

**Understanding  
Stephen Collins Foster  
His World and Music**

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# **Understanding Stephen Collins Foster, His World and Music**

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This dissertation is an explanation of the life and music of the American composer Stephen Collins Foster in terms of his historical world. Foster captured the essential dynamics of the antebellum mind and heart, which accounted for the immense popularity of his music even during the composer's lifetime. Consequently, by placing Foster and his music within the historical context of his own antebellum society, culture, and history, I sought explanations for the following: the function of sentimentality in Foster's tear-inducing parlor songs and in his blackface plantation songs; the Copperhead, anti-Lincoln politics of the Foster family; Foster's non-companionate marriage to the high-tempered yet independent "Jeanie;" what the young Foster learned during his stay in the free city of Cincinnati, located just across the river from a slave state; Foster's position on minstrelsy and how he transformed the racially denigrating minstrel song into the refined, sentimental hybrid plantation song that sympathized with the slaves; how and why the piano girls were the major purchasers of Foster's parlor songs; the meaning behind the ghost-like images of the women in Foster's songs; life in Civil War New York along the Bowery where Foster spent his final years and a re-evaluation of his New York songs; and, finally, the curious conditions of his tragic death from an "accident" in his hotel room on the Bowery. Although Foster's association with the minstrel stage is often viewed as a source of embarrassment by twenty-first century Americans, I was able to demonstrate that

Stephen Foster wrote his greatest plantation songs during the years when blackface minstrelsy expressed sympathy for the slaves, and that he abandoned the genre when it did not.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

When I first entertained the idea of studying the life of the composer Stephen Collins Foster, I had not realized the obstacles that would hinder the investigation. It appeared that a large collection of the composer's music and memorabilia was comfortably housed in the University of Pittsburgh's Stephen Foster Memorial museum that contained, in addition, all of Foster's documents, scrapbooks, journals, account books, and family letters. However voluminous, the problem with the Foster collection, as Deane L. Root, Curator of the Stephen Foster Memorial and the Center for American Music at the University of Pittsburgh has shown, is that many of these documents have been "bowdlerized." Of the many letters in the collection, for example, what remains are hundreds by mother, father, brothers, sisters, nieces, and nephews of the composer, but less than twenty letters by Stephen Foster have survived. The major extant document in Foster's own handwriting is the large manuscript book he kept for about ten years, in which he worked out the words to the songs he composed before he moved to New York. Many other documents have been altered or destroyed.<sup>1</sup>

With such highly selective archives and "doctored" evidence to clue us into details of the composer's life or the meanings of his songs, we are left with the nagging sense that Foster

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<sup>1</sup> Deane L. Root, "The Mythology of Stephen C. Foster or Why His True Story Remains Untold," *The American Music Research Center Journal*, Vol. 1, 1991, pp. 22-23

and his music have been misunderstood. In a speech given in March of 1990, Deane Root emphasized the “Mythtory” surrounding Stephen Foster:

My purpose in this talk.... is to point out that we have been allowed to see only certain aspects of Stephen Foster’s character, his motivations, only selected glimpses of his life events, modulated or even polarized views of his intentions of his music and his poetry. Our history, in other words, has been as much myth as fact.<sup>2</sup>

After listing “the varying interpretations” of Foster by important historians and musicologists, Dr. Root asked:

Is their assessment correct? Or might it be possible that all of us misunderstand this one person, and perhaps an important aspect of the entire antebellum period? Even in the face of unanimous opinion, it behooves historians to pose several questions. Are the original source materials for their topic complete? How directly do they stem from the composer himself? Have some relevant materials been overlooked or undervalued? Have the materials been altered in any way to affect their content, and, if so, how and why were they altered? Is our perception of the subject skewed by intervening authors who tried to change the way we view it? And ultimately do we truly understand the original intentions of the composer; can we see through the varying interpretations that, layer upon layer, have been applied to him and to his work over succeeding generations?<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Root concluded that “we know very little about Stephen Foster, even though he was the most famous songwriter of the nineteenth century, and is still the best-known American composer in many countries of the world today.”<sup>4</sup>

Taking up the lead presented in Dr. Root’s speech, I was encouraged to try to provide a greater “understanding” of Stephen Collins Foster and his songs by investigating his world. As an historian, I have chosen to study the composer’s world as a key to understanding the man. Foster’s songs gained popularity in America and throughout the world during his lifetime because they reflected the spirit of the antebellum age. This is not to say that they only reflected the era from which they grew. Foster’s songs are, after all timeless, in that they reflect the joys

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.



and pains of the human condition, regardless of the era. But my inquiry was based on the premise that since Foster was very much a man of his times, greater understanding of the man, his life, and his work would arise from an investigation of his world. Foster's biographers have chosen different methodologies. Some studied the songs, others delved into account books and sales of sheet music, others perused the family letters, scrapbooks, and memorabilia. But I believed that, in addition to taking into account the sources mentioned above, the best methodology would involve exploring the nuances of the antebellum culture as a key to understanding Foster's music and life.

As for Foster's songs, whether created for the parlor or the minstrel stage, I decided to investigate how they functioned in the mid-nineteenth century society, rather than dismissing them because they are irrelevant to our twenty-first century society. Foster's songs, to have been as successful as they were during his lifetime, must have served a function in that society, in some way satisfying the needs of the world in which they thrived. I believed that a careful reading of the songs would provide information, not only about Foster but about his world. In my use of the songs as source material, however, I assumed that the date of publication, unless specifically noted otherwise, was close in time to the date when Foster actually wrote the songs. Without making such an assumption, it would have been difficult or impossible to make use of the songs in an exploration of Foster's life and society. At least Stephen Foster's songs constituted uncorrupted evidence that the Foster family had not willfully destroyed.

The man most responsible for destroying evidence and cloaking the composer in "myth and mystery" was Stephen's older brother Morrison Foster, although other members of the family were also involved in the cover-up. Morrison, and later his daughter Evelyn Foster Morneweck, had the charge of maintaining and preserving the treasure trove of family letters of

the Fosters. Morrison, however, managed to “lose” or destroy what he did not want the public to see. He claimed that he once had a suitcase full of letters which he unfortunately left at a hotel somewhere around Philadelphia. Other letters, he admitted, he consigned to the flames. The composer’s sister Ann Eliza, who destroyed letters of her own because she was embarrassed by her youthful exuberance, probably destroyed ones from her brother as well. Morneweck, although she preserved for posterity much valuable information about the Foster family, knowingly withheld personal information about her uncle, blackening out sentences in the correspondence. Stephen Collins Foster, the youngest sibling, was the source of the family’s greatest pride, but also embarrassment, worry, and guilt.<sup>5</sup>

With few extant letters in the composer’s own hand, and no personal diary, understanding the man involves peeling away layers of “myth” clouding the truth. We are left with a maze of misunderstandings: about his politics, his failed marriage, his decision to abandon minstrelsy, his attitude towards slavery, his decision to sell out his copyrights, his life in New York, and eventually his death. Overall, we do not know how to make sense of the decisions Foster chose to make in his life. This is especially true because the letters that do remain were not randomly selected. As a consequence, what was left for posterity was the portrait Morrison and the family conceived as the most favorable. Morrison may have been trying to protect the collective conscience of the family, as much as his brother’s reputation. In their hearts, Foster’s brothers

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<sup>5</sup> Ken Emerson in his biography of Stephen Foster commented on the scarcity of extant documents in Foster’s own hand, in contrast to the numerous letters in the Foster Hall Collection written by various members of the Foster family. “Mortified by his failed marriage, his drunkenness, and his sorry end, Foster’s family—notably Morrison—destroyed most of his letters, of which fewer than thirty survive, while preserving all their own.” Ken Emerson, *Doo-Dah! Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 313.

and sisters must have sensed that they had abandoned him to an alcoholic death in a hotel room along New York's notorious Bowery.

Ironically, the embarrassing traits or flaws Morrison sought to cover up in his brother's character are not what is the source of embarrassment today. Stephen Foster's reputation is marred today by his association with the production of blackface songs. Foster, once America's most beloved composer, has now been consigned to a position of lesser importance, or is being

intentionally ignored, because of what is judged today as "racism" in some of his songs. Since the Civil Rights movement, many people who are unable to separate the songs from what they sense is a political message in the lyrics, view Foster's plantation songs as a dilemma and an embarrassment. Although these songs were at one time recognized and sung all over the world, today concert singers ignore them, and music producers relegate them to instrumental renditions only, cutting out the sometimes insensitive words. Musicologists like William W. Austin and writers like Ken Emerson, however, succeeded in finding value in the songs, in spite of their alleged racism. Thus, contemporary biographers of Foster appear to be concerned with finding a way around the fact that some of Stephen Foster's most famous songs were originally sung on the minstrel stage by white men who painted their faces black.

The truth is, Foster's minstrel and plantation songs had a life that was completely estranged from blackface performance and their words in black dialect. "Oh, Susanna!," for example, was played by fiddlers around campfires and danced to by settlers when they moved into the open lands of the new state of Oklahoma. Foster's songs were sung by genteel ladies in feminine parlors and by coarse young men going west after gold. They were sung by children in one room school houses and more than a century later, by children who sang slightly off-key in summer camps. Blackface performance of these songs was only one way of performing them,

only one entertainment genre, but the songs outlived their performance style, as their meaning was greater than their performance medium. They are sung today in Japanese, as they have been sung in many languages of the world, not just in old time American black dialect. Blackface was an entertainment genre that grew up along the cities of the Ohio River which were racially contentious because the Ohio river was the dividing line between the free and slave states in antebellum America. The songs were especially enjoyed in the Northern cities where the urban populations were foreign born men and women who were struggling to retain their socio-economic position when they felt their jobs threatened by freed blacks. The songs may have been born in the minstrel stage, but they grew up and beyond that stage. Who will castigate the songs for their birthplace? The songs had a life of their own, and they will continue to do so.<sup>6</sup>

Stephen Collins Foster was the product of a society in transition, a man who lived at the cusp of the industrial revolution and experienced the phenomenal social and demographic changes spearheaded by advances in technology. Although Foster's life was brief, occupying a mere thirty-seven years, those years were characterized by changes so radical that the adult composer would have hardly recognized the world of his youth. Foster also lived during the years when democracy struggled to become a reality rather than an ideal, when aristocratic claims to deference were pushed aside (not destroyed) as working class men struggled to claim their rights and to assert their individualism through the creation of their own working class culture, music, theater, and entertainments.

Foster was born in a section of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania known as Lawrenceville on the Fourth of July, 1826, the day of the jubilee celebration of America's birth. The nation's birthday

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<sup>6</sup> An old black and white film on TCM showed the early settlers in Oklahoma dancing to the tune of "Oh, Susanna!" played as fiddle music. William W. Austin in "*Susanna*," *Jeanie*," and "*The Old Folks at Home*," *The Songs of Stephen C. Foster from His Time to Ours* also wrote about the different meanings the song had to many different peoples throughout the decades.

celebration was especially boisterous that year, as the celebrants looked back with pride on the Revolutionary generation that had founded the American republic, a domain of perceived purity, union, and pastoral ideals. Yet the composer's own generation grew up facing the possibility of civil war and the destruction of their grandparents' glorious creation. The changes and threats to the status quo left antebellum Americans with a sense of loss and anxiety, a sentiment Foster captured in his music in the "loss" motif which was a predominant theme in his parlor and plantation songs. The loss motif not only recalled Foster's personal losses, but was also a metaphor for the loss the society felt as it transformed to a sooty urban reality and left the pastoral ideal behind.

The nation's transition from a rural to an industrial reality is a key concept in understanding Foster's world and music. Foster, for example, wrote minstrel songs for the urban working classes, who were themselves products of industrialization. The men who worked in the new industrial factories comprised the audience of his minstrel songs, and they were drawn to blackface entertainment for a multitude of reasons. For one thing, they enjoyed it, since it made them laugh while it eased class tensions that were coming to a head in the rapidly changing industrial order. The minstrel stage allowed the working class an outlet for their frustrations as they struggled against their social betters and, at least for a few hours on the minstrel stage, found relief from the status of underdog in the fiercely competitive urban society. But minstrelsy was also a way of denigrating the blacks that the working class whites feared would compete for jobs and social standing in the advent that abolition became a reality. As black smoke filled the skies of their new industrialized cities and covered their clothes and skin with the sooty residue, urban Americans created an entertainment that mirrored their industrial reality, as the performers covered their faces with the burn cork ointment that became known as blackface.

The parlor songs Foster wrote were also products of industrialization. They were written for the new middle classes whose numbers were growing and whose image came to represent the American ideal in manners and lifestyle. The middle classes bought Foster's parlor songs as sheet music, to be performed in their homes. But the sheet music itself was made possible by the new technologies of the steam age: powerful steam printing presses, lithography, and rapid rail transportation for dispersal of the product throughout the country. The piano too as an affordable instrument for the middle class was made a possibility by Steinway's and other piano makers' use of interchangeable parts, also an outgrowth of the industrial revolution. Even the sad sentimental songs that the young ladies played on their pianos and sang in their parlors reflected the urban crisis as families separated and the younger generations moved far from their farms to settle into crowded urban centers, where many died from strange and new diseases.

With the many ongoing changes, the antebellum economy suffered through fairly regular recessionary cycles, and wealth and status fluctuated accordingly. Status was of great concern to nineteenth century Americans like the composer's mother Eliza Clayland Foster, who suggested the topic often in her handwritten journal, which I transcribed and annotated many years ago.<sup>7</sup> The anxieties stemming from the fear of losing status and of not knowing one's place in the social order plagued many Americans, including the Fosters who suffered from an insecurity that can only be understood in the light of the helplessness these men such as Stephen Foster's father William experienced when faced with rapid and unexpected alterations in his fortunes. Recalling earlier years of prosperity when the economy was on the upswing and virtually everyone's social status was improving, Eliza Foster noted that "All were generally rising, the lawyers, the physicians, the merchants, the mechanics. The lawyers have been in the Cabinet and

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<sup>7</sup> Eliza Clayland Foster's journal was entitled "Incidents and Sketches of Pittsburgh."

in the Senate, the physicians died rich, the merchants became large landholders, and the mechanics retired to their country residences. The boot maker became a rich man and a judge, and the cobbler has refused the hand of his pretty daughter in marriage with the son of a judge.”<sup>8</sup> But with much greater swiftness, a depression or panic wiped out the wealth of these nouveaux riches.

The antebellum economy’s boom and bust cycles, which were especially volatile in the western regions, proved to be a major source of problems for the Fosters. Although historians often blamed the Foster family’s poverty on the senior William Foster’s quixotic nature and business ineptitude, a study of the economy reveals that the Fosters were as often hurt by the vagaries of an economic system that was dependent on feverish land speculation and the whim of politicians, as by their father’s sometimes fatuous business decisions. Stephen Foster’s brothers managed to succeed as “self-made” men in the new economic order, but his father William B. Foster who was a member of the older generation did not adapt well to the changes. And neither did Stephen Foster, for that matter, who came of age during the decades of the nineteenth century when, as Scott Sandage has pointed out, a man began to equate his economic worth with his personal self-worth, and a failed business enterprise identified a man as a

“loser.”<sup>9</sup>

Foster, the ninth child, was coddled as the baby of the family after Eliza’s and William’s last born, a boy named James, died in its tenth month. In such a large family, a much older sibling frequently acted the part of mother or father to Stephen Foster. The composer, who was

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<sup>8</sup>Foster, “Incidents and Sketches of Pittsburgh,” Chapter 1, p. 22, transcribed by Joanne O’Connell.

<sup>8</sup> Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers, A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 2-17.

<sup>9</sup> Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers, A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 2-17.

highly sensitive and emotional, could readily display sentimental tears, even as an adult, when affected by a sad song or a long awaited homecoming. He was also abnormally impulsive ( and today we would say neurotic). He enrolled at a college and moved in and out in one week. Another time, when he was a grown married man living in Hoboken, New Jersey, he sold the family's furniture and packed up his belongings, wife, and baby and hopped a train back to Pittsburgh, all within twenty-four hours. When watching a concert performance, he could storm out if the music in any way offended his sensibilities. And sometimes he had trouble getting to sleep if the slightest noise intruded into his bedroom. In the early years of his marriage, at least, he needed perfect quiet to write his songs. He had a piano installed in a third floor room in his house, where he composed with the door kept closed. If his young daughter Marion walked in or disturbed him with her playtime noise, he alternated from being an affectionate father to a distant and irritable one.

Foster's emotionality, when his eyes would well up with tears while playing or singing a sad sentimental song, was not unusual for his times. These tearful displays were considered acceptable genteel social behavior in the antebellum world, even for a man. Foster's tears were authentic, but even sentimental tears were fashionable in his day. The performer/songwriter Henry Russell who was a sensation in the 1840s earned a fine living off the society's desire to feel vicarious suffering and to display tears. Russell gave such a heartrending performance of his very popular song "Woodman, Spare that Tree" that the audience, night after night, pulled out their handkerchiefs and wiped away their tears. Whereupon Russell would



wipe the tears from his own eyes, take his bows, and run behind the curtain to laugh while he estimated the windfall profits earned from the tears in the eyes of his audience.<sup>10</sup>

Many of Foster's problems stemmed from the fact that he lived in the age of the self-made man, another outgrowth of industrial change, but he was neither able to establish his own success nor able to be guided in the right direction by anyone else. As he struggled to make a place for himself in the new social and economic order, which became increasingly industrial and urban centered, he consumed more and more alcohol to numb his senses to the realization that he had failed to live up to society's image of the "self-made man." His success was dependent on the technological advancements of the new industrial age, for instance, the fast, new printing presses and the railroads to carry his sheet music far and wide, yet Foster was defeated by the psychological demands the new market economy placed on men to succeed and to judge their success only in monetary terms.

Foster had an especially difficult time adjusting to his perceived lack of success, because he lived in the shadows of two very successful self-made men. One was his older adopted brother William Foster, Jr. who became the vice president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, and was a major source of monetary support for the family until the deaths of Stephen's parents. The other powerful figure was President James Buchanan, whose younger brother Edward was married to Stephen Foster's sister Anne Eliza. The Fosters became indebted to James Buchanan even before he became president, because he offered letters of recommendation that led to lucrative government posts for the Fosters at the time when political patronage was strongly in place. Stephen Foster got entangled in this familial political web, and even wrote campaign songs for James Buchanan when he ran against the candidate for the new Republican Party in the

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<sup>10</sup> Henry Russell, *Cheer! Boys, Cheer!* London: John Macqueen, 1895. The famous song writer performer offered this behind-the-scenes description of the effect of sentimentality in his autobiography.

1856 presidential election, but Foster's involvement had little to do with supporting the policies of Buchanan.

A sense of shame and inadequacy may have afflicted Foster early on, after the family lost their home "White Cottage" to foreclosure when Stephen was just a toddler, and then moved into a succession of rented homes and boarding houses for many years. Foster probably grew up dwelling on the second-hand memories of the family's more glorious days while he learned to mourn the Fosters' many losses— home, children, wealth, and status. If Stephen Foster learned from his mother Eliza to dwell on the past and view it as infinitely better than the present, the habit was not unusual for the times. Many antebellum Americans appeared not to like their changing world and preferred to hold onto images of the past in nostalgic recollections. Because Foster's idealization of the past captured a communal sense of loss, experienced by many mid-nineteenth century people who lived in an industrializing world, he was in this way able to write songs that had a universal appeal to his generation.

I began my investigation of the composer Stephen Collins Foster many years ago by going to the libraries and checking out or special ordering whatever literature or biographical studies were available. The first biography entitled *My Brother Stephen* was written in 1896 by the composer's older brother Morrison Foster. This book was little more than a promotional piece, which Morrison Foster put together after he destroyed letters or documents that he believed would have questioned the benign picture of his brother that he wanted to present to the public. He presented a vague if rather innocuous portrayal of Stephen Foster, that not only ignored the composer's drinking habits but the problems in his marriage as well, and he never mentioned the problems of slavery, or what effect that would have had on his brother's songs. Yet Morrison Foster did provide an important record of personal anecdotes and a wealth of

information ( in condensed form) that became the foundation for the subsequent biographies of his brother. Unfortunately, the family believed it was necessary to cover up certain details that would have tarnished the public memory of Stephen Foster's life. If a record existed of Foster's final years in New York, Morrison or some other Foster destroyed all evidence of it. Morrison Foster was an ardent Democrat with ties to Pittsburgh's antebellum cotton industry and to the South. If Stephen Foster had any interest in antislavery activities, Morrison would not have discussed them. Morrison did, however, publish the opinion that his brother was sympathetic to the "downtrodden," and writing long after the slave controversy had ended, he somehow included the slaves as the objects of Stephen Foster's sympathies.

The next book entitled *Stephen Collins Foster: A Biography of America's Folk-Song Composer* by Harold Vincent Milligan was published in 1920, twenty-five years after Morrison published his story. Milligan's major contribution consisted of his interview with Foster's New York friend and lyricist, George Cooper. Cooper was the man who found Foster bleeding on the hall floor of his New York Bowery hotel in January of 1864 and brought him to Bellevue Hospital, where he died a few days later. Although Milligan was grateful to Cooper for the details the latter was able to contribute to his biography, he did not appreciate the songs that Foster wrote in conjunction with Cooper in New York. Like other critics of his time, Milligan thought the Foster- Cooper collaboration produced nothing of value, even though after Foster's death Cooper successfully continued to write song lyrics for about two hundred songs by different composers. Nor did Milligan attach much importance to Foster's sentimental parlor songs. Writing in the early decades of the twentieth century, Milligan was embarrassed by the sentimentality of his grandparents' generation and neither appreciated nor understood the power or function of the sentimental. Like many of his contemporaries, he scorned it.

*Stephen Foster, America's Troubadour* by William Tasker Howard, was the best researched and most complete to date when it was published in 1934. Taking an altogether new approach, Howard researched Foster's music and his account books extensively, focusing on cataloguing the music Foster published and determining how much money the songs generated in terms of royalties. (Howard spent his final years working in the New York City Public Library.) Although Howard contributed a large amount of new information, he was writing in the 1930s and was not concerned with the race issues that concern us today. Howard also was not particularly concerned with filling in details about the era's history. Howard rarely mentioned the approaching Civil War or how that would have affected the composer. Nor was he concerned with how the antebellum culture of loss, resulting from the society's need for consolation over the death of their young, the boom and bust economy, and the strains of a society in transition played a crucial role in molding the songs into what they turned out to be. Howard, however, did interview Foster's granddaughter and others who knew the composer and did provide the public with surprising yet authentic sounding anecdotes about Stephen's relationship with his wife Jane. Unfortunately, Howard would have revealed more if he were not under constraints from Stephen Foster's niece Evelyn Morneweck not to print certain information, for example, that the successful oldest adopted brother William was of illegitimate birth, a fact the Fosters wanted kept private.

In *Stephen Foster, Youth's Golden Gleam: A Sketch of his Life and Background in Cincinnati 1846-1850*, Raymond Walters in 1936 almost completely ignored the slavery issue and concentrated instead on the cultural attractions, the arts and music of the "Queen City of the West," that would have been available to Stephen Foster when he lived in Cincinnati. While these were undoubtedly important influences on the young composer, I believe that the political

scene and the city's free blacks were more important influences on the composer. My own study determined that the black workers Foster saw around Cincinnati's waterfront, free men with a spirit of independence, could not have gone unnoticed by the young composer. *Youth's Golden Gleam* never mentioned the contentious politics of the free city that bordered a slave state, nor the fact that Foster lived in Cincinnati when slavery was the most confrontational topic and men struggled to work out the Compromise of 1850. Stephen Foster moved to Cincinnati in 1846, the same year that the Underground Railroad leader Levi Coffin moved there. Harriet Beecher Stowe also lived in Cincinnati during these same years. When she departed from the city in the same year that Foster did, she was so affected by the slavery situation that she immediately began writing her famous antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Surely, Stephen Foster was influenced by the border city in ways other than cultural attractions.

The most complete compendium of facts about the Foster family is the two volume set entitled *The Chronicles of Stephen Foster's Family*, written in the early 1940s by Evelyn Foster Morneweck. The daughter of the composer's brother Morrison, Evelyn was born late in her father's life to his second wife, but she was still the only person (besides her father Morrison Foster) who had the opportunity to hear the family legends about her famous uncle, and to have recorded them with meticulous attention to detail. Naturally, the stories would have come with a bias from her father Morrison, but Evelyn, as keeper of the family letters for many years, did make ample use of this invaluable resource. In spite of Morneweck's biases, she appears to have been a more objective and voluminous writer than her father, making the *Chronicles* the most informative collection of reminiscences of the Fosters and of the composer. Although she was born years after her famous uncle had died, Morneweck's *Chronicles* remains the most

comprehensive study made by a person with a direct link to the family, their letters, and their memories.

Unfortunately, Morneweck's hefty two volumes contain more details about the family than about her uncle Stephen, but that is understandable. As I mentioned earlier, volumes of letters written by the family members are still carefully preserved at the Stephen Foster Memorial, but few letters of Stephen Foster survived. Like her father Morrison, Morneweck was very protective of her uncle's reputation and that of the family's, and covered up details she considered too personal or revealing for the public. (The exceptions were cases where, she admitted, the news had already been made public, such as the suicide of Stephen's uncle, a brother of his mother Eliza.) Morneweck did volunteer her opinion of her uncle's attitude to the slaves, which was that although he was sympathetic in his heart, he did not envision freedom for the slaves in the near future, and believed that only through death would they be released from their suffering.

Morneweck did not appreciate the comic vaudeville style songs Foster wrote in New York City with his lyricist friend George Cooper. She proffered the usual negative opinion about her uncle's New York compositions, which was that most of the songs were of little value, because, she suggested, they were produced while Foster was drinking heavily. Morneweck failed to realize that with the Civil War times had changed and Foster, writing in a new style that the people wanted, did in fact make a new and valuable contribution to American song. Unfortunately, Morneweck, like the majority of Foster's biographers, believed that with the exception of "Beautiful Dreamer" and "Old Black Joe," Foster wrote "pot boilers" during his final years when he lived in New York City. Morneweck believed that the big mistake Foster made in his life was his decision to stop writing plantation songs, because she failed to see the

political ramifications of continuing to write blackface songs after 1853 and she did not appreciate most of Foster's parlor or comic songs. As a result, she devalued many of Foster's great songs, simply because she put a premium on her uncle's plantation and minstrel songs.

About thirty years after Morneweck's book appeared, William W. Austin published "*Susanna*," "*Jeanie*," and "*The Old Folks at Home*," *The Songs of Stephen C. Foster from His Time to Ours*. By the date of the book's publication, Americans were aware of the racism implicit in the minstrel songs and were reconsidering their value. Austin was plagued by what he saw as the dilemma that faced Americans in the 1970s. He liked Foster's music, but he felt a "responsibility" to contribute to the fight against the racism he found in the minstrel/plantation genre. Austin believed that Foster's "most famous songs like 'Old Black Joe' and 'Old Folks at Home' have served to reinforce an image of black people in the United States keeping their place as faithful servants." In the same paragraph, however, Austin admitted that these same songs "sometimes helped make recognizable the long and continuous development of black music in America." By studying the meanings of the songs in relation to one another and to people of different generations, Austin tried to determine how and if, in spite of the racism that is apparent to modern listeners, the songs could still have a value so that they would merit keeping. "If, after some exploring, we can choose to disagree about the present and potential value of the songs, we may at least understand our agreement. We can use and enjoy the songs if we choose, or at last dismiss them, knowing why we do so."

Taking "Old Folks at Home" as an example of a plantation song, Austin analyzed its meaning for Foster and his contemporaries like Jenny Lind. Then he pushed forward in time showing what "Old Folks" meant to W. E. B. Dubois and the Jubilee Singers around the 1870s, to Dvorak in 1900, and what the song meant to Ray Charles in the 1950s and to Pete Seeger in

Austin's own time. Austin demonstrated that Foster's songs like "Old Folks" had so much positive value within themselves, that they transcended the limitations of racism, and became songs of personal, national, and communal empowerment. In spite of demonstrating the value the songs maintained for many different generations of men and women the world over, Austin did not apply the historian's lens to his analysis of either the songs or the man and consequently left much to be explained.

Finally, Ken Emerson's *Doo-Dah! Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture*, published in 1997, is the most recent biography, and the most up-to-date in its treatment of issues such as slavery, antislavery, and the looming dissolution of the nation. Emerson demonstrated that Foster's songs left a positive imprint on popular music for future generations. In songs written by the Beatles one hundred years after Foster's death, Emerson found the connection to Foster's plantation songs. Even if some of Foster's songs were marred by racist words, Emerson could not dismiss them. The songs were too prominent in our culture and continue to make an impact even today.

Emerson provided numerous interesting details about Foster's life and his society, but he tended to judge the Fosters without taking into account the exigencies of their nineteenth century world. Emerson, for example, thought that the composer's mother Eliza Foster was too status conscious, but insecurity over status was not unusual for people of Eliza's generation. Antebellum men and women, who felt constantly threatened by the vicissitudes of the economy, struggled to maintain their footings in the highly competitive, newly industrializing world and money was of great concern to them. Another issue for Emerson was racism. To his credit, unlike Foster's earlier biographers, Emerson did deal with the idea of "racism" in the society but he did not explain what it meant to be racist in the nineteenth century. A more thorough



investigation of Foster's world would have revealed that virtually everyone was a racist in some form or another in the nineteenth century since most educated antebellum men and women would have agreed with the "scientists" of their day who had "proof" that the races existed in an inviolable hierarchical relationship to one another.

After reviewing the biographies about Foster, I concluded that for a variety of reasons, new research was called for. As shown earlier, the older Foster biographies written prior to the Civil Rights movement were not in touch with issues that are of concern to modern readers. That is, they ignored the possibility of racial denigration in the minstrel genre and spoke about the plantation songs with pride, while they denigrated most of Foster's sentimental parlor songs. But even the more current historiography of Foster did not answer the questions that I raised and that I believed could be answered through an analysis of Foster's his world and his presence in it. None of Foster's biographers, for example, subjected his world—racial and ethnic tensions, economic problems, cultural habits, mortality rates ---- to the type of scrutiny that would reveal *why* antebellum men enjoyed minstrel shows and blackface songs, nor did the biographers look for explanations for *why* antebellum woman loved songs that indulged the habit of weeping.

Simply acknowledging that Foster wrote blackface minstrel and tearful sentimental songs is not the same as *understanding why* Foster wrote such songs, and what communal function they must have served. In spite of the fact that the universal popularity of Foster's songs suggested that they captured the very essence of the antebellum heart and mind, Foster's biographers did not explore the antebellum world. I, however, was intrigued by the idea that many important questions about Foster could be answered by analyzing his "world" and listening for his "voice" through his songs. Consequently, I decided to place Stephen Foster within his own historical

framework in order to better explain the man who in his life and music captured the joys, pains, and anxieties that his generation experienced.

During Foster's lifetime, some of his most famous songs were written in the minstrel tradition. Since minstrelsy was one of the most popular entertainments of its day, I wanted to know why Americans in the 1840s and 1850s were fascinated by an entertainment which featured white performers wearing blackface makeup. Fortunately, many historians had already delved into this subject and produced lengthy treatises on the peculiar characteristics and meaning of blackface minstrelsy. Still, no book about Foster explained the phenomenon, so that a reader had to go outside the Foster biographies to try to make sense of it.

While I have included a rehashing of several of the more well known theories about blackface, I also penned my own theory, noting that minstrelsy burst on the scene at the same time that William Lloyd Garrison began his abolition paper *The Liberator* and the slave Nat Turner staged a violent, if unsuccessful, uprising, in the early 1830s. Although there is no single definitive explanation for blackface, this historian's analysis of the popularity of blackface entertainment notes that the genre became popular when blacks were perceived as a threat to the established social and economic order of white Americans, at the same time that America's demographics were becoming more complex with the admission of thousands of immigrants. Minstrelsy lashed out at blacks more vituperatively, also, when the very fiber of the nation was threatened with disunity, and whites found it easy to make blacks into scapegoats for the nation's problems.

