of the old folks’ concerts, as I have chosen to tell it, begins with the anatomy of a zeitgeist, the back-story of a cultural “Eureka moment” that mushroomed into a musical craze and persisted as a longstanding tradition. My fascination stems in part from my involvement in punk rock and Sacred Harp singing, community music practices with which I have a long association and some of whose Eureka moments I have witnessed up close. Like the old folks’ concerts, punk as grunge in the early 1990s and, more modestly, Sacred Harp singing as Americana music a decade later, appeared, to many, as a total surprise seemingly coming out of nowhere.

Unlike Athena springing fully armed from the head of Zeus, however, Eureka moments and their cultural content always have a history, and as surprising as they can be, they far less often involve the sudden arrival of something totally new than they do the coalescing in perception of mostly or entirely pre-existing materials. They have less in common with Athena than with the magic eye pictures popular in the grunge era: the elements are there, looking like a whole mess of unrelated blotches and then, with a small shift in focus or the donning of eyeglasses, voila! Washington Crossing the Delaware. The coalescing of elements and perceptual shift often happens around a signature event or idea that, somewhere in the process of becoming a “thing,” gets a name. Such was the case with the old folks’ concerts.

In a nutshell, the “old folks’ concert” was a practice originating in mid-nineteenth century southwestern New England in which old Yankees sang old Yankee music, often in old Yankee costume. At the tradition’s center was the late eighteenth to early
nineteenth century sacred music of the region’s earliest native-born composers, music that had been effectively shunned from public use in New England by the 1820s and relegated to the private sphere or, as has long been the prevailing view, even virtually eliminated except in out of the way places. However, the concert tradition in which it served as a powerful, central symbol was one of several means by which the music was kept in the public eye and ear well into the twentieth century, even becoming by some measures more popular after its demise than it had been in its heyday.

My central thesis is rather simple: old folks’ concerts are interesting, they deserve attention, and their story fills a number of gaps in the literature on nineteenth century America and its music. Actually, they’re really interesting. Far more than merely nostalgic and surprisingly early examples of musical antiquarianism, as they have been portrayed, the old folks’ concerts were lively sites of innovation and contestation, of political, social and theological engagement. Imagine a politically radical concert of old hymns performed by a pick-up group of small town elders led by militant antislavery anarchist Henry Wright. Imagine African American Yankees in colonial costume performing the sprawling patriotic anthem *Ode To Science* in a synagogue at the dawn of emancipation, or the music of William Billings, “the father of our New England music” (Bentley 1907 II: 350) paired with a comic “nitrous oxide exhibition” and Act 5 of Shakespeare’s *Richard III* performed on horseback. More remarkable even than such pregnant examples, the old folks’ concert (OFC) appears to stand alone in American history, if not world history, as a bona fide popular music craze started by senior citizens and enthusiastically embraced by the “young folks.” Rather than a simply nostalgic entertainment pioneered by one man, the OFC, a rich, embodied and usually communal
event, was an especially potent site for the construction of identity, place, meaning and memory in the context of tremendous cultural, theological and demographic change and brewing national crisis.

When I began my research in 1989 the only substantial scholarship on the phenomenon was Judith T. Steinberg’s 1973 journal article *Old Folks’ Concerts and the Revival of New England Psalmody*, primarily about the professional activities of the most famous leader of these concerts, Robert “Father” Kemp, 1820-1897. In his review of McKay and Crawford’s landmark 1975 book on “the father of New England psalmody,” William Billings, 1746-1800, Irving Lowens’ only critique was that “somehow the development of the so-called ‘Old Folks Concerts’ of the 1850s and the conscious revival of New England psalmody which followed seem to have escaped their attention entirely,” despite the fact that there was “ample evidence that Billings’s music did not die out, even in New England, throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century” (Lowens 1977).

In the intervening years scholars have increasingly acknowledged the ongoing presence of the music, dubbed by its practitioners “ancient harmony,” long after its widely reported demise in New England, but in works on American music the old folks’ concerts continue to appear as an aside or footnote at best, if they are mentioned at all.¹

¹ The one notable exception is Bealle’s 1997 chapter comparing Father Kemp’s performances with ancient harmony singing in the fiction of Harriet Beecher Stowe. For Bealle the former was “nostalgic display” (76) that catered to “nationalist mythology” (81), while the latter suggested a “transcendent world- where the personal was sacred” (83), anticipating attitudes and practices that went on to give Sacred Harp singing a new lease on life as “folk music.”
At this writing, Tick Steinberg’s article remains the most substantial and oft (though still rarely) cited work on the phenomenon, and this dissertation fills a number of gaps, not only in our understanding of the concerts themselves, but of their place in a constellation of nineteenth century phenomena. These include a revival of congregational singing, the place of early American music in the antislavery movement, the construction, perception and practice of age, regional, national, denominational, gender and ethnic identity, the important role of antiquarianism in political and socially progressive movements, the origins of New England sacred music historiography, relationships between historiography, fiction, nostalgia and nationalism, and the importance of technological change and increased communication and travel to musical practice. Overarching these, perhaps, this dissertation opens the relatively unexplored can of worms that is music and the “colonial revival.”

The Colonial Revival and Scholarship of American Music, OFCs and “The New England Village”

Sometimes an historical phenomenon so permeates a culture as to become an effectively permanent part of it. One such phenomenon, visible through almost any window, in any glowing screen, supermarket, parkway or even refrigerator in the United States is what has come to be called the “colonial revival,” manifested not only in real villages modeled after the nineteenth century imaginary but in suburbs, cemeteries, shopping malls, film and television, “the new urbanism,” design arts, living history
museums like Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village and even the “got milk?” advertising campaign.

In her discussion of the phenomenon, historian Jennifer L. Anderson’s description of the appeal of “old mahogany” from the colonial era around the time of the first OFC may as well have been written about the concerts: “well-worn pieces, some of which had been relegated for years to back halls and attics, were dragged out and buffed up” (2012: 303). Furthermore, she writes with equal relevance:

Objects that survived from that period became historical relics, supposedly imbued with the virtues of the Founding Fathers and Mothers who once owned them. As patriotic talismans, they also served as useful object lessons in a process of Americanization aimed at inculcating patriotism in children and new immigrants (305).

The phenomenon has been so pervasive for so long that one scholar went so far as to claim that “one cannot treat the arts, culture, and history of the United States without treating the Colonial Revival” (Wilson 2006: 3). In library and online arts and American Studies database searches (ProQuest, RILM, IIPAFT, JSTOR and others) I found well over a thousand unique entries with “colonial revival” in the subject or abstract, prominently in the fields of architecture and decorative arts but including more recent entries in areas like material culture, media and food studies. Limiting my search to studies of music I found, not hundreds, or dozens but exactly one reference: Michael Broyles’ 1996 essay on Charles Ives in which the author calls “the creative life and work” of the composer, (whose works include the antiquarian hymn-laden “The Old Folks’ Gatherin’), “the colonial revival in action.” Noting Ives’ antimodern modernism, Broyles
identifies the idealized New England village as “the principal source of his political philosophy” (in Burkholder ed. 1996: 149).

According to Broyles “historians other than architectural historians have yet to investigate the colonial revival, particularly its political impact.” While the twenty years since this observation have seen increased attention in a number of disciplines, music has apparently not been one of them. The reasons for this lacuna are interesting and, I think, pertinent. White, New England elites of yore are not the sort of people who have typically attracted ethnomusicological inquiry, unless the subjects were ethnomusicologists themselves. Folklorists, also historically uninterested in the kinds of people at the center of the OFCs, have tended to look for what was most ancient at the time of writing, while historians and musicologists, who do have a long history of interest in dead white New England elites, have tended to focus on what was new in a given period. Old folks’ concerts were sort of a square peg for these disciplinary round holes.

Another reason I believe the OFCs were able to hide in plain sight for so long is especially relevant to my study. The other most prominent musical face of the colonial revival has long been scholarship of early American music itself. Beginning at around the same time as the revival of ancient harmony, this scholarship has long focused on much of the same music with many of the same perspectives, goals and narratives, and, like the OFCs, often flared up around anniversaries and other events of national significance. Many early OFCs were even led by the same people, including Nathaniel Duren Gould, John Weeks Moore and Eben Tourjee, who wrote early histories of American sacred music or were involved in founding the institutions that enshrined (or
entombed) the music of William Billings and company as America’s earliest music. I believe the OFCs have been too close to home to be of much interest to scholars of American music.

In 1905 Oscar Sonneck complained that Gould, Moore and others had “naively viewed the history of American music through a New England church window” (in Norton 2003: 405). Amazingly, the view of New England tunebooks and Sonneck’s metaphorical church as ground zero for music in the United States has only relatively recently begun to be substantially problematized within scholarship of early American sacred music (Pappas 2013, Norton 2002, 2003). In addition to being interesting in its own right, the story of the OFCs offers useful insight into the history, institutions, ideologies and practices of the study of early American music.

If we accept that “the relationship between cultural identities and places should be understood through the processes whereby meanings are constructed,” the OFC is a rich and heretofore unexplored example of such a process, with implications well beyond the realm of music (Roman-Velasquez 1999, summarizing Hall 1995). Oscar Sonneck’s church was the same one in which the OFCs were born and prospered: the one on the green of the (imaginary) New England village, which became increasingly identified with the American village in the wake of the Civil War. In that conflict, according to historian Joseph Conforti, “the North not only won the war between the states, but also the cultural war implicit in the construction of the ‘American’ past” (2001: 24). The fight for the past was really a fight for the present and the future, as B. D. Wortham-Galvin suggests in his
aptly titled *The Fabrication of Place in America: The Fictions and Traditions of the New England Village.*

American origin myths were…a mid-nineteenth century cultural invention meant to stabilize and homogenize a socially uncertain present- one threatened by ethnic and socioeconomic heterogeneity. …Establishing tradition, therefore, was not merely a matter of nostalgia or entertainment; it was a device to cement the politics of the United States to its culture. This, not aesthetics or stylistic preferences was the real project of the colonial revival. It was a willful, if sometimes incoherent, attempt to create a common American heritage and a singular collective memory (2010: 23).

While the antiquarian publications and performances of Father Kemp have been called an “an anchor in the sea of nineteenth century musical change” they were really, to extend the nautical metaphor, just the tip of the iceberg (Crawford in Kemp 1984: viii).

**Trees and Rhizomes, Mushrooms and Binaries**

In writing about history in general, and musical traditions in particular, tree metaphors, both explicit and implied, have long been the norm. For example, the title *From Psalm to Symphony,* about the history of music in New England, implies a familiar scenario in which a tradition germinates in obscurity somewhere underground, emerges into the sunlight as a sprig, then a sapling, and continues to grow ever grander. Here, as elsewhere, “music in New England” appears as a single entity, growing apace and branching out symmetrically, hierarchically, even teleologically. Noting the dualism, hierarchy, genealogy and determinism inherent in “arborescent” occidental thinking and
representation, not only in history writing, Gilles Deleuze proposed and elaborated an alternative botanical metaphor: rhizome. In a rhizome like the potato, an underground network of nodes and strands all of which are connected to each other and any of which might be broken off to form a new network of connections, Deleuze saw a model that suggested intermediacy, multiplicity, multivalence and heterogeneity—what he termed an “anti-genealogy” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 11).

My writing is, for the most part, conventionally arborescent, and my engagement with Deleuze slight, but I have found rhizome useful to come back to for inspiration in three areas: considering the old folks’ concerts as irreducible and dynamic, thinking about the use of binary opposition both in the world of the OFCs and in writings about that world, and developing my own central metaphor for the concert tradition’s character and growth, the mushroom. The first point is pretty straightforward. Having been written about a fair amount myself over the years I know how hard it is, even with the greatest care, to represent people in a way that is not at least partially unrecognizable to them and those who know them. Thus, however tightly I have scripted my informants, I have tried to leave space for implicit conjunctions: and, or, if, but. My concerns with mushrooms and binaries require a little more elaboration.

Living under the substrate, the main body of a fungus is the mycelium, a mass of interwoven filaments. What we call mushrooms are the reproductive organs of the hidden mycelium, that pop up when conditions are favorable. With their underground networks, multiplicity, asymmetry and non-hierarchical morphology mushrooms have a lot in common with rhizomes but, as metaphor, they are better suited to the OFCs and even,
perhaps, to culture in general. While both can be propagated by fragmentation, mushrooms also propagate through tiny spores carried by the wind, and the vernal stream, and the passing forest visitor. They are more mobile and mercurial. Unlike trees and rhizomes they can pop up without warning overnight and, like Brigadoon, vanish almost as quickly. They can also lie seemingly dormant for long enough to appear altogether gone. Walking through the feral woods of New England, minus the right conditions for fruiting, you could pass the same spot every day for years without knowing what was lying ready to burst into visibility in the right season after the right kind of rain.

My use of “mushroom” has only faint echoes of the roiling complexity of Deleuze’s rhizome, and is very close to the way the term is conventionally (and conveniently) used as a metaphor. An important distinction, though, is that “mushrooming” is commonly used to indicate the rapid, symmetrical expansion of a single thing, a phenomenon for which “ballooning” might be more appropriate, while my meaning is much closer to the patchy, asymmetrical, localized and imperfectly predictable hopscotch of the way mushrooms (and people) actually do their thing.

My use of mycological terminology is straightforward. The OFC “spore” is comprised of the basic formula of the “old folks’ concert,” the term itself, and the variable constellation of ideas, practices and associations they animated in the minds of my informants and their neighbors. The prevailing winds and vernal streams that carried the spore near and far were newspapers, letters, telegraphic messages, talk and trains. The environmentally suitable locations in which, upon arrival, the spore may or may not have taken hold as mycelium in the substrate (“we could have an old folks’ concert”) included
congregations, historical and abolitionist organizations, choirs and groups of neighbors. Once established in the substrate, the fungus/potential OFC may or may not have born fruit in the form of concerts, the visible manifestation of the underlying network of factors embodied by the OFC as possibility. The suitable weather conditions that animated fruiting/concerts often involved the confluence of one or two enthusiastic organizers and some sort of public occasion, milestone or project. Local and national anniversaries, cornerstone layings, the birthday of a prominent older citizen, raising money for charity and even the passing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act were among occasions that brought out OFCs like chanterelles after a summer downpour.

In thinking about the OFCs and beyond, I find the most useful thing about mushrooms is that they are small, multiple, indigenizable, cosmopolitan and mercurial. They suggest the immediate and particular, the potential and contingent, the unpredictable, the mostly invisible, the restless, the episodic and the herky-jerky. For this reason I have found them more suggestive and appropriate than the great hemlock in the glade, predictably present, immobile and growing apace.

Playing the straight man to the mercurial mushroom, binary opposition comes into play in this work as both worldview and practice among my informants and as a convention in understanding and writing about their world. However, it also figures, perhaps more mushroom-like, as a kind of dialogic playground for exploring complexities and multiplicities suggested by the OFC. The New England dissenters lumped together as “Puritans” weren’t alone in their penchant for binary opposition, but they made an all-permeating art of it. In describing seventeenth century New England
rhetoric, Patricia Roberts-Miller observed, “Puritanism is dependent upon choosing between logically opposed binaries. Of any two conflicting propositions, at least one must be false” (1999/2014: 61).

Beyond rhetoric, for the Puritans the universe itself, as created by God, was a matter of static oppositional pairs: sacred/secular, heaven/earth, male/female, elect/condemned. By the 1850s many of the ideas and activities framed by each one had changed dramatically, but the binaries themselves endured, and my mid-century subjects tended, still, to think and speak of the universe dualistically. However, while in theory the pairs were static, in practice they could be sites of dynamism and creativity (though not necessarily in the positive sense). Designed as a framework for understanding the world, in practice binary opposition often functioned more as a tool for navigating and creating it, perhaps because, beneath their puritan exteriors, my subjects were equally products of the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution.

As nineteenth century New England music and its scholarship are stands of mushrooms that grew from the same soil, it’s not surprising that they exhibit similar characteristics, including a preference for binaries. Part of Deleuze and his contemporaries’ problem with binaries is that they obscure connections, reify distinctions and silence multiplicities. For example, in a conference paper titled Reformers and Resisters, about the state of ancient harmony in mid-nineteenth century New England, the author describes two distinctly drawn camps: musical progressives like Boston sacred music reformer Lowell Mason who were opposed to the old music, and musical antiquarians like Maine preacher and compiler Daniel Mansfield who resisted its demise
(Rhoads 2006). There’s more than a grain of truth to the characterization, and some people did identify along such strict lines. But the image of two diametrically opposed groups of people with opposite views and goals, while rhetorically useful, renders static the very dynamic and fluid state of ideas and practices around old and new sacred music at mid-century. Mason and Mansfield’s goals were, in fact, more similar than different, Mansfield said the country owed Mason a debt of gratitude, and Mason fought at least as bitterly with his Boston associates as he ever did against the music of William Billings. Furthermore, in the mid nineteenth century antiquarianism was often part of a larger progressive project, in the context of which urges to preserve, to restore, to erase and to replace manifested in different configurations under different circumstances even within the same people, often in ways that could be surprising or even contradictory.

One of the most enduring dyads at work both in nineteenth century life and its documentarians, and one that still figures prominently in American culture, politics and self-image, pits the nation as Governor Bradford’s “shining city upon the hill” against the nation as a loosely affiliated band of rough-hewn individualists. Americans tend to want to have it both ways. We want our presidents, as it were, to have gone to Yale or Harvard, but we don’t want them to be of Yale or Harvard. We want the nation to be the world’s urbane, educated leader and also its slang-talking, country trickster. This plays out in a number of related oppositional pairs of relevance to my study, including urban/rural, reason/emotion (related to masculine/feminine and control/abandon), progress/tradition (or new/old), should do/want to do, self-aware/natural and, in musical worship, edification/praise. In the wake of our bloodiest dyad, North/South, reified in the conflict of 1861-1865, as the victors gained the pen, the left side of each of these figures was
broadly ascribed to the former and the right side to the latter. In light of such broad ascription, it is not surprising that OFCs as performances of old music by elite, often urban, New Englanders have been interpreted as merely nostalgic, artificial and strictly performative (read “corny”) entertainments.

One dyad of particular relevance to the OFCs and the alleged demise of ancient harmony in New England is praise/edification. Through the hey-day of “Billings and company” the primary stated purpose of musical worship had been praise, and the intended primary audience, at least ideally, the Almighty (Gould 1853: 58). But “the reform of early nineteenth-century New England psalmody partakes of a wholly different spirit. For it was centered not on praise but on edification. Rather than God, its main recipients were the people who worshipped God.” (Crawford 2001: 135). Thus, sacred music was to have more to do with individual and collective improvement and instruction than with expression. Richard Crawford’s account of the shift of emphasis from praise to edification in nineteenth century New England musical worship is particularly succinct and informative, while also illustrating the violence of the binary.

To reformers, edification brought an impression of control. Praise, based on faith, eluded explanation; edification, based on reason, thrived on explanation, as shown by the rhetoric of the reformers, who always had a rationale to support their program. Praise tended to accept current practice as its starting point; edification was more inclined to disparage current practice, justifying changes by appealing to outside authorities, whose opinions were presumed to be superior (136).

Here Crawford presents two distinct groups of people with stable positions; a broadly Dionysian group associated with praise, tradition, emotional release, faith and the
authority of the heart, and a broadly Apollonian group associated with instruction, innovation, control, rationality and the authority of the institution. Having established this spiritual, behavioral binary he then projects it onto the landscape.

Traditions centered on praise, from shape-note hymnody to African American spirituals and gospel, have resisted the notion that a split between the two was possible, let alone desirable. But in the early nineteenth century, the idea that edification could be effectively pursued through a musical style became a driving force in American sacred music. Its appeal in the churches and meetinghouses of the urban Northeast matched the vigor with which evangelical revivalism’s music of praise reached out to “plain folk” (136).

Again, this is broadly useful as a thumbnail sketch, but in dividing people and places along the lines of the binary much is lost. The image of a progressive, urban, elite, Apollonian “North” and a traditional, rural, “plain folk,” Dionysian “South,” as enduring as it is, obscures connections, processes, ambiguities and multiplicities necessary to an understanding of the OFCs and their world. There were, for example, significant differences in sacred music practice between the neighboring towns of Northampton and Southampton, Massachusetts at the same time there were important similarities and connections between, say, Reading, Massachusetts and Macon, Georgia, where residents gave one Reading old folks’ troupe a warm welcome in the months leading up to the Civil War. The stated purpose of the Georgia Musical Convention, the first singing convention to use the ancient harmony-heavy Georgia tunebook *The Sacred Harp* in 1845, was not praise or evangelism but “the promotion of the science of vocal music,” as
was recognized by Boston editor H. W. Day who published the convention’s complete minutes in his *American Journal of Music and Musical Visitor* (10/15/1845: 114). Meanwhile, evangelical revivalism and its music, with their own rationale, were alive and well in northern cities, from the highly emotional meetings of Congregationalist preacher Charles Grandison Finney in New York City to the apocalyptic fervor of the Millerites just about everywhere, including New Haven, where a mill fire on a foggy night filled the streets with preachers, merchants and professors, fleeing churches and theaters alike, in mortal terror that the end was near.

In the 1850s, after decades of increasingly edifying church music there was, if anything, an amplified sense of the importance of praise, particularly as expressed in vibrant congregational singing, even in many of the most elite, urban Congregational churches. The fervor of the singing in the early OFCs was an eye opener for many, and nurtured a hope that the format and music of the concerts, particularly the idea of providing people with music that had associative and emotional power regardless of its perceived intrinsic worth as music, might help reignite congregations in praising God through song. As one commentator expressed it in an 1859 editorial in the Congregationalist paper *The New York Evangelist*, “Congregational singing of an improved character- not that of a drawling, indefinite, dead type, which was witnessed forty years ago- seems exceedingly to be desired. A little of that enterprise, which was lately manifested in the ‘Old Folks’ Concerts,’ if turned to this account would serve an

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2 It is generally accepted that the earliest Sacred Harp convention was the first meeting of the “Southern Musical Convention” in 1845, although the article refers to the event held in August of that year as the second session of the “Georgia Musical Convention.”
excellent purpose” (3/24/1859: 1). In the decade and a half before the first OFCs, and particularly in the wake of their early success, many New England tunebook compilers began to embrace ancient harmony, some enthusiastically, and some begrudgingly. That it became much more common in hymnals of the 1850s and 1860s than it had been in the 1820s and 1830s is an indication not only of the enduring and revived popularity of the music but of the enduring and revived desire for the enthusiastic, praise-filled singing facilitated by such well-loved, familiar tunes.

Binary opposition can be useful in sketching cultural norms, and it was a daily practice for my informants in their search for universals. But assigning people and places to one side of a binary can sap them of their fluidity, inconsistency and complexity while denying the binaries themselves their potential power as sites of creativity and dynamism in the lives of the people who entertain them. I have tried to use the binary oppositions that were my subjects’ daily companions as tools to unlock some of the multiplicities and liveliness of their lives rather than lock them in one historical box or another.

Chapter Overview

Centered on a single event, Part I is a mini ethnography of the very first OFC; what and where it was, who was involved and especially what made it so compelling. Here I document some of the many factors that came together in something meaningful and exciting enough to spark a cultural “Eureka moment” and incite an enduring musical phenomenon. Using mostly primary sources, inspired throughout by such basic ethnomusicology methods as participant observation and ethnographic interview, I begin
by identifying those involved in the event, both performers and audience members, and trying to figure out what made them tick. Running counter to likely expectations based on the prevailing narrative, the “old folks” responsible for reviving the ancient harmony were not marginal resisters of modernity but some of the very same reform minded elites behind the music’s marginalization, including many leading lights in sacred music innovation. At mid-century, antiquarianism was progressive. Initially a thoroughly southwestern New England Congregationalist phenomenon, part of the brilliance of the OFC formula was that it reconfigured the old music as part of the contemporary reform agenda of the region’s “staunchest citizens,” presenting it in an easily replicated package that quickly expanded beyond the community of its origin.

As repertoire was central to the OFC concept and its success, I devote much of Part I to a discussion of the “music itself,” its features, associations, appeal and place in the world of mid nineteenth century New Haven, Connecticut and beyond. I focus a brief account of the singularly enduring psalm tune *Old Hundred* on its relationship in the practice of Reformed Christianity to what I call “progressive retrospection” and “progressive antiquarianism.” These are related, though not identical, forms of looking backward to find a way forward. In examining three representative examples of ancient harmony performed by the “original” old folks, I pair each with an example of one of its musical “others.” I pair it with something it was evidently and deliberately *not* from the vantage point of those involved. My discussion of the first pair is centered in music, place and group identity formation, the old song *Bunker Hill* both functioning as contemporary political commentary and giving the old folks a chance to conduct a virtual walking tour of sacred America. For the second pair, making a stop in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s
fictional New England village of Poganuc, I discuss her depiction of an aesthetic, theological, cultural and political battle between Congregationalists and Episcopalians through the music of William Billings and Episcopal chant. I argue for ancient harmony’s twin appeal, on the one hand as experience in the context of the multi-sensory “gothic revival” and rise of the theater, and on the other hand as an embodied marker of puritan identity and New England nationalism in the context of the overlapping “colonial revival” and a time of an increasingly heterogeneous population that challenged Congregationalist hegemony.

The third pair, the remarkable New Jordan and Lowell Mason’s Missionary Hymn, highlights the rather stunning differences between the kinds of music the old folks performed in concert and the kinds they typically sang in church. Discussing the significance to people in the 1850s of the comparatively higher, louder, faster style of the ancient harmony, I address its relationships to the experience of worship and to dyads consciously employed in New England Congregationalists’ culture, religious practice, self-representation, ideology and imagination (country/city, local/foreign, individual/community, highbrow/lowbrow, male/female, decorum/abandon.) The OFCs featured far more minor music than the most prominent mid-century hymnals. I relate the rather vexed state of the minor mode at the time, and some of its appeal to the old folks, to contestation around minor on theoretical, aesthetic and theological grounds just as industry and transportation were growing leaps and bounds alongside the spread of keyboard instruments, ocularcentrism and increasing expectations of regularity, predictability and scientific certainty. These were expectations the theory and practice of minor music often failed to meet. I continue by exploring the gender implications of
ancient harmony style and performance practice in the context of Calvinism, the music’s relationship to the development of the Yankee character type and the quest for a national music. I conclude the section by addressing vocal timbre, looking at the significance of “nasal twang” as an observational trope, a longstanding marker of religious and regional identity and a conscious practice.

Expanding my analysis beyond the overtly musical, I address in more detail the historical and cultural context of the first OFC, including the constellation of factors in the first concert that contributed to its character, appeal, intelligibility and reception—part of what made New Englanders think “Eureka!” The event could not have been so successful without the old folks themselves, and not just for reasons of sentimentality and nostalgia or their knowledge of and association with the old music. On the surface a performance by senior citizens had the attraction of an affecting novelty, and their participation in the specific context of the OFC helped inoculate the music against the criticism it so often attracted. More subtly, I argue, the old folks taking the stage brought into play a number of ideas, practices and contemporary realities that affected the character and reception of the events. Among these were longstanding practices of typology and historiography, the Biblical commandment to “honor thy father and thy mother” as well as changing realities of senescence and family life such as longer life expectancy, later marriage, fewer and more dispersed children, urbanization and other factors that led to the increasing marginalization of the allegedly superannuated. I conclude the section with a brief history of the term “old folks” and its use in the mid nineteenth century especially in the wake of Stephen Foster’s 1851 hit song “The Old Folks at Home.”
Fundraising for charity was an important part of the original OFC formula and its success. Providing a brief sketch of two phenomena of specific local relevance to the first OFC, Irish immigration and the New Haven orphan asylum, I detail relationships between charity, millennialism and the reform movement inspired by the Second Great Awakening in order to shed light on the concert as a compelling site of progressive antiquarianism. Relating this to an emergent sense of denominational identity among Congregationalists I show how this, in turn, was deeply tied to the creation of what historian Joseph Wood calls “the New England village,” which was “a village of nineteenth-century creation and imagination” dreamed into existence by writers including Yale president Timothy Dwight, his student Lyman Beecher and, later, Beecher’s children, Ralph Waldo Emerson and others (Wood 1997: 148). It was in this imaginary village, I argue, that the OFCs took place and for which they provided a powerful symbolic and embodied soundtrack. Finally, the opportunity for communities to perform embodiment of this imaginary village, which became increasingly equated with the American village, was critical in the dissemination of the OFC as it rippled out to reach an ever-broadening spectrum of Americans.

While they originated in southwestern New England the concerts spread like wildfire or, more accurately, mushrooms, for interesting reasons reaching places like Kenosha, Wisconsin long before they reached Boston. In Part II I trace their mushrooming over three years up the Connecticut River, to the west and finally to the Boston area where they became what one paper called an “epidemic.” Along the way I trace the gradual accretion of elements including costume, instrumentation, Yankee delineation, humor and music other than ancient harmony leading up to what is
remembered as the archetypal OFC as practiced by Robert Kemp. Expanding on the biography and local history in Part I, I document the importance of social, political, religious and professional networks through which OFC organizers were connected, especially the Calvinist Congregationalism associated with the “New Haven theology,” the nascent Republican Party, commerce and antislavery activities. The latter I begin to trace in some detail through analyses of OFCs performed by both white and black abolitionists in towns up and down the Connecticut River. In a local case study I show how the concerts developed and spread in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts, home to an early and unusually dense and longstanding tradition that persisted at least through the 1950s. Throughout, I devote particular attention to how the OFCs mushroomed and the importance of mid-nineteenth century developments in communication and travel, especially the proliferation of letter writing, newspapers and rail travel responsible for what was considered at the time the “obliteration of time and space.” Unlike Benedict Anderson’s anonymous community of lone readers imagining countless others like themselves, the dispersed readership that contributed to the rise of the OFC was comprised of people seemingly removed by no more than a degree or two of separation, many of them knowing and being in conversation with each other, even if only through letters to the editor. Part II wraps up with an account of the old folks’ concert “epidemic” in the Boston area in early 1856 wherein I introduce Robert Kemp and begin to trace his transition from dealer in boots and shoes to one of the most well-known, beloved, reviled and influential musicians in the country.

Previously, besides the 1973 journal article, the only published work of any substance on Robert Kemp and his performing troupe was Kemp’s own “sketchy”
History of the Old Folks' Concerts which is as much a piece of Yankee humor and a defense of the author’s reputation as it is a memoir (Crawford 1984: x). In Part III I provide, for the first time, substantial biographies of Robert and Elizabeth Kemp and an account of the history of their concert troupe, including a hypothesis as to its origin, about which Kemp was deliberately evasive.

Especially valuable to my research were parallel diaries of a young couple, Benjamin Conant and Clara Newhall, who met and married on the road with the Kemps and traveled with them on their 1861 tour of England as part of what Kemp claimed was the largest American performing troupe ever to have crossed the Atlantic. Kemp seemed to consider the tour a crowning achievement, although it ended in what was previously something of a mystery. The diaries provide fascinating insight and details about the Kemps’ lives and character, how the ensemble functioned and was financed, professional rivalries, the state of ancient harmony and sacred music practice in the United States, as well as the particularities of life on the road with a large mixed gender performing troupe in the US and abroad during the “exciting times” of 1859-1861 (Kemp 1868: 83). They also explain the mysterious circumstances that nearly ended Kemp’s performing career. I conclude this biographical section with an account of Father Kemp’s last years, his musical publications and his passage from musical impresario to proprietary eponym. I conclude the body of the work by returning to my case study of the Pioneer Valley for a brief overview of what happened to the old folks’ concerts and ancient harmony singing after Father Kemp.
CHAPTER 1: ORIGIN

Introduction

Throughout Part I, I will discuss the origin, character, context and significance of the first old folks’ concerts. I will begin by setting the scene, identifying some of the singers and songs and discussing the immediate context and reception of the events. I will fold into the discussion examples from a wide time frame, but always with an eye and ear to their relevance at the time of the “first” old folks’ concert in 1853 and its encores, and especially their importance to an understanding of these events’ power to fire wide public enthusiasm. In order to begin understanding why people found the OFC so compelling, and to get beyond the perception of the phenomenon as simply a nostalgic revival of old music, it is necessary to look at how the concerts interacted with, and were influenced by, a host of factors at play in 1853, and it is to this task that I will devote most of Part I. These factors include national, regional and denominational identity, immigration and nativism, the brewing political and social turmoil of the early 1850s, musical aesthetics and associations, theology and gender, the changing face and perception of senescence, the ongoing influence of the Second Great Awakening and subsequent reform movement, and ideas and practices concerning New England character and “American music.” An overarching and recurring theme is the place of the OFCs in the ongoing social project of
imagining and creating what geographer Joseph Wood calls “the New England village.” This was a village with a Congregational church on the green at its morphological and metaphorical heart, a village as much concerned with progress, reform and commerce as with embracing “tradition” and what Henry Steele Commager called “a useable past.” It was a place where villagers might find solutions to the problems of a young republic in turmoil while striving to realize John Winthrop’s vision of “a city upon a hill.”

In the interest of clarity I have divided some of the most pertinent issues into sections, like trees in a forest, but our trajectory in navigating them, like the experience of living them, is at times more like falling leaves, crisscrossing each other, making it hard to tell to which tree they belong. Or, in mycological terms, like mushrooms and the old folks’ concerts themselves, issues often pop up unexpectedly, sometimes in unexpected places, but always suggesting some deep connection or symbiosis beneath the substrate.

The First Old Folks’ Concert?

Billed as a “Concert of Ancient Sacred Music,” the first old folks’ concert was given at First Church in New Haven, Connecticut on April 11, 1853. Well, it wasn’t really the first. As with other firsts and “Eureka moments,” whether it’s William Billings’ New England Psalm Singer in 1770, the “first” minstrel show in 1843 or Nirvana’s Nevermind in 1991, there is almost always a passel of “pre-firsts:”
bellwethers, near misses, things that were “ahead of their time” and things that might be seen as firsts if viewed through a different historical lens or if some little particulars had been different.

Public events very much like the first old folks’ concert, although rather rare, had been taking place here and there throughout New England since at least the mid 1830s. Most prominent among them were performances associated with the formation of the Billings and Holden Society in Boston in 1834, their 1836 publication of the *Billings and Holden Collection of Ancient Psalmody* and the subsequent formation of sister organizations in Bangor, Maine and elsewhere, including, eventually, the New Haven Ancient Harmony Association, the organization behind the first OFCs.

Another public face of the “ancient harmony” at mid-century is found in the popular press. At least since Samuel Gilman’s 1829 *Memoirs of a New England Village Choir*, and especially since the mid 1840s, the music of Billings and company as “the old music” had been a popular topic for writers: antiquarians, humorists, theologians, music reformers, advocates and scoffers.

Far from being gone and forgotten, the ancient harmony had much greater currency in mid-nineteenth century New England than has been generally thought, although it had a complex relationship to the main musical conversations of the day: progress, music education, the rise of “music of the highest class” and the cultivation of good taste (Broyles 1992). In the years preceding the Billings and Holden Society, and for nearly twenty years after, singing the old American hymns, at least in
southern New England, most often took place somewhat behind the scenes in rural places, among small denomination congregants, in some Congregationalist churches where the music still held a prominent place in worship, in family devotion, religious conference meetings, revivals, community singing and other events outside of mainstream church services.\(^3\) It was even the music of choice at the meetings of William Lloyd Garrison and his radical abolitionist cadre in Boston. What happened in April 1853 is that the ancient harmony and the conversation around it began to emerge from the wings and into the limelight. Whatever the precedents, the New Haven concert in April, 1853 was the event for which the term “old folks’ concert” was coined, and the one that initiated the mushrooming of the practice all around New England and beyond. It was the event in which everything seemed to come into focus and the stars align in a way that told people they had to have it. It was ancient harmony’s “Eureka moment.”

According to an early report in the New York Evangelist, a religious weekly with a Congregationalist, antislavery bent, the “novel concert” of April 11, 1853 was an unqualified success. In just eight sentences the author summarized the concert, modeled audience, community and journalistic response and hinted at some of the OFCs broader implications. More than just a concert review, the article succinctly

\[^3\] Praising the publishers of the Ancient Harmony Revived 4\(^{th}\) edition for making many of the old tunes available again, an 1855 Boston reviewer mentioned one of the ways the old music remained in use despite being out of fashion. “Always, in the times of religious revival, the sweet tunes of Ingalls come up; and thus they have outlived a whole half-century of neglect by the publishers of books” (Old Music, Boston Recorder 10/25/1855: 170).
laid out both the recipe and the raison d’etre for the OFC and made clear how spiritually and financially profitable and easily replicable it could be. The article was influential and widely disseminated enough to make it worth quoting in full.

A novel concert came off in the Center church, at New Haven, on Monday evening, the 11th, at “early candle light.” It was suggested by singing a few of the old tunes in a private parlor. The idea of calling out the singers who occupied the seats in the churches of that city 30 or 40 years ago and arranging them in a row round the galleries from one side of the pulpit to the other, to sing such tunes as Jerusalem, Coronation, Ocean, and other tunes of by-gone days, was certainly a novelty well calculated to awaken much enthusiasm. The number of old singers who were found willing to engage in it was very large, embracing some of the staunchest citizens of New Haven. The tunes were familiar to most of them, and a few rehearsals perfected the singing. Twelve hundred tickets for the concert were issued at 25 cents each, and sold in a few hours; the avails to be given to the Orphan Asylum. The house was filled at the hour, and the audience was so much delighted with the performance, that a request was made to have the concert repeated. The effect is said to have been exceedingly happy (New York Evangelist 4/21/1853: 62).

In the last sentence the author reveals that the story is second hand, based either on a letter or personal communication from someone who attended the concert. The source may well have been the paper’s former editor Joshua Leavitt. Born in the hilltown of Heath Massachusetts in 1794 Leavitt was an influential Congregationalist minister, journalist, tunebook compiler, antislavery activist and lawyer who played an important role in raising money for the legal defense of the slave ship Amistad rebels. By 1853 he had a long association with New Haven and Center Church, having attended Yale as an undergraduate and later in pursuit of his divinity degree. In The New York Evangelist Leavitt periodically published sacred music, which he compiled as The Christian Lyre in 1831 and in many subsequent editions in both round and patent notes. Designed for broad popular appeal and to be used in social worship, the variety of hymns Leavitt favored had less in common with the publications of Mason and company than with the southern and western shape-note tunebooks of the day. These included popular and folk melodies, hymns from the camp-meetings, and Billings and company music, including fusing tunes. As Leavitt’s focus was evangelism rather than art the music in the Lyre is stripped down, often providing two or at most three part harmony and sometimes just a melody.
Why people found the first New Haven concert and its encore so compelling had a lot do with what they were: old Yankees singing old Yankee music in public. But why they were so influential and widely publicized had at least as much to do with when they happened- how elegantly they tied together so many existing practices, contemporary ideas and pressing concerns of early 1853- who in particular was involved- some of the most influential western New England Congregationalists of the Yale school- and where they happened- at New Haven’s renowned First Congregational Church.

New Haven and Center Church

The settlement at New Haven was planted in 1638 with the church at its figurative and morphological center, out of a desire for an autonomous, localized theocracy free from the imposition of powerful and decadent Massachusetts divines. This origin story remained central to local Puritan descendants’ sense of themselves and their city. On a walking tour of historical sites conducted in celebration of New Haven’s bicentennial in 1838, they likened their ancestors’ wilderness journey to that of the ancient Israelites, and thereby their mother colony to Egypt, by singing a self-consciously antiquarian hymn; Sternhold and Hopkins’ version of Psalm 80 to the tune St. Martin’s.

From Egypt, where it grew not well,
Thou brought'ist a vine full deare
The heathen folke thou didst expell,
And thou didst plant it there.

Thou didst prepare for it a place,
And set her roots full fast;
That it did grow, and spring apace,
And fill'd the land at last.

The fourth and current edifice of First Church, erected between 1812-1814, came to be called Center Church for its position on the town green midway between North (United) Church, started by a break away band of evangelical New Lights in 1742, and Trinity Episcopal, built on the green’s south side in 1814-1816. Since the early days, New Haven’s green has had multiple functions in community life. It has been the site of open-air markets, recreation, military exercises, fairs and public floggings. The great British revivalist George Whitefield preached there in 1745 after he was denied entry to First Church on theological grounds. The green was the location of New Haven’s last human auction in 1825, the day before the installation of First Church preacher and prominent antislavery advocate Reverend Leonard Bacon. Fourteen years later, locals gathered there to gawk at the Mendi rebels of the slave ship Amistad who had been brought there for fresh air and exercise under the elms during a brief respite from their trial. For many residents, the green was the last stop on earth, as they were carried there for interment in what came to be called “the ancient burying ground.”

5 See Peck and Coe 1889: 67.
Center Church is unique among New England Congregational churches in that, not only was its spiritual foundation anchored in the religion of its puritan founders, its material foundation remains anchored atop their graves. Despite vocal opposition, the current edifice was built directly over a portion of the burying ground and, beginning in 1820, when “the congregation of the dead became more numerous than that of the living,” many graves and monuments were removed to a new location and a memorial installed in the church vestibule (*Proceedings of the City of New Haven*. 1822: 20). In its basement, “the crypt,” can be seen a portion of the original burying ground, including the graves of early and prominent citizens, maintained but otherwise undisturbed at this writing for nearly three hundred years and counting. At the bicentennial walking tour, when the crowd had entered the church, a large choir sang a hymn written for the occasion, presumably to the tune *America/God Save the King*.

Lo! we are gathering here
Now in the young green year,
And welcoming
Th’ days which the ocean o'er
Did, to New England's shore,
Those noble souls of yore,
Our fathers, bring.

…Grant that our souls be led,
Thinking of our great dead,
And by their spirit fed,
To deeds as true

It’s hard to imagine a location more appropriate than New Haven’s Center Church for the birth of a sacred music practice rooted in Puritan commemoration.
Who Were the Old Folks?

The degree of public enthusiasm for the very idea of old people giving a concert of old hymns is clear from the speed with which all 1,200 tickets were sold. The singers were in fact a mix of ages, including young people, and those named in the papers ranged from 42 to 62 years old. They may not have been the very oldest
people in town, but at a time when the average life span was about 62 years the singers were old enough to make an impression. They apparently sang well too. The public must also have been impressed that among the “old folks” were some of the city’s most prominent citizens. The list of board members of the New Haven Ancient Harmony Association, the sponsoring organization in place at least by the time of two repeat concerts in December, includes some of the most powerful Congregationalist, Whig, New Haven white men in their forties and fifties. Among them were Judge Cyprian Willcox, former U.S. representative William Whiting Boardman, publisher (and son of Noah Webster) William Greenleaf Webster, and Henry Dutton who was, at the time of the April concerts, running for governor of Connecticut and went on the following year to become the last Whig to hold the position. Among those named as singers, Reverend Eleazar Thompson Fitch, born in 1791, was, in the words of Timothy Dwight Jr. a “theologian, a metaphysician, a preacher, a poet and a musician” who taught divinity at Yale and also preached at the Yale chapel (Dwight 1903: 73). Professor Denison Olmstead, another Yale professor born in 1791, was considered America’s greatest meteorologist and was one of two men to first observe Halley’s comet in 1835. Henry White, born in 1803, was a well-known local lawyer, and a deacon at First Church.

This picture contrasts sharply with musicologist Michael Broyles’ analysis of “ancient harmony” enthusiasm embodied in the Boston Billings and Holden Society of the 1830s and 1840s. Based on the situation in that time and place Broyles concluded that “the battle for psalmodic reform was over in the 1830s” and that this
“working class organization, with little overlap in membership of other musical societies” was essentially a lower class, Universalist-led antiquarian curiosity. “The Presbyterian-Congregationalist reformers, and the members of the Handel and Haydn Society and the Boston Academy of Music in its early years,” he concluded, “were Congregational evangelicals and overwhelmingly middle class” and, he implies, had little interest in the music of the old folks (Broyles 1992: 191-193). Broyles concluded from the working class background of Billings and Holden Society officers, with the exception of the ever-interesting Leonard Marshall (introduced below), that the organization’s membership was drawn from the same ranks. This analysis is worthy of further investigation, but it doesn’t present a three-dimensional picture of the state of ancient harmony at mid-century, even in Boston proper.

A review of a Boston concert by the Billings and Holden Society in late 1838 notes that “among the auditory we observed two Ex-presidents of the Handel and Haydn Society, -the venerable Oliver Holden, Esq. of Charlestown,- many other distinguished amateurs, and many others of our highly respectable citizens” (*Boston Musical Gazette* 12/21/1838: 141). In 1839 composer and lawyer Oliver Holden himself, a prominent Charlestown citizen by any measure, was elected president of the society named for him.6 An 1839 article in the same magazine, probably by the aged composer the Hon. Nahum Mitchell, claimed of Billings that although “for a

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6 Interestingly, like Oliver Holden, the president of the Billings and Holden Society in Bangor, ME, Henry Little, had been an early critic of fuging tunes and ancient harmony, compiling the thoroughly chaste publication of exclusively European hymns *The Wesleyan Harmony*. See *The Bangor Daily Whig* 12/28/1850.
long time his name over a tune would blast the reputation of any book that contained it, yet now we see his name and his melodies making their way rapidly into the best collections” (4/17/1839: 204). This observation of the ancient harmony’s growing respectability among the respectable was echoed some years later in an 1847 edition of the periodical *The World of Music*, the author claiming that although Billings and his music “as improvement in knowledge and taste in the art advanced, soon declined and were almost entirely out of date, yet we now begin to see both his name and his melodies making their way again into respectable notice and the best collections” (reprinted in *Boston Musical Gazette* 7/19/1847: 101).

While a broadly shared sense of being “over” the music of Billings and Holden in Boston may help explain why it took nearly three years for the old folks’ concert craze to take hold in the area, there is clearly more to the story. Even if we accept the early working class affiliation of the Billings and Holden Society as evidence that the ancient harmony was dead in the water in 1830s Boston, this was certainly not the case in 1850s New Haven, if evidenced only by the leadership of the New Haven Ancient Harmony Association. Either things had changed dramatically by 1853, the place of ancient harmony in western New England and other areas outside of Boston was rather different, or Broyles’ analysis of B&H society members’ class and religious affiliation masks a latent or, actually, growing interest in the old music among reform-minded, educated New England Congregationalists, even in Boston. The truth, in fact, lies in an ornate configuration of the three factors.
The biographies of New Haven Ancient Harmony Association members provide insight into the state of old folks’ music in the city at mid-century. For their connection to music, some of the most interesting known members of the association were Irene Battell Larned, born in 1811, and her husband William Augustus Larned, born in 1806. Mrs. Larned is remembered as a leading light in the musical life of New Haven and an important figure in the founding of Yale’s music program circa 1855 when “convinced of the need for professional musical instruction at the University and prompted by the arrival in New Haven of the German musician Gustave Stoeckel, she persuaded her brother to fund an endowment for musical studies with Stoeckel as the teacher” according to the Yale University music department’s website (www.yale.edu/printer/bulletin/htmlfiles/music/history-of-the-school-of-music.html accessed 7/29/2014).

As dedicated as she was to musical progress, Mrs. Larned also had a deep connection to the ancient harmony. Her younger sister Urania remembered Irene rocking her to sleep to the “solemn tune of Denmark,” later an OFC standard (Battell 1877: 15). The night before she died in 1877 Mrs. Larned asked her nurse to “sing a hymn which Mr. Larned often repeated with her, ‘There is a land of pure delight.’ The nurse responded in an unfamiliar tune. She said, ‘Not that tune,’ and tried to sing the old familiar air of ‘Jordan’” (Battell 1877: 21). Her husband William had sung the same tune on his own deathbed “more than once” (New Englander and Yale Review, April 1862: 340). Another OFC standard, Jordan is one of William Billings’ most enduring pieces and, at least for these two “old folks,” as musically educated
and progressive as they were, it seems to have had a place in their hearts as significant as that reserved for the music of Beethoven and Mendelssohn. It just wasn’t the same place, perhaps.

Leadership of the First OFC

Newspapers reported many aspects of the first Old Folks’ concert: its humble beginnings in a parlor sing, its time and place, some of the songs performed, the audience reaction, the amount raised for charity and the names of some of the singers. But mysteries linger. Whose idea was the whole thing? And who led the singing?

This is speculative, but I suspect the idea for the first OFC may have come from Irene Batell Larned, that she was, at least, heavily involved, and the sing that gave birth to the concert may have taken place in her parlor. Mrs. Larned had a demonstrated affection for the old music, a history of musical sociability in her home and a history of organizing “county concerts” in her hometown of Norfolk, not far from Litchfield, Connecticut. A friend remembered that “she threw her whole soul into these concerts, imparting courage to the timid, correcting and assisting everyone who had a part to perform, and always doing this so kindly that every one felt it a privilege to be under her criticism” (Battell 1877: 16). Her sister Urania recalled that “When absent from home, engaged in the prosecution of her studies, she would be recalled from school to participate in all celebrations whether of a religious or secular character, to whose success her musical talents invariably contributed” (Battell 1877:
15). I believe it likely that some of those performances included an antiquarian American musical component. Irene Battell Larned also had a lot of experience teaching singing schools and even leading church music beginning in 1822 when she was only eleven years old. Her experience and energy should well have been a motivating force, whether or not the concert was her idea.

Far less speculatively, the most likely candidate for choir leader is the then 36 year old James Minor Linsley, a Yale graduate who returned to New Haven to take the position of music director at Center Church “around 1853,” according to his obituary (Obituary Record of Graduates of Yale University 1890: 573). He led the second pair of concerts in December of that year, and it stands to reason that he led the first as well. But there was another man whose influence, even if he didn’t lead the first concert, must certainly have been felt by all involved: longtime chorister Alling Brown, 1794-1859.7

**Music, Transition and the First OFC**

Alling Brown taught and led music at Center Church from 1820 until James Minor Linsley replaced him, sometime around the time of the first OFCs. Brown led the singing at numerous public events including the removal of Ancient Burying Ground graves in 1821 and the 1825 installation of Leonard Bacon, probably the

7 His name is sometimes given as “Ailing” or “Allen” in census and other records.
church’s most famous preacher of the nineteenth century. Brown led the singing at the bicentennial in 1838, and each week he led the singing in church with his “enrapturing fiddle” and little group of musicians Bacon called “Nebuchadnezzar’s band.” According to one local historian “the achievements of his devoted followers were often grand and moving in the extreme” (Blake 1898: 111). Named for two of New Haven’s founding families, Alling Brown’s association with First Church was lifelong, and began early enough that he might even have been able to remember the days when singing there was led by Noah Webster “with the help of his daughters” (Heinz 1976: 16). If Alling Brown didn’t participate in the first OFC his absence would surely have been felt. If he did participate, his presence would surely have been formidable.

New Haven city directories list Brown as a “professor of music” through 1858, so he didn’t move away or retire completely in 1853. Was he replaced by the younger Linsley in a move to modernize the music at Center Church? Brown was an advocate of modern “scientific” music and the author of two books of the same, but in 1853 the once progressive church band was passé and organs were the going concern. Linsley had Center Church’s first organ installed in 1855 (see Heinz 1976). If Linsley really did take over from Brown in 1853, the Old Folks’ Concert on April 11 of that year must have been among his first major public undertakings in his new capacity, which is at least interesting if not remarkable. Linsley is listed as a music teacher in town directories starting in 1849, so it’s possible that his obituary is wrong and he took over from Brown earlier than it reported. In any case, whether Brown willingly left
his position or was forced out, whether his resignation happened in 1853 or somewhat earlier, the first old folks’ concert took place at a time of significant transition in the history of music at Center Church.

Change and its discontents are as nearly universal as anything in human experience. Since the early days of New England Congregationalism, change in theology, worship and musical practice, and the strife that sometimes came with it, often had a strong generational component. Church was certainly not the only or even the primary domain of life in which change was sometimes accompanied by strife, but it was an important site of public expression and contestation. At least one of the earliest OFCs I have identified, in Southampton, Massachusetts, took place in an atmosphere of specific, ongoing generational turbulence expressed in the congregation’s musical practice. Early OFCs in Schenectady exhibited a more lighthearted approach to generational competition. The First Dutch Reformed Church was home to both the Symphonia or “old people’s choir” led by Simeon B. Marsh, and the Harmonia or “young people’s choir” led by his son John, the former singing ancient harmony and the latter performing mostly Handel, Haydn and Rossini. According to a local newspaper preview “the two classes are practicing upon a

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8 The Symphonia took its name from the Symphonia Grandaeva Rediviva, or Ancient Harmony Revived, published in several editions beginning in 1847. Presumably the group sang from the AHR, although the only tunebook mentioned in the advertisement for their first concert is The Easy Instructor.
pleasant and harmonious strife, to see who will bear off the palm in their forthcoming concerts” ([*The Cabinet* [Schenectady, NY] 1/1/1856: 2]).

Intergenerational consciousness was obviously central to the OFC concept, and it is likely that a dynamic of intergenerational tension and appeasement was at least an undercurrent in OFCs beyond Southampton and Schenectady, including, perhaps, the New Haven “original.” Some of those gathered on April 11, 1853 might have imagined hearing even the “congregation of the dead” in the crypt below as the “sacred songs of old time…seemed to link together the old and young of three distinct and living generations with the spirits of a century gone by” ([*Puritan Recorder* 12/29/1853: 206]).

It may be that the original OFC was partly designed to soften the blow of transition between Alling Brown and James Minor Linsley, or at least to recognize Brown’s contemporaries and his legacy. On the other hand it may be that the organizers just thought it was a novel idea with the potential to raise some money for a worthy cause while honoring the community’s older citizens. Maybe they just thought it would be fun. Whatever the case, the concert was a tremendous success, and there were immediate calls for a repeat. Within days of the concert, newspapers all around the northeast and beyond began carrying reports, sometimes including a general call to get up a local OFC.
Why Were the Old Folks Concerts So Compelling?

Throughout 1853 it appears New Haven had a monopoly on the OFC, but the idea was too brilliant, too timely and too easily replicated to stay put. It was also a potential goldmine, as receipts from the first concert proved, and an encouraging indication that southern New England’s generally moribund congregational singing might be given new life through the reintroduction of familiar, well-loved music.

During the fifteen months after the last of the initial New Haven OFCs in December 1853 the concerts went viral or, for our purposes, mycological. In a pattern sometimes obscure until we look at the networks of people and ideas involved - the breezes and vernal streams that carried the spores to new fertile ground - the OFC mushroomed outward until in encompassed what would be the tradition’s geographic stronghold for the next hundred years; southern New England, the New York City area, upstate New York and Yankee outposts in what was then “the West.” The question, it seems, is “WHY?” What was it about that first concert in New Haven that was so compelling it inspired a musical craze? It is to this question that I will devote the remainder of Part I.

What was so attractive about the idea of an “old folks concert” to a New Haven audience of 1853 that the promoters were able to sell all 1,200 tickets in “a few hours?” The involvement of locals ensured a built in audience of family and friends, as is the case today, and the music had its closeted fans that might have relished an opportunity to express their appreciation in public, these factors alone were not enough to inspire such a rush on the ticket office. It appears, rather, that it
was the whole package that sold tickets, with the old folks themselves perhaps the biggest single draw and the star that made the constellation of factors intelligible. An account of the first December concert supports this conclusion, saying “the whole concert was of peculiar interest,” including the repertoire, the “the old-time pitch pipe…with its mournful wail, like the faint whistle of some distant steam car-the old fashioned fa, sol, la of the choir, in 'taking the pitch,'” and the arrangement of singers in the gallery. However, only “spiritual associations with the aged and becoming veneration with the young, could…have drawn together the crowd of listeners who thronged the church that night” (Puritan [Boston] Recorder 12/29/1853: 206).

The combination of “spiritual associations” and novelty might have brought a crowd out to see an assembly of senior citizens do just about anything, but part of the genius of the OFC formula was musically specific: it slyly opened the door for the music of Billings and company to come back to church, from the private domain to which it had been relegated back into the public domain from which it had been largely shunned. While it had been widely agreed for decades that this music was generally unsuitable for regular use in church services, and any attempt to reintroduce it wholesale in that context would have raised eyebrows if not split congregations, who could have said “no” to a group of the community’s most venerable citizens wanting to sing the sacred music of their youth, of the young Republic, for the entire community in church, though outside of the regular service? It seems to have been many months before anyone in the press was able to find anything to criticize, as the
involvement of the old folks and the novel concert formula appear to have inoculated the repertoire from any criticism that might otherwise have been heaped on it.

I will discuss in more detail below the drawing and inoculating power of the old folks, perceptions and realities of being old in 1853 and a host of other interlaced factors that made the old folks’ concerts such powerful and appealing events. But the concerts were, by all accounts, compellingly about music and sound, so in examining the cultural terrain from which the OFCs emerged as exciting and novel, let’s begin with their most obvious surface feature: the music, how it sounded, the work it performed and what it meant to people.
CHAPTER 2: THE MUSIC OF THE FIRST OLD FOLKS’ CONCERT

Musical Multiplicity, Conflict and Context

The push and pull between “ancient” and modern church music in nineteenth century New England (as in the tradition and historiography of Sacred Harp singing) is often framed by scholars as a battle between “reformers and resisters,” between those who wished to preserve old music, like American Vocalist author Rev. D. H. Mansfield or The Sacred Harp’s B. F. White, and those who wished to obliterate it, especially the oft-demonized Boston reformer Lowell Mason and his cadre (see Rhoads 2006). This formation can be useful to an understanding of the history, and it does reflect how many sacred music activists framed things, but it glosses over a more complex and interesting picture. For one thing, in antebellum New England, when the creation of local libraries and historical organizations was on the rise, antiquarianism itself was a progressive activity that expressed forward thinking values as an important part of the larger project of reform. And, on a more individual level, for many people the binary of “reforming” and “resisting” was part of an internal creative dynamic- a pushing and pulling that helped make space for musical practice that was more multiple and contingent than any binary would suggest.