It is true that the early minstrel songs of the 1830s were insulting to blacks, but minstrel songs and the minstrel stage changed over time, becoming more sympathetic to African Americans from 1848 through 1852. In "Early Minstrel Music 1843-1852," Robert B. Winans

demonstrated that minstrel songs written from 1848-1852 were highly sentimental and sympathetic to the slaves. These were the years Stephen Foster wrote his greatest sentimental minstrel songs, known as “plantation songs,” beginning with “Old Uncle Ned” in 1847, “Nelly Was a Lady” in 1848 , “Old Folks at Home” in 1851, and ending with “My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night!” composed late in 1852. Foster’s plantation songs fit the category and the time frame for sentimental, sympathetic minstrelsy, as described by Winans, and many authorities from the abolitionist Frederick Douglass to the music historian Charles Hamm have expressed the opinion that Foster’s songs, by virtue of their sentimentality, were sympathetic in their portrayal of blacks and somewhat antislavery in sentiment.

By 1854, however, minstrel songs became less sympathetic in their characterization of blacks after the Kansas-Nebraska Act pushed the nation in the direction of Civil War. Then the minstrel audience demanded a negative portrayal of African Americans on the stage so they could have a scapegoat for the nation’s problems. What impact Foster’s abandonment of the genre had on the new direction minstrelsy took after 1854 is a topic deserving investigation. However, the fact remains that Stephen Foster had stopped writing minstrel and plantation songs by the time minstrelsy became, according to Winans, less sentimental, more caustic, and racially denigrating. Foster did not return to the genre for about seven years, that is, until 1860, and then he composed only four additional minstrel type songs. That Foster did not write for the minstrel stage after 1852, during the years when the genre adopted a less sympathetic tone, is a very important indicator of Foster’s position on minstrelsy. It also should relieve Foster of some of the blame accorded him for his association with blackface.

Foster’s plantation songs also suffer from the misconception that their allusions to Southern imagery, such as the mention of canebrakes and cotton, meant that the songs were

sympathetic models of the Old South, or worse, that Foster was sympathetic to the South and slavery.<sup>11</sup> Most of the books about Stephen Foster were written from the 1920s to 1940s, when Americans were infatuated with an image of the “Old South” which glorified the “lost cause.” During these years one of the most successful movies was Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone With the Wind*, whose background music utilized motifs from Foster’s plantation songs, as did many movies throughout the first half of the twentieth century which made reference to the Old South. Foster’s plantation songs were generally thought of as an approbation of the Old South and plantation life, the musical incarnation of the “lost cause” paradigm, but the Southern model complete with cotton and canebrakes was little more than theatrical staging. Beneath the surface, however, the South in Foster’s songs had important metaphorical meanings.

On the one hand, Foster was the smart businessman who gave the minstrel performers what they wanted when he included in his songs references to the props of the Southern plantation. On another level, however, Foster and the minstrels were satisfying the nostalgic need the urban audience had to recreate the image of their rural past on the stage. It seems that the South for the new urbanites represented their cherished pastoral ideal, which they were reluctant to relinquish, even though they knew that the simple farming life could no longer supply them with jobs and material comforts. The South, then, was a symbol for the pastoral, the oppositional to the urban industrial present which antebellum Americans wanted to escape. When Foster sang of the simple hut and the flowers on the plantation, that was his way of capturing and holding onto the pristine past in face of the increasingly corrupt present.

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<sup>11</sup> Deane L. Root, “Myth and Stephen Foster,” *Carnegie Magazine*, January-February, 1987, p. 10. One of the myths that Root pointed out was of Foster as “a spokesman for an idyllic vision of the antebellum American South.”

Additional misconceptions about the plantation songs come from their supposed source of inspiration or origination. The older historiography supported the legend that Foster was inspired to write his plantation songs by the music he heard along the riverfront docks, where the strong black men worked as stevedores, carrying luggage, cargo, and the huge bales of cotton off the boats that came up from the South. This may have been true on the docks or levees of some cities, but where and when? By the 1840s and 1850s, when Foster was writing his great plantation songs, the black river workers no longer dominated the waterfront jobs in major cities like New York and Philadelphia, and probably Pittsburgh, where the Irish constituted the dominant immigrant group. The black stevedores and riverboat men, who were said to have been the inspiration for the distinctive sounds of pathos in Foster's songs, had been pushed out of the waterfront jobs by immigrant Irishmen. The exception was the waterfront in Cincinnati, where free blacks continued to work on the waterfront when Foster lived there during the late 1840s. The dominant immigrant group in Cincinnati were Germans who did not compete with the blacks. The irony, then, is that Foster may have heard more Irish than African inspired music on the Pittsburgh waterfront before he moved to Cincinnati, where he did have the fortunate opportunity of hearing the authentic sounds of proud, free black river workers.

The next major object of inquiry was to find out why Foster's sad, sentimental songs, which many modern Americans find too lugubrious, were highly valued by antebellum Americans. Like the blackface songs, the sentimental songs that brought tears to the eyes had to serve a special function in the society. Antebellum Americans believed that sentimentality was a powerful force. The antislavery writer Harriet Beecher Stowe was aware of its power to encourage sympathy for the slaves and utilized it successfully in her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. By bringing tears to her readers' eyes and empathy into their hearts, Stowe made her readers see

the injustices of the institution of slavery for the first time. In Foster's plantation songs such as "Nelly Was a Lady," which portrayed a black man grieving over his dead black bride, the power of the sentimental to elicit sympathy for the slaves worked in a similar fashion.

Foster's parlor songs utilized the sentimental in different but equally effective ways. I have argued that sad, sentimental songs functioned by soothing a society that appeared to be in a perpetual state of mourning, either for dead loved ones, days gone by, lost hopes, failed dreams, or for the pastoral ideal. In a society sensitive to loss and overwhelmed by the death of its young, these songs which to modern generations seem affected soothed the pain of the bereaved, who were mourning actual and metaphorical losses. Many of Foster's sentimental songs, which pined over the past, served as directives for recreating the past, or bringing the past back to life. When the loss involved a dead loved one, Foster composed sad songs of death, what I have termed "mourning songs." The modus operandi Foster utilized in the mourning songs seemed to rely on the creation of sentimental "memories" and "dreams." When dreaming about or remembering the deceased, the dream or the memory reincarnates the dead or lost object. In dreams, the past is returned and the dead are reborn, even if for a moment. The creation of nostalgic memories was a way of holding on to the past while letting go. It was a technique used in mourning the dead and in mourning the glories of the past.

Foster's sentimental songs were also used to demonstrate genteel status. The songs were written for young ladies of the middle and upper classes who in mid-nineteenth century America depended on mass production and consumerism to prove their status through what they purchased. The Foster daughters, like other female members of their class, maintained their family's status by demonstrating their gentility and the family's through the acquisition and display of accomplishments, which included piano playing and singing parlor songs. By singing

sentimental songs with the proper amount of pathos in their voices, the young ladies especially of the middle class proved that they were women of “feeling” and thereby segregated themselves from the crude, unfeeling working classes. They also demonstrated that they had the wealth and leisure time to devote to musical skills, which made them feel socially and morally superior. These amateur female musicians who had the time and money to devote to accomplishments were the primary purchasers of Foster’s parlor songs and they supported Foster’s song writing.

The middle and upper classes also purchased decorative sentimental sheet music and paid for music lessons and pianos in the belief that musical accomplishments would make their daughters more marriageable to men of wealth and social standing. Whether skillful amateur piano playing did in fact make a girl more successful in the marriage game has yet to be proven. The girl I selected to test the validity of the romantic power of a young woman’s piano skills was Stephen Foster’s sister Charlotte, who died when the composer was three years of age. She was the tragic piano girl who most impressed Foster with the image of dream-like vapor women that characterized the women in his songs. The beautiful golden haired Charlotte delighted the elite families of Kentucky playing the piano, harp, and guitar and singing the popular sentimental songs of the day for the Rowan family at their home Federal Hill, today the “Old Kentucky Home” shrine. Although she turned down a marriage proposal from one of the Rowan sons, when she died at nineteen Charlotte was not engaged to anyone. In the money conscious antebellum world, it does not appear that piano playing could take the place of a hefty dowry.

Foster’s marriage was another issue that begged for explanation, since the couple stayed married yet spent many years living apart in separate states. What had gone wrong in what was supposed to be the age of the companionate marriage? In addition to the composer’s drinking habit and his inability to produce a steady livelihood to support his family, Foster was confronted

with gender issues in a world that metaphorically separated the sexes into spheres. In a complete reversal of roles, his wife Jane went to work in the masculine sphere, in the outside world of business, where she transmitted war news over the telegraph wires, another miracle of technology. Stephen Foster, in the meantime, occupied the feminine sphere, because he stayed at home working at the piano, an instrument that society had designated for the ladies.

Politics, of course, occupied the masculine sphere, but even there Foster was enigmatic. The political positions of Stephen Foster and his family are problematical for the men and women who grew up in a society that reveres Abraham Lincoln. They want to know why Stephen Foster, if he voted at all in 1860, probably supported the Northern Democrat Stephen Douglas. More difficult to understand are the composer's sister Henrietta and his brother Morrison, Copperheads who viciously attacked Lincoln during the Civil War while they rallied to the side of the President's outspoken critic Clement C. Vallandigham. In the 1856 election, when the Republicans made their debut to the world, Stephen Foster wrote anti-abolition campaign songs for the Democratic candidate James Buchanan. The fact that Buchanan was a brother-in-law of the Fosters provided some explanation for the family's devotion to the candidate who came to be known as "The Northern man with Southern sympathies." Still, most Pittsburghers strongly favored the Republicans in both the 1856 and the 1860 elections, and I wanted to know just how unusual the Fosters' politics were for Pittsburgh, and whether other Democrats in Pittsburgh had doughface or Copperhead inclinations as well.

The politics of the Foster family or of the people of Pittsburgh, however, offered few clues to the composer's personal opinions. In most biographies, Stephen Foster was portrayed as a man who was either politically ambivalent and expressed a politics of accommodation, or one who randomly vacillated in his political devotions. It seemed that Foster, when he wanted to



avoid confrontations with his Copperhead relatives, sometimes used the “voice” of his songs to express his political convictions, especially during the early years of the war, when he even sang of his admiration for Abraham Lincoln. But when his “voice” was camouflaged by black dialect and his emotions obscured by the burnt cork mask, then he was free to sing his sympathy for the slaves and his subtle condemnation of the institution of slavery.

The most difficult task in trying to understand Stephen Foster involved filling in the blank spaces in the last years of the composer’s life when he lived along the Bowery in New York City. Since there are no surviving letters by Foster from this period and only a few second hand reminiscences from friends and acquaintances in the city, it was necessary to create a portrait of New York during the Civil War and try to place Stephen in it. The task was made especially onerous by the fact that Stephen Foster had renounced even his voice when he lived in New York, because he did not write the words to many of the songs he composed. Yet Foster’s decision to allow the young lyricist George Cooper to supply the words to his songs was not an oversight. Foster was catering to the new tastes and opening the window to the future of dance halls, variety theaters, and musicals.

Unlike critics who believed that Foster produced almost nothing of value during his New York years, I believe that Foster at that time produced a new and beautiful song medium, or at least led the way in that direction. When Foster turned the writing of the words over to his friend George Cooper, “the left wing of the song factory,” as Foster called him, he was acknowledging that the songs he had written before the war were not what the audience wanted now. In Foster’s own words, the Civil War years were “harsh and stirring times” where “songs

of peace have lost their chimes.”<sup>12</sup> The new songs catered to new tastes, appealing to the new mood in America, and in the process, especially with the words of Cooper, Foster created an innovative genre that looked to the future instead of mourning the past.

A more perplexing and painful question asks how Foster died in New York. We know that he drank heavily because his wife Jane sent him money to pay for the so-called “cures” which were advertised in the newspapers. These quack medicines made with alcohol and more powerful drugs like opium did not work, of course, and Foster continued to drink. The circumstances of the composer’s death left much to be explained. He was found lying in a pool of blood with a cut in his throat, which the family attributed to a fall onto some sort of broken pottery. I could not help but conclude that Foster’s death was, in one way or another, a suicide. Even if it were the result of a freak accident, the fact that he lived alone, a self-imposed exile along the Bowery in the neighborhood adjacent to the notorious slum Five Points, would have made death a welcomed release. As was conjectured about Edgar Allan Poe, who was found dead under mysterious conditions in a gutter, Foster’s “accident” may have been a wish fulfillment, if not actually a suicide. But then again, it may have been something else.

However one chooses to explain Foster’s death, the tragedy of the composer’s life was reproduced in his songs that pined for days gone by instead of looking ahead. Rather than a personal habit, though, this tendency to mourn the past was a communal cultural experience for antebellum Americans, who felt a deep sense of dislocation in the present. Foster was a man of his times who wrote songs about loss, a metaphor for the loss of innocence as his world was being irrevocably transformed. His songs soothed the anxieties of his contemporaries, far and wide, and of his own countrymen, when they stood on the brink of civil war, were sensitive to

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<sup>12</sup> Steven Saunders and Deane L. Root, *The Music of Stephen C. Foster, Volume 2* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990) “That’s What’s the Matter,” 1862, p.190.

the death of their young, and plagued by the insecurity of a world in transition from a rural to an urban, market oriented industrial economy. Foster's songs soothed men and women who held on tenaciously to their memories of a more idyllic past while their world hurled them relentlessly into the future and the unknown.

## 2.0 FIRST FAMILIES IN PITTSBURGH

Stephen Foster was born into a family who were clearly members of the small group of pioneer elites who congregated into certain neighborhoods along the rivers of Pittsburgh in the first decade of the nineteenth century. The composer's mother and father interacted closely with these very select first families who ruled Pittsburgh society through family connections and land ownership. By the third decade of the century, the Fosters had lost their money, their land, and their home, but the composer's mother Eliza Clayland Foster preserved her memories of a golden past and of the family's former elite status and passed them on to her children. After the family home was foreclosed, and the Fosters began their descent in wealth and status, stories of the parties, weddings, joys, and sorrows that the Fosters shared with the elites of the pioneer city kept the golden days of the past alive, as they were retold often by Eliza Foster and preserved as a permanent record in her handwritten journal. Stephen Foster was too young to have retained personal memories of the elite lifestyle, but through Eliza's retelling they became part of the Foster family's communal experience.

Foster's personal loss, however, mirrored the general sense of loss which antebellumites experienced as their world changed radically around them from a rural to an urban industrialized society. As the older social hierarchies gave way to a new social order based on wealth and the self-made man, antebellum Americans were plagued increasingly by anxieties about their social status and economic security. Since so many of Foster's songs were concerned with loss, it

seems pertinent to ask how the family's personal tragedies played out in Foster's music. It does appear that images of a lost home, lifestyle, and status contributed to the "loss" motif that was dominant in Foster's songs and expressed itself as a pining for a past that was somehow always superior to the present.

## 2.1 BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY

July 4, 1826 fell on a Tuesday, and while Americans in the first quarter of the nineteenth century usually celebrated their nation's birthday in a grandiose manner, this Fourth was to be more spectacular than most. It was, after all, the nation's Jubilee celebration,<sup>13</sup> commemorating fifty years of liberty and proof that what had been thought of as an experiment in government could have enduring and endearing possibilities. The people celebrating America's Jubilee were the children of the veterans of the American Revolution, and many, including William Barclay Foster had been born while the war was still in progress. His wife Eliza Clayland Foster was born nine years later in 1788, not many years after the ink had dried on the peace treaty. The birth of Eliza and William Foster's son Stephen during this special Fourth of July celebration only added to the immense jubilation of the day. Cannon boomed, liquor flowed, and patriotic toasts were raised to honor the patriarchs of old, as Eliza Foster suffered through labor pains for the ninth time, well within hearing of the festivities.

Fourth of July celebrations were changing over time, becoming not only increasingly loud but increasingly acted out to the tune of partisan politics. From the beginning, the Fourth

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<sup>13</sup>Andrew Burstein, *America's Jubilee* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001) pp. 2- 3.

was a political occasion, ostensibly promoting national unity. Consequently, when Jeffersonians and Federalists celebrated, the attendees still exchanged cordial greetings. After the first quarter of the nineteenth century, however, when the Democrats and Whigs celebrated their nation's birth, the opposing political parties competed and harassed one another. They even exclude people from the opposing political party, calling them unpatriotic, immoral, and frankly, un-republican.<sup>14</sup>

Fortunately, when Stephen Foster was born, community unity rather than partisan politics took precedence. The celebrants at his father William's outdoor Fourth of July party toasted the founding fathers, the Republican Jefferson and the Federalist Washington, without regard to political affiliations.<sup>15</sup> It was still a family and neighborly celebration, since the party took place on the grounds of the Fosters' home, which was located in Lawrenceville along the Allegheny River, only a short distance from the rapidly industrializing city of Pittsburgh.<sup>16</sup> Although William Foster was already feverishly devoted to his Democratic idol Andrew Jackson, he was listed as a Federalist when he was elected on November 11, 1826 to the Pennsylvania assembly from both Allegheny and Butler counties, and when his candidacy was advocated for the state legislature the previous week, no one bothered to print his political

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<sup>14</sup>Diana Karter Applebaum, *The Glorious Fourth, American Holiday, An American History*. (New York: Facts on File, 1989), Chapters 1 & 2.

<sup>15</sup>Scott C. Martin, *Killing Time, Leisure and Culture in Southwestern Pennsylvania, 1800-1850* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), pp. 85-86.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

affiliation in the newspaper at all.<sup>17</sup> Apparently William B. Foster was not yet the die-hard Democrat he would become in later years.

Americans in 1826 realized the great responsibility of inheriting the political treasure that the founding fathers had bequeathed them, and felt an obligation to joyously celebrate their national jewel, as they did on this very splendid Fourth.<sup>18</sup> They were the first people in more than two millennia to establish a democratic nation, where brass and brawn enhanced a man's stature more than hereditary titles. Land still counted, of course, but there was so much to be had, and it was relatively easy to attain. Particularly the people of the western towns and cities like Pittsburgh, Louisville, and Cincinnati had discarded most of the old fashioned trappings of privilege. They had established a meritocracy for the brave, the strong, the honorable, and the true. By the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the western states stood in the vanguard, pushing democracy forward, toppling the aristocratic barriers of the old established eastern aristocracies, and replacing them with visions of the self-made man.

As optimistic as they were about their prospects for the up-and-coming West, Americans were already aware of the tenuousness of the ties that bound their nation together, ever since the Missouri Compromise established only six years earlier what people hoped would be a permanent solution to America's slavery problems. In spite of the continuing tensions between the Northern and Southern sectors, America had thrived and grown in her first fifty years. Her

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<sup>17</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles of Stephen Foster's Family* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1944), p. 9.

<sup>18</sup>Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: the First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000) Appleby argued that Americans of Eliza and William Foster's generation were awed by the achievements of their parents' generation and they felt a special responsibility for preserving the republic.

population had tripled to twelve million, while her territory had expanded to double its original size with the acquisition of the Louisiana lands. Where there were once thirteen stars, the flag now boasted twenty-four. As time would tell, however, the fact of growth only enhanced the possibilities of division, but on this national birthday Americans were jubilant and proud.

The 1826 Fourth of July was miraculous in other ways, too, because the Almighty called Thomas Jefferson and John Adams to their final rewards on this very jubilee within hours of each other.<sup>19</sup> When this noteworthy news reached the Fosters, some days after the Fourth (the telegraph would not be invented for another twenty years), relatives encouraged Eliza to bequeath the names of these luminaries to her newest born, but she instead preferred to honor him with the name of the ten year old son that her girlhood friend, Sarah Lowry Collins had lost only recently. Stephen Collins Foster would be the name of Eliza and William's ninth child.

The Fosters were members of the set of pioneer families who settled into the new lands at the confluence of the Monongahela and the Allegheny rivers which together flowed into the Ohio River. When William and Eliza crossed the mountains and arrived at Pittsburgh, the city already had a long and glorious history. Decades before, the French had realized the strategic value of the land at the juncture of the three rivers and built Fort Duquesne on the site. By the middle of the eighteenth century, their English competitors sent a young, ambitious, and naively brave George Washington to give an official warning for the French to clear out. The twenty-one year old Washington, who envisioned the land as the gateway to the West, returned east and informed the Governor of Virginia that the land was indeed worth fighting for. When Washington once again made the trip back to the land at the forks, he brought along a military contingent and kicked off the Seven Years' War. By 1758, before the war that gave England

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<sup>19</sup>Andrew Burstein, *America's Jubilee* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), Introduction



dominance in North America had ended, the French Fort was renamed Pittsburgh in honor of William Pitt, the British Prime Minister who pumped money and military aid into the land that would one day bear his name.<sup>20</sup>

## 2.2 ELIZA AND WILLIAM FOSTER

All that was ancient history by the time the composer's mother, the young bride Eliza Clayland Tomlinson Foster, arrived in the backwoods town of Pittsburgh in 1807. Within a few years, the population soared to over 4,000. Most of the city's 700 houses were still made of wood, although the newer construction was made of a whitish brick taken from the recently dismantled Fort Pitt.<sup>21</sup> There were not even street numbers on the houses, yet there was evidence of growth and prosperity. By 1810 Pittsburgh had a court house, a market house, a bank, and five churches for the pious. The first iron foundry had been established by Joseph McClurg in 1803, four years before Eliza's arrival.<sup>22</sup> The town offered many of the necessary conveniences, and very soon offered more of the nonessential cultural attractions that were essential to a cultivated lifestyle.

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<sup>20</sup>Joseph J. Ellis, *His Excellency, George Washington*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004) Chapter 1 deals with Washington's exploits in the Seven Years War. Also, see Leland D. Baldwin, *Pittsburgh, The Story of a City* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1938), Chapters 1,2,3 deal with Pittsburgh's early history. Also see "Forts in the Wilderness," by Henry Seele Commager, from Stefan Lorant's *Pittsburgh, the Story of an American City*.

<sup>21</sup>Charles W. Dahlinger, *Pittsburgh, A Sketch of its Early Social Life*. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, the Knickerbocker Press, 1916), p. 31.

<sup>22</sup>Edward G. Baynham, *A History of Pittsburgh Music 1758-1958*. (Typescript at Carnegie Library, Oakland. Music Room. Pittsburgh, PA.) p.13

In little more than a dozen years there would be piano makers, music teachers, concert halls and theaters, museums and lecture halls. Still, the rudeness of the “dingy town” of Pittsburgh in late November of 1807 must have been a strain and a cultural shock to the nineteen- year- old Eliza Clayland Foster who had been brought up in the East. She had made the arduous journey traveling several weeks by a combination of horseback and “an uncomfortable coach” because the roads in many places were not yet wide enough to accommodate stages or wagons, and the virgin terrain was mountainous.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, Eliza Foster referred to herself as a “young and joyous bride” when she first laid eyes on the city that she would call home for the next nearly fifty years.

Eliza had been born in Wilmington, Delaware and brought up by the Claylands, her deceased mother's family, in Baltimore. The port city was flourishing in the first decade of the nineteenth century and could boast all of the charms and advantages of a cultivated lifestyle. The

Claylands were Episcopalians who had come to America from England in 1670 and some of them were rather well-to-do. Stephen Foster's niece Evelyn Morneweck boasted that "Most of the clan [Claylands] were wealthy slaveholders who played a prominent part in social and political life during the Revolution."<sup>24</sup> Still, Eliza was in effect an orphan, since her father had remarried after her mother's death and moved to Kentucky. When William B. Foster came courting and offered marriage, Eliza accepted even if it did mean being transplanted to a town in the West that had only eleven years earlier been made safe for white settlers. At the Battle of

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<sup>23</sup>Evelyn Foster Morneweck, *The Chronicles of Stephen Foster's Family*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1944), Vol. 1, p. 6. Also see Eliza Clayland Foster, “Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh,” Manuscript transcribed by Joanne O’Connell, p. 2. Center for American Music, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pa.

<sup>24</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 4.

Fallen Timbers in 1794, Mad Anthony Wayne decisively defeated the Indians and opened up the Ohio valley, including Pittsburgh, to the migration and permanent settlement of whites.

Eliza's father, a second husband to her mother Ann, was Joseph Tomlinson, a saddle maker by trade. Nonetheless, the Tomlinsons were accomplished people in their own right. Two half brothers of Eliza, John and Joseph Tomlinson were born and bred in Augusta, Kentucky, where John became a physician and Joseph Tomlinson, Jr. became the president of Augusta College. The most illustrious of Eliza's relatives was the famous early American inventor of steam engines, Oliver Evans, who had married Eliza's aunt Sarah Tomlinson. They lived in Philadelphia and Eliza visited often from nearby Baltimore. Huge steam engines along the model of the Scotsman James Watt's design were already in use in the Philadelphia waterworks, but Evans built a steam engine that functioned well on the western rivers. He substituted high for low pressure and developed a compact cylinder that adapted easily to the river boat. The result was that the steamboat, which had been introduced in 1811, became a familiar marker on the crystal waters of the West.

Eliza Tomlinson was present to witness the introduction to the world of one of Evans' marvelous inventions. While she was staying at her uncle's house on Race Street in Philadelphia in 1805, Oliver Evans placed a strange thirty foot long contraption on wheels onto the street and had it propel itself for a mile down the road to the Schuylkill River. The "Orukter Amphibolos" was a steam driven dredge whose purpose was to remove sandbars from the river. It got a lot of attention in Philadelphia as it "walked down the street," but Evans' small powerful steam engines became indispensable when they were used to propel the boats on the Mississippi, and

they transformed travel and life in the cities throughout the Midwest.<sup>25</sup> It was while visiting her aunt Sarah Evans in Philadelphia that Eliza Clayland Tomlinson met her future husband, William Barclay Foster.

The Fosters were part of the large migration of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who settled into Allegheny County, the area around Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania after disembarking at Philadelphia and proceeding slowly but steadfastly in a western direction. William's grandfather Alexander Foster had come from Londonderry, Ireland about 1725. The attraction of the Londonderry immigrants for Pittsburgh is really not surprising when one looks at an early nineteenth century picture of Londonderry. The waterway encircling the Irish town, offset by clumps of trees in the background rising up on the bluffs and looking over the boats in the harbors, is remarkably reminiscent of an early nineteenth century portrait of Pittsburgh at the point.<sup>26</sup> James Foster and his family settled first into Virginia, where William Barclay Foster was born. After the Revolutionary War ended, the Fosters uprooted and moved northwest towards Pittsburgh, along with other Scotch-Irish settlers who were traveling in the same direction from Virginia and Maryland. William Foster's father settled with his family into Washington County, Pennsylvania, just to the south of Pittsburgh, an area many Scotch-Irish farmers had found attractive for farming and settlement.

When William Barclay Foster married Eliza, he was working for Ebenezer Denny, the merchant who became Pittsburgh's first mayor. Foster started out as an employee and later became a partner in Denny's general merchandise store in Pittsburgh. His job was to bring back

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<sup>25</sup>Eugene A. Ferguson, Oliver Evans, *Inventive Genius of the American Industrial Revolution*. (Greenville, Delaware: Hagley Museum, 1980) pp. 10, 35-41.

<sup>26</sup>Billy Kennedy, *The Scots-Irish in Pennsylvania & Kentucky*. (Belfast, Northern Ireland: Ambassador Publications, 1998.) I have included a copy of this picture of Londonderry.

goods from New York and Philadelphia with which to stock the store. He was responsible for transporting the raw goods of the West, such as whiskey and furs, down the Mississippi River to sell in New Orleans, where he exchanged them for such tropical products as coffee and sugar. These tropical products he brought up to the eastern cities, where he exchanged them for manufactured items to sell in the West. Thus, William Foster was often involved in a triangular trade. Morrison Foster, a brother of Stephen, described their father's early business dealings: "It was their custom at that time, the beginning of this century, to load flat boats with the products of the neighboring country -- furs, peltries, whiskey, flour, etc., and float them down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to New Orleans, where the goods were exchanged for sugar, coffee, etc. Mr. Foster went on these expeditions about twice a year."<sup>27</sup>

Before Pittsburgh manufactured her own goods, the pioneer folk of the western city eagerly awaited the products of the East. Getting the goods to Pittsburgh was not easy, however, because before the invention and general use of the steamboat, around 1815, the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers could only be navigated downstream to New Orleans with any ease. The boat ride back up to Pittsburgh could not be made in any timely manner. Often the boat had to be pulled upstream by long poles, which the boatmen could push down into the bottom of the river and use to push the boat upstream. Since pulling the boat upstream was such a strenuous task, the boat, which was a flatboat, was usually broken up at the mouth of the river at New Orleans, and used in the construction of houses.

Getting out of New Orleans was very difficult. It could involve sailing a ship from New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico and around Florida and Cuba, all the way up to New York and Philadelphia. Once while going around Cuba, pirates reportedly almost captured William's

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<sup>27</sup>Morrison Foster, *My Brother Stephen* (Indianapolis: Privately Printed, 1932) p. 10.

boat before a Spanish man of war rescued it. Since sailing upstream from New Orleans was virtually impossible before the invention of the steamboat, William Foster had to travel back to Pittsburgh by foot and horseback from either New Orleans, or Philadelphia.<sup>28</sup> This return trip could be dangerous, involving forays through the thickly wooded Pennsylvania terrain, which was filled with wild animals, Indians, insects, and malaria. Foster was known to travel with armed men through Natchez, Nashville, Maysville, and Wheeling to Pittsburgh.<sup>29</sup> At first the backs of strong horses were used to transport the goods over the mountains, but later the famous Conestoga wagons “were used drawn by six horses” each wearing a string of bells that made “eloquent music.”<sup>30</sup>

When Eliza agreed to marry the stocky built Scotch Irish William and settle with him in the land then known simply as the "West" or even the “Far West,” it was a momentous decision. She was leaving behind the refined civilization, not to mention friends and family from Philadelphia and Baltimore, to move across the mountains into little more than a log cabin village, which is what Pittsburgh was in 1807. The journey, besides the danger and discomfort attached to it, also involved a risk for Eliza of another kind. The couple were not married until they reached Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, a town situated in the Blue Mountains, a distance almost half way between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. Eliza had to trust that William Foster would in fact marry her. Surely Eliza must have read the very popular *History of Charlotte Temple*, a novel filled with dire moral truths and warnings to young women not to be deceived by confidence men. The fictional Charlotte Temple ran off with a smooth talking man, but the

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<sup>28</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 6.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6.

<sup>30</sup> Foster, *My Brother Stephen*, p. 11.

man did not marry her and instead abandoned her to die in childbirth.<sup>31</sup> Eliza Clayland Tomlinson had friends and relatives in Chambersburg and William B. Foster must have known the minister who married them.<sup>32</sup> The Reverend David Denny was somehow related to his boss and partner Ebenezer Denny of Pittsburgh. Three weeks and then some after starting out from Philadelphia, and two weeks after marrying in Chambersburg, the young couple was welcomed into the “hospitable mansion” in Pittsburgh belonging to William Foster’s partner.<sup>33</sup>

The gravitational pull toward the frontier or the West that drew Eliza and William B. Foster, and many other young people like them, began in the late eighteenth century. Historian Stephen Ambrose explained the phenomenon in very universal terms: “America’s westward thrust was inevitable.”<sup>34</sup> Lewis O. Saum, on the other hand, attempted a more precise explanation. The movement to the West, he said, was a “drift from things spiritual to things temporal.” More simply put, it was “lucre” that drew people in that direction. Saum believed the real reason for the westerly trek was that in the West a man on his own merits could establish a home and live comfortably.<sup>35</sup> While social and economic restrictions applied in the East, in the West a man could apply his muscle freely to the abundant natural resources of the area with the

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<sup>31</sup> Mrs. Rowson, *The History of Charlotte Temple: A Tale of Youth*. The book was originally printed in 1794 in Philadelphia, but it was reprinted in 1801, 1803, 1805, 1808, and 1811 by publishers in Hudson, New York, New Haven and Hartford, Connecticut, giving Eliza Foster ample opportunity to have secured a copy.

<sup>32</sup> Foster, *My Brother Stephen*, p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> Foster, “Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh,” Transcribed Manuscript, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> Stephen E. Ambrose, introduction to Bernard De Voto’s *The Year of Decision, 1846* (New York: Truman & Talley Books, St. Martin’s Griffin, 2000, 1942), p. Introduction xxi.