Of course there was no shortage of people who adopted absolutist positions. Momentarily jumping ahead to a time after the OFCs’ honeymoon with the press, in a
wonderfully scathing 1859 editorial for the *New London Daily Chronicle* titled “Popular Opinion Versus Science,” the anonymous author uses the device of a fictional positive review of a concert by fictional old folks’ troupe “The Antediluvian Minstrels” in the fictional “Pumpkinville” to prove two things. First, as he had claimed in an earlier review, the tunes of Billings and company were “trash” suitable only for performance in “an asylum for deaf mutes, if they could be tolerated there” (9/7/1859: 2). Second, this was scientifically and objectively demonstrable regardless of how much the under-educated public adored the music. Attempting to quash the complaints of readers irked by the author’s rough treatment of a local (non-fictional) OFC, he crowns his argument by quoting from a then recent local anti-old folks’ music lecture by Lowell Mason, expecting Mason’s authority was sufficient to settle the matter permanently: the old music was trash, Lowell Mason said so, period.⁹

Had he still been living Rev. Daniel Mansfield, compiler of the influential progressive old-school-leaning *American Vocalist*, might have begged to differ. “In

⁹ “And now we have a piece of information to communicate which may possess interest for the people of New London as well as for those of Pumpkinville. A lecture on Sacred Music was recently delivered in this city by the great master of that branch of musical science, Lowell Mason. On that occasion he expressed his views as to the merits of what is known as the Old Folks’ music, and his opinions were in _entire harmony_ with those expressed on the same subject in *The Daily Chronicle* of August 31st. He pronounced that class of musical compositions _‘intolerable stuff;’_ and the authors of them to have been _‘no musician;’_ and the tone of his entire discourse on that topic was such as most triumphantly sustained and confirmed the opinions expressed in this paper of the merits of the Old Folks’ Concert.”
every part of the United States,” he wrote in 1848 “even where new music is sung in the public congregation because it is fashionable, let any one mingle with the devout worshippers of God in their social meetings, and he will hear- not the scientific gingling (sic) of imported discord, but the simple harmony of old ‘Turner,’ ‘Northfield,’ the ‘Union Hymn’ or something that moves the hearts of good men, if it does not tickle the fastidious fancy of infidels” (1848: 2).10

Mansfield might appear to be saying the old music was inherently superior as evidenced by the fact that genuinely religious people still preferred it, at least in private. However, though he was clearly a strong advocate of ancient harmony, he recognized that “No tune, however good it may be, is appropriate to every time and place. But it is very easy for persons of judgement to determine when and where a tune may be useful” (2). Mansfield wasn’t picking a fight with Mason to whom, he wrote, “our country owes a debt of gratitude,” nor was he trashing Mason’s compositions, a number of which appear in his book. While Mansfield used his preface to promote ancient harmony and take a dig at the many third rate compositions of his day, his overarching argument was that there was a need for music for “every occasion connected with the worship of God,” and a one-size-fits-all

10 As an advocate of the old songs, and his own tunebook, Mansfield may have overstated the ubiquity of Billings and company’s music in singing outside of regular church services. And as a Methodist from the small, inland community of Hope, Maine with close family connection to the Western Reserve, the people with whom he was in closest contact surely sang more of the old music than the average New Haven Congregationalist. But from the evidence I have gathered over the years ancient harmony was an important ingredient in extra-service singing in many places long after it had been largely discontinued in church services.
approach to sacred music based on theoretical abstractions was unhelpful (Mansfield 1848: 2). The battle wasn’t so much between two opposing kinds of music as it was between an absolute versus a pragmatic, contextual approach to sacred music in general. There were certainly hardliners on all sides, but for a great many mid-nineteenth century New Englanders, like Mansfield, questions of ancient and modern, imported and domestic music weren’t a matter of “either/or” but “when and where.” As suggested above, this was true even of some of the most ardent and educated of urban musical progressives, including prominent members of the Handel and Haydn Society and other Boston musical organizations, who were all in favor of old folks’ music in its proper place. As dearly as some might have liked the “village” to have room only for select Europeanate music of “the highest class,” many of the villagers were content with, even enthusiastic about, a broader palette of sound and music making opportunities. Beethoven scholar Alexander Wheelock Thayer, for example, who advocated rescuing the old tunebooks from oblivion in an historical address at the National Music Convention, reported hearing a rehearsal for the first OFC in Northampton “in a genuine state of delight,” and that he “used to hear the symphonies in Boston on Saturday evenings, and sing the old tunes the next” (Dwight’s Journal of Music 6/3/1854: 68). In this instance the arborescent configuration of New England music history “from psalm to symphony” was, at least momentarily, turned on its head.

Loring Barnes, for four years president, and sixteen years secretary, of the Boston Handel and Haydn Society, included a lengthy section of unreconstructed
“ancient church music” in his 1856 *Congregational Harp*, among the first of many tunebooks to be directly impacted by the OFCs. In the preface he wrote “the selection of what is sometimes called ‘ancient music,’ or ‘old folks’ music,’ from the compositions of Billings, Holden, Swan, Read and other authors, was made, not with the view of introducing them into the Church, but for the purpose of giving variety to Congregational or Choir practice, and for the gratification of the home circle” (1856: ii).

Leonard Bacon, with the help of Eleazar Fitch and others, oversaw the compilation of another book released that year that seems to have been profoundly affected by the OFCs. On the recommendation of a panel convened at a denominational meeting the year before, *The Congregational Hymn and Tune Book* was designed “to include not only such pieces as commend themselves by their intrinsic merit, but as many as possible of those which have been endeared to evangelical believers by long familiarity, or by local and personal associations,” including fuging tunes and other ancient harmony selections (Day et al. 1856: 1). Unlike Loring Barnes, the authors of *The Congregational Hymn and Tune Book* seem to have struck a compromise in their tune arrangements. For example, fuging sections were left intact, but with the harmony somewhat “corrected.”

The idea that a tune’s popularity and “association” could make it useful regardless of its “intrinsic merit” was something of a revelation for many at mid-century, self-proclaimed antiquarians and progressives alike. Like Daniel Mansfield, and unlike
Loring Barnes, Bacon apparently felt the continued popularity of some fusing tunes made space for them even in congregational singing.

Again and again sacred music advocates debated the relative value of music based on its “intrinsic merit” versus qualities like popularity, familiarity, singability, affective power and “association.” Leonard Bacon and others involved in the earliest OFCs were struck by the power and enthusiasm of the singing at a time when congregational singing was seen to be at a low ebb, having been largely replaced by choir singing, viewed by many as “worship by proxy.” Some felt the European-leaning nineteenth century musical reform had failed to deliver on some of its most important promises. “It was…fondly anticipated that a generation of singers would rise up and sing,” wrote music historian, tunebook compiler and OFC leader Nathaniel Gould. But, he claimed, too often mid-century congregations would “sluggishly sit and sing when neither the voice nor the spirit of the song seems to rise above the seats on which they sit” (Gould 1853: 202). The strength of the singing at the first OFCs seems to have convinced Bacon not only that the old hymns had unappreciated value, intrinsic and associative, but that the ancient harmony and the concert format itself could be employed strategically to help bolster congregational singing in general.

Leonard Bacon was hardly alone. Any list of early OFC leaders and advocates would have to include a large number of reform minded, musically educated people who sought to promote congregational singing and musical progress in general. For
example, Eben Tourjee, who led OFCs early in his career, went on to become a founder and director of the New England Conservatory of Music and receive an honorary doctorate in music from Wesleyan University but maintained a connection to the “ancient harmony” throughout his life, editing a large collection of old tunes for OFCs during the nation’s centennial in 1876. Solomon Warriner, who led OFCs in Springfield, Massachusetts had earlier collaborated with Thomas Hastings on the influential highbrow *Springfield and Utica Collection*. Other prominent music reformers who led OFCs include Simeon Marsh, composer of the famous tune *Martyn*, music historian and publisher John Weeks Moore, Cyrus Thurston, active in Boston Musical Conventions, and T. Morton Dewey Esq., president of the Philharmonic Institute of Boston, composer of pop songs and teacher of an 800 pupil singing school in Boston. Even Robert Kemp, who in his biography proudly proclaimed, with a Yankee wink to the reader, “I never knew a note of music, and cannot distinguish a 'minim' from a 'demisemiquaver’” had been an active member of the Boston Handel and Haydn Society and an agent for the Mendelssohn Society before taking up the baton himself (Kemp, 1868: 195).

Returning to the theme of multiplicity, psalmody, whether Billings’ or Mason’s, was just the tip of the musical iceberg for many people. In his remarkable journal *The American Journal of Music and Musical Visitor* H. W. Day, a Boston composer, patent-note innovator, member of the Handel and Haydn Society and bitter enemy of Lowell Mason, published pieces by the European masters, camp meeting music, fugging tunes, marches, glee[s, chanteys and notations of bird song, published in
full the minutes of one of the first Sacred Harp singing conventions and commented on notational innovations in the south and west. An especially nice tribute to musical heterogeneity among the New England “elite” comes from W. T. Sears, who learned music playing the “Yankee viol” in church, toured with several minstrel troupes and Father Kemp’s old folks before landing a gig with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. In an 1890 reminisce that reads like a Mark Twain monologue he wrote “I have held every conceivable position as a performer in the past 35 years, from the lone and lively fiddle at a down East hard cider party to a double bass in grand opera, and am still in harness” (Boston Herald 5/4/1890: 26). Clearly, evaluation of music could be multiple, pragmatic and contingent even in people who, in some circumstances, aligned themselves with absolute positions in a host of enduring and culturally constitutive binaries. Part of the OFCs’ immediate impact was due to its brilliance as a formula that took advantage of ongoing interest in ancient harmony by creating a viable context for public expression of that interest.

To say there was ongoing interest is not, of course, to suggest the music was everywhere commonplace in 1853. Some at mid century claimed the music had gone out of general use “thirty or forty years ago” while others set the date later, for example the 1852 Melodia Sacra that included “a few sterling tunes… which although once highly popular, have been laid aside for the past ten or twelve years, and are consequently new to young singers” (ii). Daniel Mansfield’s enthusiasm aside, for many younger people the music was very novel even if they had heard bits of it here and there, and some of the old folks themselves reported not having heard
the tunes, at least in church, for decades. Unlike the more generalized romanticism and ideologically driven cobbling together of disparate music at the center of the twentieth century “folk revival,” the enthusiasm sparked by the first OFC was more literally a revival, a rekindling of embers and a reminder within specific walls of sounds with which they had once reverberated. Musical practice continued to be an arena of conflict in New England churches, but the old folks’ concert created a context in which perhaps the most contested local musical genre could be appreciated relatively angst free. Nostalgia was an important and explicit part of the formula, but it was far from the only factor.

The Tunes and Musical Sources of the First Old Folks’ Concerts

I haven’t been able to track down programs for any of the New Haven concerts, but newspaper accounts provide a good sample of the repertoire. Throughout the following section I will consider, at times, the very first OFC and at others I will take as a whole the first four New Haven concerts, the first in April with a repeat in May and two in December. All but one of the tunes listed for the four concerts were drawn from the most popular of those composed during the Billings era, and all but one were included in the 1853 Ancient Harmony Revived, the most popular book used in subsequent OFCs before the introduction of Father Kemp’s Old Folks Concert Tunes in 1860. From among the corpus of these old tunes, most of the ones chosen could be described as just as well suited to the fiddle as the violin, in that
they are melodically and harmonically as close to other forms of British North American vernacular music as they are to the more classical-aspiring music of the period. The songs named as having been sung in April were Jerusalem (almost certainly Jeremiah Ingalls’ New Jerusalem), Coronation, Exhortation, New Durham, Bridgewater, Stafford, Sherburne, China and Ocean. The December performances added to the list Montgomery, Majesty, Greenwich, Delight, New Jordan, Bunker Hill and Old Hundred, and possibly Bangor, China and Denmark.12

Of these eighteen tunes all but three were by Billings and company, the exceptions being Old Hundred from the Genevan Psalter, the British psalm tune Bangor and the popular anthem Denmark composed by the slightly older English contemporary of Billings, Martin Madan. Of these tunes only Old Hundred, Bangor and “corrected” forms of Coronation had been widely embraced by nineteenth-century musical reformers, the other tunes having become anathema to many, at least in the context of regular worship.13 Thirteen were fuging tunes, featuring the imitative contrapuntal sections that had become a much loved hallmark of Billings-era New

12 These were mentioned in a letter to the editor of the Springfield Republican as songs the author would like to have heard sung had he been able to attend the concert. He uses the tune names rhetorically as examples of a class of music, but I have included them in my list since each became an OFC standard and is entirely likely to have been performed in the New Haven concerts.

13 China remained popular as a funeral hymn through much of the nineteenth century, although reformers seemed to accept its presence begrudgingly. D. H. Mansfield said China, along the tune Windham, had “acted as pallbearers for half a century.” (Mansfield 1848, preface) For an account of the continuing popularity of China see Cooke 1997, xlii-xlxi. Denmark appeared in some nineteenth century reform tunebooks, perhaps because it was popular and deemed acceptable since its harmony was more in keeping with standard practice of the day.
England church music and a prime target for reformers as early as the late eighteenth century.¹⁴ Of those listed for the December concerts nearly half were in the minor mode. It may be that the repertoire was simply a reflection of the New Haven old folks’ taste, but I suspect their desire to distinguish the indigenous ancient harmony from the modern and “imported” may have led them to favor minor as well as fuging tunes to a degree that exaggerated their overall presence in the canon. Not only was the music of the first OFCs old and American, but it wore “old” and “American” on its shirtsleeve.

**What the Music Was, What It Wasn’t and How It Was Perceived**

The musical diversity of the nineteenth century reform movement and the Billings and company music before it, the generational and regional differences, the individual voices and myriad moments can barely be hinted at in a few songs. The convention of considering two musical eras or styles in opposition has a white washing effect on nuance and connections. As historiologist Penelope Corfield put it in *Time And The Shape Of History*

> “Freezing” time into conventional periods tends to encourage a belief that each period has a special character, which is then evoked to explain things within that period, so risking a purely circular argument. An accompanying

¹⁴ Although inspired by seventeenth and eighteenth century British precedents, Yankee “tunesmiths” embraced the fuging tune to such an extent that the form became broadly associated with New England, even in old England.
problem is that the preceding epoch, before any era that is being studied, is often viewed as being diametrically “opposite,” thus obscuring links and continuities across time (2007: 202).

Nevertheless, such diametrical opposition was a convention that was central to the OFC so we’ll use it. We’ll consider the music in three pairs, in each case a song used in the first OFCs contrasted with music that, for the New Haven singers, the ancient harmony was implicitly not. Each pair suggests distinctions that, in addition to musical era and style, I believe were relevant to the old folks’ understanding of the repertoire. In the first pair, Andrew Law’s Revolutionary era *Bunker Hill* and Alling Brown’s *Brighton* I will focus on popular music, ideas of place and the performance of national identity. In the second, William Billings’ *Majesty* and Leonard Marshall’s *The Lord Is My Shepherd*, I will emphasize denominational distinctions and American identity in the tug of war between the overlapping Colonial and Gothic revival movements. I will consider in greater detail the third pair, the remarkable fuging tune *New Jordan* and Lowell Mason’s *Missionary Hymn*, beginning with a closer look at “the music itself” and how it was sung in the first OFC. I will continue by discussing the tension between absolute and contextual evaluations of the ancient harmony at mid-century, and the relationship between Calvinist theology and the music as embodied social and gender practice. I will conclude the section by revisiting issues of regional and national identity in a discussion of ancient harmony, the “Yankee,” and the pursuit of “American music.”
In strictly musical terms the contrasts in each pair are apparent enough that a quick look, with a little background and minimal musical analysis, should be enough to establish the sonic terrain of the first old folks’ concerts in relationship to their mid-nineteenth century musical “others.” But before moving on to our oppositional pairs we’ll begin with a look at the singularly enduring psalm tune *Old Hundred*, which was performed to great effect in at least one of the December concerts and remained a fixture in OFCs for a hundred years.

**Old Hundred and Progressive Antiquarianism**

![Figure 18: Old Hundred from The Romberg Collection of Sacred Music, 1852.](image)

The Protestant Reformation, at its outset, could be described as progressively retrospective, both avant-garde religion and an attempt to revive primitive Christianity, to move forward by returning to the original, all in teleological linear time progressing to the ultimate revival: a return to the timelessness and right relationship with God enjoyed before the fall of man. Corporate singing in the local
vernacular, in imitation of Jesus and the early Christians, was an important part of this radical cultural and theological revivalism, and a practice Martin Luther famously viewed as second in importance only to prayer. Although Luther did not compose Old Hundred, the long-lived frequency with which the tune has been attributed to him in hymnals, history and folklore speaks to the longstanding association of the tune with the very early days of the Reformation.

The most enduring of tunes from the 1551 Genevan Psalter, Old Hundred’s popularity in American Protestantism has not been universally uninterrupted, but it has been universally perennial. At the time of the first American Old Hundred revival beginning in the early 1720s the tune as originally printed was held up as a prime example of what was then remembered as the stately music of the early Pilgrims and Puritans. At that time its use in “regular singing” was advocated in opposition to the “lining-out” or “reading by line” that was then prevalent and increasingly seen by musical progressives and theologians as outmoded and inappropriate. Some seventy years later Old Hundred was invoked as an antidote to the “unscientific” homegrown New England sacred music of the late eighteenth

15 See Gilman 1829: 74-80 for an account of singing in a fictionalized New England village where Old Hundred apparently fell out of use from around the time of the Revolution until it was revived as an example of the novel “good old music” around 1806 under the influence of the “lofty” chorister “Mr. Forehead.” According to Gilman, at that time only the oldest members of the congregation knew the tune. For more on the tune and tunebook see Havergal 1854: 13.
16 Scholars have long tended to use the term “regular singing” as synonymous with singing from written notation. For a discussion of what the term meant during the eighteenth century singing school movement and how it varied across time and place see Osterhout 1986.
century that grew from seeds planted in the singing schools of the first *Old Hundred* revival. In the years leading up to 1853 many New Englanders had begun to associate *Old Hundred* with the “good old” lively music of Billings and company that had been, by then, largely eradicated from Congregational church services, replaced in part by slow choral arrangements Leonard Bacon called “heavy and dull” and “to the singer positively painful” (Day et al 1856: 3). If we consider the mid-nineteenth century ancient harmony revival a third revival of “old Puritan music,” that makes three times by the 1850s that *Old Hundred* was rallied partly in opposition to music it had helped to inspire.

Part of *Old Hundred’s* perennial appeal is its association with early Calvinism and the “grandfathers and grandmothers” of those at the height of their powers in the 1720s, 1790s and 1850s alike. But its appeal may be at least as significantly musical, as the tune features both the kind of compelling folk-like melody enjoyed by many singers and the measured simplicity deemed appropriate for worship by many progressives and theologians throughout the whole time span. In addition, by 1853 *Old Hundred* had a long association with its ritual function as the most popular tune for the doxology and, along with *Old Lang Syne*, it had long been one of the most common tunes for use with new contrafacta texts celebrating local and national history and events. For all these reasons the tune was practically irresistible, and it is not surprising that the reviewer of the second December OFC said its mass sing-along rendition then would “long haunt [his] memory like a glorious dream” (*Puritan Recorder* 12/29/1853: 206).
Bunker Hill Versus Brighton

Alling Brown’s *Brighton* is a lively tune, hardly the dreary stuff Leonard Bacon complained about in his 1856 tunebook introduction, and it’s not hard to imagine Center Church congregants finding a good rendition “grand and moving in
the extreme.” But compared to *Bunker Hill* it’s rather formal. The melody rides clearly on top in the soprano with the other voices playing a mostly supporting role, and the A natural in the sixth and seventh bars helps propel the piece to a strong second cadence on the dominant. *Bunker Hill* is minor, more active, it features a fuging tune-like extension in the form of a bass and treble duet, and in the tenor tune and each of the harmony parts there is a melodic drive that equals or surpasses in importance their harmonic relationship to each other. Among other things it sounds more like a folk or pop tune, even a march, than *Brighton* does.

And it was as essentially a popular folk tune, minus the duet extension, that *Bunker Hill* often appeared in nineteenth century hymnals like Joshua Leavitt’s *Christian Lyre* and Daniel Mansfield’s *American Vocalist*. It may also have been in such a form that it was sung during the Revolutionary war “constantly…through the ranks of the army” as it’s awkward to sing such an extended tune solo and probably tricky to carry a fragile tunebook or organize four part harmony singing in the field (*Puritan Recorder* 1/18/1854).¹⁷ Earlier in the nineteenth century, music reformers had frequently disparaged the music of Billings and company for its alleged similarities to popular folksongs like *Yankee Doodle*, but by mid-century such criticism had lost some of its sting, at least in some circles, and for many people an association with popular folksong was part of the ancient harmony’s appeal.

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¹⁷ On the other hand, Nathaniel Gould and others mention the use of tunebooks in the camps. See Gould 1853: 50 for example.
Also worth considering are the different ways Brighten and Bunker Hill functioned as markers of place, time and identity. Through his tunebooks Alling Brown’s music achieved circulation beyond New Haven, but for members of Center Church singing music composed and led by their longtime chorister must have been the most local of local music experiences. Because of the tune’s sound, structure and provenance, singing Brighton located Center Church singers of the early 1850s in elite, urban New Haven at the cutting edge of cultural progress, or at least what had been the cutting edge in recent memory. In singing Bunker Hill, on the other hand, the
old folks’ could take a virtual walking tour of sacred America, and embody as a community a sonic monument to a place that marked a time and an event that helped define a people.\(^{18}\) “Why should vain mortals tremble at the sight of death and destruction in the field of battle” the song asks rhetorically, and answers “Life, for my country and the cause of freedom is but a trifle for a worm to part with.” Singing New Englandly, to paraphrase Emily Dickinson, the singers could celebrate, or even momentarily become, New England as America, and thereby paint their own little slice of it in populist national, rather than elite provincial, colors. The text, the sound and provenance of the tune all probably contributed to the effect, but nothing may have contributed more than the very name *Bunker Hill*. The battle named for the hill famously took place on another hill entirely, but as is generally the case with national epics the purpose of the song is not to accurately portray history but to inspire unity around a powerful symbol.

I believe that in 1853, at least in the second half of the year, singing *Bunker Hill* would not have been received simply as patriotic nostalgia but as social commentary. The subject of the battle and the monument erected to commemorate it between 1825 and 1843 were very much in the news and public conversation in the summer and fall of the year for a bundle of reasons. First there was the annual June 17\(^{th}\) celebration of Bunker Hill Day that, in 1853, marked the tenth anniversary of the

\(^{18}\) The act of relating to history through the medium of place, however virtually, may even have had its own power as a kind of meditative retrospection for singers in addition to the specific symbolic power of the place Bunker Hill. For insight into the history of place as a marker of time see Corfield 2007, especially 186.
monument’s completion. In association with this there were tremendously popular and much publicized exhibitions in Boston and Salem of Truman Bartholomew’s famous diorama of the battle. More a happening than a museum display, the exhibition often included music and pageantry and was ceremoniously visited by a host of dignitaries including centenarian James MacDonald, reportedly the last living veteran of the battle (Boston Herald 6/13/1853: 4). Also adding to, and taking advantage of, the Bunker Hill buzz, there was an advertising push for an anthology of the recently deceased Daniel Webster’s orations, including his legendary address at the laying of the Bunker Hill monument cornerstone on June 17, 1825 before a crowd of over twenty thousand enthusiastic listeners, two hundred veterans and General Lafayette. According to historian Richard Frothingham, the event “was unequalled in magnificence by any thing of the kind that had been seen in New England” (Frothingham 1851: 344). For antislavery Yankee Whigs like many of the New Haven old folks, the sting of Webster’s death the previous October was most likely intensified by the landslide election of Democrat Franklin Pierce against whom Webster had been running for president as a third party candidate.

The Bunker Hill buzz in the second half of 1853 seems to have been as much about current events- rising New England nationalism, brewing political crisis, questions about the future of the nation, perhaps even the death of Daniel Webster -
as it was about retrospection and extolling the virtues of the Revolutionary War. In the first OFCs singing *Bunker Hill*, also known as *The American Hero*, may well have been an assertion of Center Church reformers’ cultural centrality and moral authority as orthodox Calvinists and puritan descendants in a period when the nation’s moral compass, composition and direction were subject to particular scrutiny and contestation. For the New Haven old folks in 1853 the tune *Bunker Hill* must have had a power and luster unattainable by any more recent composition, even one as near and probably dear as Alling Brown’s *Brighton*. The importance of the tune to the singers is further supported by the fact that it was the only one mentioned that came from a source other than the *Ancient Harmony Revived*. The old folks evidently went out of their way to include it in the program.

**Majesty Versus The Lord Is My Shepherd**

Our second pair was inspired by a musical battle in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s fictional Poganuc between “‘Piscopal’ chant and William Billings’ tune *Majesty*, one of the most popular in the OFC repertoire. In Stowe’s configuration the pair has less to do with opposing musical eras than with denominational and political distinction,

19 Public excitement and discussion about the exhibit was likely the inspiration for the song *The Sword of Bunker Hill*, published in 1855 as sung by Ossian’s Bards. At an OFC in New Britain, Connecticut in December, 1860, *The Sword of Bunker Hill* was the only secular song and the only song of recent composition in a program otherwise devoted entirely to the music of Billings and company, bearing some testament to the timeliness and symbolic power of the place, the battle, the monument and the very name of Bunker Hill.
changing demographics and Puritan identity. Thinking about the juxtaposition at mid century, it is also suggestive of the changing nature of Congregationalist church experience in the context of neo-Gothicism and the rise of the theater.

For New England Congregationalists, including our New Haven old folks, the dynamic between chant and OFC music had both interdenominational and intradenominational dimensions, and we will consider the issues in that order. Initially, as a “High Church” genre, chant figured as the alien sound of one of Congregationalism’s most immediate theological, cultural and political others. But as nineteenth century Congregationalism gradually embraced High Church forms, chant increasingly figured as an artifact and subject of internal wrestling over the nature and meaning of worship, community and identity.

Figure 6: Majesty from Billings and Holden Collection, 1836
The musical battle in Poganuc, a thinly veiled fictionalization of Stowe’s childhood home of Litchfield, Connecticut, takes place in the frigid though politically fiery winter of 1816-1817. Just months later, in an historic state election, a motley coalition of dissenters including “Jacobites,” Baptists, Methodists, Quakers and, prominently, wealthy Episcopalians, would finally succeed in ousting the long-ruling, Congregationalist-dominated Federalist Party. The goals of the Democratic-Republican/Tolerationist coalition included more liberal suffrage laws, greater religious freedom and the end of Congregationalist dominance in state government, including the disestablishment of Congregationalism as the official, state-subsidized church, which was finally accomplished at the constitutional convention of 1818.

Understandably, Poganuc’s Congregationalists felt under threat that winter. Like First Church congregants in New Haven, they had come to share “their” town green with a new Episcopal church in the early nineteenth century, and the strange sounds emanating from the structure were heard by some as a shot across the bow. When the “little choir and their new organ rang out the Te Deum” and the “waves of
sound rolled across the green,” a group of “hard-handed old farmers” gathered at Deacon Dickenson’s store stopped their trading to listen (Stowe 1878: 62).

To them it bore the sound as of a challenge, the battle-cry of an opposing host that was rising up to dispute the ground with them; and so they listened with combative ears. “Seem to be a hevin’ it all their own way over there, them ‘Piscopals’…said one. “Yes,” said Deacon Dickenson; “all the Democrats are j’inin’ them, and goin’ to make a gen’l push next ‘lection. They’re goin’ clean agin everything- Sunday laws and tiding-man and all”(62-63).

Soon the Congregationalists responded with their own musical salvo at a church service in which chorister Benjamin Davis “selected old ‘Denmark’ as a proper tune for opening the parallels between them and the opposing forces of ritualism.” Having conferred with the minister about which tunes the singers wanted to sing “to keep up the reputation of their ‘meeting’-house,” the next up was Majesty, which Davis led “beating time and roaring, first to treble and then to counter and then to bass.” The singing was such that “everybody felt sure they were better than any Episcopal organ in the world.” The “combative ears” of the congregation had been pacified and “when the doctor rose to his sermon the music had done its work on his audience in exalting their mood to listen with sympathetic ears to whatever he might have to say” (57). Dr. Cushing, the fictional doppelganger of Stowe’s father Lyman Beecher, then goes on to deliver an implicitly political sermon refuting Episcopal doctrine and ritual, particularly apostolic succession and the celebration of Christmas.
In Stowe’s account of this rivalry the hymn texts play third fiddle to both the music itself and the manner of singing in establishing the differences between Congregationalist Federalists and Episcopalian Tolerationists. The text of *Denmark*, Irene Battell’s lullaby to her sister Urania, is Isaac Watts’ version of Psalm 100, beginning; “Before Jehovah’s awful throne, Ye nations bow with sacred joy. Know that the Lord is God alone, He can create and He destroy.” This appeal to a sovereign God could have been read as a proclamation of Puritan faith in opposition to the forces of tradition and ritual, but Stowe doesn’t even mention the text. While she does quote in full the text of *Majesty*, also concerned with God’s sovereignty, it seems only peripherally related to the job assigned the tune by the chorister and minister, and it is the music that is front and center. Comparing the Episcopal chant to “the measured motion of the mighty sea in calm weather,” Stowe calls *Majesty* one of “those old fuguing tunes” that was “like that same ocean aroused by stormy winds, when deep calleth unto deep in tempestuous confusion, out of which at last is evolved union and harmony” (73).

Stowe depicts the music and the “roaring” of the singers as embodiments of Puritan and regional character emblematic of national identity, writing the music was “suggestive of the strife, the commotion, the battle cries of a transition period of

20 I find it interesting to consider that the placid sound of Anglican/Episcopal chant could have been heard by Poganites as a sound of historical Loyalist satisfaction with the status quo of British rule. In 1817 it might just as well have been heard as protest music against the status quo which was, at that time, the virtual Puritan theocracy unambiguously endorsed in the singing of *Denmark* and *Majesty*. 
society, struggling onward toward dimly seen ideals of people and order.” The strife, commotion and struggle Stowe heard in *Majesty* she implied was as native to New England Puritanism and the new Republic as it was to Poganuc’s natural setting, “a place where winter stood for something” on a hill that “like all hills in our dear New England, though beautiful for situation in summer, was a howling desolation for about six months of the year.” Suggesting a harmony between the text, the music, the singers and natural New England as an antitype of the Biblical Promised Land she wrote:

> when back and forth from every side of the church came the different parts shouting: “On Cherubim and seraphim full royally he rode, and on the wings of mighty winds came flying all abroad”- there went a stir and a thrill through many a stern and hard nature, until the tempest cleared off in the words; -“He sat serene upon the floods their fury to restrain, and he, as sovereign Lord and King, For evermore shall reign” (74).

I do not know how accurately Stowe’s account reflects music making in Litchfield circa 1817 or to what degree her thoughts about the ancient harmony were a product of her historical vantage point in the late 1870s after a quarter century of old folks’ concerts, but she provides us with a perceptive and lively vignette of the dynamic between High Church and Low Church music in a once thoroughly Puritan, if fictional, New England village.

In the mid-nineteenth century the United States was under the spell of Romantic medievalism known as “neo-Gothicism” or the “Gothic revival” movement
although, as architectural historian Jeanne Kilde points out, the movement “for Low Church evangelical congregations was not a revival at all but an extraordinary move toward High Church Roman Catholic architectural forms” (2002: 20). About the appeal of these forms influential mid-nineteenth century architect Andrew Jackson Downing wrote “the high tower, the steep roof, and the boldly varied outline, seem wholly in keeping with the landscape because these forms in the building harmonize…with the pervading spirit of mysterious power and beauty in romantic scenery” (1850: 344). In some ways the Gothic revival, represented by stone spires and chant, and the overlapping colonial revival, represented by white steeples and the old folks’ concert, were sides of the same coin. Despite formal differences between spire and steeple, between neo-Gothicism’s appeal to ancient Europe and neo-colonialism’s to earlier America, the movements share much of the same ideological DNA in retrospection and locating the human, specifically the American, in the natural world as a point of spiritual origin and national identity.

Under the influence of neo-Gothicism, inspiration from Episcopal and Catholic forms reached even into resolutely anti-Catholic Congregationalist churches and their services. In 1842 architect and Center Church member Henry Austin had redesigned the church interior with a touch of Gothic flare, and at the time of the first OFC he was finishing a book of plans for gothic inspired frontier churches at the request of a Congregationalist organization the year before. The embrace of High-Church forms hardly meant a softening of attitudes toward Catholicism but as Lyman
Beecher put it in 1852, “if you want to get Martins about your house you must put up a Martin house” (quoted in Van Rohr 1992: 275).

Figure 8: Trinity Episcopal Church, New Haven, with reflection of Center Church’s steeple.

The high church trappings were not embraced just to lure Catholics to salvation and assimilation, nor were they limited to the spires and stained glass by now so long a familiar fixture in many Congregationalist churches. While the Puritans and their descendants had long retained the Protestant Reformation’s shift from an emphasis on the visual and sensory to the linguistic in worship, by mid-century the hunger for more spiritual, experiential church was such that even a student and associate of Lyman Beecher could write that “Preaching is so characteristic of Protestantism that our religion is a species of spiritual pedagogics rather than a devotional life. More liturgy is needed” (Bittinger 1891: 68). And more liturgy he got, to the extent that by 1862 a historian of the New Haven green could write:
The changes which have gradually crept into Puritan usages and forms of worship through the influence of the Episcopal Church are so familiar that they hardly need be enumerated. These innovations, which one hundred years ago would have been regarded as little short of Roman Catholicism, and also the growing use of various portions of the Episcopal liturgy in Congregational worship, are among the borrowed graces by which New England Puritanism is being progressively mellowed and enriched (Blake 1898: 108).

In addition to being “mellowed and enriched,” Congregationalist services were also becoming more theatrical and multisensory at the same time a growing number of theatrical entertainments were taking place in church. In *When Church Became Theatre*, Jeanne Kilde details the origin of the now familiar auditorium-style church in American Protestantism’s nineteenth century move toward the theater, in both the morphology of buildings and the activities they contained. Needless to say, not everyone was happy with such innovations and the blurring of lines between church and stage. In *The History of the Church of God*, ardent Calvinists Sylvester and Cushing Hassell quoted one old light preacher who bemoaned the influence of “Romanism” and listed the rise of church entertainments, specifically targeting old folks’ concerts, as some of the “numerous corruptions of doctrine and practice” introduced in the nineteenth century (1886: 600). But while Congregationalism’s embrace of theater and neo-Gothicism, including chant, was hardly uncontested it was eventually broadly accepted and became commonplace.

The chant sung in Poganuc was the ancient *Te Deum*, but I have chosen to oppose *Majesty* here with a chant of Yankee composition as this suggests a more
complex and interior dynamic of political and denominational foment. Of the scores published in the mid-nineteenth century I chose *The Lord Is My Shepherd* by Leonard Marshall, partly just to bring Marshall into the discussion because of his interesting role in the afterlife of the ancient harmony and his place in mid-nineteenth century New England church music in general. A prominent member of both the Billings and Holden and the Handel and Haydn societies, Marshall is another example of a music reformer who found ways to balance an interest in ancient harmony with a progressive musical agenda. Among other interesting items his 1863 tunebook *The Church Organ*, from which *The Lord Is My Shepherd* was taken, are a large number of tunes he marks as “old style,” including several fusing tunes and a “corrected” reharmonization of *Majesty* made into a plain tune. *The Lord Is My Shepherd* was published too late to have been a literal counterpart to old folks’ music in either 1818 Poganuc or 1853 New Haven, but it is illustrative of the genre. As suggested by the term chant, Marshall’s setting of the Twenty Third Psalm is in free rhythm and features singing over a pedal with a few harmonic moves and rhythmic gathering points rather than a tune as such. The effect is meditative and formal, even mystical, and its structure seems to mark it as a piece for performance by a practiced choir rather than a participating congregation. Even in its very appearance on the page it suggests a “mighty sea in calm weather,” as Mrs. Stowe put it, in sharp contrast to the “tempestuous confusion” of *Majesty*.

Returning to the first OFC, in an atmosphere of neo-Gothicism, at a time when the experience of church was becoming more like the experience of theater, the
significance of singing *Majesty* and other selections of ancient harmony could not have been missed by concert-goers. If the OFC as performed religion benefited from the neo-Gothic move toward a more sensory and theatrical experience of church, perhaps the choice of repertoire served to Calvinize the experience of theater, to make possible the performance of equilibrium between Puritan austerity and the comparative opulence of antebellum middle and upper class life.

**New Jordan Versus Missionary Hymn**

For New Haven Congregationalists what the OFC repertoire was perhaps most palpably *not* was the music of Lowell Mason and company, the predominant style of sacred music in most of their churches at the time. To represent this music I have chosen *Missionary Hymn*, one of Mason’s most enduring pieces, and one that was sung by a group in New Haven, doubtless including some of our old folks, upon the departure of the *Amistad* Mendi bound for Sierra Leone in November, 1841. Squaring off against *Missionary Hymn* is *New Jordan*, a rare piece in the OFC repertoire, but one that was sung by the New Haven old folks, at least in the December concerts at North Church, and serves well to represent the style of the core repertoire in all the early OFCs.

The musical contrast in this pairing is at least as striking as that in our previous pair. *Missionary Hymn* is a good tune with suitable harmony that gets the words across with minimal fuss. Unassuming and hummable, it’s the kind of thing
you could sing or listen to while doing something else. In *New Jordan* there’s enough melodic material for a dozen Lowell Mason hymns, and when it’s being sung there’s no getting away from it; the song pretty much takes up all available mental and sonic space. Of all the songs in the early OFC repertoire it may provide the single best example of characteristics mid-century people associated with the ancient harmony. Among other things, as opposed to *Missionary Hymn*, *New Jordan* was minor, higher and, in general practice, louder and faster.\(^{21}\) I will return periodically to the specifics of this pairing, but I will broaden the discussion to consider salient musical characteristics and perceptions of ancient harmony, the style and experience of singing it, and the relationship between the music and ideas of regional and national identity, particularly as embodied in the Yankee character of literary and popular imagination.

\(^{21}\) That *New Jordan* is minor and higher than *Missionary Hymn* is self-evident. My assertion that it was generally faster and louder in performance is based on both internal factors and the historical record. Presumably you could perform the song relatively slowly if you had a big enough bass section for singers to take turns breathing during their five and a half bars of sustained C, but that’s not how the music was generally remembered. Likewise with training and practice it would be possible to perform the song with some choral delicacy, but the song isn’t particularly amenable.
Figure 9: New Jordan from The Easy Instructor, 1819

Figure 10: Missionary Hymn, 1823
Higher, Faster, Louder

One of the most picturesque and comical examples of how many nineteenth century northerners perceived the music of the old folks is found in Yankee delineator James Hackett’s 1831 portrayal of itinerant singing master Melodious Migrate in the play The Moderns. Migrate recollects teaching a singing-school “chock full of obstropolous girls,” and singing the tune “Holden, page seventeen.”22

We were going it full blast, the four parts, like a four horse team o’er a brand new turnpike- when I consated the tenor was a leetle mite too weak and opened myself like a tree toad in wet weather “full chisel”- well I had hardly got over a bar or so when a blasted dog who had got into the room set up such an almighty howl imitating that all the gals and boys busted out laughing and throwing peas as thick as a fiddler’s musty (quoted in Hodge 1964: 120).23

There is a lot to unpack in this little description. In a time before audio recording, memory and imagination may have conspired to exaggerate the excesses of

22 It is possible that the anonymous author of The Moderns was aware of one of the two relatively obscure old tunes by that name, but I think it’s more likely he made up the tune name expecting audiences would be aware enough of composer Oliver Holden to associate his name with the class of ancient harmony Migrate was talking about.

23 As far as I know no complete script for The Moderns has been uncovered to date, the only source being performance notes from Hackett’s portrayal of the character in a London production. I have not been able to find another example of the expression “thick as a fiddler’s musty” but I believe “musty” is a colloquialism for mustache (either an historical colloquialism or one invented by Hackett for added comic effect) and the joke of its thickness may be its association with the unkempt, old-time country musician. It may even be the “musty’s” thickness implies the fiddler in question is African American, as were so many associated with the old time “frolic.” I am speculating, but I suspect part of the joke here is that Melodious Migrate is represented as being so countrified he's practically black. It's a line of inquiry I haven't seen pursued in what I've read on minstrelsy or in the “whiteness studies” literature of some years back, but the possibility of a nineteenth century perception of African Americans as, on one level and among other things, “ultra-Yankees” may be worth investigating.
singing in earlier generations and country places, amplified tenfold here for comic effect. But for the humor to be effective it must have been at least based in broadly shared perceptions of the music and related performance practices. Migrate’s singing “like a tree toad in wet weather” that sets the dogs howling suggests an enthusiasm expressed in pitch as well as volume. The implication that the ancient harmony was higher, even comically higher, than the modern would surely have resonated with audiences. “Would that the singers of the present day had the voices and lungs of their grandfathers and grandmothers,” wrote one reviewer of the *Ancient Harmony Revived* in 1847, “but now it is necessary to write the music an octave lower to accommodate their degenerate successors” (*Maine Cultivator and Hallowell Gazette*, 9/18/1847: 2). Exaggeration aside, from even a casual comparison of ancient harmony collections with those of Mason and company it is clear that the older music tended to be rangier and much more frequently strained the upper register of the average singer. The main melodies of *Missionary Hymn* and *New Jordan* illustrate the point, the latter covering an octave and a half and reaching a high G, the former covering only an octave with a high of E. Even if some might have keyed *New Jordan* lower than standard pitch for convenience, the range of comfortable keys would likely have been constrained by the low G in the bass and the low C in the tenor and alto. The perception of the ancient harmony as high may also have been influenced by the music’s association with a sharp, “nasal” vocal tone, discussed in more detail below.
The other implication of Migrate’s “full bore” singing is that it was loud, an association that carried over into the old folks’ concerts. Speaking of the singing at one early OFC a reviewer wrote “the contrast between such a volume of harmony and the meager performances in most of our houses of public worship on Sundays, was much to the advantage of the former” (Cambridge Chronicle 6/2/1855:2) while another wrote of the first OFC singers in Cleveland, Ohio simply “they ript it up” (Plain Dealer 3/27/1855: 3).

Volume is a significant musical characteristic associated in the United States, and elsewhere, with the countrified, the old fashioned and the unrefined, all of which have long had both negative and positive connotations for Americans. In American culture there is a long history of creative tension between ideas of refinement and brash enthusiasm, a broadly Apollonian/Dionysian dichotomy widely understood to break down roughly along the divides between city and country, town and gown, logic and emotion. There is an equally long history of Americans’ wanting to have their cake and eat it too in this regard. We want our politicians, for example, to have attended Yale or Harvard but we don’t want them to use big words or play polo. We would rather they were the kind of regular people with whom we could imagine drinking beer and yelling at the television when the ref makes a bad call. This dialectic was clearly at play in nineteenth century sacred music theory and practice in New England. While there was a long standing ideal of refinement and restraint expressed in things like soft, well coordinated singing, moderate tempi and clear
articulation of words there was also an understanding among many that this ideal was contingent, not always realizable, and that this might be for the best.

In his own fictionalized memoir centered on Congregationalist singing in the imaginary village of Waterfield, based on Atkinson, New Hampshire, author and theologian Samuel Gilman digresses to praise the singing at a Methodist gathering he attended. “It did not offend me that they sang with all their might, and all their soul, and all their strength; for it was evident that they sang with all their heart. I was conscious of hearing only one grand and rolling volume of sound, which swallowed up minor asperities and individual peculiarities” (1829: 40). Some decades later Eben Tourjee, an advocate of powerful, emotionally charged singing everyone could join in, echoed Gilman’s sentiment, writing “a great mistake is made by those who in congregational singing look for exact time, or even tune. The very roughness of it is part of its charm. No true musician will object to it because it is rude. Nor will He to whom it is offered condemn its rude simplicity” (New York Times 1/22/1872). While Tourjee mentions only time and tune specifically, volume was likely an ingredient of the “rude simplicity” he appreciated.

Far from everyone, of course, had positive associations with the “rude simplicity” and loud singing often associated with the ancient harmony, the country church and the ecstatic religionist. An 1818 letter to the Salem Gazette echoed a common theme, rejoicing in “how much the musical taste of the public has improved” as evidenced in a performance by the Essex South Musical Society in which the old
“compositions, which would have disgraced a six-penny ballad” and were often “twanged to most unharmonious discord” were replaced by music that was “pure, chaste and well accented; and, for the most part, soft and delicate.” Still, the transformation was apparently incomplete, as the author continues “I say for the most part; for we must be a little critical; my poor old nerves were rather severely exercised by the loudness and harshness of some parts of the performance, when in full chorus” (5/22/1818).

In contrast to the suggestion that religion and music should be soft and delicate, an appreciation of singing by Daniel Mansfield’s protégé William Farrington singles out the impressive volume of his voice as an important ingredient of religious expression. Once asked “to favor the vast audience of ministers and people with a song” at a religious conference, Farrington obliged.

Before the close of the first stanza, tears began to flow, and suppressed shouts to break out over the whole house. Every one was doing his best, however, not to disturb the singer or mar the song. But the second stanza was too much for mortal endurance, and during the whole of the third and last, no voice but his could have risen above the tempest of shouting that threatened to swallow up both the singer and the music. When he sat down the bishop was seen weeping like a child; the vast gathering of people were melted, and it was full five minutes after the song had ceased before the Conference could be brought into sufficient composure to resume the regular order of business (Poole 1890: 58).

Placing these two examples back to back may seem to be comparing frogs to grandmothers as the performances were separated by several decades and some two
hundred miles. In addition to a divide between city and country, progressive and old-fashioned, between a public concert and singing at a religious conference, there are echoes of the Appolonian/Dionysian in the divide between Calvinism and Arminianism, the Essex performance having taken place in a Congregational church and Farrington’s at a Methodist conference. The singers Samuel Gilman praised for their “grand, rolling volume of sound” were, like Eben Tourjee, William Farrington and Daniel Mansfield, Methodists, Arminian Christians with whom loud, emotional singing was often associated. But Gilman’s approbation of loud singing, as well as that implied by Tourjee and Mansfield, was not strictly denominationally bound, as each was writing in general about effective sacred singing intended for a general Protestant readership. There was space, in New England Congregationalism of the mid-nineteenth century, for appreciating loud singing for a combination of aesthetic, nostalgic, religious and national reasons. Some of the appeal of the OFC was its association with music that was, despite tunebook admonitions and singing practice in more refined congregations to the contrary, associated with a kind of full throated enthusiasm that was, if similar in volume to that associated with Arminian Christians, indigenous to elements within New England Congregationalism, moderated perhaps by orthodoxy’s built-in checks on emotional excess.

**Speed, Fuging Tunes and the Communal Experience of Sacred Poetry**

Melodious Migrate’s account of singing “full blast…like a four horse team o’er a brand new turnpike” is clearly ridiculous, but tangled up in the humor is an
implicit appreciation of the liveliness associated with the old fuging tunes. Many mid-
century northerners, if sometimes begrudgingly, shared such an admiration of this
liveliness for a variety of reasons. As we have seen Harriet Beecher Stowe, like James
Hackett a sometime Yankee delineator herself, associated tempo with national
character, hearing in the old fuging tunes “a grand wild freedom, an energy of
motion…that well expressed the heart of a people courageous in combat and
unshaken in endurance” (Stowe 1878: 49). Others expressed appreciation in more
purely aesthetic terms. In an enthusiastic account of one proto-OFC, an 1848
performance by the Bangor Billings and Holden Society, renowned Baptist
theologian and author Joseph Belcher described speed as an important ingredient in
the group’s effective rendering of Jacob Kimball’s Invitation, a fuging tune that
would soon become one of the very most popular in the OFC repertoire.

When the part beginning “Fly like a youthful hart or roe” was repeated, one
could hardly help imagining himself among a flock of young deer, scampering
“Over the hills where spices grow,” so swiftly did the chorister lead off and
the singers follow (Belcher 1856: 203).

The rapid pace at which the old fuging tunes were often sung, along with the
jumbling of text that resulted from the combination of speed and the genre’s rather
unbridled polyphony, made the fuging tune a prime target for many nineteenth
century humorists and critics, including composers like Oliver Holden and Daniel
Read who early repented of their compositional roots.\textsuperscript{24} It is not hard to imagine how, to an audience listening to unfamiliar music and text, struggling to hear a complete sentence, fuging tunes could seem, in Stowe’s words, a “tempestuous confusion” in their resistance to a linear unfolding of meaning. But for singers, and listeners familiar with both music and text, the experience of the fuging tune can have much the character of close reading akin to meditation on a Bible passage, when words and phrases become partially unmoored from their syntactical/temporal anchor and hang twisting in the air, like elements of a Calder mobile. Thus suspended in variation they expose new aspects of themselves and relationships to other text objects, becoming more than temporally, syntactically bound pieces of a linear puzzle.

As mentioned, edification through clear, forceful language was important to the Puritans and their Congregationalist descendants. But in the fuging tune the almost sculptural, close reading experience of its poetry can lend to an enhanced rather than a compromised encounter with its meaning. If the “old folks” ever experienced such an effect, it may have been magnified by the fact that the echoes, reiterations and permutations came from each of “the four parts” with considerable independence, asserting, reinforcing and multiplying a text’s meaning from all corners of the village, as it were. I offer this possibility only as a potentially useful perspective based on my own experience as a singer, but I would think anyone who

\textsuperscript{24} See Gould 1853: 53 for a detailed and humorous analysis of all he found wrong with Timothy Swan’s fuging tune \textit{Montague}. 

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has sung or led a fuging tune in the customary hollow square of the *Sacred Harp*
might attest to the power and beauty of the texts quickly bouncing from part to part in
socially grounded reiteration. The text jumbling and potential adrenaline rush of a
lively fuging tune might sometimes be at theological cross-purposes with sacred
music’s intended role in worship and edification, but I would argue this is not always
the case, at least for singers and others familiar with the music and texts.

Samuel Gilman’s take on the old music’s “grand wild freedom” is more
pragmatic and less sentimental than Stowe’s, but seemingly no less appreciative of its
unvarnished Yankeeness in the face of one educated city interloper’s condescension.
When the pretentious and fashionable music reformer “Mr. Forehead” attempted to
have the Billings and company music replaced in the local church with “none but the
slow, grand and simple airs which our forefathers sang” his argument was that it was
more refined and “beginning to be in the fashion.” The author’s counter argument
was that “conscious superiority in taste and…fastidious arrogance of fashion” were
not reason enough to stop people singing music they knew and loved and,
furthermore, while the “most slow and solemn tunes might be executed with good
effect when sustained by the accompaniment of an organ… yet it was scarcely
judicious to confine the whole music of a vocal choir” to that music (Gilman 1829:
79). Gilman’s argument seems to be partly a defense of his fellow villagers’ taste
against Forehead’s pretension and partly a plea for variety, but he’s also talking about
tempo. For an organless choir of regular village Yankees, he seems to say, slow tunes
could only go so far, and faster music like the old fuging tunes sung “with the speed
of darting cavalry” was easier to render effectively, perhaps without exposing the “minor asperities” Gilman felt could be ameliorated by volume as well (36).

While refinement in sacred singing remained an ideal that was realized to various degrees, sometimes rivaling even that in old Europe, there remained in the New England mindset a sense that there might be something suspicious about religious singing that was too uniform, too well regulated and restrained. One of the early Puritans’ objections to social dancing, in addition to its innate carnality, was that “it suggested to them a loss of individual autonomy” (Johnson 2005: 66). A little, perhaps Dionysian, roughness around the edges, a little resistance to externally imposed order and decorum in singing may have been a reassuring sign that Puritan/American individualism was alive and well. Whether this individualism was expressed as “masculine” brashness or a “feminine” tendency to chaos, in sacred singing there seems to have been a degree of equilibrium, or at least an ever twisting mobile on which hung visions of New England as the seat of individualism and revolt and visions of New England as the seat of more orderly gender manifestations, “masculine” rationality and “feminine” refinement. The first old folks’ concert seems to have been attractive in part because the music, with all its rough edges in compositional and performance style, was understood to express both Yankee individualism and time tested community values while resisting the increasing standardization, regulation and moderation of the mid-nineteenth century.
New Jordan: Theory, Practice and the Minor Scale in Mid-nineteenth Century New England

The following is a rather lengthy and detailed account, the conclusion of which is that I believe the fact that some, or much, of the music was minor and “unscientific” was part of the attraction of the old folks’ concerts. If that’s enough information for you, you might want to breeze through the section. As my primary musical training is in Carnatic music, I write more from the perspective of raga theory than harmonic analysis, privileging melody and recognizing the multiple and dialogic identity of scale degrees that are typically understood, at least in theory, to be static.

The music of the first OFCs may have been disproportionately minor in relation to the ancient harmony corpus, perhaps even deliberately so, but the mid-century perception of the ancient harmony as more minor than the music of Mason and company was justifiable. The status of the mode had become rather vexed, and while the tunebooks of Mason and company did contain minor music, it was generally tame enough in comparison with the older music that it might be considered “apologetic minor;” slow, full of accidentals and frequently bending towards major. There were also proportionately far fewer minor tunes in most mainstream tunebooks of the day than in many earlier collections, in mid century ancient harmony publications or in more overtly populist collections like Joshua Leavitt’s Christian Lyre.

The problem with minor at mid-century was at least three-fold, involving ideas about what sorts of texts, tunes and sentiments were suited to the mode,
theoretical wrangling over the “scientifically” appropriate rendering of the scale for melodic and harmonic purposes, and theory’s inability to account for or regulate aspects of aural culture. The latter was especially problematic in relation to minor tunes in oral circulation or printed in earlier decades that failed to conform to mid-century theoretical expectations of how minor should behave. Concomitant with the industrial revolution and expansion of the rail system were heightened expectations of regularity and what was referred to at the time as the “obliteration of time and space” whereby the liminal and ambiguous were effectively erased from experience in a series of discrete stops, a subject discussed in greater detail below.

One reason the minor mode fell out of favor for hymn tunes in the nineteenth century is that scientific musicians had come to think of it as suited primarily, even exclusively, to “grave” tunes and texts. As Northampton, Massachusetts composer and compiler George Kingsley put it “minor is always plaintive, mournful and even gloomy” (1847: 15). At mid-century such an understanding excluded minor from use, not only to set joyful texts, but in quick music like that of the old fuging tunes.25

25 In the words of one reviewer of the first OFC in Hartford in January, 1854 “Another defect, in this style of music, was that it employed the same rapid movement in a minor key that it did in the major…The true associations with the major and minor keys are natural ones. The former is employed to represent cheerful emotions- the latter, sad ones. Time, in music, is either slow or fast: with these two qualities, we have different associations. Slow time is connected in our mind with majesty, solemnity, gloom and imperfection. Rapid time with animation, life, energy and increased action. These are natural associations, as every one knows who has witnessed the effect of martial music. To connect, therefore, rapid time with the minor key mutually destroys the expression of either. The Scotch are guilty of the same fault in much of their popular music” (Connecticut Courant 1/14/1854: 2).
minor mode had been favored for songs of mourning and lamentation in the heyday of Billings and company as well, the tune China being the most obvious exception, although even that Mrs. Stowe described as being in “the major key invested with all the mournful pathos of the minor” (1878: 284-285). However, for composers of the old school, minor’s character and associations were more flexible than for those of later decades. Although its association with the mournful was widely acknowledged in the old tunebook introductions, in practice minor had also been associated with the emphatic, whether mournful or ecstatic, yearning, expectant or defiant. Take, for example, the text of the aptly named Delight, sung by the New Haven old folks.

No burning heat by day  
Nor blasts of evening air  
Shall take my health away  
If God be with me there.  
Thou art my sun and Thou my shade  
To guard my head by night or noon.

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26 For a detailed account of China’s long life and reception, including nineteenth century appreciation of the tune, see Cooke 1997: xlii-xlix.
27 A July, 1853 letter to the editor by pseudonymous young Hartford resident ADOLESCENS provides a window into contemporary perceptions of the ancient harmony in general and Delight in particular, as well as the interest in the music among at least some of the “young folks.” “How often I remember to have heard my mother in her stories of ‘Auld Lang Syne’ sketch the picture of grand-mother, at her little spinning wheel singing ‘Delight,’ and how the very name, with the expressive air, kindled a response of ecstacy in her young heart! May we not hope that a gentle breeze will this time move the hearts of our sturdy old oaks, and if youthful voices are needed to join in the ‘Ancient Harmony,’ will not our singers cheerfully acquiesce, and lend a helping voice?” (Connecticut Courant 7/2/1853: 1).
Likewise, in all its intensity and implications of the end of mortal life, the very minor *New Jordan* proclaims a yearning, even a confident hope and vigorous affirmation of God’s sovereign goodness.

On Jordan’s stormy banks I stand
And cast a wishful eye
To Canaan’s fair and happy land
Where my possessions lie.

O the transporting rapturous scene
That rises to my sight:
Sweet fields arrayed in living green
And rivers of delight.

There generous fruits that never fail
on trees immortal grow.
There rocks and hills and brooks and vales
With milk and honey flow.

All o’er those wide extended plains
Shines one eternal day.
There God the sun forever reigns
And scatters night away.

As in *Delight*, there is a fierceness to *New Jordan*, in text, tune and harmony that seems to strike out at the trials of earthly life, in the latter case through a proclamation Holy of faith in “treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor dust doth corrupt” (KJV Matt 6:19). Some might hear *New Jordan* or *Delight* as severe, but it would be hard to argue that either is gloomy. There was enough wiggle room in mid nineteenth century reformers’ thinking about minor that some conceded it could be employed to express what H. W. Day called “holy joy,” but not the kind of defiant exultation of these old folks’ tunes (*American Journal of Music* 8/29/1844: 3).
Part of the problem with minor’s dominant mainstream association with the mournful and gloomy at mid century may have been that the religion of many New Englanders of the day was less mournful and gloomy than the religion of their parents and grandparents had been. Even among many self identified Calvinists there was what more orthodox critics saw as a creeping Arminianism; a growing emphasis on God’s love and people’s ability to work to secure it. This was certainly the case “Taylorites” like Lyman Beecher, Leonard Bacon and, even more so, the evangelistic Charles Grandison Finney of New York City and Oberlin College. Why sing backward in anguish or forward in dread, some might have asked, why sing so mournfully when there was work to be done evangelizing, reforming the world and helping to bring history to its triumphant conclusion?