<sup>35</sup> Lewis O. Saum, *The Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America* (Westport, C.: Greenwood Press, 1980), pp. 201-203.

reward "a place of comfort" for himself and his family.<sup>36</sup> The East was growing progressively more crowded, its lands worn out and already claimed by the scions of the colonial settlers. But the West was fertile ground for the ambitious man, the place where "vitality and opportunity abounded." In addition to trade and business opportunities, land was plentiful in the West and speculation in land presented itself to William Barclay Foster as a particularly attractive and lucrative means of acquiring wealth.<sup>37</sup> This image of financial opportunity, more than anything, appears to have been the driving factor behind William Barclay Foster's migration to Pittsburgh.

Five years after arriving in the town at the junction of the three rivers, William Foster had achieved the western migrant's dream. The young couple were living in their own house at the corner of Sixth Street and Cherry Alley in the downtown section of the city, and Eliza Foster already had endured four of the ten births it was her womanly duty to suffer through. Eliza's first child was a girl born in 1808, who lived less than two months. The couple's next child, Charlotte Susanna Foster, was born in December of 1809. In January of 1812, Eliza gave birth to another daughter, named Ann Eliza after the first born girl who had died. In May of 1814, the Fosters' first son was born, named appropriately William Barclay Foster. He lived only ten months. About this time William Barclay Foster purchased a farm from Alexander Hill consisting of 121 acres of land a few miles northeast of downtown Pittsburgh. Almost immediately, he began to plan for the construction of a new, larger home for his family.<sup>38</sup>

Soon after the death of the baby William Foster, in March of 1815, the Fosters adopted a little boy about eight years of age. He was an illegitimate child of some family member, and

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>38</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 10, 14.



Foster biographer Ken Emerson has speculated that he may have been the illegitimate son of the senior William Foster. He had the same shimmering red gold hair that the eldest daughter Charlotte had. Eliza was a brunette, but William Barclay Foster was probably a fair haired Scotch Irishman.<sup>39</sup> In any event, the child was given the name of the dead Foster son, William Barclay Foster, Jr. and raised as Eliza and William's own child. After the Fosters moved into their new house, Eliza gave birth to six more children. Henry Baldwin, born in March of 1816; Henrietta Angelica, born in September of 1818; Dunning McNair born in January of 1821; Morrison, born in June of 1823; Stephen Collins, born July 4, 1826; and a boy named James Clayland, born in February of 1829.<sup>40</sup>

William Barclay Foster was ambitious in his youth, if somewhat visionary and romantic. When he purchased the 121 acre farm in 1814, he immediately set out to make it into a town of some sort. The land was bounded by the Allegheny River on the north, and according to Morrison Foster, "it was on this same piece of land that George Washington was cast on the night of December 28, 1753 and nearly frozen..." Washington fell off his raft into the Allegheny River while he was assessing the value of the French controlled lands at the forks for the Virginians. William B. Foster named the new town he laid out Lawrenceville, to honor the captain of the ship *Chesapeake* which had gone down during the War of 1812. Captain James Lawrence was the man who gave us the expression "Don't give up the ship!"<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Locks of hair of the Foster children are preserved in tissue at the Stephen Foster Memorial. Brother William's hair was the same strawberry blonde coloring of Charlottes, but William's hair had specks of grey.

<sup>40</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

William Barclay Foster sold 30 of the 121 acres to the United States government for \$12,000, some of which became known as the "Lawrenceville Burying Ground," and was used as a final resting place not only for the residents of Pittsburgh but for veterans of the 1812 War. But most of the land in Lawrenceville that Foster sold to the government was allotted to the building of the United States Arsenal. William Foster was understandably proud of the part he played in the development of the Arsenal, and he showed visiting dignitaries, including President Monroe, around its grounds when the latter came to Pittsburgh in 1816. Ann Eliza Foster, the second daughter, recalled "the day on which Pa rode out with President [-elect] Monroe, when he visited the Arsenal, when he must have been on the committee of reception....Pa was sitting in the midst of the uniforms and officials by which His Excellency was surrounded."<sup>42</sup>

### 2.3 THE WHITE COTTAGE

Sometime in 1814, William Foster began construction of the family home that would be known as the "White Cottage." The house was built on the farm he had purchased from Alexander Hill. Clearly, with a rapidly expanding family, William Foster needed the extra space that the new house would provide. It would also offer the family serenity and natural beauty, since the "White Cottage" was constructed on a "a beautiful knoll" facing the Allegheny River. Set on four acres in the middle of a "grove of forest trees," the house was situated on Penn Avenue (or Penn Street, as it was called then) at a time when the elites of Pittsburgh society lived on Penn

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<sup>42</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 10 Decades later, during the Civil War, the Arsenal supplied the United States with a good portion of the cannon, guns, and munitions used by the Union Army.

Avenue. The wooded terrain became in the summer a canvas of immense greenery, in the midst of which sat the “White Cottage” high enough to command “ a view up and down the river for miles.” The main building of the Foster homestead measured fifty feet across the front, and contained four rooms on one floor and a center hall. A two story wing of three or four rooms stretched to the east, and large coal burning fireplaces were built into the corners of each of the four rooms on the main floor.

Foster legend has it that Benjamin Henry Latrobe, the man who later designed the Capitol in Washington, designed the Foster house. Latrobe was originally hired to design the Arsenal in Lawrenceville. The famous architect stayed in Pittsburgh from 1812 to 1814 where he was involved in an unsuccessful partnership to design steamboats that would travel the Mississippi River. Unfortunately, his steamboat designs did not work properly on the western rivers, and he found himself in a financial bind. With his dreams of entrepreneurship gone amuck, and pressured by monetary needs, Latrobe probably welcomed the opportunity to design the Foster home “White Cottage.”<sup>43</sup>

The house’s design and reference to a “cottage” style reflected the early nineteenth century’s desire for simplicity and adulation of simple republican virtues. The White Cottage was larger on the inside than it looked on the outside, since it had two stories but on the outside gave the appearance of a single story cottage. This "cottage style" was very popular in the early part of the nineteenth century and during the Jacksonian era, when understatement and simplicity were preferred to the late nineteenth century’s ostentatious architecture that promoted the

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<sup>43</sup>John E. Semmes, *John H. B. Latrobe and his Times, 1803-1891* ( Baltimore: The Norman, Remington Co., 1917), p. 25.

owner's social status.<sup>44</sup> The house was painted a simple white with green shutters, and was in fact part of a small working farm. In the rear was a smokehouse, a cow barn, a stable for the horses, and pens for the pigs. The Fosters also had on their property a summer spring house that was cooled by running water from a stream overhead. Here fresh milk from the cows could be kept cool during the hot Pittsburgh summers and offered to thirsty visitors or sold to neighbors. Stephen Foster was born in the White Cottage.<sup>45</sup>

## 2.4 WILLIAM B. FOSTER AND THE BATTLE OF NEW ORLEANS

In the same year that William Foster began construction on the White Cottage, he became involved in a patriotic gesture which showed that William put his country before his family's personal security. Or perhaps William believed that the security of his family depended on the future security of the nation. However one interprets William's actions, the story of his contribution to Andrew Jackson's victory at the Battle of New Orleans reveals a great deal about the temperament of Stephen Foster's father. The senior William can be viewed as trusting, idealistic, and patriotic, or as a man who made impetuous impractical decisions. When America went to war with Great Britain, and Andrew Jackson promised America the glory of whipping the British, William Foster in a moment of patriotic exuberance risked his own money to

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<sup>44</sup> Mark Gilernter, *A History of American Architecture and Buildings in their Cultural and Technological Context* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1999)

<sup>45</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p.35.

personally equip and finance a supply ship to send down the Mississippi to Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans.<sup>46</sup>

In 1814, William B. Foster was deputy commissary of purchases at Pittsburgh, and was also performing the duties of issuing commissary of the United States. When the Army of the Northwest asked the government for supplies to continue the War of 1812, there was no money forthcoming: "But my father," wrote Morrison Foster, "with his own money and upon his own personal credit, procured the necessary supplies." After the British burned Washington and were intent on capturing New Orleans, "urgent orders came to Pittsburgh to send forward clothing, blankets, guns and ammunition to the relief of Jackson's army. But no money was sent with which to purchase them. Again my father extended his generous hand and himself procured the much needed supplies."<sup>47</sup>

William Foster loaded up the steamboat *Enterprise* with one thousand of everything that would be needed for the famous battle. He packed the ship with 1,000 camp kettles, 1,000 eighteen pound and 1,000 twelve pound cannon balls, 1,000 pairs of shoes, 500 blankets and wool overalls, etc. The fully loaded ship left Pittsburgh on December 1, 1814, and arrived at New Orleans fourteen days later. Captain Henry Miller Shreve captained the *Enterprise*, and as the ship sailed out of the Pittsburgh wharf, the captain reportedly called out, "I'll get there before the British, or sink this boat."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> The amount of money William put up is not known exactly, but one source in 1897 estimated about \$90,000, a number that seems too high. *Pennsylvania Railroad Men's News*, August 1897, Vol. 9, No. 8, p. 259

<sup>47</sup> Foster, *My Brother Stephen*, p. 17.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

Captain Shreve is important in the history of the navigation of the Western rivers. He not only captained the *Enterprise*, he also designed and built it, and the *Enterprise* was the first steamboat to travel from Pittsburgh down river to New Orleans and to successfully make the upstream trip all the way back to Pittsburgh. Nicholas Roosevelt, an ancestor of Teddy Roosevelt, had already built the steam driven *New Orleans*, but his boat, although constructed along Robert Fulton's design, could not make the return trip to Pittsburgh from New Orleans. That was in January of 1812. Henry Miller Shreve took advantage of Roosevelt's failure, and immediately began construction of the *Enterprise*, using a superior design and a high pressured steam engine that was manufactured in the Pittsburgh plant owned by George Evans, the son of Eliza Foster's famous uncle.<sup>49</sup>

After the British burned the Capitol in Washington and bombarded Baltimore, John Henry Shreve wanted to get supplies to Andrew Jackson in a hurry. In late November, on William Foster's credit and money advances, the *Enterprise* was loaded "with munitions from the North Side Army Ordnance." Three keel boats, which traveled at a much slower pace than the *Enterprise*, had already departed from Pittsburgh in late September laden with war materials headed for New Orleans, but they had not yet reached their destination. At forty-five tons, Shreve's boat the *Enterprise* was about half the size of a barge boat, but it quickly "made up in speed what it lacked in size" and arrived in New Orleans by December 15, overtaking the keelboats along the way.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>Edith S. McCall, *Conquering the Rivers, Henry Miller Shreve and the Navigation of America's Inland Waterways* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), pp. 87-97.

<sup>50</sup>Florence L. Dorsey, *Master of the Mississippi, Henry Shreve and the Conquest of the Mississippi* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1941) pp. 87-91.

Once in New Orleans, Jackson commandeered the *Enterprise* for military service, using it “mainly to transport troops and supplies to various entrenchments.” Captain Shreve unloaded his cargo in New Orleans, then went back up the Mississippi to pick up more munitions from the slower traveling keelboats. He also used his boat the *Enterprise* to transport some women and children out of harm’s way before the famous battle began, but he “returned again, and was engaged in the battle of the 8th of January, serving at the sixth gun of the American Batteries.”<sup>51</sup> Thus Captain Shreve himself reportedly took part in the famous Battle of New Orleans, which proved to be a glorious day for the Americans and one of humiliation, defeat, and great loss of life for the British.<sup>52</sup>

William B. Foster became personally indebted for the ship’s cargo to New Orleans because the Pittsburgh manufacturers of army supplies refused to accept William Foster's official signature as commissary. Having no confidence in the government's ability or willingness to pay them back, they insisted on personal notes from Foster “which the distracted commissary immediately gave them.” After the war had ended, Washington settled the claim, but left Foster \$2,704.90 short. “Congress refused to approve certain sums advanced, contending that Mr. Foster had paid for the goods with his own notes on his own responsibility and that reimbursing him for losses sustained by reason of the depreciation of treasury notes would establish a dangerous precedent.”<sup>53</sup> Judge Walker of the U.S. Court of Pittsburgh in 1823 heard the case and gave his opinion: “Terminate as this cause may [be] Mr. Foster has established for himself a character for zeal, patriotism, generosity, and fidelity which cannot be forgotten; and has placed

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<sup>51</sup> Foster, *My Brother Stephen*, p. 18

<sup>52</sup>Edith S. McCall, *Conquering the Rivers, Henry Miller Shreve and the Navigation of America’s Inland Waterways* ( Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), pp. 117-121.

<sup>53</sup> Evelyn Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 8.

a laurel on his brow that will never fade." The Jury turned a verdict in favor of William B. Foster but the judgment was never paid, nor would the "laurel on his brow" pay the family's ever mounting debts.<sup>54</sup>

## 2.5 SOCIAL STATUS IN PIONEER PITTSBURGH

Eliza Foster kept a journal, "Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh" in which she related the details of her early life in Pittsburgh, when the Fosters associated with the first families of the pioneer city. She wrote the journal in bits and pieces, mostly from memory many years after the family descended from the high ranks of their social order. Vignettes recounted in her journal focused heavily on the issue of social status, and Eliza Foster for much of her life struggled to maintain and prove the family's status through education, cultural achievements, and etiquette. She managed to pass on to her children an image of an elite past, which was far superior to the family's present circumstances. At the same time, Eliza through her reminiscences tried to establish evidence that the Fosters' social status existed independently of the family's money.

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, men and women of the West were characterized as elites and first families for more reasons than their wealth. Later towards the middle of the nineteenth-century, status was accounted for more by the money one had than intrinsic moral worth, accomplishments, or bloodlines. We know from Eliza Foster's journal that the Fosters in the first decades of the century visited and dined with the leading families of their new city, people whose names today stand out on the street signs of downtown Pittsburgh,

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<sup>54</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 121.



or show up in the names of townships and counties. Eliza Foster in her journal explained the source of the power of these special people in the community: "Why did this people hold the reins of custom in their hands and extend their influence to new comers? Because they were a consolidated, federal voice, the O'Haras, the Butlers, the Dennys, the Collins's , the Nevilles, the Ormsby's, the Wilkins's, the Kirkpatrick's, the Addison's, the Craigs, etc. were one voice in state affairs and gave the same tone to every opinion. The ignorant stranger that differed from them, after he had had time to learn their code, need never appear in their presence. There was none to make them afraid." <sup>55</sup>

In these early years, the elites of a community dominated, resting their strength in the similarity of their backgrounds and ideas, and in the society's commitment to according deference to their social betters. Elitism in the pioneer western areas of the United States was a different matter from Eastern elite status. Although many had connections with the elites of the East, these men of the West were often first generation self-made men, tough fighters who had conquered, not inherited, their wealth and status. They faced and defied the woodlands, the Indians, and virtually anyone who stood in the way of their personal success. Once they had established themselves in the upper classes of their society, they fought anyone who threatened to jeopardize their positions.

The Whiskey Rebellion which occurred in the last decade of the eighteenth century in western Pennsylvania showed that there was another class of men which was antagonistic to these elites. Perhaps encouraged by the memory of their ancestors who would not pay a tax on

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<sup>55</sup> Foster, "Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh," transcribed manuscript, pp. 21, 25. Pittsburghers did not want the mettlesome New Englanders telling them how to live. Eliza referred to Charles Shaler, a New Englander from the "land of steady habits" who settled in Pittsburgh. He was a young Yale educated lawyer from Connecticut. He apparently took the "time to learn their code" because Shaler Township is named for him.

tea, these men rioted, destroyed, and pillaged rather than pay an excise tax on their homemade whiskey. They burned down the home of the refined and polished Nevilles, forcing them to rebuild on an island in the Ohio River, today Neville's Island. But these elites were tough, fighting men themselves. They controlled the rougher classes in the early years, and were able to quell the Whiskey insurrection at Braddock's Field without engaging the troops that President Washington had ordered from the East to put them down.<sup>56</sup>

Eliza and William Foster at one time belonged to this coterie of early Pittsburgh elites, independent men and women who through their own efforts had managed to attain not only the wealth, but the polish and credentials of the upper classes. They shared dinners, picnics,

weddings and funerals, but this select group of first families was united in many ways. They consisted of merchants, landowners, and men with military standing. Most made money in real estate speculations, or they were professionals, with many lawyers among them who were kept busy handling questionable land titles. The first families of Pittsburgh were also united by blood and marriage. The Nevilles married the Craigs, the O'Haras married the Dennys, etc. Ebenezer Denny's wife was Nancy Wilkins of the famous Judge Wilkins family. The O'Haras married Croghans and Carsons. Presley Neville, who entertained Lafayette at his house in Pittsburgh at the corner of Water Street and Ferry, married Nancy Morgan with whom he had eleven children.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>George Thornton Fleming, *History of Pittsburgh and Environs, Vol. II* (New York and Chicago: American Historical Society, 1922) pp. 38-41. Lee pardoned the men involved in the insurrection, but the arrival of the troops had shown the insurrectionists that the new American republic was no "experiment in self-government."

<sup>57</sup> Morgan Neville, the son of Presley Neville and Nancy Morgan wrote what is today considered a folktale of the Midwest, *Mike Fink, Last of the Boatmen*, in 1829.

Whether they had large or small families, the elites congregated into certain neighborhoods. Early on they lived on Water Street, but when that area was taken over by manufacturing, they moved to Penn Street. The Wilkins, for instance, were neighbors only "some squares" away from the Dennys. James O'Hara, the wealthiest businessman in Pittsburgh, built his house "on the bank of the Allegheny River," on sixty acres of orchard which afforded a full view of both the Allegheny and the Ohio Rivers.<sup>58</sup> Another neighbor was John Woods, the son of Colonel George Woods, the surveyor who made the city plan of Pittsburgh. John Woods was an attorney who handled the sale of the lands belonging to the heirs of William Penn. John Woods and his wife Theodosia Higbee of New Jersey "were patterns to society and lived and died honored and regretted"<sup>59</sup> in a large brick mansion in the center of the square fronting on Penn Street bounded by Tenth Street and the Allegheny River. "There were orchards and grassy slopes, hoary old trees, shrubbery and flower gardens, with quarters for the colored servants."<sup>60</sup>

Historian Scott C. Martin has postulated three classes of men and women for nineteenth century southwestern Pennsylvania: an upper class, a middle class, and a working class. It would seem that the Fosters belonged to the upper classes of Pittsburgh society during the first quarter of the nineteenth century, although subsequently their status began to slide down towards the level of the middle classes. In early nineteenth century Pittsburgh, according to Martin, "Wealth was a crucial but not the only factor in determining upper class membership in Southwestern Pennsylvania." The upper class "refers to large landowners, prominent members of

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<sup>58</sup>Annie Clark Miller, from Mary Dewees' journal, reprinted in *Chronicles of Families, Houses, and Estates of Pittsburgh*, p. 14.

<sup>59</sup>Eliza Clayland Foster, "Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh," p. 30.

<sup>60</sup>Annie Clark Miller, *Chronicles of Families, Houses, and Estates of Pittsburgh and its Environs*, p. 30.

the learned professions, owners of substantial commercial enterprises, and influential politicians.” The Fosters had two of these four qualifications. They were neither professional men nor owners of a large commercial enterprise. But William B. Foster, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, was a fairly large landowner, and he was a politician, serving as a state representative and in later years as mayor of Allegheny City. Martin also postulated that most members of the patrician class had descended from or been closely associated with the region’s early settlers.<sup>61</sup> This qualification applied to William B. Foster who was an original pioneer settler himself whose business partners were Ebenezer Denny, the first mayor of Pittsburgh, and Anthony Beelen, another old time settler.

Another criterion for membership in Pittsburgh’s elite social circles was family descent from a Revolutionary War officer, a credential the Fosters could also claim. The travel writer Fortescue Cuming insisted the first families of Pittsburgh used wealth to compensate for their lack of “descent, and all the virtues and accomplishments.”<sup>62</sup> Yet Cuming was not correct when he said Pittsburghers could not trace their ancestors to the second generation. The first families of Pittsburgh had to be “related to a revolutionary officer” to claim patrician status, and this was one criterion that could not be bought. Samuel Jones, who wrote *Pittsburgh in the Year 1826*, acknowledged the importance of having a revolutionary war veteran as an ancestor, but he believed wealth in land could compensate for the absence of an ancestor who had served in the war. “Wealth was held in high honor and is most potent in bringing down the hills and filling up

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<sup>61</sup>Scott C. Martin, *Killing Time, Leisure and Culture in Southwestern Pennsylvania, 1800-1850*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995) p. 103.

<sup>62</sup>Scott C. Martin, *Ibid.*, p. 107 quoted from Fortescue Cuming, “Sketches of a Tour” in Thwaites, ed., *Western Travels IV*, p. 86.  
Revolutionary War ancestors: Many of the elite pioneer families of Pittsburgh not only had ancestors who served in the war, but many served directly under George Washington.

the valleys of etiquette” in the new city, wrote Jones. Pittsburghers could compensate for their “deficiency” in Revolutionary ancestry, by “unrol[ing] their deeds, or those of their ancestors, (not in arms, but) containing their titles---to boundless tracks of land in the country adjacent to, or to lots in town, with the appurtenances....”<sup>63</sup>

William Foster, of course, could roll out the title to his lots in town, but he did not have to. Both William and Eliza had relatives who served in the Revolutionary War, in some cases directly under the command of George Washington. William's father James Foster was part of a band of Scotch-Irish fighters called the Liberty Company of Londonderry Volunteers. James was listed as a private in the Tenth Pennsylvania Regiment, but later joined a Virginia regiment and was present at the siege of Yorktown and the surrender of Cornwallis. Another Foster brother James graduated from the College of New Jersey, later known as Princeton, in 1764 and while he served as Pastor of the Presbyterian Congregation, he recruited men for Washington’s Continental Army. Eliza Clayland Tomlinson claimed that two of her Clayland uncles had died in service to their new country and a third was praised personally by George Washington for his conduct at the Battle of Brandywine.<sup>64</sup>

Henry Marie Brackenridge, an important pioneer settler in Pittsburgh, explained the phenomenon of how members of the patrician class of Pittsburgh were usually related to Revolutionary War officers, who brought “refinement” and “manners” to the pioneer city: “It so happened,” wrote Brackenridge, “that after the Revolutionary War, a number of families of the first respectability, principally officers of the army, were attracted to this spot [Pittsburgh]

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<sup>63</sup>Scott C. Martin, *Killing Time*, pp. 106-108, quoted from *Pittsburgh in the Year 1826* by Samuel Jones.

<sup>64</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles of Stephen Foster’s Family*, pp. 2-4.

impressing on the area, a degree of refinement, elegance of manners and polished society unusual on the extreme frontier.”<sup>65</sup>

Eliza and William Foster were members of that special first generation of Americans who felt not only great reverence for their ancestors’ achievements as founders of a great republic but a sense of inferiority as well at their own, less illustrious achievements.<sup>66</sup> To make up for their feelings of inferiority, and to claim equality to their more polished and established eastern brethren, these sons and daughters of the Revolutionary generation established their own noble lineage, based on Revolutionary War veteran ancestry, and were driven to amass as much land as possible whenever they could, which they bought on credit and often risked to foreclosure during the uncertain cycles of the antebellum economy. The conclusion drawn by Scott C. Martin seems accurate, then, that “wealth was crucial, but not the only factor” in determining upper class membership in Southwestern Pennsylvania.

Martin also pointed out that the fashion in which one spent his leisure time was (and still is) one way of demarcating social class. Eliza Foster’s journal described the leisure activities of Pittsburgh’s pioneer elites in the first decades of the nineteenth century, giving guidelines for confirmation of status. "Parties, theatricals, and balls were the order of the day," Eliza noted of the activities of these first families. The officers and their ladies from the Arsenal often put on amateur theatrical performances, for which they rehearsed in the White Cottage. The junior gentlemen took the parts of the ladies. Tickets were free, it seems, but given out selectively. No strangers were invited to the plays, nor was money exchanged, so that the entertainment was not

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<sup>65</sup> Martin, *Killing Time*, p. 103.

<sup>66</sup>Joyce Oldham Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: the First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge, Ma.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000)

yet commercial. "We shall have no strangers present. All the lookers on will be our own set, unless some of us may have visitors who of course will attend if they wish," said Morgan Neville. Neville and Wilkins participated in the plays, as did Captain Swearingen and Ebenezer Denny. "Our little borough has so few amusements that we have fallen upon this not only as a source of amusement but also of improvement," explained Morgan Neville. Thus, "many evenings were made enjoyable with a little wine and a great deal of nonsense."<sup>67</sup> Another evening was made "enjoyable" when the Fosters held a party at their boat house, and members of the orchestra traveled by barge regaling themselves and anyone within earshot with the sounds of their music.<sup>68</sup>

One particularly pleasant summer pastime involved boarding the steam propelled *Shamrock* in downtown Pittsburgh, then sailing north on the Allegheny River to celebrate the Fourth of July at Pine Creek, a "beautiful farm belonging to John Wilkins," one of Pittsburgh's pioneer elites. The members of the sailing party spent the patriotic day in 1818 at the Wilkins' "farm," feasting and dancing to music at their splendid "corn party." The evening before, July 3rd, the elites gave a party at the Arsenal, which was attended by Eliza's uncle, Major Clayland, a Revolutionary War veteran from the Battle of Brandywine who was "treated with so much friendship by General Washington." The next day, on the Fourth, the *Shamrock* "lay in waiting full of gaily and fashionably dressed ladies and gentlemen." One guest on the boat was "a fair beauty of that day," a Miss Fulton, of the steamboat reputation.<sup>69</sup> When the boat reached Pine

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<sup>67</sup>Foster, "Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh," pp. 29-35.

<sup>68</sup>*Pittsburgh Gazette*, July 5, 1818.

<sup>69</sup> Mary Ann Fulton (1789-1852) married Neville B. Craig of Pittsburgh and had ten children.

Creek, the ladies and gentlemen aboard disembarked for a day's entertainment of alfresco dining and dancing under the shade of "many an embowering pine tree:"

A long narrow table made of rough boards but covered with snow white linen damask, under many an embowering pine tree whose thick and deep green foliage darkened the spot with a cool shade, informed the party that this was the place to stop. The ladies were handed to the shore. A dressing room made of limbs topped from large trees was prepared, ready for their reception. In a short time, the whole company assembled together. At one the company dined on cold ham, cold tongue, broiled chicken, plenty of sweet corn, and cold pies, custards and tarts and sweetmeats. After a merry dinner, the gentlemen led the ladies to a level shade where they danced to the delightful music of the band attached to Colonel Constance's regiment.<sup>70</sup>

Another party containing many of the resident elites was a dinner given at the home of Eliza's girlhood friend Sarah Collins, the mother of the boy after whom Stephen Collins Foster was named. Mrs. Collins was married to "a leading lawyer who resided in the most public part of town." Thomas Collins "had been educated in the best circles of a flourishing eastern city." Sarah Lowry was the "daughter of a wealthy land and slave holder of Maryland." Like Eliza herself, Sarah met her future husband while she was visiting her aunt. Sarah had "refused many advantageous offers of marriage" before she met and accepted the proposal from the widower Thomas Collins, who was one of Pittsburgh's first four lawyers. Sarah was Thomas' second wife. The Collins family lived in Lawrenceville, near the Fosters. The great parlor of their home showcased a grand harp in its bay window, demonstrating that the Collins' women were musical. The parlor also contained portraits of the four Collins daughters, painted by the famous artist Sully, who had visited Pittsburgh in the early part of the nineteenth century. Along side of the Sully portraits hung a painting of Napoleon by the French artist David, brought from Paris, and portraits of Thomas Jefferson and General Lafayette. When the famous French general visited

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<sup>70</sup> Foster, "Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh," pp. 33-35.



Pittsburgh in 1825, the Collins daughters dressed in their finest and attended a ball in his honor.<sup>71</sup>

Mrs. Addison, a Scotch lady, who was the widow of a Superior Court Judge, was seated to the right of Mrs. Collins at the dinner table. Although Eliza Foster informed us that Judge Addison "did not leave them [his family] rich, but comfortable," the Addisons continued to associate with Pittsburgh's elites and did not lose their social clout. The fifty-five year old Mrs. Addison was "active in all the virtues of benevolence," and she kept her daughters similarly employed in charitable acts for the sick or the needy. To the left of Mrs. Collins sat the matronly widow Mrs. Butler whose husband, General Richard Butler, had been killed by the Indians when General St. Clair attempted unsuccessfully to take over the Ohio Valley in 1791. Also at the table was Catherine Stevenson Wilkins, "a lady whose establishment was very large, having ten children at home."<sup>72</sup> Her husband John Wilkins was the brother of Judge William Wilkins who in 1839 would build "Homewood," the most fashionable estate in Pittsburgh. The mansion was built in the Greco-Colonial style on 650 acres of pristine land just north of where today is located the expansive Homewood Cemetery. Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, Andrew Jackson, and John Tyler, mostly men of Southern sympathies, were entertained at "Homewood" before it was razed in 1922.

In another vignette set down in her journal, Eliza Foster turned to the subject of social intermixing, wherein she warned of the dangers that are present whenever a member of the elites threatened to move outside of his set, or rather, when the elite became involved with a person

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<sup>71</sup>Foster, "Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh," pp. 46-50.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36-46. Information on the birth, death and marriages of these first families of Pittsburgh comes from the death, marriage, and genealogical records held at the Pennsylvania Room, Carnegie Public Library, Oakland, Pittsburgh.

even of the middle class. This story concerned the son of the United States Senator James Ross, whose memory is commemorated in downtown Pittsburgh's Ross Street and in Ross Township. The Senator had a young handsome son named George Ross, aged about twenty-five. He was sent away for several years to learn about the world and garner a cosmopolitan education. But there is also the implication in the story that he was sent away to forget about a young girl who was not of his "set."

The young girl George Ross was meant to forget was "Evelyn" Watson. The girl's aunt Elizabeth Watson was married to the Reverend John Black, pastor of the First Reformed Presbyterian Church of Pittsburgh for nearly fifty years, from 1800 to 1849. It is difficult to see on what grounds the Senator would have objected to "Evelyn," as she claimed that her father's house was as nice as the Ross's and the Reverend Black certainly had the credentials. He had three sons, a doctor, a lawyer, and a preacher. Eliza Foster continued her story, with two women discussing whether or not George and Evelyn had gotten engaged, and whether it was possible for a marriage to be successful when the partners came from different social circles. The generation of Eliza Foster's parents believed in the established hierarchies of bloodlines, but already the new idea of the self made man and a more flexible social order was being suggested. Eliza believed the circles could be breached if the young woman received the proper education:

"As two elderly ladies left the door, one said to the other, "Do you think....that Mr. George Ross ever engaged himself to Evelyn Watson?"

"No," said [the other lady]. "She never said he did. Not but that she was as well to live as he, but there are situations that all people hold in society, despite the equality of our republican institutions, called rank or grade, and most generally persons get along better when united to or associating with those who rank with them."

"Now Evelyn Watson could have been quite happy if her affections had inclined towards some respectable young gentleman of her own circle. There ought to be no difference in rank in this country," said Mrs. Derham[ the first lady.]

"Nor is there legally," said the other, "it is only in the old world, that rank means any thing before the law. Here the people are in the habit of saying set or circle, because it continually happens that a certain number of persons are frequently thrown together, from the fact of their views of life or religion being somewhat similar. After sometime their habits are the same; hence they form for themselves a circle, so that there are already several circles in this small town."

"Well, Mr. Watson was well off and could afford to do well by Evelyn. But his views being formed to suit his own set, he did not give Evelyn the kind of training that would suit the circle in which George Ross moved. Thus there are often objections to marriages by one party or the other.....Evelyn Watson was a fine little girl, a pious girl, and besides was very pretty, indeed remarkably so."

"For which reason," remarked the other lady, "she was a greater ornament to her own set, where she could shine. But put her all at once in another set and she would be quite unhappy, and might appear to a great disadvantage, though she was in reality as good as the best in the best set."

"Her father was at fault; he should have sent her far away to school...But that did not suit his views. Some old gentlemen think it is the ruin of a young girl to send her to boarding school."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Foster, "Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh," pp. 53-54.

The strange tale continued. George Ross returned to Pittsburgh and on his way home, stopped at an inn run by a Mr. Chalfant. In his hurry to get home, he decided to take a short cut: "I believe I will not go up to the bridge, but will ford the creek [Turtle Creek] and go home by the river road." His father, Senator Ross, warned him not to, "as the water is high and the ice running. It may be a little farther to go by the bridge, but what of that, we can make home by bed time."

Just before George set out to Turtle Creek, he asked Chalfant for news of the town, and Chalfant hesitatingly informed him "the day I was in they were burying Squire Watson's pretty daughter." Upon learning of the death of Evelyn, George, blinded by grief, bounded out of Chalfant's and hurried to Turtle Creek, which he attempted to ford sitting on his black horse. He was so distraught that he did not pay heed to the creek's "swollen torrent rushing so fiercely through the arches of the bridge." Soon he was overcome by the rising waters, and although Chalfant threw ropes to him, it was to no avail.<sup>74</sup> George Ross drowned in Turtle Creek on February 10, 1814.

It was possible to substantiate the facts behind vignettes such as this one that Eliza Foster described in her journal. Evidence found in birth and death records, and in old newspapers on microfiche confirmed the stories in each of Eliza's "sketches". I located the following obituary in the February 16, 1814 *Mercury*:

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<sup>74</sup> Foster, "Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh," pp. 55-65.

## MELANCHOLY

Drowned, on Thursday last, in attempting to ride Turtle Creek, on the lower road, Mr. George W. Ross, eldest son of James Ross, esq. of this place. This unfortunate young gentleman had been absent from home for some months, and on the near prospect of being re-united to his family and friends, was arrested by the chilling hand of death. On Sunday, his remains were attended to the grave by a large concourse of relatives and friends.<sup>75</sup>

Whether George died because he was careless in his grieving state is not known. But clearly Eliza had a moral to her story. Evelyn Watson did not belong to the same circle that George Ross came from, and although the circles often overlapped, members of different circles were not meant to intermarry. The upper and middle classes mingled, of course, but the upper classes feared their status would be compromised if the middle class climbed too high. The upper classes, according to historian Scott Martin, developed an “almost morbid interest in genealogy and family lineage [Revolutionary War veteran status] as determinants of gentility and prestige” in order to exclude those of “inferior bloodlines” from the social circle.<sup>76</sup>

Eliza Foster believed the portals to the established families could be breached if the young lady acquired the proper education and accomplishments. It was not a matter simply of money, because Eliza Foster suggested that Evelyn Watson’s father had money enough. Eliza thought that Watson’s father should have sent her away to boarding school to get “the kind of training that would suit the circle.” What the young lady was missing, and what perhaps boarding school could have provided, was gentility through accomplishments.

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<sup>75</sup>*Mercury*, February 16, 1814. Pennsylvania Room, Carnegie Public Library, Oakland, Pittsburgh.

<sup>76</sup>Scott C. Martin, *Killing Time*, p. 106.

## 2.6 EDUCATING THE FOSTER DAUGHTERS

Eliza definitely believed in educating her own daughters in the best manner possible, to acquire the badge of good breeding that accomplishments and schooling in the East could offer. Eliza Foster felt that it was her responsibility, in any way that she could, to bring the culture of eastern cities like Baltimore or Philadelphia to her new city in the West. (In fact, Pittsburgh would model itself in many ways after its older sister city Philadelphia.) If the daughters of the East participated in the genteel culture of music, pianos, and feminine accomplishments, Eliza would see to it that her daughters did, too. According to niece Morneweck, "Eliza Foster's ambition for her daughters was that they should have the advantages of an education in the aristocratic tradition in which she herself had been brought up."<sup>77</sup> Daughters Charlotte and Ann Eliza received training in music, dancing, and French at a local school run by a Mrs. Brevost. This woman was the daughter of a French gentleman who had lost his money and land after the defeat of Napoleon, and escaped to America to avoid the retaliation of the Bourbons. The Brevost school was a select "Boarding and Day School for Young Ladies on Second Street, between Market and Wood Streets," in downtown Pittsburgh.<sup>78</sup>

An important personage in the history of music in early Pittsburgh was William Evens, who taught music at Mrs. Brevost's and was at one time a teacher of Charlotte Foster. A native of England, he tried several cities in America before he moved from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh in 1811. The journey took twenty days by wagon, which was very similar to Eliza Foster's journey four years earlier. He opened his first school in "Pennsylvania's smokehouse" at the corner of

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<sup>77</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 29.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

First and Wood Street and quickly acquired seventy-five pupils. He became Pittsburgh's foremost teacher and remained in the area for thirty years. He charged about \$1.50 per quarter per student, although sometimes he doubled his price to \$3.00 per quarter. Primarily a voice teacher, he taught sacred anthems and hymns, but he also taught a variety of small instruments. By 1826, Evens was teaching wind and bowed instruments, writing organ music, and running music schools all over the city. In 1830, he moved to Allegheny Town, on the north side of the Allegheny River, where, like other musicians of his day, he supplemented his income working at a trade, in his case, as a carpenter. When finances got tough he sold his books of the great composers' sonatas and oratorios at auction, but before doing so he copied them by hand, using quarts of homemade ink. He reportedly had in his home "a stack of music six and one-half feet high." He died in 1854 in Pittsburgh when an epidemic of cholera hit the city.<sup>79</sup>

In 1821 Eliza Foster sent her oldest daughter Charlotte to a convent school on the other side of the Allegheny Mountains in Emmitsburg, Maryland. Religious denominations meant little to the Fosters as she sent Charlotte to St. Joseph's Academy. The school had been founded by the "saintly Elizabeth Seton whose memory is revered by devout American Catholics to this day," according to Morneweck who wrote in the 1930s.<sup>80</sup> Seton died several months before Charlotte entered the school. Eliza Foster may have been acquainted with the Catholic headmistress when she, Eliza, was a young girl living in Baltimore, since Seton conducted a parochial school in that city during the first years of the nineteenth century. Maryland, it should be remembered, had been established as a colony where Catholics could practice their religion and have all the civil and political rights of non-Catholics, so it should not be surprising that

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<sup>79</sup> Edward G. Baynham, *A History of Pittsburgh Music 1758-1958*, pp. 14-17.

<sup>80</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 33.

Elizabeth Seton ran a successful Catholic school for girls.<sup>81</sup> Charlotte was not quite twelve years old when she left home to board at St. Joseph's, and her letters show that she was homesick. "I rise early, and I sometimes fancy myself at home with sister Ann Eliza, skipping along the Lane...." wrote Charlotte in a letter to her mother, but she was determined to do well and acquire the "accomplishments" that Eliza wanted her daughter to be able to display.<sup>82</sup>

Having "accomplishments" conferred social status, since it was a sign that a nineteenth century girl had received the proper education and upbringing. The properly educated young lady of the middle or upper class could play the piano and sing; had the ability to speak, read and write French; and could embroider and paint. Through public demonstrations of such conspicuous talents or "accomplishments," the young lady would provide proof of her own and her family's gentility and social status. Although Charlotte and Anne Eliza, the two older daughters, were schooled in the genteel arts, Henrietta, the youngest of the girls, came of age when the Fosters no longer had the money to support the ornamental education that was prized by the upwardly mobile families of the middle class.

Some women of Eliza Foster's generation did not approve of all the attention given to accomplishments. They considered the girls who came of age during the war of 1812 and who devoted too much attention to accomplishments lazy and spoiled. The widowed Mrs. Butler, the woman at Mrs. Collins' dinner party, speculated that the difficulty in obtaining ready made consumer goods from Europe as a result of the War of 1812 would prove too strenuous a burden for the present generation of young ladies: "It is too bad. We shall have to do without a great

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<sup>81</sup>Leonard Feeney, *Mother Seton: Saint Elizabeth of New York (1774-1821)*, (Cambridge: Ravengate Press, 1975)

<sup>82</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 35, quoted from Charlotte's letter to Eliza Foster.



many fine things now, or pay pretty dearly for them, and our young ladies have been brought up in such idle habits, there will be no getting them to knitting and spinning." Another friend of Eliza replied, "I should like to see Mrs. Neville's or Mrs. Wilkins pretty daughters at the spinning wheel." <sup>83</sup> The "idle habits" included the hours devoted to the acquisition of artistic and musical accomplishments. Women of Eliza Foster's generation, many of whom were the wives of the pioneer settlers of the West, were used to hard work. Their middle or upper class daughters, like Charlotte and Ann Eliza Foster who spent their time practicing the piano or reading French, could rest assured that their acquired artistic skills would make them models of genteel society and beacons of light in a city whose reputation was far from cosmopolitan.

Although slavery was outlawed in Pittsburgh, bound servants were employed, thereby relieving the young Foster girls and other girls of the upper or middle classes of hard work around the house. The Fosters had bound servants in their house, both black and white. Tom Hunter was a white bound servant born at the White Cottage on September 14, 1818. His birth was carefully noted in the Foster Bible just as the births of the Foster children were. Tom's father had been a soldier at the Arsenal and his mother was a domestic servant for the Fosters. Shortly before Tom was born his father "Private Hunter," in a fit of rage or madness, threw his wife down the stairs, knocking her unconscious. Believing that he had caused the death of the young pregnant woman, Private Hunter rushed down to the bank of the Allegheny River and drowned himself. The young woman recovered and gave birth to Tom who was brought up at the White Cottage. When Tom was sick, Eliza Foster nursed him, but southern plantation mistresses did the same thing for their sick slaves. Tom may not have been very happy with his position because at

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<sup>83</sup> Foster, "Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh," p. 56.

the age of sixteen he set out on his own, some believe to the West, and was never heard from again.<sup>84</sup>

The other bound servant was Olivia Pise, known to the family as "Lieve", a girl of mixed African and European ancestry who allegedly played a prominent role in Stephen Foster's musical development. She was the mulatto daughter of a Frenchman who escaped from the West Indies, perhaps during the Haitian Revolution. The older children remembered "Lieve," as Olivia was frequently called, bringing cold milk from the ice house to serve guests, but Morrison Foster claimed in his biography of his brother Stephen that Olivia served a more important function. The West Indian girl was responsible for bringing the young future composer to her church of the "shouting colored folk," where she introduced Stephen Foster to melodic motifs that he later incorporated into two of his plantation songs. When Stephen was a teenager, the Fosters had yet another "colored" servant in their employ, a bound girl named Kitty, whose remaining three years of servitude were given as a gift to Eliza by her friend Sarah Collins. Kitty is not believed to have made as much of an impression on the young Stephen as the influential Olivia Pise, but it is possible, because Stephen Foster was older when Kitty was with the family, that her influence was more important than the family has acknowledged.

The idea of bound servants, black or white, is more offensive to us today than it was to antebellum Westerners. When William B. Foster was in dire financial straits, he almost "bound" his own sixteen year old son Morrison to Cadwallader Evans, the son of Eliza's famous uncle Evans of steam engine fame. Cadwallader Evans had a very successful steam engine factory in Pittsburgh where he built the engines that were used to power the steamboats. Morrison did work for Evans, who taught him "to be an accountant, and also....instruct him in mathematics" but

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<sup>84</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles of Stephen Foster's Family*, p. 35.

Evans to his credit refused to have Morrison on the terms of a bound indenture. Evans “says he won’t have him bound; if he does not wish to stay and be useful without an indenture, he is not worth having.”<sup>85</sup>

Ann Eliza, the Foster daughter a few years younger than Charlotte, was not sent away to a boarding school. In 1822, her parents were thinking about sending her to Troy, New York, where Emma H. Willard conducted a famous “seminary for young ladies.” Willard’s Female Seminary had earned a reputation for being academically demanding, far more so than other schools for girls, since it offered “science courses more advanced than those available at some colleges for men.” Besides, Emma Willard was a scholar in her own right. She was the first woman to write an American history text, *The Republic of America*, which was praised by Lafayette and Daniel Webster. In spite of Willard’s extraordinary reputation, Eliza Foster decided that Ann Eliza was “too timid and shy to go far away from home.”<sup>86</sup> She was only ten years of age, but there may have been other reasons for the decision to keep Ann Eliza close to home, such as finances.

Instead of leaving home, Ann Eliza attended a religious school conducted by the Reverend John H. Hopkins at his home in Allegheny, where the Fosters were also living. This was the Episcopal Institute, where young men could be trained for the ministry and young religiously inclined ladies like Ann Eliza could also obtain a pious education. Another student at the school was Edward Buchanan, whose older brother James would become President of the United States in 1857. Edward and Ann Eliza soon developed a warm and affectionate

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<sup>85</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 168.

<sup>86</sup>Norma R. Fryatt, *Sarah Josepha Hale, the Life and Times of a Nineteenth Century Career Woman* (New York: Hawthorne Books, 1973) p. 24.  
Mornweck, *Chronicles*, p. 35.

relationship, and when they married in 1833, the quiet Ann Eliza brought to the Fosters a powerful, well connected brother-in-law and an influential political alliance.<sup>87</sup>

## 2.7 FORECLOSURE AND THE DEPRESSION OF 1819

Eliza Foster's genteel lifestyle, wherein her daughters were trained in the feminine accomplishments, and her home was a source of pride and serene happiness, came swiftly and abruptly to an end. According to Morneweck, "early in the year 1826," the year of Stephen Foster's birth, "William B. Foster came to the end of his resources." The Bank of the United States, which held mortgages on Foster's property, foreclosed on all of the property in the southern half of Lawrenceville. Foster was able to save several parcels of land near the Arsenal, but the land near and including the plot on which White Cottage was built was foreclosed. William Foster and his family were allowed to remain in the house "for almost two years longer" while they rented the house from the bank. The exact date of the foreclosure is not known nor is it known when the family had to move out of their "beloved White Cottage." The first year that finds them at a new address is 1830, when they moved into a rented establishment on Water Street in downtown Pittsburgh. The beautiful house on the four acres passed into the hands of Malcolm Leech, "a prosperous wholesale grocer of Pittsburgh."<sup>88</sup>

William Foster is often blamed for the family's social and economic decline, and the loss of the family home. When he risked and lost much of the family's fortune in outfitting Andrew Jackson for the battle of New Orleans, the senior Foster lost more than his money; he lost his

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<sup>87</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 88.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

reputation as a businessman and perhaps his confidence. As a young man, William B. Foster had been fortunate when land values in Pittsburgh were climbing rapidly, and when he was in business partnerships with successful men like Anthony Beelen and Ebenezer Denny. Later, when he got involved in businesses on his own, as he was briefly in an iron foundry, he did not prove himself to be a saavy businessman. After the Panic of 1819, because of the complex system of mortgages and banks calling in loans one from the other, he lost his properties and his home.

William B. Foster's financial problems began several years before Stephen Foster's birth and after the Panic of 1819 was underway. Immediately after the war ended in 1815, Pittsburgh looked prosperous and there was little evidence of the dire economic situation that would make its appearance within a few years. Business transactions and land speculation encouraged by "credit buying and paper money hoisted the bubble and it grew for three years." To satisfy the needs of the businessmen, Pennsylvania had authorized forty-one new banks, each of which issued its own notes, with little concern for specie backing. Soon, however, inflation and land speculation spun out of control. When the Second Bank of the United States came into existence in 1817, it ordered the resumption of specie payments to lessen the inflation. The western banks paid no heed and continued to make mortgage loans. Consequently, by the following year, when the Bank of the United States decided to call in its loans to the state banks, a panic ensued.<sup>89</sup>

It was around this time that William Foster came into difficulty, for "He no longer could cover the notes held against him by the Bank of the United States."<sup>90</sup> Of course, if William had been less patriotic and had not cared so much about the success of General Jackson, he would

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 161-166.

<sup>90</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 37.

have had more to support himself and his family while they rode out the depression. Instead, William endured one financial difficulty after another, and the family's fortunes began a rapid and unsettling decline. When one considers the erratic nature of the antebellum economy, the vagaries of a banking system that were dependent on political whim, natural and man-made calamities, and competition from industrial centers even in foreign countries, perhaps the critics should be less judgmental.<sup>91</sup>

At the end of the War of 1812, Pittsburgh emerged as a manufacturing dynamo, and prices, wages, and employment soared.<sup>92</sup> Britain, however, did not like the idea of towns like Pittsburgh becoming successful manufacturing centers that would compete, not only in quantity of smoke, but in production of wares with such British manufacturing cities as Birmingham. Faced with declining sales and prices, the British manufacturers decided to put an end to industrial competition from America. They dumped tons of British manufactures onto American docks, at such low prices that the local manufacturers could not compete. The British were willing to "incur a loss upon the first exportation [to the United States] in order by the glut to stifle in the cradle those rising manufactures in the United States which the war had forced into existence contrary to the usual course of nature."<sup>93</sup> The actions of British manufacturers crippled Pittsburgh's industry for almost a decade.

When British imports pushed Pittsburgh manufacturing against the wall, the value of iron products decreased from over \$700,000 to \$500,000, and other industries suffered as well. By

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<sup>91</sup>Richard C. Wade, *The Urban Frontier, the Rise of Western Cities, 1790-1830* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996) pp. 161-195.

<sup>92</sup>John Steele Gordon, *An Empire of Wealth* (New York: Harpers Collins Publishers, 2004), pp.132-139.

<sup>93</sup> Wade, *The Urban Frontier*, pp. 165-166.

1819, industrial employment had dropped and the value of all manufactured goods fell from \$2.6 million to \$800,000. Steam engine factories which were the pride of Pittsburgh almost disappeared. Glass works suffered in the same way. No segment of Pittsburgh's economy escaped the loss of production and "the city seemed dying."<sup>94</sup> A townsman who toured the industrial center of Pittsburgh wrote: "I went down Diamond-Alley, passed the old woolen factory; it was shut up-- there used to be a great deal of noise here; it is very quiet now." He turned into Liberty Street: "It was very still." Heading for the river, he walked through Marbury Street and "passed the iron factory---one or two ragged children came to the door.....the shop was like the woolen factory, shut up."<sup>95</sup>

The depression resulted in immense personal suffering. The Fosters lost their property, but those who maintained theirs could neither rent nor sell, as people began to leave the city which had more than doubled its population in each previous decade. Signs in the windows read "To Let ---For Sale," but there were neither renters nor buyers. "There are now more buildings than families; in old times there were two families to a house, now there seem two houses to a family." In some ways the Fosters were more fortunate than other families, who had no property to relinquish. Those without property to offset their debts went to debtors' prisons, which swallowed rich and poor alike. "For the most part the men who inhabit our jails, were lately among our best livers," quipped one newspaper editor. During the summer of 1819, 115 persons were imprisoned for debt, most of whom owed less than \$10. One man was jailed for owing 18 cents."<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Wade, *The Urban Frontier*, p. 166.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 150-160.

<sup>96</sup> Wade, *Urban Frontier*, pp.66-168.

The crash came on suddenly and left people bewildered. The first reaction for many was to blame the banks. Nearly everyone held some notes, and most of them were worthless following the crash. "Damn the Banks, and the Witch that begot them," seemed to be the rallying cry for the embittered note holders. Sometimes town meetings were called just to condemn the bankers. Most deserving of blame seemed to be the Bank of the United States, which set in motion the deflationary pressures which brought down the speculative balloon. Local bank branches had made loans to Westerners like William Foster, but when these people could not pay, the Bank of the United States took possession of their homes and land. It seemed that most of the property in the West was mortgaged to this "monster" money power of the East.<sup>97</sup> Men who suffered foreclosure became enraged when they realized that the bank's policy had "netted the monster large amounts of urban property."<sup>98</sup>

By 1826, the year of Stephen Foster's birth, Pittsburgh's economy had returned to its postwar level, but for some, the scars ran deep and their financial well being could not be restored. William Barclay Foster was unable to recover from the losses he had endured, nor could he restore to his family the security and lifestyle they had known. The depression had shattered the self confidence of many families in the city, and the Fosters were numbered among them.<sup>99</sup>

The economic calamity was especially painful because the city's trading dominance was at the same time being threatened. The newly built toll free National Road connecting Baltimore with Wheeling, Virginia ( West Virginia did not come into existence until the time of the Civil

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<sup>97</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 174-177.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 175-177.

<sup>99</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 177-187.



War.) and the new three-hundred sixty three mile long Erie Canal connecting the Great Lakes with the Atlantic Ocean threatened to divert trade away from the city.<sup>100</sup> The Erie canal would become the most important American transportation artery of its day, linking the West to New York, but when it was completed in 1828 it jeopardized Pittsburgh's preferred position at the head of river navigation. For the time, the prospect for a return to prosperity and happiness did not look good, either for Pittsburgh or for the Fosters.

## 2.8 ECONOMIC DECLINE

After the foreclosure on their home, the Fosters with some difficulty fell out of the ranks of the elites. The fall was especially difficult and psychologically damaging because, as historian Edward Pessen argued in *Jacksonian America*, “The distinguishing feature of the [Jacksonian] American was his love of money.” Contemporary accounts of America by European travel writers remarked on the antebellum obsession with money. Michel Chevalier, in *Society, Manners and Politics in the United States* published in 1839, claimed that “At the bottom of all that an American does is money; beneath every word, money.” Pessen informed us that “In a number of cities publications containing nothing more than lists of rich men and the supposed exact sums they were worth went through many editions.”<sup>101</sup> De Tocqueville’s *Democracy in*

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<sup>100</sup> Simmons, *Star-Spangled Eden*, p. 13.

<sup>101</sup> Chevalier, quoted in Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America, Society, Personality, and Politics* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1969) p. 25.

*America* and Fanny Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, both published in the 1830s, also described a people passionately devoted to making money.<sup>102</sup>

The Fosters eventually descended into the economic though not the social or cultural mold of the middle classes. Most members of the middle class “could seldom match the cultural attainments, social prestige, or professional reputations of their patrician counterparts,”<sup>103</sup> but the Fosters who had earlier exhibited social and cultural superiority struggled to retain the superficial characteristics of their upper class identity through accomplishments and manners, and by maintaining family and political connections. Although they stayed in touch with some of their old friends, the Fosters were now seldom invited to the large dinner parties at the homes of the elites. Nor did the Foster sons and daughters intermarry with the important Pittsburgh families like the O’Haras, Craigs, or Nevilles. Immediately after the loss of the “White Cottage,” the Fosters found themselves in a nebulous economic and social space that can best be described as “genteel poverty.”

No matter how poor the Fosters were at certain times, however, none of them descended to the ranks of the working classes. The Foster men did not work as operatives in the new factories, nor did the Foster women become mill girls. And none of them swept up the cotton mill factory floor, as the young Andrew Carnegie did in the 1840s, where he threw up nightly from the rancid smell of the preservative oil used to make the bobbins.<sup>104</sup> They worked with

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<sup>102</sup>Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* ( New York: Bantam Books, 2000, Original published 1835).

<sup>103</sup>Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1981)

<sup>104</sup>Joseph Frazier Wall, *Andrew Carnegie* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989) p.88.

their “heads,” not their hands.<sup>105</sup> They bought and sold, added and subtracted numbers, and made deals. But they did not enter the ranks of the professionals and become lawyers, doctors, or even clergymen, professions which required an expensive or time consuming education or at least connections to guarantee an apprenticeship. There was plenty of work for lawyers in the West, with the many disputed claims involved in the area’s overly active land speculation, in addition to the usual problems with inheritances, wills, and legal disputes of all kinds. But the Foster boys did not choose that route.

Historian Stuart M. Blumin characterized the middle class by five areas of difference-- work, consumption, residential location, voluntary associations, and family organizations – that would segregate them as a class from the mechanics and other members of the working class. The most important factor was change in workplace relations. The change was a product of industrialization and urbanization. Several generations earlier, the craftsman or artisan would be the owner of the shop and the producer. If the owner of the shop had men working for him in production, he worked along side of them. There were few men like white collar managers who held the position between the owner and the workers. The owner often sold his own product, so that he was also the retailer. That type of limited commerce all changed in the three or four decades prior to the Civil War, when Stephen Foster and his brothers came of age. The middle class, according to Blumin, filled the “white collar” and professional positions that commerce and industry mandated. They were retailers, clerks, insurance men, managers, contractors,

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<sup>105</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles of Stephen Foster’s Family*, p.p 77, 86. When Henry Foster was sixteen years old in 1832, his father William sent him to “Bassenheim, a manual training institution at Zelienville, a mile from Harmony.” Morneweck said the reason was that William hoped the “outdoor work would be beneficial to him because Henry was a delicate boy, and they feared consumption.” However, since “the years 1832 and 1833 were troublous years to Stephen’s father,” William Foster probably had finances more in mind than health.

subcontractors, salesmen, accountants, purchasers, importers, and forwarding and commission merchants, and engineers.<sup>106</sup>

The young Foster men were employed in middle class occupations, where their work environments separated them from manual workers.<sup>107</sup> Morrison Foster worked in the business office of the Hope Cotton Company managing its accounts, when he was not traveling the rivers buying cotton for the Pittsburgh mill. Dunning Foster went into a partnership in Cincinnati as a commission agent handling the cargo and the passengers of the steamships that daily traveled the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. As a teenager, Stephen Foster assisted his father with the paper work involved with settling land claims for war veterans, and when he reached young manhood, he went to live with his brother Dunning in Cincinnati to learn bookkeeping and business. Henry Foster also worked in a variety of white collar occupations, including clerical work in Washington for the treasury department when President Polk was in office. The Foster men also earned the salaries of the middle class, from \$1,000 to \$1,500 per year.<sup>108</sup> Stephen Foster during his better days, when he was writing and selling his songs, made from \$1200 to \$1400 per year from his royalties.<sup>109</sup>

The decade preceding the Civil War proved stressful for older men of the middle class like William Barclay Foster who had "once waxed in the abundant opportunities of the canal age." By the 1850s, the numbers of shopkeepers and craftsmen and independent producers had been reduced by half and the number of dependent wage earners or factory workers increased.

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<sup>107</sup> Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 67, 68, 122, 185.

<sup>108</sup> Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class, Social Experience in the American City, 1760 – 1900*, (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 1,3,9.

<sup>109</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles of Stephen Foster's Family*, p. 220.

Factories with large capital investments replaced the middling craftsmen when Morrison and Stephen came of age, and men of the senior William's generation no longer had anything, either a business, skills, or knowledge, that they could pass on to their progeny.<sup>110</sup> According to Mary P. Ryan:

"After 1850 few transferred a store or workshop to a second generation. Rarely did a son follow in the father's footsteps. Most of the sons of the old middle class who came of age at mid-century could expect to be unceremoniously catapulted into the status of self made man. Just what these young men would make of themselves remained an open and anxious question. A self made man was by no means assured of being a rich man."<sup>111</sup>

Native born men such as Stephen Foster and his brothers were the fortunate ones selected for the positions in the middle class occupations, but finding positions was highly competitive.<sup>112</sup> By 1860, from one quarter to almost one half of the adult male population of the nation's largest cities were employed in these "middle class" occupations.<sup>113</sup> Although white collar employment was one of the fastest growing sectors of the economy, there were not enough openings to keep up with the rapid growth in the population of the middle class. The senior William tried to assist his sons in gaining entrance into the world of business and into the white collar occupations, but he really knew little about the complicated workings of the new business order. In truth, he had barely succeeded in the old business order. Although in his heart he wanted the best for his sons, he "saw no prospect of being able to leave them so well off that they need not earn their own livings and he had a father's natural dread lest any of his children be forced out into the world,

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<sup>110</sup>Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 150-153.

<sup>111</sup>Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, p. 152.

<sup>112</sup>Mornebeck, *Chronicles of Stephen Foster's Family*, p. 220.

<sup>113</sup>Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, pp. 67, 68, 122, 185.

unprepared to take care of himself.”<sup>114</sup> Clearly, the mid-nineteenth century was a time of special anxiety as men like William Barclay Foster worried whether or not they or their sons would achieve the status of self made men in the highly competitive antebellum world.<sup>115</sup>

## 2.9 TRAGEDY AND LOSS

From about 1828 to 1830, the Fosters experienced a succession of losses and tragedies that left a deep imprint on the family. Eliza Foster suffered especially from the traumas. She sank into a deep emotional depression from which she emerged only after she resigned herself "to the will of that omniscient power.”<sup>116</sup> In May of 1828, the Fosters’ beautiful eldest daughter Charlotte journeyed aboard the steamship *Waverley* to Kentucky, where she planned on visiting and staying with relatives of her father. In the late autumn of the following year, the nineteen -year-old Charlotte died in Louisville. More will be said in a later chapter about the golden haired Charlotte who played the piano and harp, and sang the sad sentimental songs that were so much appreciated by her generation. Seven months after Charlotte’s death in October of 1829, the Fosters’ youngest, a baby boy who William called the “sweet fellow” James died in May of 1830. Sometime during these tragic years, the White Cottage was foreclosed and the Fosters began the itinerant existence that carried them from one boarding or rented house to the next for several years in succession. Eliza, not surprisingly, suffered from a debilitating grief after the loss of her daughter, her infant son, and her home all within a few years. In 1832 Eliza wrote to

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<sup>114</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p.229.

<sup>115</sup> Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, p. 152.

<sup>116</sup> Letter May 14, 1832 by Eliza Foster to son William, Morneweck, *Chronicles*, inset opposite p. 86.

her oldest son William Jr., apologizing for her grief stricken state which prevented her from writing more than one letter in the preceding two years:

"Besides the very many perplexities of housekeeping, there was the weak and tremulous state I was left in after the death of your ever to be lamented sister Charlotte and equally interesting little brother James, that my body has only recovered strength, since my mind was restored to that tranquility which a perfect reconciliation to the will of that omniscient power which regulates and rules, and although the vessels are all broken which I hew'd out to hold the sources of my earthly joys, and all my gone by hopes are nothing but a dream, the song of joy, the delightful cottage, and the sound of the deep-toned instrument [the piano that Charlotte played] still comes dancing on in the arrear of memory, with pain, and sorrow at thought of how it closed, with the departure from this transitory stage of her we loved so dearly--but now I have little to ask, all is well that God in his mercy sends me."<sup>117</sup>

Manufacturing in Pittsburgh returned to its 1815 level by 1826, and surpassed it by 1830, with iron goods and steam engines showing an impressive increase. But neither Pittsburgh nor the Fosters could regain their primacy which was lost during the economic depression of the nation and the personal depression of the Fosters. Cincinnati forged ahead confidently and by 1830 outdistanced Pittsburgh in cultural attractions as the Queen City of the West.<sup>118</sup> Though prosperity returned to Pittsburgh, few could forget the agonizing years through which the city had passed. The genteel culture that Eliza knew in her home White Cottage, where she entertained and was entertained by Pittsburgh's pioneer elite, became a thing of the past. It had passed away like the grandeur and golden age of Ireland, that Thomas Moore mourned in his sentimental and melancholic songs which Charlotte Foster sang so poignantly in the Foster's

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, inset opposite p.86.

<sup>118</sup> Wade, *Urban Frontier*, p. 195.

parlor.<sup>119</sup> Ultimately, Eliza's nostalgia for her own genteel and happy past was refashioned into the "voice of by gone days" in Stephen Foster's sentimental songs.

As historian Frances Couvares as shown, Pittsburgh's culture became decidedly "plebeian" by the middle of the nineteenth century, when craftsmen in the iron and glass factories encouraged mass culture to dominate the culture of the city. Circuses and minstrel shows which were popular with the working classes were plentiful, since industry continued to dominate in Pittsburgh. The intimate parties, museums, lectures, and concerts that Eliza had known became a thing of the past. Hardworking Pittsburgh Presbyterians pledged "to abstain from the opera, the theater, the circus, and card playing." The *Gazette* lamented in February of 1850: "Our city lacks, exceedingly, those more healthful and proper sources of amusement, which render other cities so attractive, such as galleries of pictures, museums, public institutes, and Libraries, etc."<sup>120</sup>

Ironically, Pittsburgh had all these cultural accouterments in the 1820s, when the Pittsburgh born artist James Lambdin opened a museum and Thomas Sully painted portraits of the Collins' daughters and even the Hudson River artist Thomas Cole spent a few years in Pittsburgh. But by the 1840s and 1850s, Pittsburgh was not a very welcoming place for artists. David Gilmore Blythe, Pittsburgh's own genre artist, captured the image of the dejected struggling artist in one of his canvasses, appropriately named "Hard Times." In keeping with the times and the commercial inclinations of the city, Blythe painted a huge panorama of Pittsburgh

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<sup>119</sup>Howard Mumford Jones, *The Harp that Once---, the Life of Thomas Moore* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1937)

<sup>120</sup> Frances Couvares, *Remaking of Pittsburgh* ( Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), pp. 34-35.



history which he intended to profit from by exhibiting wherever crowds of people congregated, but another artist was already exhibiting a panorama, and Blythe could not compete.<sup>121</sup>

The ironmasters who were taking control of Pittsburgh's culture by mid-century, "demonstrated no inclination to participate in the forging of a distinctive bourgeois cultural order." Thereafter until the 1890s, when Carnegie and Frick and Mellon imposed their own high culture on the city, supported by the money they had taken from the people's sweat and hard labors, "prosperous Pittsburghers who sought genteel recreation had little to choose from." If Stephen Foster wanted to experience more of genteel culture, he would have to go to Cincinnati. As the society became increasingly dominated by ironmasters and craftsmen from other trades, "neither home, nor manners, nor civic duty distracted the businessman from his business."<sup>122</sup>

In the early years of Pittsburgh's history, men interested in making money managed to have time for both business and genteel culture. By the middle of the century, business overstepped everything else. William G. Johnston, an established bookseller in early Pittsburgh and a contemporary of the Fosters, noted in his *Reminiscences* the change that had taken place in Pittsburgh later in the nineteenth century:

"The world once revolved slowly, and men had an abundance of time for business, and leisure sufficient to eat, to sleep, and to enjoy life. Now its revolutions are accomplished by rapid whirling; men's brains and muscles are wound up to the utmost tension; business is done in briefer time; eating consumes fewer minutes; sleep is banished and it is almost impossible to say where enjoyment comes in."<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Bruce. W. Chambers, *The World of David Gilmore Blythe* ( 1815-1865) Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1990), pp. 30-50.