There is a seeming paradox here. If the religion of mid century Congregationalists was less mortifying than that of their ancestors, why had they so long worked to replace the lively music of Billings and company with the more staid and stately hymns of the nineteenth century reform movement? Defending the old fugging tunes in the March 6, 1839 Boston Musical Gazette ancient harmony fan “GAMUT” wrote “you may talk and tell and argufy, as you please, about your sober and solemn airs, as being most fit and suitable for religious purposes; my religion is cheerful, and so shall be my music.” I believe, however, that many Congregationalists’ problem with ancient harmony was not that it was cheerful, but that it was seen as unschooled, unrestrained and retrograde. The Congregationalism of the day was more interior as well as forward-looking, and the way of progress was that of order,
sobriety, restraint and diligence rather than the hyper-emotionalism and excesses of the old-time singing school, frontier religion or the camp meeting. To the extent the ancient harmony was seen as disorderly and emotionally overwrought it might have been identified with some of Congregationalism’s Protestant others. If, for mid century Congregationalists, ecstatic public outbursts were generally inappropriate and déclassé, they were especially so when keyed in minor. Perhaps that’s part of what made the fuging tunes, particularly those in minor, so surprising and enjoyable for singers and audience members at the old folks’ concerts. And if old folks’ tunes and the minor mode in general were seen as retrograde, perhaps the reform movement’s embrace of antiquarianism helped make room for the music in the mid century soundscape.

Minor’s structure was as problematic as its associations. Earlier composers and compilers had usually kept things simple. The introduction to the 1803 Chorister’s Companion, for example, says only “there are but two Keys In Music, viz. C, the Major or Sharp Key, and A, The Minor or Flat Key. The first is suited to express the cheerful passions, the latter the mournful or pathetic” (Jenks and Griswold 1803: 9). The author then gives the two scales side-by-side, minor first, suggesting his lack of hand wringing over the topic. Minor tunes in the book do include sharped sevenths, but seemingly according to the composers’ taste rather than a discernible rule. As the nineteenth century progressed, writing about minor became more involved, even convoluted, and tunebook discussions of the scale were buried
further in the introductory matter, sometimes appearing almost as an afterthought to discussions of the major and chromatic scales.

In his chapter on melody Daniel Mansfield recapitulates perhaps the most common mid century understanding of minor, that in ascending passages the sixth and seventh scale degree should be raised a half step, but qualifies this in a revealing footnote in which he defends the singing of minor in general.

In many compositions the sixth *descending* must also be sharpened, though no sign appears. Indeed, in regard to the structure of the Minor scale, there appears to be no little diversity of opinion, even among distinguished composers. The uncertainty of its structure, together with the comparative difficulty of its performance, has created an aversion to the study of the minor scale, though by far the sweetest and most effective music is found in it (1848: xii).

Mansfield hints at several issues here, drawn from his own experience, perhaps influenced by the editorializing of the ever-interesting H. W. Day and possibly even by familiarity with music and music theory among the Shakers. There certainly was considerable “diversity of opinion” about minor at mid century, some “distinguished composers” not even agreeing with themselves, as Day noted. A sworn enemy of Lowell Mason who once headlined an article about him “The Great Puke,” Day is hardly the most dispassionate observer but he is not far off, if combative, in his assessment of Mason’s changing position on the minor mode.

Mr. Mason’s instruction on the minor scale, and remarks on minor music from year to year, are palpable contradictions and childish changes. One year he is opposed to minor music. The next he is greatly in favor of it… One year he
teaches the minor scale one way, and Mr. Webb another. Next year he teaches it Mr. Webb’s way. And when Mr. Johnson gets home from Germany he adopts Mr. Johnson’s method (*American Journal of Music* 7/30/1845: 98).28

A common site of inconsistency, as Day and Mansfield each noted, was the behavior of notes between the fifth and octave, understood theoretically as an issue of half and whole steps in relation to melodic direction. Unlike in major, many agreed, in order for melody and harmony to work out right the area between the fifth and upper octave in minor had to be jury-rigged, but few could agree on exactly how. The vagaries of the sixth scale degree in practice posed a particular problem for theory intended to be consistent and comprehensive. Some tunebook introductions taught only a minor scale in which the seventh degree was invariably sharped, creating an “augmented second” between sixth and seventh, inconsistently referring to this arrangement as the “harmonic minor scale.”29 Others claimed the augmented second was inadmissible without exception and taught only a minor scale in which both sixth and seventh were sharped in the ascent, inconsistently referring to this as the “melodic minor scale.”30 Some taught both, as Lowell Mason had done in his introduction to the 1822 Boston Handel and Haydn Society Collection.31 But in his 1854 *The Hallelujah* Mason taught seven varieties of minor, for most of which

28 Day is referring to Mason’s collaborators George Webb and A.N. Johnson.
31 Wm. Bradbury’s *The Jubilee*, 1858, Mason and Webb’s *The Psaltery*, 1847 and I. B. Woodbury’s *The Dulcimer*, 1850 etc.
singers would have found little or no practical application, even in singing from Mason’s own tunebooks. Most mid century northeastern tunebook prefaces acknowledged the existence of a “natural minor scale,” but only some advocated its use, and even then usually only in descent. Of the compilers with whom I am familiar only Mansfield mentions anything about the possibility of a higher sixth scale degree in the descent, although this was a common feature of many minor tunes in oral circulation and even notated in earlier hymns like Stephen Jenks’ 1805 *Evening Shade*.

The “comparative difficulty” of the minor scale described by Daniel Mansfield, and widely acknowledged, must have been due in part to the “uncertainty of its structure,” as the prescriptions of nineteenth century teachers were often in conflict not only with each other but also with the melodic logic of existing tunes. It can be just plain hard and ugly, for example, to consistently raise ascending sixth and seventh scale degrees a full half step in singing tunes designed with a different understanding of minor in mind, including many of the popular or “folk”-influenced tunes and ancient harmony pieces Mansfield and others favored.

The compilers of *The Ancient Harmony Revived* found a convenient way around the whole mess. At the end of a brief and uneventful theoretical introduction they wash their hands of the issue quoting ancient harmony composers Jeremiah Ingalls, Daniel Read and Abraham Maxim in a section titled “Difference between the Major Scale and the Minor Scale, as taught by the old teachers” (1855: 6). Thus the
anonymous compilers were able to present versions of the old system of the natural minor scale with a sprinkling of decorative sharps without having to stick their necks out in support or defiance of any current teaching on the matter.

In theory and practice, navigating minor’s vicissitudes, especially in the upper part of the scale, has been a longstanding problem in Anglo-American Protestant music. For example, a similar problem related to the character of the sixth scale degree debated by Shaker hymnodists beginning by at least the early 1830s and pointed out by Mansfield in 1848 continues to crop up among Sacred Harp singers well over one hundred and fifty years later. In print and theory-heavy musical subcultures that intersect substantially with neighboring aural practices factors that can make reconciling theory and practice especially challenging include the

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In his analysis of Shaker music in print, manuscript and oral tradition, folklorist Daniel Patterson identified tunes in several kinds of scales with minor thirds as well as tunes that featured a variable sixth scale degree in different performances even by the same singer and from verse to verse. When the Shakers switched from shape-note and other notational systems to their own “letteral” notation, Shaker music theorist Russell Haskell insisted tunes with a minor third universally take D as a tonic, assuming a higher sixth degree as the norm. Isaac Youngs, on the other hand, insisted minor tunes be set in A, although in his publications he frequently raised the sixths.

In order to describe and categorize tunes that didn’t fit the major/minor mold, Patterson employed terminology of the ancient church modes, something that had been introduced in American sacred music scholarship by earlier twentieth century scholars. Ancient church music terminology was attractive to folklorists like George Pullen Jackson, Samuel Bayard and others both for its utility in categorization and its implication of American “folk” music’s connection to antiquity. Patterson acknowledged his “dissatisfaction” with the practice, but wrote “until musicologists agree upon equally convenient terms, the rest of us have little choice but to continue to use the flawed ones” (1979: 544 n 16).

As his hearing of Sacred Harp singing matured George Pullen Jackson sought to describe it more precisely. While he continued to think of melody in terms of essentialized modes with stable pitches he introduced some subtleties including the category of the “neutral interval” to describe singers’ common treatment especially of third and seventh scale degrees, although “neutral” is hardly a neutral term.
insufficiency of the major/minor dyad to describe every tune and the insufficiency of
the idea of consistent, stable half and whole tones to account for the subtleties of
vocal practice.

In his analysis of Sacred Harp music and singing, musicologist Charles
Seeger hinted at one aspect of the problem, describing “the numerous but inimitable
little slides, trembles, catches and other ornaments that cannot very well be written
down in our system of notation” (1940: 485). Although Seeger wasn’t writing about
the minor mode only, to Daniel Mansfield a complexity like that Seeger observed was
especially problematic in minor. Twentieth century Sacred Harp singing cannot be
confounded with Shaker or Congregationalist singing in nineteenth century New
England, but sacred music critics of the day observed a similar lack of harmony
between theory and practice, between music’s representation and its sound, between
“the composer’s intention” and aural culture. An 1839 letter published in the Boston
Musical Gazette seems to echo Seeger’s observations.

Did you ever keep a singing school? If you ever did, you have been frequently vexed with one circumstance. Almost every school contains some or many scholars, who have previously learned to sing by rote. In such a case, nearly all the tunes they have learned, are mis-learned;… There is, in most old choirs in all parts of New England, a habit of introducing certain passing notes and variations, which form no part of the harmony, and often serve to destroy utterly all the proper effect of music (3/6/1839: 180).

The author “E.B.D” goes on to describe in considerable detail, and even notate,
singing habits he considers intrusions from instrumental music practice. Singing
master, historian and old folks’ concert leader Nathaniel Duren Gould undertook a similar project in his 1853 *History of Church Music in America*, devoting an entire chapter to “improprieties in execution,” most of which are, incidentally, alive and well in the twenty first century (145-156). Gould, “E.B.D.” and Seeger were all writing about what they heard as “ornamentation,” or unwritten additions to the “real” melody, but their observations suggest deeper issues of expectations of the relationship between notation and sound and of standard notation and theory’s inability to capture anything that, in practice, fell between the theoretical cracks.

Many earlier composers and tunebook compilers acknowledged, even expected and encouraged, a more nuanced navigation of the written notes but by mid century most insisted on a much more literal correspondence between what was written and what was sung.

The need for consistency and “science” expressed by nineteenth century music reformers is often ascribed by music historians to a desire for refinement and European culture, but I suspect it was also an expression of the sea change occurring in what railroad historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch called the “sociocultural space time continuum” (1986: 36). In rail travel New Haven and Wallingford, for example, could be experienced as wholly discrete places rather than centers gradually dissolving and melding into each other through the fields and groves between them, as someone on foot would experience. Although he was writing about home furnishing and museum display I see musical implications in Jean Baudrillard’s observation that in western modernity “space itself has the connotation of *emptiness*; instead of space arising
from the living interrelationship between forms (as a space with 'rhythms'), forms are apprehended, in their relationship to each other, by way of the emptiness which is the formalized sign of space” (1996: 61).\textsuperscript{33} I suspect mid-century problems with “unscientific” music went beyond a tendency to disorder and things like “ornamentation” to include discomfort with a, perhaps preindustrial, mode of music making in which the identity of musical notes, even “stable” ones, was implicitly partly dialogic, what lay between them being not emptiness but relationship- space with rhythm- the identity of each being partly archived in the others. Again, the disjuncture between music reformers expectations and common practice wasn’t a problem of minor alone, but the conundrums of variability and aural culture appear to have been especially challenging when it came to minor music.

A more macroscopic, though related, problem with minor in mid nineteenth century New England was a disjuncture between an evolving but uncertain official culture and a more established but variegated vernacular culture that varied considerably along regional, class, denominational, family, and other subcultural lines. In discussing this disjuncture between theory and practice and between official and vernacular culture I believe it’s important not to draw too clear a line between “art music” and “folk music,” the former being associated with the written and discursive, the latter with the aural and intuitive. Vernacular music practices include their own

\textsuperscript{33} Baudrillard goes on to ask something that may is interesting to consider in light of reform during the industrial revolution. “Should we perhaps interpret this affectation of emptiness as an echo of a moral order founded on distinction and distance?” (1996: 61)
modes, objects and objectives of discourse that intersect with and differ from other discourses running around and through them, and in every music for which there is a tradition of visual or linguistic representation, including Euro-American art music, there is a great deal that cannot be usefully represented and which requires the discourse of bodies. Timbre, groove, vibrato and other “microtonal” phenomena are among aspects of art music that are ubiquitous but tend not to be theorized or notated in a way meaningful to performers.\textsuperscript{34} What scientific music was beginning to have as it emerged in nineteenth century New England that more localized vernacular music practices generally did not have was infrastructure and oversight: institutions, conventions, teacher certification, sanctioned standards and established European models all stemming in part from a desire for musical consistency and harmony between discourse and practice.\textsuperscript{35} I think part of the mid-century resistance to minor music was that its ambiguities and multiplicities in practice were a bit of a thorn in the side of a budding official music culture and a nuisance to teachers and theorists.

Vexed as it was in the 1850s, minor music continued to be a favorite of the old folks and people like Daniel Mansfield who were surely not alone in their love of its various incarnations. Its gradual attenuation in the nineteenth century sacred music

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\textsuperscript{34} In a topically local illustration of this rather obvious point, in his 1803 European-aspiring \textit{Instrumental Assistant} Yankee composer Samuel Holyoke describes four ways to bow the bass viol but the last of which, “Springing,” he says, cannot be described but “must be learnt from example” (Holyoke 1803: 14).

\textsuperscript{35} Later, of course, popular and folk music forms would begin to borrow from official music models so that today you can go to punk rock summer camp, become a certified teacher of Irish fiddle or get an undergraduate degree in bluegrass music.
repertoire must have felt to many singers like a real constriction of expressive range; a deprivation of minor music’s power, in Mansfield’s words, either “to make the eyes of a congregation sparkle” or “to make them weep” (1848: ii). It may well be that the music of the old folks’ concerts reminded audience members, maybe even exposed some for the first time, to the potential expressive range of the minor mode. It is likely that the relative rarity of minor music in church services in 1853 added to its appeal in the concerts, perhaps enhanced by its perceived wildness and resistance to systematization and regulation. What is certain is that minor music was a notable feature of the first old folks’ concert and may well have played an important role in the excitement generated by the event at a time when major ruled.

Old Folks Music, Melody, Egalitarianism and Gender

Returning to our third tune pair, the harmony in Missionary Hymn seems to be there primarily to prop up the melody, which rides right up on top in the soprano as Lowell Mason and others deemed a scientifically irrefutable necessity, while in New Jordan, as in virtually all the music of the early OFCs, the main melody is embedded in the tenor. It’s tempting to imagine how the social and gender implications of this wild fuging tune with its tenor main melody might have registered with singers and audience members in a time of uncertainty and change including debate around female suffrage (the so-called “woman question”) and the 1853 ordination of Congregational pastor Antoinette Brown, the first woman ordained in the United
The common modern perception of the ancient harmony as “democratic” may be largely residue of Romantic nationalism and the assertions of twentieth century scholars, but it’s not hard to imagine how the experience of immersion in the dense texture of New Jordan’s competing voices might resonate with American ideals of individualism and egalitarianism. At the same time, singing music in which the main melody is given to a part primarily associated with men might have felt to the New Haven old folks like a more accurate reflection of everyday social relations, or even a theologically more appropriate gender configuration.

There’s a long tradition of gender related angst in the history of musical Calvinism, especially a concern that singing in general and certain kinds of music and texts in particular can have a feminizing effect on worship and the worshipper. In 1543 Calvin himself warned that, in singing, the congregation “ought not to give occasion for our giving free rein to licentiousness, or for our making ourselves effeminate in disordered delights” (quoted in Garside 1979: 33). Such concerns continue to resonate with some American Protestants including adherents of Reformed Christianity sometimes referred to as “neo-Calvinists.” In his 2001 book *Future Men* influential author and theologian Douglas Wilson claims “music has been one of the chief culprits in the feminization of the church. Many of the ‘traditional’ hymns of the nineteenth century are romantic, flowery, and feminine.” With regard to

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36 Antoinette Brown, trained by Charles Grandison Finney at Oberlin, but not awarded a degree, was the first woman ordained in the United States. Her local ordination in South Butler, New York didn’t create much of a stir nationally and her tenure as a Congregationalist preacher was short lived, but it was certainly a bellwether and important sign of the times.
music, he says, “we must return to a world of vigorous singing, vibrant anthems, more songs where the tenor carries the melody, open fifths, and glory” (2001: 98).37

In the mid nineteenth century, too, there were plenty of people who felt the perceived manliness of old folks’ tunes like New Jordan made it preferable to the music of Mason and company, and that this manliness was embedded in the music itself. In a mid 1830s piece titled Hymn Tunes and Grave-yards for The American Monthly Magazine, New York City lawyer and author William Post Hawes, writing as J. Cypress Jr., lamented the decline in popularity of “the old hymn tunes” like “Majesty, Wells, Windham and Jordan” (all of which would become OFC standards). He claimed that in the “rich, sleepy churches” they had been displaced by “choristers who seem to prefer to set a tune which only themselves can warble, as if the better to show forth their clear alto voices” (emphasis original). Here, hurling the word alto as an epithet, Hawes plays the sissy card to discredit a musical style along with the class pretension and religious “sleepiness” with which he associated it. But unlike Jean Calvin and Douglas Wilson, Hawes’ jab at unmanly music was not so much about theology and worship practice as it was about heritage and nationalism. “Sinner as I am” he wrote,” I am a descendent of the pilgrims, and it is not I, but their blood that

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37 One complaint made by Wilson and other contemporary critics of the popular hymns is that in so many, especially those of what is sometimes called the “Jesus is my boyfriend” variety, the singer is made to implicitly identify as the feminine partner in a love relationship with God. Interestingly this complaint fails to take into account biblical descriptions of the church as “the bride of Christ,” as well as Jesus’ parable likening watchful Christians to the five virgins who were ready with oil for their lamps in anticipation of the bridegroom’s arrival.
speaks. The cause is…patriotism as well as piety” (1842 Vol II: 95-96). Americans had long expressed feelings of national identity in gendered terms, casting their country and its people as inherently more manly and vigorous than effete Europe, and it wasn’t much of a stretch to extend this idea to the realm of sacred music, understood as an expression of national character.

While the music itself was seen as robust and manly, mid-century contextual associations with ancient harmony were often domestic and feminine, as in many places it had been shut out of the churches and relegated to the world of the lullaby, family devotions and the parlor sing. It seems the association of New Jordan and other examples of ancient harmony with the ideal manliness of the Puritans and the Revolutionary war camp on one hand and the ideal womanliness of the mid century home contributed to their homecoming in the churches from which they had been shunned.

Old Folks’ Music and the Yankee

38 Post was a New York City lawyer best known as an author for his writing on wildlife and sport. This article was included in the posthumous 1842 collection Sporting Scenes and Sundry Sketches. When my parents moved into a house previously owned by our friend and neighbor Molly Weld, mother of Massachusetts governor William Weld, I found a copy of this book (and a baby picture of the governor) among items Mrs. Weld had left behind in the closet of what became my room. A note inside indicates that it was given to her relative, Vail Blydenburgh by a friend in 1929 because one story “refers to seemingly some of your ancestors.” When I googled Vail Blydenburgh, one of the first things that appeared was a photo of him in colonial regalia, probably for Washington’s birthday in 1936. I don’t know if he sang in an Old Folks’ Concert associated with the celebration.
Even many people who might have dismissed the ancient harmony on technical grounds could celebrate William Billings as a pioneer and the music of what has come to be called the “first New England school of composers” as an important step in the right direction in the upward and onward cultural march. Perhaps more relevant to the OFC, many mid century New Englanders took pride in cherished aspects of regional character and national history they saw embodied in the music in spite of, even because of, its unrefined vigor. In their relationship with the music many people were able to “contain multitudes,” dismissing it with one hand while reaching with the other for something that could be embraced as implicitly indicative of spiritual or cultural superiority, or at least an innate Americaness. Melodious Migrate’s humorous account of the faster, higher, louder sound of the ancient harmony could seem like an indictment of the music and the country old folks with whom it was often associated unless we consider how greatly many New Englanders enjoyed identifying with the unrefined but canny character of the Yankee everyman, the prototypical rustic northeasterner most famously the subject of the American folksong *Yankee Doodle*, invented and reinvented in song, on stage, on the page and exercised in popular imagination and self-representation. Here I will briefly sketch the origin and growth of the Yankee character, his (and later her) relationship to ancient harmony and the old folks concerts, to mid-nineteenth century New England

39 See the section “Billings a Pioneer” in Gould 1853, one of many mid century appreciations of Billings if not an outright endorsement of his music.
culture and politics, and ultimately, the significance of the Yankee to the development of American sacred music scholarship.

Literary historian J. A. Leo Lemay describes the depth of the Yankee character’s roots and the rhetorical strategy of identifying with the rustic in early New England, long before the term Yankee was coined. According to Lemay, in the face of unremitting condescension by English and Europeans “one typical response was to pretend to be a hick,” and as early as 1646 “John Winthrop used the pose to disarm his supposedly more cosmopolitan contemporaries.” “The pretense,” writes Lemay, “was a trap that would expose the foolishness of the sophisticate— but only, of course, if the sophisticate really believed in his essential superiority” (1985: 62). This basic character and rhetorical strategy will be familiar to any student of Benjamin Franklin, Bugs Bunny or the many historical and regionally specific variations of the prototypical American as self-reliant rustic trickster.

Lemay described another layer of what he termed the “American put-on” at the heart of the Yankee character that has particular relevance to the OFC-a subtly religious dimension that appears to have roots as deep as the put-on itself. On the surface, the 1630s broadside song *New England’s Annoyances*, the focus of Lemay’s thoroughgoing study of the same name, seems to be an anti-emigration ballad designed to discourage faint-hearted English men and women from coming to New England by detailing the difficulties of life in the new colony. Among deterrents was the character of the archetypal New Englander himself, the “patch-upon-patch, hoe-
swinging, corn-growing, pumpkin-eating hardscrabbler, whose ‘best beer’ was made from green cornstalks and whose moonshine was concocted from ‘pumpkins and parsnips and walnut-tree chips’ (62). Beneath the surface, of course, the whole thing was an in-joke lampooning the “supercilious condescension” and effete nature of the imagined audience of Old Englanders. But further beneath this broad, apparently secular humor, Lemay contends, the song was written by and for religious dissenters among the colonists, and is “ultimately a religious song, recalling not only the facts of past material privations but indirectly asserting that those privations indicate a spiritual superiority” (63). The use of such a dynamic secular/sacred rhetorical strategy— we might call it “Yankee disingenuity”— has had a long shelf life. A version of it came to be a hallmark of Father Kemp’s old folks’ concerts and one of his most enduring contributions to the practice.

In a detailed analysis of the rise and significance of the character in the imagination of New England and the nation, Joseph Conforti describes the Yankee’s cultural rebirth after the war of 1812 and how, “from a regional epithet disdained by colonial New Englanders, ‘Yankee’ became, by the mid-nineteenth century, the ascendant signifier of the American character” (2001: 171). The fictional Yankees of the 1830s were often complex and not wholly sympathetic creatures “whose virtues and foibles [were] simultaneously praiseworthy and disconcerting” but who, nevertheless, “performed increasingly important cultural work in the North, from the so-called Jacksonian age of commoners through the rise of romantic celebrations of rustic life and ordinary folk” (162). At the heart of that work was cultural nationalism
applied to the creation of a New England-centered American identity, celebrated in popular culture and championed by influential writers like Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and the Beechers. The soundtrack of this mid century Yankee was comprised of vernacular music genres including, importantly for obvious reasons, the ancient harmony of William Billings and company.

To point out the pleasure many nineteenth century New Englanders took in identifying with the Yankee character is hardly to say northern antebellum depictions of New England rustics and their music were universally sympathetic. There was a tradition of, especially urban, humor ridiculing the New England rustic. Broad comic performances in Boston of the song *Springfield Mountain*, for example, made fun of one rural Western Massachusetts community’s sincere, if rustic, response to a genuine local tragedy, set to the tune *Old Hundred*.40 Not uncommonly in pieces ridiculing country Yankees their music was singled out as evidence of their shortcomings, the piece about the Antediluvian Minstrels’ visit to Pumpkinville being a case in point. “Roderick Rondelay,” writing for the *Boston Musical Gazette* in 1839, provides another somewhat dystopian view of music making among New England villagers. Rondelay recollects a visit in his youth to the “Village of B…” where he met “six or eight humstrummers” led by “Mr. Scraper” on the Yankee viol, all singing from one of the old time tunebooks. “They sawed and drawed away in good earnest, and I thought I never heard old *Greenfield* and *Montgomery* go more frisky

...and rampant” he writes (2/20/1839: 172). The young Rondelay then sets out to dazzle the locals with his urbane musical prowess, requesting them to perform the more complex and highbrow tune *Mexico*.

That piece?” said the Scraper, “there’s none but Boston folks and the Boston Band can perform that.” They then asked me if I was acquainted with it. I told them I was not, but I knew the piece very well which it was in imitation of, in *Lock Hospital*. “I have never heard of Lock’s horse-stable,” said Scraper, “I guess it’s a curious kind of a thing.” I then told them I could give a little specimen of its style, if they would let me try the viol. “Fudge!” said Scraper, “I rather guess it would be trying, but howsomever, take hold of it.” *Amesbury*, in Lock Hospital, was perfectly in my recollection, and I sung the principal air, and played the Bass accompaniment, all off hand, without stop, stay or hesitation; also several other things from the same work. “Who be ye?” cried Scraper. “Aint you the devil?” (2/20/1839: 172).

Although, here, the hicks from the Village of B. along with their “frisky and rampant” hymn tunes are the butt of the author’s humor, Yankee bumpkins from Franklin to Bunny have typically made it their business to have the last laugh. For fictional Yankees and their real life counterparts, anyone seen to set themselves up as

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41 Popular fuging tunes of the Billings and company school, Lewis Edson’s *Greenfield* and Justin Morgan’s *Montgomery*, named for towns in the Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts, both went on to become OFC favorites, though in the second or third tier of popularity in the OFC canon.

42 Rondelay is referring to the English sacred music collection popularly called *The Lock Hospital Collection*, designed for the London Lock Hospital Chapel’s “fashionable congregations,” containing “an elegant, theatrical type of hymnody that was far removed from the norms of church music, whether in cathedral, town church, village parish or dissenting meeting-house” and which constituted an “important new influence in English and American church music during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” (Temperley 1993: 44-72).
intellectually or otherwise superior, like Roderick Rondelay, ran the risk of becoming the butt of the “American put on” and, like any royalty, millionaire or operatic tenor in a Warner Brothers’ cartoon or Marx Brothers’ movie, ending up face down in the mud or having a piano dropped on them. Many Americans relished opportunities to imagine themselves as party to such deserved come-uppance.

While depictions of the Yankee, even in the evolving “North,” could be negative or, more often, ambiguous, by the time of the first OFC the character had been essentially enshrined as a bearer of fundamental New England and American character and values. Joseph Conforti traces two nineteenth century trends critical to the transformation and, ultimately, near sanctification of the Yankee. First, beginning in the 1820s the unbridled, often itinerant marketeering of the self-reliant, horse-trading Yankee man was increasingly moderated by a domestic republicanism embodied by growing ranks of female Yankees imagined by authors including Lydia Maria Childs and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Second, a mythology of the “Pilgrim Forefathers” employed in Revolutionary and early Federal era nationalism grew by leaps and bounds between the 1820 Mayflower bicentennial and the outbreak of the Civil War, and by mid-century a perception of the Yankee as heir of the noble Pilgrim cum Revolutionary was well in place.

By the time of the first OFC, when Americans wanted to celebrate, denigrate or delineate the Yankee they had a large arsenal of positive, negative and ambiguous models to draw on from life and literature, song and the stage, and among the most
prominent types was the old-school singing-master or choir leader: characters like Melodious Migrate, Mr. Scraper, Seba Smith’s Christopher Crotchet of Quavertown and others, including more complex examples like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s David Gamut and Washington Irving’s Ichabod Crane.

The fictional and fictionalized Yankee singing master of the nineteenth century (and beyond) was often a liminal character who, like other misfits and presumed itinerants, was eccentric in body and behavior, either slightly crazy, besotted, antiquated or for some other reason an outlier to the ideal village, “in town” for a constellation of rhetorical purposes including comic relief, patriotic nostalgia and social commentary. They also often embodied Lemay’s idea of spiritual superiority via deprivation. For the Yankee singing master the privation celebrated was, if often ambiguously or disingenuously, usually in the areas of moderation and/or “larnin.” Whatever its relationship to the Yankee singing master, virtually no real or fictional nineteenth century New England village was complete without him or, occasionally, her.

It was many months after the first New Haven OFC that performers began to openly delineate the Yankee singing master and other regional types, but I believe that, from the beginning, part of the attraction of the OFC was its Yankee implications, including a subtly religious dimension and a sense of spiritual superiority like that identified by Lemay. Beneath a comic exterior, the Yankee that would become most prominently associated with the OFC was a mid nineteenth
century domesticated, spiritually and morally superior Puritan/Revolutionary; a self-deprecating, disingenuously ignorant, self-righteous reformer dedicated to building the future and preserving the past, to creating a simple but morally grounded village that had all the advantages of the city in an old-time country setting, and ready to teach the rest of the country how to do the same. The soundtrack of that village was made up of birds and crickets, busy sawmills, Yankee Doodle and sacred music that by the 1850s had become associated with home and hearth, with the Pilgrim forefathers and foremothers who attended the church on the green. While the first OFC in New Haven was a performance that at once recalled an old-time church service, a Yankee country singing school and a late eighteenth century style “grand concert,” it also recalled the actual recent parlor sing of its origin. The ancient harmony’s domestic associations at mid-century were made explicit in later OFCs like Father Kemp’s “fireside rehearsals,” in which a parlor was actually recreated on stage, fireplace and all. I believe such associations with morally sound, rural, old time, republican domesticity is a large part of what made it possible for the ancient harmony to return to church as an indisputable part of the soundtrack of antebellum progressive Congregationalists, genuine Yankee Americans and, as time went on, any “real” Americans.

**Ancient Harmony and “American Music”**

An 1838 letter to the *Boston Musical Gazette* defending the *Billings and Holden Collection* asserted a relationship between bold melody, independence in the harmony parts and American character, complaining of the pieces in the “collections
now most generally used” that “no tune or air can be discovered in any of them, unless it be some of the old familiar ones, and they are scarcely discernible by reason of their being so smothered by the other parts.” In contrast to the pieces of Billings and Holden, the author claimed, the more modern works were “mere dull-lifeless, unmeaning movements, having no beauty of melody- and without design, save that of heavy, raking German harmony” (11/14/1838: 115). Part of the appeal of old folks’ music here was that it could be understood as “American music,” not only in provenance but in character. Let the Germans and German wannabes have their hive mentality, the author seems to say, all a real American needs is a tune fit to whistle.

Scholarship on the origins of self-consciously “American music” often focuses on art music and the twentieth century. But by the time of Antonin Dvorak’s historic 1892 appointment as director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York City, seen as a bellwether of a nascent “American music,” debate around the subject “had been raging for half a century” at least (Saffle 1998: 346). Central to the conversation were two things: anxiety over the perceived lack of a truly national music, and questions about what the character of that music would be, or should be, if and when it appeared.

Bohemian born Anthony Philip “Father” Heinrich, who spent his adult life in the United States, including influential stints in Boston and New York, was an early adopter of the “American music” project who found an opening for a national music at the juncture of high art and popular national themes. An item in the *Boston Musical*
Gazette trumpeted Heinrich’s 1838 proposal to write a piece in which “all the subjects and associations… will be exclusively American” thereby encouraging a “spirit of patriotism in the bosom of Americans” (12/21/1838: 141). His piece The Musical Week was never fully realized, but Heinrich’s compositions, while far beyond the technical sophistication of the average parlor pianist, are peppered with references to popular Americana from barbecues and the banjo to Pocahontas and the passenger pigeon. The Gazette praised his attempt to balance artistic aspiration and popular sentiment in The Musical Week saying that Heinrich “though his aim will be simplicity, will do his best to produce a work which may not diminish the rising character of this Republic, for an improving taste in the highest style of music” (12/21/1838: 141).

While the “highest style of music” was a focus for many elites, in the years leading up to the first OFCs there was also vigorous public conversation around popular music forms and their place in the development of a national music. A lively and representative example is found in the postscript to Jack Downing’s Letters “by Major Jack Downing” of Downingville, pen name and fictional village of author Seba Smith. In an attack on the Yankee dialect stories of Smith and other popular authors who “degrade and vulgarise the tongue and the taste of the country,” a critic at the American Review for June 1845 wrote “when these things shall found for us a learning, the Ethiopian Minstrels will create for us a Music, and the disciples of Jim
Crow a Theatre of our own” (in Smith 1845: 117). Including the review in his postscript, Smith responded in character “What is one’s meat is another’s pisen; and if the American Review don’t like my literature, it is because he doesn’t know what is good.” Smith then goes on to defend his work, and popular art in general, quoting at length from a rebuttal to the Review published in the *Evening Gazette* that is as much about music as literature.

The learned Dr. Julius, who was sent here by the King of Prussia…carried home with him a scroll of these very “Ethiopian songs” at which this Reviewer sneers, as affording proof as striking as it was interesting, that we had the germs of a national music among us. We may never…in these United States give birth to a Homer, a Milton, or Tasso… But a hundred songs, from anonymous pens if you choose, having half the merit of those which have given a mystic charm to the *braes* and brookside of the land of Burns, would still associate a poetic feeling with the soil, that might be worth all the glory of an Epic….The organ of those airs, if they come from among the *many*, will speak more for the general musical feeling of the people than the composition of the grandest overture from the hand of a Master (118).

In its heyday the music of Billings and company may have been widely considered state of the art music “from the hand of a master,” but by the middle of the nineteenth century it was well established in popular perception as music of “the many.” For better and for worse, it was widely seen as popular music that, even decades after its “decline,” continued to “gratify the ear of the multitude” (Gould 1853: 58).

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43 It might be argued that both of the reviewer’s dread prognostications would come to fruition through jazz, blues and rock on one hand and vaudeville and Hollywood on the other.
Part of what made the ancient harmony more appealing as “American music” than the “Ethiopian melodies” or Burnsian popular folksong is that it was white, it was local and it could be imagined not on the stage, the plantation or some surrogate Scotland but in the heart of the New England village. There it rubbed shoulders, and shared much in the way of popular perception, with the many mid-century singing family groups that cropped up after the success of the Hutchinson Family of New Hampshire.

In an 1845 review of the Cheney Family singers of Vermont at Manhattan’s Niblo’s saloon, Walt Whitman exclaimed “at last we have found it…at last we have found, and heard, and seen something original and beautiful in the way of American musical execution.” Praising “the girl” as refreshingly “simple, even awkward” and the “Cheney young men” as “such brown-faced, stout-shouldered fellows as you will see in almost any American church, in a country village, of a Sunday,” Whitman imagined in them both the heart and the future of American music.

The elegant simplicity of this style took us completely by surprise, and our gratification was inexpressible. This, said we in our heart, is the true method which must become popular in the United States- which must supplant the stale, second-hand, foreign method, with its flourishes, its ridiculous sentimentality, its anti-republican spirit, and its sycophantic influence, tainting the young taste of the republic… We beg these young Yankees to keep their manners plain always. The sight of them, as they are, puts one in mind of health and fresh air in the country, at sunrise (quoted in Bergman 2003:44)

44 Whitman eventually came to embrace and was famously inspired by Italian opera, but in his mid-1840s embrace of native vernacular music he spoke for many around the country.
Like the Hutchinson Family and others, the Cheneys sang an eclectic variety of popular, national, humorous, topical and sacred music. Both Moses Cheney and his brother Simeon published singing books for old folks concerts in the 1870s and are known to have led OFCs well into their later years.\textsuperscript{45} I don’t know if their set list at Niblo’s that night included any tunes by Billings and company, but the appeal of the ancient harmony as “American music” had much in common with the Yankee, country village appeal of the Cheneys’ “simplicity” and “stout-shouldered,” implicitly anti-urban, “republican spirit.”\textsuperscript{46}

In the words of Reverend Daniel Mansfield the old hymns “composed among the hills and forests of \textit{Puritanic} New England” (emphasis original) stood in stark contrast to the “scientific gingling (sic) of imported discord” (1848: ii). Mansfield was not referring to theology here for he, like the infamous itinerant Lorenzo Dow,\textsuperscript{46} There’s something curious here. If anyone embraced simplicity in church singing it was Mason, and if any American sacred music could be accused of over-reach or baroque frilliness you would think an ornate fuging tune like \textit{New Jordan} would be a prime candidate. Perhaps the perception of Lowell Mason and company’s music as fancy and the ancient harmony as simple had less to do with strictly musical concerns than with the European gaze of the former and local provenance of the latter: maybe the distinction between \textit{Missionary Hymn} and \textit{New Jordan} is also partly about ideas of place. Alternatively, perhaps the old American hymns were seen as simpler because the melodic material in each part had more in common with folk and popular tunes, comparatively unhindered by the requirements of formal harmony.

\textsuperscript{45} In a long letter in 1882 Moses Cheney complained that he hadn’t been able to lead any old folks’ concerts that winter, and that his brother Simeon “is or has been teaching 3 schools this winter…His book \textit{[either Brother Cheney’s Collection of Old Folks Concert Music of American Singing Book-TE]} sells slowly; it is admired by the better critics” (Moses Cheney to Harriet Cushman 3/5/1882. Author’s collection).

\textsuperscript{46} There’s something curious here. If anyone embraced simplicity in church singing it was Mason, and if any American sacred music could be accused of over-reach or baroque frilliness you would think an ornate fuging tune like \textit{New Jordan} would be a prime candidate. Perhaps the perception of Lowell Mason and company’s music as fancy and the ancient harmony as simple had less to do with strictly musical concerns than with the European gaze of the former and local provenance of the latter: maybe the distinction between \textit{Missionary Hymn} and \textit{New Jordan} is also partly about ideas of place. Alternatively, perhaps the old American hymns were seen as simpler because the melodic material in each part had more in common with folk and popular tunes, comparatively unhindered by the requirements of formal harmony.
Wesleyan University founding president Wilbur Fisk and other Methodists had been long engaged in what one denominational historian called an “incessant war…against Calvinism” (Simpson 1882: 6). Mansfield, rather, invokes the Puritans as ancestors for their presumed character and connection to American identity and the New England landscape. Emily Dickinson was more specific in her characteristically wry assessment of the relative merits of Yankee and “imported” music, especially with regard to vocal style and, implicitly, psychological register as indicative of national character. Of her visit to the “Swedish Nightingale” Jenny Lind’s 1851 performance at First Church in Northampton Dickinson confided in a letter “No doubt it was very fine- but take some notes from her ‘Echo,’ the Bird sounds from ‘the Bird Song’ and some of her curious trills, and I’d rather have a Yankee” (in Lowenberg 1992: xxii). Dickinson may have simply meant she would have preferred a local performer who sang without Lind’s frilly Europeanisms, but in her use of the term “Yankee” rather than “American” or “New Englander” she implies the whole package. I suspect she may even have been referring specifically to the singing of a popular contemporary Yankee delineator of the stage like George “Yankee” Hill, James Hackett or a less comical but no less deliberately Yankee performer like one of the Cheneys or Hutchinsons.
The “Old Folks” and “The Old Nasal”

One final characteristic of the music in the first old folks’ concert that deserves attention is timbre. One term describing vocal production is so nearly universal in reports of singing in early New England, OFCs and more recently Sacred Harp singing that it begs special comment, and that is “nasal twang.” This and similar terms have been so regularly employed over such a long period that I wonder if it is really a recurring observation of an ongoing phenomenon or if making the observation is itself a kind of trope- a veiled tradition of reacting to music that is perceived as old fashioned, rustic or unusual and, for performers, a tradition of introducing a “nasal twang” to encourage that perception.\footnote{One reason I suspect it is a trope, or tradition, to observe Puritan/Billings/OFC/Sacred Harp singing as nasal, in addition to its suspicious near universality, is that so many people know the term nasal and how to apply it to this music but, in my experience, so few have a ready adjective for any other kind of vocal timbre. Over the years when newcomers or even relative old hands at Sacred Harp singing have commented on its “nasal” sound, I have often stumped them by asking, out of curiosity, “as opposed to what?” Some people with exposure to classical music or voice lessons will offer “round,” “full” or “chesty” in contrast to singing “in the upper mask” but this is relatively rare.} It seems there is something people enjoy about the term itself, about having occasion to use it either to disparage or to celebrate certain music and about having occasion to employ some version of it in singing.

A small selection of the nearly endless supply of examples should suffice to illustrate. A 1775 London imprint of the American folksong “Yankee Doodle or, as now christened by the SAINTS of New England THE LEXINGTON MARCH” indicates that the words should be “sung thro the Nose & in the North Country drawl...
and dialect” (in Sanjek 1988: 387). In accounts of OFCs, vocal timbre is sometimes mentioned as an aspect of authenticity in trying to render the songs “as far as possible in the style they were sung” in their heyday (Field et al 1883: 11). A newspaper account of an 1860 concert in Amherst, Massachusetts describes an “aged deacon” brought down from a nearby hilltown to play the church bass and sing in the “old nasal” (Hampshire and Franklin Express 11/2/1860). In a 1940 article about Sacred Harp singing Charles Seeger described the “characteristic nasal voices of the Southern singers” (485). Ethnomusicologist Stan Scott reported that as an undergraduate at Bennington College circa 1969 composer Henry Brant instructed students to “sing as nasally as possible” in a performance of music by Billings and company (personal communication, 2008). More recently, in a 2008 interview early music performer Marsha Genensky described her group Anonymous 4’s singing of American “folk hymns” as “a little bit more nasal” than their singing of European repertoire (Worland 2008). The term even comes up regularly applied to speech. Sometime Yankee delineator Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, was praised for a public reading in which she delivered “the nasal twang of the Yankee dialect in the most approved style” (Greenfield Gazette and Courier 4/6/1872).

“Nasal twang” and related terms rarely come up as neutral descriptors but appear with, often strong, negative and positive associations with more or less equal regularity. In his account of an 1848 Billings and Holden Society concert Joseph Belcher wrote “I was happy to find that the rich nasal sound of forty years ago is not yet forgotten” (1859: 355), and a reviewer of an 1858 OFC mentioned that the “select
choir sang a few tunes with the old nasal twang, so prevalent in the days when we were young, which we enjoyed hugely” (Farmer’s Cabinet 7/14/1858: 2) On the other side, in his 1829 Memoirs of a New England Village Choir Samuel Gilman reported being annoyed by the “ultra-nasal twang” (32) of one choir member in his fictionalized village, and an 1873 review of the debut concert by opera singer Caroline Richings-Bernard’s old folks troupe complained that the program began with “the old fashioned ‘RUSSIA,’ representative of the style of 1800, sung purposely with more force than sweetness, and with a strong nasal flavor” (New York Herald Tribune 12/30/1873).

The only suggestion of nasality I have found in reference to the first OFC in New Haven is in a July, 1853 Springfield Republican editorial. There the author, “Anglo-Saxon,” reported how sorry he was to miss the performance by the New Haven old folks and, quoting Burns, how he “might like to see them ‘skirl up the Bangor,’ or China, or Denmark, to their hearts’ content” (7/23/1853: 2). To skirl is to emit a shrill sound or play a bagpipe. Whether “Anglo-Saxon” had specific knowledge of the singing at the New Haven concerts or was simply stating a commonly held perception of the music in general, his association with the “skirling” of the ancient harmony was thoroughly and vigorously positive. He even went so far

48 It is perhaps interesting that newcomers to Sacred Harp singing quite often compare it to bagpipe music, either because of the vocal timbre or the frequency of open fifths and songs comprised largely or entirely of a single chord.
as to suggest the sound of the old music might be more important to him than theology as a part of church experience.

if some enterprising publisher would issue a hymn book, giving the pieces of the old authors as originally written, and making a tolerably judicious selection, and some religious society in my neighborhood would adopt it, I think I know one person who would ‘join the parish.’ I would go the full length of a Sabbath day’s journey on foot, to get to meeting, and think I could strain a point or two in my theology, if necessary- say, throwing in the doctrine of original sin, or a few new school or old school peculiarities (7/23/1853: 2).

In 1852 William Adams went even further in his implicit endorsement of the “old nasal.” His address to the New England Society that year was designed in part to rehabilitate the reputation of the early Puritans and put a positive spin on their perceived eccentricities and extremism, part of the ongoing project of creating the myth of the Pilgrim Forefathers. Adams went so far as to suggest that their psalm singing, including the “unnecessary drawl and nasal twang” of some, was a deliberate act of rebellion against the godless materialism and fancy dress of the king and secular British culture- against, in his words, the “bacchanalian choruses” of “roystering reprobates.” Thus “nasal” psalm singing was not a subcultural peculiarity of “ridiculous precisians” and narrow-minded, countrified religious extremists but a proclamation of Bible-sanctioned individualism and liberty, an emblem of “Puritanism, the nakedness of religion” Adams likened to “the nakedness of the athlete, entering the arena, stripping himself of every robe which would embarrass his
limbs, before wrestling for very life” (in Brainerd 1901: 180). We are reminded of New England’s Annoyances, as Adams echoes the common theme of glorifying plainness, even privation in New England culture, seeming to hear in the “old nasal” some embodiment of what were seen to be fundamentally puritan/American values and characteristics.

In many accounts of old folks concerts throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, the manner of singing receives as much attention as the repertoire. Even in the early days of the OFC there was a lot of variation in singing style, from genteel semi-classicism to rough-cut exuberance and the comic exaggeration of Yankee theater and the minstrel show. For some groups vocal style was a choice advertised as part of a concert’s appeal, while for others it was a less self-conscious expression of their time, place and experience. The newspapers had little to say about the specifics of the New Haven old folks’ singing, but a review of the second December 1853 concert at North Church praised both the “vast full tones” of the hundred singers and the “pensive languor” and “diminuendo strains” of some songs (Puritan Recorder 12/29/1853: 206). For the finale, the audience of over a thousand joined the old folks in “full and finely measured tones…almost drowning in vocal harmony the organ’s diapason peal” in singing Old Hundred, the organ accompaniment being a touch of refinement that hadn’t been available in the first concerts at Center Church. The effect was reportedly “not delicate, touching, or, exquisite in an operatic sense, but strong, majestic and electrical” (206).
The singers’ “diminuendo strains,” assuming the writer was describing vocal dynamics and not a structural feature of some tunes, would have marked the event as a practiced choral performance rather than a revival of old-time congregational singing. According to Leonard Bacon such sound sculpting could be effective in choir singing, but in congregational singing “any attempt at what is commonly called ‘expression,’ - consisting in crescendos and diminuendos, in sudden pauses and holds, in the accelerating and retarding of the movement, &c, - is not only needless and useless, but hurtful” (Day et al 1856: 2). For Bacon, congregational singing was worship, while the choir, unless they were leading the congregation, served the purpose of edifying the listener and should have recourse to “all those arts of musical elocution which add force and significance to the language of the hymn.” While the “vast full tones” and possible “skirling” of the New Haven old folks recalled for some listeners an old time worship service, the first OFCs were edifying choral performances that were, as Bacon said of choir singing, “intended to be effective and impressive upon the listener.” At the same time, however, Bacon seems to have seen in the popular old tunes and concert format, potential to foster “more enthusiastic” congregational singing (5).49

Beyond the New Haven “original,” singing style in the early OFCs reflected the variety in local preferences, musical practice and self-representation at mid-

49 Bacon was not specific, but given the unparalleled success of the events and the subsequent inclusion of old folks’ music in the Congregational Hymn and Tune Book, the concerts he was referring to were almost certainly the first New Haven OFCs.
century, but it also reflected a long history of musical variability from place to place, congregation to congregation, and even within single congregations and families. In many locations comparatively refined choral singing and “expression” had long been commonplace, even before the heyday of Billings and company. Still, in the mid to late nineteenth century the most widespread and enduring perception of the ancient harmony was, for better and for worse, that of countrified music performed with something approaching wild abandon and a strong nasal twang. The New Haven old folks may have played with the unrestrained, countrified Yankee associations of the old music in their self-representation, as did many of their imitators, and through old acquaintance some singers likely embodied a bit of the old-school nasality and fervor, even if in some vestigial muscle. But while their singing of tunes like *New Jordan* might have been higher, louder, faster and more minor than what people were used to hearing in church, it seems to have fallen short of the “shouting” and “tempestuous confusion” of Stowe’s Poganuc singers (1878: 56). It may be that the broad appeal of the first OFCs was due in part to the singers’ ability to perform a balancing act between Yankee ideas of decorum and abandon, social integration and individualism, thereby suggesting an attractive and viable way forward for the “old nasal” and ancient harmony in an emerging social and musical paradigm.
The Appeal of the Music: Conclusion

Many of the New Haven old folks were among the most famous and respected people in the country. While some who wrote about the early OFCs expressed a desire to see their music replace the music of Mason and company in regular service, by 1853 it was clear that was unlikely to happen, and the music of Billings and company was so marginalized it was no real threat to what was then the well-established music for service. However, while Mason and others continued to rail against the ancient harmony, for many at mid-century its perceived flaws were outweighed by early association and a growing recognition, only perhaps possible in retrospect for some, that the music was in some regards really good after all. Not only was it good, but it was familiar, fun to sing and provided an opportunity to “make a joyful noise,” to embody and express patriotism, remembered youth, old fashioned piety, Yankee identity and a social order that may have seemed more in keeping with certain cultural ideals than was implicit in the more “scientific” music of the day. I believe a combination of nostalgia, the prevailing of cooler heads and the effective marginalization of ancient harmony contributed to its successful return to church in the guise of the old folks’ concerts and also to the relative ease with which mid-century tunebook compilers began including more Billings and company in their books. Billings may have been unacceptable as a threat, but he was lovable as an old friend, a patriot and an early Yankee genius working with limited resources, as had been the case for the ancestors of most Yankees in the pews on Sunday or singing in the gallery at an old folks’ concert.
In tracing the factors that contributed to the success of the first OFC, drawing a line between the musical and extra-musical involves some decision-making if not convenient fiction. Still, while many of the issues addressed above exceed the boundaries of the area conventionally roped off as “music,” to varying degrees all are rather evidently tied to the nexus of repertoire, sound, performance practice and ideas about them. In the upcoming pages I will examine some subtler factors at play in the first OFC that are less overtly connected to music but nonetheless significant. Probably the most important “extra-musical” factor in the appeal and success of the first Old Folks’ Concert was the participation of the “old folks” themselves.

The Drawing Power of the Old Folks

On the surface there were two main reasons the old folks were indispensable to the appeal and success of the first OFCs. One was the particular novelty of an entertainment mounted by senior citizens on top of the relative novelty of entertainments in church in general. The other was the fact that the venerable singers, including some of New Haven’s “stauncheest citizens,” had the clout to mount such an entertainment and could claim the much-derided music as an important and familiar
part of their younger days. As discussed above, their symbolic and, in some cases, literal status as the last living representatives of the revolutionary and early federal period inoculated the event against the criticism that otherwise would likely have been lobbed at such a brazen reintroduction of the music of Billings and company to a church setting.  

Underpinning these more immanent factors, reasons for the appeal of singing old folks can be found in ideas and realities of senescence and the intersection of the social, political, theological and emotional tenor of early 1853. The 1850s are remembered as a time of turmoil and uncertainty that, unbeknownst to the New Haven old folks, would culminate in civil war. In addition to the broader crises of the day, older New Englanders faced a number of challenges that were specific to their generation during a time of growing life expectancy, changes in family norms and the transition from a home agrarian to an urban industrial economy.

The period before the war is also remembered for the pervasive sentimentality and search for stable ground that so often attends social upheaval, and the Puritan/Revolutionary “fathers and mothers,” both living and historical, were

50 Connection to the Revolutionary/early Federal generation, and through it to the earliest Puritans, was a moving target for OFC participants and audiences. Initially focusing on living singers who had actually fought in the war, still more who could remember it and many who could remember such significant early national events as the death of Washington, later in the nineteenth century a sense of connection to the period was established through singers whose fathers had fought in the war, who were born at some significant time (again, the death of Washington was a common point of reference) and even those who possessed objects associated by family tradition with some significant person or event (a chair General Washington once sat on, for example).
frequently the objects of sentimental and nationalistic antiquarianism. In the wake of
the Second Great Awakening and the tidal wave of reform it helped inspire,
nineteenth century New England saw an explosion of activity in the study of local
history and practicing other forms of antiquarianism as part of a broader progressive
reform agenda. Many local history collections, antiquarian groups, historical
publications and celebrations of local history date their origins to the decades
surrounding the Civil War and, with or without overt sentimentality, the region’s
oldest citizens as living representatives of New England’s glorious heritage were
often a focus of these organizations and activities.

**Old Folks, Typology and New England Historiography**

While antiquarianism and the documentation of New England history received
a tremendous boost from the Second Great Awakening they had deep historical roots
that contributed significantly to nineteenth century understandings and practices.
Early English migrants including Governors Winthrop and Bradford began to
chronicle the history of the Puritans in New England “almost immediately upon
landing in America” (Miller 1984: 164). During the 1660s and 1670s the emphasis on
local and regional history intensified under the urging of ministers who believed the
wayward tendencies of the younger generations were putting New England at risk of
suffering God’s wrath. Many saw this fear realized in a rash of environmental
disasters, portents and, in 1675, a devastating war with Native Americans led by
Metacomet/King Philip (Stout et al 1986). For ministers of the day portraiture and history were not just nostalgic reminders of holier times. They provided critical opportunities to study the character of departed saints in the interest of stemming the tide of degeneracy and preserving Puritan values and ideals so, as Urian Oakes preached in 1673, “the memory of them may not dy and be extinct with the present Generation” (in Hall and Allen 1984: 164).

Beyond advocating the study of New England history, many sermons were actual history lessons that were later printed and disseminated. According to historian Harry Stout, in late seventeenth century New England “print functioned primarily as a historical rather than an evangelistic tool” and was intended to “chart the children’s location in providential history” (Stout 1986:74). Historical sermons examining the lives of the parents were designed to “show how far short of that pattern the children had fallen” (75). In making local history into effective preaching one of the most important tools was the use of types and antitypes, seeing the local in the biblical and the biblical in the local. In relation to the first OFC, a hyper-local latter day example, discussed above, is the overtly antiquarian singing of Sternhold and Hopkins’ Psalm 80 to the old tune St. Martin’s led by Alling Brown at the 1838 New Haven bicentennial. In that moment the singers identified with their ancestors, the New Haven planters, who in turn became antitypes of the ancient Israelites, and the Massachusetts Bay Colony an antitype of Egypt and its pharaonic oppression. The particular history, including the largely failed economic and political aspirations of
The planters, was over-painted with typology that explained and justified the settlement’s story, pointed the way forward and gave assurance of its destiny.

The everyday typology at work in this example, and in nineteenth century New England generally, was a far cry from the rigorous typological hermeneutics of the early Puritans. But it was part of a long tradition stemming from the influential writing of people like Cotton Mather, who “through typology…infused New England’s history with the strongest possible sacred significance in terms lifted directly from Scripture records” (Stout 1986: 139), and Urian Oakes whose *New England Pleadeth With* was one of many sermons from which seventeenth century Puritans had “learned to celebrate their isolation and fix on New England a sacred significance that would grow stronger as time went on” (74). Through such deeply ingrained practices of typology, to honor the old folks in 1853 was to honor their whole history and call to mind, often explicitly, people, experiences and lessons from both the biblical and New England historical record.

“Old Folks,” The Fifth Commandment and the Changing Face of Senescence in Antebellum New England

In the early Puritan ideal, society was to be organized in a “divinely appointed” hierarchy in which “the old were to assume the highest rank, their longevity a sign
from Providence of their chosen status” (Haber 1979: 16). Preaching on the fifth commandment to “honor thy father and mother” and against the disobedience of children was stock in trade of puritan preaching, but in sermons by heavy hitters like Increase Mather and Samuel Willard the urgent, admonishing tone suggests that actual practice often failed to live up to the scriptural ideal. In documents from the 1673 trial of Rhode Islander Thomas Cornell for matricide, historian Elaine Forman Crane found not “the harmony and respect that sermon literature, laws, and a hierarchical/patriarchal society attempted to impose” but evidence of family problems long thought to be more modern phenomena, including “filial insolence, generational conflict, disrespect toward the elderly” and “adult dependence on (and resentment of) aging parents” (2002: 2).

Further challenging the longstanding perception, even among scholars, that seventeenth and eighteenth century New England was essentially a gerontocracy in which the aged were almost universally revered, historian Carol Haber recognized that “the status of the old…rested not on an unwavering adherence to pious prescription but on a variety of social, economic, and demographic factors (1979: 17). Whatever the ideal, the social reality of age and status in early Congregationalist communities was clear, as was manifested quite publicly in seating practices at church where, regardless of their age, the most prestigious members of a community sat in front while the impoverished old were relegated to the back. The factors on

51 Throughout this section I draw heavily on the work of Carole Haber, the most convincing I have found on the topic.
which social status depended included ongoing family and community responsibility and the ownership of property. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, large families, late last pregnancies and comparatively early death meant that few parents, even in old age, outlived their central place in the nuclear family or the responsibility, power and social integration that went with it. While some did live well beyond the marriage of their youngest children and some did retire, it was more often the case that men and women worked until death, in the home or outside of it, and thus maturity and old age often looked much the same.

Traditionally fathers had retained their property, and the attendant status, for the duration of their lives. But over the course of the nineteenth century, with a shift towards giving land by deed prior to death, growing life expectancy and having fewer children, it became increasingly likely for people in their later years to find themselves in a position of declining social integration and status. In addition, as people moved to the cities to find work, family and community bonds were fractured and a growing number of the aged found themselves stranded, as it were, in the city or even the poor house when they were no longer able to work or had become outpaced by modernization. In 1853 the presence of more old people, more often unmoored from important determinants of social status, contributed substantially to a growing perception of “old folks” as a natural subset of society, united by age alone. At the same time an explosion of social reform movements, fired in part by the postmillennial strain of Second Great Awakening fervor, sought increasingly differentiated objects of reform. While the superannuated tended to be viewed as
beyond hope of rehabilitation, they were increasingly recognized as a distinct population group, and one that posed its own set of problems for society as a whole.