<sup>122</sup> Couvares, *Remaking of Pittsburgh*, , pp. 34-35.

<sup>123</sup>William G. Johnston, *Life and Reminsicneces from Birth to Manhood of Wm. G. Johnston*. (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1901) p. 190.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Pittsburgh's industrial success was verified by the amount of black smoke that filled the air, darkened the sky, and left a black haze over the buildings. In an eerie conflation of life imitating art or art imitating life, the inhabitants of the proud industrial city in the 1840s and 1850s often found their faces and clothes covered with the black sooty residue that dominated the skyline, just like the white men who covered their faces in blackface makeup before they appeared on the stage in the most popular entertainment of the day.

### 3.0 YOUTH IN ALLEGHENY CITY

When Stephen Foster was still a toddler, the family moved out of the White Cottage, their ancestral home at 3600 Penn Avenue which had provided them with the emblem of their elite status. According to his niece Evelyn Morneweck, “Stephen probably was too young to be grieved at the loss of the White Cottage, but the regret of his parents and older brothers and sisters was deeply impressed upon his consciousness in later years.”<sup>124</sup> Subsequently, they became a family in transit, migrating back and forth across the rivers, in a northerly or a southerly direction to some small town in either Pennsylvania or Ohio. Blown about by the capricious antebellum economy, the Fosters floated like the dead leaves of autumn set adrift in a winter wind. They finally settled into Allegheny City, which was across the Allegheny River on the northern side above Pittsburgh, in a house purchased by the oldest son William. While the Fosters’ new home in Allegheny did not offer the elite status of the White Cottage, it managed to offer a wealth of ethnic, racial, cultural, and political diversity, all of which melded into Stephen Foster’s truly American music.

During Foster’s youth, much of the responsibility for the care of the Fosters passed to the oldest adopted brother William Jr. who came to represent a father figure for Stephen and a major source of the family’s support and financial security. Although the adolescent Stephen told his mother that he longed to be in his brother William’s sunshine, Stephen Foster always lived in

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<sup>124</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 38.

this very successful and competent older brother's shadow. When their parents William and Eliza died, William, Jr. sold the Allegheny house that Stephen Foster still occupied and renounced his financial responsibilities to the family. Stephen Foster then began a precipitous descent down a psychological and financial abyss. An understanding of the demands the Fosters placed on their adopted son while the family lived in Allegheny City provides some explanation for the younger William's decision in later years to abandon his responsibilities to Stephen Foster.

### **3.1 BROTHER WILLIAM**

After moving out of the White Cottage, the Fosters' first journey away from Pittsburgh took them to Harmony, Pennsylvania, in 1832. The village thirty miles to the north of Pittsburgh had been established by a colony of religious separatists. Afterwards, they returned to Pittsburgh, where they took up temporary residence in a variety of boarding houses, rented rooms, and leased houses. The farthest the Fosters moved outside of Pittsburgh was to Youngstown, Ohio where they lived on and off from 1835 until they settled more or less permanently into a house purchased by the oldest son William in Allegheny City. Youngstown, Ohio was a "young, growing city" in the 1830s. Its abundance of unclaimed acreage satisfied the senior William's passion for land speculation, but the real reason for settling into the Ohio town was for a passion of a different order. The younger William Foster and his sister Henrietta Foster had fallen in love with a sister and a brother from the Wick family of Youngstown and married them. Henrietta soon gave birth to several children and set about raising her family there. Brother William was

not so fortunate. His bride died of tuberculosis ten days after the wedding, and the forlorn bridegroom moved on.<sup>125</sup>

Young Stephen, in the meantime, enjoyed the woodsy environment of Youngstown, as a refuge from the dingy urban rooming houses that had served as his home in Pittsburgh. Another much appreciated haven from urbanity was the home of his old Uncle Struthers in Poland, Ohio, where Stephen enjoyed the freedom of wandering about in an abundantly natural setting: “Stephen enjoys himself at uncle Struthers. He never appears to have the least inclination to leave there and don’t seem to feel at all lonely. Uncle just lets him do as he pleases with the horses and cattle, which makes him the greatest man on the ground!” Uncle Struthers, a relative of William Barclay Foster, was one of the first white settlers to the area. Early on, he predicted that “Stephen, who even then displayed great originality and musical talent, would be something famous if he lived to be a man.”<sup>126</sup>

The late 1830s were precarious times, not only for health, but in economic terms, and western cities like Pittsburgh were especially affected by the hardships caused by yet another downward turn in the economy, the Depression of 1837. William was too old to fight back now, and he had been unable even as a younger man to tame the antebellum economy that kept the Fosters on a perpetual roller coaster. The senior William was always chasing the next rainbow, or his last debtor, but he was not able to adjust to the larger changes that were going on around him. While America was transforming into a nation where industry reigned supreme, William’s business expertise had not gone beyond transporting goods east and west, arduous work he did when he was a much younger man. As the senior Foster neared the end of his productive years,

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<sup>125</sup> Foster family letter, January 9, 1838, Foster Hall Collection, C656, Center for American Music, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pa.

<sup>126</sup> Foster, *My Brother Stephen*, p. 51, quoted by Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 166.

worries about what fate had in store for himself and his family weighed heavily on his mind. Although in his heart he wanted the best for his sons, he “saw no prospect of being able to leave them so well off that they need not earn their own livings and he had a father’s natural dread lest any of his children be forced out into the world, unprepared to take care of himself.”<sup>127</sup>

Fortunately for the Fosters, just as the senior William lapsed into a financial decline, the younger William’s star began to rise. More and more, the family came to depend for financial assistance on the oldest adopted son. The boy who “assumed the mantle of responsibility”<sup>128</sup> at an early age became the major support of his family until the deaths of Eliza and William Foster in 1855. The younger William began his career with the canal system in April of 1826, a few months before Stephen was born. An engineer named Nathan Roberts from the New York Canal was passing through Pittsburgh on his way to locate a canal line to run from Pittsburgh to the Kiskiminetas. Sensing an opportunity was at hand, the elder William invited the engineer to dinner at White Cottage, where he was introduced to the young William. “Suppose you let your son go with us, Mr. Foster, and learn to be an engineer,” asked Mr. Roberts, thus starting the younger William out on his illustrious career that took the ambitious young man from “axeman” to the vice-presidency of the Pennsylvania Railroad.<sup>129</sup>

The Fosters’ dependence on the younger William began soon after the loss of White Cottage, after the senior William Foster had lost the use of his right hand. From the year of Stephen Foster’s birth in 1826, when the eighteen year old William was unofficially apprenticed to be an engineer, the young man was on his own, employed as a civil engineer laying out canal

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<sup>127</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p.229.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>129</sup> *Pennsylvania Railroad Men’s News*, p. 260.

lines in Kentucky and Pennsylvania. The labor was strenuous and he was on the road constantly in the early years, but the younger William's salary was considered good, and to the senior Foster, a boon. When the father needed money, which was all the time, he asked, cajoled, and pleaded, usually throwing guilt onto his adopted son.

Throughout the 1830s, letters written by the father William to the son asked for guidance and suggestions in business and financial decisions, but mostly they asked for money, very directly. Not only the father, but the Foster sons and daughters never appeared reluctant to ask for handouts. The Fosters pressured their adopted brother in lovingly worded pleadings with a coercion that seemed to underscore a debt that the younger William owed the Fosters. William Foster, Jr. was, after all, an illegitimate child who had been adopted into the family at a young age and was brought up, trained, and educated under the kind tutelage of William and Eliza Foster. As their economic situation worsened and the Fosters became more anxious about finances, they schemed to find solutions and, it seemed, they always looked to brother William to solve their problems. The Foster correspondence frequently expressed concerns over the family's finances, and the brothers often borrowed from one another, securing their borrowings with promissory notes. If later in life Stephen Foster asked for handouts from relatives, it was a habit he learned by example from his older brothers, sisters, and father.

William, Jr. accepted and bore the responsibility laid upon him by his adoptive family in an honorable fashion, but sometimes it appeared that the Fosters went too far. After his William and Eliza died in 1855, William, Jr. took actions that suggest that he felt he had fulfilled his obligations to the Fosters. In 1856 he sold the house in Allegheny that he owned and that had for years served the Fosters as a home. The result of the sale was that Stephen Foster was literally left out in the cold to fend for himself. The correspondence between William Jr. and

William Sr. provides some explanation for William, Jr.'s decision to release himself from his obligations to the Fosters, including Stephen, after the death of his parents.

The senior William emphasized the urgency of his requests for money by threatening dire circumstances for the family, if the money could not be had. When the father wanted “300 Dollars to enable me to close my accounts...& which I am desirous to do this month,” he said that the money was necessary “in order to prevent any unpleasant situation.” At another time, when William, Sr. asked his son for \$200, he offered a note in exchange which he assured the younger William was “as good as any Note for its amount in Pittsburgh.” Later he pleaded, “I beg that you will not disappoint me. I have no other resource, unless I throw myself on the mercy of the Jew brokers here.”<sup>130</sup>

In December of 1833, when it became known that the younger William would be receiving a big promotion, William senior felt no embarrassment about asking how much the young man would be earning: “I have heard that you will be a principle engineer, if so I surely rejoice at it. I Hope you will inform us what your pay will be..”<sup>131</sup> He wanted to include his son's salary in his own accounting of the family's budget and expenses.

The senior William, who was already past fifty, was no longer interested in holding down a job. He preferred to invest his son's money, speculate in land, or in some way turn a quick dollar. No sooner had the senior William secured a position as a toll collector on the canals than he decided to resign. The reason, he said, was that the salary was not large enough to support the family. When the younger William objected to his father's resignation, William senior defended his decision by saying that since he could not live on the money, he would be tempted to take

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<sup>130</sup> William B. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., April 10, 1833 (Foster Hall Collection, C639).

<sup>131</sup> William B. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., December 15, 1833 ( Foster Hall Collection, C623).



public funds to meet the family's expenses. "It was impossible for me to live on my salary which would now have been \$420 Dollars, and while I was handling money it must be had, no matter where it was to be replaced from; so that I was kept in eternal misery between constables on the one hand and the fear of involving my Bails men on the other, and blasting my reputation for ever by being dismissed from service for using public money." The Foster family needed "an average of 1227.00 per annum," and "to make up the annual deficit" the senior William said he "sacrificed the coal in the outlot, drew on you etc." Then he admitted his own sense of confusion about his dismal prospects: "I feel totally at a loss to know what to turn my attention to."<sup>132</sup>

The senior Foster was clearly embarrassed by what he considered his own financial ineptitude, and after many unsuccessful attempts at business, he apologized to his son: "I have delayed from day to day and from week to week to write you in hopes of being able to say something with certainty, respecting my future prospects for business."<sup>133</sup> When nothing substantial turned up, William Foster, the father, decided to chase down old debtors. He hired a lawyer ( charged to son William, of course) to collect moneys owned him which had never been paid. One claim for something like \$3,000 was against Henry Baldwin, William Wilkins, and Mr. Robinson, Jr., all impressive names for Pittsburgh. The outcome for this case was similar to William's earlier history with collections of moneys owned to him: "The verdict was rendered and filed in our favor," noted William Sr., but it was probably never collected.<sup>134</sup>

The senior William also had entrepreneurial visions. He wanted to raise enough money, "\$1500 on credit of the coal lot," to get his son Henry established in a general merchandise

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<sup>132</sup> William B. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., July 14, 1834 (Foster Hall Collection, C628).

<sup>133</sup> William B. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., December 7, 1834 (Foster Hall Collection , C631).

<sup>134</sup> William B. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., December 7, 1834 (Foster Hall Collection, C631).

store. But when the coal lot did not produce the needed capital, he asked his son William to put up the investment money, phrasing the request as an opportunity, “that you and Henry can enter into a good business.”<sup>135</sup> By the fall of 1835, William junior had somehow been pushed into becoming the backer for the venture, even though two other experienced merchants, Hall and McElvey, were involved. By the time they got the store established, however, the Panic of 1837 set in. When the business began to falter, William Jr. worried that his father’s debts might put him, as the major financial backer, at risk. In addition to the risk to his money and reputation, debtor’s prison, while rare, was still a fact in the legal system. William junior wanted his father to get out of the business. Ignoring the younger William’s advice, the senior William and his partner bought more goods, “amounting to 4 or 5000 Dollars.” Soon, however, it became known that “Foster & Hall were selling goods at cost,” and that the business was failing. At that point, the father William agreed to close out the business. There were other business failures in Pittsburgh in 1837, including “Sam’l P. Darlington” who was “shut up by the Sheriff and God only knows how many more---Will I share their fate?” asked a worried older William.<sup>136</sup>

The Fosters rarely appeared to worry very much about the younger William, no matter what his work entailed or if it were dangerous to his health. While the senior Foster was speculating with his son’s money in a risky store venture, William Junior spent the summer plotting the lines for the canals that were to run through Kentucky, at a time when the weather was hot and fatal diseases were apt to strike. The younger William wrote from his tent in Kentucky: “This has been a dreary, wet Sunday. It has confined us pretty closely to our tents; we

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<sup>135</sup> William B. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., December 7, 1834 ( Foster Hall Collection C631), January 5, 1835 (Foster Hall Collection, C632).

<sup>136</sup> William B. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., June 8, 1837 (Foster Hall Collection, C646).

are fortunate in having good capacious and water proof ones; we are obliged to keep under our canvass...”<sup>137</sup> He reassured his family, however, that “We live rather comfortably in our tents.....the fare is rather coarse but wholesome.” William junior never complained. He simply complied with his filial duty and accepted the gratitude of the Fosters when it was forthcoming. After William sent Henry Foster a 50 Dollar note, Henry wrote back “It came in good time indeed. We are like many of our neighbors pretty hard run, but we will not complain.”<sup>138</sup>

In spite of the most recent failure with Foster & Hall, William asked his son in May of 1838 to again put money into a store that Henry Foster would run, this time, in partnership with a Mr. Skinner of Warren, Pennsylvania. The senior William insisted that the business’s prospects were more “flattering” this time, “far beyond our most sanguine calculations.” He asked William junior to help “your brother [Henry] by lending him on interest 12 or 15 hundred Dollars to assist in laying in their winter stock of Goods.”<sup>139</sup> This time the senior William’s optimism about the prospects for the store was based on sales that were made with promissory notes. By the middle of the summer of 1838, with the depression that had started in 1837 well advanced, William senior conceded that “it was not possible to place the same reliance on promissory notes as on cash.”<sup>140</sup> The wise young William realized that his brother Henry did not have enough experience for business and he advised him to get out. Then he himself walked away from all the business dealings in which his father or anyone else in the family was trying to

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<sup>137</sup> William B. Foster, Jr. to Eliza Foster, May 14, 1837 (Foster Hall Collection, C642).

<sup>138</sup> William B. Foster, Jr. to Eliza Foster, April 21, 1838 (Foster Hall Collection C659).

<sup>139</sup>Foster family letter, June 20, 1838 C663

<sup>140</sup>Foster family letter, June 20, 1838 C663

involve him.<sup>141</sup> By January of 1840, the father complained that “William [junior] refused to have anything to do with ...Business here with [brother-in-law] Thomas Wick or anyone else...”<sup>142</sup>

Next, the senior Foster expended his energies in ensuring that his son William would reap the benefits of the patronage system. He promoted his son the way some men promote a good race horse or a prize fighter. When a Democrat named Porter became governor of Pennsylvania, the father worked to get his son offered the position of principal engineer of the Pennsylvania canals. As soon as the canal commissioners were Democrats, William senior pulled whatever strings were necessary for the benefit of his son directly, and the Foster clan indirectly. He wrote the Canal Commissioners at Harrisburg and asked them to give William the position of principal engineer. William wrote the letter detailing his son’s qualifications and experience for the job. When the son was offered the job, the father accepted for him until William, Jr. would become available to accept personally.<sup>143</sup>

As soon as William, Jr. secured his new position with the enhanced income, the senior Foster asked his son to buy a farm that he and his wife Eliza could retire to in their old age. “Henry informs us that you had expressed a wish that a good farm could be selected, that you would purchase it as a resting place for your mother and myself as well as such as the boys as might feel inclined to stick by us, and a comfortable retreat for yourself when you might wish to retire from your present occupation,” William wrote his son in the summer of 1839.<sup>144</sup> Then the

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<sup>141</sup>Foster family letter, August 18, 1838 C667

<sup>142</sup>Foster Family letter, January 12, 1840 C665

<sup>143</sup> Foster family letter, August 18, 1838, C667

<sup>144</sup>Foster family letter July 26, 1839 C681

father inspected farms that were for sale and sent their descriptions along with prices to his son. The farms were priced at from \$25 to \$40 per acre, and contained anywhere from nine to three-hundred acres of land.

Henrietta Foster made demands of a different nature on brother William. At the urging of his father, William junior had invested \$1,000 in a store that Thomas Wick, Henrietta's husband, opened in Youngstown. That store failed and when Thomas Wick died in 1842, he probably still owed the money to William, Jr.<sup>145</sup> (Thomas Wick died of the same tuberculosis that took his sister Mary Wick, William's ill fated bride.) After her husband's death, Henrietta wrote a long, self pitying letter requesting that William move in with her and take care of her and her three children. She said he was the only one who was in the position to take on the responsibility, and she urged him to do so. "I should like to have some one of my brothers live with me and provide every thing we needed to live on and there is none of them in a situation to do so but yourself. Oh how I wish you would give up canalling and settle in Pittsburgh with me in the way I have mentioned."<sup>146</sup>

Not all the Foster siblings were openly dependent on brother William. Morrison Foster started out working for Cadwallader Evans in his steam engine factory. By September of 1839, Morrison changed employers and went to work in the firm of Wrenshall & Co., the oldest cotton establishment in Pittsburgh, where "Mr. McCormick one of the partners took a great fancy for him."<sup>147</sup> By 1840, after Pollard McCormick had started his own business, he took Morrison to work at his Hope Cotton Factory in Allegheny. Dunning Foster had been clerking on river boats

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<sup>145</sup>Foster family letter, August 25, 1842 C507

<sup>146</sup>Foster family letter, July 2, 1842 C503

<sup>147</sup>Foster family letter, July 26, 1839 C682

for several years, but by the fall of 1841, he settled into the occupation of commission agent which he said he preferred, even when business was slow. “We have been doing a very dull business in the Forwarding & commission line this fall owing to the extreme low waters we have had and which still continued. I am very well satisfied with my new situation and greatly prefer it to being on the river.”<sup>148</sup> Ann Eliza Foster Buchanan preferred to place her dependence on her husband Edward’s older brother. James Buchanan, even after he became president of the United States, was always generous with his many nieces and nephews.

William, Sr. struggled in any way he knew how to keep the family solvent. Since he had personal experience with land claims, he took up the itinerant occupation of helping other men establish title to their land. He had worked in the land claims office, but now he was working on a case by case basis, establishing land claims in as far away places as Kentucky. He was paid \$100 in goods for successfully establishing Dunlap’s land claims in Louisville and Lexington, Kentucky. But he also continued to travel great distances to make good on his own unresolved lawsuits, and the journeys usually proved fruitless. His friend Walter Forward assisted him and encouraged him to continue to go after the government for the money he had put out to supply the soldiers in the 1812 War. As late as 1841, however, Foster was still trying to recoup his losses when Forward assured him: “Do not be impatient you are not forgotten, I trust that your claims will yet be considered, if they are not, it shall not be my fault.” Another friend W. W. Irwin assured William Foster that he had “the word of both the President and Wm Forward that [he would] be provided for.”<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>148</sup>Foster family letter October 23, 1841 C600

<sup>149</sup>Foster family letter, October 1, 1841 C597

If William Foster could not get his money back, at least he was entitled to a government position. Walter Forward had promised William Senior that once he, Forward, was appointed comptroller of the Treasury, he would get William a position in the Office of the Treasury. “He [Forward] wants me at Washington as a companion and political advisor!!” William senior gushed with pride. “So our prospects begin to brighten a little,” but when the offer finally came through, it was for a clerkship in the Treasury, which the senior William did not want for himself. Instead he gave the Washington position to his son Henry, to “get a foothold for him there which may be permanent in case I should live or die, he can help his mother.” In this way Henry became a clerk in Washington, at least while the Democrats were in power, earning a steady income of \$1,000 per year.<sup>150</sup>

### **3.2 THE DEPRESSION OF 1837**

By 1840, the Depression of 1837 was well entrenched, and William Foster, Sr. found himself deeply in debt with creditors hot on his back. William and Eliza returned to Pittsburgh after an extended stay in Youngstown, Ohio when William learned that land he owned in some of the townships east of Pittsburgh was to be offered for “sale by the Sheriff.” One of the creditors “proposed a compromise,” however, and William Foster came to Pittsburgh in order to “close up the matter relating to the land in Wilkins and Plumb Townships.” Besides having his land foreclosed once again, William Foster in 1840 was “in debt some five or six hundred dollars to different persons, a considerable part of which had been sued.” William was thinking of filing

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<sup>150</sup>Foster family letter, March 30, 1841 C703

for bankruptcy, although he wrote at the end of May, 1840: “I have not yet pushed to the necessity of availing myself of that law, but suppose I will shortly.”<sup>151</sup>

Land values in the West, which the senior William had always relied on to go up, were falling by the early spring of 1841, and land in Pittsburgh was being auctioned off at sheriff’s sales. William Foster believed that “land pirates” were “at the bottom of the business” of these auctions. When his erstwhile investor Sam McElwey found himself hopelessly in debt, William thought it was just a ruse “to get his [McElwey’s] property condemn’d and brought to Sheriff’s sale.”<sup>152</sup> William senior expressed his frustration over the flat market for land: “The great scarcity of money and the heavy exchange against the West is producing much distress here; and it is almost impossible to sell real property; I have offered the land in the county for 10 Dollars per acre; but neither more than half of what it would have brought three years ago....”<sup>153</sup> For many years speculation in land was profitable. With new settlers in the West constantly demanding land, opportunities abounded for fortunes to be acquired through buying and selling, especially after Andrew Jackson’s Indian Removal Act made thousands more acres available for speculation. Jackson himself grew wealthy turning over the lands he took from the Indians, and William Foster could see no reason not to follow in the footsteps of the hero of New Orleans.

The bad times that William Foster was experiencing in the late 1830s and early 1840s were directly attributable to Andrew Jackson’s decision to attack the Bank of the United States, but the senior William Foster never appeared to make the connection. He felt vindicated that

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<sup>151</sup>Foster family letter, March 31, 1840 C691

<sup>153</sup> William B. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., March 20, 1841 (Foster Hall Collection, C703).



Andrew Jackson had destroyed the “monster” Bank which had foreclosed on his beloved White Cottage. When President Jackson refused to renew the bank’s charter in 1836, prompting its director Nicholas Biddle to call in his loans to the smaller banks, the result was many foreclosures of farms and homes, especially in the West, where land speculation was rampant. William Foster was rather myopic in his political vision and his singular devotion to Jackson and the Democrats. He put the blame solely on the aristocrats and the Bank of the United States. On July 16, 1837, William B. Foster wrote a letter to his son William expressing dismay over the depressed state of the economy. The only ones at fault, he thought, were the “silk stockings gentry” and the infamous Bank: “Our country is in a terrible state of depression; the silk stockings gentry are damning Jackson for killing their savior God Moloch [Bank of the United States] but the countryman when he looks at a shin plaster for 25 cts. to take the price of a quart of strawberries, damns all the Banks and hurrahs for Jackson.”<sup>154</sup>

Stephen’s mother also complained about the Panic of 1837, as she enviously eyed the people who did not seem to be adversely affected by the economy. Eliza to her son William wrote: “Pittsburgh looks very dull as to business in Market Street, but yet one would not suppose business to be going down when they see the elegant coaches with silver trappings on the splendid horses by which they are drawn, and to hear of ladies hoping for the hiest [sic] pric’d and most accomplished drivers; but for my part I am truly thankful that I have shoes to put on my feet without having earned them by the swet[sic] of my brow...”<sup>155</sup> Eliza was depressed during this stressful financial period, and her depression showed up in guilt-ridden confessions to her son William, as if she were personally responsible for the state of the nation’s economy.

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<sup>154</sup> William B. Foster to William Foster, Jr. June 8, 1837. Quoted in Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p.126.

<sup>155</sup> Eliza C. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr. June 16, 1837, quoted in Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 127.

“I have been an unprofitable wife and a careless mother,” she wrote, “and in the midst of all this the Lord has been always remembering me in mercy shedding a ray of hope upon my mind when I was dark and sad...my tears fall fast and heavy, my dear William, while I write these lines with deep repentance for my life of Thoughtlessness.”<sup>156</sup>

### 3.3 NEW NATIONAL BANKRUPTCY LAW

In the early spring of 1842, just as the depression was clearing up, William Barclay Foster found himself irreparably trapped by his sinking finances. Sometime in March of that year, he took advantage of the new general bankruptcy law that went into effect on August 19, 1841. As the senior Foster explained to son William: “Having filed my application for the benefit of the general bankrupt law, it has occurred to me that some objections may be raised on the ground of my having assigned to you the balance of my claim against George Poe at Erie. I therefore request that you make out a statement of money advanced me, with such vouchers as you may have....” Thus he warned his son to be prepared for objections that might be made to his bankruptcy application, even though the son William had made plenty of advances to his father, and would continue to do so. William Barclay Foster was serving as mayor of Allegheny City and while the work brought in some income, it did not supply him with the money that his family needed. The senior William also found some aspects of the job unpleasant. “My office affords me about business enough to keep me from desponding,” he wrote, “but is painful in

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<sup>156</sup> Eliza C. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., June 16, 1837 (Foster Hall Collection, C646).

many respects to witness as I must do, the awful depravity of poor human nature, in many cases of female intoxication and prostitution is truly lamentable.”<sup>157</sup>

There was no national bankruptcy law when William Foster lost the White Cottage and its surrounding acreage. There had been one enacted in 1800, but the law only offered the relief of involuntary bankruptcy to creditors – merchants and traders – but not to debtors. The 1800 law lasted only two and a half years, at which time it was repealed. Although the Constitution had given Congress the power “to establish uniform laws on the subject of Bankruptcy throughout the United States,” Congress never went about doing so. Most states had insolvency laws which took the place of the absent federal bankruptcy law, but these laws varied from state to state and from decade to decade. Furthermore, they weren’t all that helpful to a businessman / speculator like William B. Foster. In the early decades of the republic’s history, bankruptcy was considered a crime, and later a disgrace. The opinion of the business community was that bankruptcy laws only served to encourage irresponsible merchants and entrepreneurs. But as business became bigger and more impersonal, with the advance of the mercantile era, bankruptcy became acceptable as an “equitable” and “rational” way to deal with the irrational vagaries of the antebellum economy. “And so the pendulum of opinion swung from hostility to bankruptcy relief to an attitude that mixed indifference with tolerance and outright approval.”<sup>158</sup> Business failure

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<sup>157</sup> William B. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., March 30, 1842 (Foster Hall Collection, C513). The Fosters began to refer to Allegheny Town as Allegheny City in 1840, when the borough became a city.

<sup>158</sup> Peter J. Coleman, *Debtors and Creditors in America: Insolvency, Imprisonment for Debt, and bankruptcy, 1607-1900* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1974) pp. 283-285

came to be seen essentially as “a random consequence of uncontrollable economic forces,” and more sympathetic legislation followed.<sup>159</sup>

The national bankruptcy law, which was passed by the Whigs in 1841, was designed to protect businessmen who owed at least \$2,000, but the new law also opened the door, for the first time, to “all persons whatsoever,” who might file a petition for voluntary bankruptcy. The act was passed in the wake of the terrible suffering brought on by the 1837 Depression, and it provided a special innovation. For the first time, individual debtors were covered in addition to merchants and traders. The new law, however, because it protected the debtor in addition to the creditor, was denounced in elite circles. Over 33,000 people took advantage of the 1841 law, which in effect canceled \$440,934,000 in debt, leaving debtors to pay about one tenth of that amount, or only \$43,697,357. The very success of the 1841 bankruptcy law doomed it to failure. As soon as many of the debtors were relieved of their stress, the sense of urgency evaporated, and on March 3, 1843, President Tyler repealed the 1841 law, barely more than a year after its passage.<sup>160</sup>

### 3.4 EDUCATING STEPHEN FOSTER

Since the 1830s proved to be such difficult times for the senior William Foster, he found himself unable to provide for the care and education of his youngest son. The pubescent Stephen Foster

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<sup>159</sup>Charles Warren, *Bankruptcy in United States History* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1972, 1935), pp. 25-45

<sup>160</sup>Morton Horwitz, *The Transformation of American law, 1780-1860* ( New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 228-229.  
Lawrence M. Friedman, *A History of American Law* ( New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985),pp.269-271.

was still young enough to cavort in the Ohio woods with his elderly Uncle Struthers, but William and Eliza Foster thought it was time their youngest became interested in the world of work. Once again they looked for guidance to brother William: “As to Stephen I leave everything regarding the future for him to your judgment,” she wrote her eldest son. “West Point or the Navy I have no choice. You are not only his brother but his Father, and I trust all his feelings will ascend to you as his patron.”<sup>161</sup> Therefore, Eliza and William entrusted the 13 year old to “Brother William” who was given the responsibility of providing his sibling with a formal education. “We have concluded to let Stephen go with William who will put him to school at the Academy at Towanda where William’s office and headquarters are. I think it an excellent chance for the dear little fellow to get an education,” the senior William wrote Morrison Foster.<sup>162</sup>

In the winter of 1840, his brother William accompanied Stephen Foster on a long sleigh ride that took them both to Towanda, Pennsylvania, a town about three hundred miles from Pittsburgh where William Jr. was stationed. “To Stephen the journey was a joyous adventure, and remained with him all his life as a beautiful memory to which he often referred with delight.”<sup>163</sup>

Unfortunately, the Academy at Towanda was not such a “joyous adventure,” and Stephen spent more time “gathering wild strawberries”<sup>164</sup> than studying. Next, the future composer was sent to the Athens Academy at Tioga Point, which was located a short distance from Towanda. This school, even at brother William’s expense, also proved to be unsatisfactory.

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<sup>161</sup> Eliza C. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., August 7, 1840 (Foster Hall Collection, C692).

<sup>162</sup> William B. Foster to Morrison Foster, January 12, 1840 (Foster Hall Collection, C685).

<sup>163</sup> Harold Vincent Milligan, *Stephen Collins Foster, A Biography of America’s Folk-Song Composer* (New York: Schirmer, 1920), p. 22.

<sup>164</sup> William Wallace Kingsbury, from Milligan, *Stephen Collins Foster, A Biography of America’s Folk-Song Composer*, p. 24.

The fourteen year old Stephen did, however, write and perform his first composition, "The Tioga Waltz," for four flutes at the Athens Academy. R. M. Welles, who was attending the school at the same time, recalled meeting the young Stephen in January, 1841. Homesickness, of which the young composer complained frequently to his mother, may have been at the root of the problem. He also complained that the family where he boarded was noisy and the rooms insufficiently heated.<sup>165</sup> "Don't pay Mr. Herrick for fire in my room as I have not had any since you payed [sic] him last." Stephen begged his brother William to allow him to live with him in Towanda and study there privately with a Mr. Vosberry. But there was another reason he may have wanted to leave the Athens Academy. One of the students at the academy was a young lady named Frances Welles, probably a sister of the above mentioned R. M. Welles. The musically inclined Frances lived in a large home near the school, and Foster spent many pleasant musical evenings at her house. Frances, however, accepted a proposal of marriage and left the school.<sup>166</sup> It was not long before Stephen Foster left the Athens Academy, too.

The family immediately made one final attempt to give the youngest son a formal education. On July 20, 1841 Stephen was sent to live in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania to attend Jefferson College, which was located about twenty miles south of Pittsburgh. William Barclay Foster's father had been one of the original trustees of Jefferson College, but even that could not convince Stephen to stay in school. Stephen complained to brother William, "When I wrote to you from Canonsburg I did not tell you whether I liked the place or not (if I remember aright) but now I will take the liberty of telling you that I became more disgusted with the place as long as I stayed in it. It is not a good time to begin college in the middle of the season as I could not get

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<sup>165</sup>R. M. Welles, "The Old Athens Academy," Bradford County Historical Society, Annual No. 5, Towanda, Penn. 1911, from Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 190-191

<sup>166</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 198.

into any class for three or four days after I went there, and when I did get started into a recitation it was in irregular hours.” One week after entering Jefferson College, he bummed a ride home with another disgruntled student.<sup>167</sup>

Maybe Stephen left the school because he was stressed about not having enough money to pay his bills. Although Stephen’s father had paid the tuition in advance, Stephen complained to his brother William in July of 1841 that there were several bills owing and that he did not have enough money to pay them. He needed money for the little extras, he wrote his older brother, such as the small fee to join a literary society “as all of the students belong to them.” But more serious deficits were the boarding fees which Stephen’s father did not pay. Stephen asked his brother William to “pay boarding bills at the end of every month,” which amounted to \$8.50 plus an additional \$1.25 per week for washing expenses “as I have to keep myself very clean here.” Jefferson College was the last attempt that the family made at getting Stephen a formal education. Although he liked to read at home, his father said with resignation, “I cannot get him to stick to school.”<sup>168</sup>

Stephen rarely functioned well in a formal school environment. At the age of five, he and Morrison attended “an infant school taught by a Mrs. Harvey,” but when asked to recite the alphabet, Stephen bounded out of the classroom “with a yell like that of a Comanche Indian,” and ran a mile and a half to his house. The following year, however, Stephen must have settled down because Eliza wrote: “The little children go to school with quite as happy faces as though the world had no thorns in it.” Next, Stephen attended the Allegheny Academy, which had been started by the Reverend Joseph Stockton, an intimate friend of William Barclay Foster from

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<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 203-205.

<sup>168</sup> William Foster, Sr. March 30, 1842, quoted in Milligan, *Stephen Collins Foster, A Biography of America’s Folk Song Composer*, p. 34.

Meadville, Pennsylvania. Joseph Stockton emphasized the classics and mathematics, but elocution was the subject taught at the Academy at which Stephen excelled. Stephen studied with John Kelly from Derry, Ireland, who took over the Academy after Stockton's death. Years later, the composer wrote a poem, "A tribute from the Kelly boys," to commemorate this favored man among school boys. Stephen's mother and older sisters also provided him with very convenient home schooling. William B. Foster procured the books that Henrietta ordered, and Eliza Foster had her son copy lengthy tracts of Shakespeare as a way of committing the classics to memory. In his own way, Stephen Foster acquired an education, but it was not to be garnered in the confines of a school room.<sup>169</sup>

### 3.5 AT HOME IN ALLEGHENY

After Stephen Foster abandoned the schooling that his older brother or his father had offered, he went to live in Allegheny City with his mother in the brick house that brother William had purchased for the Fosters.<sup>170</sup> By the fall of 1841, Stephen was studying privately with a Mr. Moody, "a first rate teacher of mathematics in Pittsburgh," but he spent most of his time leisurely hanging around the house with his mother and a pet cat. His father William finally appeared resigned to the fact that Stephen's "leisure hours are all devoted to musick[sic], for which he possesses a strange talent."<sup>171</sup> When the senior William traveled north to Erie, Pennsylvania, chasing after an unresolved legal claim, he left Eliza and Stephen in Allegheny. They had "the

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<sup>169</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 82, 86, 100, 102.

<sup>170</sup> Eliza C. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., August 7, 1840 (Foster Hall Collection, C692).

<sup>171</sup> William B. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr. September 3, 1841, quoted in Morneweck, *Chronicles*.



house to ourselves,” but they were lonely, Eliza confided to her son William, “so much so that it has induced a very pretty.....tortouse shell collour’d cat to take up her boarding and lodging with us.....Stephen gives her all the little bits he is permitted to gather for the sake of her company.” Eliza continued to try to induce son William to undertake the guidance of Stephen’s future, offering reassurances that the youngest son would not be a burden forever: “He is not so much devoted to music as he was; other studies seem to be elevated in his opinion, he reads a great deal, and fools about none at all.”<sup>172</sup> Stephen had his regrets after he left school: “He says he has lost conseat [sic] of himself because he was once in his life a great fool and that was when he did not go back with brother William.”<sup>173</sup>

When William senior filed for bankruptcy in the spring of 1842, he asked his eldest son to take care of Stephen through the summer. The father wanted the younger William to find work for Stephen, perhaps to direct him in his choice of a vocation: “I wish if you could make a target bearer of Stephen, and find employment for him, that you would take him through the summer. He is uncommonly studious at home, but dislikes going to school. He says there is too much confusion in the school. I dislike to urge him so long as he discovers no evil or idle propensities. He says he would like to be in brother William’s sunshine.”<sup>174</sup> But this time “Brother William” had had enough of his wayward, dreamy eyed sibling. He had provided the house in Allegheny where Stephen could stay. That was all the sunshine he would provide, and in the future Stephen probably increasingly came to feel that he lived in his older, successful brother’s shadow.

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<sup>172</sup> Eliza C. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., October 18, 1841 ( Foster Hall Collection, C599).

<sup>173</sup> Eliza C. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., August 14, 1841 (Foster Hall Collection, C708.)

<sup>174</sup> William B. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., March 14, 1842 (Foster Hall Collection, C515).

The Fosters settled comfortably into the house that William Jr. had purchased on the East Common in Allegheny City. Eliza wrote her generous son, “We have fairly settled down into the house keeping having a good girl which enables me to keep clean and comfortable as I study nothing but our comfort, which little we have I take great pleasure in attending to it.” Apparently, Eliza once again felt that she had a home. “ Everything around our neighborhood looks natural and perfectly harmonizes with the very pleasant association of home. The Robinsons have been to see us, looking as cheerily as they could to welcome us back.” Even if her daily activities were “a haknied [sic] stale story,” Eliza was contented. “You know what I am doing very well at this season, turning old clothes in[to] new ones, looking after the baking and the cooking and brushing about the house, and sometimes taking a comfortable rest in a rocking chair, by a pleasant coal fire to read the Cronicle[sic] in the forenoon, and the daily American at four o’clock in the afternoon, going to bed at nine o’clock that I may rise at six to have breakfast for Morrison who is off to his business the moment it is over, we have ever and anon a quiet and peaceable and temperate house exactly such a one as I have always been longing for.”<sup>175</sup> They even had a new Christ church built in Allegheny, “with an excellent preacher in it.”<sup>176</sup> The new church kept Eliza very busy, as she explained, with its “fine musick[sic], fine stores, plenty of room, and people flocking in.”<sup>177</sup> It was this new preacher, a

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<sup>175</sup> Eliza C. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., November 10, 1841( Foster Hall Collection, C601).

<sup>176</sup> Eliza C. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., September 16, 1841 (Foster Hall Collection, C596).

<sup>177</sup> Eliza C. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., November 10, 1841 (Foster Hall Collection, C601).

Mr. Woods, who announced the senior William Foster's name as a candidate for the office of Mayor of Allegheny.<sup>178</sup>

A few years after the Fosters had settled into the house in Allegheny, William, Jr. built a new three-story brick house for the family, on land he had purchased in 1843. The house was located at 605 Union Avenue near the one they had been living in.<sup>179</sup> It offered a lovely view facing onto the East Commons, an expansive park-like green area set in the better part of Allegheny. The large comfortable new house became for the Fosters their only permanent home after the loss of White Cottage. Brother William never deeded the Allegheny house over to the Fosters, however. It remained in his own name to be used by the Foster family, until as it turned out, William and Eliza passed on. At one time, Stephen, Morrison, Henry, Eliza, and the senior William lived there together. When money was tight, or when the family broke apart and did not need such spacious living quarters, they moved out and rented it to another family. The Fosters were content in the Allegheny house. "Pa has made a beautiful little garden and rises early every morning to dress and weed it," Eliza proudly informed her son William.<sup>180</sup> Stephen could stroll on the broad grounds of the Commons while he mentally fit lyrics to his music, or he could pay a visit to the pretty neighbor girl Susan Pentland and improvise songs on her piano. Eliza, when the weather was nice, could gossip with the neighbors behind the house where they baked bread in an oven shared by the neighboring families.

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<sup>178</sup>William B. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr. October 1, 1841 (Foster Hall Collection C597).

<sup>179</sup>Baynham, *History of Music in Pittsburgh 1758-1958*, p.77.

The Foster house at 605 Union Avenue no longer exists.

<sup>180</sup>Mornebeck, *Chronicles*, p. 128.

### 3.6 ETHNIC DIVERSITY

Although the new house was a great comfort to the Fosters and provided them with a real home for the first time in more than a dozen years, Allegheny City was more diverse in every way than the staid Lawrenceville, where the White Cottage had been located. In the 1830s and 1840s, working, middle, and upper middle class families, from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds made their homes there. The new neighborhood was also more free spirited, perhaps even “bohemian” with more artists, poets, and musicians and was consequently more interesting for a young man with Stephen’s burgeoning talents.

Allegheny City was cut up into a patchwork of ethnic groupings. The Irish lived in the western section, along with the Scotch Irish, and the Germans almost exclusively lived on the eastern side of Allegheny which was called Dutchtown. The nativists, like the Episcopalians of English background, lived in the better sections of Allegheny, “grouped in the neighborhood of the public squares,” such as on the East Common, where the Foster home was located and where the prosperous lawyer John McKnight lived. The Buchanans also at one time lived in Allegheny, where the young Edward Buchanan studied for the ministry at the Episcopal

Institute on Western Avenue “to gratify the hope of his mother that one of her children should be a clergyman.”<sup>181</sup>

Noble poetic types who wanted to improve society for the oppressed and men with antislavery inclinations also congregated in Allegheny City . Charles P. Shiras, a good friend of Stephen’s who lived a few blocks from the Fosters, published an anti-slavery newspaper and

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<sup>181</sup>Philip Shriver Klein. *President James Buchanan, A Biography* (Pennsylvania State University, 1962), p. 93, 3.

poems that proselytized improving the life of the working man and ameliorating the misery of the slave. William H. Burleigh, a young law student, came to Allegheny to edit the Western Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society's publication, the *Christian Witness*<sup>182</sup> Another Alleghenian who became involved with the antislavery movement was Charles Avery. He was a wealthy philanthropist, who made his fortune in a successful Allegheny cotton mill before he had a change of heart and became a leader in Pittsburgh's antislavery society.

But there were also poor families like the Carnegies from Scotland. The thirteen year old Andrew Carnegie came to Allegheny from Dunfermline, Scotland in 1848, the son of a destitute immigrant hand weaver who had been pushed out of work by the mechanization of his trade. They moved into two rooms on the top of a relative's house on Rebecca Street, where the gloom and poverty of their life quickly dispelled the optimistic notions they had entertained about their life in America. Andrew had neither the time nor the interest that the arts demanded. He went to work as soon as he came to America, and soon became acquainted with Morrison Foster because he delivered messages to the Hope Cotton Factory.<sup>183</sup>

Music was plentiful in Allegheny and the diverse ethnic groupings provided the youthful Stephen with an opportunity to hear a variety of musical sounds. The black church in Allegheny City offered the sounds of black inspired music, sung in the emotionally laden voices of the enthusiastic black church members. The German immigrants to Allegheny, on the other hand, offered the sounds of the pure classical Germanic music of Bach, Beethoven, and the songs of Schubert. Henry Kleber, the German born musician who taught Stephen the basics of music theory, also lived in Allegheny, where he taught music and opened a music store. The Irish had

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<sup>182</sup>*Story of Old Allegheny City* (Pittsburgh: Allegheny Centennial Committee, 1941), p.33.

<sup>183</sup> Joseph Frazier Wall, *Andrew Carnegie* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), pp. 81-82.

their own songs, foremost among them the sentimental sad ballads of Thomas Moore. The popularity of these songs was not limited to those born in Ireland, for Moore's songs could be heard in the parlors of middle class native born Americans as well. The Carnegies had their own Scottish airs of Robert Burns, which were almost as popular as the Irish songs. The native born neighborhood girls and boys, who were equally musical, encouraged Stephen Foster to write parlor and minstrel songs, which they performed in Allegheny at their youthful club, the Knights of the Square Table. Yes, Allegheny City was a fortuitous place for Stephen Foster's peculiar brand of genius to emerge.

### **3.7 UGLY RACE RELATIONS IN ALLEGHENY CITY**

Allegheny was also the home of the black Delaney family, who had moved to Pittsburgh from Virginia where free blacks were not allowed to educate their children. They settled into Allegheny in the 1830s, and the young Martin Delaney began studying medicine with Dr. Andrew McDowell, the family physician of the Fosters whose pretty daughter Jane would one day marry Stephen. The doctor lived across the Allegheny River on the Pittsburgh side on Penn Avenue, where William Foster had built the White Cottage. When the depression of 1837 hit Pittsburgh, Martin Delaney's father and brother lost their jobs and he felt compelled to give up his medical training so that he could work to ensure the family's survival. Delaney went into business on his own, advertising in Pittsburgh's 1837 business directory during the height of the depression: "Delaney, Martin R. Cupping, Leeching, and Bleeding." Delaney was very good at his job and with recommendations from Dr. McDowell and two others Pittsburgh physicians, Delaney was admitted to Harvard Medical school. Although he began the program, racist

attitudes did not allow him to complete it. Delaney later became a famous black abolition leader who published his own anti-slavery publication in Pittsburgh called the *Mystery* before he joined up with Fredrick Douglas to co-edit *The North Star*.<sup>184</sup>

Race relations in Pittsburgh and Allegheny could be vicious, and the hardships growing out of the 1837 Depression only increased mob attacks. The attacks were usually “led by unemployed whites who hoped to drive the blacks out of the area,” especially if they were achieving some success and represented a threat to white jobs. Native born and immigrant white workmen joined forces to shout, “Down with Niggers! Send them back to Africa where they belong!”<sup>185</sup> That relations between the races were degenerating was made evident by the fact that Pennsylvanians rewrote their state constitution in 1838 and took away the free black men’s right to vote, a right free blacks had enjoyed for many years in Pittsburgh and Allegheny City.<sup>186</sup>

Just how callous white feelings were regarding blacks in Allegheny was made indelible by the horrific experiments of Thomas Semple, a tanner by trade, who was the mayor of Allegheny City in 1841. While holding the office of city magistrate, just before he became mayor, he tried an experiment to see if human skin could be used in the place of leather. A black man who had “ruthlessly killed a farmer” fell through the ice of the Allegheny River and drowned, while trying to escape across the frozen river by foot. The alleged murderer’s body was recovered and left in the Town Hall to await the coroner’s verdict. During the night, Semple stole the body and brought “the corpse to his tanyard, peeled it and tanned the skin. Later, the future

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<sup>184</sup>Dorothy Sterling, *The Making of an Afro- American, Martin Robison Delany 1812-1885*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971) pp 20-58.

<sup>185</sup> Sterling , *The Making of an Afro-American*, pp. 58, 59, 66.

<sup>186</sup> *Freedom and Community: 19<sup>th</sup> Century Black Pennsylvania* (Philadelphia: The Center, 1992)

Mayor cut the human pelt into small pieces and made belts, watch fobs, and razor straps for his friends.” Although a committee of irate citizens clamored for Semple’s trial on a charge of inhumanity, the jury exonerated him on the excuse that he had “merely been conducting a scientific experiment.”<sup>187</sup> Semple served as mayor of Allegheny for one year and retired to a farm in Pennsylvania a highly respected citizen. After Semple’s term as mayor ended, William B. Foster served two terms as mayor of Allegheny City, from 1842 through 1843. Although Mayor William B. Foster was personally sympathetic to blacks, not all the residents of Allegheny were, as the story of the black band leader Frank Johnson revealed.

Racist attacks were particularly virulent when Frank Johnson came to perform in Allegheny City in 1843. Johnson’s all black band was composed of ten musicians, who in 1835 had performed in London where the enraptured reviewer mistook them for American Indians. The band had traveled to Pittsburgh from Cincinnati on the steamboat *Little Ben* and on Friday, May 12th, they gave a “Grand Soiree Musicale” at Philo Hall, where they were well received by the audience. The next Tuesday they were scheduled to play at Temperance Ark in Allegheny where Mayor William B. Foster had recently been holding temperance rallies. Tickets were twenty-five cents each and on the night of May 16, 1843, “friends of temperance and good Music” assembled to hear the show inside the Ark. In the meanwhile, on the outside, white ruffians began making themselves offensive by expressing “their superiority over the inoffensive and talented colored musicians.”<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>187</sup>*Story of Old Allegheny City* (Pittsburgh: Allegheny Centennial Committee, 1941), p. 121.

<sup>188</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles of Stephen Foster’s Family*, pp. 262-263.



A newspaper account of the incident said that the mob was composed of “native born subjects and sons of aristocrats,” not of the “potatoe [sic] foreigners.”<sup>189</sup> This assertion is surprising considering that the early 1840s were the years when there was a constant influx of Irish into the industrialized cities of America, and Pittsburgh was no exception. A virulent animosity developed between the Irish and the blacks, as the former steadily pushed the blacks out of jobs that for years had been unofficially consigned to black labor. Especially since Frank Johnson’s band was performing for the temperance cause, the Irish would have objected. According to a contemporary article:

“During the evening, the mob on the outside of the Ark in which the Band were performing for the benefit of the temperance cause, were with some difficulty kept quiet and after the performance had closed, WM. B. Foster, Esq., the Mayor of Allegheny City, advised the members of the band to remain within the building, and he went out and appealed to the better sense of the mob in a short speech, after which he conducted a portion of the band through the crowd, the remainder intending to await the arrival of a carriage from the city.”<sup>190</sup>

Some of the musicians rode in the carriage, but the mob reconvened at the corner of Diamond and Federal Streets, to greet the walking musicians. There Mayor William B. Foster made another speech, after which he conducted another black band member through the crowd. The band members tried to make their way to safety, but as they got nearer to the bridge that crossed the Allegheny River, the mob assaulted the black musicians “in the most brutal manner with brickbats and stones,” leaving one man with a deep cut in his forehead. “The mob,” asserted the newspaper, “was mostly composed of boys and young men,” but they could not be sure who threw the stones. “In the morning the blood on the pavement near the bridge where the assault was committed stood in pools.”

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<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 262.

<sup>190</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 262-263.

Four men were brought before Mayor Foster on charges of riot and assault, and they were held on \$200 bail. Although at first it appeared that the citizens of Allegheny were determined to have justice in the case, when the rioters came to trial, the jury returned a verdict of “Not Guilty and the defendants pay the cost of the prosecution.” The attack and the verdict showed that the citizens of Allegheny City were not friendly to blacks, no matter how talented or professional they were. The large number of immigrant Irish living in the city had only made racial antagonisms more bitter. Frank Johnson’s band was not easily scared off, however. Perhaps encouraged by Mayor Foster’s concern and fair treatment, they advertised that “a Grand Quadrille Party” would be held at the Bonnafon’s Saloon the next week.<sup>191</sup> That Stephen’s father came to the defense of the black band must have left a strong imprint on the mind and heart of the impressionable sixteen year old.

### 3.8 WEST POINT FANTASY

By 1846, the Fosters of Allegheny City began to break up and go their separate ways. Henry Foster went to work in Washington in the treasury office when the Democratic President Polk came to office. Later he married a girl from Lawrenceville. Mary Burgess was from the old circle or as Eliza would have put it, “set” of Foster family friends. When the Whig Zachary Taylor replaced Polk in 1849, Henry came home to Pittsburgh, but he and his wife Mary moved into his mother-in-law’s house in Lawrenceville. Morrison Foster was not at home either, since he was traveling extensively in the South buying cotton for his employer Pollard McCormick.

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<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.261-264

Dunning Foster had formed a partnership in Cincinnati called Irwin & Foster, which solicited business for the various steamboat companies that carried cargoes between Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. Since the size of the Foster family had shrunk considerably, Eliza and William decided to vacate the Allegheny house and move back to Youngstown, Ohio. That left the house on the East Common available for William Jr. to rent to another, presumably larger family.

The senior William had actually purchased a house in Youngstown, but it was an investment property which he had no intention of keeping. This fact was a great disappointment to Eliza, since she enjoyed the house and the quiet neighborhood of Youngstown. In a letter to Morrison, written in August of 1847, Eliza confided:

“...the house is so delightful I would never get tired keeping it in summer, how it will be in winter remains to be tried. The neighborhood is the best I have ever liv’d in, and nothing can exceed the beauty of the spot for shade and verdure. If I had some of my boys here, I would not wish to do better than to make my home here the rest of my days, but this may not be, as Pa says he is trying to sell it.”<sup>192</sup>

When Eliza and William did return to Pittsburgh, they settled into the St. Charles Hotel at the corner of Wood and Third Streets, a place where the Fosters stayed frequently. Later they moved to a private boardinghouse at 85 Penn Street.<sup>193</sup>

In 1846, Stephen appeared to be the only Foster with no plans or direction for the future, and the family, understandably, was concerned. After he made little effort to complete his formal education, the dreamy eyed young man toyed with the idea of attending West Point, the nation’s military academy in upstate New York. The idea may have originated with brother William because years earlier Eliza Foster had written to her son William, asking his advice regarding

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<sup>192</sup>Letter dated August 23, 1847 from Eliza Foster to William Foster, Jr. Quoted in Morneweck’s *Chronicles*, pp. 306-307.

<sup>193</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 357.

West Point.<sup>194</sup> Stephen actually made an application for an appointment to the military academy, but receiving the appointment involved getting a sufficient number of very positive recommendations, a feat that was difficult or impossible for a poetic young man like Stephen Foster. A prominent politician made the final selection from among many qualified young male applicants, or at least, male applicants with qualified and impressive families. About a dozen years later, Ann Eliza's son, Edward Buchanan, Jr. did get an appointment to West Point, but by that time he could offer the recommendation of his uncle President James Buchanan. Edward, who began the "cadet life" in 1859, considered soldiering the "grandest profession a man can have."<sup>195</sup> In contrast, it is almost comical to think of Stephen Foster applying to West Point in 1846. The fate of the "Class of 1846," as explained in the book of that title, was to meet in mortal combat as the legendary commanders of the armies of the North and the South. We have to smile when we juxtapose the name of Stephen Foster with that of George McClellan, Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson, Robert Anderson, and William Tecumseh Sherman, all of whom either attended West Point in the 1840s or graduated from the Academy in 1846, the year Stephen made his application.<sup>196</sup>

Presumably Foster's temperament would not have fitted him for the activities of a cadet. "A full schedule of classes, interrupted only by the main meal of the day at midday, was followed by that never ending staple of all cadets' existence: drill twice a day." The day's schedule included "classes, study, physical education or athletics, military duties, marching and

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<sup>194</sup> Eliza C. Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., August 7, 1840 (Foster Hall Collection C692).

<sup>195</sup> Edward Buchanan, Jr. to Morrison Foster, March 31, 1860 (Foster Hall Collection C577).

<sup>196</sup> John C. Waugh, *The Class of 1846: From West Point to Appomattox* (New York: Warner Books, 1994) The irony in store for these graduates is the theme of Waugh's book. West Point graduates commanded fifty-five of the war's sixty major battles, and a West Pointer commanded one side in the remaining five battles.

recreation.” Of course, there was an escape that tempted most of the cadets, and would have appealed to Stephen. In 1824 an Irishman named Benny Havens opened a tavern about a mile south of the academy. “Sneaking out under cover of darkness and dodging sentries, generations of cadets made the pilgrimage to Benny Havens to enjoy a home cooked meal, and more often than not, something a bit stronger to fortify their spirits. For fifty years Benny Havens was the bane of West Point’s superintendents and a cherished sanctuary for its students...” When Cadet Jefferson Davis was caught at the tavern, he was court-martialed, dismissed, and then reinstated.<sup>197</sup>

Stephen Foster’s application for West Point was passed over, and the spot given to a young man referred to in the Foster correspondence as G. McKn., an abbreviation that is strongly suggestive of McKnight, a name today that marks a busy thoroughfare in Pittsburgh. Henry Foster, writing from Washington on March 16, 1846, was surprised that the appointment went to “young McK.” “I can scarcely believe it possible that there is so little justice in our Government,” Dunning wrote apologetically. But then he consoled himself and Morrison with the idea that “it may result for the best, as I doubt very much whether Steve’s health would have permitted him to remain at the Point, had he received the appointment.”<sup>198</sup>

Putting considerations of Foster’s physical health aside, it does not appear that he was suited by temperament for the rigorous schedules and discipline demanded at West Point. If Foster by some fluke had been admitted to the Academy, his name would have joined the names of other misplaced individuals who were accepted at West Point, yet were dismissed before

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<sup>197</sup>John Grant, James Lynch, and Ronald Bailey, *West Point, the First 200 Years* ( Guilford, Connecticut.: Globe Pequot Press, 2002, p. 47.

<sup>198</sup> Henry Foster to Morrison Foster, March 16, 1846 (Foster Hall Collection, C488).

graduating. Not surprisingly, all of them were artists or poets. Cadet Edgar Allan Poe spent more time at Benny Havens than at the Academy. Indeed, Poe thought that Benny Havens “was the sole congenial soul in the entire God forsaken place.” Cadet James McNeill Whistler entered West Point in 1851, the year Foster would have graduated had he been accepted. Whistler even exasperated the drawing instructor, Professor Weir. When asked to paint an engineer’s rendering of a bridge, he insisted on putting a couple of mischievous boys into the scene, or in some way disturbing the focus of the picture. Whistler was eventually dismissed for “academic deficiency,” and Superintendent Robert E. Lee refused his appeal for reinstatement. We can imagine similar examples of comical student-professor confrontations and mutual frustrations if Stephen Foster had been accepted at West Point.<sup>199</sup>

Stephen Foster drew on fantastic imaginings when he fancied that he would make a suitable cadet at West Point. Probably he was attracted by the glamour of the idea, and was equally inspired by a psychological drive to identify with a truly masculine vocation. When the appointment fell through, the Fosters, either with a sense of disappointment or a knowing sigh of relief, were desperate to find a place for their youngest son. In June of 1846, Morrison secured for Stephen “a better situation” at McCormick’s cotton factory. Dunning wrote about Morrison’s efforts: “I hope he may succeed, if we get Stephen comfortably situated it will be a great object gained.”<sup>200</sup> According to Morneweck, Stephen “had lately been given a small position in Mr. McCormick’s new Hope Warehouse, checking cotton bales as they were rolled up the wharf directly from the steamboats into the building.”<sup>201</sup> What Morrison meant by a “better situation” is not known, but for some reason or another it was decided that Stephen would move to

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<sup>199</sup> Grant, *West Point, the First 200 Years*, pp. 47, 75.

<sup>200</sup> Dunning Foster, June 1846, quoted in Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 282.

<sup>201</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 282.

Cincinnati and work for his brother Dunning doing much of the same type of work he did for McCormick. Dunning Foster, the brother who had a partnership in the commission and forwarding business working with the steamboats that plied the Ohio Rivers, next took on the responsibility of Stephen Foster.

#### 4.0 THE AWAKENING IN CINCINNATI

In 1846, Stephen Foster moved out the home of his youth in Allegheny City to live in Cincinnati where he went to work as a bookkeeper in the employ of his brother Dunning. The family hoped that Stephen would learn a trade and get established in the manly world of business. He did learn a trade in Cincinnati, and he did enter into the world of business, but it was the business of music. Foster was a young man with an ambiguous sense of his future when he left Allegheny City at the end of 1846; by 1850 he returned home a new man, confident that he could earn his living writing songs. The question is, what happened in that three year time period to transform the young rather insecure man? What did Cincinnati, the city known alternately as the "Queen City of the West" ( because of its fine culture) and as "porkopolis" (because of its pig slaughtering) have to offer the budding composer? Why did Stephen Foster's artistic talents flower in Cincinnati? Early in 1850 he settled back in Pittsburgh with a new and brighter determination about his future in music. He was confident that his "financial prospects were now as good as any of his brothers,"<sup>202</sup> basing his confidence on the fact that while in Cincinnati, he had signed a contract with the New York music publishers Firth, Pond and Company which guaranteed royalty payments for everything he wrote. Six months after returning home he married one of the daughters of Pittsburgh's most prominent physician.

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<sup>202</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p.376.



## 4.1 MUSICAL BOOKKEEPER

Stephen had visited Cincinnati many years before, when Eliza Foster had taken him, as a child along with Henrietta and Morrison, to visit her half brothers in Kentucky in 1833. As usual, Eliza was short of cash, and one of her half brothers paid their passage. Stephen was just seven years of age when he visited Cincinnati for the first time and was afflicted with either a bout of fever, or as sister Ann Eliza assumed, cholera.<sup>203</sup> In a letter written in 1883 to her brother Morrison Foster, when both were quite elderly, Ann Eliza wrote: “In examining those [letters] written by myself, strangely enough, I do not find any allusions to Stevy in any but one of them, from Meadville, of the date of June 18, 1833, in which I say “he had gone with Ma & Etty [Henrietta] to Augusta, Ky, to visit our half uncle Tomlinson, & that he had been attacked by cholera, as had also Uncle Joseph, but that both were happily recovered.”<sup>204</sup> This is the only suggestion in the family correspondence that Stephen Foster “had been attacked by Cholera,” but 1833 was the year when cholera afflicted Bardstown, Kentucky in a terrible way, and Bardstown is situated just up the river from Augusta about sixty miles inland.

Thirteen years later, a healthy twenty-year old Stephen Foster arrived in Cincinnati on a Pittsburgh to Cincinnati packet boat that traveled the Ohio River on a daily schedule. He was now an adult, old enough to assume the responsibilities that middle class manhood entailed. His destination was his brother Dunning’s business which was located on Front Street at # 4 Cassilly's Row. The building, which was named for Eliza Foster’s old friends the Cassillys

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<sup>203</sup>Raymond Walters, *Stephen Foster, Youth's Golden Gleam: A Sketch of his Life and Background in Cincinnati, 1846-1850* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936), pp. 5-7.

<sup>204</sup> Ann Eliza Buchanan to Morrison Foster, October 17, 1883 (Foster Hall Collection C455).

who had moved to Cincinnati in the 1820s, stood in full view of the city's largest steamboat landing along the Ohio River.