The first old folks’ concert, in concept and realization, was clearly engaged with ideas and realities of senescence, some of which were markedly different from what the “old folks” of 1853 might have expected based on the lives of their parents and grandparents. The first OFC and its celebration of age and the aged may have been in some measure a response to the realities of being old in 1853. Centering the old folks, or the old folks centering *themselves*, may have brought participants and attendees some needed, if temporary, relief from the problem of the increasing marginalization of the community’s older citizens. Despite the fact that, in his case, it was a put-on, there may be something to Robert Kemp’s proposal to mount an OFC as “a protest of the Old Folks against being ignored by their posterity” (1868: 30). While the New Haven old folks doubtless shared the world-view that cast them as types of Revolutionary cum Puritan grandsires, they were also real people with real histories, desires and musicality. Surely, for them, that first concert and its encores must have been attractive as public forums in which to claim the relevance, authority and respect they knew they deserved while making music that was, at least to some of them, very dear.

Realities and ideas can be, of course, difficult to parse and in consort form the unevenly textured feedback loop of experience. If the first OFC was partly designed to address real problems of real old folks and the problems they posed for society, it
was certainly also an expression of a long history of ideas about aging and the aged in New England culture.

**The “Old Folks”: History of the Term and Mid-Century Perceptions of the Aged**

A brief history of the term “old folks” itself sheds some light on mid-nineteenth century thinking about age and the reception of the first OFC. In the 1537 Mathew’s Bible the term is used to refer to older people generally, and in early America it was used in this way as well as to refer to people of previous generations, whether generalized ancestors or more specifically parents or grandparents. As early as the late eighteenth century the term was used self-consciously as a rustic, antiquated colloquialism, often in humorous or light hearted contexts. Early in the nineteenth century the term began to appear regularly in quotes or italics, especially when referring to parents. The term had a long association with historical remembrance, a toast at an 1821 gathering of the Old Colony Club to celebrate the bicentennial of the Mayflower Pilgrims’ coming ashore reading “Old times- old folks- old records- and OLD COLONY” (*The American Mercury* 1/9/1821: 3). By mid century, especially in the wake of Stephen Foster’s 1851 hit *The Old Folks At Home*, the term had accrued a nearly impenetrable veneer of self-conscious folksiness.

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52 The only occurrence is Jeremiah 31:13 “both young and old folks,” which in the King James version reads “both young men and old together.”
and sentimentality, and appeared in print more often than not with actual or implied quotation marks. Use of the term was in turns, or at once, sentimental, reverent to the point of worshipfulness, affectionate, cute and, at worst, patronizing. When, occasionally, the term was used with irony or derision the vitriol was usually directed, not at old people, but at the sentimental folksiness of the term and its users, while writing that was critical of some antiquated person or behavior tended to favor the term “old fogy.” In 1853 the term “old folks” was so familiar and rife with association that an “old folks’ concert” would hardly have required description. Just about everyone must have expected it to be a performance by old people of rustic and old-fashioned music. As we have seen, for the extant crop of old Yankees, the music of William Billings and company was the most obvious choice.

While life for the old folks of 1853 may have been a far cry from the puritan ideal, New Englanders retained a strong sense that the aged should be revered. The public was also fascinated by old age and stories of old times and rustic behavior. In 1835 a woman named Joice Heth, alleged to be 161 years old, was exhibited in Worcester as “the solitary relic of a former age- who was an old woman before the ‘old folks’ of the present day were born” (Massachusetts Spy 1/7/1835: 3). In the wake of the early OFCs, papers throughout New England ran a story about a woman “only 93 years of age” who gave an ‘Old Folks’ Tea Party,” and among the guests were “four ladies of the respective ages of 86, 82, 80, 70, and three gentlemen of 85, 80, 73, making the united ages of the eight persons 649 years” (Connecticut Courant 8/26/1854: 3). Such stories had long captivated New Englanders, but in the mid
nineteenth century the newspapers were especially full of them. In these stories the aged often figured as objects of sentimental and nostalgic attachment but there is often a touch of the old jeremiad as well, the old folks figuring as living didactic portraits, reminders of the increasing decadence of the modern world. In the words of one 1837 article, in its entirety, “The Old Folks.- in Cincinnati there are now living a man and his wife whose united ages make two centuries. People born in these degenerate days will not live as long” (*Times-Picayune* 5/6/1837: 2).

**The Power and Appeal of the Old Folks: Conclusion**

In addition to all of the more overtly musical appeal of the OFC, the involvement of the old folks themselves promised, all at once, an opportunity to address social problems in some small measure, indulge in nostalgia and sentimentality, practice the fifth commandment in public, celebrate regional history and identity with New England as God’s appointed garden in the wilderness, and perhaps even be reminded of the looming danger of further straying from the old ways. There were many elements of brilliance in the OFC formula, but the whole thing couldn’t possibly have made such an impact, and the practice go on to spread so far and last so long, if the first performances had not substantially involved the old folks themselves.
CHAPTER 4: OTHER EXTRA-MUSICAL FACTORS

The New Haven Orphan Asylum, Immigration, Millennialism and Reform

Another important ingredient in the OFC formula, and one that would continue for the duration of the tradition, was raising money for charity. The first OFC raised the "tidy sum" of around $300 for the New Haven Orphan Asylum, a non-sectarian private institution incorporated in 1833 as an outgrowth of The New Haven Female Society for the Relief of Orphan and Destitute Children.\(^53\) One of the founders’ goals was to provide an alternative to the public alms-house, where children were institutionalized and, if able, made to work alongside adult inmates.

In 1853, for the first time, the asylum provided shelter for “more children of foreign-born parentage than Yankee” (Solenberger 1933: 30). Many had come from Ireland to escape the famine that had begun in 1845, and a history of the asylum

\(^53\) The asylum was started by members of nine Protestant churches in New Haven and, although it took in children regardless of religious background, all were required to attend a Protestant church. Officially African American children were not accepted until the time of the Civil War, although the organization’s history is careful to point out that at least one exception was made. With the war came the end of the policy of race-based exclusion. See Solenberger 1933: 29
claims that by 1850 New Haven, then a city of twenty thousand, was “one seventh Irish” (30). Fear and hatred of immigrants, especially Catholics from Ireland and Germany, was widespread in the early 1850s and led to the formation of anti-immigrant secret societies like the “Know-Nothings” and their subsequent political manifestation, the nativist American Party, which had considerable political success in the mid to late 1850s.

An early dig at the OFCs in the February 25, 1855 edition of Dwight’s Journal of Music implied a connection between the music of the OFCs and Know-nothingism (see Tick-Steinberg 606). The political terrain of the 1850s was extremely complex, involving what might now seem strange ideological bedfellows, and the orientation of the various political parties cannot be neatly contained by contemporary categories like liberal, moderate or ultra-conservative. The implication that singing the old songs was a manifestation of Know-nothingism is worth investigating further, and the line between New Englanders of the Know-nothing school and Whigs-turned-Republicans in the early days of the OFCs was sometimes blurry. The “genuine” American music of the OFCs must have appealed to the anti-immigrant sentiments of the Know-nothings, and at least one proto-Know Nothing nativist organization, the Order of United Americans, employed Revolutionary era
costume and music beginning around 1855 in their public demonstrations, but I have found no compelling connection between such groups and the old folks’ concerts.⁵⁴

According to one correspondent writing in William Lloyd Garrison’s abolitionist paper The Liberator, “Know Nothings will be Do Nothings. Not one word have they yet spoken against slavery- as a party. They dare not: it would instantly make them a Northern party to do so, and this, they have no wish to be” (12/1/1854: 191). Those at the heart of the early OFCs were hardly “do nothings” on the issue of slavery, and wore their northern identity on their shirtsleeves. Many were active in the antislavery movement whether, like Leonard Bacon, as advocates of colonization (liberating enslaved people and sending them “back” to Africa), of a gradual end to slavery or, like Henry Wright, of militant abolitionism. Of course opposition to slavery didn’t necessarily mean having no connection to it or even personally profiting from it, if indirectly, but that’s a story for another time.⁵⁵

The relationship between the OFC, nativism and antislavery deserves more attention, and I will come back to it in Part II. For the time being, suffice it to say that the originators and early participants in the concerts were, overwhelmingly, members of the officially orthodox while socially progressive Congregationalist elite, vocally

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⁵⁴ The only suggestion I have found of a possible connection between nativist groups and the early OFCs is dubious and circumstantial. United American demonstrations sometimes featured Revolutionary-era clad members referred to as “continentallers,” and an early OFC troupe from Chelsea, MA was called the Old Continentallers. I haven’t found any connection, and I think it had more to do with their costumes than any nativist affiliation.

⁵⁵ An interesting, though controversial, resource of specific relevance to the first OFC is www.yaleslavery.org. See also Baptist 2014.
opposed to slavery and politically less xenophobic, though not necessarily less passionate, than those who imagined a vast conspiracy against the American way led by the pope. In religious opinion they tended to be associated with relatively liberal orthodoxy like the “New Haven theology” of Yale’s Nathaniel Taylor (Van Rohr 1992: 285-287). The first OFCs, while rife with New England and American nationalism, seem to have fallen far short of the Know-nothings’ extreme nativism.56

Immigration was closely tied to the orphan issue, as the children were increasingly those of foreign-born parents, and the orphan issue was tied to the temperance movement by the fact that so many children of all backgrounds were being orphaned in large part due to their fathers’ alcoholism.57 For the western New England Congregationalists at the heart of the OFC, addressing all of these concerns was brought together with addressing the biggest national issues of the day, antislavery and union, under the umbrella of social reform. The spark that ignited the fire of reform in the nineteenth century was the religious fervor of the Second Great Awakening. And, according to historian of Congregationalism John Van Rohr, the revival’s “Congregational phase” had begun right there in New Haven, “with the

56 For more on the Know-nothing Party and its relationship to other political factions in the mid-1850s see Michael Holt’s The Political Crisis of the 1850s, especially chapter 6.
57 The history of the asylum records that it organized a children’s Temperance Society in 1842 "to counteract the tendency to strong drink, hereditary with so many of them” (Solenberger 1933: 29).
renewal of religious fervor at Yale College in 1802, under the inspiration of its president, Timothy Dwight,” grandson of Jonathan Edwards.58

One outcome of the Second Great Awakening (and the one before it) was the foregrounding of Christian eschatology in American thought and public discourse. Central as it is to the puritan project, in the river of New England religion Christ’s second coming had never been very far beneath the surface. But the storm of religious revival in the early nineteenth century washed it right up onto the shore, over the berm and flooded the fields with questions of the millennium. Would Christ appear, suddenly and dramatically, tomorrow, next month or next year, to reign on earth for a thousand years as adherents of pre-millennialism believed? Or would he return at the end of a thousand years, literal or metaphorical, during which the church would prepare for his coming through continued evangelizing and gradual improvement of conditions on earth as many postmillennialists believed?

Just ten years before the first OFC, pre-millennialism had reached a fever pitch with Baptist lay preacher William Miller’s widely publicized, broadly embraced, calculation that the second coming would occur in October, 1843. Even in the intellectual stronghold of New Haven, a fire at Bunce’s paper mill during a snowstorm on January fifth of that year threw the “meteoric metropolis…into a great commotion,” while a “mounted horseman dashed through Chapel St., at a furious rate,

58For an account of the state of religion at Yale leading up to this revival see Purcell 1918.
exclaiming, ‘the end of the world is at hand.’” And as people rushed into the streets, “struck with instant terror,”

A venerable minister of the church gravely assured one of the fire companies that it was no artificial combustion, but the actual “coming of the Lord in great glory”- and many persons remained under this remarkable but very natural delusion during the whole night (Norwich Courier 1/11/1843: 2).

While “Millerism” is remembered for having been especially attractive to less well-educated adherents of Arminian faith traditions, Methodism in particular, there was no shortage of Congregationalists, including scholars, in its grip. But those at the center of the first OFCs do not appear to have been among them. Center Church chorister Alling Brown, for example, was one of many who debunked Miller’s calculations, publishing in June of 1843 his Views, adverse to those of Miller and others; in regard to the interpretation of ‘Time, times, and half a time,’ being a few thoughts on these words and kindred topics, as they occur in Daniel’s visions and John’s revelations. Brown’s skepticism was likely shared by many, if not most, who attended the churches on the green. Their views were likely more in line with those of the great theologian Jonathan Edwards who, while he certainly didn’t reject the literalness of the millennium, suspected the thousand years spoken of in prophecy had begun with the first Great Awakening of the mid eighteenth century, and would be comprised of Christ’s spiritual reign and a gradual perfecting of the church that would culminate in the Second Coming. Such a postmillennial view is more consistent with the long-term social reform goals of the OFC organizers and participants I have
identified, who seem to have partaken in mainstream nineteenth century Congregationalism’s view that the role of the church was “not simply to convert individuals but also to remake the social order” (Van Rohr 1992: 262). While some Adventists and other believers in the “soon coming” of Christ did eventually begin to hold old folks’ concerts, the tradition was initially confined to adherents of postmillennialism who expected business as usual to continue for a good while, and for whom the concerts were one part of the much larger project of perfecting the world.

The OFC And Congregationalism In 1853

An important factor in the first OFCs that may be less readily apparent than broader cultural trends is the changing face of Congregationalism itself in the early 1850s, and its relationship to the ongoing project of creating a sense of American identity with its heart and soul in the New England village. Congregationalist orthodoxy viewed history teleologically, with adherents as the advance guard of the Christian project, the completion of which in the millennium was the whole point of history to begin with. In their view the Christian project was also the American project, and Puritan descendants tended to see themselves as, if not uber-Americans, at least ur-Americans. But in the nineteenth century there were a number of challenges to their presumed place at the culmination of world history and center of American identity. As hinted at in Poganuc People Congregationalist hegemony had been threatened by the tremendous growth in other denominations since the mid eighteenth century, and also by immigration, by disestablishment of
Congregationalism, and even from “within” by the Unitarian heresy that not only challenged Calvinist orthodoxy and drew congregants away from the fold but took valuable property and institutions, notably Harvard University, out of Calvinist Congregationalist hands.

Further from “home,” the bigger the United States became the more territory there was in which Yankee Congregationalists had little or no direct influence. Many became dissatisfied with the 1801 “Plan of Union” between Congregational and Presbyterian churches, feeling the joint effort to promote Reformed Christianity on the expanding frontier had led very disproportionately to the creation of Presbyterian rather than Congregational churches.59 Things came to a head in October, 1852 when a “newly developed national denominational consciousness” (275) found expression at a Congregationalist convention in Albany, the “first meeting of a synodical character, representative of Congregationalism as a whole since the Cambridge body of 1646-8” (Walker 1893: 538). A number of decisions were made at the convention that directly affected American Congregationalism, at least two of which pertain to the old folks’ concerts. First, the Plan of Union was dissolved. While many Congregationalists and Presbyterians continued to work and worship together, and evangelism in general remained a shared goal, those who voted for dissolution apparently felt the plan had been a failure and that Congregationalism in specific was worth fighting for. Secondly, delegates voted to raise money and establish an

59 See Van Rohr 1992, especially 263.
organization to oversee the building of Congregational churches on the frontier. The effort was so successful that “by 1853 almost sixty-two thousand dollars were raised,” and by the time of a second denominational gathering in 1865 “427 meeting houses had been built in the west” (Van Rohr 1992: 277).

In light of these developments, and the Albany Conference in general, the first OFC just six months later could be understood as an expression of a newly invigorated sense of denominational identity and purpose, especially considering that the chairman of the conference’s Business Committee and an important voice in the discussion was none other than Center Church pastor Leonard Bacon. If this is an accurate reading, performing Congregationalist identity assumed the sound of ancient harmony outside of New England as well, as in the coming months and years some of the newer churches, including Cleveland’s aptly named Plymouth Church and the newly minted First Congregational Church of Albany, where the 1852 conference was held, would mount their own old folks’ concerts.

Problems presented by establishing churches geographically distant from their New England roots included the attending proclivity towards “heresy in doctrine and disorder in practice” and the influence of “Romanism” due to the large number of recent Catholic immigrants to the south and west (Van Rohr 1992: 276). One of the reasons Presbyterian polity had so often prevailed over Congregational in churches constructed under the Plan of Union was that Presbyterianism’s tighter system of oversight was seen as more conducive to maintaining order. One way to stave off
Congregationalism’s anarchic potential and ensure greater denominational cohesiveness, approved in Albany, was to send delegates from the east to meetings in the west, thus establishing closer contact between the two regions. Such contact and the importance of the emerging myth of the nation’s puritan New England origins seem to have been, along with westward migration in general, important factors in the spread of the OFC to the west, most likely explaining how the practice reached Kenosha, Wisconsin well before it ever got to Boston and Father Kemp.

**Old Folks’ Concerts, Congregationalism and *The New England Village***

In addition to sending church delegates west, a related practice as significant to the development and spread of the OFC as to the spread of Congregationalism itself was another solution to the problem of wayward churches, one that had been in practice since at least 1830. Group or “colony” migration was the practice of moving en masse from New England, sometimes along with home missionaries, to establish new churches and communities in “the West.” For colony advocate Asa Turner this was a way to ensure the transplantation of Congregationalist New England village-style stability, in his words “fixing the character of towns, spreading the moral power of New England, and effectually aiding to save the West” (in Van Rohr 1992: 267). The village that Turner and others sought to export to the frontier was an “old fashioned” New England “center village,” with a church on the green surrounded by stately homes and a thriving but still rural economic center in which citizens formed a
tight-knit, God-fearing community much like that in Litchfield/Poganuc or New Haven’s Center Church. Although by the mid nineteenth century this was widely understood to be the archetypal puritan village of old, the center village was for the most part a nineteenth century phenomenon geographer Joseph Wood described as a “proto urban” place that had not been at all the norm in earlier New England when settlements designated villages had been more typically comprised of dispersed farmsteads with a church at a crossroads that was more a nominal than a functional center (1997: 2).

Without taking a position on the veracity of Wood’s claims, the old folks’ concerts do, at least, suggest “New England, in the eyes of colonial revivalists…was not a site bounded by the historical record, but an imaginary ripe for the construction of an American exceptionalism” (Wortham-Galvin 2010: 24). Wood, and others, have observed that the character of what came to be viewed as what he calls “the New England village” was a Romantic invention concocted largely by nineteenth century New Englanders themselves through popular history, art and literature like that of Leonard Bacon, Timothy Dwight, his student at Yale Lyman Beecher and, later, the likes of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Sarah Orne Jewett, Harriet Beecher Stowe and her brother Henry.60 Perpetuating a “cult of the past,” Wood writes, “center villagers…

60 Leonard Bacon, for example, described in some detail the New England village ideal in his 1839 *Thirteen Historical Discourses*, written for the New Haven bicentennial “New England is a land of villages, not of manufacturing villages merely, or trading villages, but of villages formed for society, villages in each of which the meeting house is the acropolis…These
 historicized the landscape to evoke an ahistorical colonial tradition,” and by the late nineteenth century the “connection between center village and colonial community-between village as setting and New England as tradition- was confounded. The literary elaboration of the tradition had become reality” (1997: 149).

The Romantic vision of the urban/rural “center village” was manifested not only in the construction of new communities and reconfiguring of existing ones but also in the structure of the asylum, the garden cemetery and the emerging city park movement. The ideal was so appealing and made so much sense to New Englanders’ sense of themselves and their centrality to American history and culture that it became almost unshakably embedded in both scholarship and popular thought as the irrefutable truth, and remains with us in more recent manifestations of the colonial revival like the architecture and planning of American suburbs, the New Urbanism, living history museums like Henry Ford’s Greenfield Village and, more recently, “hyper-real” communities like Disney’s Enterprise, Florida (Baudrillard 1994).

The layering of quoted quotations, overt and covert, is part and parcel of both scholarship and the invention of tradition. In an observation explicitly only two layers
deep, though implicitly deeper, geographer B. D. Wortham-Galvin quotes historian Joseph Conforti writing of the Romantic nineteenth century New England village ideal that antebellum revivalists “revised narratives that redefined New England as a distinctive place with a peculiar people and a sacred past.” This narrative linked “the Yankee character and the white village to New England’s religious and republican origins.” The fictions of New England resisted fact in order to stabilize the socially uncertain present (Wortham Galvin 2010: 24).

At the time of the first OFC this uncertainty grew from concerns about immigration, urbanization, political upheaval, looming sectional strife, the question of slavery and other challenges discussed above. Among the realities resisted by the Romantic village ideal was the fact that aspects of the nineteenth century center village that were popularly attributed to imagined Puritan values and close knit community were in fact the result of complex factors including the economic decline of some of the very places that came to be emblematic of the tradition. By the 1850s rural village New England was two decades into an “eighty year decline” (Wortham-Galvin 2010: 24) and according to Wood it was in part that very “decline and decay” that “became the material grist for invention of tradition” (1997: 169).

Some of the most significant and powerful invented tradition of the nineteenth century involved mythic stories of American origin like the fictional landing at Plymouth Rock, the Battle of Bunker Hill and the many other heroic events of the Revolutionary War. The first old folks’ concerts implied these traditions while also
suggesting their own tradition of American origin; that of New England and America’s first genuine “native” Yankee music, the ancient harmony of William Billings and company. Thus the implications of the OFC went well beyond anything that could be accounted for by nostalgia or ongoing enthusiasm for a lively, local music genre. Writing about the Romantic village, Wortham-Galvin could as well have been describing the first old folks’ concerts.

Establishing tradition…was not merely a matter of nostalgia or culture; it was a device to cement the politics of the United States to its culture. This, not aesthetics or stylistic preferences was the real project of the colonial revival. It was a willful, if sometimes incoherent, attempt to create a common American heritage and a singular collective memory (2010: 23).

While the first OFCs were clearly very much about aesthetics, nostalgia and stylistic preference, I believe part of the concerts’ appeal was their suitability to the imaginary village and collective memory projects, and it’s hard to imagine a musical practice better tailored to the job. As a sounded community embodiment of Yankee identity, the OFC responded and contributed to the nineteenth century creation of the New England village, which in turn became in popular imagination the American village, the archetypical site of national identity, heritage and collective memory. The old folks’ concert was, among all else, a very public way of claiming and expressing spiritual connection not only to God, the congregation and community, but to the land itself, “America,” and the Puritan “congregation of the dead.”
American Origin Myths, Ecumenism and the Broadening Appeal of the OFC

In the New England village the church on the green was a Congregational one, and Congregationalist descendants of the Great Migration were understood to be the heart and soul of the community, its “staunchest citizens.” But they were not the only people who lived there. One final ingredient in the OFC formula that was critical to the spread and endurance of the tradition, and would contribute greatly to its significance, was an implicit logic and opening for participation by a broader spectrum of Americans than just parishioners of the church on the green. While it is significant that the first OFC took place at First Congregational Church, New Haven, it is equally significant that the performers were drawn from “the singers who occupied the seats of the churches of that city” (New York Evangelist 4/21/1853: 62, emphasis added).

In detailing the appeal and dissemination of the fad for old mahogany furniture in the 1850s Jennifer L. Anderson could, again, have been writing about ancient harmony and the OFCs.

Although the Colonial Revival was initially promulgated by descendants of the former political elite, and arguably geared toward their self-promotion and social retrenchment, Americans of all stripes laid claim to the increasingly mythologized narrative of the nation’s founding. Objects that survived from that period became historical relics, supposedly imbued with the virtues of the Founding Fathers and Mothers who once owned them. As patriotic talismans, they also served as useful object lessons in a process of Americanization aimed at inculcating patriotism in children and new immigrants (2012: 305).
Despite the Congregationalist roots and orientation of the OFC, the formula was flexible, implicitly ecumenical and anchored in a general sense of American history and identity. In mycological terms the soil that was hospitable to the spore of the OFC idea was not so much Congregationalism per se as it was emergent widespread and deeply held beliefs about the nation’s puritan and revolutionary origin that the ancient harmony was seen to embody.

Hymn singing had long been a religious activity in which denominational differences could take a back seat. American Protestants of virtually all stripes and backgrounds were familiar with the poetry of nonconforming English hymnodist Isaac Watts that made up the bulk of the texts used in the first OFCs, and the popularity of Billings and company’s music had never been restricted to Congregationalists. The first OFCs’ casting of the old hymns as heritage music, as implicitly national rather than denominational hymns, made them even more appealing to a widening circle of Americans. While the spore of the OFC initially spread through the rivulets of New England Congregationalism, it wasn’t long before old folks concerts were popping up all over the place. Within a few years the OFC mushroomed throughout the northeast and Yankee west, performed by white Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian groups, by Congregationalist and Methodist African-Americans, by Adventists, Spiritualists, Irish Catholics and, by the late 1870s, as part of “Hebrew Fairs” held to raise money for Jewish immigrants in need.
The early days of this mushrooming from origin to craze (and subsequently tradition) in the years 1853-1856 have much to tell us about the meaning and significance of the OFCs and, more generally, about the culture of the time. Having looked at some of the reasons why the OFCs mushroomed, in Part II we will turn our attention to how.
PART II: MUSHROOMING

Introduction

In Part I I have identified what an old folks’ concert is and some of the reasons why the 1853 New Haven “original” and its encores were so immediately compelling to the public. But to show how the practice mushroomed in the years leading up to its viability as a commercial enterprise in Boston in March 1856 we need to look at a combination of factors so far mentioned only in passing. Most prominent among these are social, religious, economic and political networks connected, often over large distances, by newspapers, railway, steamship and canal travel, letter writing and telegraphs.

Before the advent of OCR technology and full-text historical newspaper databases, tracking the day-to-day mushrooming of the OFCs before Father Kemp would have been virtually impossible, as I discovered during many pre-internet years of poring over hundreds of, usually un-indexed, nineteenth century newspapers in hard copy and microfilm in collections across the country, in Canada and England. The task has only become possible with the advent of online resources including Proquest, newspapers.com, ancestry.com and genealogybank.com among others, and while such collections are far from complete, over the past few years between them they have become comprehensive enough to provide a starting point.
Several things became clear early in this phase of my research. First, newspapers played an indispensable role, with OFCs in virtually every new location following on the heels of one or more newspaper articles. Second, the people responsible, the most avid of the early old folks and their friends had much in common and were typically VERY closely connected through family, involvement in business, political and religious intercourse, especially through connection to Yale University and the legacy of religious leaders Nathaniel Taylor and Timothy Dwight. Those who organized concerts or wrote newspaper articles in the various cities often knew each other or at least knew of each other if they were not, in fact, related. Third, they maintained both personal and impersonal connections over what would often have been, not long earlier, impossible distances, via denominational, political and reform networks, ideologically branded newspapers, letters and, critical especially in the first ten months, the burgeoning rail system. The possible relationship between anonymous readership and “imagined community” (including the nation state) observed by Benedict Anderson is worthy of further exploration in this connection, but the community of readers at the heart of the mushrooming OFCs was, for the most part, decidedly not anonymous, but comprised of people who were well known to each other, either personally, through letters to the editor or by mutual involvement in a variety of organizations and activities (Anderson 1983).

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61 For more on the role of newspapers in the rise of nationalism, imagined community and the “remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations” see Anderson 1983, especially 33-36.
The initial mushrooming of the OFCs was hardly scattershot. Not coincidentally, the pattern of their spread during the first year closely mirrored prominent patterns in the rail system which themselves reflected patterns of geography, history and commerce. After a slow start the OFC “spore” first traveled up and down the lines that connected New York, New Haven, Hartford and Springfield, Massachusetts and along the Connecticut shore. From Hartford/Springfield they traveled to Albany via the Hartford/Springfield/Stockbridge/Albany line. From Albany the OFC spore blew south to Newark and west to Cayuga County in western New York. From there it likely traveled to Wisconsin where, a year to the day after the first New Haven concert, there was an OFC in Kenosha, which had been settled fewer than twenty years earlier by a group from Cayuga County. As with actual mushrooms, the spread of the OFC sometimes involved surprising leaps, but always upon further inspection the conditions on the ground bore obvious hallmarks. Interestingly, although the idea reached the Boston area soon after the first concerts, it apparently took nearly three years to bear significant fruit there. In this chapter I will show how the OFC eventually reached Boston and Father Kemp, the only representative of the tradition whose work in OFCs has become even a footnote in our understanding of nineteenth century America.
CHAPTER 5: CHEAP POSTAGE AND NEWSPAPERS, ORGANIZATIONS AND TRAINS

Post and Press

Since its inception in 1787 the U.S. constitution has contained a clause giving Congress the authority to “establish Post Offices and postal Roads” in part to help a dispersed and heterogeneous population hang together as a nation (U.S. Constitution Article 1, Section 8, Clause 7). According to the U.S. Senate website “The postal powers embrace all measures necessary to establish the system and to insure the safe and speedy transit and prompt delivery of the mails. Congress may also punish those who use the mails for unlawful purposes” (www.senate.gov accessed 9/25/2013).

While the Founders had in mind primarily the promotion of a national print culture, the mid nineteenth century saw a sea change in the role of the post in American life. According to historian David Henkin “the best evidence suggests… that in 1820 most Americans did not engage directly in any form of interactive, long-distance communications network, while by 1870 most of them did” (2006: 2). The author goes so far as to say that the seven years prior to the first OFC “stand at the center of a revolutionary era in nineteenth-century U.S. history, when a critical mass of Americans began reorganizing their perception of time, space, and community around the existence of the post” (6).
The communication explosion was no accident. Joshua Leavitt, in addition to his work as a lawyer, Yale trained minister, tunebook compiler, crusader for the separation of church and state, abolitionist and co-editor with Leonard Bacon of reformist periodical *The Independent*, was a vocal advocate of postal reform, particularly the introduction of “cheap postage.” In his 1848 pamphlet by that name he told readers “you must understand its merits; you must talk with your neighbors, and get them interested in its favor; you must write, if you can, for the papers; you must unite, without delay, in signing and forwarding the following petition to congress,” a petition urging the federal government to intervene in railway companies’ usurious rates for transporting mail and establish a uniform rate of postage “not to exceed one cent on newspapers, and two cents on each pre-paid letter of half an ounce, for all distances” (1848: 111). This, Leavitt posited, would “bring three times as many letters as are now sent by mail in this country” (110). On the success of eight years of cheap postage in Britain, Leavitt quoted The London Committee, established to report on the phenomenon, which called it “the greatest boon conferred in modern times on all the social interests of the civilized world.” On the specific potential benefits to the United States Leavitt quoted “an American gentleman, writing from London in 1844” who said “it is hardly possible to overrate the value of this (cheap postage) in regard to the exertion of moral power. At a trifling expense one can carry on a correspondence with all parts of the kingdom. It saves time, facilitates business, and brings kindred minds in contact. How long will our government adhere to its absurd system?” (4-5).
In addition to a great increase in letter writing, the mid nineteenth century also saw tremendous growth in the production and dissemination of newspapers. The boom corresponded with, among other things, rising literacy, emigration and an explosion of clubs, organizations and special interest groups with their own print organs, and was made possible by the interaction of changes in public demand, the habits and meaning of reading and the dramatic cost reduction that came with innovations like the 1830 invention of the high-speed steam press. For decades the cost of sending a letter was many times that of sending a newspaper. An 1864 New Haven newspaper article recalls “even persons belonging to the middle classes did not scruple to cheat the post office in the days when letter postage was a shilling instead of a penny. On the covers of newspapers…they wrote in milk; the writing when held to the fire became legible; and the newspaper went back again with an answer similarly inscribed” (*Columbian Register* 8/20/1864: 1).

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62 Music was one of the special interests served by a growing number of periodicals with a growing number of subscribers. An early 1853 article in the *New York Daily Tribune* titled “HOPEFUL,” posited a specific connection between this growth and politics. “Congress is growing musical. We may look out for harmony. Over seventy members of that august body, we are informed, now take in Dyer and Willis’s *Musical World and Times*. Sweet sounds are in the ascendant. Even the President, Vice-President, members of the Cabinet, Foreign Ministers, Judges of the Supreme Court, Gen. Scott, and other celebrities in any quantity, have yielded to the soft persuasion… Good for Congress- good for the incoming Administration- good for the universal Yankee nation! Three cheers for the *Musical World and Times*” (quoted in *The New York Musical World and Times* 2/5/1853: 100).

63 See Kovarik 2011, especially chapter 2. For a detailed discussion of analyses of the journalism revolution that extend the “technological determinism” of earlier explanations to embrace social analysis and the give and take between technology, demand, class, gender and changes in the practice of reading see Lehuu 2000, especially 44-48.
Another cost effective mode of communication, also one of few available modes of mass communication, was the letter to the editor. Writing to newspapers for publication remained a common practice even after the cost of mailing letters was dramatically reduced in 1851, and played a crucial role in the mushrooming of the OFCs. What’s more, the growth of telegraphy in the 1840s and 50s made it possible to send news and personal communication over large distances nearly instantaneously.

The newspapers of the 1850s, the penny press and highbrow publications alike, were a far cry from the presently still-lingering twentieth century model. In many ways they worked more like other soon to be ancient phenomena like blogs, Facebook and Twitter. Opinion, news, humor, poetry, advertisement, exegesis, dialog, rants and in some cases printed music mixed freely and were reprinted with impunity by editors who thought an item would be of interest to their readers or who had a space to fill. “Westfield Items- There was an Old Folks’ Concert last night” read one 1854 tweet in its entirety, while bloggier accounts of the OFCs rambled on in first person giving every detail of the weather, the music, the singers’ appearance and even the program and complete lyrics for an entire concert (Springfield Republican 2/17/1854: 2).

The mushrooming of the OFCs coincided with the tail end of an era of “decentralized mass-production” of print that produced a “literature defined by… exuberant understanding of culture as iteration and not origination” (McGill 2003: 4). The interactive, free form style of mid century periodicals made them perfect vehicles
for spreading the OFC. The press, public discourse and private communication were symbiotic and there was notable intertextuality between letters, conversation and published articles. In an early 1854 letter published in an Albany paper and reprinted in Hartford correspondent “VALENTINE” wrote of an OFC there “I went 150 miles and paid near five dollars to hear JENNY LIND, and never regretted it either; but, without any disparagement of the incomparable singer, I confess I would go farther to hear such a concert as this” (*Albany Evening Journal* 1/23/1854: 2). Soon after, a young Mary Dodge wrote to her parents back home in Hamilton, MA “tonight there is to be what they call ‘The Old Folks’ Concert,’ which I think you would like to attend…these concerts are very popular. One gentleman came clear from Albany, in New York, to attend the last one. He said he went a hundred and fifty miles and paid five dollars to hear Jenny Lind sing, and was glad he did it, but this was worth more than that” (Dodge, ed. 1901:54-55). The buzz that made the mushrooming of the OFCs possible was largely generated by such an interaction between private communication and public discussion in the form of published letters and editorials written by those who had attended concerts, who wished to see them mounted in their location, who preferred the old hymns to the new or were simply taken with the novel constellation of ideas and practices embodied in the OFC.

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64 A suffragette, abolitionist and friend of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mary Abigail Dodge is better remembered by her pseudonym Gail Hamilton, under which she was the influential author of abolitionist and feminist articles and books. At the time of the early OFCs she was living in Hartford where she taught high school. See Dodge 1901.
Typically news outlets were affiliated with a denomination, a political party, a reform movement or some other group or groups. The fact that it was possible to get predominantly the kind of news you wanted from “kindred minds” was another important factor in the dissemination of the OFC idea, as well as in the maintenance of networks in general. In mycological terms, the newspapers were the largest vernal streams that carried the spore of the OFC downhill via paths of least resistance to similarly hospitable locations. On a larger scale, they were also the strongest of the prevailing winds that carried the spore over the hills and across the prairies.

The relationship between the newspapers, the postal system and the public in the mid nineteenth century was sometimes fraught. A particular area of trouble was the early adoption of the direct mail campaign by northern antislavery activists, especially Congregationalists. William Lloyd Garrison and others took advantage of the new cheap printing technology of the 1830s to try to influence the nation’s political landscape by mailing thousands of their abolitionist periodicals and tracts to southern slave owners, resulting in outrage and even violence directed at post offices, postal workers and the postal system in general. In his 1835 address to Congress President Andrew Jackson lobbied unsuccessfully to eliminate such antislavery tactics by passing “such a law as will prohibit, under severe penalties, the circulation in the Southern States, through the mail, of incendiary publications intended to

65 See Lehuu 2000, especially 48-49, for more on the democratization of print, privatization of reading, segmentation of the reading public and broader changes in reading habits and meaning in the years before the Civil War.
instigate the slaves to insurrection” (http://constitution.findlaw accessed 9/25/2013). By 1853, many New England Congregationalists and others had two decades or more of practice using the mass medium to disseminate ideas, maintain networks and promote reform. Because of the milieu into which the OFC was born, the idea was able to travel quickly along paths that were, by then, well worn.

**Railroads, the Space-Time Continuum, and a Hartford Tragedy**

Critical to the radically expanding possibilities for connectedness across large distances in the 1850s was the revolution in transportation via steamships, canals and, most dramatically, the nation’s burgeoning rail system. According to the 1932 Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States, in 1800 a day’s travel could get you from New York City to New Haven or Philadelphia. In 1830 it could get you as far as Baltimore or Providence. But by 1857 after only a day’s journey you could find yourself all the way to North Carolina, west of Cleveland and anywhere in New York State or New England with the exception of northern Maine (see Paullin 1932).
Rail travel did more than make it possible for people and news to travel further and faster. According to historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch it brought about a fundamental shift in the prevailing “sociocultural space-time continuum.” A common nineteenth century perception of train travel was that it was able to “annihilate time and space.” However, Schivelbusch writes, “The notion that the railroad annihilated space and time was not related to that expansion of space that resulted from the incorporation of new spaces into the transport network. What was experienced as being annihilated was the traditional space-time continuum which characterized the old transport technology” (1986: 36).

The author goes on to describe something that may remind us of another continuum, and the discussion in Part I about the minor mode and the disjuncture between musical practice and the emerging expectations of the industrial age. “As the space between the points- the traditional traveling space- was destroyed, those points
moved into each other’s immediate vicinity: one might say they actually collided. They lost their old sense of local identity, formerly determined by the spaces between them” (38). Thus, it seems, as the spread of the keyboard and a more quantitative, ocularcentric theory of music worked to annihilate, in Baudriallard’s terms, the “space with rhythms” between musical notes, the railways effectively annihilated the space between stops (Baudrillard 1996: 61).

Whether or not the reader accepts anything beyond a coincidental similarity between railway stops and musical notes, the changes that were occurring in perceptions and realities of time, space and community in the early 1850s had a profound effect on the OFCs. In an irony not unique in American history, (think of Henry Ford’s anti-urban, anti-modern “factory villages” and untiring advocacy of folk music and dance), the old folks and their admirers ran to the train station, the post office and the newsroom in their rush to experience and promote sights and sounds of an earlier space-time, to look for an earlier, purer version of themselves and to stake their claim on the old-fashioned New England village of their imagining.

The first railway in the United States, referred to as the “Granite Line” was, significantly, laid to haul stone to the site of the Bunker Hill Monument in 1826 (Olson 2002: 210). To nineteenth century Europeans one of the most unusual characteristics of American rail lines is that they were full of curves rather than mostly straight. Americans’ long observed preference for discarding and replacing rather than maintaining and repairing had made the nation well suited to adopting
new technology. Accordingly, American railways were built to be cheap and impermanent because, although it resulted in less direct travel, it was much cheaper to follow the topography, to go around things, rather than do the blasting and filling necessary to lay a straighter route (Schivelbusch 1986: 97).

While the mushrooming of the OFCs was directly linked to the railway boom and the growing connectedness of far-flung people, the American penchant for cheap, curvy rail lines played an unfortunate role in slowing the spread of the OFCs in the first ten months. Within days of the first concert on April 11, 1853 there was a call for a similar performance in New Haven’s “sister city,” Hartford. Under the heading “‘Old Folks’ Concert,’’ likely the first time the phrase appeared in print, a short piece in the Connecticut Courant for April 16 asked “Could not such a concert be got up here? It would prove interesting, and would, unquestionably, draw a great crowd. There would be no lack of either books or singers” (4/16/1853: 2). There was a similar call in New London, the Daily Chronicle for June 20 noting “The people of Hartford are desirous of getting up what is called an ‘Old Folks’ Concert’ in imitation of the New Haveners...We should think such a concert would gratify a large class here, where there are great numbers who profess to prefer the ‘tunes’ which were in vogue some thirty or forty years ago” (New London Daily Chronicle 6/20/1853: 2). Based on all accounts, however, Hartford was the next city to answer the call.

Hartford might well have hosted an OFC within weeks of the New Haven original had it not been for a terrible railway accident on May 6 that took the lives of
some fifty people and is remembered as the first major railroad bridge disaster in U.S. history. Among the dead was prominent Hartford physician Archibald Welch, returning home from the sixth annual United States Medical Convention in New York City when his train rounded a sharp bend near Norwalk and plunged sixty feet into Long Island Sound over an open drawbridge. The driver and the bridge operator hadn’t been able to see each other around the bend until it was too late. In the introduction to a lengthy and impassioned plea for someone in Hartford to mount an OFC, a newspaper editor wrote that week “The last conversation we held with the lamented Dr. Welch, previous to his departure for New York, was upon this topic. He was earnestly desirous that the plan should be carried into effect, and intended to exert himself for that object upon his return” (Connecticut Courant 6/18/1853: 2). But instead of a concert they had a funeral that filled to overflowing the new gothic revival edifice of Pearl Street Congregational Church, attended by many who would participate in the second concert by the old folks of Hartford, held in that same building eight months later.

While the old folks of Hartford reeled from the tragedy of May 6, the New Haven singers carried on, as their notoriety and that of their “novel entertainment” continued to grow. At Center Church on May 24 they gave “another concert, which was equal to the former one,” and another two in December, this time at North Church, just a stone’s throw up the green, all in benefit of the Orphan Asylum (Constitution [Middletown, CT] 5/25/1853: 2). In response to one of the December concerts it was reported “prominent citizens of New York, clergy and others, have
invited this choir to give a similar performance in that city. –Should the invitation be accepted, we predict a rich result even in that great nursery of stars and prima donnas” (Puritan Recorder 12/29/1853: 206). While I have found no evidence that the New Haven singers took up the offer, and the first OFC in New York City of which I have found evidence was not until May, 1856, travel and communication between New Haven and Manhattan played an important role in the early mushrooming of the practice.
CHAPTER 6: FROM NEW HAVEN TO HARTFORD

The New York-New Haven Line

The connections between New York City and New Haven’s Yale University and First Church were many, and by 1853 the New York-New Haven railroad had made communication and travel between the cities incomparably easier than it had been even in recent memory. It was in New York City that the first influential newspaper account of an OFC to be disseminated widely beyond western Connecticut was published; the April 21, 1853 article quoted in full in Part I, written for the *N.Y. Evangelist*, long edited by Joshua Leavitt but in 1853 edited by another Yale trained Congregationalist minister, Walter Hilliard Bidwell. The article may well have been written by Bidwell himself, based on an account of the first New Haven concert provided to him in a letter or personal communication by an audience member. In a few short sentences the article provided the easily replicable formula for an old folks’ concert, modeled audience and community response and compellingly summarized

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66 A likeminded religious periodical, *The Independent*, edited by Joshua Leavitt, took notice of the first New Haven concerts as well, but only in a passing reference as part of a review of the 1853 edition of *Ancient Harmony Revived*, and not until late May. “The ‘Old Folks’ Concerts’ lately held at New Haven, in which the quaint harmonies of Billings, Holden, Reed (sic) and others were sung from this book to crowded audiences, -prove that there is a power in this music beyond that of mere association” (5/26/1853: 84).

67 Bidwell may also have been one of the “prominent citizens” and clergymen who attended one of the December concerts and invited the old folks to New York. Other possible candidates include influential evangelist Charles Grandison Finney and Joshua Leavitt who, in 1853, was co-editor with First Church pastor Leonard Bacon of *The Independent*. 
the aesthetic, historical, national, financial and Christian reformist raison d’etre for such events.

The reach and influence of the Evangelist was geographically broad but demographically narrow. An agent for the paper wrote in 1837 “I notice one thing. Wherever the Evangelist has been the family paper, there you will find abolition” (in Ginzberg 2005: 108). While the article of April 21 informed other early OFC news items in more general papers around the Northeast, and was reprinted in full in at least one paper, the Evangelist’s orientation meant that news of the first old folks’ concerts was most widely disseminated in abolitionist, Congregationalist circles, and it is to this milieu that the earliest and most influential OFCs were largely confined. But despite the early broad dissemination of the OFC idea, it was more direct, local connections that led to the first sign of the practice mushrooming.

A Train From Albany and a Poem by Mrs. Sigourney

In the three months following the first New Haven concert the Connecticut Courant carried an ongoing discussion of the possibility of a similar concert in Hartford, advocated not only by “old folks” like “A. SEXAGENARIAN” but by at least one enthusiastic member of the “rising generation” using the pen name “ADOLESCENS.”

From a select circle of the rising generation your humble servant has been appointed a committee to wait upon our honored sires and dames through the
columns of your paper, and respectfully entreat them to carry out so agreeable a proposal. We can scarcely imagine why any one of our contemporaries should wish to obliterate from memory those quaint, but sweet old tunes of bye gone years, whose every note still trembles with the fervor of our ancestors’ spirits - the heartfelt breathings of their piety. To us, an occasion like the concert proposed, would be one of the deepest interest; we should consider it a rare privilege indeed to attend it, and we do sincerely hope that our kind elders will grant it to us. An “Old Folks’ Concert”! It would be like a glimpse of our beloved country in its infancy, innocence and purity, and it might be sure to awaken in us kindred fires of holy zeal to those which animated the breasts of our forefathers. May we not hope that a gentle breeze will this time move the hearts of our sturdy old oaks, and if youthful voices are needed to join in the “Ancient Harmony,” will not our singers cheerfully acquiesce, and lend a helping voice? (Connecticut Courant 7/2/1853: 1).

While the published discussion died down over the summer, the old folks of Hartford were at work behind the scenes, and within five months of the tragic death of Dr. Welch, they had regrouped and begun to plan in earnest for a concert of their own. The Courant for October 22 reported “At a meeting of citizens held at the Lecture Room of the Centre Church, on the evening of the 17th inst., pursuant to a call by gentlemen from several of the Ecclesiastical Societies of the city, it was unanimously resolved...that it is both desirable and expedient to provide for holding, at some convenient time and place, a Concert of Ancient Sacred Vocal Music.” Also resolved was the appointment of a “committee with powers of substitution and addition, to superintend, arrange and direct” the concert” (Connecticut Courant 4/16/1853: 2).
Like the board of the New Haven Ancient Sacred Music Association, the committee was comprised of some of the most prominent and influential older Whigs in the community, most born between 1784 and 1800. Unlike the scholars and preachers that made up the bulk of the New Haven group the Hartford committee members were mostly businessmen. Namesake of the influential, even notorious, early publisher of the Courant, committee chairman Barzilai Hudson, born 1793, was a major stockholder in the Phoenix Mutual Life Insurance Company of Hartford and was elected its first president in 1851. A wealthy dry goods and furniture merchant, he is remembered in the centennial history of that company as “a highly respected member of his community. His store…was not merely a shopping center for the 16,000 people living in Hartford in 1851, it was an unofficial headquarters for the city’s prominent people including lay church workers, American Bible Society members, and wealthy philanthropists” (Phoenix Mutual 1951: 9). Born in 1790, committee secretary Lynde Olmsted was also a prominent Hartford merchant, as well as a long-time deacon at Fourth Congregational Church, Hartford, and a Yale classmate of his cousin Denison Olmsted, one of the most prominent of the original New Haven old folks. Colonel John Bull, born 1800, was “one of many successful merchants in Hartford” (Hinman 1852: 396), and Edward Bolles, born 1797, was another of the “leading merchants of Hartford” (Bayles 1889). Like Bull, Albert Day,

68 See Olmsted 1912: 74
born 1797, was a former director of Phoenix National Bank of Hartford. In 1854 Day became president of People’s Bank and in 1856 was elected Lieutenant Governor of Connecticut. Thomas Danforth Boardman, born 1784, and Pliny Jewell Sr., born 1798, were among the nation’s most prominent manufacturers, Boardman of pewter goods and Jewell of leather, including belts used in place of more expensive gears in manufacturing. Jewell was a Whig who turned Republican upon the formation of the party, and his sons Pliny Jr. and Marshall are remembered as a founder of the party in Connecticut and Republican governor respectively (see Osborn 1908 132-140). The youngest of the Hartford committee was H.K.W. Welch, born 1821, a Hartford lawyer and, like his father the “lamented Dr. Welch,” a Yale graduate. Like Pliny Jewell Sr. and a number of the other “old folks,” “in politics Mr. Welch was associated in early life with the Whig party” and later “a member of the Republican Party from its organization” in 1855 (http://www.ctstatelibrary.org/pages/obituaries/welch-henry-k-w accessed 8/20/2013).

Another notable difference between the New Haven and Hartford OFC organizers is that the Hartford bunch were not all Congregationalists. Although the first concerts took place in a Congregational Church under the leadership of a “decided Calvinist of the stern, old fashioned type,” the make-up of the committee was more ecumenical (Cutter 1913: 1481). Colonel John Bull, for example, was an

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69 See Burpee 1914: 128
70 See Adams 1856: 90
71 See Cutter 1913: 1481
Episcopalian who served as vestryman at Christ Church\textsuperscript{72} and Edward Bolles was a staunch Baptist whose parents’ house had been the site of the first public services held by the denomination in Hartford in 1789.\textsuperscript{73} Such denominational distinctions may be lost on some modern readers and, indeed, they were considerably less of an issue in 1853 than they had been in the Hartford old folks’ youth, but the slight shift towards inclusiveness is noteworthy, and a bellwether of the broadening appeal of the old folks’ concert idea that would take place in coming months and years. Perhaps the Hartford OFC organizers sought to expand on the New Havenites’ ecumenical call to participation by any who had, in decades past, occupied the singers’ seats in “the churches” through the collaboration of “gentlemen from several of the Ecclesiastical Societies of the city”. Or perhaps connections through business, politics and reform activities trumped theological difference in the desire to present on stage a unified Yankee identity, aesthetic and moral example; to see the “village” come together to sing the praises of its central place in American history and the right of its citizens to moral and political authority in a time of looming political crisis.

Near the end of December, the Hartford committee finally settled on a time and place: First Church, also called Centre Church, on January 9, 1854, postponed to January 10. The event received considerable press even before hand, as the buzz about old folks concerts in general grew. One correspondent reporting on the December New Haven concerts in a letter to the editor of Boston’s \textit{Puritan Recorder}\

\textsuperscript{72} See Russell 1895: 730-731.
\textsuperscript{73} See Bolles 1865: 34.
wrote “Our Hartford friends too are getting up an “Old Folks” Concert, and they will
eclipse us, if they can. But we have no jealousy in such a cause. Success to the "Old
Folks" of our sister city!” (12/29/1853: 206).

And success they had. The singers, numbering “about 200” (New York
Evangelist 1/19/1854:1) were led by the “stalwart, gray haired patriarch” (Albany
Journal 1/23/1854:2) Pliny “Father” Jewell Sr., to an overflow audience with “1,360
tickets sold” at twenty-five cents each (Connecticut Courant 1/14/1854: 2). Following
the lead of the New Haven old folks, the Hartford group pledged the proceeds to their
local Orphan Asylum, the nation’s first. The concert was such a success that it was
repeated eight days later due to the “earnest solicitation of hundreds” at the brand new
Gothic revival edifice of Pearl Street Congregational Church, this time apparently
with an even larger choir of 300 and 1,500 tickets sold, despite bad weather (New
York Evangelist 1/19/1854: 1). Like the make up of the committee responsible for
organizing the event, the many “divines” in attendance represented a variety of
Protestant denominations, although the opening prayer was given by Pearl Street
pastor Elias Beadle.

News items about the concerts were widespread; considerably more so than
those about the first New Haven concerts had been. As in New Haven, local papers
were first, followed by another substantial report in the Evangelist. Subsequently,
papers throughout New England, cities and small towns alike, and even local papers
as far afield as Washington, DC and Sandusky, Ohio carried news of the concerts. Of
particular interest to journalists and, presumably, readers, was the participation of “Col. Sam’l Green, formerly of New London, who is 87 years old, and Deacon Normand Smith, who is upwards of 80,” who “sang in the choir, and highly enjoyed the opportunity of singing the old tunes once more” (*Salem Register* 1/19/1854: 2).

The most detailed and influential account was provided by “VALENTINE,” in a long letter, peppered with Yankee dialect, to the editor of the *Albany Evening Journal* describing the author’s transcendent experience of the second concert, to which he had hopped a train from Albany after reading a brief account in the same paper a few days earlier. As in news items about the Hartford concerts published in Springfield, MA and elsewhere, the piece ends with a plea for someone to organize a local OFC in imitation, with a particular plea for the potential old folks of Albany to imitate New Haven and Hartford in donating the proceeds to the local orphan asylum. Because of its lively detail and the extent to which VALENTINE’s letter was quoted and reprinted throughout New England and the “west” it is worth quoting at length.

A few days ago, the Journal contained a short paragraph in relation to the “Old Folks’ Concert,” which recently came off in this city. Well- here I am, all the way from old Albany; on purpose to attend the repetition of that affair, to be given on the 18th. Some may call this a “tom fool’s errand,” but let such hear me through; before they decide. A friend here had kindly secured me a ticket beforehand, otherwise my journey had been in vain, as the number of

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74 Green, from a long line of newspapermen, was the longtime editor of the *New London Gazette* whose uncle founded the *Connecticut Courant*. Smith was prominent enough in his devotion to his church to have merited a poetic tribute by Mrs. Lydia Sigourney, the “sweet singer of Hartford,” on his death in 1860. This article cited was quoted in part or in full in papers throughout New England as well as in Washington DC and Ohio.
tickets was limited to 1500, all of which were sold at least twenty-four hours before the Concert was to be held. Go with me, in imagination, kind reader, and let us see what all this affair shall be, about which there is so much excitement.

We will start at 6 o’clock, in order to secure a good seat, though the services do not commence till 7. Though the evening is quite stormy, the crowds in the street evince some unusual interest, and all seem to be moving in one direction. The current turns toward Pearl street, and the new Congregational Church on that street seems to be the goal. We will enter-if we can. We, who thought to be early, must be among the last, for that spacious and elegant edifice is already full to overflowing. Finally, without much fibbing, my friend diddled the sentinel at the gallery stairs into the idea that I was one of the singers, and so I obtained a good seat in full view of the Choir. Now, before “meetin’ begins,” let us look around on this vast congregation. A finer looking set of people than these Yankees can not be scared up. See the venerable gray heads and stalwart forms. Ah! these are the men of the olden time, who have turned out, in spite of the storm, to hear the tunes they sung in their youth, as did their fathers before them. The pulpit and platform are filled with divines, among whom I observe Bishop Williams and Doctors Robbins and Hawes, Rev. Messrs. Beadle and Fisher, Charles A. Goodrich, and many others to me unknown. Now let us turn to the Choir. But where is it? Can it be that the 60 or 70 persons in the orchestra, alone form this great Choir of which I have heard so much? O, no! On the right side gallery sit something like a hundred men who form the bass wing. On the opposite or left side gallery are quite as many more ladies, according to the old custom, are to sing the tenor; while the men in the orchestra aforesaid, sing the treble or air. Well, this arrangement seems odd to us moderns, but it is the old way, and that’s enough. But there is a more striking feature in this great Choir of 300 than that. Just look at the ages of the singers. Why, here are many old ladies without a tooth in their heads, some of whom must be at least three score and ten. Whew! what a screech we shall have from their cracked old voices, to be sure! And then the men- only see the gray heads! One, at least, of these is over 80 years of age, and many are over 60. And now, who is to be the leader of this motley throng, than whom I should rather undertake to manage a hundred yoke of cattle, or Yates’ big team, albeit I am no “whip.” I confess I have some curiosity to see who and what he is that can manage such a team as this, so seated “all over the lot,” as they are. But here he is. A stalwart, gray haired patriarch- another Squire Cornell in appearance- rises
and strikes the front of the gallery, as a signal for silence, and in an instant all that vast multitude are hushed. He begins with a word of caution against unnecessarily injuring the house, and that speaks well for him. He then calls on Rev. Mr. Beadle to offer prayer; for what do Yankees ever undertake without first having a prayer? Well, this is a real, good prayer—short and appropriate. The presence and blessing of Heaven were invoked, so that while observing the manners and customs of the fathers, they should partake largely of the Pilgrim spirit.

The prayer over, and all expectation is again on tiptoe. A low whistle is heard, strongly resembling that of the distant cars. What does that mean? an ancient pitch-pipe, as I live! No other instrument is to be seen or heard, and from that the army choir “sound.” And now they begin to roll out the notes of old “Paris,” with the words “‘He reigns; the Lord, the Saviour reigns.” With what a power and thrilling effect does that great band of singers pour forth their melody. What a good, round, rich volume of sound proceeds from their united voices. And then, what excellent time they keep. Why, Father Jewell, the leader, manages them “just as easy,” and seems so much in his element that any one can see that he enjoys it. See those old dames—how they sway to and fro just as they “used to did;” the old men, too, they strain so hard to reach the high notes, and enter into the spirit of it with such zest, that they seem like old Simeon “ready to depart” for very excitement. Just watch the old folks down stairs too—see the tears start to their eyes as the strains remind them of other days. Their heads, their hands, their feet all unite in keeping time, and even their trembling voices are heard occasionally. I have seen interest and enthusiasm at concerts before, but never none like this. It is not like the curiosity to see some foreign prima donna heralded by Barnum; it is simply a gathering of the descendants of the Pilgrims, who have met to hear their neighbors sing the tunes the Pilgrims sung. But to return to the Choir.

The majestic strains of “Paris” have ended and the more lively “Bridgewater” follows; and now for a “Fugue.” How nicely part after part comes in, and yet how mixed up they get. But notwithstanding our fears for their safety, they all come out exactly right, to a dot. Then come the plaintive strains of “Greenfield” and old “New Durham.” The charming “Montgomery” follows, which was very properly encored. “Portland,” “Newport,” “Paradise” and “Sherburne” follow, and then comes the pathetic “Sena” (sic) with the words
See the Lord of glory dying; See his gasping; hear him crying
during the singing of which the utmost solemnity and tenderness pervaded the
entire assembly. But what shall I say of “Maryland,” “Complaint,” “Majesty,”
“Ocean,” “Greenwhich” (sic), “Edom,” “Schenectady,” and last, though not
least, “Old Hundred,” which was joined in by the whole audience. By request
the Choir also sang “Coronation,” in which all were asked to join; and they
did join with a will! The vaulted roof of that church never passed such an
ordeal before, and may now be considered perfectly safe. That good old tune-
how often it is murdered in these latter days, resembling the “Coronation” as
much as a cat does a cabbage.

I wish that all the descendants of the New England Fathers could hear just
such a concert. I am sure it would revive their early recollections, and increase
if need be, their respect and veneration for that pioneer band to whom they
owe so much, and whose pious ways are, alas! too much departed from, in
these days. I went 150 miles and paid near five dollars to hear JENNY LIND,
and never regretted it either; but, without any disparagement of the
incomparable singer, I confess I would go farther to hear such a concert as this,
that I have feebly attempted to describe.

And now I would inquire why we cannot have such a one in Albany?
They are common in New England this winter, and everywhere well received;
and are there not hundreds and thousands in Albany, too, who would gladly
attend one? I am sure there is enough of the New England feeling there to
make it a matter of interest. It certainly need not fail for want of singing talent,
for no city has more. I am sure my friend Col. Littlejohn would glory in
leading off, and would manifest as much zeal as he did for “Tippecanoe and
Tyler too” in ’40. What say you, Colonel? And then there is Prof. Packard
too- he knows just how to get up such an affair, and he must be urged to
engage in it. Of course, I will not drop a hint that the avails of such a concert
could, with great propriety, be given to the Orphan Asylum, as was the case
with this one in Hartford; but there are plenty of other charities that need it.
But enough on that point. I will only add, that in accordance with a desire very
generally expressed, the Hartford Choir are to give another concert of this
kind in the course of a couple of weeks (Albany Journal 1/23/1854:2).
The Hartford old folks clearly followed the format established by the New Haven group with one variation; those singing the melody were placed in “the orchestra,” a theater-like architectural feature of the neo-Gothic edifice not present in Centre Church or the older churches on the New Haven green. This may have been done in part for effect, but was probably necessitated by the fact that the gallery was too small to hold the large number of singers. The repertoire, drawn from the latest edition of the *Ancient Harmony Revived*, was in keeping with the New Haven concerts. Of the eighteen pieces mentioned by VALENTINE all but one, *Old Hundred*, were by American composers of the Billings and company school. All but four were fuging tunes, and seven were unapologetically minor.²⁵ As in the December concerts in New Haven, the event concluded with the mass singing of *Old Hundred*. The one other piece performed that was in the common church service repertoire of 1854 was *Coronation*, performed “by request,” and also joined by the audience. But the arrangement was, significantly, the original rather than one of the many “corrected” versions typically contained in the standard hymnals. As VALENTINE put it “that good old tune- how often it is murdered in these latter days, resembling *the* ‘Coronation’ as much as a cat does a cabbage” (2).

The singers were apparently members of various denominations, although one of the “divines” mentioned by VALENTINE, Doctor Thomas Robbins, born in 1777,

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²⁵ The *Ancient Harmony Revived* contains two songs named *Portland*, but the one performed was almost certainly the fuging tune by Abraham Maxim, one of the most popular in the overall OFC repertoire.
recorded in his diary the day after the first concert “yesterday there was a famous singing-meeting of aged people, mostly in the first society” i.e. members of Centre Church (Tarbox ed. 1886: 1077). A member of Yale’s class of 1796, Robbins was an antiquarian, bibliophile and a founder and first librarian of the Connecticut Historical Society, to which he donated his large collection of old books, and where I conducted much of my early research. His connections to the New Haven old folks were many. In addition to work related connections, he was Irene Battell Larned’s uncle and often called on the Larneds, Eleazar Fitch, Leonard Bacon and others when he visited New Haven. An avid singer and advocate of singing-schools and sacred music, Robbins was unable to attend the first Hartford concert due to illness, but must have enjoyed the second one tremendously, although he recorded in his diary only “at evening attended on invitation a very large singing-meeting in old-style tunes and singers” (1077).

Robbins was, like most of the other divines mentioned by VALENTINE, a Congregationalist preacher, but at least one was a prominent member of another denomination. Of Puritan ancestry and Unitarian parents, John Williams had converted to Episcopalianism after divinity training at Harvard, and became Assistant Bishop of Connecticut in 1851 while serving as president of Hartford’s Trinity
College. The Episcopal connection is significant, as Hartford’s Christ Church would soon become the first non-Congregational church to house an old folks’ concert.

Thomas Weston Valentine and a Poem by Mrs. Sigourney

The author of the lengthy letter to the editor of the *Albany Evening Journal*, an account that did much to fan the flames of the OFC phenomenon, is as interesting as the letter itself. “VALENTINE” was Thomas Weston Valentine, who had several compelling reasons to drop everything and jump on the train to Hartford. Among other things he was a singing-school teacher of long standing and, clearly, an advocate of “ancient harmony.” A licensed Baptist lay-preacher who, later in life, claimed to have preached “on over five hundred occasions, in more than fifty pulpits, in ten counties and three states” (Valentine 1874: 200), he also served his church as deacon, chorister, clerk and Sunday School superintendent and had a long standing interest in religious affairs generally. Like so many of his peers Valentine was also a reformer for whom the preservation of New England history, documenting his own family genealogy, and antiquarianism in general, were as much progressive as retrospective projects. In 1853 Valentine had family and friends in Hartford, possibly including his younger brother Henry who later served on the staff of Governor Marshall Jewell, son of OFC leader “Father” Jewell. Like most early old folks’

76 See Nichols 1924.
concert leaders and proponents Valentine had a long family history in New England. Like several he was the grandson of a Revolutionary War soldier and, like at least two others, the grandson of a Revolutionary War drummer. But Valentine was unique among public proponents of the old folks’ concerts in that his grandfather on his mother Sabra’s side, Abraham Wood, was a prominent composer of the Billings and company school, cited on the cover of antiquarian tunebooks including The Ancient Harmony Revived, the only composer whose works were included in the publications of William Billings other than those of Billings himself, and the composer of popular tunes including Worcester and Marlborough that would become OFC standards and are still in print in current editions of The Sacred Harp. More immediate to his own career, in 1854 Thomas Weston Valentine had an interest in the Hartford OFCs as the superintendent of the Albany Orphan Asylum. Due to his unique set of interests and connections to Hartford and the old folks’ concerts Thomas Weston Valentine’s enthusiasm is not surprising, and it was infectious.

The day after the concert was a busy one for Valentine. Before settling in to write his long letter to the editor, he had toured both the Hartford Orphan Asylum and The Retreat for “the relief of the insane,” and had begun his day by visiting Lydia Sigourney. Born in 1791, in 1854 Sigourney, herself, was one of the old folks. While she was a universally known public figure and one of the most revered poets in the country, her formal sentimentality had become outdated, and much of her later work

77 See Kroeger 1996: xxi
78 See Valentine1874: 200-201
centered on celebrating earlier, simpler times in the New England village and lamenting the changes that had contributed to the marginalization of her generation and style.\textsuperscript{79}

On January 23, the day Valentine’s letter was published in the \textit{Journal}, the \textit{Boston Courier} carried in full Mrs. Sigourney’s poem \textit{The Old Folks Concert}, reprinted from the \textit{Connecticut Courant} of a few days earlier. While clearly inspired by the second Hartford concert on the “quite stormy” evening of January 18, the bulk of the poem is devoted to a general celebration of old church ways; not the old church ways of the Episcopal church she had joined on marrying Charles Sigourney, but the Congregational church of her childhood. Sigourney refers only obliquely to the concert in three places. In the first stanza she notes the power of “ancient song” to call to mind memories of youth.

\begin{quote}
Back they come- those days of old,-
Back on Memory’s wing of gold,
And their visioned scenes again
Quicken, at the ancient strain,
As its tide of ancient song,
Quaintly rolls yon aisles along.
\end{quote}

In the second stanza Sigourney seems to imply the bad weather of January 18 in a celebration of Yankee religiosity and hardiness reminiscent of Harriet Beecher’s Stowe’s account of life in old Poganuc where “winter stood for something.” In the church of Sigourney’s memory

\textsuperscript{79} See Loeffelholz 2004: 32-64.
Stove or furnace never gave
Comfort to its humble nave;
Nor did winter’s cold deter
The warm hearted worshipper.

Finally, the “sweet singer of Hartford” concludes her tribute by linking the concert to the old-fashioned, “homespun,” rural American ways and values she viewed as being at the heart of the strength and moral character of the nation. Along the way she takes a pot shot at trains, telegraphy and implicitly any aspect of modernity that would threaten the moral and the local.

When our country, newly free,
Sober in her liberty,
Well content with rural cheer,
Had not doffed her homespun gear,

Did not ask on steam to fly,
With a whistle and a cry,-
Nor the lightning flash employ
As her tireless errand boy;

But she had a peaceful smile,
Full of heart and free from guile,
And at hearth-stone taught the while,
Truths to rear a healthful throng,-
Love that made republics strong,-
And we bless the ancient strain
That restores her thus again
(Boston Courier 1/23/1854:2).

Here she makes the strongest claim yet for the power of ancient harmony stating, in no uncertain terms, that the old hymns held the key to restoring not only memories of life in an idealized earlier time, but the increasingly divided nation itself.
While Sigourney was enthralled with the idea of old music performed largely by old people, I believe her impressions of the Hartford old folks’ concerts were gathered not from first hand observation but from published accounts and personal communication, most prominently her visit with Mr. Valentine. Of the eleven tunes she cites in the poem, none are fuging tunes, all but two are European compositions of the slow, staid variety advocated in the second *Old Hundred revival* of the early nineteenth century, and only one, Mr. and Mrs. Larned’s favorite tune *Jordan*, represented the music of Billings and company favored by the old folks. Perhaps the tunes she mentioned were those actually sung in the church of her youth, or perhaps her idea of old sacred music was influenced by her long association with the Episcopal church. While all the tunes she cites are included in the 1850 edition of the *Ancient Harmony Revived*, her account of the group’s repertoire doesn’t jibe with that given by the papers, so she may have just grabbed some familiar or poetic sounding titles. In any case, her generalized account of emotions, memories and national feeling stirred by old sacred music struck a chord, and in the months following its composition the poem was reprinted in full or quoted at length in papers around New England and as far afield as Sandusky, Ohio.

Valentine’s article, too, was referred to and even printed almost in full in newspapers including the *Salem Register* and the *Ohio State Journal*. With the Hartford concerts news coverage of the OFC phenomenon increased notably, which helped pave the way for a rapidly growing number of OFCs in western Massachusetts,
Albany, Portland, Kenosha and elsewhere before finally reaching Boston in late summer 1855.
Episcopali ans, Nitrous Oxide and Richard III

Although the job of Part II is to show the mushrooming of the OFCs before being taken up by their most famous practitioner, Robert Kemp, it is worth noting a few interesting developments in the tradition in and around Hartford after the initial blush before moving on. Pliny Jewell Sr. led two more successful concerts in Hartford that winter, although the press was mostly local and it was the first two that made the greatest impact on the spread of the practice. The third and “the fourth and last of these concerts (with a change of programme)” were held in Christ Church, the Protestant Episcopal church of committee member Colonel John Bull and, significantly, the first non-Congregationalist church to house an OFC (Hartford Courant 2/25/1854:3). While most OFCs in 1854-1855 continued to be held in Congregational churches, the Christ Church performance was a bellwether of the potential for wider participation.

Old Folks’ Concerts were held in the Hartford area here and there for at least a hundred years after the first. Pliny Jewell’s son Pliny Junior, for example, followed his father both in the leather business and in directing old folks concerts when he wasn’t busy representing the state of Connecticut at the National Music Congress or,
allegedly, directing a frog orchestra. Some of the most fascinating local developments in the OFC department took place during the Civil War. Less than a decade after the Centre Church concert, a local event called an old folks’ concert could mean a number of things, the “ancient harmony” being paired with anything from the ridiculous to the sublime. Following P.T. Barnum’s lead and heralding the birth of vaudeville, a performance on November 29, 1862 included an old folks’ concert, Act V of Shakespeare’s Richard III performed on horseback, and a group of Bohemian glassblowers (or a parody thereof). Another event a few months later, strangely not the only one of its kind, paired an OFC with a “grand exhibition of the nitrous oxide, or laughing gas” in which, it was advertised, “gentlemen will inhale the gas” and the audience would laugh so hard their sides ached (Hartford Daily Courant 5/8/1863: 3).

If events like these were designed to help the audience momentarily forget the war that was tearing the country apart, other OFCs offered more focused and dignified engagement with both the old music and the issues of the day. Of particular

80 A preview in the 11/29/1862 Hartford Courant actually says the entertainment would feature “the Bo-He-Man gas blower” which, assuming it is not a misprint, must have been some sort of burlesque of the troupe of Bohemian glass blowers popular in the 1860s. Either way, it’s a pretty odd thing.

81 Dr. G. Q. Colton had given his first nitrous oxide exhibitions in Hartford in 1844, at one of which local dentist Horace Wells apparently first came up with the idea that the gas might be useful as an anaesthetic. Wells tried to interest the medical establishment, but died unsuccessful. It wasn’t until Dr. Colton revived his entertainment in 1862 and went on the road in a double bill with Father Reed’s Old Folks Quartette that another Hartford dentist, Dr. R. Charles Dunham, tried out Wells’ idea at Colton’s suggestion and became the first to introduce nitrous oxide into his practice. See “The History of Anaesthesia” in The Connecticut Quarterly 1895.
interest to this study of music, antiquarianism, identity and reform are wartime performances given by two African American old folks troupes comprised of “some of the most respectable colored people” in the community, members of Hartford’s Talcott Street Congregational and Methodist Episcopal Zion churches, who gave popular old folks concerts both at home in Hartford and up and down the Connecticut River (*The Constitution* 5/7/1862: 1271).

The “Colored Old Folks of Hartford” During the Civil War

Held at least from the Northeast to the mid-western USA and southern Ontario, African American OFCs in general, and the Hartford groups in particular, are worthy of study in their own right. While a detailed account is beyond the scope of this work, a brief overview of the Hartford groups contributes to a broader understanding of the mushrooming of the OFCs, the performance of American history and the embodiment of the imaginary New England village. As with the first OFCs, many of the particulars were reported in local newspaper advertisements, previews and reviews. For a broader picture of Hartford’s black community in the 1860s I turned repeatedly to Barbara J. Beeching’s 1995 Trinity College master’s thesis on the remarkable collection of letters and documents of the Primus family, held by the Connecticut Historical Society. At least two members of the family were, themselves, apparently intimately involved with the OFCs. The organizing committee for the Talcott Street Church group was comprised of Mrs. J. Paul and Mrs. H. Primus, incidentally the earliest women I have found named as OFC organizers. Mrs. Primus must certainly have been Mehitable, born into a prominent black Hartford family and married to
Hartford’s “most noted black citizen” Holdridge Primus who is a strong candidate for the group’s song leader (quoted in Beeching 1995:1).

The most active group seems to have been the choir of the M.E. Zion church, led by J. F. Hazard, and managed by Perry Davis, considered later in life “perhaps one of the best known characters in the county of Hartford” (*Hartford Weekly Times* 1/3/1895:12). The first performance by the group of which I have found record took place on February 26, 1862 just four days after huge celebrations of Washington’s birthday and amidst a string of Union victories that involved many soldiers from Connecticut and Massachusetts, white and black, and inspired hope of an end to the war. The concert took place at Touro Hall, the 1,500 seat auditorium that in 1856 had become Hartford’s first synagogue. Every day for a week leading up to the concert the group placed ads in the *Hartford Courant* listing some of the pieces to be sung and informing the public that the money raised would go to the worthy cause of purchasing a melodeon for the church. “Go and see them,” the ad said, “they bring out the music with spirit and life” (2/21/1862: 3). The concert was enough of a success that “in consequence of the numerous solicitations of friends” and with financial assistance of the venue’s manager, “Mons. J. Arcan,” the group rented the equally large Allyn Hall for a repeat a few weeks later (3/17/1862: 2).

82 See the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Hartford website http://jhsgh.org/exhibit-touro.html
As with the first concert, ads for the Allyn Hall concert focused not on race or patriotism but on the quality of the music, using language notably more formal than what was usual for such things, perhaps in part to suggest the intended dignity of the performance. “We will endeavor to give entire satisfaction to all who favor us with their presence and their money. Come one come all, and see the Old Folks. Come you that love good singing, and judge for yourselves” (3). The Courant’s preview, too, focused on the music saying the event would “call out those who love the fine old strains of other days” and that “the old people promise to throw all their energies into the work, and there is little doubt but Allyn Hall will be made to ring with these ancient melodies” (3/19/1862: 2). In their careful language and, apparently, fine singing of often difficult pieces, Hazard, Davis and company may have been inspired by the example and teaching of early Talcott Street pastor J. W. C. Pennington, who escaped slavery and dedicated himself to, among other things, proving the “fallacy of that stupid theory, that nature has done nothing but fit us for slaves, and that art cannot unfit us for slavery” (quoted in Swift 1989: 223).

None of the early Hartford ads or articles mentioned the ethnicity of the performers, perhaps because it wasn’t part of the intended attraction of the performance or, perhaps more likely, because the congregation was known to residents of the city. But when the group performed out of town, first in Springfield, MA and later in Middletown, CT, they were billed as, and they billed themselves as, The Colored Old Folks. It is unclear whether they did this because they expected it to
be part of their drawing power, because they wanted to avoid surprising anyone, or for some other reason.

The first, and perhaps only, Springfield concert took place on April 17, 1862 at a time of great joy and sorrow, the Springfield Republican carrying news that day of President Lincoln’s signing into law a bill ending slavery in Washington DC and the previous day an account of the heroic death of local son Colonel Everett Peabody at the battle of Shiloh, the war’s bloodiest to date. It seems significant that the concert was held not at one of the city’s black churches but at Music Hall, a venue that, like Touro and Allyn Halls in Hartford, drew a general audience. It seems the group was making a concerted effort to reach out to a general public. The concert was followed, however, by a “festival” at Sanford Street Church, the African American Congregational church where radical abolitionist martyr John Brown had worked, worshipped and helped form a branch of the armed, militant antislavery League of Gileadites in response to the Fugitive Slave Act a little more than a decade earlier. The Republican’s review of the Colored Old Folks was positive and, while the group’s race figured prominently, the main focus was again on the quality of the performance.

The colored old folks concert, by a choir of about 30 persons from Hartford, Thursday evening, fully established their good reputation here, both in “tune and time.” Their costumes were brilliant and in keeping with the parts

83 The congregation is still active, having merged with another church and changed it’s name to St. John’s Congregational Church in honor of Brown. See http://www.sjkb.org/discover_stjohns/history.html
represented. The comic pieces were better done than by any “burnt cork” imitators (4/18/1862: 4).

A preview for a May 8 concert in Middletown, CT highlighted the novelty, pageantry and respectability of the performance as well as the expected high caliber of the music. It is not clear if the writer had first hand knowledge of the group, if he was making an already long-familiar assumption about African Americans’ musicality, or if he was simply reiterating the group’s press materials and reviews.

Something new is going to happen in Middletown on Thursday evening. There is to be an Old Folks concert, and the old folks are colored folks, and no burnt cork at all to be used. This company belongs in Hartford, and is composed of some of the most respectable colored people there. They have given successful concerts in Hartford and Springfield. If our citizens want to hear some old fashioned music by people who know how to sing, and want to see some ancient costume, they can do it on Thursday night at McDonough Hall for only a quarter of a dollar (Constitution 5/7/1862).

As evident from the newspaper accounts, in keeping with the common practice of old folks’ concerts in the 1860s, influenced by Father Kemp, both the M.E. Zion and Talcott Street Church groups sang selections from the ancient harmony repertoire along with patriotic and sentimental numbers, interspersed with humorous patter in at least one case and often, if not always, dressed in colonial costume. The most obvious parallel in public entertainment was the minstrel show, enormously popular in 1862 as it had been for decades before, and featuring usually white performers, their faces darkened with burnt cork, portraying black caricatures and
performing a version of African American music and culture. In light of the
popularity of minstrelsy and the tremendous amount of scholarship that has been
devoted to it in recent decades it might be tempting to view a group of African
Americans singing the music of William Billings in old fashioned Yankee garb as a
kind of reverse minstrel show. But the Talcott Street and M.E. Zion singers were not
lampooning or even imitating the culture of their white neighbors and, despite the
“comic pieces,” their performances were no burlesques. Like the first group of
Hartford old folks they were, themselves, Yankees, singing in a dignified fashion
Yankee music that was as much one aspect of their own history as it was a savvy and
aesthetically rewarding response to a historical moment. The final words of one of the
group’s most musically challenging pieces, *Ode On Science*, must have had
resonance for both historical and contemporary reasons for many in the audience,
black and white: “The British yoke, the Gallic chain, was urged upon our necks in
vain. All haughty tyrants we disdain, and shout long live America!”

In her study of the 1860 census, Beeching found in Hartford a well established,
tight knit black community with considerably higher rates of literacy and property
ownership than elsewhere, and some families that “had been in Hartford for
generations.” Of Hartford’s 700 black residents, “73 percent were natives of
Connecticut, and a full 90 percent had been born in Northern states” while in Boston,
for example, only “39 percent of blacks were natives of Massachusetts, and 59
percent had been born in Northern states” (1995: 37). In Hartford the census
recorded only eight illiterate black residents, and black property ownership was
double that in Boston by percentage. As Beeching observes, racism, segregation, discrimination and limited opportunity were pervasive and taken for granted in Hartford as elsewhere, but by comparison many in Hartford’s black community were doing pretty well, and the 1860s was a time when “black and white interests seemed to converge in the struggle over the future of slavery and the preservation of the Union” (11). They converged as well in concerns about immigration, which had increased so much in the previous ten years that in 1860 there were 12 times as many foreign born as black residents in Hartford, creating competition for jobs and housing that “though present, seems to have been of very limited importance before 1850” (35). I am convinced it is appropriate to view the concerts by the “colored old folks” as, in part, proclamations of solidarity between white and black abolitionist Yankees.

Being Hartford Yankees wasn’t the only point of connection between the Talcott Street Church and M.E. Zion singers and their local white audience members. Both churches had their roots in Hartford’s Centre Church, site of the city’s first OFC in 1854. In the mid 1820s a group of black Center Church congregants purchased land on Talcott Street for a church of their own and, ten years later, a group led by that church’s pastor broke away to form M. E. Zion, apparently out of a desire for services that were less reserved than the Congregationalist norm (23). One of the main reasons black congregants of Centre Church cited for starting a church of their own was dissatisfaction with being treated as second-class citizens in church, which

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84 The author notes, however, that some considered literate were functionally illiterate.
included being relegated to the gallery. Not only had older Talcott Street and M.E. Zion congregants apparently been around the music of Billings and company in their youth, they had had no option but to sit right up there with the choir. I have found no evidence of black congregants singing in the choir, but I have found accounts of African Americans being called on to sing in church services in the days before the advent of separate churches. Compositions like *Ode On Science, Denmark, Easter Anthem* and *The Dying Christian*, mentioned in ads for the M.E. Zion concerts, were among the most difficult in the ancient harmony repertoire. While the group may have been advertising what appears to have been its considerable musical prowess, I suspect the choice of repertoire also suggests long familiarity with the music or considerable practice, and probably both.

The phenomenon of African American old folks’ concerts, and the Hartford singers in particular, calls for further study. But from the evidence to date, the progressive antiquarians at Talcott Street and M.E. Zion Church were accomplished

85 See the *Essex Antiquarian* for May/1899 for a short account of old folks concerts that concludes with an appreciation of African American sacred singing in the days before the ancient harmony was considered ancient: “In the earlier days the voice of some negro slave lent variety to the concert. The full, sweet, rich tones of the negro voice is ever beautiful. A writer testifies to its effect with exquisite language:

‘Loud he sang the psalm of David!
He, a negro, and enslaved,
Sang of Israel’s victory,
Sang of Zion, bright and free.

And the voice of his devotion
Filled the soul with strange emotion,
For its tones by turn were sad,
Sweetly solemn, wildly glad’” (73).
performers who represented aspects of their own aesthetic and spiritual culture with both dignity and humor. Employing ancient harmony some knew from youth, they expressed through corporate singing the sacred and nostalgic as well as a national and regional pride they had in common with other New Englanders. The performances both expressed solidarity in turbulent times and proclaimed the singers’ natural right to a place, maybe even a vote, in the ideal New England village.
CHAPTER 8: FROM HARTFORD TO ALBANY TO KENOSHA

Returning to 1854, shaking off visions of the future and the war that was to come, let us return to the mushrooming of the old folks’ concerts as they started popping up with ever increasing regularity in a growing diversity of locations over the next year and a half. In addition to Valentine’s letter to the editor and Mrs. Sigourney’s poem, the most significant development in the immediate wake of Hartford’s success was the introduction of OFCs to the Pioneer Valley in Massachusetts in mid-February and Albany, New York a month later. The impact in western Massachusetts was mostly local, inspiring a host of towns up and down the Connecticut River Valley to put together old folks groups of their own. The region was to become the home of a particularly densely concentrated and long-lasting tradition, with even small towns beginning to get in on the act, some of which still held OFCs within living memory.

There had already been talk of an old folks’ concert in Springfield, MA for months when residents of the city made the short train trip to Hartford to see one in the flesh. But the nearby city of Westfield, just across the Connecticut River, beat Springfield to the punch, a group there holding the first OFC outside of Connecticut on February 16, 1854. In keeping with the established pattern, the local news reported that it was “so satisfactory a performance that its repetition is called for” (Springfield Republican 2/23/1854: 2). I have been unable to find any further information about
the event, and its impact appears to have been minimal and local. However, the people of New Haven took notice, and perhaps some pride from a distance, in the growing popularity of their “novel entertainment,” a New Haven paper reporting that “They have had an ‘Old Folks’ Concert’ in Westfield, Mass, which gave great satisfaction” (Columbian Register 2/25/1854: 4).

While the impact of the first OFC in western Massachusetts was local and slow to inspire imitation, the impact of the Albany concert was much broader, apparently leading indirectly to the first OFC in Kenosha, WI less than a month later and more directly to the first in Portland, Maine in mid-May and Newark, New Jersey by year’s end. We will return to Springfield, Massachusetts, but first let us turn our attention to points west.

Albany, the Ilsleys, Serendipity and Two Books

The first old folks’ concert in Albany took place on March 14, 1854 at “the old brick church,” the First Congregational Church of Albany.\footnote{Interestingly, this event took place just weeks before what appears to have been the last concert given by the Portland Sacred Music Society, formed and formerly led by Ferdinand Ilsley.} In this event I find myself in the midst of a number of serendipitous collisions that, among other things, help to open up the world in which the participants lived.\footnote{See Merton and Barber 2004 for a fascinating study of the history and sociological semantics of serendipity. Among other things, they tie such apparently meaningful happenstance, historically and phenomenologically, to the collecting of old books.} It was there that the collision of several people with the OFC formula led to the expansion of the practice.
to Wisconsin, New Jersey and the coast of Maine. And, oddly enough, in the streets of Albany, 1854 I, myself, bump into my dissertation advisor, Mark Slobin. As my research began with the chance finding of an ancient harmony tunebook given to Amelia Clarke by her father Daniel Russell Clarke, director of the first OFC in Northampton, MA, Slobin’s path in scholarship to the same time and place began with finding a bound volume of sheet music belonging to Emily McKissick, whose musical and religious life as a girl in Albany intersected with at least one key figure in the city’s first OFC. It is possible that the then nineteen year old McKissick, an able musician and most likely a choir singer, may even have been one of the “young folks” enlisted to help the “old folks” sing.

In Emily’s Songbook Slobin et al provide a model for using a single piece of material culture as the jumping off point for biography, music history and ethnography. In his contribution to the book James Kimball paints a vivid picture of Emily’s milieu and Albany’s musical, cultural and religious landscape in the 1840s and 1850s. Kimball’s account, based partly on Munsell’s Annals of Albany, depicts the city during that period as a place full of music, theater and activity; a rapidly growing and bustling capital city on the crossroads, and a railroad hub connected to the rest of the world and westward expansion as well by its prominent position on the Erie Canal. In addition to its many homegrown musical and theatrical events like the old folks’ concerts, due to its “thriving economy, rapidly growing population and important geographical location” Albany was also a “key stop for all manner of touring musical, theatrical and celebrity entertainments” including the ubiquitous
Jenny Lind and many others (Slobin et al 2011: 10).

To provide a firsthand picture of the neighborhood, a sense of context for the old folks’ concert, and also to further cement the bonds of intertextuality, I will quote Kimball’s quote of an especially picturesque item from the *Albany Evening Journal* describing a stroll down State Street, just short two blocks north of the “old brick church,” one late summer evening a few months before the first OFC.

**STATE STREET BY STARLIGHT.** – This great thoroughfare in the evening presents a somewhat singular appearance. Of the throngs of human beings that pass up and down its spacious walks, many congregate at different points along the avenue to hear and see what is going on in doors and in the open air. If we start from the Exchange these attractions (so the crowd say) meet our eye. The astronomer is looking through the telescope, the man of strength is testing his power on a piece of metal whose dial face notes how many pounds he can lift, while a third party is testing his wind on a similar piece of machinery. But they are not alone. Each object presents something of interest and an idle group are always to be seen around them. Then the balcony band at the Museum attracts its listeners, who congregate on the walk in front much to the annoyance of pedestrians and ladies in particular, who can scarcely edge their way through the unmannerly crowd without someone being jostled up against her. Passing up we meet a crowd collected about the window of the Morse Telegraph Office who appear eagerly interested in watching the effect of the mysterious fluid as it passes over the line; many a good joke has been perpetrated at the expense of some green horn, who for half an hour has been seen to watch the movements of Cull, who it is said could send a facsimile copy of any message left at the Buffalo or Albany office; but he never saw the mysterious paper – he was sold. Onward we move, breathing the air impregnated with the smell of ripened peaches, passing numerous fruit stands and some straggling musicians with hand organs, tambourines, fiddles and harps, until we meet the motley group collected around the store of Ar-Showe’s, the noted tea and coffee vender; looking in, we find behind the counter two Chinese, one dressed after the fashion of our own citizens and the other in Chinese costume. Almost everything from a stick of candy to a chest of tea or bag of coffee can be found; the children run after penny stick of candy and the girls buy the ginger paste.
We might extend our walk to the Capitol and note the place where the greatest farce of the season is being enacted, but we might be looked upon as having traveled out of our jurisdiction, and we will therefore conclude by advising all to go and see the play (9/2/1853: 2 in Slobin et al 2011).

Albany’s first old folks’ concert was clearly a sensation in a lively town accustomed to sensations, including those of the homegrown variety. While Thomas Weston Valentine’s letter to the editor of the *Albany Evening Journal* was apparently an important influence on the event and, as he had suggested, the proceeds were donated to the Albany Orphan Asylum, Valentine’s trip to Hartford was far from the local old folks’ only lifeline to the roots and meanings of the OFCs. The Albany old folks had their own reasons for mounting a concert including, as was the case in New Haven and Hartford, the “New England feeling” Valentine mentioned and an interest in performing their own version of a Yankee and centrally Congregationalist village.

Although the “old brick church” was apparently the oldest church building then extant in the city, in 1854 it had only been a Congregational church for some four years. Since its construction, the building had been home of First Presbyterian Church of Albany and it was only in 1850, after several years of “the most serious controversy in the history” of the church that the Presbyterian majority left to build another home. Only then was the original edifice sold to a Congregationalist faction, including forty-seven members of First Presbyterian and members of other churches who had either grown up with, or for some reason preferred, Congregational polity and worship style, who banded together to form the first church of the denomination
in the city’s history. By now we should not be surprised that the first sermon preached in the newly Congregationalist “old brick church” in 1850 was none other than Leonard Bacon, pastor of New Haven’s Center Church. Two years later, in 1852, the city had “ordered that tan bark be placed around the church… to deaden the noise caused by the rumble of cart wheels over the cobblestone pavements” as, inside, were gathered four hundred and sixty-three Congregationalist pastors including Bacon, Henry Ward Beecher, his father Lyman and other leading lights “delegated from seventeen states and Canada” and comprising the “first Council or Synod, representative of American Congregationalism as a whole, that had met since the Cambridge synod of 1646-48” (Walker 1894: 382). This, dubbed the “Albany Convention,” had led to the dissolution of the Congregationalist/Presbyterian “plan of union” and increasing interest in specifically Congregationalist identity and other developments germane to the meaning and mushrooming of the OFCs as discussed in Part I.

One member of First Presbyterian who may have gone with the Congregationalists was Ferdinand Ilsley, formerly the church’s choir director and one of the prime movers behind Albany’s first OFC. Ilsley had moved to Albany from Portland, Maine by 1839 and was proprietor of what had become by 1853 the “principal music store in town,” selling tunebooks, instruments and sheet music to locals including the young Emily McKissick (Slobin et al 2011: 11). He also sold

88See Blayney 1877, especially page 36, for more on this topic.
tickets to the old folks’ concerts. By the 1850s Ilsley had a long track record of performing in, and leading, large-scale concerts. “At the age of twelve he sang the alto solos in Handel's Dettengen Te Deum at the concert given in April, 1820, by the Beethoven Musical Society” of Portland, Maine, an organization prestigious enough to have gotten Beethoven himself to consider writing a piece for them late in his life (Edwards 1928: 77). In keeping with his long association with progressive music, a concert Ferdinand directed near Albany in March, 1853 was praised in the musically progressive/conservative Dwight’s Journal of Music for its largely European classical repertoire, the paper noting the event as “one of many good signs that Yankee Psalmody and Negro Minstrelsy are gradually yielding to something better in our inland towns and cities” (in Slobin et al 2011: 11). Little did the editors know that within months Ferdinand Ilsley would not only be involved in planning concerts comprised exclusively of “Yankee Psalmody,” but that part of his motivation, “in common with many of [Albany’s] older citizens,” was apparently that this might “have the effect to introduce into our churches music more in accordance with the taste and feelings of our worshippers, and more devotional in its character,” in particular the very “ancient sacred music” routinely excoriated in the pages of Dwight’s (Albany Evening Journal 4/1/1854: 2). Like Leonard Bacon and others, Ilsley saw in the popular music of Billings and company the potential to encourage revitalized congregational singing.

It is worth reiterating here that while many, if not all, leaders of the early old folks’ concerts were music reformers interested in improving the state of music in the
country, what made some music, in the words of *Dwight’s Journal*, “better,” was not, for them, always about theoretical absolutes but was often contingent on the music’s purpose and effect. It was this manifestation of the legendary, self-conscious, pragmatism of the self-proclaimed Yankee that made possible what seemed a contradiction to those inclined to equally intentional absolutism. Apparently some music reformers didn’t understand, or at least pretended not to understand, the high/low cultural balancing act involved in Yankee pragmatism and self-image in which seemingly mercurial behavior made perfect sense and was perfectly consistent. Like the hyper-educated Joshua Leavitt, editor of the deliberately populist tunebook *The Christian Lyre*, Ilsley and other OFC leaders apparently saw in the potential of popular-if-antiquated hymnody a usefulness that sometimes trumped both highbrow European aspiration and industrial-age expectations of order. And their embrace of the music was less often resigned than enthusiastic, as they saw the importance of sacred music’s emotional impact and historical connection as at least equal in importance to the technical requirements espoused by many of their more absolutist co-reformers. An interesting case in point connected to Ferdinand Ilsley is the two editions of a tunebook published by an organization he helped found. The first edition of *The Portland Sacred Music Society Collection*, 1839, is comprised mostly of music by the great masters, European psalm tunes and new compositions in imitation of these models, including a number by Ilsley himself. But in keeping with the growing mid-century interest in ancient harmony, the second edition of 1842, renamed the *Eastern Lyre*, was a deliberately more eclectic collection, including a large number of
tunes by Billings and company in their original arrangements.

In the organization of Albany’s first OFC Ferdinand Ilsley was probably the main man behind the scenes, but he did not lead the singing. That honor went to his seventy three year old father Nathaniel, who either happened to be visiting Albany from the family home in Portland, Maine at the time or, more likely, was imported expressly for the purpose of playing the role of antiquated singing master leading the music of his youth. Albany had plenty of candidates for authentic old-time chorister, some of whom Valentine had suggested in his letter to the editor. But Nathaniel Ilsley had a special claim to the role, due not only to his age but to his prominence as a longtime advocate of musical progress and the patriarch of a large musical family that included “seven children, four boys, all tenors, and three girls, all sopranos,” widely celebrated in association with music in their region. Even several generations later, in 1928, the author of *Music and Musicians of Maine* wrote “to the Ilsleys, the City of Portland owes much for its progress in music.” Of all Nathaniel’s children Ferdinand, “a superior violinist as well as a tenor singing” was the most well known and, at least in Albany, must have been known to virtually everyone with an interest in music (Edwards 1928/1970: 77). I cannot imagine a better candidate for leader of Albany’s first old folks’ concert than the aged father of the city’s most prominent purveyor of all things musical.

I have been unable to answer a number of salient questions about ideas of identity, regional and national sentiment and music at play in the Albany concert
which was, in a sense, the first multi-ethnic OFC. Settled by Dutch traders well before the Puritans set up shop in Plymouth, Albany was hardly a Yankee town and, as we have seen, didn’t even have a Congregational church until 1850. While some involved in the OFC were, like the Ilsleys, displaced New Englanders, some with deep local roots also played an active role. The chairman of the arranging committee, for example, was Colonel Samuel Pruyn, a prominent merchant, bank president, and a member of the Dutch Reformed Church and one of Albany’s most established and best-known Dutch families. He was also an antiquarian who “assisted Joel Munsell in the compilation of the ‘Annals of Albany’” (Hughes 1895:16). Did Pruyn have particular interest in old New England sacred music? (The Dutch Reformed and Congregationalist churches had a long history of close ties by 1854). Was his interest in the concert more broadly antiquarian? As a descendant of French speaking Dutch settlers, what was his relationship to the idea of the Puritans as ancestors? Did the event inspire national pride in participants and audience members and, if so, did national feeling trump the particularities of local history? It may be that for most people it was just a novel entertainment with a moral and antiquarian bent that raised money for a good cause, but as we track the mushrooming of the practice it is worth keeping such questions in mind, particularly questions of the relationship between the individuals on stage and the people, or versions of themselves and their ancestors, they represented.

Albany’s first OFC followed the formula established in New Haven and Hartford. The singers included “one hundred and seventy ‘old people’ of both sexes,”
arranged in the front of the gallery (Cayuga Chief 3/21/1854: 2). Nineteen of the twenty-four songs performed, all from the Ancient Harmony Revived, were American pieces of the Billings and company school, including thirteen fuging tunes and two anthems and, as in New Haven and Hartford, the concert concluded with the mass singing of Old Hundred. While the performance didn’t sell out, the house was nearly full and the evening generated enough excitement to merit a repeat on March 28, once again at the Congregational Church but this time with Ferdinand Ilsley himself at the helm.

The Albany concerts apparently had both a direct and indirect impact on the mushrooming of the practice. They were likely the direct inspiration for groups that performed in Rochester and Buffalo in late April. I have not been able to confirm it, but I suspect the elder Ilsley, having returned to Portland Maine, had a hand in the city’s first OFC that spring. Not long after the Albany concerts Ferdinand Ilsley moved to Newark, New Jersey, taking the old folks’ concerts with him and leading the first to take place south of New Haven in late December. Although the very next community after Albany to hold a concert was Springfield, MA, to which we shall presently turn our attention, it is worth pausing in Albany to consider a newspaper article, its author and their possible connection to the OFCs’ dramatic leap westward in the spring of 1854.

Thurlow Weed Brown, Wisconsin and the Fruits of the Albany OFC

The most complete account of the first Albany concert appeared in the March
21, 1854 edition of *The Cayuga Chief*, later named *The Wisconsin Chief*, a reform-minded paper out of Auburn, NY devoted especially to the cause of temperance. The author of the piece was the paper’s editor Thurlow Weed Brown who, having missed the “rare treat” of hearing his friends and local favorites The Amphions, had “blundered upon one of even greater interest” while visiting Albany, the details of which he provided in an open letter to his sister and co-editor Emma Brown (2).

![Figure 12: Emma and Thurlow Brown, courtesy of Be-Hold Inc.](image)

Thurlow Weed Brown was memorialized by his friend in the temperance fight, Charles Jewett, as a man “with faculties of observation unusually keen, a brilliant imagination, strong logical powers, a rare command of language, an iron will, and a hatred of the whole liquor system as intense as ever glowed in a human soul” who had “contributed largely to mould the public sentiment of his time” (Jewett 1872: 366). Brown is interesting in connection with the mushrooming of the practice for
several reasons. For one thing, he provided what may be the earliest complete concert program to be published, including the lyrics and page numbers in the Ancient Harmony Revived for all twenty-four songs performed. More importantly, at the time of his letter he was in the process of moving himself and his paper from Auburn to Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin, about seventy miles inland from Kenosha. I have not been able to trace a direct connection, but I suspect Brown may have been an influence in the formation of the old folks’ choir that performed in Kenosha on April 11, 1854, a year to the day after the very first OFC in New Haven, and less than three weeks after the publication of Brown’s letter to the editor. Like many who settled in Wisconsin in the mid-nineteenth century, Brown was a descendant of puritan ancestors whose family had moved progressively westward over the generations to Cayuga County, New York and surrounds and then onward to newly minted Yankee outposts in the west. His article provides insight into the perceived timeliness and emotional impact of old people singing old sacred music in 1854 that is likely to have resonated particularly strongly with Yankee reformers wishing to establish incarnations of the traditional/imaginary Puritan New England village in the Wild West.

While, for some, the OFCs as a whole and the re-assignment of the melody to

89 I have been unable to find a direct connection between T.W. Brown and Kenosha OFC leader William Seymour. If Seymour was, indeed, influenced by Brown’s enthusiasm for the Albany concert, they would have to have communicated by telegraph, and Seymour would have to have gotten right on the project. Brown wrote to his sister Emma on May 15, the day after the concert, and The Kenosha Telegraph for May 16 contained the first publication of the intention to mount a local OFC. The Telegraph for May 17 issued a general call to “old folks who are also singers” to attend the first rehearsal, set to take place on Saturday May 20.
the tenor singers in particular may have represented a revival of Puritan masculinity in an age of what some feared was the increasing feminization of religion, for Brown the feminine and domestic implications of the event were front and center. A true devotee of what came to be called the “cult of domesticity” in twentieth century intellectual folklore, Brown wrote of the singers “such an array of venerable mothers never before blessed our sight. Said a hardened young man in our hearing ‘I am a better man for this sight. Would that one of those were my mother, I know I should not be what I am’” (Cayuga Chief 3/21/1854: 2). Here Brown echoed a theme common in his writing, and the episode may even have influenced a story he published later that year in Why I Am A Temperance Man, in which an image of a young man fallen to the curb in a drunken stupor illustrates the chapter titled “If my mother had lived, I should never have been here” (1854: 262). Brown’s own childhood had been difficult and his mother long an invalid, which he attributed largely to his father’s alcoholism. Situating the ancient harmony of the old folks not in church but in the home, he wrote “by the rocking cradles of our childhood and often even now at the hearth, from voices growing tremulous with age, the soul-stirring hymns of another generation swell out like tuneful whisperings, drawing us with chastening bonds more closely to the past” (Cayuga Chief 3/21/1854: 2). Brown certainly had an interest in the music itself, writing of its “grandeur and thrilling power which, whenever and wherever heard, still captivates the soul and holds it entranced.” Likewise he bemoaned the fact that “in the course of progress in sacred music, the choicest gems of the past have been abandoned” and “harmony of less
depth and power has been forced upon the stage” (2). But to Brown the concert in Albany seems to have represented, more importantly, home, stability, the pure religion of days gone by and, especially, mother.

Figure 13: “If My Mother Had Lived,” from *Why I Am a Temperance Man*

In logic that is by now familiar, as a reformer Brown also apparently saw in the festival of retrospection at the Albany OFC signs of a way forward through working to recapture the imagined temperance and the noble, pious, republican spirit of his ancestors. “May the ‘old people’s concerts mark a new era in the musical world,” he wrote (2).
The OFCs’ potential to embody both mother home and father church as well as the stability of the idealized Puritan village must have been particularly compelling for reformers on the rough-and-ready frontier. By 1854 Kenosha had seen tremendous growth and change since its settlement as Pike, later Southport, by a company from Hannibal, NY beginning in 1835, but it was still a fledgling community in the evolving Yankee diaspora. I suspect the settlement’s very remoteness from New England may have been one reason the locals took so early and vigorously to the OFC idea.

Due in part to the settlement’s newness and relative remoteness, religious practice appears to have been more malleable in Kenosha than back in New England and was marked, in the early days, by considerable improvisation and interdenominational collaboration. Although Peter Woodin, president of the Western Emigration Company behind the town’s settlement, was a prominent Baptist preacher and church planter, no church of any denomination was built until 1840, although members of the community erected a “school house and a place of worship, free, to all denominations” in 1837. In late 1848 Kenosha, then Southport, gave birth to the short-lived Excelsior Church, “founded on purely democratic principles” and welcoming “all classes, the high and the low, the believer and the unbeliever” to share a platform and “advocate with perfect freedom, whatever doctrine” they wanted (Mygatt 1857/1904: 395). In such an atmosphere of invented and improvised tradition it should not be surprising, perhaps, that the first old folks’ concert in the west was the most ecumenical to date. Although organized and directed by Congregationalist
Deacon William Seymour, it took place in the town’s Baptist church, with remarks by not only Baptist and Congregationalist ministers, but apparently by a Methodist and an Episcopalian as well. The ecumenical nature of the event may have been partly the child of necessity, as it must have been a challenge to scare up enough old folks for a large choir in a frontier town less than twenty years old, the Congregational church was in the process of being moved to a new location, and an ecumenical gathering of singers might have suggested the utility, as well as the symbolic and practical power, of an ecumenical group of speakers. As it turned out the singers available were “mostly women” and, possibly influenced by T. W. Brown’s article, a local reviewer wrote about the feminine power of the event. “It was a sight to strike one with reverential awe, to see so many aged women, with their neat white caps on, all sitting before us with quiet simplicity, and modesty. It instinctively sent our thoughts back to the days of our mothers and grand mothers, with all the loves and joys connected with the memory thereof” (*Kenosha Telegraph* 4/13/1854: 3). Incidentally, this is the earliest reference I have found to the singers’ old-fashioned attire, something that would become an important feature of the OFCs in coming months, and a topic to which we will return below.

As far as I have been able to determine the next OFC west of New England and New Jersey didn’t take place until March, 1855 at the young Plymouth Congregational Church in Cleveland, Ohio, the “Boston of the New England of the west.” While old folks’ concerts would eventually become rather common in the Midwest, at least in parts settled substantially by New Englanders, Deacon Seymour
and the Kenosha singers were well in advance of the charge. The power of the ancient harmony’s domestic, feminine associations recognized by Thurlow Weed Brown in Albany and the anonymous reviewer in Kenosha would come to play an important role in the music’s adoption as a tool in the abolition fight, as we shall see presently when we reach Greenfield, Massachusetts.

Spring, 1854: Mushrooming With Increasing Intensity

The next town after Albany to hold an OFC was Springfield in the Connecticut River Valley, the “Pioneer Valley,” of western Massachusetts. While this concert was most likely the thirteenth OFC to have taken place in five towns in just under a year beginning with the New Haven original, the following twelve months saw at least forty one concerts in twenty three towns in six states before late March 1855, with continued rapid expansion in the months leading to Kemp’s Tremont Temple triumph of March 13, 1856. April, 1854 saw concerts not only in Kenosha but Rochester, Buffalo and probably Bridgeport, CT, followed by events in a rapidly growing number of places in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire and New Jersey.90

90 The only other new wrinkle I have discovered during that month was the first OFC I have identified as having taken place outside of a church setting; an April 28 performance led by B. W. Durfee at Buffalo’s Corinthian Hall, a theater that had hosted the likes of Susan B. Anthony, Jenny Lind, Frederick Douglass and Ole Bull.
In relation to the coming national and international renown of Father Kemp and his troupe, the most pertinent movement was the gradual closing in on Boston. By May 1854 the practice had reached Lowell, MA some 30 miles northwest of the city. By the following January it had made it to Salem, 15 miles up the coast, by February to the neighboring town of Chelsea, just a short train or ferry ride to the northeast and, three weeks later, to Boston itself. In these and numerous other performances along the way, OFC leaders and performers added to the basic formula most of the elements that would come to be associated most closely with Kemp: costume, instruments, props, music in addition to the ancient harmony and, primarily with Kemp, commercialism and a strong dose of Yankee theater. The practice was clearly well established by early 1856, but the significance of Kemp’s triumphant return to his former hometown is at least twofold. Symbolically it was a return, in a big way, of the music of Billings and company to the city most closely associated with its birth and alleged demise. It was also a watershed moment in the mushrooming of the practice. Although there had been OFCs earlier in Newark and Portland, Boston was the real city to jump on the bandwagon in a big way, and it was with Kemp’s performance there that the OFC began to bridge the gap between phenomenon and epidemic to the extent that a few years later the general public would forget, if they ever knew, that the concerts had not originated there, at least not this time around.

Before returning to the advance on Boston, let us first step out of our strict timeline once again to stay in place for a more localized case study; the mushrooming
of the OFCs in and around the Connecticut River Valley of Massachusetts. There we will find several items of interest, including several OFC firsts and innovations, a fleshing out of the concerts’ political implications, a discussion of micro-regional differences between neighboring towns and a return to the antiquarian tunebook owned by Daniel Russell Clarke, and later his daughter Amelia, that I bought at a flea market in 1991 and where my research really began.
CHAPTER 9: THE PIONEER VALLEY, WESTERN MASSACHUSETTS

The Valley’s Personality

As the product of Connecticut planter descendants, for the first year of the OFC’s existence it was strongly correlated with people who could trace their ancestry to New Haven and Hartford, or to Connecticut River Valley towns including Springfield, MA to which Connecticut had given birth. While scholars continue to refine and reshape ideas of regionalism in early New England, I am inclined to follow historian Peter Benes in recognizing in the Pioneer Valley a “personality” that might, in addition to the many connections with New Haven and Hartford, help explain the early adoption and remarkable persistence of OFCs in the region.

Over a century before the OFCs, residents of the Valley, many under the influence of Reverend Jonathan Edwards, had also been early adopters of Isaac Watts’ metrical version of the psalms. According to Benes “in its preference for Watts, as in the larger Great Awakening of which Watts was a part, the Connecticut Valley played out its historic role as rival to Boston’s hegemony over Puritan north America” (1981: 131). After the Revolution, communication improved dramatically, but for well over a century prior “the insularity of the Connecticut Valley was…a factor in the development and perpetuation of a regional style,” and Boston was much further “physically and psychologically” than sister towns up and down the river (Hosley
Noting that “the singing of Watts was consistent with the original purposes of the Connecticut Colony settlements,” Benes suggests it was also consistent with “Valley tastes in art and architecture” and part of “a household and ecclesiological aesthetic that gave regional cohesion to a dispersed population” (Benes 1982: 131).

I find in the interplay of three factors, in particular, some accounting for the local prominence of old folks’ concerts. Longstanding family and church connections and lines of communication between towns along and near the river were clearly part of the puzzle. More tentatively I suggest part of the “personality” of the region was expressed in a subtly localized version of the Yankee self-image discussed in Part I: a dynamic balancing of the urban and the rural, modern refinement and often self-consciously countrified Puritan conservatism and progressive retrospection. Part of this self-image was, and continues to be, a feeling of rivalry with Boston and a sense among residents of the Pioneer Valley as the real heart of New England. More microscopically, I believe the Valley’s long association with Isaac Watts, whose poetry was employed in the lion’s share of the old folks’ music, may have contributed to making the concerts so popular and enduring in the area. Finally, the Pioneer Valley was a hot bed of abolitionist and Underground Railroad activity and, for

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91 Here I may be bending the author’s words to my own devices, as his argument is, in part, that communication improvements and the growth and increasing industrialism of towns around the Valley largely eradicated the regionalism and insularity of the area after the Revolution. Discussing architecture in Windsor and other Connecticut River Valley towns, Hosley argues that patterns in the area had more to do with lines of communication than with proximity or some innate regional identity.
reasons discussed further below, the OFCs were very appealing to antislavery activists. But whatever the reasons, residents of the Pioneer Valley took to the old folks’ concerts like fish to water, beginning with the Westfield concerts in February 1854 and especially in the wake of the concerts in Springfield a month later.

Colonel Warriner, Dr. Osgood and the Old Folks of Springfield

There had been talk of a local OFC in the Springfield papers since shortly after the New Haven original, but planning didn’t begin until nearly a month after the first in Hartford. An item in the February 4 *Springfield Republican* noted that “these affairs are getting to be somewhat common in Connecticut, and we believe they have failed of success in no instance;” and asked “can there not be such a concert in Springfield, led by Col. Warriner, and in Dr. Osgood’s church?” (2). A few days later in the same paper “one of the ‘old ones’” called for a meeting of old singers to discuss the matter (2/9/1854: 2). On February 11 they had their meeting, and a committee was appointed “to ascertain of Col. Warriner whether he would take charge of the proposed concert” (2/13/1854: 2). Warriner agreed, a license was obtained for a series of concerts from the board of aldermen, and within two weeks the paper was able to report “the fire is up and the thing is going with all of Young America enthusiasm… The Old Folks’ Concert will be the great local event of the year” (3/1/1854: 2). The location, as suggested in the letter to the *Republican*, was by far the most obvious choice: “Dr. Osgood’s church,” the First Congregational Church
Samuel Osgood, born in 1784 was, at the time of the first OFC, nearing the end of a long tenure as the church’s pastor, a position he had taken in 1809 when First Church was still literally the only church in town, as it had been in various forms since the 1630s. Prior to enrolling at Dartmouth College, Osgood had studied with Daniel Webster, with whom he remained close and who came to hear Osgood preach when visiting Springfield. Early considered “more liberal than many of his ministerial brethren,” when conflict with Unitarianism had come to a head in 1819 Osgood “had no hesitation in ranging himself with those who adhered to the tenets of John Calvin.” Remembered as a lifelong and unflagging “champion of orthodox faith,” Osgood was also a staunch abolitionist who debated those advocating a gradual end to slavery in a series of letters to the *Boston Recorder*, several of which were reprinted in the *Springfield Weekly Republican* (Morris 1875: 43). He was also an Underground Railroad station master, a position he shared with, and which likely brought him in contact with, a number of people who became prominent OFC leaders and participants in the Pioneer Valley.

The choice of chorister was no less obvious than the choice of location. Colonel Solomon Warriner, born in 1778, had led the choir at First Church for some forty years beginning in 1801 and, although a merchant by trade, he had a national reputation as a composer and tunebook compiler in his own right and in collaboration with the renowned sacred music reformer Thomas Hastings. Warriner had led music
at many events of local importance, including Dr. Osgood’s ordination. The ancient harmony was the sacred music of Warriner’s youth, and “at even a tender age he used to sing the old fashioned ‘alto’ in the village church,” but, like most OFC leaders, the colonel was a music reformer who had early adopted modern European-leaning standards and practices (Warriner 1899: 143). He is remembered as having done “more than any other man to elevate the style of sacred music in Western Massachusetts” through work that included being the founding leader of Springfield’s first formal musical organization, the Handel and Haydn Society (143). Warriner is also sometimes credited as the first American compiler to set the tune in the treble (or soprano), advocating that women alone sing the part, in his 1813 Springfield Collection of Sacred Music. In addition to his musical qualifications and long history with the church, Warriner was a Yankee’s Yankee: the son of a Revolutionary soldier and member of a well-established local family who had, himself, served in the War of 1812.

The success of the first Springfield OFC was reported even before the event took place. In early March Timothy Morton Dewey was already working on a concert up river in Greenfield inspired by the “eminent success achieved by Hartford and Springfield (?) in that line” (Springfield Republican 3/7/1854 :2, question mark original). The New York Evangelist, reporting on the fourth Hartford concert, claimed the events had been “reproduced also in Springfield and other places (3/9/1854: 39). While Dewey, with his question mark, was predicting success for the Springfield old folks, I don’t know if the Evangelist editor was thinking of the concert in Westfield
and substituting Springfield unconsciously or if he actually thought the Springfield concert had already happened. Either way, Springfield was clearly on the minds of the OFCs’ target audience and poised for a memorable concert.

The performance followed the established formula with no apparent innovation. As in New Haven, Hartford, Westfield and Albany, twenty-five cent tickets were sold at the local book and drugstores, the concert was well attended and enjoyed, the songs performed were of the familiar class and they were sung by a group comprised of both old and young folks. The papers were strangely quiet in the wake of the first concert before beginning a barrage of publicity for the repeat on March 24, postponed to the 29th. The only article in direct response to the first concert I have found was a letter to the editor titled “DON’T HAVE A FUSS” in which the author implies the failure to decide beforehand to which worthy cause the proceeds would be donated led to some argument between committee members, a problem that had also arisen after the second Albany concert (3/21/1854). Dr. Osgood himself responded in a letter titled “NO FUSS,” in which he said wasn’t aware of any dissension, didn’t want people in neighboring towns to think there had been any, and encouraged people to come to the next concert, the proceeds from which the committee had decided to dedicate towards finishing the gateway to the city cemetery (3/22/1854: 2).

The editors of the Republican took it upon themselves to blow the loud trumpet for the second concert. “Let the old church again be crammed,” wrote one. “We trust that everybody, and everybody’s wife and children are calculating to attend
the Old Folk’s Concert on Wednesday evening. Very few opportunities occur in one’s life-time to hear so magnificent a choir, as Col. Warriner has in charge” (3/27/1854: 2). For a week before hand the paper carried lengthy notices in the local section and, on the day of the concert, one last reminder: “Remember the Old Folks’ concert tonight. Remember that the proceeds go to improve the cemetery. Remember that you must buy tickets before you go. Remember to go!” (3/29/1854: 2).