As commission agents, Irwin & Foster competed with several firms along the river, all of which were eager to represent the steamboat companies that transported the products of the local manufactures and merchants downriver, and brought the products from the South or the West upstream to Cincinnati. They also booked passage for people traveling on the boats as well. Although Dunning had worked as a clerk for a steamboat that traveled the Ohio River, the partner in the firm who supplied "the energy and stability" and the real experience was the Scotch-Irish Archibald Irwin, the son of a Pittsburgher who had moved to Cincinnati in the 1820s, and established himself as a commission merchant. Irwin & Foster offered boats to Pittsburgh, that as "packets" ran daily between Cincinnati and Pittsburgh, which was not the case when Charlotte ventured to Cincinnati almost twenty years earlier. Most of the boats that Dunning's firm handled traveled in a southerly direction, to St. Louis, Nashville, Memphis, and New Orleans. Far less frequently did they travel to Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York and Boston.<sup>205</sup>

Fortunately for Stephen, his duties as bookkeeper involved keeping accounts of what went on and off the boats. Thus his job took him out of the office down to the levee, where he had the opportunity to see and hear the river workers in action. Included in the cargo that Irwin & Foster handled were huge bales of cotton that were brought up from the South, and carried from the boats by big, strong stevedores. If they were black, they were free blacks, who sang as they worked, and whose strong and poignant voices would have carried over the levee and had a powerful impact on the budding composer. The river boats on which the blacks worked carried

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<sup>205</sup>Walters, *Stephen Foster, Youth Golden Gleam*, pp. 11-15.

what Mark Twain called “no pitiful handful of deckhands, firemen, and roustabouts down there, but a whole battalion of men.”<sup>206</sup> These were the black men whose songs, according to Foster legend, supplied the composer with working material for his own music, and the men whose manliness and humanity impressed Stephen as well. Stephen Foster, it seems, never was far from the river, either in Pittsburgh or Allegheny or Cincinnati, and the river was never far from his songs.<sup>207</sup>

Originally Stephen Foster stayed with his brother Dunning at the Broadway Hotel located along the wharf, but afterwards he moved into a nearby boardinghouse run by a Mrs. Jane Griffin on “tree shaded Fourth Street in a good neighborhood.”<sup>208</sup> A picture of Broadway around Fourth Street from the early 1850s showed a wide cobblestoned thoroughfare filled with multi-horse drawn carriages and well dressed middle class ladies and gentlemen strolling the sidewalks with their top hats and walking canes. The buildings were brick row houses, three or four stories high. There were a few trees planted sporadically, but it was a delightful “picturesque” mid-nineteenth century display of urbanity.<sup>209</sup> Cincinnati was a beautiful city in the late 1840s. Twenty years earlier, when Charlotte Foster had visited the Queen City on her way to Kentucky, she was delighted mostly with its cleanliness. Charlotte marveled that the buildings of Cincinnati all looked as if they had been “built just yesterday,” because they were so clean, not covered with the black soot that was the hallmark of Pittsburgh during the nineteenth century. In 1843,

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<sup>206</sup>Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi*, in *The Family Mark Twain*, p. 33, from *Stephen Foster, ¶ Youth’s Golden Gleam*, p. 16.

<sup>207</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 308.

<sup>208</sup>Walters, *Stephen Foster, Youth’s Golden Gleam*, p. 11.

<sup>209</sup>Scene is from *Western Scenery, or Land and River, Hill and Dale, in the Mississippi Valley* by William Wells, featured in Morneweck’s *Chronicles of Stephen Foster’s Family*, p. 306.

Charles Dickens also described the city favorably in his *American Notes*: “Cincinnati is a beautiful city; cheerful, thriving and animated. I have not often seen a place that commends itself so favorably and pleasantly to a stranger at the first glance as this does, with its clean houses of red and white, its well paved roads, and footways of bright tile.”<sup>210</sup>

War between Mexico and America broke out in 1846, and the following year Dunning Foster decided to join General Winfield Scott's forces in Mexico and leave his brother Stephen on his own in Cincinnati. First Dunning traveled to Pittsburgh to bid his farewells to his mother and father before departing for the land that was "a vague, faraway affair" to Eliza Foster. Joining Dunning from Pittsburgh were Richard Cowan and Bill Blakely, boyhood friends who joined Pittsburgh's Jackson Blues which was captained by an Alex Hayes.<sup>211</sup> Cowan and Blakely preceded Dunning in their departure to Mexico. Morrison joined the Third Regiment and was accorded the rank of sergeant, but his company was not called to Mexico.<sup>212</sup> During Dunning's absence, from the middle of 1847 until the middle of 1848, Stephen Foster was left to work with Dunning's partner Archibald Irwin.

Irwin left no performance review of our young composer, but Morrison Foster years later wrote that the twenty year old Stephen “was a beautiful accountant and his books kept at that time are models of neatness and accuracy.”<sup>213</sup> No matter how neat and accurate Stephen's books were, we get the feeling that once Dunning was off fighting in Mexico, Stephen avoided doing much work at Irwin & Foster's. Stephen Foster was in fact very busy publishing songs

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<sup>210</sup>Charles Dickens, *American Notes*, vol. III, 1843, p.130, featured in *Stephen Foster Youth's Golden Gleam*, p. 40.

<sup>211</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*,, p. 301.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 292, 301.

<sup>213</sup> Foster, *My Brother Stephen*, p. 35.

during these Cincinnati years, both minstrel and parlor songs. The minstrel songs included on their title pages dedications to specific minstrel performers, showing that Foster was actively making professional connections with the minstrels in Cincinnati. The parlor songs, which included dedications to young ladies, show that he was socializing. Since he also had to meet with his publisher, when would the young Stephen have had time for bookkeeping?<sup>214</sup>

From 1846 until 1849, Stephen Foster published quite a few songs which he dedicated to young ladies, alive and dead, and to men, young and old. Most of the songs, until 1849, were published by W. C. Peters, or a variation of that company. Peters and Field of Cincinnati, for example, appeared on Foster's title pages alternatively with Peters and Webster, and Peters, Webb, and Co, depending on the business arrangements of the publisher. Even Firth, Hall, and Pond (not yet Firth, Pond, and Co.) appeared on one title page along with Peters & Field in 1846. Whether Foster actually wrote the parlor songs in Cincinnati, or earlier in Pittsburgh is not known. He did travel back to Pittsburgh on the packet boats from time to time, when he could have been inspired to write the sentimental songs dedicated to the ladies. In 1846, "There's a Good Time Coming!" was published, with a dedication to Mary D. Keller, a Pittsburgh girl. On the title page appeared the names of three publishers: Peters & Webster of Louisville, Peters and Fields, and Firth, Hall, and Pond. The following year Foster composed "Where is thy Spirit, Mary?" which he also dedicated to the same Mary D. Keller. The last was what I have termed a

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<sup>214</sup> My conclusion here is based on the belief that Foster wrote most of the songs published in Cincinnati while he was living in that city, and that he published them not long after he wrote them. Some critics are of the opinion that Foster carried around manuscripts of songs that he had composed at an earlier date in Pittsburgh; and when he needed a song, he pulled one from an old trunk and published it. I do not believe this was always or even frequently the case.

“mourning song,” as Stephen Foster wrote the song after Mary had died in December of 1846. (Foster presented the song to Mary’s sister Rachel Keller, but it was not published un 1895.)<sup>215</sup>

W. C. Peters also published light hearted songs such as “What Must a Fairy’s Dream Be?” in 1847, which Foster dedicated to Mary H. Irwin, a girl who was related to Dunning’s partner Archibald Irwin. When Irwin saw the song, if he did, we wonder if he winked or winced at Stephen’s obvious dereliction of duty. In the following year, Peters published “Stay Summer’s Breath” which the young composer dedicated to the lovely Miss Sophie B. Marshall of Cincinnati. Marshall was the granddaughter of the Fosters’ good friends the Cassillys. Stephen spent a lot of time at the Marshall house in Cincinnati and probably used their piano for composing. Foster also spent time at the home of John B. Russell and his wife, who had a lovely “dark-eyed, dark-haired daughter named Eliza “who would play the piano when Stephen dropped in of an evening.” Overall, it appears that the bookkeeper/ composer spent a good deal of time socializing.<sup>216</sup>

The young Foster also dedicated songs to male friends. After John Russell introduced Stephen to *Gazette* editor William D. Gallagher, Stephen wrote and dedicated a song to Gallagher. He even dedicated the romantically titled song “Summer Longings” to Samuel P. Thompson, “a young fellow who lived at Mrs. Griffin’s boarding house” where Stephen was boarding at the time.<sup>217</sup> In the middle of the nineteenth century such a suggestive demonstration of affection from one man to another signified the romanticism of the age, rather than the

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<sup>215</sup> Saunders and Root, *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Vol. 1, pp. 9, 20, 32.

<sup>216</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, 336.

<sup>217</sup> Walters, *Stephen Foster Youth’s Golden Gleam*, pp. 35-36.

homosexuality of the author. “Summer Longings” was published in 1849 by W. C. Peters of Baltimore, showing that Peters had opened another store in Baltimore.<sup>218</sup>

## **4.2 HOTBED OF RACIAL DISSENT**

Although Stephen found time to write songs and to socialize, the city also offered the young composer the opportunity to become more intimately aware of the complex issues of race and slavery that were threatening the nation. Foster's three years in Cincinnati coincided with some of the city's most intense debates over abolitionism and slavery. Not only were these the unsettling years just preceding the Compromise of 1850, but Cincinnati had a long history of explosive confrontations over race. Cincinnati was located just too close to the “problem” not to react emotionally. Antislavery could be treated as an academic discussion in New England, relegated to the higher realm of ethics. Cincinnatians, on the other hand, because they were situated just across the river from a slave state, had a real situation to face. They felt the repercussions of changes in the laws regarding the South’s peculiar institution. Escaping slaves had been known to walk across the frozen Ohio to freedom, and if abolitionists had their way, freed slaves would cross the Ohio River easily and take jobs away from whites.

It was difficult for Cincinnatians to know just what position to take on the hotly debated slavery issue at mid-century. Concern for the suffering of slaves or a belief in the ideal of liberty were not always the most influential factors. Cincinnatians had a long history of close commercial and personal ties with Southerners, because they sold pork products downriver and

brought back cotton which could be conveyed north to Pittsburgh's cotton mills. Slaveholders frequently came to the Ohio River city to conduct business, bringing their white families with them or their black concubines, or both. For whatever reason, it was much more difficult for Cincinnatians to ignore the slavery issue, than, for example Pittsburghers.

Ohio was set up in 1787 as a free state as part of the Northwest Ordinance, but that did not mean Ohio welcomed blacks. Indeed, Ohioans' treatment of their black residents was not a pretty story. The initial establishment of the Old Northwest as free was a ruse to keep the land for white farmers and laboring men, to exclude, in other words, not only slavery, but aristocratic and greedy slave masters and lowly enslaved and free blacks. It was idealized as white man's land, and to make sure no one misconstrued the meaning of free territory, Ohio immediately established rigid black laws. In 1803 all blacks and mulattos were required to present certificates of freedom before they could settle in the state. A new 1807 law required, in addition to the certificate of freedom, a bond of \$500 signed by two freeholders who would guarantee that the new black residents would not become burdens to the state. By 1829, all blacks who had not presented the \$500 bond guarantee had to leave the city or be expelled. At that point, half of Cincinnati's blacks moved to Canada.<sup>219</sup>

By the 1830s, Cincinnati had become a hotbed of racial dissent and violence. Following in the wake of the Nat Turner slave uprising, the students at the Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, where Harriet Beecher Stowe's husband and father taught, spent their evenings rioting and debating the issues of slavery versus freedom. When the trustees of the school forbade further discussions of slavery, many of the students withdrew and moved away to set up the free

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<sup>219</sup> Robert E. Chaddock, *Ohio Before 1850* (New York: AMS Press, 1976), pp. 35-40.



thinking Oberlin College.<sup>220</sup> Although few blacks lived in Cincinnati in the 1830s, their numbers were growing relatively more rapidly than the increase in the white population, from 1,000 in 1830 to over 3,000 by 1850. As the black population increased, they were viewed as a threat and a competition to the white workers, who discriminated more and more against them and subjected them to violent racial attacks.

As a consequence, when the subject of removing the black codes was brought up, Cincinnatians and other Ohioans from the southern counties, with pressure from the South, voted as a unit in 1839 to keep the black codes on the books. Kentuckians went even further and pressured Ohio to pass a more drastic Fugitive Slave Law. The law passed because of the close business relationship that southern Ohioans maintained with the South, a relationship they were afraid to jeopardize. The Ohioan lawmakers justified their decision to keep the black codes and to enforce a harsh slave law by showing “investigative reports” that concluded that free blacks were “more idle and vicious than slaves,” and also that blacks were a “distinct and degraded class” that competed with white men for employment and demoralized whites simply by association.<sup>221</sup> It was during this strongly anti-abolition decade, the 1830s, that minstrelsy and the minstrel songs portrayed a negative and insulting image of blacks.

Cincinnatians’ attitude of accommodating the South began to change, however, in the 1840s. The primary reason for this change was that new commercial relations were being forged with the North, so that Cincinnatians no longer felt they had to jump when Southerners told them to. The first time Ohioans demonstrated their commercial independence from the South was in

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<sup>220</sup>Eugene Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery, Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Controversy*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967) p. 34.

<sup>221</sup>Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery*, p. 32.  
Robert E. Chaddock, *Ohio Before 1850* (New York: AMS Press, 1976) p. 85.

1841 with the *State v. Farr* decision, which followed the example set by Massachusetts. Now slaves who were accompanied by their master automatically became free upon entering the state of Ohio, even if they were just traveling through the state to another destination. The new ruling did not show that Ohioans were more sympathetic to blacks. They were just becoming enraged over the idea that anti-abolitionists were threatening the free speech of whites.<sup>222</sup>

James G. Birney was a Kentuckian who moved to Ohio, emancipated his slaves, and set up an antislavery paper called the *Philanthropist* in a town near Cincinnati. In early July of 1836, a white mob broke into Birney's newspaper office, smashed the press, shredded the newspapers, and dumped everything into the Ohio River. Salmon P. Chase, an attorney friend of Birney, came to the latter's defense and in the process became the leader of the antislavery crusade in Cincinnati. Chase was responsible for removing most of the city's black codes by 1848, but it was not an easy task. He lost many of his cases when he defended men who had been attacked by anti-abolition mobs or who were trying to help escaped slaves.<sup>223</sup>

Chase noted that the judges often overlooked the *State v. Farr* decision in order to preserve good commercial relations with the South. In 1847, when Stephen Foster was living in Cincinnati, Chase defended the abolitionist John Van Zandt who was being sued for trying to help an escaped slave. When Zandt found fugitive slaves hiding near the Lane Seminary, he tried to escort them to Springfield, Ohio. The slaves were caught and returned to their owner in Kentucky, after which the owner of the slaves sued Van Zandt. Chase defended Van Zandt, but

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<sup>222</sup>Chaddock, *Ohio Before 1850*, p. 107.

<sup>223</sup> Stephen Middleton, *Ohio and the Antislavery Activities of Attorney Salmon Portland Chase, 1830-1849*. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990) pp. 50-84.

he lost the case because of the “proslavery sentiment in Cincinnati,” and the jury fined Van Zandt \$1200.<sup>224</sup>

### 4.3 THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Whether or not Stephen Foster was curious about the plight of escaped slaves, he had the opportunity to read the details of the Van Zandt case, and others like it, in the Cincinnati newspapers. He also would have heard talk about Cincinnati’s Underground Railroad, which in recent years had made steady strides towards advancing new routes to freedom for the slaves who had been able to make their escape across the Ohio River. In spite of the unpopularity of the abolitionists, Cincinnati did have an active underground railroad. Consequently, the residents of Cincinnati often engaged in heated debates over the future or morality of slavery, while dramatic stories of escapes passed from one person to the next.

The shortest route from the slaveholding states to Canada lay through the Ohio Valley and the Western Reserve along the shore of Lake Erie, where people with New England roots made their homes. Therefore, more underground railroad lines actually developed in Ohio than elsewhere, with many stations in the southwestern part of the state around Cincinnati. It is estimated that more than 40,000 slaves escaped through Ohio from 1830 to 1860.<sup>225</sup>

The leader of the underground railroad in Cincinnati was a Quaker named Levi Coffin. Coffin was a native of North Carolina, who became convinced of the evils of slavery and rallied

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<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74-77.

<sup>225</sup> Henry S. Ford and Kate B. Ford, *History of Cincinnati, Ohio* (L.A. Williams Publishers, 1881, reprinted by Ohio Book Store, Cincinnati, Ohio, 1987) pp. 96-97.

to the abolitionist cause. From 1826 until 1846 he lived in Newport, Indiana, where he kept a store, packed pork, and made linseed oil, at the same time secretly handling an underground railroad station. It was to Coffin's house in Newport, Indiana that the fictional Eliza Harris of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* traveled on her journey to freedom, and told her incredible story of escape. Coffin moved to Cincinnati when free-laborites urged him to open a wholesale store that stocked only goods made from free labor. Stephen Foster and Levi Coffin arrived in Cincinnati in the same year. Since Coffin's store had to compete with products made by slave labor, he said he kept the store at much "pecuniary sacrifice."<sup>226</sup>

To carry out his underground railroad work, Coffin learned that he could rely on the German immigrants who lived in Cincinnati, because they did not exhibit the bitter antagonism to blacks that the Irish immigrants displayed. He regularly paid the German owners of a livery stable ten dollars to supply him with a team of two horses to transport his fugitives twenty or thirty miles to the next underground railroad station. "The people of the livery stable seemed to understand what the teams were wanted for, and asked no questions..." Surprisingly, Coffin had his own prejudices and did not always trust the "colored people" with the "affairs of our work." "Most of them were too careless, and a few were unworthy--they could be bribed by the slave hunters to betray the hiding places of the fugitives."<sup>227</sup>

Levi Coffin in his *Reminiscences* described the underground railroad experience in Cincinnati:

"Our willingness to aid the slaves was soon known, and hardly a fugitive came to the city without applying to us for assistance. There seemed to be a continual increase of runaways and such was the vigilance of the pursuers that I was obliged to devote a large share of time from my business to making arrangements for the concealment and safe

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<sup>226</sup> Ford, *History of Cincinnati, Ohio*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

conveyance of the fugitives. They sometimes came to our door frightened and panting and in a destitute condition, having fled in such haste and fear that they had no time to bring any clothing except what they had on, and that was often very scant....." <sup>228</sup>

Coffin's house was well suited for hiding the fugitives: "Very often slaves would lie concealed in upper chambers for weeks, without the boarders or frequent visitors at the house knowing anything about it...." Mrs. Coffin walked up several flights of stairs to bring food to the fugitives which she hid in a basket with "some freshly ironed garment on the top, to make it look like a basketful of clean clothes."<sup>229</sup> Stephen Foster, while living in Cincinnati, might have heard whispers about the fantastic escapes engineered by this remarkable family.

#### 4.4 BLACK IMAGE IN FOSTER'S MIND

Despite the oppressive environment for blacks in the border city, some of the free blacks in Cincinnati at mid-century had elevated their status during the previous decade. As deplorable as the race situation was, blacks in Cincinnati were able to improve their status and living conditions by the 1840s. Thus, when Stephen Foster was living in the city in the final three years of the decade, although deep seated prejudices remained, some free blacks were giving the appearance of confidence and asserting their desire of being accorded the dignity of being men.

According to historian Carter Woodson, many of the 3, 237 blacks in Cincinnati at mid-century had made positive economic strides by the 1840s: "Some had accumulated large tracts of land and real estate." One black man had a large business making barrels for the pork packers.

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<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96-99.

Another black man had a coal business that was so successful the whites tried to drive him out. Other black businessmen even employed whites. There were black tailors, photographers, and grocers. Woodson attributed the "unusual progress" to the development of the steamboat and the rise of the black mechanic. "Negroes employed on steamships amassed money received in the form of tips," and black mechanics were getting as much skilled labor as they could do. "In things economic the negroes were exceptionally prosperous after the forties," noted one writer. Cincinnati had by that time become noted for its pork-packing, and since slaughter houses were sufficiently dirty and undesirable business, blacks were allowed to work in them. The Germans who made sausages were not adverse to hiring blacks as assistants. Thus the meat business, along with the steam boating and packet trade, offered job opportunities for blacks that were unique to that city.<sup>230</sup>

According to Woodson, the 1840s decade was "in fact a brighter day for the colored people in the city" of Cincinnati. White artisans began to hire black men, and white mechanics not only worked with blacks, but they associated with them, "patronized the same barber shop, and went to the same places of amusement." The *Cincinnati Gazette* wrote: "There is no question.....that the colored population of Cincinnati, oppressed as it has been by our state laws as well as by prejudice, has risen more rapidly than almost any other people in any part of the world." The *Gazette* was speaking in moral terms as well as financial. Black schools, churches, and Sunday schools emerged, and blacks joined the temperance organizations.<sup>231</sup>

The consequence of these economic improvements for blacks in Cincinnati was the image of prouder and more independent black men for the eyes and the ears of the young

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<sup>230</sup> Carter G. Woodson, "The Negroes of Cincinnati Prior to the Civil War," *Free Blacks in America, 1800-1860*, ed. By John H. Bracey, Jr. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1971) pp. 72-77.

<sup>231</sup> Woodson, "The Negroes of Cincinnati Prior to the Civil War," p. 76.

and impressionable Stephen Foster. What had Foster learned living and working in Cincinnati where everyday he came into contact with free urban blacks working on the wharves of the Ohio River? Based on the content of the songs he began to write during his stay in Cincinnati, beginning with his 1848 composition "Nelly Was a Lady," we can conclude that Foster learned to regard blacks as human beings deserving of respect and sympathy for their trials. He learned to find tragedy in the black man, not comedy.<sup>232</sup> Perhaps while watching these strong black men go about their business, lifting and toting bales of cotton and other objects from the boats, or walking about with confidence in their free state, Foster saw that they were "men." Author Peter Quinn, in his novel *Banished Children of Eve*, may have had it right in his fictionalized account of Stephen Foster watching the black workers on the dock in Cincinnati:

"Sometimes, after work as a clerk in the steamboat office in Cincinnati, Stephen would go down to the docks and watch the gangs of Negroes load and unload the boats. They were men. He had never given it much thought before. Never looked at negroes with any intent of figuring out who they were, no more than he tried to distinguish the individual horses in the work teams that endlessly hauled wagons to and from the docks. Now he watched them. When the work stopped, they stood together in a group, talking and looking over their shoulders at the white men who oversaw them. Their whole way of speaking and gesticulating changed when they were by themselves. There was a litheness to their step, an energy and gracefulness, that they lost when the whites returned. Rhythmical, playful, high-pitched. Yet there was something sly and mocking in it, conspiratorial. White people were unnerved by it. They were sure it was at their expense, Sambo and Cudjo making sport of their master, aping his walk or mannerisms, returning his contempt....He[Foster] never spoke to anyone about the Negroes, never asserted what observation had confirmed to him: these are men....." <sup>233</sup>

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<sup>232</sup> Even with Foster's 1847 plantation song "Uncle Ned," there is still a hint of comedy, although the comic elements seem to arise more from characterizations based on aging, not race. "Uncle Ned," for example, had no hair on his head and no teeth in his mouth.

<sup>233</sup> Peter Quinn, *Banished Children of Eve* ( New York: Viking Penguin, 1994), pp. 43-52.

#### 4.5 IRISH OR BLACKS ON THE WATERFRONT?

Cincinnati, and Ohio for that matter, had a larger population of free blacks than any other western city or state.<sup>234</sup> As a consequence, Cincinnati, and especially the area around the docks where Stephen Foster worked, offered him greater opportunity to see and hear free blacks than any other western location could or would have afforded. Cincinnati also offered the free blacks more opportunities for jobs, especially along the waterfront, than other areas provided. First of all, steamboats, which regularly ran up and down the Ohio River, provided free blacks with such jobs as stevedores or porters on the river's wharf. They loaded and unloaded freight from the incoming and departing boats, and carried the passengers' luggage on and off the boats. Cincinnati was one of the cities that still employed black stevedores on its docks after 1850. It appears that by mid-century, usually only Southern waterfront towns or waterfronts without large Irish immigrant populations still employed blacks on their wharves. But these black workers in the South were not usually free. In towns on the eastern seaboard, and wherever the predominant immigrant group consisted of the Irish, there were virtually no waterfront jobs for free blacks. A vicious competition developed over the waterfront jobs in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston, and by 1850 the Irish mobs had all but pushed the free blacks off the wharves in these cities. Although the precise details are not known, it is most likely that the same competition with the same results occurred in Pittsburgh where there was also a large Irish population.<sup>235</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> Van Beck Hall, Conversation March 23, 2007.

<sup>235</sup> Maud Russell, *Men Along the Shore* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), p. 10. Russell remarked on the scarcity of records or evidence, or histories, of the longshoremen. "Whatever the causes, one can search in vain for early records of facts of American stevedoring....Only one full-length study of stevedoring and of longshoremen themselves has, previous to this one, been published in America."



In Cincinnati, on the other hand, although Irish lived in the city, the predominant immigrant group were the Germans, who did not compete with the blacks as fiercely for jobs. The German immigrants who came to America more for political reasons during the revolutionary days of the 1840s were not without skills like the Irish. They were not so poor as the Irish, and did not have to compete with blacks for the lowest jobs. As a consequence, the Germans did not push the blacks out of every job they found open to them, including the waterfront jobs, the way the Irish did. This left some opportunity for the blacks in Cincinnati to grow in wealth and confidence.

Morrison Foster always claimed that his brother Stephen was influenced by the music of black singers and musicians that he heard on the Cincinnati waterfront. Historian Eileen Southern noted the presence of black singers on the river fronts. Blacks sang, she said, when they worked as stevedores on the wharves or as firemen, feeding the cavernous furnaces in rhythmical fashion while their emotion laden voices rang out in unison. Other blacks who worked in menial jobs on the boats or in food preparation also sang and black musicians played dance music for the boat's passengers. Southern tells us:

"As a group the most musical black folk of the ante-bellum period may well have been the men working on the wharves and waterfronts of the Mississippi River and its two big tributaries, the Missouri and the Ohio. Negroes were employed as stevedores on the wharfs and on the levees; they worked as firemen and laborers and in food services on the boats that plied back and forth between waterfront cities."<sup>236</sup>

Southern's idea that blacks worked on the river fronts of the nation's interior is confirmed by some statistics of black employment. An 1850 table of "Negro Labor in the United States" listed

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Russell was referring to *Longshoremen* by Charles Barnes published in 1915. Of course, books have been published since Russell's on the subject, but there is still little information available about the stevedores of the 1850s.

<sup>236</sup>Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans, A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1971) pp. 147-148.

blacks as workers on the boats and levees of the interior waterfront towns along the Ohio, the Missouri, and the Mississippi Rivers, down to New Orleans.<sup>237</sup> According to Southern, black waterfront workers and boatmen carried their peculiar work songs and folksongs with them, “from Wheeling, West Virginia, and Cincinnati on the Ohio River, from Omaha, Nebraska, Kansas City and St. Louis on the Missouri River, to the town on the Mississippi itself, Cairo, Illinois, Memphis, Tennessee, and finally, to New Orleans.”<sup>238</sup>

Blacks also worked on the waterfronts in the South. In 1850, they are listed in statistical tables as boatmen, stewards, sailors, and to a lesser degree, stevedores, in the coastal cities of Baltimore, Charleston, Norfolk, and Portsmouth, Virginia. These waterfront workers were both free and unfree.<sup>239</sup> According to Maud Russell, stevedoring of cotton in the South was “largely the province of Negro slaves who were, almost exclusively the longshoremen of the South Atlantic, the Gulf, and the Lower Mississippi.”<sup>240</sup>

But few free blacks who lived in the free cities of the North which had large Irish immigrant populations worked on the waterfronts after the 1840s. C.H. Wesley wrote that “Foreign workers also gave the colored worker a greater competition here [New York] so that the occupations which were carried on by Negroes in the South were often in the hands of other races in the North.”<sup>241</sup> Free blacks had worked on the waterfronts of the eastern coastal cities and in northern river cities like Pittsburgh in the 1830s and early 1840s, but by the late 1840s and 1850s, the Irish took over the waterfronts in the major eastern seaboard cities and probably in

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<sup>237</sup> Lester Rubin, *The Negro in the Longshore Industry* ( Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974, pp. 76-82, 97.

<sup>238</sup> Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, p. 148.

<sup>239</sup> Charles H. Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States 1850 – 1925* ( New York: Vanguard Press, 1927 and Reprint by Russell & Russell, 1967) pp.34-50.

<sup>240</sup> Russell, *Men Along the Shore*, p. 16.

<sup>241</sup> Wesley, *Negro Labor in the United States 1850 – 1925*, p. 39.

cities like Pittsburgh which had a dominant group of Irish. Historian Bruce Nelson said of the Irish in New York:

“The Irish became the dominant force on the New York waterfront in the 1850s.....Recent historical investigation has confirmed that slaves and free blacks worked as seamen and dock laborers during the colonial period, and they continued in these roles during the early years of the new republic, at least until the 1820s and 1830s. But with the coming of mass immigration from Europe, African Americans faced a tidal wave of competition. By 1855, at a time when New York’s African American population numbered less than 12,000, more than half of the city’s population of 630,000 was foreign-born. No wonder the abolitionist Frederick Douglass lamented that fact that ‘every hour sees the black man elbowed out of employment by some newly arrived emigrant whose hunger and whose color are thought to give him a better title to the place.’”<sup>242</sup>

Consequently, few blacks could find work on the docks of the major Northern cities except when they were employed as strike breakers and worked under police protection. During the 1850s, longshoremen and stevedore unions were formed which excluded blacks.<sup>243</sup> During a spree of strikes in the 1850s and early 1860s, Irish longshoremen in New York battled black workers who had been brought in to take their places, and the Longshoremen’s United Benevolent Society, formed in 1852, was exclusively Irish.<sup>244</sup> In Boston, Irish dominated longshoremen unions “as far back as 1847” excluded blacks and Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris reported that blacks were “used as strikebreakers against the Irish in Boston as far back as 1855.”<sup>245</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Bruce Nelson, “Ethnicity, Race, and the Logic of Solidarity: Dock Workers in International Perspective,” *Dockworkers: International Exploration in Comparative Labor History, 1790-1970* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2000)

<sup>243</sup> Lester Rubin, *The Negro in the Longshore Industry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974), p. 136

Rubin reported that in 1853 the Riggers’ and Stevedores’ Union Association formed in San Francisco, which was “guild-like” and “is more than likely that it included no blacks whatsoever.”

<sup>244</sup> This idea is documented by many sources ( see below) in Noel Ignatiev’s *How the Irish Became White* (New York : Routledge, 1995).

<sup>245</sup> Herbert R. Northrup, *Organized Labor and the Negro* (New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1971), p. 141.

The black newspapers commented on the Irish takeover of the waterfronts. As early as 1838, the *Colored American* noted: “Along the wharves, where the colored man once had done the whole business of shipping and unshipping...in all these situations here are substituted foreigners or white Americans.”<sup>246</sup> In Philadelphia in 1849 the situation was the same: “The wharves and new buildings attest to this fact, in the person of our stevedores and hod-carriers as does all places of labor; and when a few years ago we saw none but blacks, we now see nothing but Irish.”<sup>247</sup> A census report of the middle 1850s listed only 28 black hod carriers and 27 stevedores in Philadelphia, “a drop in both cases of more than half in only three years.”<sup>248</sup>

Another African American newspaper noted in 1851 that in the major cities, “the influx of white laborers has expelled the Negro almost enmass from the exercise of the ordinary branches of labor.”<sup>249</sup> Frederick Douglass lamented that free blacks could no longer be found in the waterfront jobs, which, he noted, were rapidly being taken over by the Irish. In 1853, Douglass wrote, “Every hour sees us elbowed out of some employment to make room for some newly arrived emigrant from the Emerald Isle, whose hue and color entitle him to special favor. These white men are becoming house servants, cooks, stewards, waiters, and flunkies....If they

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Sterling D. Spero and Abram L. Harris, *The Black Worker* (New York: Atheneum, 1968, p. 148. Quoted in Lester Rubin, *The Negro in the Longshore Industry* ( Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1974), p. 43.

<sup>246</sup>*The Colored American*, July 28, 1838, quoted in Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 110.

<sup>247</sup>*Daily Sun*, November 10, 1849, from *How the Irish Became White*, p. 110.

<sup>248</sup>Hershberg, “Free Blacks,” p. 192, from *How the Irish Became White*, p. 110.

<sup>249</sup>*African Repository*, 1851, quoted in *How the Irish Became White*, p. 111.

cannot rise to the dignity of white men, they show that they can fall to the degradation of black men.”<sup>250</sup>

These testimonials that the Irish were replacing blacks in all sorts of jobs, including waterfront jobs, suggest that the adult Foster may have heard more Irish song than black music on the wharves of his own city by mid-century. As a boy, Stephen Foster in the 1830s and early 1840s would have heard the singing of black workers on the waterfront in Pittsburgh but he probably had to move to Cincinnati to have the chance to hear the black singing stevedores by the late 1840s. There would have been Irish working along side the blacks on Cincinnati's waterfront, but they probably did not monopolize the waterfront. Germans, who made up the city's dominant immigrant group, left the blacks to work on the wharves loading and unloading the steamboats. Thus Cincinnati's demographic history, that it attracted greater numbers of Germans than Irish immigrants, may have had an effect on the music that Foster heard along that city's waterfront.