The second concert generated considerably more press than the first, including description of the scene, by now familiar. One interesting observation contributed to the growing body of press devoted to reception of the OFCs, focusing on audience members’ experience and internal participation almost on the level of reflex. The music was not just in nostalgic remembrance, it was in their bodies. Wrote one anonymous reviewer “it was worth the price of admission to see the old men down stairs keeping time with their thumbs, and swallowing the swelling tide of music with open mouths, as old Lenox, and Bridgewater, and Sherburne, and Victory, and Woburn, and Montgomery, and China, and Castle Street, and Majesty, and Old Hundred, and so forth, rolled out from a hundred voices.” As to the evening’s only reported imperfection, “we noticed quite a number of gentlemen and ladies from adjoining towns, among the audience, and only regret that opportunities have not been afforded for the attendance of large numbers of our neighbors, by the convenient running of the trains” (3/30/1854: 2). In another example of symbiosis between life and the news, written either by or about someone apparently familiar with Thomas Weston Valentine’s account of finagling his way into the second Hartford concert, an
in-joke in the form of a letter to the editor said “the gentleman from one of the neighboring towns who got into the last ‘old Folks’ concert’ by representing himself to be one of the choir, is respectfully informed that the committee are just a quarter short, and would like to have him pay up. We haven’t the slightest idea who the man is” (4/5/1854: 2).

The Springfield old folks remained in the news and the public eye throughout the spring and summer, one interesting example being a reunion of the singers at the invitation of prominent local engraver Jonathan Golthwait, who asked through the paper that the singers come “to eat strawberries with him in a grove near his residence” (6/24/1854: 3) on the rural south side of town, a gathering at which the Republican said “there is certainly an intimation that the grand old tunes are to be sung in the woods” (6/22/1854: 2).

The press response to the Springfield OFCs appears to have been mostly local, although some notice was taken further afield as noted above, and the Norwich Courier of April 19 carried news that “the ‘Old Folks’ of Springfield recently got up a Concert after the fashion of those at New-Haven and Hartford; and Col. Warriner, who officiated as chorister on the occasion, has just been presented with one hundred dollars of the proceeds of the concert as a testimonial of the esteem entertained for
him by the choir” (2). While the old folks of Springfield failed to make as geographically broad a splash as their counterparts in New Haven, Hartford and Albany, their concerts were significant to the practice’s gradual closing in on Boston, and marked the beginning of the particularly dense concentration and long-lived tradition of OFCs in and around the Pioneer Valley. In 1854 and early 1855 OFC groups in the valley would add several innovations to the basic formula, including the addition of antique instruments, the beginnings of concerts in smaller, out of the way places, and a more overt connection to the antislavery movement.

Greenfield: A Town Hall, a “Yankee Viol” and an Antislavery Anarchist

The next town in western Massachusetts to hold an OFC in the wake of Springfield’s success was Greenfield, about forty miles up the Connecticut River. The first concert there saw several innovations on the basic formula that would become common features at OFCs elsewhere, either in direct imitation based on written and oral accounts or, in some cases, simply because they involved rather obvious associated details imported from other performance and local history practices. It was also in Greenfield, in the fall of 1854, that the OFCs first became overtly associated with the radical abolition movement, as organizers discovered that the concerts’

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92 Such expressions of gratitude were not uncommon in local performances, including OFCs. It was somewhat widely reported, for example, that Pliny Jewell had received an engraved sterling silver pitcher for his leadership in Hartford.
sound and associations with childhood, mother, father, home and harmony could be a powerful tool in arousing public indignation and sympathy for those enslaved, for whom home was “but another name for earth’s deepest sorrow and most intense anxiety” (*Liberator* 12/1/1854: 191).

The first of Greenfield’s many OFCs over nearly a century to come took place on the afternoon and evening of May 2, 1854 at the brand new Town Hall. This may have been only the second such event anywhere to be held outside of a church, and likely the first that was not tied to a charitable cause. Rather than benefitting local orphans or town beautification the arranging committee gave the “$30, left after paying the expenses of the Concert” to the man “who conceived and superintended the getting up of the concert, on his own responsibility in regard to the expenses and the trouble of it:” Timothy Morton Dewey, Esq. (*Salem Register* 5/11/1854: 2).

A lawyer, amateur antiquarian, manufacturer of scythe-snathes, and one-time riverboat captain, Tim Dewey was also well qualified in music. A published songwriter and compiler, with Boston’s renowned L. O. Emerson, of the 1852 *Romberg Collection of Sacred Music*, Dewey had led singing schools since at least 1838, one of which was allegedly attended by eight hundred students. While studying law in Boston he had helped organize the National Music Convention in

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93 If I seem overly familiar, I follow the lead of one of his singing school students whose copy of the *Romberg Collection* I bought somewhere. Several times the book’s original owner penciled in “Tim” before Dewey’s name above songs of his composition.

94 See especially Ellis 1911: 98
1843, becoming its president after it was renamed The Philharmonic Institute in 1851. Locally in the valley, Dewey directed numerous concerts and went on to lead OFCs for many years, sometimes with his partner in business and relative by marriage, Amos Rugg, and Amherst College music instructor George Cheney. Dewey’s efforts to mount an OFC had been reported in the *Springfield Republican* of March 7, and earlier in the Greenfield papers, but after all his work getting the concert off the ground, for most of the event he handed the baton to friends, perhaps because, at forty two years old, he thought it appropriate to have the music led by genuine old folks.

The May 2 concert was a grand affair, especially for a town of under three thousand residents, the smallest town to date to hold an OFC. Of the more than two hundred performers, thirteen of the oldest were singers between the ages of 61 and 85 who represented twelve towns around Franklin County. If Dewey’s rationale for making the event a county-wide affair was to ensure the large venue was filled to near its capacity, his plan worked, as “The Hall was crowded with spectators, both during the afternoon and evening, from all parts of the County” (*Salem Register* 5/11/1854: 2).

The afternoon program began with beloved local character and longtime pastor of Greenfield’s First Congregational Church, the usually barefoot Reverend Amariah Chandler, “reading off in old style, a hymn…and the choir singing it” (2). This is the earliest of many accounts I have discovered of “lining out” at an old folks’ concert, although the practice had already been fairly common at local history events.
for at least a few decades in 1854, and was still the norm in a few scattered churches.
After the seventy-two year old Chandler “invoked the divine blessing,” singing from the *Ancient Harmony Revived* began under the leadership of the equally senior John Brooks of Bernardston, a former Universalist minister and, notably, a dyed in the wool Democrat, as was Chandler. During the first part of the evening concert the singing was led by Elias Taylor of Charlemont, which was probably that town’s first encounter with a practice of celebrating old people and old music that would take root there and persist into living memory.

Only at the end of the evening did Tim Dewey take up direction of the choir. This was no doubt in part because he had been busy with one of the concert’s “great attractions,” and another OFC innovation; playing in a small band comprised of two violins, double bass, “small bass viol,” flute and melodeon.95 According to one local antiquarian, probably Dewey himself, the smaller of the two basses had been “played in the time of the revolution by Capt Samuel Morey, an eccentric genius of the ancient regime, who navigated the Connecticut in a ‘dug-out’ as early as 1784” (*Springfield Republican* 5/3/1854: 2). After the pitch pipe and before the organ, the usually home made “church bass” or “Yankee viol” had been the first instrument

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95 I don’t make much of it, but it speaks to serendipitous interconnectedness that in 1854 the home of George Hovey, the band’s flutist, was the Main Street mansion that later became The Greenfield Library, where I began my research into OFCs in town. The house was originally built for Joshua Leavitt’s grandfather Jonathan who, like Amariah Chandler, came to town to take the position of First Congregational Church pastor. Maybe it just shows that if you rattle around somewhere long enough you wind up rubbing elbows with similarly inclined people, living and dead, whether or not you’re aware of it.
introduced in many New England churches to support choir and congregational singing by doubling the bass line. Beginning in some places as early as the heyday of Billings and company, other instruments, too, including flute, violin and clarionet had been added to the bass to cover the other vocal parts, as in the little group led by Alling Brown referred to by New Havenites as “Nebuchadnezzar’s band.”

The introduction of the church band, and especially the Yankee viol, added to the basic OFC formula something that would be imitated far and wide. The Greenfield concert was not the first one in which an instrument other than a pitchpipe had been used; the tune Old Hundred, at least, had been accompanied by organ in December, 1853 at North Church in New Haven. But while the organ was associated with progress, high art, equal temperament and mechanization, the church bass had the twin powers of adding interest to the performance and evoking, visually and sonically, an earlier, more patriotic, more homespun village New England. Of course organs were always an option in venues that had them, and on May 3, the day after Greenfield’s first OFC, the first one in Lowell, MA led by Benjamin Franklin Rix featured organ accompaniment for at least part of the evening. As we have seen repeatedly, it was not uncommon for people to want to have it both ways, and before long concerts featuring both church band and organ would become common.

One final Greenfield “first” worth noting is that the May 2 concert was the first OFC in which the program contained a song named for the town. Although all the previous OFC towns except Kenosha and Buffalo had multiple compositions
named after them by Billings and company, none of these tunes were popular enough to have made it into the *Ancient Harmony Revived*. By May 1854, however, the tune *Greenfield* had already been established as an OFC standard, even if it was, as one OFC reviewer said of it, an example of the improper melding of “rapid time with the minor key” so common in the old music (*Connecticut Courant* 1/14/1854: 2).

The concert was deemed a success, and was still the talk of the town some three weeks later when Beethoven scholar and *Dwight’s Journal of Music* correspondent Alexander Wheelock Thayer paid a visit to Greenfield.\(^{96}\) While the old folks most likely met socially to sing from the *Ancient Harmony Revived* in the intervening months, they waited until November to return to the stage. On the morning of Wednesday, November 1, about one hundred of them met again at Town Hall for a “pic-nic,” at the time still a fairly novel form of social entertainment, and afterwards repeated their established pattern of an afternoon and an evening concert. As in May, the one hundred and fifty or so singers were led in song by Tim Dewey and Elias Taylor, this time joined by farmer, antiquarian and “itinerant singing master” from Deerfield, Deacon Charles Hitchcock, the brother of Amherst College president and dinosaur specialist Edward Hitchcock (Sheldon 1898: 50). It was through the final song leader, Charles Fisk(e), a newcomer both to town and to the directing of

\(^{96}\) Mentioning that in addition to the old folks’ concert the town had recently seen a performance of an oratorio by Haydn’s student Sigismund von Neukomm and that T. M. Dewey was in the midst of mounting a performance of George Root’s juvenile cantata *The Flower Queen*, Thayer wrote to *Dwight’s Journal* “for one, I go for all these. Let us have them all. Beget a taste for music making the grand recreation” (6/3/1854: 68-69).
OFCs, that Greenfield’s old folks’ concerts would take on an overtly political
dimension in the coming weeks.

Dr. Charles L. Fiske, a physician who had left the orthodox Congregational
church so that, according to a friend, “he might work more earnestly and efficiently
for the downtrodden slave, and for humanity in all directions,” had only moved his
practice to Greenfield from Connecticut in 1853 (Liberator 12/1/1854: 191). He
quickly became known locally as both a singer and popular lecturer at the Greenfield
Lyceum, although apparently not previously as a concert leader. Like First Church of
Springfield pastor Samuel Osgood, Charles Fiske and his wife Emeline are
remembered as having been active in the Underground Railroad, a local history
recording that their home on Main Street “was often the refuge of the fugitive slave in
his search for freedom” (Thompson 1904: 770). On November 22, Charles and
Emeline Fiske received a week-long visit from a friend, the radical abolitionist,
feminist, anarchist and close associate of William Lloyd Garrison, Henry Clarke
Wright, whose stay would culminate in the first overtly abolitionist old folks’ concert.

Henry Wright had trained as a Congregational minister but, like Fiske, left the
church for abolition and reform work. Initially an advocate of strict non-violence, he
gradually came to believe that “the abolitionist credo- ‘resistance to tyrants is
obedience to God’- no longer required peaceful resistance” but required every worker
to, in Wright’s words, “‘arm himself with a pistol, or a dirk, a bowie-knife, a rifle, or
any deadly weapon’” and kill anyone attempting to return fugitive slaves to bondage
(Cornell 2006: 154-155). Wright was talking about the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 that mandated punishment for aiding escaped slaves and financial reward for catching and returning them to their masters- the law that had inspired John Brown to return to Springfield to help start a chapter of the League of Gileadites.

In the Fall of 1854 an even fresher wound for Wright and other abolitionists was the May 30 passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which gave adult white males living in those territories the right to decide by vote for or against permitting slavery there, effectively annulling the Missouri Compromise of 1820 that promised no slavery in the region. In the months leading up to Greenfield’s first OFC the proposed act was the biggest story in local papers, and the controversy surrounding it and happenings in the territories continued to be front-page news up to the time of the Civil War. Around the Pioneer Valley various groups held “anti-Nebraska meetings,” and in Franklin County a group of Congregational ministers published in the Gazette and Courier that they, “having in common with their fellow citizens at the North, had their moral and religious feelings shocked by the proposition of Congress to admit Slavery into the Nebraska territory, feel impelled at this crisis publicly to express their opinion, that the measure proposed would be a violation of solemn compact, a gross outrage upon the cherished and conscientious sentiments of a large portion of the citizens of this nation, and a great moral wrong” (2/27/1854: 3). With the passage of the act both advocates and opponents of slavery, including militants on both sides, flocked to the territory hoping to turn the tide in their favor, resulting in a localized civil war that anticipated the larger conflict to come. In the process the Whig Party
was split into northern and southern factions and eventually dissolved, with many former members in the North, including some of our OFC leader friends, joining the nascent Republican Party.  

While the Franklin County ministers urged the public to “unite with [them] in earnest prayer to Him who only is our confidence for the maintenance of justice and right,” Henry Wright was hardly alone in dividing his confidence between the Almighty and the possibility of violence in the abolition fight (*Greenfield Gazette and Courier* 2/27/1854: 3). At a speech in March 1856 at New Haven’s North Church, site of the December 1853 old folks’ concerts, Henry Ward Beecher pledged to help finance and arm a group of young Yale graduates for an expedition to Kansas, even going so far as to say that in the antislavery fight there one Sharp’s rifle contained “more moral power” than “a hundred bibles” (in Cornell 2006: 155). That Henry Wright’s work in Greenfield failed to generate enough controversy to have made it into the papers is perhaps testament to the “anti-Nebraska” sentiment broadly held in the area.

Wright recorded his stay in Greenfield in some detail in a long letter to the editor, his friend William Lloyd Garrison, published in the December 1 issue of the *Liberator*. Wright was impressed by Charles Fiske’s account of the November 1 concert, and soon began to consider the potential political utility of a program that had generated so much interest throughout the county. Of the music, he wrote

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97 See Holt 1978 for a detailed analysis of party dynamics and history in the 1850s.
enthusiastically to Garrison that the tunes had been “selected from ‘Ancient Harmony Revived,’ in which you, friend Jackson, and a few others, so often perform our devotions in Boston” (191). While he didn’t elaborate on the details or significance of the Boston cadre’s use of ancient harmony, it seems that Wright, at least, in addition to more aesthetic concerns, saw the music’s evocative power and domestic association as useful in turning nostalgia and the sanctification of home and the New England village to overtly political ends. Wright gave antislavery lectures at the smaller of Town Hall’s two public spaces on his first two evenings in town but, having fallen ill with “Ague and Fever,” thought it better to stay in that Friday, a decision that led somewhat serendipitously to the abolitionist concert two days later. His description of the weekend’s events merits quoting at some length.

Friday evening, instead of a public meeting, several gathered at Dr. Fiske’s to sing—among them, Mr. Dewey, a composer of some fine music, and who has published a volume of music, in connection with Emerson of Boston. It was decided to have an anti-slavery lecture Sunday evening, in the large Town Hall, and that the choir of Old Folks and Young Folks would meet and sing. So, Saturday evening, they met again at the Doctor’s to sing. Mr. Dewey, W.T. Davis, brother of Hon. G.T. Davis, and several others of the best singers, were present, and a good time we had.

Sunday evening came, and the choir—about fifty, old and young—Judge Sanger, of the Court of Common Pleas now in session here, Dewey, Davis, & c., being of them—the anti-slavery lecturer and the audience, to hear, and to enjoy, and to be benefitted. The singing, led by Dr. Fiske, began at six and continued till seven. Then a lecture on slavery, especially in its bearings on domestic relations and endearments, showing how it desolates home, where human beings are created and developed. Then, after the lecture, the choir sang some twenty minutes longer. It was, indeed, a happy scene. Would that you and Francis Jackson had been there to enjoy and to help. Many old folks and young folks were there, and their hearts blended in loving harmony.
around the domestic shrines of the past; and the awakened sympathy was all
directed to the desolated homes and blighted hearts of the slaves (191).

According to Henry Wright, the tunes of Billings and company had been, as
“domestic shrines of the past,” well suited to his aim of “awaken(ing) sympathy” in
his auditors, priming them to be receptive to his message and driving it home with
more singing at the end. Wright was impressed by the power of the music and its
associations. “Home is but another name for earth’s deepest sorrow and most intense
anxiety to the slave,” he wrote to Garrison the next morning. “This doom of the slave
has been felt by you. Many felt it last evening, as they listened to the tunes, which, if
they have no other merit, have that which, above all others, endears them to the heart-
that of containing the melody which composed the lullaby of childhood” (191).

While Wright focused on the ancient harmony’s capacity to tug on the
heartstrings, I believe he intuitively struck on a formula that did more than that; a
formula similar to that employed by Harriet Beecher Stowe in her influential 1852
novel Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Mrs. Stowe peppered the book with musical references,
familiar enough to her intended readers to have rung in their ears, that served not just
as tear jerkers but indices of the nature, social position and spiritual trajectory of her
characters. As Deane Root has observed, “through her characters' singing, she
revealed the nature of their souls and their capacity for sanctification” (Root 2007). I
suspect that, echoing Mrs. Stowe, Henry Wright was attracted to the ancient harmony
not only for nostalgic and aesthetic reasons but for its ability to instill in singers and
audience alike a sense of “the nature of their souls,” to remind them where they came from and who they believed they were or should be; true Yankees in spirit, defenders of liberty and heirs of a long history of striving for a purer, more perfect world. In short they saw themselves as comprising the moral and practical heart of the New England village and the nation as a whole, and the music served as a potent, embodied, reminder of this status.

While the Greenfield concert mounted by Charles Fiske and Henry Wright was the most overtly abolitionist I have found, it was far from the only OFC with political implications. In Cleveland, Ohio, for example, the first OFC in 1854 was held at Plymouth Congregational Church, named at the suggestion of Henry Ward Beecher, and recently formed by break-away abolitionist members of the city’s First Presbyterian Church. If nothing else the concert was an expression of Yankee solidarity with abolitionist implications in a city where the idea of an immediate end to slavery was less broadly embraced than it was in Greenfield. In the Fall of 1862 in Amherst, Northampton and Hadley, Massachusetts old folks’ concerts were given “for the Cause of Freedom,” and the proceeds “devoted to the Relief of the Sick and Wounded UNION SOLDIERS!” (Hampshire and Franklin Gazette 9/19/1962: 4). A few months earlier audiences could hardly have missed the implicit endorsement of abolition and, most likely, black suffrage in performances by the African American old folks troupes from Hartford, especially the “festival” held at the African American church later named “St. John’s” after local abolitionist martyr John Brown.

More broadly, though, I believe the subtler themes of New England nationalism and
Puritan moral superiority expressed in all the early old folks’ concerts must have been read increasingly as political and implicitly abolitionist in the years leading up to the Civil War. The soundtrack of abolition included a wide range of music, much of which may be lost to history, but I believe we can confidently expand the playlist now by adding to it the music of Billings, Belcher, Edson, Holden and the rest of the “first New England school of composers.

New Salem, Northampton and Southampton

After Greenfield’s May 2 concert, the next town in the Pioneer Valley to hold an OFC was the Franklin County town of New Salem, some twenty miles southeast of Greenfield on the western edge of the Swift River Valley. New Salem is notable as both the first town of under two thousand residents and the first town not connected to the rail system to hold an OFC. The concert on May 31, 1854, although proclaimed a “grand affair,” was also a thoroughly local one and the smallest to date, with only 25 singers “whose average age was 64,” the oldest being “a lady from Greenwich, who was 80” (Springfield Republican 6/10/1854: 3). Not long after New Salem’s first, OFCs began popping up in other small towns and villages around the Valley and beyond, a trend that would continue well into the twentieth century. New Salem’s First Church, itself, remained the site of OFCs for at least fifty years.

The day after the New Salem concert, on June 1, “between fifty and sixty persons” sang at First Church in Northampton located on the Connecticut River about
midway between Springfield and Greenfield (Springfield Republican 6/3/1854: 3). This was the first of many such concerts to be held in town and, as had become the pattern, it was successful enough to merit a repeat two weeks later. Among those impressed by the singing was Beethoven scholar and pseudonymous Dwight’s Journal correspondent Alexander Wheelock Thayer who stopped in at a rehearsal the night before the concert at which, he wrote, “I must confess I listened in a state of genuine delight.” Thayer was but one of many among the musical elite who, perhaps despite their education, had an enduring fondness for the music of Billings and company. Thayer wrote that, well after the presumed demise of this music, he “used to hear the symphonies in Boston on Saturday evenings, and sing old tunes the next, with a good old singer who complained that none of the young folks could read that music now-a-days” (Dwight’s Journal 6/3/1854: 68).

Northampton is of particular interest to this study for several reasons. Most directly, it was the point of origin for my own study, beginning with research in tunebooks owned by the leader of the first local OFC leader Daniel Russell Clark, the longtime choir leader and a founding member of Edwards Church, an 1833 offshoot of First Church. I began my research more seriously upon the serendipitous acquisition of a copy of The American Vocalist given to Daniel Clark by his brother William and later owned by his daughter Amelia who, according to a note written in the book by a friend, continued to sing examples of its ancient harmony “over and over” until her death in 1944 at the age of 94 (marginalia, author’s collection). Also worth noting, Northampton figured prominently in the history of Billings and
company’s music as an important center of musical publication in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. What’s more, for a relatively small town in western New England this early music history is exceptionally well documented, in the voluminous mid-nineteenth century manuscript of self-taught local historian Sylvester Judd and later in both a doctoral dissertation by Paul Osterhout and a master’s thesis by Rev. Miriam Howland. These provide an unusually rich sense of local historical context for the OFCs, and have been of ongoing use to me in working to understand local dimensions of the practice everywhere.98

Long a frontier town, Northampton early distinguished itself as a cultural center on the leading edge. Mid-eighteenth century First Church pastor Jonathan Edwards himself reported that, at a time when lined out singing in unison was nearly universal in regional churches, “our congregation…excelled all that ever I knew… generally carrying regularly and well three parts of music, and the women a part by themselves” (in Osterhout 1978: 43).99 A generation or two later, in addition to being a destination for early composers and tunebook compilers in search of publication, from 1800 to 1803 Northampton was the home of the American Musical Magazine.

98 Of the three, only Howland mentions the old folks’ concerts as they were beyond Judd’s and Osterhout’s scope. Rev. Howland has not only a scholarly interest but a longtime family history and connection to Congregational church music in the Pioneer Valley. When I first met her in the early 1990s she was the music director at First Church, Southampton. She has since been ordained and is, at this writing, the pastor of First Church, Chester MA. In addition to helping me in the early days of my research, Rev. Howland kindly gave me a well-worn family copy of Father Kemp’s Old Folks’ Concert Tunes used by her Parsons relatives at First Church, Northampton.

99 For a nuanced discussion of the relationship between “lining out” and “regular singing” in 18th century Northampton and other towns on the river see Osterhout 1986, especially 26-45.
only the second music periodical to be published in the United States, as well as the Hampshire Musical Society that published it, one of the earliest organizations of its kind in the country. Northampton residents were equally early in adopting the scientific musical reform of the early nineteenth century. One American Musical Magazine contributor, composer and First Church choir leader, Elias Mann, was especially prominent in the movement, compiling the 1807 Massachusetts Collection of Sacred Harmony in which he refuted many of the practices employed in his earlier Northampton Collection and later celebrated in The Ancient Harmony Revived.\textsuperscript{100}

While Northampton was often on the cutting edge culturally, it was also a town whose residents valued their history, sometimes, as in the case of Sylvester Judd, to the point of obsession. Antiquarianism and historical preservation of all sorts thrived there in the mid-nineteenth century, more often in harmony than in conflict with the town’s progressive conservatism, and singing ancient harmony was part of it.

Prominent in the town’s musical affairs, OFC leader Daniel Russell Clark, a mason by trade, led music from both modern music collections, like those of his neighbor George Kingsley, and from collections of ancient harmony. The annotations and musical corrections in his two well-used copies of the Ancient Harmony Revived in Historic Northampton’s collection seem to indicate Clarke’s deep engagement with and knowledge of the music of Billings and company some fifty years after Elias Mann had rejected it. In a review of the June 1 OFC the Springfield Republican called

\textsuperscript{100} See Jones 1993.
the forty six year old Clark “an old school singer, of high repute among the elders” (6/3/1854: 2). That his daughter Amelia was still singing some of the old hymns in 1944 suggests the Clarks likely sang this music at home. D. R. Clark probably also had opportunity to express his “old school” proclivity at evening prayer meetings in the Edwards Church basement vestry at which, parishioners later recalled, Deacon Asahel Abels could be counted on to “raise the rafters with some of the good old hymns” (Wilbur 1983: 9).

Northampton’s first old folks’ concert was not the overtly political affair that Greenfield would see a few months later, but it took place in a broadly abolitionist milieu. Daniel Russell Clark was one of several involved who joined the Free Soil Party upon its formation in opposition to the Kansas Nebraska Act. Although, in his letter to Garrison, Henry Wright characterized Northampton residents as often conservative and somewhat apathetic on the issue of slavery, by the time of the first OFCs the town had become an important stop on the Underground Railroad and the home of a number of free blacks, emancipated and fugitive slaves as well as prominent abolitionists of various stripes, including the most militant. The most famous of these was Sojourner Truth, who had come to the area to live and work in the radical egalitarian and utopian Northampton Association of Education and Industry in the Florence neighborhood.101 Also well-known beyond the valley for their abolition work were First Church pastor John Payne Cleaveland and Connecticut

101 See Gaffney 2004 for more on African Americans, abolition and utopianism in the Northampton area.
River Railroad president Erastus Hopkins, elected to the state senate in 1848 and remembered as a diligent worker in the Underground Railroad. Others were known primarily locally. Before becoming preoccupied with documenting local history, Sylvester Judd had served as secretary of the Northampton Antislavery Society, and another society member, Hampshire County Sheriff Ansel Wright, adamantly refused to arrest people who had escaped slavery as mandated by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Northampton had been the site of a large meeting that year, organized by local residents who had, themselves, escaped slavery, in which participants adopted a resolution, earlier proposed at a meeting in Boston, that “constitution or no constitution, law or no law, we will not allow a Fugitive Slave to be taken from Massachusetts” (Northampton Courier 10/29/1850). The chairman of that meeting was First Church member William Clarke, an agriculturist, paper mill owner and, of course, the original owner of the tunebook in which my research began. William Clarke’s son William was one of many younger Northampton men who joined the curious Republican paramilitary cum fraternal marching organization known as the Wide Awakes in the months before the Civil War, as was his friend Truman Meekins who went on to become a second generation old folks’ concert leader for many years in and around Northampton. In 1854 Northampton was both buzzing with abolition activity and celebrating its bicentennial. While the old folks’ concert and its reprisals were not explicitly linked to either the town anniversary or the abolition cause, I suspect the public singing of old Yankee hymns implied both to many Northamptonites.
In September 1854 William S. Rogers of Southampton, MA, then recently elected First Church choir director, began to organize the first OFC in Northampton’s much smaller neighbor to the southwest. The December 6 concert adhered to the standard format, but several things about it are noteworthy. Likely of interest on the day, Rogers was perhaps able to inject a little extra local pride into the event by singing three pieces by well known local composer and singing master Justin Morgan, including songs named for the adjacent towns of Montgomery and Huntington. Of greater interest for our purposes are the differences the concert suggests between Northampton and Southampton with regard to location, local history, demographics and their relation to sacred music practice.

While comparatively cosmopolitan First Church, Northampton had been quick to adopt scientific music reforms early in the nineteenth century, its country cousin appears to have been at least thirty years behind the times, as was not unusual for small towns in western Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{102} With only about 1,200 residents, even fewer than New Salem, and most involved primarily in agricultural work, Southampton was the smallest and most rural town to date to hold an OFC. Fewer than seven percent of Southampton residents were foreign born, half the average of Hampshire county towns at the time, and of those native born the overwhelming majority were descendants of settlers from Northampton, of which town the

\textsuperscript{102} See MacDougall 1940: 117.
Southampton area had been the southwest frontier until 1730. Like New Salem, Southampton was unconnected to the rail system in 1854, and the concert was a very local affair with all of the singers being parishioners of First Church.

In the mid 1830s the only instrument used in the Southampton church was still a pitch pipe, and with the formation of the Southampton Sacred Music Society around 1834 a serious controversy erupted that would not be resolved until the end of the decade. William Rogers was at the center of this controversy and, although he had been only in his thirties at the time, he sided with some of the community’s older citizens, including old-school singing master Asahel Birge, born in 1770. I have been unable to determine the exact nature of the controversy, but modernization seems to have been central, as was so often the case. When I spoke with historian, First Church music director and descendant of early Southampton settlers, Miriam Howland, in 1992, she expressed the opinion that an attempt to rout the music of Billings and company was what set off the conflagration (personal communication). Whatever the direct cause, the generational nature of the conflict is suggested by even the first names of some of the men elected to represent the two opposing factions: oldsters Eliphalet, Elisha and Asahel versus Stephen, Gilbert and Theodore, for example. There was enough bad blood that, one Sunday, one of several ousted choir leaders “came with his choice of music and directed his followers; while the newly appointed

103 See Reconnaissance Survey Town Report, Southampton: 1982
leader carried through with his music and singers AT THE SAME TIME!” (First Church, Southampton MA, n.d. [1981??]).

At the time of Southampton’s first OFC, the wounds of the 1830s would still have been fairly fresh in the minds of many parishioners, and the music of Billings and company likely fresher in their memory than in many of their Northampton cousins’. I am not certain whether the concert constituted a triumphant resurrection of cherished music, an attempt to gratify older parishioners whose feelings had been hurt, some combination, or something else entirely. But it highlights the ongoing generational conflict around sacred music, and the differences in musical practice that existed sometimes between even the closest of neighbors and neighboring towns. The independence afforded by congregational polity as well as the resultant multiplicity in local practice, history and leadership continued to factor in the nature and significance of OFCs in locations around New England and beyond, even as the format and overarching meanings of the events were broadly shared within the predominantly Congregationalist milieu from which they emerged.
CHAPTER 10: INNOVATIONS AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE ARCHETYPAL OLD FOLKS CONCERT, MAY 1854-MARCH 1856

A Phenomenon in Search of an Impresario

Robert Kemp’s March, 1856 appearance at Tremont Temple was neither the group’s first performance nor the first OFC to take place in Boston. But their triumph there marked the beginning of the OFC craze in and around Boston that led to the large scale mushrooming of the practice throughout New England and beyond, and the beginning of Robert Kemp’s career as a musical impresario. Kemp got into the game early enough that, in subsequent decades, many would forget he had adopted rather than invented the old folks’ concert, but late enough that nearly all of the practices that became hallmarks of his performances were already in place, introduced one or two at a time to make the concerts ever more attractive and novel.

Beginning in the spring of 1854 OFCs began to pop up in so many places and in such an apparently scattershot way that it is often difficult to trace direct lines of influence between them. What is somewhat easier to trace, and of greater relevance to this phase of the history, is the accretion of practices that Kemp brought together in what would become the standard OFC format for generations to come. Let us therefore turn our attention from direct connections in the spread of the OFC to the
development of the practices that would come to define it between the spring of 1854 and Kemp’s first Boston appearance.

**Costume and Character**

As with other elements that came to be associated with Father Kemp’s performances, it appears the practice of performing in some version of Revolutionary era and other antiquarian costume was something a number of groups hit upon independently as an obvious option influenced by related practices and the Colonial Revival in general. The idea of costumed old folks’ concerts had been floated as early as July, 1853, in a letter to the editor of the *Springfield Republican* in which “Anglo-Saxon” wrote that the New Haven concerts would have presented “a tableau vivant- a living picture of the past, if the performers had been in costume” (7/23/1853: 2). It seems to have been nearly two years, though, before costume began to be an expected part of the events.

Precedents for Revolutionary era costume in public performance were abundant. For decades New England history, the Revolutionary period in particular, had been popular topics for plays and other theatrical performances. Celebrations of Independence Day, Washington’s Birthday, town anniversaries, the landing of the Mayflower and just about any other public celebration with an historical dimension had long provided opportunity for getting in costume. Whether historical figures or types, revolutionary heroes and their dames were not the only personages represented.
General and Mrs. Washington were ubiquitous, but so were characters like the countrified Yankee “Brother Josh” and “‘grandma…with her knitting work and snuff box” (Cape Ann Light and Gloucester Telegraph 5/17/1856: 2). Not all actors and characters were white, as Native Americans and African Americans sometimes participated in costumed history celebrations, and were sometimes impersonated. An account of the 214th anniversary celebrations of the Ancient and Honorable Artillery Company in 1852, for example, mentions “Deacon Cyrus Foster, the aged negro,” later a leader of old folks’ concerts in Boston, who had “made it a point to attend this and other festivals, in regimentals, for very many years past” (Salem Register June 10 1852: 6).

One historical celebration must have been remembered by many who later sang with Father Kemp’s Old Folks. In 1844, ten years before it became Kemp’s adopted home, the town of Reading, MA held a grand bicentennial celebration beginning with a parade that included a “coach with the soldiers of the Revolution, and just after it two gentlemen and four ladies, clad in the garb of the olden time. These ‘last of the cocked hats,’ who, while the soldiers of the Revolution seemed young again, appeared to have grown as suddenly old, attracted much attention.” Then, “after the ‘old folks’ came the Choir,” not in costume but equally representative of connections to the town’s past (Flint 1844: 95).

From the mid 1840s at events including the anniversary of the battle of Bunker Hill, the laying of the cornerstone of the Washington Monument, the funeral
of Daniel Webster and Independence Day celebrations around the country, members of the nativist fraternal political organization the Order of United Americans often appeared as “Continentallers, in the full and perfect wearing apparel of the Revolution…each personator being a complete character in himself, and as natural and life-like as it is possible to conceive” (Salem Register 7/8/1850: 2). Perhaps taking the sartorial if not the political lead of the Continentallers, Connecticut based quartet the Continental Vocalists claimed to be the first musical group to introduce Revolutionary era costume into their performances of national music, including ancient harmony selections. At the suggestion of member W. D. Franklin, formerly of The American Vocalists, the group adopted a striking antiquarian look for their extensive, successful and influential first Northeastern tour, including 173 performances beginning in September, 1853. This was followed by other successful tours from New England to the Midwest throughout the 1850s that likely helped popularize the practice of costumed performance of “American music.”

One practice that was an especially meaningful point of reference from Father Kemp onward was the popular July 4th “Antique and Horrible” parade that spread around New England and beyond beginning in the early 1850s as a parody of public demonstrations by Boston’s aforementioned elite Ancient and Honorable Artillery

104 Wesleyan University Olin Library Special Collections William Dwight Franklin Collection number 1000-134.
105 The Continental Vocalists performed Billings and company repertoire, although I have not been able to determine if they did so in their early tours or only after the success of Father Kemp.
Company. In one early parade in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1851 the Antiques and Horribles were led by Capt. J. G. Peabody, “who appeared in a venerable coat, said to have been worn at the battle of Bunker Hill. The company numbered about seventy-five, and no two had uniforms alike; there were high crowned hats and low crowned hats; long tailed coats and strait jackets; long guns and short guns; and everything that was grotesque and ludicrous” (*Boston Atlas* 7/7/1851). These events satisfied at least two of the main principles of Yankee humor; they lampooned the self-satisfied pompousness of the elite while self-congratulatingly celebrating, a la Yankee Doodle, the privations of New England life.

The introduction of costume to the OFCs may have been initially less deliberate than the examples above. At a proto-OFC given by the Bangor Billings and Holden Society in 1848 Joseph Belcher had noted the group’s members included “matronly personages in caps” (Belcher 1859: 335). One of the earliest mentions I have found of costume at an OFC is the review of the first Kenosha concert in April, 1854, performed by “mostly women…with their neat white caps on” (*Kenosha Telegraph* 4/13/1854: 3). In both of these cases the outfits appear to have been more a function of the performers’ age and antiquated style than a calculated novelty. But by July, 1854 costume had become closely enough associated with the concerts, at least in northwestern Connecticut, that a local store saw commercial potential, advertising the sale of “old shoes for old folks concerts.” The earliest use of costume in an OFC to be widely reported was in the first concerts given by the Massachusetts group led by bank president and Whig politician Colonel Francis Ball Fay, variously referred to
as “The Chelsea Continentals,” “The Chelsea Continentalers” and “The Old Continentallers of Chelsea.” The *Newark Daily Advertiser* for February 28, 1855 reported “the Old Folks of Chelsea, Massachusetts, have made an improvement in concert giving, which it would be well for our Old Folks to look after when they appear again. The arrangements were made by a company of Continentalers who dressed in garments as old fashioned as the music which was given on the occasion” (2). Picking up on the story of this novelty in the following weeks, the item was quoted in papers as far afield as New Orleans (*Times Picayune* 3/9/1855: 2).

Whether they hit on the idea independently or in response to accounts of the Chelsea singers, the Cleveland old folks were early adopters of costumed performance. A preview of their second performance at Plymouth church noted that “the attractions” had been “increased to render the second more interesting than the former.” Costume seems to have already been one of these attractions, however, the author noting that “nothing has ever been so successful in exciting…reminiscences of auld lang syne…in Yankee hearts as these revivals of old New England Songs and old Puritan Costumes” (*Cleveland Plain Dealer* 4/5/1855: 3).

At the time of Father Kemp’s first appearance in Boston costume had not been adopted universally as part of the OFC formula, but it was common enough in the concerts and elsewhere that he must have been well aware of the practice.
Orchestra and Instrumental Accompaniment

Other than the sound of a pitch pipe, the “first” old folks’ concert in New Haven and those that followed in its wake over the ensuing year appear to have been comprised entirely of vocal harmony, with the exception of organ accompaniment on at least the mass singing of Old Hundred at North Church in December, 1853. The earliest record I have found of instrumental accompaniment was in the May 2, 1854 concert in Greenfield, MA with its small “church band” led by Tim Dewey. However, Dewey was simply, and probably intuitively, introducing something that had been an occasional feature of “ancient sacred music” performances by the Boston Billings and Holden Society a decade or more earlier, and was still common practice in many churches that had not yet made the switch to organ or melodeon accompaniment. The church band may have signified the past, but it was still very much an accessible past, and a contemporary option, in the mid 1850s. The use of a church band seems to have been an easy way to increase the novelty and excitement of performances that any number of leaders hit upon independently.

In November, 1854 an early concert in Portsmouth, NH led by John Christie, Esq. was advertised as being accompanied by “full orchestra,” although elsewhere the musicians were referred to as a “church band” (Portsmouth Journal 11/18/1854: 2). I suspect the truth may have been somewhere in between; an augmented church band, larger than the usual but smaller than anything the term “full orchestra” would conjure to modern readers. Benjamin Franklin Rix of Lowell, MA was another of several OFC leaders who were influential in the introduction of more elaborate
accompaniment. His first OFC on May 3, 1854 featured only organ, played by “Miss Cheney,” most likely the Abigail Cheney listed as a member of his household in the 1850 census. But by 1856 Rix had begun enlisting the help of local collaborator and professional musician, Theodore Maas, as director of an “efficient orchestra” to accompany his choir, by then named the New England Pilgrim Society (Lowell Daily Citizen and News 4/29/1856: 3). Maas may have been the first European born and trained musician to occupy a leadership role in OFCs. 106 By 1856 Old Folks’ Concerts, including those led by Rix and Maas, came sometimes to be dubbed “Grand Concerts” in reference to chorus and orchestra performances of the late eighteenth century and implying something more impressive than “the old village church” could offer. These eighteenth-century concerts served as yet another point of historical reference and a resource for imagery, performance practice and musical content, including the use of orchestras.

106 Theodore Maas, sometimes spelled Theodor Maass, has proven elusive, but he was active in Lowell in music ranging from military brass to European high art as tenor soloist, performer and teacher on organ, violin, cornet and violoncello. He may be the same Theodore Maas who was active in Charleston, SC in the late 1850s and later in Savannah, Georgia as a performer, professor of music and director of the Liedertafel, one of the city’s post Civil War Germanic choral societies.
Other Music and The “Song of the Old Folks”

The music of Billings and company was ill suited to Americans’ taste for variety in concert programs, especially for younger people for whom the music did not have such power of previous association. By early 1855 several OFC leaders had begun to introduce other kinds of music to their programs in order to relieve what was, for some, the monotony of an evening of ancient harmony alone. In New Jersey, Ferdinand Ilsley introduced “light music” and popular classics like Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus, while B. F. Rix and Theodore Maas added “solos, quartettes & choruses of a more classical character.” Maas is reported to have been a well-trained and excellent tenor singer and performer on the violoncello and cornet, skills he brought to the Pilgrim Society’s more highbrow performances.

The addition of secular and instrumental music marked the OFC’s transition from “service of song” to popular entertainment. The earliest introduced quasi-secular piece I have discovered was “The Song of the Old Folks,” sung to the tune of Auld Lang Syne. While it would become the theme song and opening number of Father Kemp’s Old Folks, it was actually written for the occasion of an OFC by a local group in Portsmouth, NH in January, 1855 by celebrated local poet Albert Leighton (or Laighton).
Professionalism

A notable precursor to the professionalization of the old folks’ concert was the growing recognition of their appeal beyond the Congregationalist milieu from which they emerged. By the time of Robert Kemp’s first performances concerts had begun to be performed by an increasingly wide range of people in a wide range of venues, from Town Halls and opera houses to churches of denominations including Baptist, Methodist, Unitarian, Universalist and Dutch Reformed.

Kemp was the first to explore the commercial potential of the old folks’ concert to any great degree, but he was not alone in the pursuit. B. F. Rix, born into a musical family and the grandson of a Revolutionary War drummer, was unusual though not unique among early OFC leaders as a musician by profession rather than avocation. Rix and Maas’s New England Pilgrim Society was one of the first troupes to venture into the world of touring, at first around Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire and by May, 1856 a series of concerts in New York City, likely the city’s first. As a professional musician directing OFCs, Rix was preceded by, at least, Ferdinand Ilsley in Albany, although Ilsley’s initial role in the emerging tradition was more that of community music leader than aspiring impresario. Upon his relocation to Newark in late 1854, however, Ilsley seems to have become more ambitious, and the concerts began to occupy a more prominent place in his professional life around northern New Jersey. Robert Kemp may have been unaware of the specific successes of other OFC leaders, and it appears his discovery of the professional potential of the concerts was more serendipitous than by design. But once discovered the path to
musical professionalism was well worn, to some extent by a few OFC leaders and, more importantly, by domestic touring ensembles of various sizes dating at least to the success of the Hutchinson Family beginning in 1840 and, perhaps even more importantly, the host of minstrel troupes beginning with the Virginia Minstrels, who had given their first full length performance in Boston’s Masonic Temple almost exactly thirteen years before Kemp’s watershed debut in the city.
CHAPTER 11: TREMONT TEMPLE AND THE COMING “EPIDEMIC,”
EARLY 1856

Infection

Titled “Epidemic in Watertown,” the Boston Herald’s lead story for May 15, 1856 contained the most scathing early account I have found of an old folks’ concert. To this critic, at least, the old folks’ concert idea seemed less like a spore blowing in the wind than a virus infecting the culture. Peppered with mocking Yankee dialect, the piece described Watertown’s first OFC two days earlier as the latest manifestation of a disease that had infected the Boston area over the previous several months.

One of the diseases incident to human life has for some time past given evidence of its existence in our social system, and by the cute observation and analysis, it was calculated that the disease would culminate on Tuesday evening the 13th inst. Accordingly, being of that curious tribe, we watched the development of the disease, and were enabled, of course, by the deprivation of some of the creature comforts, to witness the denouement of the fatal contagion.

But a short time since only a few persons from Reading, we think, were known to be absolutely infected with the malady. But so covetous is “human nater” that soon the Cambridge people have it, the Boston people have it, the Waltham people have it, and why should not the good people of Watertown have it? Of course there is no good reason why not. Watertown people are pretty much like other people, only “more so.” And so the Watertown people had it just like other people, we suppose. At all events they had a most violent attack of the “Old Folks’ Concert” last evening, and it lasted for two mortal hours of excruciating manifestations (5/15/1856: 1).
Here the author, CIVITAS, attributed the origin of the “excruciating manifestations” to “a few persons from Reading,” i.e. Father Kemp and company, an attribution that would come to be widely repeated, and a claim that Kemp would come to jealously defend throughout his life.

News of the old folks’ concerts had appeared periodically in the Boston papers even since the planning stages of the first New Haven concert in the Spring of 1853, but it was not until nearly two years later that the city saw its first OFC and, after a slow start, nearly another year after that before the onset of the “epidemic.” This may seem surprising since Boston had been the most important center both of the ancient harmony itself, beginning in the 1770s, and its subsequent early revival by the Billings and Holden Society in the 1830s. But I believe it was in part precisely because Bostonians had been early in the game in both cases that they were latecomers to the OFC party. City dwellers’ greater temporal remove from ancient harmony’s hey day as well as their relative cultural sophistication, real or imagined, made them slow to warm up to the idea. This greater temporal remove from the music and the character of the city in general also affected the character and reception of OFCs in the area. As was the case in places like the Pioneer Valley and Kenosha, Wisconsin there were people in the Boston area who genuinely loved the old music, and those for whom it was still woven into the fabric of their days and even their church services. As Deacon Nathaniel Gould observed of Boston area churches circa 1853 “in some of them…even at the present time, the same customs, music and manner of singing, are in use, that generally prevailed fifty years ago” (1853: 40). But
for most Bostonians, the music’s distance from their lives contributed to making the concerts more novel, more humorous and potentially more despicable than they had been in the more culturally conservative, Calvinistic milieu in which the OFCs had developed.

The first old folks’ concert in Boston, at least the first to receive any attention from the press, was almost certainly the March 26, 1855 performance by the Chelsea Continentallers led by Col. Francis Fay at Tremont Temple. The concert was well attended and well received, but it does not appear to have excited much of a buzz locally. However, both the performers and the venue demand attention.

Colonel Fay and the Chelsea Continentallers

Colonel Francis Ball Fay, 1793-1876, had much in common, in addition to the year of his birth, with OFC leaders before him. As a businessman and capitalist, he served as the first president of Chelsea Savings Bank, an agent for the Chelsea Ferry and Land Company and a director of the Clinton and Fitchburg Railroad. As an antiquarian, benefactor and reformer, he conducted vigorous genealogical and local history research, endowed libraries in Southboro and Chelsea, MA and helped found an industrial reform school for girls. In politics, Colonel Fay was, like other OFC leaders before him, an antislavery Whig who joined the new Republican Party upon its formation, and served in a number of elected positions including first mayor of Chelsea and a short stint in Congress. A descendent of Great Migration immigrants,
Fay’s father, also Francis, served in the Revolutionary War as a musician, enlisting as a fife major at the age of sixteen in 1776. But Colonel Fay differed from many of his OFC directing peers in several noteworthy regards. Born into a poor family, he was a classic self-made man, and a lifelong autodidact who took up the study of Latin at the age of fifty. Also unlike many concert leaders before him he was no “temperance man,” and vocally opposed the movement to outlaw alcoholic beverages, on the grounds that prohibition was an intrusion on personal liberty. Perhaps most interestingly, in religious sentiment Fay was no Yale-affiliated Calvinist but, at least for much of his life, a Universalist, which likely affected his choice of concert venues and certainly must have made his relationship to the hymns of Isaac Watts and others set by Billings and company quite divergent from that of the likes of Irene Battell Larned, “Father” Jewell, and Solomon Warriner. For Colonel Fay the appeal of the old folks’ concerts had more to do with pageantry, nostalgia and patriotism than with celebrating Calvinism or promoting congregational singing. In this he may have helped set the stage for the coming professionalization of the OFC.

Francis Fay’s choir of locals, variously billed as “the Chelsea Continentallers” and “the Old Continentals of Chelsea” among others was the first OFC troupe whose use of Revolutionary era costume was widely reported in the press. The group’s costumes and Washington’s Birthday debut at Chelsea Town Hall on February 22, 1855, and its repeat on March 8, received press around New England and as far afield

\[107\] See Fay 1898: 294-296.
as New Orleans. On March 26, just over a month after their debut, Fay brought his group to Tremont Temple. It is quite possible that Robert Kemp attended this concert but, even if he didn’t, the press surrounding Fay and his Continentallers may well have influenced his decision to add costume and ancient harmony to performances by his nascent Reading Opera Chorus Class some ten months later. Colonel Fay continued to direct costumed old folks’ concerts after the success of Robert Kemp and even after his election as mayor of Chelsea in 1857.

**Tremont Temple: Abolition, Sacred/Secular Economics and the Old Folks**

At the time of Boston’s first OFCs, Tremont Temple was one of the most renowned and reputable venues in the city, historian of religion Margaret Lamberts Bendroth calling it “the epicenter of Boston’s political debate, intellectual culture, and social reform” (2005: 104). The largest of its three auditoria, capable of seating 2,500 with standing room for many more, was also one of the largest in the city, second in size only to the Music Hall erected a few doors down in 1852. Tremont Temple holds a unique place in the development of the OFC “epidemic” that spread from Boston to the rest of the country and beyond, not only because of the attention brought to the practice by the prominence of the venue, but because, for exactly one year from the Continentallers’ performance on March 26, 1855 all of the old folks’
concerts in Boston of which I have found record were held there.\textsuperscript{108} The decision to hold them at the Temple was likely a pragmatic one based on its size, prestige, location and availability, but beneath those characteristics lies an intersection of commerce, politics and religion that is telling of the culture from which the OFC epidemic emerged and of the growing commercial prospects of the concerts.

Tremont Temple’s preeminence as a performance venue was tied to the abolitionist, egalitarian origins of the congregation that purchased the building, the old Tremont Theatre, in 1843. Widely regarded as the nation’s first integrated congregation, the Free Baptist Church was started by a group of abolitionists led by Timothy Gilbert who believed African Americans and members of all social classes should have the right to equal participation in church affairs and services. Sitting on “brimstone corner” just a stone’s throw from the Temple, the neo-Calvinist Park Street Congregational Church was also an abolitionist hotbed, and had been the site of William Lloyd Garrison’s first antislavery lecture in 1829. But Park Street observed the usual practice of financing its activities by renting pews, effectively relegating those who couldn’t afford them to the gallery or shutting them out altogether. Gilbert and his band hit on the idea of renting out church space to businesses and for special events.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{108} In its previous incarnation as the Tremont Theatre it was also the site of performances by the Billings and Holden Society in the 1830s, although I have found no record of anyone making the connection. Deacon Nathaniel Gould, a fan of the Billings and Holden Society, and an integral participant in Boston’s second OFC in August 1855, may have put it together, but his History of Church Music in America was published too close to the time of the first OFC in New Haven for him to have had a chance to write anything about it there, and I have not been able to find an account of his take on the OFCs.
events to take the financial burden off the congregation, thus enabling rich and poor, black and white, to worship together, attend services free of charge and sit in an arrangement that was not a constant reminder of the social order in the world beyond the Temple walls.109

Tremont Temple’s location was well suited to the congregation’s social and religious goals, situated as it was both near the heart of the city’s largest African American community on the north slope of Beacon Hill and just a short walk for “Boston Brahmins” living on the affluent south slope near the Massachusetts State House. Importantly, it was also in the heart of the theater district, and the Temple quickly “assumed a dual role in the city, as both a church and a public building” (Bendroth 2005: 104). The intersection of the sacred and secular in church was, in itself, nothing new in the city but, according to Bendroth, what was new in this case was that the intersection “was economic, not political, reflecting the rising power of market forces in the shaping of American society” (104). Not coincidentally, the same could be said about the new phase of the old folks’ concerts that blossomed in the Temple. The economic viability of an old folks “troupe” that was suggested there opened the door to a broader kind of sacred populism, secular worship and commercial antiquarianism that would become vital if contested characteristics of many OFCs after 1855. This new phase hardly vanquished religion, politics, reform,

109 See Bendroth 2005.
nationalism, history or enthusiasm for the ancient harmony from the concerts but, for Father Kemp and others, these were increasingly wrapped in green.

Nathaniel Gould and the Boston Musical Convention

After the Continentallers’ Boston debut, the next old folks’ concert in the city took place five months later on August 21, 1855 also at Tremont Temple, but this time “prepared with the aid” of Deacon Nathaniel Duren Gould. Born in 1781 Gould was referred to in one enthusiastic preview as “almost the only survivor of the choir leaders of fifty years ago” (*Boston Evening Transcript* 8/21/1855: 2). The concert received little attention from the press and seems to have done little, locally, to speed the coming epidemic, but it deserves comment for several reasons having to do with the people involved in organizing the event and those who attended it.

Nathaniel Gould, himself, is fascinating and worthy of more attention than space allows, especially in regard to his relationship with ancient harmony. Gould’s 1853 *Church Music in America* contains one of the earliest substantial histories of the subject but, a true piece of progressive retrospection, Gould’s focus is just as much on the concerns of his day and continued improvement in sacred singing in the future. In his temporal navigation Gould provides, sometimes explicitly and others obliquely, a fascinating and detailed picture of mid-nineteenth century perceptions of the ancient harmony in relationship to the contemporary state of affairs and future practice.
Gould taught his first singing-school in 1799, near the tail end of ancient harmony’s hey day and, like many of his contemporaries, early adopted the values, practices and music of nineteenth century musical reform with its broad rejection of the music of Billings and company. Also like many of his contemporaries, and others in the 1850s, he was conflicted about the old music and well able to “contain multitudes” in relation to it. In the same work he called it the “spurious” product of a “dark age” in American music while commending the Billings and Holden Society and noting there was “so much merit” in Billings’ tunes that “some of the greatest masters of Europe have been heard to say that if they could write an air like some of his they should consider their names immortalized” (43).

If Gould’s somewhat apologetic appreciation of ancient harmony led him to agree, or even volunteer, to be involved in the Boston Musical Convention’s one and only OFC, the fact the concert was advertised as having been “prepared with the aid of” rather than “led by” Gould might suggest his reluctance to be too closely associated with the controversial music in the eyes of his peers and the public. If he was, indeed, reluctant at first, his ambivalence seems to have dissipated, as he went on to direct the music in at least one subsequent OFC, with help from his former singing-school pupil and fellow Baptist, Alpheus Trowbridge. It may be that the reception of Gould’s concert at the prestigious Boston Musical Convention helped pave the way for broader acceptance of the old folks’ concerts, just as the

\[\text{110See } \textit{Boston Traveler} 4/26/1856: 2\]
participation of New Haven’s elite seems to have inoculated the “first” OFC against the disdain (or disinterest, for that matter) it might have received had it been framed differently or emerged from a different milieu.

In one dramatic and telling episode, Gould’s concert was interrupted by none other than aged divine Lyman Beecher. Given his long association with the “better music” movement, we might expect Beecher to have been incensed by the presentation of rustic old tunes with little perceived merit at a convention designed to foster musical progress and excellence. The truth was rather the opposite. Artemas Nixon Johnson, composer, tunebook compiler and Gould’s sometime publisher, records that after the singing of one old favorite, the revered minister “rose to his feet, and declared he could not repress his emotions. He said he had learned the tune at a singing school seventy years ago, and that his old heart had not been so near heaven for fifty years, as it had been brought in listening to the old tunes which had been sung at that concert” (1856: 113).

Despite his stern public reputation Reverend Beecher was no opponent of musical pleasure, and was known to enjoy playing tunes like *Auld Lang Syne* on the fiddle in his front parlor. And, like so many of his reform minded contemporaries, he clearly had a soft spot for the ancient harmony, *when and where appropriate*. Beecher’s spontaneous, emotional endorsement must have made quite an impression on the audience. Along with the concert itself it made enough of an impression on Lowell Mason’s sometime associate A. N. Johnson that he included several fuging
tunes and other specimens of ancient harmony in his Key Stone Harmony published the following year, writing the pieces were “inserted in this book for the convenience of those who wish occasionally to introduce specimens of these old tunes at concerts. Their effect upon old people who were familiar with them in their early days is remarkable” (113).

Musical conventions, designed to foster musical progress in general and the “improvement of sacred music” in particular, were still rather novel and tremendously popular in the mid 1850s, and the Boston convention attracted attendees from far and wide. One feature of the event was a set of rehearsals by “four or five hundred performers…embracing many of the best singers in New England” that, according to Gould, “none but those possessed of unfeeling hearts, leather ears, and nerves fitted for treason, could have heard without emotion” (1853: 222-223). The exceptionally dense concentration of choir leaders and singers, singing-school teachers and other sacred music aficionados from around the region and beyond at the 1855 convention made Gould’s program at Tremont Temple a kind of press junket for the old folks’ concerts. For many influential and enthusiastic sacred music practitioners it was surely their first exposure to the OFC. Although it seems not to have contributed much directly to the epidemic around Boston, the concert and its reception, including Lyman Beecher’s endorsement, most likely inspired attendees like Eben Tourjee, Cyrus Thurston and possibly even Robert Kemp, to mount concerts in their own
communities. It likely also contributed to the uptick in fuging tunes and other ancient harmony selections in tunebooks published after 1855, not only the *Key Stone Harmony* but works by Boston Musical Convention participants Leonard Marshall, Loring Barnes, William Bradbury and others. Finally, at least in retrospect, Gould’s concert was a portent of the OFC epidemic to come.

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111 I have not found evidence that Robert Kemp attended the 1855 Boston Musical Convention but, as an active participant in the city’s musical life, a member of the Handel and Haydn Society and treasurer and ticket agent of the Mendelssohn Society, it is not unlikely that he did.
Kemp’s Boston Debut

With the next old folks’ concert to take place in Boston we come, at long last, to Robert Henry Kemp, 1821-1897, whose Boston debut at Tremont Temple and the widespread attention it garnered tipped the scales, turning the old folks’ concert from a sensation into an epidemic. It was not the group’s first public performance, but it was the one Kemp remembered as thrusting them into the limelight and, in the process, transforming him, virtually overnight, from failed “fancy farmer” and junior partner in a shoe and boot concern into the public figure he would remain to various degrees for the rest of his life.112

On the night of March 13, 1856, long before the 7:30 start time, Tremont Temple’s large hall was crammed with nearly a thousand people beyond its capacity of 2,500 and, as Kemp later recollected, “door-keepers had been knocked down, and the crowd held possession of the staircase and lobbies” (Kemp 1868: 31). In just one of the “many very kind notices” in the Boston papers to whose influence Kemp

112 Prior to his concertizing, Kemp’s mention in the Boston papers included only advertisements for Mansfield and Kemp’s boot and shoe store, notices of the store being robbed, and mention of Kemp as treasurer and ticket agent for the Mendelssohn Society. The first performances by the Reading Opera Chorus class in Reading and Lynn received slight press attention, with more substantial pieces appearing in the wake of two February, 1856 performances in Cambridgeport. It was only with the first Tremont Temple concert and the eleven that followed shortly thereafter that the press response became torrential.
attributed “much of the fame which the ‘Old Folks’ speedily acquired” (34), The Boston Herald of the following morning claimed “thousands were turned away from the doors unable to obtain an entrance” to this “great and triumphant occasion”(3/14/1856: 4). The program was hardly anything new, being comprised largely of the same pieces performed in the same venue by the similarly costumed Chelsea Continentallers a year earlier and at the Boston Musical Convention the previous August. What was so different about the Reading Opera Chorus Class and their Boston debut that generated such an unprecedented response?

By March, 1856 the pump had been well primed for the OFCs to blow up in Boston but, to mix water metaphors, the fact that Kemp and his group were the ones to catch the wave was not due to coincidence or good timing alone but to the coalescing of several musical and extra-musical factors. Not the least of these were the elaborate costume, grand arrival and sheer size of the Reading entourage- some two hundred in all, including about forty singers and eleven instrumentalists joined by a significant portion of the town’s population. 113 Tickets to classical concerts in Boston often cost a dollar, but Kemp wisely kept his down to twenty-five cents, making the concert accessible to a broader spectrum of the public. Critical to the success of the concert and the many that followed is the fact that, having gotten the attention of the public, the group was able to deliver on its promise with what was

113 “The orchestra was sufficiently antique, consisting of 3 violins, 1 violoncello, 1 contra bass, 2 flutes, 1 trombone, 1 ophicleide, 1 bassoon, and an organ harmonium” (Boston Evening Transcript 3/14/1856: 2).
reported as exceptionally good singing and playing. Also working in their favor, the thirty-four year old Kemp and his ensemble were unusually young and attractive for a choir of “old folks” as noted in the following excerpt from a review in the *Cambridge Chronicle*.

One great lesson to be drawn from this concert is that female beauty cannot be concealed even beneath the most uncouth disguises of outward costume. We must acknowledge that we have never seen so many pretty faces triumph over such unpromising circumstances. A much esteemed bachelor friend of ours who has hitherto been proof to all female attractions, is supposed to have yielded at length to the fascinations of these flour-barrel bonnets. At any rate, he took the first train for Reading yesterday morning and nothing has been heard from him since (3/15/1856: 2).

In his 1868 memoir *History of the Old Folks’ Concerts* Kemp singles out a community-wide effort as an important factor in the success of the first Boston concert. After mounting several popular performances in Reading, Lynn and Cambridge earlier in the winter, Kemp decided to give it a try in the big city, writing that he “was convinced that the affair ought to assume the proportions of a demonstration,- a protest of the ‘Old Folks’ against being ignored by their posterity” (29-30). Kemp was determined to make it a grand affair, and pulling this off, he reminisced, required “extensive labor and research in which not one but scores of people” were involved. The “success of the first concert in Boston” he attributed “to the ardor with which the young ‘Old Folks’ entered into the enterprise, in attending to the details and preparing for the occasion,” which included rehearsal, soliciting
ancient habiliments from neighbors and getting used to wearing them without cracking each other up (30).

In this moment of apparently non-strategic humility, seemingly something of a rarity in his writing, Kemp neglects to mention that, community involvement aside, the concert could not have happened as it did without him.\textsuperscript{114} That it happened at all was due largely to his organizational skill, financial backing, ability to think big and willingness to take a risk. That it was such a success had a lot to do with his advertising experience and Boston connections, on one hand, and his musicality, nascent theatrical talent, sense of humor and thorough understanding of Yankee character and caricature on the other. Chief among the latter was Kemp’s canny ability to walk the tightrope, with a wink, between the sacred and the secular, broad humor and piety, country bumpkin and city elite. In addition to these factors Robert Kemp had an able and eager collaborator in his wife Elizabeth Alden Kemp, 1824-1882, who, according to one account, was actually the one who initially proposed the idea of performing a costumed old folks’ concert. Also significant, unlike old folks choirs before them, the Kemps and their group had a manager, Elizabeth’s older

\textsuperscript{114} I’m reluctant to assert too strong an opinion about Kemp’s character, as it’s so easy to get these things wrong, something that is likely familiar to anyone who has been written about to any great degree by someone for whom the writing is part of their work.
brother William Fernald Alden, who worked to make arrangements, sell tickets and promote the Boston concert from his home in nearby Cambridgeport.\textsuperscript{115}

Kemp was initially concerned about the possibility of failure in Boston but, emboldened by two successful concerts and rave reviews in Cambridge, once he determined to “make the trial” in the big city he and the group went all out. In the days leading up to the concert the Boston and Cambridge papers were flooded with advertisements and letters to the editor trumpeting the group’s musicality, costume and village church choir provenance as an “Association of Amateurs, selected from the different Religious Societies in Reading” \textit{(Boston Herald 3/13/1856: 3)}, known as “a famous place for raising good singers” \textit{(Salem Register 4/3/1856:2)}. Kemp chartered a special train to Boston and back to accommodate as many Readingites as he could muster, promising them only an excursion and supper at Higgins’, a popular oyster house on Court Street near Tremont Temple. Due to the growing press attention and aggressive advertising campaign after the concerts in Cambridge, when the fully costumed group arrived in Boston they found a large crowd had gathered to greet them at the station. From there they created further spectacle, riding in twelve horse-drawn omnibuses to Tremont Temple. The Tremont debut and subsequent encores appear to have been financed in part by William Alden, Kemp writing “the bills, as presented to the manager, were very large, and the liberal patronage alone

\textsuperscript{115} William Alden toured with the troupe in 1859/1860. A New Year’s resolution tucked into Benjamin Conant’s tour diary, witnessed by Conant, Father Kemp and others, records that on December 31\textsuperscript{st} 1859 troupe member Woodbury Griffin agreed to “abstain from all vulgarity and obscene language” if Alden agreed to quit smoking until the end of the tour.
enabled him to meet them” (Kemp 1868: 35-36). However Kemp was able to finance such a risky project, he must have been relieved when he arrived at the venue to find the hall was already packed to the gills and the last ticket had been sold hours earlier.

The Opera Chorus Club, Costume and the “Antique and Horribles”

Kemp’s 1868 memoir account of the concert is largely in keeping with 1856 newspaper accounts. Commenting on the general hubbub that preceded their arrival he wrote “the public were evidently aroused, and I felt somewhat aroused myself when I learned what had been going on” (31). The papers, too, noted the chaos that preceded the concert, but Kemp’s memory of the group’s entrance differs from these accounts in one detail. While the papers said the group’s taking the stage in costume elicited “roars of laughter” (Boston Evening Transcript 3/14/1856: 2) and “shouts of admiration” (Cambridge Chronicle 3/15/1856: 2), Kemp recollected that “as the members of the troupe and their friends slowly filed on to the platform before the immense audience the noise and disturbance ceased, and all were intently engaged in examining the queer, quaint, and curious costumes which covered the apparently venerable forms before them” (Kemp 1868: 31).

What is clear is that their “fantastic yet appropriate attire” was not just window dressing for the music but an integral part of the event’s attraction and novelty (Boston Evening Transcript 3/14/1856: 2). As one review put it “the immense audience that assembled shows there exists a great love in our community for ancient
melodies, or that an appeal to the desire for novel and quaint effects is indispensable to the most complete success of even musical entertainments in our city” (2). It seems Bostonians had come to crave theater and spectacle, even in connection with sacred music, something that was not yet the case in places like Northampton, Hartford and Greenfield. In Kenosha, for example, the “neat white caps” of the “aged women…all sitting before us with quiet simplicity, and modesty” had tugged at the heartstrings and elicited nostalgia for older times “with all the loves and joys connected with the memory thereof” (Kenosha Telegraph 4/13/1854: 3). Likewise a Cleveland reviewer speaking of the dearness of “reminiscences of ‘auld lang syne’” wrote “nothing has ever been so successful in exciting these in Yankee hearts as these revivals of old New England Songs and old Puritan Costumes” (Plain Dealer 4/5/1855: 3). While some accounts of earlier events mentioned the amusement of the “young folks” at the antique music and performers, audience response to OFCs before Kemp was hardly “roars of laughter” and “shouts of admiration.”

The shouts and roars were prompted by a combination of things, including the extremity of many costumes as examples of a type, the disjuncture between them and the people they contained, and the male performers’ exaggerated assortment of wigs and fake white beards. Facial hair had a funny kind of double entendre in 1856, as an emblem of youngish hipsterism in the present and country bumpkinism in the days “lang syne.” It’s as hard to imagine, for example, Henry David Thoreau without a beard as it is to imagine Paul Revere with one. In relation to Kemp and company’s facial hair we might be reminded of fictional old-time singing master Melodious
Migrate’s comment about students throwing peas “as thick as a fiddler’s musty,” implying an association between unshaven, possibly even African American, rusticity and the music of the old-fashioned country singing school.

Some in Kemp’s group went beyond generic outfits to characterization, employing props, stage business and banter to portray a wide range of antiquated New Englanders. Many represented simply “Puritan fathers and mothers,” while others represented more specific Yankee types like the hick farmer, the “Green Mountain Yankee,” the “Boston dandy” and the “old continentaller.” Kemp himself portrayed an old-school singing master, an aged cousin of fictional country choristers like Melodious Migrate, Christopher Crotchet and Ichabod Crane. His song introductions and asides to the audience were replete with Yankee humor and rustic New England patois, a talent he further displayed in his memoir, which is as much a Yankee humor piece as it is an autobiography. For just one example, at some point Kemp got in the habit of introducing Billings’ enduringly popular Easter Anthem, a setting of prose cobbled together from scripture and Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts*, by saying “this is one of our pieces which hasn’t got no meter” (*New York Musical Review and Gazette* in Tick-Steinberg 1973). A letter to the editor from “CORONATION” about the second Cambridge concert in February called Kemp a “venerable man” who acted “the old singing-master to a charm, beating time, shaking his head, and ordering his class with just the gravity and pompous importance which puffed out the masters of olden times” (*Boston Herald* 3/8/1856: 2).
Playing the part of an “old Granther” who looked “as venerable as Father Time himself” (Boston Evening Transcript 3/14/1856: 2), Kemp’s slightly older friend and longtime bass viol player Daniel Foss was also a hit, making comic business of producing a “huge lump of rosin from a capacious side pocket just at the right time” (Cambridge Chronicle 3/1/1856: 2) and fumbling with a “unique chronometer of huge proportions” which “added largely to the enjoyment of the occasion” (Boston Evening Transcript 3/14/1856: 2). “CORONATION” reported that Foss, “older than Joice Heath,” the allegedly 161 year old woman exhibited around New England in the 1830s, “rosins his bow and tunes his instrument in a manner which brings down the whole house” (2). It is worth noting that the author was not alone in seeing no discord between “bringing down the house” and the sacred nature of the repertoire, even writing without irony that Kemp’s Tremont Temple concert had been “urgently solicited by some of the venerable clergy…of Boston” (Boston Herald 3/8/1856: 2).

Some members of the Opera Chorus Club portrayed historical New Englanders including John Hancock and General Putnam, while others portrayed figures who were Yankees only by adoption, notably the ubiquitous George Washington and even Daniel Boone, representing America at its most regal and most rustic respectively. As she did in performances ever afterward, Elizabeth Alden Kemp
appeared as Mrs. Washington, according to one account. Part of the fun for the audience must have been trying to figure out who was who. Within a few years the “Yankees” represented at OFCs would come to include everyone from Pocahontas to Marie Antoinette. After all, as, in the eyes of many nineteenth century Yankees, New England stood at the apex of history, all history was hers.

Some items of clothing became characters in their own right, including a bonnet “the size of a flour barrel” that rarely escaped mention and became a kind of group mascot. Some connected to specific episodes in New England history required explanation. The significance of “a hat worn at the Battle of Bunker Hill” or “a check worn by one of the Salem witches,” for example, could only be ascertained through introduction, something Kemp was careful to do at the interval as the Readingites mingled with the audience to give them a chance to inspect their outfits close up (Kemp 1868: 31-32).

The authenticity and antiquity of their dress was extremely important to the group’s initial appeal. More than symbols, the costumes were “patriotic talismans” as Jennifer Anderson describes “old mahogany” furniture during the early phase of the Colonial Revival. Anderson writes “people fearful of eroding social distinctions expressed a growing appreciation for ‘old mahogany’… In their eyes, antique mahogany objects, preferably made of solid wood and darkened with the tincture of

116 In his diary, however, Benjamin Conant records that Mrs. Washington was portrayed by “Mrs. Boutwell.”
age, exemplified the supposed virtues of an earlier time.” Manufacturers took advantage of the taste for “old mahogany” until “to the great annoyance of those who owned or inherited authentic colonial artifacts, anyone could…purchase freshly minted heirlooms” (2012: 305). While Kemp early began advertising, and in later life defended, the authenticity of his troupe’s costumes, he apparently came to realize that audiences were less affected by the outfits’ actual provenance than by what they were told about them. By at least 1859 troupe members began to make their own costumes or buy them new, and advertisements for the group after their return from England often boasted dubiously of a three hundred year old dress that had allegedly belonged to Queen Elizabeth.

One reviewer of the Boston debut mentioned the “performers in their ‘antique and horrible’ costumes” (Cambridge Chronicle 3/15/1856: 2). The aforementioned and celebrated Antique and Horrible Artillery Company of Lowell and its imitators around New England must have figured significantly as implicit contemporary points of reference for Kemp and his audiences. A description of the Antique and Horribles’ “ancient and ridiculous” (Gloucester Telegraph 7/9/1851) uniforms at an 1851 Independence Day parade could just as well have been a description of the men in Kemp’s troupe: “no two had uniforms alike; there were high crowned hats and low crowned hats; long tailed coats and strait jackets…and everything that was grotesque and ludicrous (Boston Daily Atlas 7/7/1851).
Appearing like an embodiment of a verse of the song Yankee Doodle, the motley ensemble of “Horribles” reportedly brought with them “a cannon composed of a pistol mounted on a big pair of stone wheels, and drawn by an ox team” (Brattleboro Weekly Eagle 6/30/1851). Yet, as ridiculous as they were, the company’s leader appeared in “a venerable coat, said to have been worn at the battle of Bunker Hill,” and the group marched in the same parade with real military companies and the usual cast of Independence Day characters (Boston Daily Atlas 7/7/1851). Their march wasn’t an act of subversion but a celebration of the holiday, the nation in general and New England in particular that was perfectly intelligible to their intended audience. If this seems curious we should recall the discussion above of what Leo Lemay called the “American put on,” and the pleasure Americans had long derived from lampooning the uppity and assuming the role of the bumpkin, a la Yankee Doodle, or the “patch-upon-patch, hoe-swinging, corn-growing, pumpkin-eating hardscrabbler” of the ironic seventeenth century faux anti-emigration ballad New England’s Annoyances (Lemay 1985: 62). In particular we should be reminded of the subtly sacred undertone Lemay posited was at the heart of the latter song and the “American put-on” in general. On the surface an indictment of the rough living and unrefined character of New England Puritans, New England’s Annoyances was actually a joke at the expense of imagined effete English men and women and, Lemay contends, “ultimately a religious song, recalling not only the facts of past material privations but indirectly asserting that those privations indicate a spiritual superiority” (63).
An ingredient of Robert Kemp’s success was his ability to deftly employ a version of the sacred/secular American put-on, using the “antique and horrible” to suggest the “ancient and honorable,” the broad humor and spectacle of the former proclaiming the Yankee pride and piety of the latter. The costumes, including the tension between their ridiculousness and the life and death seriousness of the texts, seem to have intensified the experience of Kemp’s old folks’ concert, providing the audience opportunity to experience a rich dynamic of piety, irony, slapstick, historical imagination, reverence and nostalgia. Audience members must also have enjoyed the opportunity to congratulate themselves for how far they, as urban moderns, had come from the privations, musical and sartorial, of the rural, pre-industrial past. It is not surprising, then, that the group’s early performances could be understood as examples of “good taste and judgement” (Cambridge Chronicle 3/1/1856: 2) by some, (likely including those who got the joke and appreciated this configuration), while others, (including those who did not), saw them as despicably irreverent, and Kemp himself as reminiscent “in dress and action of one of Donizetti’s trained monkeys” (New York Musical Review and Gazette in Tick-Steinberg 1973).

Even among those who might have appreciated Kemp’s Yankee humor and costume in other contexts there were plenty who disapproved of his wedding them to sacred music. Lowell Mason, for one, was quick to dismiss Kemp’s entertainments as “old clothes concerts,” and I suspect the “venerable clergy” who had “urgently solicited” Kemp to come to Boston did not include Lyman Beecher, who had been so moved by the old folks’ concert at the Boston Musical Convention. A review in The
Liberator of one of Kemp’s publications a few years later sums up a common response to his modus operandi. “We have no objection to dancing per se, but dancing at a funeral is not in good taste. Truly, there is but a step from the ‘sublime to the ridiculous,’ and it is here taken” (9/14/1860: 2). Still, by throngs of New Englanders, including those of only average piety, those who really loved the old music and those with a thirst for morally acceptable Yankee entertainment, Kemp’s formula was received as a stroke of genius.

The Music of Kemp’s Boston Debut

As much excitement as the costume and characterization generated, the group and their Boston debut would not have made such an impact if the evening had not been well programmed and the music especially well rendered. Early reviews were unanimous in praising the group’s accomplished musicality saying, for example, that “Billings and Holden, Swan, & c., find no better interpreters than our Reading friends” (Cambridge Chronicle 2/23/1856: 2). After discussing the costume, one reviewer who apparently agreed wrote “we come now to the great attraction, the music, and we wish we could do it justice. The enunciation was very distinct, the execution satisfactory in the highest degree...The concert was over all too soon, and we felt at its close, like throwing up our hat and shouting BILLINGS AND HOLDEN, FOREVER” (2). According to other reviews, the group’s style was “superb and taking” (Boston Herald 3/14/1856: 4), the singers possessed “fresh, true and prompt voices,” the parts
were “remarkably well balanced” (*Salem Register* 4/3/1856: 2), and the group was “up to the mark’ in time and tune, singing the most difficult passages with perfect success even at the close of the evening” (*Cambridge Chronicle* 3/15/1856: 2). One seasoned critic called Kemp’s Boston debut “one of the most gratifying entertainments we have attended during the present season” (*Boston Herald* 3/14/1856: 4), while a self-described musical amateur wrote “I have never heard a concert in my life which gave me more satisfaction” (*Cambridge Chronicle* 2/16/1856: 2).

One of the most telling accounts enthused that “the music, both of the orchestra and the chorus class, could hardly have been improved, and while the listener was reminded by it of days ‘lang syne,’ it lacked the drawl and hum-drum that often make the old tunes unpleasant” (*Boston Evening Transcript* 3/14/1856: 2). This “drawl and hum-drum” most likely refers to the relative lack of, in the words of Leonard Bacon, “what is commonly called ‘expression’” (Day et al 1856: 2). To this critic, at least, Kemp and company’s performance lacked the rustic, congregational-style singing, folksy accompaniment and countrified “old nasal” sound so often associated with the music of Billings and Holden. This review implies that, in keeping with its relatively highbrow name, the singing and playing of the Reading Opera Chorus Class was rather more refined than that heard in the average old folks’ concert. In fact, the raves in the Boston press suggest that the group’s singing and playing may have been in advance of what was commonly found even in city choirs and concert halls.
Although, in his memoir, Robert Kemp claimed (capitals original) “I NEVER KNEW A NOTE OF MUSIC, AND CANNOT DISTINGUISH A ‘MINIM’ FROM A ‘DEMISEMIQUAVER,’” this is Yankee shtick in keeping with his Father Kemp persona. Before moving to Reading from Boston, Robert and Elizabeth Kemp had been members of the city’s Handel and Haydn Society and had sung in the society’s chorus (1868: 195). Even after they moved to Reading, Kemp was elected treasurer of the Mendelssohn Choral Society and the Kemps probably sang with that group as well, the singing of which the picky Boston critic John Sullivan Dwight described as being “such as a cultivated taste can listen to with real pleasure” (Dwight’s Journal of Music 11/18/1854: 53). When Kemp and company toured England in 1861, members were incensed at being compared by the locals to Christy’s Minstrels, then also touring Britain, and went to considerable lengths to communicate to the public that, unlike the lowbrow “Ethiopian delineators,” many of the “old folks” were, according to tour diarist Benjamin Conant, members of the Handel and Haydn Society. In his 1860 Father Kemp’s Old Folks Concert Music Kemp cited his “knowledge of music” among qualifications for making the collection (2). The Kemps and their group may not all have been prepared to go on to a career in art music, although several of them did, but their self-representation as musical hicks was a bit of “Yankee disingenuity,” and by most accounts the appeal of their performances was due, in part, to their relative musical refinement. The Reading Opera Chorus Class’s somewhat fancified

117 See Boston Traveler 6/30/1855: 2.
renditions of homespun music were enjoyed all the more because they touched both polls of Yankee identification, simultaneously embodying “Yankee Doodle” and the “city upon a hill.”

Musicianship is one thing, and the ability to make a set list is another. It was important to the group’s success that Kemp had a knack for structuring an evening’s entertainment. The ancient harmony was not really designed for, and is not well suited to, exclusive performance in a full-length concert. While potentially exciting for those who love them, even with a little added “expression” a few dozen examples in rapid succession can make for a juggernaut of an evening for those not familiar enough with the tunes to have prior associations with them or even be able to distinguish one from the next. Kemp found a number of work-arounds to keep the sets fresh and intensify the impact of the ancient harmony, including audience participation, the stage business, dialogue and costume discussed above and, eventually, the introduction of other kinds of music.

Rather than dividing sacred and secular music into two sets or separate concerts, as he sometimes did later on, it seems that early in his career Kemp used popular, sentimental and national songs as anchor points, providing variety, levity and moments of the familiar to refresh the ears and lengthen the attention span of the many audience members for whom the music of Billings and Holden was less interesting in practice than in theory and in small doses. This was the OFC format that continued into living memory. The practice of combining sacred and secular music
was the subject of debate in mid-nineteenth century New England, including at the Boston Musical Convention, where it was agreed that there were occasions in which it was appropriate. Although Kemp’s critic at *The Liberator* complained of the “violent incongruity” in his repertoire, the public was increasingly comfortable with such mixing and matching (9/14/1860: 2).

Added incrementally to Kemp’s ancient harmony repertoire, the wide variety of other music included solos, duets, songs about New England life, dialogue songs, temperance pieces (Mrs. Kemp’s specialty), tear jerkers like *Ring the Bell Softly*, nostalgic songs like *Home Sweet Home* (which the group famously sang for President Buchanan, by request), comic and dialect songs like *Yankee Doodle* and *Johnny Shmolker*, the songs of Robert Burns and old ballads like *Kidd’s Lament*. Also figuring prominently in their repertoire were national anthems. In the mid-nineteenth century, not only American and New England nationalism, but nationalism in general was in vogue, and songs that expressed it straddled the line between the sacred and the secular. Even earlier chaste collections like Alling Brown’s 1830 *Musical Cabinet* had contained national pieces like the *Marseillaise*. While not everyone agreed it was appropriate to pair such songs with the old hymns, the Reading singers’ renditions of
*Hail Columbia*, the *Marseillaise* and *God Save the Queen* were a noted feature of their concerts that reportedly moved some audience members to tears.\(^{118}\)

Based on Kemp’s memoir and newspaper reports, however, in early 1856 performances by the Reading Opera Chorus Club the music was almost entirely that of Billings and company. Character and costume were, therefore, especially important in helping to keep their first Boston audience engaged and move the evening along. But Kemp did have some more overtly musical programming tricks up his sleeve. For one thing, the group began their Tremont Temple concert with *Old Lang Syne*, later adopting Albert Leighton’s *Song of the Old Folks* text as their theme song. Also adding variety was a florid piece by Vincenzo Pucitta that had become a popular feature of Independence Day and other public celebrations a few decades earlier with the English text *Strike the Cymbal*, written by Massachusetts theologian and free thinker Abner Kneeland.\(^{119}\) In addition to creating flow through variety, Kemp added structure to the evening by using the two most familiar examples of ancient harmony as linchpins, inviting everyone to sing along with *Coronation* during the first half and crowning the evening with the mass singing of *Old Hundred*, by then a familiar practice.

\(^{118}\) *The Liberator*, for example, was of the opinion that national anthems, while they could be inspiring, expressed sentiments that were “clannish, defiant and directly at variance” with Christian humility (9/14/1860: 2).

\(^{119}\) Among other claims to fame, Abner Kneeland was the last man to be convicted under Massachusetts’ blasphemy laws.
If Boston people wanted their old sacred music served up with pageantry, humor, refinement and variety, Kemp and company were able to deliver in a way that exceeded any group before them, combining the basic elements of earlier OFCs and making the logical next step by embracing theatrical conventions and Yankee humor of the stage and popular press. In this sense Robert Kemp could claim, as he continued to jealously maintain throughout his life, that he was the originator of the old folks’ concerts, at least as they came to be in what was, by far, their most popular incarnation.

By the end of their Tremont Temple debut the Reading Opera Chorus Class had assured themselves of a lasting place on the Boston music scene and Robert Kemp had become a celebrity. From the stage he announced that a second concert would be given at the same location the following week to accommodate the throngs of people who had not been able to get in. The encore performance quickly sold out, and ten more were given, the last of which took place in the Temple on March 26, performed in the afternoon in order to give “friends in the neighboring towns an opportunity of attending” (Boston Evening Transcript 3/25/1856: 2).

Colonel Fay and the Chelsea Continentallers performed at the Temple that same night, and they were far from Kemp’s only competition. The Ordway Aeolians, for example, had advertised an upcoming series of concerts as featuring “Ethiopian melodies,” but after March 13 apparently tried to cash in on Kemp’s success by changing the billing to “OLD FOLKS’ CONCERT and the revival of the old and
favorite ETHIOPIAN MELODIES” (Boston Herald 3/17/1856: 3). The old folks’
concert “epidemic” was in full swing, and Robert Kemp and company became widely
believed to be its source.
CHAPTER 13: ROBERT AND ELIZABETH KEMP AND THE OLD FOLKS OF READING

Introduction and a Note on Sources

In his introduction to the 1984 Da Capo Press reprint of *Father Kemp and His Old Folks: A History of the Old Folks’ Concerts*, Richard Crawford noted that, until a more comprehensive history of the practice was written, there was a “certain justice” that Robert Kemp’s “rather untidy chronicle” would continue to be “one of the central documents in that history,” since the book’s “qualities characterize the Old Folks Concert itself” (xi). For this and other reasons Kemp’s book continues to be of interest. Having written this rather comprehensive history, however, it would be something of an injustice not to provide additional background on Robert and Elizabeth Kemp, the people most famously associated with the concerts.

Kemp’s 1868 book is, indeed, “untidy” and only became really useful to the present work in concert with a host of other sources. At times it is as much a piece of Yankee delineation as a memoir, and among the characteristics that make it less useful than it could be are, as Crawford observed, its “sketchy chronology” and long quotations from other works, especially on the history of England. Kemp is unclear, even evasive, about details like when he gave his first old folks’ concert and,
throughout the book, he displays his penchants for exaggeration, self-promotion and defensiveness, particularly of his claim to have been the originator of the “peculiar entertainments.” He enjoyed broad popularity throughout his career, and in later life in Boston was generally well thought of, even beloved, as a tireless temperance and charity worker, veteran fireman and local character. But his foibles, often targets for his competitors and detractors, make his memoir a less reliable resource than it might have been.

Kemp’s claims to have performed 6,000 concerts in twelve years in front of five million people including “all the Crowned Heads of the Old World” seem to have come from a combination of creative mathematics, wishful thinking and intentionally outlandish self-promotion. In order to deflect criticism without changing his behavior, Kemp so often used Yankee schtick that it can be difficult to tell when he was being sincere and when he was writing in character, something he was rather good at. In his preface, for example, Kemp offers three variations on the following coy item:

However unromantic it may seem reader, I am a shoe-dealer. “Everybody suited at No. 261 Hanover Street,” is my motto. This, however, is not mentioned as an advertisement. I would scorn to harbor such an intention in a publication which, I hope, will be purely of a literary, and not a business,

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120 By 1875 Kemp seems to have come to believe some of his claims, and perhaps forgotten that even he had given several OFCs before Tremont Temple. In a letter to the editor that year he wrote “There has been so much controversy in the papers as to who was the originator of the Old Folks Concerts, I feel it my duty to the citizens of Boston to state that 23 years ago this winter a small band of singers from the little town of Reading, 12 miles from Boston, and led by me, gave the first Old Folk’s Concert ever given in this country, at the Tremont Temple… The project and the dressing in ancient costume originated with me, and I defy any man in America to doubt the assertion” (Boston Journal 11/12/1875: 2).
character. But, at the same time, should the reader see fit to drop in at No. 261, he will at all seasons find a good stock, and a determination on my part to sell
(1868: 4).

In an 1864 advertisement for Sawyer’s American Pastilles, an “invaluable help to all who speak or sing before popular assemblies,” Kemp signed his endorsement “Father Kemp and Family, Consisting of Father Kemp, Mother Kemp and eighteen children” (Hartford Courant 4/15/1864: 3). Here, as elsewhere, Kemp wove exaggeration into the fabric of his persona, walking a line between humor and lying, likely in the hope of reaping the benefits of both while forestalling criticism. It seems he sought advantage in leaving room for the public to wonder if it was all a put on, how much fabrication was involved and whether it was he, Robert Kemp, or he, “Father” Kemp, who was prone to telling stories in the interest of doing business.

Quirks aside, Father Kemp and His Old Folks is a valuable resource in dialog with other important sources, including Robert and Elizabeth Kemps’ other publications, and a host of local histories, genealogies and archival materials. Particularly important, once again, were the newspapers, especially around Boston that, between the troupe’s triumph in March 1856 and Robert’s death in 1897, carried many items about the old folks’ concerts and about the Kemps as prominent local residents. Of, at least, equal interest are letters and detailed tour diaries in the possession of Donald Bennett of Bethel, Maine, written by his relatives Benjamin Conant and Clara Newhall (Conant), two young members of Kemp’s troupe who met
and courted on the road and married hastily on the eve of the old folks’ departure for England in January, 1861.¹²¹ Both the newspapers and diaries contain insights into Kemp’s character, career and life, sometimes supporting and sometimes casting doubt on elements of his self-representation.

**Robert and Elizabeth Kemp**

Robert Henry Kemp was born on Cape Cod, in Wellfleet, Massachusetts on June 6, 1821. In his memoir he touted his Pilgrim heritage, writing “I am under great obligations to the Pilgrim Fathers for landing so near Cape Cod. I thank them heartily. Had they gone farther South, their descendants would have dressed differently, sung different psalm-tunes, I might have been somebody else, and, consequently ‘Father Kemp’ would never have had a chance in the world” (1868: v). In fact, Kemp’s grandfather, Captain Robert Kemp, was from Maryland, apparently a member of a prominent Quaker family from the Eastern Shore, a detail our Robert may have obliquely referred to in the quotation above but chosen to omit to maintain his professional image as a thorough Yankee.

Like his grandfather, the other men in Kemp’s family were seafarers, his father Nathan having drowned off a boat in Boston Harbor when Robert was just two years old. His step-father Nathaniel Tileston Davis had spent more than four years

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¹²¹ Excerpts from the Conants’ diaries and letters appear in a privately published book I found at a used bookstore many years ago (see Crosby 1974). Thanks to the advent of the internet I was finally able to track down the originals in 2012.
sailing the south seas on the brig Independence, discovering an island in the process and returning with a famously rich cargo of silk, spices and other exotic goods.\footnote{122}

Robert Kemp, on the other hand, was something of a black sheep in the seafaring department. He did try his hand at the sailor’s life for three years, signing on to his uncle’s pinky boat as cook at the tender age of nine, but it seems he was better suited to the life of city merchant than rugged seafarer, a fact he illustrates in his memoir with humorous examples of his ineptitude.

Kemp’s first experience in retail was likely with his mother, who, after Nathan Kemp’s death, kept a store in Wellfleet, the operation of which was later taken over by Nathaniel Davis. Perhaps with the help of Davis, who by then had a store in Boston, Robert Kemp moved to the city at the age of 20 to become the junior partner in a boot and shoe concern with John Mansfield, a member of a prominent family in the shoe business, and the husband of Robert’s sister Hannah, whom Mansfield had married shortly before Kemp moved to Boston.\footnote{123}

In Boston, Robert met and soon married Elizabeth Jane Alden (1824-1882), of the prominent Mayflower Aldens of Cambridgeport, Chelsea and Lynn. An Alden on his mother’s side, Mansfield may have even had a role in introducing them. By all accounts the Kemps’ marriage was a good one. Their fortieth anniversary in 1881 was reported in the papers as a public celebration with three hundred people, calcium

\footnote{122} See Davis 1903: 154.\footnote{123} In the Alden/Kemp family Bible it is recorded that Mansfield’s wife, Robert Kemp’s sister Hannah D. Kemp Davis, died in August, 1849.
lights and Chinese lanterns on the lawn and a twenty five-piece brass band. Upon Elizabeth’s death a year later Robert was reportedly so distraught that he burned all the photographs and other memorabilia related to their performing life together “in order that they might not bring so constantly to mind the greatness of his loss” (Boston Evening Transcript 5/15/1897: 4).

While living in Boston, Robert and Elizabeth Kemp had three children. The first, Elizabeth (“Lizzie”), was born on February 14, 1844, and sang alto with the old folks from an early age and was even married on stage during a concert in 1866. Robert H. Kemp, born on June 24, 1846, also travelled with the troupe, and later went into the shoe business with his father. Merinda Kemp was born on July 4, 1848 but only lived four months. A fourth child, Minnie, whose unfortunate story I will relate below, was born after the couple moved to Reading.

Writing in character in his memoir Kemp disavowed any musical training but, as mentioned above, while living in Boston Robert and Elizabeth were active participants in the city’s music scene, among other things singing in the Handel and Haydn Society Chorus, a group that consisted primarily of talented, choir trained amateurs at the time. Whatever “Father” Kemp’s pretended ignorance on the subject, Robert and Elizabeth were enthusiastic and experienced singers whose remove from

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124 See Boston Journal 7/26/1881:3.
125 See Newark Daily Advertiser 1/12/1866:2.
Boston and its music making opportunities played an important role in the birth of their old folks troupe.

By 1853, one way or another, the Kemps had accumulated enough money to buy a hobby farm in the fashionable, upscale second district of the “old town” of Reading, which the arrival of the railroad had made a convenient suburb of Boston, twelve miles away. Of the move Kemp later wrote “after traversing so many thousand miles of my own and foreign countries I have become convinced that the fortunate day of my life was when I purchased my from (sic) of twelve acres in that suburb (1868: 14). His relationship with his adopted hometown exemplified the mid-century urban/rural “center village” ideal discussed above. Calling it “a model New England town” (16), Kemp found in Reading a place were he could “enjoy the comforts of rural life, in connection with [his] city business” (14). The couple had a house built and moved to town in 1854, while Robert continued to commute to the Boston shoe store until at least the end of the following year. He seems to have bought the land either from, or with, John Mansfield, whom an 1854 map shows as living in a stately, new Italianate home next door to the Kemps that would later become the home of their daughter Lizzie and her husband Francis Dewey.\(^\text{126}\)

Upon the move, Kemp wrote that he was “attacked with a disease which has prevailed to a great extent among my neighbors and friends since my remembrance—‘Fancy Farming’” (14). By his own account, Kemp was no better suited to farming

\(^{126}\) See Woodford 1854.
than sailing. He claimed his most profitable agricultural endeavor was growing apples, two hundred and fifty barrels of which he sold for a profit he estimated at eight cents a barrel. His description of dealing with vermin is a good example of his skill as a Yankee humorist and provides a glimpse into his short stint as an agriculturalist.

A good portion of my time was passed in killing caterpillars. It is a pastime edifying to the fancy farmer, for only about one season. A rustic wants variety as well as other persons. If the vermin would change their nature, so that the brain might be exercised to invent some new method of destruction, the slaughter might then be contemplated with a certain degree of interest and pleasure; but a caterpillar is the same worm as the seasons come round, and there is but one way of killing him. He is numerous, and requires incessant watching (16).

As Kemp continued to commute to Boston for more than a year, probably along with his new neighbor John Mansfield, I cannot imagine when he had time for all the agricultural exploits he describes. It may be an example of his sketchy chronology, and it’s likely that he only took to fancy farming in earnest after dissolving his partnership with Mansfield on January 1, 1856, the very day before what appears to have been his second old folks’ concert. In any case, when the quiet of winter came on, probably 1854/55, the newly rustic family found themselves

\[127\text{“The copartnership heretofore existing between the subscribers under the name of MANSFIELD & KEMP, is this day, by mutual consent dissolved. The business will be hereafter carried on by J. MANSFIELD, who is authorized to settle all the business of the late firm. JOHN MANSFIELD Boston, Jan 1, 1856” (Boston Traveler 1/2/1856: 3).} \]
in need of variety and something to exercise the brain and, as they had in Boston, the Kemps turned to music.

**Origin of the Reading Old Folks**

According to Kemp, his foray into the world of concert leading was, like the first OFC in New Haven, an outgrowth of social singing at home.

Winter came, and with it the long evenings, when the people in the country, and especially the good people of Reading, depend upon social intercourse for their enjoyment… After a few evenings passed in quiet, and mostly in bed, a thought struck me, from which has originated the “Old Folks’ Concerts,” which have since become so famous… One evening I invited a few young people (singers) to my residence, to pass an evening in repeating some of the popular songs of the day, with which we were all familiar. The first experiment was so successful that many evenings were passed in like manner… It then occurred to me to revive old memories by singing some of the tunes which strengthened the religious faith of our grandfathers and grandmothers… Accordingly the “country round about” was thoroughly scoured, and every old singing-book which could be procured was brought to my house on the next evening of the “sing…” These rehearsals attracted much attention in the neighborhood (1868: 16-17).

Just how musical the Kemps’ neighborhood was is confirmed by comparing an 1858 list of troupe members with an 1855 map of Reading that shows many of them living as close as a few doors away or in the adjacent Reading village center, an easy walk from the Kemps’ home. Some details of Kemp’s recollection are less certain, however, and an 1891 rebuttal to a premature obituary, written by someone
who seems to have known the Kemps, offers a slightly different account. According to its author the group initially met to sing, not popular songs, but the “better class of choral music” the Kemps had enjoyed in Boston (Boston Daily Advertiser 9/1/1891: 6). His new neighbors, however, “although possessed of good voices, were hardly up to that class of music, and old songs and hymn tunes were substituted.” The idea of mounting a costumed concert of ancient harmony the author attributed to Mrs. Kemp. Another of Kemp’s questionable details is the claim that they had to scour the countryside for singing books, something he may have exaggerated for effect and so he could use the cute phrase “the country round about.” In fact, Kemp’s store was less than half a mile from Cornhill, Boston’s publishing and bookselling hub, where he surely could have found several of the ancient harmony collections then in print and probably even shape-note collections like the Southern Harmony. These details aside, the “sings” became a popular feature of the neighborhood, and a concert was planned.

One of several questions that remains is when Kemp’s first OFC actually took place, as in his memoir he writes, somewhat mysteriously, “the evening of Dec. 6, 185- was set apart as the proper time” (27). It is possible that by 1868 he had forgotten what year it took place, but I think it is more likely that he wanted to leave the reader free to imagine it happened earlier than it actually did, strengthening his claim to have been the originator of the practice.

Another difficulty in sorting out the origin of the Reading Old Folks stems from the existence of two groups with similar and shifting names. The group Kemp
led was early known alternately as the Reading Opera Chorus Club, the Reading Opera Chorus Class and variants thereof. Meanwhile, a group sometimes billed as the South Reading Opera Chorus Club performed in some of the same places around the same time. Also unclear is what repertoire the groups initially sang. The earliest press notice I have found of the Reading Opera Chorus Club is a preview of their May 3, 1855 performance at Bethesda Church, where Lyman Beecher’s son William was pastor, in which there is no mention of Kemp, repertoire or costume. A review of an August 22 concert by the South Reading Opera Chorus Club gives the leader as “Mr. Bancroft,” and the only song mentioned is Stephen Foster’s popular *Hard Times Come Again No More* (*Boston Herald* 8/24/1855: 2). There were many Bancrofts in town, but the South Reading group’s leader was almost certainly the Kemps’ young neighbor Francis James Bancroft, born in 1833, an organ builder and choir leader at the Baptist church in South Reading.

I cannot say for certain, but from all the evidence I have found, my theory is as follows. The social singing at the Kemps’, probably including a mix of popular and light classical songs, created or tightened the bonds between a loosely affiliated group of musically inclined locals, and both Bancroft and Kemp decided to lead some of them in concerts of this music in 1855. Bancroft likely leaned heavily on members of his choir at the Baptist church while Kemp’s group was likely initially comprised more of Congregationalists from Bethesda Church. There was probably some overlap in membership and friendly rivalry between the groups. The concert that Robert Kemp refers to in his memoir is probably not the first concert he led, but the first one
to feature costume and ancient harmony, as suggested by his wife, and took place during his second winter in town, on December 6, 1855.

After Kemp’s successful old folks’ concerts in Reading and Lynn the South Reading group seems to have followed suit. Whatever their origins, by early 1856, both groups were performing the music of Billings and Holden in antiquarian dress and helping to spread the OFC virus throughout the region. The author of an April 1856 Salem Observer review of local concerts noted “the two rival societies from Reading adorn…their show bills the one with a huge old-style bonnet, and the other with a monstrous bell-crowned hat” (4/19/1856: 2). The first group was certainly the one led by Kemp, who used the image of what he called a “champion bonnet” on the back of his 1860 tunebook and in advertisements for the duration of his career. The author goes on to suggest the two groups “unite their forces, marry the two societies, con-join the hats and bonnets and then, being ‘knit in the chains of harmony’ give us specimens of the fine old tunes as rendered by a powerful chorus of the two ‘companies of singers’” (2). They may, indeed, have done something like it. Francis Bancroft, along with his parents and wife Harriet Ann Weston, later toured with Kemp, as did another Baptist member of the South Reading group, tour diarist Clara Newhall (Conant).128

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128 A review of the South Reading Opera Chorus Class’s performance on August 22, 1859 singles out “Miss Newhall” as deserving “particular note” (Boston Herald 8/24/1855:2).
Figure 14: Elizabeth and Robert Kemp, cartes de visites ca. 1860. Author's collection.

The Kemps, Sacred Music and Religion

As the Kemps made their mark broadly in the realm of sacred music, it is worth pausing for a moment to consider the place of religion in their lives and performance. The details have proven elusive and, in his writings, Kemp generally
kept his cards close to his chest on the subject. Whatever his mid-Atlantic, possibly Quaker, roots, he was almost certainly a traditional Congregationalist, although he seems to have had a connection to Methodism. As in other areas of his life, critics often questioned his sincerity in regard to religion. In response to Kemp’s (probably falsely) alleged practice of having troupe members attend services at the various churches in a town where they had an upcoming concert to distribute handbills, sometimes even in costume, *The New York Evangelist* commented “it is considered doubtful whether this piece of impertinence and irreverence will prove worth the ten cents charged for it, should they repeat their tour another season. Christian people everywhere will do well to make a note of ‘Father Kemp’” (1/26/1875:4).

Despite such criticism, the available evidence suggests the Kemps were more serious about spiritual things than their antics might have suggested to their detractors. The public manifestation of their religion was more often reform work than overt statements of faith. I believe it was no mere public relations ploy (although it didn’t hurt) that the troupe performed many benefit concerts, including performances that

129 At least one early performance by the Reading Opera Chorus Class at Tremont Temple was given “For the Benefit of the Hanover Street Mission Sunday School,” a Methodist organization later led by Methodist activist, old folks’ concert leader and New England Conservatory founder Eben Tourjee (*Boston Traveler* 4/12/1856 p 3). Although it was an outreach project of the Hanover Street Methodist church, the mission was formed for the general benefit of the poor in Boston’s North End. Kemp’s funeral address was given by Rev. Albert Hale Plumb, a temperance activist and defender of traditional Congregationalism. Kemp probably knew Plumb through the temperance movement, though it is possible they met when, towards the end of his life, Kemp lived across the street from Roxbury’s Walnut Street Congregational Church where Plumb was pastor.

130 As this was well after Kemp stopped touring, the author is almost certainly referring to one of his many imitators, but I feel it is relevant as evidence of associations with the name “Father Kemp.”
raised money for organizations like Boston’s Hanover Street Mission Sunday School. Robert and Elizabeth were particularly active in advocating and raising funds for the cause of temperance, both of them being longtime activists in the movement and “Mother” Kemp publishing a collection of cold water songs, including sacred pieces and poems of her own composition in during her husband’s tenure as president of the Faneuil Hall Temperance Club, circa 1876.

Robert Kemp did, occasionally, make more direct statements of faith. It’s hard to gauge to what degree he was writing in character or simply observing convention, but in his 1860 tunebook preface he expressed a hope that the music’s “original power may yet be felt in stirring up souls to an active interest in holy things.” Although a review in The Liberator said it “sounded very much like cant” (9/14/1860:2), Kemp went on to urge singers to take from the old tunes “that spirit of humility which so adorned the life of our Great Exemplar, preparing us for that endless song upon which the fathers have entered” (Kemp 1860: 2).

Scripture clearly had a place in the Kemps’ home, and I found many temporal details about Robert, Elizabeth and their family in entries, apparently in both of their hands, recorded in a family Bible at the New England Historic Genealogical Society. More tellingly, as president of the Faneuil Hall Temperance Reform Club in 1876-77 Kemp defended his practice of reading Bible passages at meetings despite divisive

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131 See Boston Traveler 4/12/1856: 3.
protest by a significant faction. Some suggested Kemp’s public piety had less to do with inner conviction than with making business connections, perhaps not surprising given the slipperiness of his persona. But the available evidence suggests Robert and Elizabeth Kemp were earnest, mainstream Congregationalists of about average devoutness, for whom piety and gaiety were not in conflict in the singing of sacred and secular music. At a time when New England church was becoming more like theater the Kemps used historical imagination, nostalgia and Yankee typology to smooth the seams between the sacred and secular, the platform and the pulpit. The old folks’ concerts were entertainments first, but I believe it was significant to the Kemps that their brand of moral, popular theater partook of aspects of church that went beyond mere sentiment.

CHAPTER 14: FATHER KEMP AFTER MARCH, 1856

Beyond Boston

While a detailed account is beyond the scope of this dissertation, I will provide an overview of Kemp’s touring and publications, mostly with an eye to their character and impact, as well as a brief account of Kemp’s later years. Since my understanding of life on the road with the old folks is largely based on the Conants’ diaries it reflects things as they were in 1859-1861, and is not necessarily representative of Kemp’s entire career.

Despite the group’s stunning and unexpected success in Boston, Robert Kemp did not immediately set out to make music his profession but returned to his life of “fancy farming” in Reading, while accepting invitations to perform in increasingly distant towns around New England. For some months he continued to lead the concerts for charity and the sheer fun of it, and continued to bring along a costumed entourage in addition to the musicians. In October, 1856 Kemp suffered a “very severe” fancy farming injury that put the troupe out of commission for a few months and possibly encouraged him to switch professions once again.\(^{133}\) It was not until

\(^{133}\) “Mr. Robert Kemp, of Reading, leader of the ‘Old Folks Opera Chorus Club,’ and an amateur farmer, in stepping from his wagon Saturday evening, accidentally struck a broom handle, inflicting a very severe wound upon his abdomen” (Boston Herald 10/14/1856: 2).
Spring 1857 that the group, now sometimes billed as the “Old Folks Opera Chorus Club,” took to the road with commercial intentions. Between 1857 and Kemp’s return to full time shoe selling in 1868 the ensemble toured regularly most years, mostly during the cooler months, the ever-changing membership seemingly returning to everyday life or performing closer to home in the summer.\(^{134}\)

The old folks traveled by all available means- trains, steam ships, carriages, ferries, hacks and even on foot- to meet what was often a punishing schedule.\(^ {135}\) Benjamin Conant records, for example, that the group was on the road, many days performing both a children’s matinee and an evening concert, from late August 1859 until late March 1860 with only a brief respite at home in early October. Sundays were not guaranteed days off, as the group frequently “furnished the singing” for a church service, performed one of their exclusively sacred concerts or both.\(^ {136}\) In one unusually long, unbroken stint in Philadelphia, the group performed for twenty-nine days consecutively. They even worked on holidays. The day before Thanksgiving, 1859 Conant wrote “We shall have to work quite hard tomorrow. Have a lot of bills

\(^{134}\) While Kemp’s Civil War draft record notes his occupation as “singer,” the federal census conducted in June 1860 lists Robert, Elizabeth and Lizzie as “shop keeper,” “housewife” and “seamstress” respectively (United States Census 1860).

\(^{135}\) During the group’s five week stay in the New York City area in the Fall of 1859, for example, Benjamin Conant commented on a trip from their hotel in Brooklyn to a concert in Jersey City, New Jersey. “It was quite a long walk to Jersey and back, having nearly half a mile to walk here, and about the same distance in Jersey besides going from one side of N.Y. city to the other, and crossing two ferries” (Benjamin Conant diary 11/13/1859).

\(^{136}\) “We all attended the Winter St. (Orthodox) Church in the forenoon yesterday and furnished the singing…In the afternoon I attended an orthodox church on the same street. In the evening we gave a sacred concert assisted by several singers from the different churches of the city” (Benjamin Conant diary 9/12/1859).
to distribute in the morning, and give an afternoon and evening concert at the Cooper Institute” (11/23/1859). When they did have a day off much of it, at least for some of them, was often devoted to promotional tasks including getting handbills printed, distributing them, visiting local newspaper offices and hoisting one or both of the group’s flags near the next night’s venue. They also sang for groups including school children and asylum residents in visits that were as much promotional as charitable.

One-night stands were often the most challenging, the old folks traveling to the next town after the gig or first thing in the morning and setting right to work promoting that day’s performances. More often, though, even in relatively small towns like Greenfield, MA, they spent at least a few nights and found time to explore, alone, in small groups or en masse. They visited Niagara Falls and the Liberty Bell, marveled at the pineapples growing in a hot house at the Colt revolver factory and took a pleasure trip on the Kennebec River. They visited local institutions from a pin manufactory to a state penitentiary, and their excursions frequently included singing. Kemp records that in the nation’s capital they sang not only for the current president but sang Timothy Swan’s popular old mourning song China as they wept over George Washington’s grave. Conant mentions singing while looking out over the

137 “Yesterday morning I carried the flag over to Jersey City and put it up and then went up to Cooper Institute and distributed bills from West fourteenth to Eighteenth streets inclusive. Travelled a great deal yesterday, and my feet are so sore to-day that I can hardly walk” (Benjamin Conant diary 11/17/1859).
Pioneer Valley from the top of the arsenal in Springfield, on a ferry-boat and even at the United States Mint.

In larger cities where they spent more time, the old folks had opportunities to experience local culture in greater depth, including experiences they could not have had at home in Reading, Wakefield and Littleton. During one long stay in Brooklyn, Benjamin and Clara visited Barnum’s museum, saw a performance of *The Octaroon* and experienced an array of preaching, worship and singing practices at churches including Henry Ward Beecher’s. Raised a Unitarian, Benjamin typically attended two and sometimes three services every Sunday wherever they were, and commented extensively on regional and denominational preaching, theology and singing at Congregationalist, Methodist, Swedenborgian, Baptist, Dutch Reformed, Universalist, Episcopal and other churches. Of one Sunday in New Brunswick, New Jersey, for example, he wrote

I have been to church three times to-day. This morning went to the first Presbyterian Church. The preaching was very good but the singing awfully out of tune. This afternoon went to the Catholic. I never was in a Catholic Church before and don’t care to go very often. This evening went to a Presbyterian. Very good sermon on the “goodness of God” (12/18/1859).

Accommodations, ever an issue for touring musicians and a central concern in the Conants’ diaries, could be radically different from week to week, even day to day. Clara records that at Newark’s United States Hotel on New Year’s Eve 1859/60 they had “the same rooms as before, but only three in them instead of five (BC 12/31/60)
while another night, as her future husband recorded, “the single gentlemen all slept in a hall, sixteen of us, in nine beds (8/30/1859). Occasional discomfort aside, the touring life gave the young old folks social opportunities they might not have enjoyed at home. “After concert last night,” Benjamin writes, “several of us had a good nice time in the girls’ room, in the way of nuts, candy and ale, and a social chat, which lasted till about eleven o’clock” (12/10/1859). The Kemps, despite their own relative youth, may have had to earn their “Father” and “Mother” monikers by acting in loco parentis on the road.

Although Conant once complained of Father Kemp’s “stubborn and domineering spirit,” the troupe seems to have operated with a degree of democracy, egalitarianism and good will (3/23/1861). In several diary entries he mentions the group meeting without their leader to discuss and even vote on aspects of group dynamics and touring. Group members shared some of the burden of day-to-day operations, Conant, for example, being responsible for getting their belongings to and from their accommodations. He refers to pay as a “dividend” or “stipe” that was tied to the amount of money taken in after expenses and shared equally by the performers, though the men made more than the women. “We did a very good business last Thursday” he writes. “Took three hundred and forty-two dollars in the afternoon which is more than we have taken any day yet;- shall have about ten dollars apiece after paying expenses (11/26/1859). And, elsewhere, “We had a dividend yesterday of

138 Conant actually considered this “very good accommodations,” but it illustrates the point.
twenty four dollars for the gentlemen, and sixteen dollars for the ladies, and there is some left in the treasury ‘against a rainy day’” (10/30/1859). I do not know if Kemp, soloist Emma Nichols or agent Henry Jarrett took a larger dividend than the thirty-odd other members, but Conant’s math suggests that, if they did, it was not much. As to good will, when Kemp had a hundred dollars stolen from his pocket in the green room during a performance, Conant writes, “The class met in the reading-room… and passed a series of resolutions, sympathizing with him, and showing our selves ready to render him any assistance that lay in our power, and to give him a benefit concert at such time and place as he might choose (9/15/1859).

Some of the towns the old folks visited early on had been the sites of foundational concerts in the OFC tradition with which Kemp became increasingly associated as the originator. In New Haven in 1857, for example, the group generated some confusion among audience members who, likely expecting something more like the “original” concerts at Center Church, couldn’t quite make sense of the fact that the old folks of Reading were actually, for the most part, young folks.

Kemp’s first foray beyond New England was an 1857 trip to Brooklyn. There the group appeared at Henry Ward Beecher’s Plymouth Church, among other places. 139 This connection may have come through Henry’s brother William, the

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139 Beecher was a friend of the old folks’ concerts, many taking place at his church. “A tune which has always interested a congregation, which inspires the young, and lends to enthusiasm a fit of expression,” he wrote, “ought not to be set aside because it does not follow the reigning fashion, or conform to the whims of technical science” (1855: vii).
former pastor of Bethesda Congregational Church in Reading where the Opera
Chorus Club gave one of its first concerts, and a church Robert and Elizabeth likely
attended. From there the troupe went to Philadelphia and points south, including a
visit to the nation’s capital. One highlight used ever after by Kemp in his arsenal of
press points was singing *Sweet Home* for President Buchanan by request.\(^{140}\)

As it had in New England, the group often caused a sensation, a Philadelphia
paper enthusing “such tremendous crowds…has (sic) not been seen in this city since
Jenny Lind was here. If you want to feel happy go to-night” (*Philadelphia Inquirer*
1/13/1858: 1). The old folks also generated controversy. An article in the Dutch
Reformed periodical the *Intelligencer*, quoted in the *New York Evangelist* suggested
the problem with Kemp might be a problem with New England Congregationalism in
general.

> Will our Eastern brethren tell us if Congregationalism smiles on such things?
> If the descendants of the stern Pilgrims familiarized their children with such
> broad farces and buffoonery, while they condemn the theatre? We are aware
> that they do not attach the same sacredness of association to houses of
> worship that we are accustomed to, though we have heard sharp rebukes from
> New England men of applause at a public meeting in what we call a church;
> but we should like to know if a meeting-house may be alternately a place of
> solemn worship and a comic opera-house of the most ridiculous kind?

\(^{140}\)See *Lowell Daily Citizen* 2/1/1858: 2.
Such a mixture of popular acclaim and critical backlash followed the group throughout the 1850s and 60s, on tours of the United States as far south as Washington DC, as far west as St. Paul, Minnesota as well as in southern Canada and, in 1861, England.

Usually billed as “Father Kemp’s Old Folks” and variations thereof by late 1857, when the group performed in places where OFCs had already become an established practice people sometimes had their own ideas of what the concerts should be. A letter from “OHIO” to the editor of the New York Musical Review and Gazette makes a distinction between “our concerts out West and yours down East. . . . Here, the old folks, assemble together and pass an hour or more singing the music they were wont to sing in their youthful days” (quoted in Tick-Steinberg 1973). In Cleveland, in particular, where Plymouth Church had been the site of early homegrown OFCs, Kemp drew consistently good houses but was also subject to vitriolic press. When he wrote a letter to the editor of the Plain Dealer about a reprise of their 1859 debut in town, essentially an advertisement in the guise of a warning to the public to beware of his imitators, the response was a bitterly sarcastic indictment of his too-cute Yankee shtick, his defensiveness and ceaseless quest for free advertising.

DEAR FATHER KEMP;-If it were anybody else but you we wouldn’t publish the above advertisement without pay. But seeing it is you, and as you come from Seouth Readin’, we shouldn’t feel right if we didn’t publish it. And so “several associations” are round palming themselves off as the original Old Folks? Is this really so, Father KEMP? Why how you talk! What upon airth can they mean? We were never so astonished in our life. But the pesky critters
don’t stop here. They represent themselves- mark the sinful sinfulness of their sin! - as being “under the management of KEMP”!! We have no language in which to express our indignation at the conduct of these “several associations.” You see, Father KEMP, that we are very much interested in this matter- that we care a great many rows of pins about your company, and that it makes a tremendous sight of difference to us, Father KEMP, whether you are the original company or not. You don’t know how many nightless sleeps we have passed in worrying about it (Plain Dealer 1/31/1860).

Kemp’s troupe early became far and away the most famous of the kind, but they had plenty of competition from both local groups and touring ensembles like B. F. Rix’s New England Puritan Society. Kemp’s dearest rivals in 1859-60 were The Massachusetts Old Folks, a remnant of the South Reading Opera Chorus Club led by H. Garrett Fields that sometimes performed with Hall’s Brass Band.141 While Kemp’s Old Folks confined their touring to the eastern seaboard, Midwest and southeastern Canada until their England trip, Fields’ group covered the same ground while also bringing the OFCs south of Washington D.C. for the first time, appearing as far to the southwest as New Orleans.

There was enough sympathy for old Yankee hymns even in Macon, Georgia in February, 1860 that the Massachusetts Old Folks had a full house and good press notices there. Expecting only novelty from the group, one reviewer wrote

This introduction of sacred airs in the program was a happy thought, particularly acceptable in Macon, chiming admirably with the deep religious sentiment for which our public is so justly celebrated, and imparting to the

141 See Boston Evening Transcript 8/24/1859.
entertainment just enough of a devotional aspect to rescue it from the category of this world’s vanities (*Macon Telegraph* 2/28/1860: 3).

Not every night went so well for Fields and company. In his diary entry for January 6, 1860 in Newark, Benjamin Conant wrote

> We heard from the Massachusetts Old Folks today. They disbanded some time since, and part of them went to New Orleans and part went home…The conductor of the train we came here in tonight said they had to pawn their watches and articles of clothing to raise money enough to get home with, and some are two or three hundred dollars poorer than when they left home. Mr. Kemp feels pretty jolly over it (1/6/1860).

However jolly Kemp felt over his rivals’ misfortunes, it must not have been anything very personal. In 1859 both Kemp and Fields announced plans for a tour of England, but when Kemp’s company finally left for Liverpool in January 1861 Garrett Fields was with them.

The story of Kemp’s England trip and the months leading up to it, compellingly detailed in the Conants’ diaries, deserves more attention than there is space for here. For one thing the sheer size of the company makes the tour worthy of attention, Kemp claiming the thirty performers comprised “the largest concert company…that had ever crossed the Atlantic (1868: 189). More importantly, Kemp

142 One paper suggested the cause of the break up wasn’t financial but the “consequence of jealousy among the ladies,” claiming that in Milwaukee “Miss Jenny Twitchell the leading contralto, received the most applause, and the rest of the crinoline rose up and smashed the company” (*Constitution* [Middletown, CT] 12/7/1859: 2).
remembered the tour as a high point of his career despite having returned home without the troupe under mysterious circumstances, a move he spends nearly half of his memoir chapter on the trip explaining and defending. Crawford points to this chapter as the book’s “most obvious shortcoming,” writing that although “an engaging, often informative companion on his home turf, Kemp rapidly loses interest in the Old Folks when he hits the British shore (Crawford 1984: ix). The reason for this, and the circumstances of his return, are revealed in the Conants’ diaries: with only a few dissenting, the class voted to have Kemp removed as their leader, effectively sending him and his family packing only a few months into what was to have been a much longer tour.

**Brewing War, the Old Folks Abroad and an Early Retirement**

The months leading up to the England tour were hectic and marked by tragedy. Despite having been advised against it on financial grounds by “General Tom Thumb’s” agent, George Wells, Kemp and his agent Henry Jarrett spent more than a year working to get the tour off the ground. At the same time Kemp finished preparing the first edition of his eponymous tunebook *Father Kemp’s Old Folks’ Concert Tunes* published by Oliver Ditson. On May 30, 1860, Elizabeth gave birth to

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143 “Mr. Wells, an agent that went to England with Tom Thumb came to see Father Kemp about going to England. He does not seem to think we should do a great business to go there” (BC diary 9/15/1859). Conant is referring to George Wells, an associate of P. T. Barnum who arranged for and accompanied Charles Stratton, aka Tom Thumb, on one of his tours of Europe.
the couple’s fourth child, Minnie. Just over three months later the troupe embarked on a northeast tour, leaving Minnie behind, presumably with family. Many of the concerts were within a short train trip of Reading, probably by design, and the Kemps likely made it home some nights. But in his diary entry for October 16, Benjamin Conant records that while the group was staying in the nearby city of Lowell “Father Kemp had a telegraphic dispatch… saying his child was very sick and his wife went down yesterday morning, and yesterday afternoon he received a dispatch to come home immediately; so we did not have him at either concert yesterday.” During this difficult time the troupe carried on, sometimes under the direction of Mr. Fields, with the Kemps, themselves, missing only a few of the performances. In his entry for October 19th, however, Conant writes “Father Kemp was not with us at all in Fitchburg. His child was buried yesterday.”

Despite this tragic setback, planning for England went full steam ahead, as did the group’s long farewell tour. A broadside folded up in Benjamin Conant’s diary shows that as early as the previous February Kemp had been advertising “positively the last concerts of Father Kemp’s Old Folk’s (sic) previous to their departure for Europe.” Near the end of the tour the troupe made a last dash southward, sporting brand new antique outfits commissioned for the England tour. At one farewell concert in Baltimore during the “exciting times” of December 1860 their performance of the Star Spangled Banner “caused an uproar” in which, according to Kemp, “many called for a repeat of the song, others ‘Go home you-----Yankees!’ ‘Stick to your Psalm tunes!’ ‘Nigger-Worshippers!’ mingled with applause…from all parts of the house”
(1868: 83-84). If Benjamin Conant’s views are representative of the group’s, the Reading singers were not only “-----Yankees” but abolition sympathizers, if not activists. The previous December Conant had recorded in his diary

> There has been much said in the papers lately about John Brown, who was hung last Friday for inciting an insurrection of slaves at Harper’s Ferry. I do not think that it will be any gain to the South. His calmness and trust in God and religion were the admiration of all (12/4/1859).

Hardly all, as it turned out, in the divided city of Baltimore, where the group’s hyper-Yankee cuteness seems to have been read, by some, as a battle cry. Conant and others took a train to the nation’s capital to obtain passports and the troupe beat a hasty retreat north, followed by equally hasty preparations for their first and only trip across the Atlantic.

In early December Benjamin and Clara had announced to family their plan to marry, which they did on January 7, just two days after returning from points south. In her diary entry for that day Clara Newhall, now Conant, wrote

> My wedding day- spent it flying around the house doing as fast as I could packing my things etc. Was married at eight o’clock in Eve. Can’t say I enjoyed the evening much but felt rather sober in view of that and leaving my home to go so far away, but it is so I am married and hope with God’s help I shall be able to do right in this new event of my life (CNC diary, 1/17/1861).
The next day the group had a rehearsal and final, grand farewell performance at Tremont Temple, and on the morning of January 9 they boarded the steamship Canada, bound for Liverpool.

Uncharacteristically, Benjamin made no diary entries during the voyage, but according to Clara it was a rough one. “Mr. Rae the purser said he had been on the line fourteen years and it was the roughest passage he had made,” she wrote (1/22/1861). Their January 21 arrival in Liverpool was very welcome, although both Benjamin and Clara were underwhelmed by the city, which they wrote was smoky and reminded them of Pittsburgh.

The group’s first concert on January 23 passed off reasonably well, and received reasonably positive press, as did the rest of their three-week stint in the city and surrounds (partially due, according to Kemp, to his having charmed one early critic into changing his negative review into a glowing one). But the old folks met with a number of unexpected obstacles that left them barely able to make expenses. Kemp was surprised to find much of the same sentiment in Liverpool that had dogged them in Baltimore.

We were unknown, and had got to meet and conquer that peculiar prejudice which every true Englishman entertains against everything foreign, and especially American. The mutterings which preceded actual hostilities in 1861 were heard, and the secessionists had already captured the cotton merchants of Liverpool, and held them prisoners. Hatred of the North and everything

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144 See Kemp, 1868: 97-100. Kemp was clearly pleased with the story, as he tells it in great detail.
Northern increased, and the “Old Folks” were identified with that section (Kemp 1868: 92).

Both Benjamin Conant and Robert Kemp noted their frustration with the cheapness of the English that made it necessary to give away up to a thousand complimentary tickets just to ensure a good house. Also frustrating was the unfamiliar class system and the attending three-tiered ticket prices to which the Brits were accustomed. Even the group’s fancy new costumes brought frustration, failing to create the sensation in England that they did back home. As Kemp remembered of the Liverpudlians a coal-cart driver, dressed in costume, exactly like my concert rig, attracted my attention,- the same three-cape coat, bell-top hat, and knee-breeches which I was to show to the people. Many of the women also wore bonnets which looked nearly as large as my “champion.” My heart almost sank within me. My intention in matters of dress was to be behind the times (92-93).

From Liverpool the Americans moved to London for a run of what turned out to be “about forty concerts” beginning on February 11 (187). There, according to Kemp, the “average receipts for the five weeks” were “about twelve pounds per night, which, with the afternoon concerts…amounted to little over twenty pounds” (188), or about one hundred US dollars, per day. As in Liverpool, Kemp wrote, “the sum was hardly sufficient to pay advertising bills in thirty papers, and other necessary charges, which in England are always much larger than similar bills in America (1868: 188). The financial insecurity and frustrations of touring in an alien environment full of
confounding Englishness led to tension in the group, probably contributed to the “stubborn and domineering spirit” Conant attributed to Kemp on the tour, and ultimately led to a rift between Kemp and most of the others.

Some of the trouble had to do with the irreconcilably different perspectives of the coterie of young people out on a lark and those who had families to support, sought long-term careers in music or were otherwise more invested in the financial success of the concerts. Benjamin Conant expressed the adventurous optimism of many of the young old folks, writing “we have seen a great deal that was interesting, and feel quite well paid for coming, although we have not made anything. Hope we shall begin to make money now” (in Crosby 1974: 85). For him and Clara the trip was basically a paid honeymoon. They toured Madame Tussaud’s, Westminster Abbey and the British Museum, heard Charles Dickens read and Charles Spurgeon preach, and Clara got to ride an elephant. Another highlight was going to Buckingham Palace to “hang around,” as Benjamin put it, until they finally saw the Queen, which is, incidentally, the closest the group ever got to performing for her, something Kemp was happy to have the public believe they had done.145

For the Kemps, on the other hand, travelling with their two children, the tension and protracted financial insecurity of the tour were not so easily brushed off. As early as six weeks into the tour Kemp had threatened to leave the group to their

145 Kemp mentions the Prince of Wales attending a concert while in the US (1868: 99), probably the basis for Kemp’s advertising claim to have performed for “all the crowned heads of Europe.”
own devices, Conant writing that one night in London “He had taken offense at something said a night or two before and had given notice that he should stay only through the following week. Most of the class, except perhaps Mrs. Nichols, seemed willing to have him go” (in Crosby 1974: 84). For pragmatic reasons Kemp advocated a return towards Liverpool after their London engagements, but enough of the group wanted to continue the adventure, hoping for the best, that the old folks forged onward to Brighton. While they were there, things came to a head. Benjamin Conant’s diary entry for March 21 reads, in part

Mr. McPhail and myself conceived the idea of getting up a book to be sold in the concert room, instead of Mr. Kemp’s, and have the money put in the treasury. We copied off several pieces, and yesterday invited the members of the class up here to receive their sanction, which we did, unanimously. Last night had an invitation to travel with Mr. Kemp. He said he was about to dissolve his connection with this class and form another. Today there was another meeting of the class and it was voted unanimously to have Mr. Kemp’s connection with us cease at the Crystal palace a fortnight from next Saturday, and a notice was sent to him informing him of the vote (3/21/1861).

Kemp was, understandably, hurt by the insurrection, probably exhausted, and likely still grieving Minnie’s death only five months earlier. That night, Conant wrote, “Father Kemp, in consequence of receiving the notice he did, failed to come to the concert,” and, on March 23

Yesterday morning, at a meeting of the class, another notice, signed by every member except Mr. and Mrs. Nichols and Mr. Temple, was sent to him saying that in consequence of his not appearing or sending any notice, that we would consider him no longer leader of the Company. He seemed to feel very badly
about it, and was crying nearly all the time. He and his family left for Liverpool at three o’clock, and are going in the America that sails today for Boston (3/23/1861).

Benjamin Conant wrote to an editor at the Middlesex Journal back home explaining the situation, which became the basis for the article Kemp spends some five pages refuting, with customary Yankee flair and comic deflection, in a letter to the editor reprinted in his memoir. Concerning his return without the troupe he wrote that, in addition to his financial woes, “I left because I had accomplished the great object of my visit….pleasure, observation, and study.” He concludes, in part

I studied day and night, having had the pleasure and observation. I was in a deep study to know how I could best get out of the sad fix I was well into. My study was, how shall I get home. I determined at once to leave with what little cash I had left.

I…would advise all who wish for similar experiences, to take over a sewing, printing, or cracker-machine, or some other American novelty in the shape of an “Old Folks’” concert company, and I will guarantee all the pleasure, observation, and study one’s heart or head can hold (1868: 189-190).

The troupe carried on without the Kemps, led by the newly elected H. Garrett Fields, but played to smaller and smaller houses until they finally gave up and headed home in early June, ending a tour in which expenses had “just about been met by the receipts from concerts given” (Boston Herald 7/16/1861: 4). Kemp, meanwhile, “retired for a season” from the stage and went back into business with his old partner John Mansfield, using his celebrity to sell boots and shoes (2). Advertisements for
their new digs at 9 Tremont Row claimed the store was large enough to accommodate five hundred customers at once, and there Kemp could be “found daily, telling interesting stories of travels in England and America, and giving short lectures to throngs upon the Quality, Style and Low Prices of Goods found in The Largest Retail Boot and Shoe Store in New England” (Boston Traveler 2/10/1862: 1). He may not have achieved his goals of conquering Britain or singing for the Queen, but the trip seems to have been worth it for its publicity value alone. The public had not heard the last of Father Kemp.

Father Kemp’s Return and Departure

In early 1862 Kemp ended his brief retirement and returned to performing, beginning with “levees” held in the store and Monday night concerts at Tremont Temple. The pull of the road proved irresistible, and the troupe mounted successful annual tours through the end of 1867 when Kemp gave up touring for good. After his second retirement Kemp did continue to make periodic public appearances but confined himself to the Boston area. No longer looking to music as a source of income, he led concerts for charity and the temperance cause, and volunteered his services for a variety of special events including an annual old folks’ singing at Walden Pond.\textsuperscript{146} Even after Elizabeth’s death in 1882 he continued to lead the active

\textsuperscript{146}See Boston Journal 8/14/1879: 4.
social life of a popular local figure, holding court at the store until about 1891, appearing and speaking when he could at public events like reunions of the Boston Veteran Firemen’s Association, of which he was president for a time, and directing the rare concert.

The end of Robert Kemp’s life was marked by kindness as well as tragedy bordering on scandal. For several years he suffered from a “creeping paralysis,” and was long attended by his former daughter-in-law Katharine “Kittie” Carle who, along with her children, lived with him for a time and looked after him even after her divorce from Robert Junior. In a will written in 1890 Kemp had left his estate of “some $20,000” to his children, with Robert Junior as executor, but soon after the elder Kemp’s death in May 1897 Kittie Carle, by then Stillings, presented a second 1894 will, in which Kemp left her most of his estate in gratitude for her devotion and in the interest of his grandchildren. To his own children he left only one hundred dollars each, feeling that Lizzie and her family were doing fine without his money, and Robert shouldn’t have it because of his “habits” (Boston Daily Advertiser 11/30/1897: 6). The drama of the two wills played out in the Suffolk Country probate court in November 1897, complicated by the fact that Robert Junior was found dead in Kalamazoo from an apparent morphine overdose shortly after the case began. The judge finally ruled in favor of the second will and Kittie Carle who, with her husband E. B. Stillings, was raising Kemp’s grandchildren (6).
Robert Kemp was buried next to his wife in Mount Auburn Cemetery, created in 1831 as yet another manifestation of the nineteenth century imaginary New England village ideal- a kind of “Litchfield ever after.” As concerned as he was for his reputation in life, he was remembered fondly in death as a “genial old gentleman” whose name was a “household word throughout the New England States and “a man of a good deal of conscience” who “enjoyed high social regard everywhere along his itinerary” (Boston Daily Advertiser 9/1/1897: 6). He even enjoyed the rare opportunity to see how he would be remembered after he died, surviving a premature obituary in 1891 with Mark Twain-esque good humor, entertaining reporters “who
hurried to his house expecting to find crape upon his door” (*Boston Journal* 5/21/1897).

Robert Kemp’s concerns about being lost in the shuffle of activities by his imitators and successors were not unfounded. Even during his lifetime he became, in a sense, the victim of his own success as “Father Kemp” came to be, in the language of trademark law, a “proprietary eponym” like Kleenex and Q-tips. The character of the old school singing master was well known, and “Father Kemp” became a generic name for this member of the pantheon of Yankee types. After the publication of his tunebook, and especially after he stopped touring, “Father Kemp” was known to most Americans as a character whose image, in ancient costume, adorned the cover of a book; not a real shoe salesman, failed farmer and junior seaman from Wellfleet, Boston or Reading, but the most recognizable example of the old school Yankee singing master employed in nearly every imaginary New England village. During his lifetime and after, many OFC leaders appeared as Father Kemp, later generations in some places apparently believing that Father Kemp had been a real, local singing master way back when. The term “Father Kemp” even attained some currency as a descriptor of any superannuated man of the old school, musical or otherwise. Even with all his years of touring, it was for his publications that Father Kemp would be most widely remembered, “Robert” having gotten lost along the way.
Father Kemp’s Old Folks’ Concert Tunes

Robert Kemp’s foray into the publishing world began with his contributions to the anonymously compiled 1857 *Continental Harmony: A collection of music principally designed for “Old Folks Concerts,”* to which Francis Ball Fay and five of his Chelsea associates also contributed. While it conserved space by dispensing with the customary rudiments section, the three hundred and forty nine page book was still large and relatively expensive. In a savvy commercial move in 1860, Oliver Ditson issued *Father Kemp’s Old Folks’ Concert Tunes*, a short, most often paperbound oblong collection that was the cheapest of its kind to date, available in bulk for use in concerts, social singing, reunions, historical and church celebrations and, at least in one case, country singing schools of the old fashioned variety. According to Tick-Steinberg the ancient harmony found in the book is largely faithful to the original publications, was largely drawn from the *Ancient Harmony Revived*, and was printed from the same plates that had been used for the *Continental Harmony* (614).
The book went through two more editions during Kemp’s lifetime: an enlarged edition with more secular songs in 1874, and an upright version with the tune moved to the soprano in 1889. By the early twentieth century Kemp and the OFCs themselves had acquired an aura of ancient tradition, in some cases even something worthy of revival in their own right. “The old folks’ concerts of a half century ago were revived by an entertainment last night in Strawbridge Methodist Episcopal Church” begins a review of a 1907 concert. “The entertainment was announced as a ‘Grand concert in ye Methodist Meeting House where ye roads of
Park and Wilson do cross in ye village of Baltimore…Mr. Charles P. Cleaveland…was made up for Father Kemp, a noted musician of his day, who gave old folks’ concerts in Baltimore in 1848” (Sun [Baltimore, MD] 2/23/1907: 6). In 1917 William Arms Fisher, head of the Oliver Ditson Company and a former student of Antonin Dvorak at the National Conservatory in New York, oversaw an historical edition with a preface based primarily on Kemp’s memoir. One last edition was published in 1934 during a time when, as in 1917, “community singing” was widely advocated as an anodyne for the nation’s woes, and singing books suited to the task were in demand. As late as World War II a Connecticut music educator advocated the performance of OFCs using Kemp’s book, and laid out the format in a pamphlet titled “Why Not Try an Olde Folkes Concerte?” published by the Committee on American Unity Through Music. In the introduction the author noted “as recently as twenty years ago such concerts were a common form of presentation by church choirs, and even today they are heard of occasionally” (Woodruff 1941: 20).

Kemp’s was hardly the only book designed for use in old folks’ concerts, but it was, by an order of magnitude, the most popular and enduring. I have not been able to determine how many copies were printed between 1860 and 1934, but they are ubiquitous in New England junk shops, used bookstores, church basements, historical societies and yard sales, often in multiple copies. In the mid 1990s, for example, a friend picked me up a box of a dozen copies for a few dollars at a tag sale, all signed by concert leader William Moore. When I first began my research, two book dealers independently told me they were aware of Kemp’s book but didn’t bother with it
because it was so common as to be worthless. (At the time the usual price, even for larger mid to late nineteenth century oblong hymnbooks was a dollar, the same price they were typically sold for in the 1850s). It is possible that, at least in terms of sheer sales, the ancient harmony enjoyed greater popularity in New England after its “demise” than it had in its heyday. Whether or not this is true, the ubiquity of Kemp’s tunebook poses some interesting questions, not just about the story of the “ancient harmony” of William Billings and company, but about the persistence and meaning of things as they are ever more removed from the time period(s) with which they are conventionally associated.

**Old Folks’ Concerts After Father Kemp: A Return to the Pioneer Valley**

To provide a little more on what happened to the OFCs in the wake of Father Kemp I will return to the Connecticut River Valley of western Massachusetts. Old folks’ concerts remained popular and were held periodically to popular acclaim in even the smallest Hampshire and Franklin County towns for over a hundred years. In 2012, for example, I spoke with Mrs. Arlene Seely whose performance in an OFC in 1956 at First Church of Southampton, site of the town’s first OFC in 1854, was the first of many local musical events she participated in after moving to town from Northampton. The concerts occurred with enough frequency that they remained an option known to many, but rarely enough that novelty remained an important part of their attraction. It was what I think of as a leap frog tradition: not cherished and lovingly handed down the generations, like the archetypal folk practice, but always sitting in the attic or on the bookshelf ready to be dusted off for the right occasion if it
happened to occur to someone industrious. Or, to return to mushrooms, the OFC continued to lie, like the mycelium, out of sight in the substrate until the right season and the right rain.

Figure 17: Concert preview, Southampton, MA in the *Springfield Union* 4/26/1956

As what counted as “old music” changed with the times, the music of Billings and company came to occupy an increasingly symbolic role and most (though not all) OFCs, like the “Olde Folks Concerte at ye First Church Vestry” led by “Squire Bixler” in Northampton in 1932, took on more the character of secular entertainments than services of sacred song. This led to a, sometimes, curious musical mélange that might include comic Yankee, “Dutch” and Irish character songs, a harpsichord solo, “ancient ballads” and selections from the classical repertoire. Music’s provenance often played second fiddle to its popularity. In the words of one Northampton OFC enthusiast in 1932, the year of the widely celebrated bicentennial of George Washington’s birth, “to no other type of entertainment do people come in so relaxed and happy a frame of mind. They know the program will not be too high brow for them, and they are anticipating hearing their old favorites” (*Hampshire Gazette*)
In the desire to satisfy their audiences OFC leaders even paired, in medley, pieces by William Billings and Daniel Read with popular light works of Beethoven and, in at least one case, a chorus from Donizetti’s *Lucrezia*.\(^{148}\) In this the OFCs continued a longstanding American tradition of musical heterogeneity manifested in periodicals like H. W. Day’s *Musical Visitor* and *The World of Music* that had announced itself in 1840 as “a new polyglot collection of sacred, secular and instrumental harmony…designed to supply the wants of the community.”\(^{149}\) There, as elsewhere, popular ancient harmony selections appeared back to back with just about everything under the sun as they continued to do in latter day OFCs. On the other hand, some people found opportunities for a tighter focus on the old New England hymns, George Cheney of Amherst even teaching country singing-schools from Father Kemp’s Old Folks’ Concert Tunes in the late nineteenth century.

In Franklin County, at least into the early decades of the twentieth century, many concerts were led by members of the Field family, distant relatives of Robert Kemp’s rival and collaborator H. Garrett Fields. These included “Miss Maria” Field of Northfield and the quartet sometimes referred to as the “famous Fields of Leverett” whose descendants still live in quartet member Asa Field’s house and remain active in music at the Congregational Church. Of particular interest were the “old folks’ gatherings” started in 1870 and long led by Phinehas Field, a deacon in the

\(^{148}\) Program for “Ye Olde Folkes Concerte” held at the Opera House in Greenfield MA, March 3, 1891. Author’s collection.

\(^{149}\) *World of Music* 1/11/1840: 1
Charlemont Congregational church, a former Underground Railroad agent and brother-in-law of local son Joshua Leavitt. Consisting of “prayer, reading of Scripture, singing from the old books, short addresses and social chat, with a good dinner sandwiched in at the proper time” these events are the closest things to Sacred Harp singings I have discovered in nineteenth century New England (Field et al 1883). These annual old folks’ gatherings were widely imitated, both in Williamsburg and other Pioneer Valley towns and as far afield as Utah, where some Mormon communities still hold them, although presumably minus the music of Billings and company.¹⁵⁰ In Charlemont they were held annually at least into the 1920s, and were remembered fondly in 1992 by 97 year old resident Colonel Carroll Adams, who said his wife had attended them with her family when she was a girl (personal communication 1992).

The “Old Folks’ Gatherings” were started by a group of Charlemont neighbors at the suggestion of local farmer Judson Booth who, on behalf of his 93 year old mother-in-law Thirza Wing, “had an earnest desire that the aged women of his neighborhood might meet at his house and have a social tea party.” The gathering ballooned into a larger, all day festival at the Methodist Vestry and became an annual

¹⁵⁰ I have not been able to document the relationship between the Charlemont old folks’ gatherings and those first held by Mormons in Utah in 1875, led by photographer and choir leader Charles Savage. Also called “old folks’ days” and “old folks’ outings,” Savage’s daughter recalled that he was inspired by sympathy for an elderly woman neighbor, as had been the case in Charlemont. While it is possible that Savage hit on the idea independently, I suspect he may have heard about the Charlemont gatherings in his wide travels or from reports in newspapers including the New York Times.
event that lasted until at least 1926. Founders and organizers included song leader Henry W. Bissell, Samuel Potter, Phineas Field, his wife Chloe Maxwell Leavitt Field and his brother Eugene. Although in the early days the old folks spent much of the day “singing from the old books,” the role of the ancient harmony diminished over time, and by the nineteen teens old folks’ concerts and gatherings in Charlemont usually featured only a few pieces by Billings and company.

In addition to the old folks’ gatherings, the OFCs influenced a wide range of events that often blurred lines between the social, the sacred and the historical, including old folks’ parties, excursions, fairs and “pic-nics” like the one held for the Springfield singers by Henry Golthwait. These often featured the singing of old songs including examples of ancient harmony, especially from editions of Father Kemp’s collection.

Church pageants, musical plays for amateur theater groups, services of sacred song and local anniversaries were not infrequently occasions to drag out Father Kemp’s book and other elements of the OFC formula. Sometimes the focus was very local, as in a 1936 historical pageant held at First Church, Northampton to celebrate the town’s 275th anniversary, in which the choir performed music associated with earlier church figures including Jonathan Edward and composer Elias Mann as well as popular ancient harmony selections.  

151 Manuscript for pageant—First Church, Northampton Archives: Special Events, Box 9
The “Old Folks’ Play,” popular in the late nineteenth to mid twentieth centuries in the valley and beyond, offered more fanciful representations of “the olde days,” peppered with ancient harmony selections. *Ye Little Olde Folks’ Concert: A Grade School Operetta* 1902 (renewed 1930) for example, featured the hymn *Mear*, “lined out” by one of the children, and *A Hundred Years Ago: An Up To Date Old Folks’ Concert* (1910) featured the old fusing tunes *New Durham* and *New Jerusalem* alongside the *Anvil Chorus, Swing Low Sweet Chariot* and *You Cant’ Have Any of My Peanuts*. Some musical and theatrical entertainments included ancient harmony selections seemingly out of the blue, like a performance by children in Keene, NH of a “flower cantata” that ended curiously with the old minor fusing tune *Complaint* “by request.”152

Family reunions continued to be venues for ancient harmony singing in the valley. One especially widely reported gathering, covered in newspapers all around the northeast and as far afield as San Francisco, Chicago and Bismarck, North Dakota took place in 1889 at First Church, Springfield, Massachusetts, site of the city’s first old folks’ concert in 1854. In preparation for a combined OFC and social singing at the annual Billings family reunion, the arranging committee was charged with “scouring the ‘back towns’ of [the] section, as far away as Franklin county” for copies of William Billings’ tunebooks, before settling on the more readily available

152 “Grand Concert in Town Hall, Keene Nov. 7 1867 by Mrs. Foster’s pupils.” Keene, NH Historical Society box 13A, folder 17).
Ancient Harmony Revived and Father Kemp’s Old Folks’ Concert Tunes (Springfield Republican 8/25/1888:5).

While the OFCs were not lovingly handed down the generations, old tunebooks and the habit of singing from them often were. A copy of The American Vocalist I found at a local flea market was purchased by William Clarke in 1848, given to his brother Daniel (leader of Northampton’s first OFC in 1854) and ultimately to Amelia Clarke who, according to a note penciled in at the end, continued to sing some of the old songs “over and over, 1944 age 94.” Such long-lived social singing of ancient harmony was more common than the ballad-heavy publications of twentieth century folklorists would indicate, and has only recently begun to be addressed by scholars (Post 2011). While latter-day old folks’ concerts and ancient harmony singing in New England did not, perhaps, comprise the kind of tradition lionized by folklorists like George Pullen Jackson, the Lomaxes and Helen Hartness Flanders, there is clearly, as Irving Lowens (1977) suggested, “ample evidence that Billings’ music did not die out, even in New England, throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century,” and the performances and publications of Father Kemp were among the most influential factors in this, no longer surprising, persistence of New England’s “ancient harmony.”
CONCLUSION

Old Folks Concerts, Creative Binaries and Science Fiction

At Henry’s suggestion they had been photographed in their costumes…
“It isn’t much trouble, and the old folks will enjoy it some day. We ought to consider them a little,” Henry had said, meaning by “the old folks” their future selves.

-From *The Old Folks’ Party* by Edward Bellamy, 1876

I will conclude with a brief discussion of the close kinship between the old folks’ concert and American science fiction as arenas of imagination, both for what this kinship reveals about the OFCs and nineteenth century America, and for avenues of research it might suggest. This is not the abrupt shift of gears it might appear to be. In the old folks’ concerts, participants imagined themselves as their ancestors, imagining their own frightfully modern 1850s as the “old continentallers’” unimaginable future. The flipside of such temporal play was imagining themselves and their contemporary world as their own imagined descendants’ distant past, something they did with increasing relish as the century wore on. Beyond temporal play, there is a strong, general relationship between the OFCs and early science fiction through their connection to the progressive reform activities and millennial thinking inspired by the Second Great Awakening, but there is also a very specific connection through the influence of the OFCs on the nineteenth century’s most famous author in the genre, Edward Bellamy.
In a list of the most popular and influential American novels of the nineteenth century, not far below *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* at the top is Edward Bellamy’s utopian futurist *Looking Backward: 2000 To 1887*. Therein the young protagonist, Julian West, falls into a hypnotic sleep in 1887 Boston and wakes in the year 2000 to find the city and the nation a prosperous, egalitarian, socialist (or, to use Bellamy’s term, “nationalist”), utopia. Much of the book consists of description of the social and technological innovations that led to the change, in comparison with the injustices and follies of nineteenth century America. Although decidedly not a work of progressive *antiquarianism*, it is clear from its very title that it is a work of progressive *retrospection*, albeit imaginary. It was not Bellamy’s first experiment with “imaginary progressive retrospection,” however. That honor goes to his second published work, the 1876 short story *The Old Folks’ Party*, set, like many of his stories, in “the village environment by which he interpreted the heart of the American nation” (Bellamy 1898: xiii).

*The Old Folks’ Party* was clearly influenced by the OFCs in general but also, I suspect, by one especially prominent event Bellamy likely attended in 1874, in Ludlow, Massachusetts, just a few miles from his home in the Pioneer Valley town of Chicopee Falls. The story concerns a group of teenagers in “the village of C.” who hold weekly, themed club meetings, and one week decide the next gathering should be devoted to an old folks’ party, in which they will meet and reminisce as if fifty years had passed. They devote their days to re-imagining themselves, assembling costumes and wigs, and “before the end of the week, the occupation of their minds
with the subject of old age produced a singular effect. They began to regard every event and feeling from a double standpoint, as present and as past.” This “double standpoint” is worth noting, and I will come back to it in a minute (Bellamy 1876/1898: 72)

By the day of the party, the club members “were perplexed and bewildered as to their identity, and in a manner carried away by the illusion their own efforts had created.” As in the archetypal OFC, costume and impersonation were powerful ingredients of this attempted embodiment of senescence and another era.

The occupation of their mind during the week with the study of their assumed characters had produced an impression that had been deepened to an astonishing degree by the striking effect of the accessories of costume and manner. The long-continued effort to project themselves mentally into the period of old age was assisted in a startling manner by the illusion of the senses produced by the decrepit figures, the sallow and wrinkled faces, and the white heads of the group (85-86)

I imagine how much more “carried away” the club members might have become had they chosen to add singing old songs in harmony together to their exercise in embodiment, and how much more effective and affecting it might have been even than costume and impersonation in bridging the gap between two standpoints.

As in Looking Backward, one of Bellamy’s central interests here is imagining future perspectives and attitudes, as when one of the “old folks” relates the story of a kid who gets a black eye for “telling Judge Benson’s little boy that people of his complexion were once slaves.”
“I’m not a bit surprised that the Benson boy resented the imputation,” said George. “I really don’t believe that more than half the people would be certain that slavery ever existed here, and I’m sure that it rarely occurs to those who do know it. No doubt that company of old slaves at the centennial— that is, if they can find enough survivors— will be a valuable historical reminder to many” (80).

But Bellamy’s musing on the present as future past in The Old Folks’ Party is more than idealistic speculation. Through it he explores the story’s central question about the nature of the self in time, as articulated by the young old folks who “found the strange inability of one epoch to understand or appreciate the others, hard to reconcile with the ordinary notion of a persistent identity” (72). With this seemingly proto-postmodern observation Bellamy throws into sharp relief the “double standpoint” central to the old folks’ party, and the old folks’ concerts, as much more than a static emotional state of yearning for a remembered or imagined past.

After coming up with the phrase “temporal play” and finding it useful I finally decided to Google it to see if I had coined something clever. Boy, had I ever not. I was initially horrified to discover I had somehow missed a lively philosophical tradition from Aristotle to Judith Butler, the last thing I wanted to start grappling with in a nearly completed dissertation. Fortunately, without having to put my waders on, a recurring theme quickly emerged. Temporal play may not be just one variety of imaginative activity; according to some conceptions it is constitutive of imagination itself which, at least for Kant, was a “faculty involved in all cognition.”
For Kant, imagination entails a temporal play between the past and the present; the absent past becomes present in the imagination. As imagination deals with absences and non-actuality, imagination also seems the most adaptable faculty to tackle the uncertainty of an unknown future (Aradau and Van Munster 2011: 70).

According to Heidegger scholar Frank Schalow, “as the hallmark of finitude, imagination embodies the temporal play of presence/absence, and transposes this tension into a vortex of differentiation from which arises new idioms of expression” (Schalow 2001: xiii-xiv). With all their shimmering theological, aesthetic, cultural and biological binaries it’s not hard to imagine at the heart of the old folks’ concerts such a “vortex of differentiation,” giving rise to “new idioms.”

In the interest of suggesting a mechanism through which such idioms might have arisen from the OFCs I offer a brief discussion of history, fiction and narrative in the context of Calvinism and its residue in the world of the old folks. Much of historian Hayden White’s work has involved exploring in detail that which separates the ancient annals (simple lists of dates and occurrences) from “history proper,” and that which unites “history proper” with fiction: the absence in the first, and presence in the latter two, of narrative, which is predicated on the introduction of a moral framework without which neither “history proper” nor fiction could be written (White 1980). In early puritan portraiture, nineteenth century histories of music in New England, Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the science fiction of Edward Bellamy, even if their creators were meticulous with details and aimed to “get it right,” what “right” meant often had less to do with verisimilitude for its own sake than with establishing a
proper and effective moral and spiritual framework within which to understand the people and events recorded in terms of the lessons they taught and the actions they inspired. As was her wont, post-Calvinist spiritual thinker and puritan heir Mary Baker Eddy took this tendency to the metaphysical extreme, writing in her 1891 autobiography *Retrospection and Introspection* “Mere historic incidents and personal events are frivolous and of no moment, unless they illustrate the ethics of Truth…The human history needs to be revised, and the material record expunged” (21-22).

The aforementioned 1888 Billings family reunion in Springfield, Massachusetts provides a brief, pertinent anecdote, by means of which I will get to my point. In welcoming the Billingses, Rev. Dr. Burnham “commended them upon the justifiable pride in their ancestry and pointed to William B. Billings, the musical composer, Alkinah Billings, the geologist, John S. Billings the navigator, and [fictional Yankee “affurist”] Josh Billings, ‘the uncle of us all,’ as noble representatives of the race” (*Springfield Republican* 9/15/1888: 6). The last was, of course, a joke, but a telling one. The tendency to privilege the moral framework, the spiritual and pragmatic, gave the old folks leeway to mix fact and fiction in writing and performing their own history and, perhaps ironically, helped make the very binaries of Puritan rationalism, meant to constrain and define that framework, into engines of creativity. These binaries and the ancient harmony embodied and performed by the old folks in their imaginary New England village, comprised a vortex of differentiation, a cauldron of imagination that participated in writing and performing a history the early nonconforming New Englanders could not have
imagined, even as they were employed in striving for a millennial future that was the spiritual centerpiece of their economic, social and cultural experiment in the wilderness.

So, what remains to be done? Beyond the ideal New England village as birthplace of America, what else were the old folks imagining, and what role did it play in writing their future, our past and present? Among possible directions for future research would be a closer look at any new idioms of expression the OFCs participated in generating. This might include a deeper exploration of music in the imaginary village and the construction of national and regional identity, although an exploration with a frame larger than the national might be more with the times. In this direction a possible starting place might be Benedict Anderson’s claim that “in world-historical terms bourgeoisies were the first classes to achieve solidarities on an essentially imagined basis” (1983: 77). Music and cultural revivalism in the nineteenth century and earlier calls out for further study, especially as music seems a natural area for exploring relationships between imagination and the varieties of nostalgia and other affects involved. In particular, as noted in the introduction, music and the colonial revival is rather desperately in need of more attention. Looking at related phenomena in multicultural and transnational contexts would likely yield insights into the OFCs and their relationship to imagining race, gender, aging and other factors, and further investigation of the OFCs would likely reciprocate. African American OFCs demand more attention, not limited to issues of race as has sometimes been a problem in the study of blackface minstrelsy. While such a study
would likely inform discussions of the minstrel stage and the black/white binary in American culture more generally, if enough information can be found, musical retrospection and antiquarianism among African Americans would likely offer valuable perspectives and provide some missing puzzle pieces in our understanding of music making in early America, the antislavery movement and African American communities.

There are many smaller puzzles that might be worked on as well. What was shape note music scholar George Pullen Jackson’s connection to the old folks’ concerts, for example? His pencil drawings of his performing group the Old Harp Singers suggest a direct influence from Father Kemp, Jackson was obsessed with musical “survivals,” and he wrote extensively about nineteenth century tunebooks in his native New England, but as far as I can tell, he was virtually silent about the OFCs. I suspect the answer may be in yet another area for possible research: the largely forgotten late nineteenth and early twentieth century view of the New England village as dystopia and the southern “highlander” as an example of genuine, virile America. Of particular interest in this regard are the writings of Congregationalist preacher and journalist Rollin Lynde Hartt, who wrote a fictionalized account of his tenure in the village of “Sweet Auburn” which, according to Field family tradition, centers on members of local OFC singing group “the famous Fields” of Leverett, Massachusetts.

More needs doing with the old folks concerts, science fiction, temporal play and religion. As scholars including Raymond Williams and Benedict Anderson have
weighed in on the subject of science fiction, apocalypse and utopia, there appears to be no shortage of food for thought there. Perhaps the most overarching of anything that comes to mind, there seems to be potential in really investigating temporal play and inter-temporality (see Gunderson 2008) explicit in both the OFCs and science fiction, in light of its possible role in imagination itself or, as Kant seems to have had it, *any* act of cognition. “Temporal play” could almost be a synonym for “music,” and as the old folks’ concerts were especially rich sites of such play on multiple levels, they appear to have more to tell us about imagination and performance. They may even have more to tell us about “music itself.”
APPENDIX I: THE Earliest Image of an Old Folks’ Concert?

The earliest image I have found of an old folks’ concert, an engraving by prominent Waltham, MA artist Asa Coolidge Warren, appeared in Ballou’s Pictorial Drawing Room Companion for June 7, 1856. Warren’s engraving depicts the interior of Waltham’s Rumford Hall “as it appeared on the occasion of one of those old folks’ concerts which filled it to overflowing during the past winter,” probably February or March 1856. Most likely one of the first OFCs to have been influenced by Robert Kemp’s success in the Boston area, the concert was performed by a local group under the direction of Leonard Jewell, like “Father” Jewell of Hartford a member of Winchester, New Hampshire’s musical first family (Ballou 1856: 364). Tellingly, the caption identifies the event as an “entertainment” rather than a concert of sacred music with its “spiritual associations with the aged” as in the first New Haven concerts (Puritan Recorder 12/29/1853: 206).

While the rather rudimentary style of the engraving belies the artist’s considerable talent, Warren nevertheless captured, in narrative detail, the story of the old folks’ concerts and much of what the public found compelling about them. More than simple documentation of a concert, the image seems to have been designed to supply readers in the increasingly visual culture of the 1850s with a story about themselves; their historical roots, how far they had come, who they were and where they were going. The first impression is that of immensity, spectacle and excitement. The entire upper half of the engraving shows the hall itself, enhancing the impression
of the size and significance of the event, as well as the cultured prosperity of 1850s Waltham. In the lower half, the citizens of the town, the imaginary “villagers,” are divided into two strikingly different large groups, the moderns in the audience gazing with apparent excitement at their neighbors, “the old folks,” the proscenium acting as a kind of magical history mirror. At the center of everything, Leonard Jewell, his queue bobbing with the music, points his baton directly at the one piece of stage decoration, a tricorner hat, a universally recognized symbol of the “spirit of ’76.”

Throughout the two groups of Walthamites, a series of vignettes portray important elements of the performance and its reception. The performers’ costume makes the most immediate impression, and received top notice in the picture’s caption. “It was surprising that so rare a collection of dresses could have been accumulated,” wrote the author, pointing out that they represented no single time period. “Here was a handsome uniform that had figured in the ‘old French war,’ there a dress that had been worn with distinction in the days of the ‘Republican Court.’ To the young, these singular costumes were the theme of special wonderment, while they awakened many a genial reminiscence in the minds of the aged” (Ballou 1856: 364). Important to the impact of the collage is the presence of recognizable Yankee character types including the “old continentaller,” “granny with her knitting,” and standing prominently a head above the others downstage right, the ubiquitous rustic farmer often called “Brother Jonathan.” The “place” represented is both a spatial and a temporal collage bringing together visual elements of the village church choir, the
urban “grand concert,” the military camp and, prominent on the periphery, stage left and stage right, scenes of domesticity.

At the time, “eyeglasses were considered evidence of old age and infirmity” and were consequently “worn inconsistently if at all,” especially by women (http://www.museumofvision.org/exhibitions/?key=44&subkey=4&relkey=35 accessed 4/17/2014). While not a single pair can be seen in the audience, seven of the performers are depicted wearing, not just any eyeglasses, but “Martin’s margins” and other spectacles of eighteenth century provenance. Glasses might have been necessary for those reading music and knitting on stage, but here the suggestion of old age and infirmity must also have added power, pathos and humor to the performance.

In contrast to their antiquated dress the, perhaps exaggerated, chinstrap beards of the two cello players identify them as not just younger people but hipsters. Eighteenth century New England attitudes and beliefs about facial hair were such that the likes of William Billings and his engraver Paul Revere wouldn’t have been caught dead in a chinstrap. As devotees of the 1850s “beard movement” the antiquely attired young cellists represent not only humorous anachronism and aesthetic incongruity but the forward march of science and reform, their facial hair both hygienic and morally progressive.

Warren’s depiction of the audience also tells a story. The event’s intergenerational appeal is clearly marked, especially in the lower left with what seem
to be three generations of the same family- a toothless grandmother, a middle aged man and two children- all apparently enjoying themselves. Audience response seems to be equal parts amusement and amazement, many members smiling and some standing to get a better look at the costumes or possibly, in the case of the two men standing shoulder to shoulder near the front, a better look at some of the younger female “old folks.” Just left of the lower center two young men seem to be sharing a secret or humorous observation, further enhancing the depiction of the jovial, informal and social nature of the event. This was no church service.

I have seen no evidence that Warren’s engraving had much of an impact on the OFCs, but it’s a succinct representation of the concerts and their reception, and the visual references and cues would have been understandable and familiar enough to readers that, with the addition of the words “Billings and Holden,” they likely could have reconstructed the OFC formula from this image alone.
Figure 18: “Old Folks’ Concert At Waltham” from Ballou’s Pictorial Drawing Room Companion, June 1856.
APPENDIX II: CHRONOLOGY OF OLD FOLKS’ CONCERTS AND RELATED NEWS, 1853-1856

The following incomplete and imperfect list of old folks’ concerts, related news items and developments from the New Haven “original” through the end of 1856 provides a quick thumbnail sketch of the concerts’ early mushrooming from origin to “epidemic,” and may offer useful points of departure for further research. Concert locations are in bold.

1853

4/11  **New Haven, CT** the “first” OFC. At First (Center) Church.
4/16  Notice of OFC in I “could not such a concert be got up here?
4/21  *NY Evangelist* article published.
5/19? **New Haven, CT** repeat.
6/18  Call for an OFC in Hartford published in *CT Courant*.
10/22 Report of OFC beginning to be organized in Hartford. *CT Courant*.
12/14 **New Haven, CT** North Church led by James Minor Linsley.
12/?  **New Haven, CT** repeat.

1854

1/10  **Hartford, CT** led by Pliny “Father” Jewell Sr.
1/18  **Hartford** repeat.
1/19  Thomas Weston Valentine visits Lydia Sigourney
1/23  Thomas Weston Valentine article re: Hartford OFC appears in *The Albany Journal*.
1/23  Lydia Sigourney’s poem *The Old Folks Concert* printed in full in *Boston Courier*, reprinted from the *CT Courant*.
2/16  **Westfield, MA**
2/21 **Hartford, CT** Christ Church “third in the series.” First in a non-Congregationalist church.

2/27 **Hartford** a repeat at Christ Church called “Last OFC for the season”

3/14 **Albany, NY** led by Nathaniel Ilsley at the Old Brick (Congregational) Church

3/16 **Springfield, MA** led by Col. Warriner

3/21 Article re: Albany OFC by Thurlow Weed Brown published in *Cayuga Chief*.

3/28 **Albany, NY** repeat, led by Ferdinand Ilsley at the Congregational Church.

3/29 **Springfield, MA** – a repeat led by Col. Warriner

4…? **Bridgeport, CT** announced in April 1 paper.

4/6 Sigourney’s poem reprinted in *Pittsfield Sun*.

4/11 **Kenosha, WI** at Baptist Church led by Deacon Seymour.


4/28 **Buffalo, NY** at Corinthian Hall led by B. W. Durfee “assisted by some of the young singers of the place.” *NY Musical World and Times* 5/6/1854: 2. Likely the first OFC not held in a church.

5/2 **Greenfield, MA** led by T. M. Dewey et al. Church band introduced.

5/3 **Lowell, MA** led by Benjamin Franklin Rix. Organ introduced. Later, same group used costumes. First traveling group?


5/31 **New Salem, MA** afternoon concert. First OFC in small town (under 2,000 population) Inspired by January 27 *Barre Patriot* article reprinted from *Boston Traveller*?

6/1 **Northampton, MA** led by Daniel Russel Clarke.

6/5 **Portland, ME** at Third Parish Church to benefit “the contemplated society for the relief of the aged and necessitous females of the city.” *NY Musical World and Times* 6/10/1854: 62.

6/8 **Northampton, MA** repeat.

6/10? **New Salem, MA** repeat?
6/26 **Springfield, MA** Old Folks’ strawberry picnic and singing held by Jonathan H. Golthwait.

7/4 **Winsted, CT** Old Folks gave “another concert.”

7/20 Wolcottville (Torrington), CT firm advertises “old shoes for old folks concerts.” The ad ran several months.

10/29 **Northampton, MA** announced in October 5 paper and others. Town bicentennial.

11/1 **Greenfield, MA** with pic-nic. announced as “second concert this season.” Led by Dr. Charles Fiske, T. M. Dewey, Charles Hitchcock and Elias Taylor.

11/26 **Greenfield, MA** abolitionist OFC led by Charles Fiske.

12/1 Henry C. Wright letter to the editor about the Greenfield OFC published in *The Liberator*.

12/6 **Southampton, MA** Led by W. S. Rogers at First Church.

12/13 **Portsmouth, NH** with “church band.” Led by John Christie Esq.

12/27 **Newark, NJ** proposed by F. L Ilsley, son of Nathaniel Ilsley.

12/29 **Newark, NJ** repeat with change of program.

1855

1/4 **Albany, NY** unconfirmed. Announced in NJ paper.

1/24 **Portsmouth, NH** with “full and efficient orchestra.” *Song of the Old Folks* written for the occasion by Albert Leighton.

1/29? **Salem, MA** late Jan/early Feb- announced Jan. 22.

2/7 **Westfield, MA**

2/21 **Newark, NJ** with addition of light music and Handel’s *Hallelujah Chorus*. Halsey Street M.E. Church. Choirs of various churches united.

2/22 **Chelsea, MA** Town Hall. Washington’s birthday concert by the Old Continentallers. Likely the first OFC in full costume.

2/23 **Saccarappa, ME** Methodist Chapel, led by Mr Bean of the Presumpscot House, with assistance from the Portland Old Folks.
3/1  **Natick, MA** at “Mr. Nason’s church” led by Timothy S. Travers.

3/6  **Gorham, ME** by the “Portland Old Folks”

3/8  **Chelsea, MA** Old Continentallers. Repeat of first concert.

3/8?  **Augusta, ME** no mention of specific date or leader. Address by Mr. Drew, prayer by Dr. Tappan.

3/26  **Boston, MA** Tremont Temple- Continentallers of Chelsea. Almost certainly the first OFC in Boston.

3/28  **Portsmouth, NH**

3/29  **Cleveland, OH** at Plymouth Congregational Church.

4/4  **Orange, NJ** led by Professor Ilsley at First Presbyterian Church

4/5  **Cleveland, OH** repeat “the attractions have been increased…Old Puritan Costumes”

4/5  **Worcester, MA** “with full orchestra and organ.” Led by E. S. Nason on Fast Day.

4/26  **Northampton, MA** led by D. R. Clarke

4/26  **Worcester, MA** Mr. Nason leads repeat concert.

5/2  **Newburyport, MA** to benefit the “Old Ladies Society,” organized by the “young ladies of Newburyport.” Part of May Day Festival, “with tableaux”

5/3  **Reading, MA** Reading Opera Chorus Club. Uncertain if this was Robert Kemp and company, and whether or not it was an OFC.

5/9  **Concord, NH** South Church “concert of Ancient Sacred Music! Vocal and instrumental,” for benefit of the M.C.M Association.

5/10  **Cambridge, MA** Cambridge Musical Association, at Athenaeum Hall

5/24  **Cambridge, MA** repeat of Cambridge Musical Association at Athenaeum Hall.

5/30  **East Douglas, MA** Led by O. W. Hunt at Congregational Church.

5/30  **Shrewsbury, MA** Led by the “young” E. S. Holmes- 250 singers. May have been delayed to June 6.

6/?  **Fall River, MA** led by Eben Tourjee.
8/21 **Boston, MA**- Tremont Temple, “with assistance” of Nathaniel Gould.

8/22 **South Reading, MA**  Led by “Mr. Bancroft.” NOT an OFC, apparently, but given by the group that became Kemp’s local rivals and with which his troupe shared members.

9/19 **Shutesbury, MA** Ladies Aid Society of the Baptist church, along with a fair and old folks supper.

11/29 **Schenectady, NY** Thanksgiving Day eve. At First Dutch Church, to benefit Second Dutch church.

12/6? **Reading, MA** Kemp claimed this as the date of the first performance by the Reading Opera Chorus Class, but was evasive about the year. This was likely the first time he led an OFC.

12/24 **Caldwell, NJ**

12/31 **Caldwell, NJ** repeated due to bad weather on Christmas.

**1856**

1/1 **Worcester, MA** NE Puritan Society

1/7 **Schenectady, NY** Presbyterian Church, for the benefit of S. B. Marsh

1/? **Reading, MA** Reading Opera Chorus Class, led by Robert Kemp.

1/8 **Auburn, NY** announced in papers but unconfirmed.

1/9 **Reading, MA** Old Folks’ Concert by Reading Opera Chorus Club directed by “Professor Kemp”- a repeat of concert the week before.

1/21 **Cleveland, OH**

2/14 **Chelsea, MA** Old Continentallers at Town Hall led by Col. Fay. Apparently repeated the following week. To aid local poor.

2/25 **Cambridgeport, MA** Athenaeum Hall “Antique or Old Folks’ Concert” given by the Reading Opera Chorus Class “under the direction of Mr. Robert Kemp, recently of this city” (Boston).

3/6 **Portsmouth, NH** at the Temple led by John Christie.

3/13 **Boston, MA**- Tremont Temple, by Reading Opera Chorus Class. First Boston appearance by Kemp and company.
3/16 Hingham, MA members of local church choirs at Loring Hall led by Henry C. Wilder.

3/19 Boston, MA Tremont Temple. Reading Opera Chorus Class repeat.

3/26 Boston, MA Tremont Temple. Reading Opera Chorus Class gives “last performance.” Afternoon show.

Boston, MA Tremont Temple. “Chelsea Continentals.” Evening concert, arranged to be repeated.

4/5 Salem, MA Reading Opera Chorus Class (Kemp and co.) at Mechanic Hall

4/8 Weymouth, MA To benefit two local people. A repeat scheduled for April 20 was postponed indefinitely.

4/10 Boston, MA City Hall, unspecified group of “old folks” (Chelsea group?)

4/12 Charlestown, MA “South Reading Old Folks Chorus Society” at City Hall. Another ad calls them the “South Reading Opera Chorus Class.” Kemp’s group or Bancroft’s?

4/15 Salem, MA “South Reading Old Folks’ Choral Society” at Mechanic Hall.

4/17 Boston, MA “old folks’ charity concert” by “Reading Opera Chorus Class” to benefit Hanover Street Mission Sunday school. Last of twelve concerts in Boston for the season.

4/22 Beverly, MA South Reading group at Town Hall

4/29 Roxbury, MA led by N. D. Gould and Alpheus Trowbridge at Dudley Street Baptist Church and Society.

5/1 Milford, MA May Day evening ofc led by “Ziba Thayer, a singing master of Old Times.”

Gloucester, MA at Town Hall


5/12 Springfield, MA New England Pilgrim Society, led by Rix and Maas.

5/13 Watertown, MA at Town Hall, led by Asa R. Trowbridge of Newton, choir director at Watertown Baptist church.

Roxbury, MA performers included “several young ladies belonging to the choir of the Universalist Church.”
5/14 **Gloucester, MA** Including African American character Cuffee.

5/15 **Springfield, MA** New England Pilgrim Society (Lowell) at Hampden Hall. A repeat “at the urgent solicitation of many prominent citizens of Springfield”

5/16 **Worcester, MA** B. F. Rix and company

5/17 **Worcester, MA** repeat by Rix et al

5/31 **New York, NY** at the “Broadway Tabernacle. plus an afternoon concert with the “Tremaine Children” billed as an “Old Folks and Young Folks Concert.” About thirty members appearing in costume. One of a series given in NYC by Rix et al

6/2 **New York, NY** New England Pilgrim Society repeat

6/6 **Springfield, MA** Rix and New England Pilgrim Society “on their return from New York” at City Hall.

7/4 **Lee, MA** OFC led by M. S. Wilson at festival held by “Ladies of the Baptist Society.”

7/25? **Newport, RI** Aquidneck Hall, led by Eben Tourjee.

8/5 **Newport, RI** Old Folks excursion, “grand concert” and clam bake, led by Eben Tourjee.

8/20 **Nahant, MA** “Old Folks of Reading.”

10/9 **Chicopee, MA** Led by E. G. Heath.

10/15 **West Cambridge, MA** At Town Hall to benefit the new Unitarian Church. A fair, OFC and antiquarian dinner. “To be repeated.”


11/20 **Schenectady, NY** Thanksgiving Day evening Second Dutch Church, by “the Symphonia or Old Folks’ Choir,” led by Simeon Marsh.

12/15? **Boston, MA** Chelsea Continentalers at Tremont Temple.

12/29 **Boston, MA** Chelsea Continentalers at Tremont Temple, repeat.
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