What did the blacks sing on the Cincinnati waterfront? Many writers, including Eileen Southern, speak about the unique sounds of the black waterfront singers,<sup>251</sup> but the blacks who worked on Cincinnati's waterfront were free, just as the blacks in Pittsburgh, and they lived and worked with native born and Irish immigrant whites. Consequently, their musical sounds would have been acculturated. Southern paints a picture of black steamboat workers carrying their unique sounds far and wide, along the rivers and canals. The blacks who worked in Cincinnati, however, would have been affected by the sounds and the music of the immigrant workers who

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<sup>250</sup>Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass, Written by Himself*, (London, 1962) pp. 298-299, quoted in *How the Irish Became White*, pp. 111.

<sup>251</sup>Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, pp. 147-148.

worked on the urban waterfronts. They probably would have retained the pathos in their voices, but the sounds would not have been the same as that heard on the levees in the more southern cities.<sup>252</sup>

Frederick Law Olmsted heard authentic black music in 1853 when he boarded a steamboat in New Orleans. Martin Delaney also wrote about the unique sounds of sadness in the slave boatmen's songs, that he heard in the slave South where he went to gather information for his 1859 novel *Blake or the Huts of America*. "In the distance, on the levee and in the harbor among the steamers, the songs of the boatmen were incessant. Every few hours landing, loading and unloading, the glee of these men of sorrow was touchingly appropriate and impressive....If there is any class of men anywhere to be found whose sentiments of song and words of lament are made to reach the sympathies of others, the black slave-boatmen are that class." Other writers who commented on the unique sounds of the black boatmen were also talking about their experiences in the slave South. As late as 1863, H. G. Spaulding wrote in his article "Under the Palmetto" that "A tinge of sadness pervades all their melodies."<sup>253</sup> W. H. Russell commented in "My Diary, North and South" that the oarsmen sang "in unison a real negro melody, which was unlike the words of the Ethiopian Serenaders as anything in song could be like another."<sup>254</sup>

These oarsmen that Delaney, Olmsted, Spaulding, and Russell described above were slaves singing in the South. Stephen Foster did not hear slave singing. Stephen Foster heard free black singers whose style and taste in music was in some way altered by the songs they heard white men, including the Irish, sing on the wharf. By the late 1840s, free urban blacks, as they

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<sup>252</sup>Southern, *Ibid.*, pp. 104 - 119.

<sup>253</sup> Henry George Spaulding, "Under the Palmetto," in the *Continental Monthly* (August, 1863), p. 200, quoted in Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, p. 104.

<sup>254</sup>W. H. Russell, *My Diary, North and South*, quoted in Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, p. 104.

would have been in Cincinnati, were singing a variety of songs, including the popular songs of the day. The black river workers probably sang minstrel songs, and even ballads, along with African inspired and religious songs. The songs probably sounded unique when sung by blacks, and the songs may have been altered, too, to conform to a black style of singing or rhythm.<sup>255</sup> They may have even sung Irish- inspired songs learned from their co-workers on the wharf. After all, tap dancing was an acculturated genre with black and Irish antecedents.

It may be concluded then, that, free blacks sang whatever they liked on the waterfront, but there may have been a special quality to their singing that influenced Foster when he heard them. Whatever and however the blacks on the riverfront sang, though, Eileen Southern assures us that they did sing: "Stevedores always sang as they worked."<sup>256</sup> Southern contended that black musicians influenced Foster in Pittsburgh, but if they did, it may have been when Foster was a boy or in his teens, in the 1830s or early 1840s, before the Irish usurped many of the waterfront jobs in the northern cities. By mid-century, in the cities where the Irish were the dominant immigrant group, they claimed the waterfront as their own. That left the Cincinnati riverfront as the one place where the budding composer would have still had the opportunity to hear black singing on the wharves in the late 1840s.

#### 4.6 CINCINNATI MINSTRELS

The one source of influence about which there is no question is the minstrel stage itself. In Cincinnati, Foster was definitely influenced by the blackface minstrels---the imitation blacks---

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<sup>255</sup> Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, pp. 105-131.

<sup>256</sup> Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, p 147

who performed regularly at the popular theaters of the city. In fact, the early songs that Foster created appear to have been more influenced by the stage minstrels than actual black singers. It was a case of art imitating art, if such a thing is possible.<sup>257</sup> Cincinnati's theaters and concert halls drew locals as well as out-of-towners traveling up and down the Ohio River to enjoy their minstrel performances. Foster attended the minstrel shows and made his first professional contact with minstrel performers in Cincinnati. The Christy Minstrels, with whom Stephen would establish a long if rather uncomfortable relationship, performed in Cincinnati in 1846 and 1847. Edwin P. Christy, the troupe's leader, was already directing his performances towards refined minstrelsy when he and Foster made contact, and his characterization of blacks on stage was, comparatively speaking, sympathetic. Foster in turn created minstrel and plantation songs whose protagonists were even more sympathetic and sentimental than Christy's earlier stage personas. Soon Christy adopted Foster's characters as his own, affixing to the songs' title pages the words "As sung by E.P. Christy."<sup>258</sup>

Foster also became acquainted with William Roark of the Sable Harmonists who performed in Cincinnati frequently from 1847 through 1849. In the final three months of 1849, the Empire Minstrels gave a record fifty-nine performances. Less famous yet active groups to appear in Cincinnati were the Sable Troubadours, Kneass' Great Original Sable Harmonists, and Campbell's Minstrels. At least fourteen blackface troupes performed in Cincinnati in the 1840s.

As an impressionable young man, Foster must have attended the minstrel shows in Cincinnati and begun to see their relationship to his own talents as a composer. Foster had the

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<sup>257</sup> Scholars such as Hans Nathan are of the opinion that early minstrelsy owes more to its roots in British folk music, and Irish and Scottish fiddle tunes and ballads than to African inspired music. Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962) p. 160.

<sup>258</sup> A glance at the songster of E. P. Christy's minstrel songs shows a strong preference for sentimental minstrelsy. Stephen Foster Memorial Collection, University of Pittsburgh.



first public performance of one of his minstrel songs while he was living in Cincinnati, although he was not present to witness it. The song was “Way Down South, Whar the Corn Grows,” and the performance took place in Pittsburgh at the Eagle Saloon, which offered ice cream, not alcohol, and nightly entertainments that consisted not only of musical performances but presentations of “tableaux vivant” or “living statues,”<sup>259</sup> live models who stood motionless in artistically pleasing poses for the admiration of the public.<sup>260</sup> The Eagle Saloon brought customers in by offering a prize for the best minstrel song. When Morrison Foster learned about the contest, he asked his younger brother to send a composition that could compete for the silver cup. Morrison entered Stephen’s “Way Down South, Whar’ de Corn Grows” and attended the performance contest in Pittsburgh.

The minstrel entertainer Nelson Kneass, who was managing the Eagle Saloon, sang Foster’s song to a piano accompaniment that he, Kneass, arranged and played. The judges chose as the winning song one by a Mr. Holman, rather than Stephen’s, but Kneass knew a good thing when he heard it. He rushed down to the court to have the song copyrighted in his own name. That was not the first time Kneass attempted to claim authorship of a song he did not write. The famous if macabre “Old Ben Bolt” was sometimes attributed to Kneass, although he did not write it. Morrison Foster, who was a friend of Judge Irwin, was somehow informed of Kneass’

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<sup>259</sup> Robert Peebles Nevin, “Stephen C. Foster and Negro Minstrelsy,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, November, 1867. Sometimes, these “tableaux vivant” would be sexually suggestive models, but Nevin who described the event of Stephen Foster’s first publicly performed minstrel tune, does not mention any such display at the Eagle Saloon.

<sup>260</sup> Robert Nevin to Morrison Foster, July 21, 1865 (Foster Hall Collection C473). More than twenty years after the fact, Robert P. Nevin wrote the article “Stephen C. Foster and Negro Minstrelsy” which was published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, November, 1867. Nevin’s memory could have been hazy. Before he wrote the article, Nevin asked Morrison: “Was not the song Uncle Ned? What was the prize offered?”

attempted plagiarism in the case of his brother's song. As a result, Morrison made sure that "Way Down South, Whar' de Corn Grows" was copyrighted in the name of its rightful owner.

In Cincinnati Foster fell into the dubious habit of giving out manuscript copies of his songs to the minstrel performers before they were protected by copyrights. He often went backstage at the Melodeon and National theaters to hand out manuscript copies to the performers to sing that night on the stage, with "no restrictions nor permissions in regard to publishing them." He probably gave "Oh! Susanna" to M. J. Tichnor of the Sable Harmonists who appeared at the Melodeon in March and April of 1847. At about the same time, he turned over a manuscript copy of the song to George N. Christy to sing, the minstrel who sometimes sang the female "wench" roles in drag for the Christy Minstrels. Foster's flirtation with all of the minstrels did not please them, because each one wanted to be considered an exclusive performer of a particular song. To William Roark of the Sable Harmonists whose natural hair consisted of shoulder length silky curls, Stephen gave the manuscript copy of "Uncle Ned," which became a staple with him. The composer gave "Lou'siana Bell" to Joseph Murphy of the Sable Harmonists to sing in the spring of 1847, and a copy of "Way Down in Ca-i-ro" went to James F. Taunt of the Empire Minstrels. None of these transactions involved royalties for future performances, and most may not have even involved an exchange of money.<sup>261</sup>

Foster's minstrel songs also appeared in special editions promoting the minstrel performers. William E. Millet of Millet's Music Saloon at Broadway in New York published a collection of the songs performed by the Sable Harmonists for which he wrote to Stephen

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<sup>261</sup>Raymond Walters, *Stephen Foster, Youth's Golden Gleam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936), p. 62.

requesting permission to include “Uncle Ned,” “Oh! Susanna” and “Lou’siana Bell.”<sup>262</sup> But these publishers did not pay Stephen royalties for the use of his songs in their special collections. Nor is it likely that the minstrels paid royalties to either Stephen or the publishers when they publicly performed his songs. Foster did not stop handing out his unprotected compositions until he signed his royalty based contract with Firth, Pond & Company on September 12, 1849. At that time, “Stephen finally had awakened to the commercial possibilities of his musical compositions, and had ceased to hand out the work of his brain and heart to others for them to reap all the benefit.”<sup>263</sup>

#### 4.7 W. C. PETERS AND THE MUSIC PUBLISHERS

Once Foster’s songs were performed on the minstrel stage and proved that they were popular with the audiences, the music publishers envisioned immense profits in publishing them. Cincinnati had three music publishers when one Cincinnati paper reported, “The book publishing business has increased very fast in this city within a few years, but the publishing of music is outstripping it.”<sup>264</sup> Foster already had a song in print before he came to Cincinnati. When he was only seventeen, in 1844, George Willig of Philadelphia published "Open Thy Lattice, Love" but the Foster family may have paid Willig to publish the song. In Cincinnati, Foster renewed his acquaintance with William C. Peters, the man who years earlier had taught music and opened a music store in Pittsburgh when Stephen was a child. In October of 1846, Peters and Field issued

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<sup>262</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 337-338.

<sup>263</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 354.

<sup>264</sup>Quoted from the Cincinnati *Gazette*, Walters, *Ibid.*, p. 85.

“There’s a Good Time Coming,” their first title by Stephen Foster, who had recently arrived in Cincinnati. The title page included the names Peters & Field, Cincinnati; Peters & Co., Cincinnati; Peters & Webster, Louisville; and Firth, Hall & Pond, 239 Broadway. The numerous names on the cover shows that to defray the publishing costs, the publishers shared in the costs of the plates. After Peters opened up his music firm in Cincinnati, he became one of America's major music publishers, some say, as a result of one song he published for Stephen Foster, “Oh! Susanna.”<sup>265</sup>

Peters was born in England in 1805 and died one year after the Civil War had ended, in 1866. After spending his teen years in Canada, he settled into Pittsburgh about the time that Stephen Foster was born. He taught flute, piano, and violin, and Charlotte Foster was one of his early students. He soon gave up teaching to enter into a partnership in one of Pittsburgh's first music stores. There is a family story of how the child Stephen Foster walked into Peter's store and picked up a flageolet and played several songs without ever having taken lessons. It was about the same time, around 1830, that Thomas Dartmouth Rice was said to have walked into Peters’ store in Pittsburgh and asked him to write out the music for his famous “Jump Jim Crow” song. Richard D. Wetzel, who has published a serious study of Peters’ life and works, claimed that he “found no sheets ascribing an arrangement to W. C. Peters,” nor did he find any evidence whatsoever that Peters arranged the song for Rice. “If Peters met with Rice,” Wetzel wrote, “he left no record of the meeting, and his own arrangements and compositions show his preference

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<sup>265</sup> Richard D. Wetzel, “*Oh! Sing No More that Gentle Song*,” *The Musical Life and Times of William Cumming Peters (1805 -1866)* (Warren, Michigan: Harmonies Park Press, 2000) pp. 257, 262.

for the ballad, a genre with strong English roots.” Furthermore, Wetzel claimed that Peters “wrote disparagingly about [Ethiopian music] in his publication, the *Baltimore Ohio*.”<sup>266</sup>

Whatever the truth may be, the rumor persisted that William C. Peters published Rice’s song and made a lot of money on it. Several years later, Peters moved to Louisville where he opened another music store in 1838. By 1845, he left the Louisville store to the management of his son Henry, and moved to Cincinnati, where Peters, with two other sons, William and Alfred, concentrated on building their most successful store.<sup>267</sup> By 1848, he had entered into a partnership, and as “Peters, Field & Co. of Cincinnati,” his firm was recognized as one of the preeminent publishing houses of antebellum America.<sup>268</sup>

In Cincinnati, Peters published several of Foster’s minstrel songs, including “Oh! Susanna,” “Louisiana Belle,” “Old Uncle Ned,” and a reprint of “Open Thy Lattice, Love.” Peters made a fortune, however, on “Oh! Susanna,” and history has condemned him for it ever since. W. C. Peters gave Foster a pittance for America’s most well recognized “folk-song,” but he hardly treated Foster any better or worse than the other music publishers had. When Peters issued “Oh! Susanna” and volunteered “two fifty-dollar bills” as complete payment for the song, Foster was happy just to receive “the first hard cash he [Foster] had ever earned from his music.” Stephen Foster was twenty-two at the time, and proud to have his song in print. The rest of the story is vague. Some historians contend that Peters made \$10,000 on the song, which was a huge sum of money in the mid-nineteenth century, and enough money to enable Peters to

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<sup>266</sup> Wetzel, “Oh! Sing No More that Gentle Song,” *The Musical Life and Times of William Cumming Peters (1805 -1866)* p. 82.

<sup>267</sup> Russell Sanjek, *American Popular Music and Its Business, the First Four Hundred Years*. Vol. II. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 129-130.

<sup>268</sup> Jon Newsom, “Home, Sweet Home, Life in Nineteenth –Century Ohio, Understanding the Music” On-line source: <http://memory.loc.gov/cocoon/ihas/html/ohio/ohio-newsom.html>

establish a "music publishing empire." Others argued that Peter's relationship with the young Foster was just business as usual. At least a dozen other music publishers published "Oh! Susanna" without even crediting Foster as composer, and the minstrels performed his songs over and over again, after a one time payment, if even that.

As to whether or not Peters took unfair advantage of the young Stephen Foster, Richard

D. Wetzel commented somewhat at length:

"I will not digress further into the complex publishing maze that resulted from Foster's naiveté and the avarice of publishers, nor am I able to estimate how much Peters made from Foster's music. There can be no doubt that Peters profited handsomely from Foster's titles in his inventory, but if Foster's payment in dollars was comparatively small, he benefited from Peters' characteristic and uncommon attention to editorial details. The following statement by Saunders refers specifically Peters' edition of "Susanna," but is generally typical of Peters' work as a publisher: '[Peters' edition of Susanna]...is genealogically more closely related to a Foster autograph, and represents, in any case, the published form in which Foster intended the song to reach the marketplace.'" <sup>269</sup>

Wetzel seemed to think that the relationship was mutually beneficial: "It was, in Foster's own words, Peters' gift of \$100 for "Susanna" that set him on his career as a songwriter. Further, through Peters' advertising Foster acquired much of his early fame." Peters apparently was responsible for having Stephen Foster's name appear in print 122 times. <sup>270</sup>

It was probably Peters who introduced Foster to Firth, Pond, & Company, the music publishers with whom he would maintain a profitable ten year contract. It is not known exactly when Foster was introduced to the firm, but one source says that Peters eventually made an arrangement "to release the writer to a New York firm." This would have been Peters' way of easing his conscience and getting rid of the young composer at the same time. The timing was

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<sup>269</sup> Richard D. Wetzel, "Oh! Sing No More that Gentle Song," *The Musical Life and Times of William Cumming Peter* (1805-66), p. 266. Also letter from Saunders, August 9, 1985.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 267. Raymond Walters, "Stephen Collins Foster, *Cincinnati Star*, Thursday, April 25, 1940, Fine Arts, Section 10, page 2. Quoted in Wetzel.

right, in any event. In 1846 Peters and Field of Cincinnati in conjunction with Firth, Hall, and Pond published Foster's "There's a Good Time Coming." The following year, sometime in 1847, William Hall broke away from the New York publishing house, leaving John Firth and Sylvanus Pond to form a new enterprise, Firth, Pond, & Company. The new partnership was seeking new talent, but perhaps they could have been more generous. When they published Foster's "Nelly Was a Lady" and "My Brudder Gum" in 1848, Firth, Pond, & Company paid the young composer with only fifty printed copies of each song. Presumably Foster could sell these printed copies to minstrel performers, which was preferable to handing out manuscript copies for free. At least the printed copies did have a copyright printed on them.<sup>271</sup>

Firth, Pond, and Company may have been giving Foster an initial trial run. In any event, they must have been happy with the composer's work, because, in a letter dated September 12, 1849 they offered him a royalty of two cents on all future songs in response to a proposal made by Stephen Foster. "We will accept the proposition therein made, viz. to allow you two cents upon every copy of your future publications issued by our house, after the expenses of publication are paid..." Firth, Pond, and Company encouraged Foster to have the minstrels perform the songs to "introduce them to the public in that way," but the publishers warned Foster, "in order to secure the copyright exclusively for our house, it is safe to hand such persons printed copies only, for if manuscript copies are issued particularly by the author, the market will be flooded with spurious issues in a short time."<sup>272</sup>

Foster had entered into a royalty paying contract at the end of 1848 with F.D. Benteen of Baltimore, but the contract apparently did not have an exclusivity clause that would have prevented the composer from contracting "future songs" with Firth, Pond, and Company. F.D.

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<sup>271</sup> Sanjec, *American Popular Music and its Business*, p. 131.

<sup>272</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 354.

Benteen published piano variations on "Oh! Susanna" as well as a "Susanna Polka" and a "Susanna Quickstep," and Benteen remained Foster's primary publisher throughout 1850.<sup>273</sup> Indeed, the majority of Foster songs that came out in 1850 were published by F. D. Benteen, not by Firth, Pond, and Company. Little seems to be known about the publisher F. D. Benteen of Baltimore, or about Foster's relationship with the firm. Benteen shared plates with W. T. Mayo of New Orleans, whose name appears in conjunction with that of Benteen on the Foster songs that the Baltimore firm published. Firth, Pond, and Company published six of Foster's songs in 1850, while F. D. Benteen published ten. The following year, Firth, Pond, and Company took over, publishing the majority of his songs in 1851, as F. D. Benteen begins to fade out of the Foster picture.<sup>274</sup>

Since the performer was often more recognizable than the composer to the audience, some early songs give as much credit to the minstrel performer as to the composer. The title pages usually contained decorative lithographs of the minstrel performer or at least the minstrel's name in large type on the title page. This was the case with the lively minstrel tunes such as "Dolly Day," "Gwine to Run All Night," and "Angelina Baker" that were performed on the stage by the Christy or the Campbell Minstrels.<sup>275</sup> Before Foster got involved with Firth, Pond, and Company, there were some editions of Foster's songs in which the composer's name did not appear on the title page at all. An early printed edition of "Oh! Susanna" did not display Stephen Foster's name, but contained instead on the title page the words, "Sung by G.N. Christy of the Christy Minstrels." In March of 1848, Mason, Colburn & Co. issued "Uncle Ned Just issued this day, the favorite and popular Negro Melody" without mentioning Foster. In June of

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<sup>273</sup>Sanjek, *American Popular Music and its Business*, p. 131.

<sup>274</sup> Saunders and Root, *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Vol. 1. pp. 64-130.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72, 78, 87.



the same year, Peters, Field and Company announced "New Song this day issued in the Songs of the Sable Harmonists entitled Susanna."

Eliminating Foster's name from the title pages did not seem to bother Foster at first, when he was not certain that he wanted to associate his name with the genre of the "lower classes." Indeed, the refined somewhat effeminate Foster was never comfortable in the minstrel world. Once Firth, Pond and Company became Foster's principal publisher, they made sure they put the composer's name on the cover, even if they sometimes added the name or a picture of the minstrel performer.<sup>276</sup> Since copyright protection had been extended to cover musical compositions in 1831, most music publishers included the composer's name on the cover of the music by 1848. The publishers were "becoming increasingly sensitive to each other's property"<sup>277</sup> and Firth, Pond, and Company appeared to regard the Foster name as a valuable commodity to which they claimed ownership. They also warned the naive composer to beware of minstrel performers and music publishers who offered no payment or promises of royalties.

Even after Foster knew enough to copyright his songs, he had problems when underhanded minstrel performers tried to establish copyrights in their own names, pretending that they, the performers, had written the songs themselves. In addition to the subterfuge involving the minstrel performer Nelson Kneass, Foster became embroiled in a difficulty claiming ownership of "Nelly Was A Lady."<sup>278</sup> Foster had given the minstrel Charles White a copy of the song in manuscript form, for performance purposes only, but White had the audacity to bring the song directly to Firth, Pond, and Company and claim authorship of it. The

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<sup>276</sup>William Osborne, *Music in Ohio* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2004), p. 410.

<sup>277</sup>Wetzel, "Oh! Sing No More that Gentle Song," *The Musical Life and Times of William Cuming Peters* (1805-66), p. 267.

<sup>278</sup>Morrison Foster to I. J. Cist, February 27, 1865 (Foster Hall Collection C583).

music publishers, unaware of the deception, had copyrighted the song in White's name on February, 1849. For the song's title, they used "Toll the Bell for Lovely Nell, or My Dark Virginia Bride," which is one of the lines of the chorus of the song. When the duplicitous fact and the true authorship of the song were made known to the publishers, Firth, Pond, and Company immediately entered a new copyright on July 18, 1849 under the original title "Nelly Was a Lady" and the title page read "Written and Composed by S.C. Foster."<sup>279</sup>

#### **4.8 HARRIET BEECHER STOWE AND ROMANTIC RACIALISM**

"Nelly Was a Lady" was different from earlier minstrel songs. Although performers in blackface often sang the song on a minstrel stage, it was highly sentimental and the song's success was based on its ability to bring tears to the eyes of those in the audience. That characteristic brought the song into the sentimental genre, and endowed it with a political agenda. "Nelly" was a black woman, who died and was mourned by her black husband. It was Foster's ability to gentrify minstrel songs and convert them into a mandate for sympathy for the oppressed that made Foster's songs unique. Earlier minstrel songs written in the 1830s and early 1840s were denigrating to blacks, and unsympathetic to the sufferings of the slave. Foster's songs, on the other hand, were characterized by a sentimentality which put them clearly on the side of the antislavery crusaders. Sentimentality in the minstrel songs was based on the idea of conveying sympathy through the words and the music of the song, with the object of the sympathy being a

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<sup>279</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles of Stephen Foster's Family*, p. 353.

black man or woman. Creating sympathy for blacks through the sung or the written word would have far reaching consequences.

Harriet Beecher Stowe created sympathy for enslaved blacks through her novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The tears produced by her pen were so powerful that Abraham Lincoln is reported to have said to Stowe: "So you're the little lady who made this big war."<sup>280</sup> Lincoln often spoke in parables but he was being serious, however facetious he may have appeared. Stowe's novel used sympathy to awaken hundreds of thousands of apathetic whites to the evils of slavery, and the need for its eradication. Harriet Beecher Stowe spent eighteen years in Cincinnati, and her last three years in the city coincided with Foster's three years in Cincinnati. Whether Stephen Foster and Harriet Beecher Stowe ever met is not known, but Foster and Stowe said good-bye to the city in the same year, 1850.

Stowe was only twenty-one when she arrived in Cincinnati in 1832 from "the land of steady habits," Connecticut.<sup>281</sup> She was the daughter of Lyman Beecher, the famous fire and brimstone theologian who taught at the Lane Seminary in the 1830s when the school was embroiled in explosive student-professor confrontations over abolitionism. Stowe married a mild tempered professor from Lane, a colleague of her father's, and made a home for herself and her family in Cincinnati. At the age of thirty-nine, the mother of five living children, Stowe decided she had had enough of the volatile border city. When cholera afflicted the city in 1849, Stowe lost her youngest to the disease. Still grieving over the death of her baby Charlie, Stowe packed up the following year and moved to Maine. Immediately, Stowe set to work on her

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<sup>280</sup> Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe, a Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994)

<sup>281</sup> The phrase referencing Connecticut comes from Elilza Foster's "Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh."

masterpiece *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, drawing on experiences she gained living in a free city located directly across from a slave state.<sup>282</sup>

Harriet Beecher Stowe, while living in Cincinnati, was influenced by new theories on race that came to be known as romantic racialism. Stephen Foster was undoubtedly influenced by these same theories. Stowe was living in Cincinnati in 1837 and 1838, when Alexander Kinmont came to the city to give a series of lectures expounding his theories. Stowe probably attended one of the lectures or at least read about them. Kinmont's romantic racialism identified the black race with Christian virtues, thus creating more sympathy for blacks. Kinmont began with premises similar to those espoused by the scientific racists, contending that blacks were in their physical and mental condition distinct from whites, but he explained that in some ways they were actually superior. That is, morally and spiritually. According to Kinmont, blacks possessed some very desirable traits sadly lacking in the Caucasians: "light-heartedness, a natural talent for music and a willingness to serve, the most beautiful trait of humanity." In this way, while Kinmont's theories remained racist, the deleterious effects of racism were somewhat mitigated. According to Kinmont, the black man was more capable of displaying the true virtues of a Christian than the white man. In fact, it was almost impossible for the Caucasian to be a true Christian. According to Kinmont, "All the sweeter graces of the Christian religion appear almost

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<sup>282</sup>Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe, a Life*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994)  
Stowe was able to make her readers empathize with slave women by characterizing them as women who had lost their children, through sale, if not through death, which was the white woman's experience in the nineteenth century.

too tropical and tender plants to grow in the Caucasian mind; they require a character of human nature which you can see in the rude lineaments of the Ethiopian." <sup>283</sup>

Mid-century ideas on race, widely published in historical, literary, and scientific writings, emphasized the "peculiarities of diverse peoples and nationalities, which approached, if it did not actually proclaim, a racialist explanation of society and culture." <sup>284</sup> Even people who exhibited an antipathy for slavery believed in a hierarchy of the races, and that the Anglo-Saxon race was on top. Consequently, theorists of the mid-nineteenth century accepted the idea that the races were fundamentally different. What they disagreed about was why the races were different. Was it a matter of experience and environment, or was it a basic unalterable genetic difference? "The biological school saw the Negro as a pathetically inept creature who was a slave to his emotions incapable of progressive development and self-government because he lacked the white man's enterprise and intellect. But those who ascribed to the priority of feeling over intellect sanctioned by Romanticism and evangelical religion could come up with a strikingly different concept of Negro differences." Whereas some found weakness in the characteristics exhibited by blacks, the "romantic racialists" discovered redeeming virtues in being black. <sup>285</sup>

The romantic racialists created an image of the black man that could be construed as praise worthy according to the romantic's ideal of human behavior and sensibility. But the image projected onto blacks could also be viewed as condescending, even if it were sympathetic.

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<sup>283</sup> Alexander Kinnot, *Twelve Lectures on the Natural History of Man, Cincinnati 1839*, from Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe, a Life*, p. 218.

<sup>284</sup> George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: the debate on African American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* ( Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971) p. 97.

<sup>285</sup> George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: the debate on African American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), p. 97.

Indeed, the romantic racialist endorsed the child stereotype of image of the black man, while it rejected slavery as taking unfair advantage his innocence and good nature. The idea behind the romantic racialist's benevolence was that the black man's nature was "childlike, affectionate, docile, and patient," but, they asked, should a Christian people oppress the weak and crush the helpless? The most extreme of the romantic racialist might deny that traits like "childlike, affectionate, and docile" were characteristics of inferiority, and even suggest that "the Negro was the superior race because his docility constituted the ultimate in Christian virtue." At the same time, characteristics ascribed to the white race were the polar opposite: "a love of liberty, a spirit of individual enterprise and resourcefulness, and a capacity for practical and reasonable behavior."<sup>286</sup>

The romantic racialists could be very convincing and initially their writings did lead to an improved and more sympathetic characterization of blacks. William Ellery Channing espoused a form of romantic racialism in his 1840 essay on emancipation. He wrote: "We are holding in bondage one of the best races of the human family. The Negro is among the mildest and gentlest of men." Channing held that the white man was inferior to the black when it came to "the dispositions which Christianity particularly honors." The African was a better candidate for Christian perfection "because he carries within him, much more than we, the germs of a meek, long-suffering, living virtue." Lydia Maria Child, the abolitionist poetess, also believed the races were different, but she said it was because of "spiritual influences, long operating on character, and in their turn becoming causes." In any case, the proper response to racial differences was, according to Child, "a brotherly pluralism, variety without inferiority."<sup>287</sup> James Russell Lowell,

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<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>287</sup> *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, January 5, 1842, quoted in Frederickson, *Black Image in the White Mind*, p. 107.

a Garrisonian abolitionist who believed in ending slavery "immediately" wrote in 1845: "We have never had any doubt that the African race was intended to introduce a new element of civilization, and that the Caucasian would be benefited greatly by an infusion of its gentler and less selfish qualities."<sup>288</sup> In the 1850s, romantic racialism's image of the black man as a natural, self-sacrificing Christian was most poignantly expressed as Harriet Beecher Stowe's character Uncle Tom. In a similar vein, Stephen Foster's plantation songs such as "Nelly Was a Lady" evidence a sympathetic consideration that the romantic racialists promised. The sympathetic portrayal of blacks on the minstrel stage in the late 1840s and early 1850s could be traced to the ideology of romantic racialism.

#### 4.9 HOME – COMING

At the beginning of 1850, change was in the air. Morrison had recently recovered from a serious bout with a fever that he had contracted in his travels to the South to buy cotton for the Allegheny factory. His boss Pollard McCormick urged him to "make arrangements with one, two or three houses in Nashville to purchase for you as rapidly as possible 10 or 1200 Bales [of cotton],"<sup>289</sup> but Morrison was only able to purchase 835 bales and to make a payment of

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<sup>288</sup>James Russell Lowell, "Anti-slavery Papers," published in Boston, 1902, quoted in Frederickson, *Black Image in the White Mind*, p. 108.

<sup>289</sup> Pollard McCormick to Morrison Foster, May 11, 1848, quoted in Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 335.

\$24,000 before “his sickness put an end to all business negotiations” and sent him “to bed.”<sup>290</sup>

When Morrison was finally recovered, after a convalescence of months and urgent letters from sister Ann Eliza telling him to prepare himself “for appearing in the presence of a just and Holy God,”<sup>291</sup> he was ready to strike out in search of gold. Adventurous men eager for a fast track to wealth came to California from all over the world. Even men from China crossed the ocean to America to look for gold in California. But Dunning Foster, who had already been far away from home fighting a war in Mexico discouraged Morrison from attempting the feat:

“Mr. Whim...of gold hunting is very good but I cannot advise you to undertake the journey and more especially as you would be obliged to go without money sufficient to give you a good start of it. I have no doubt and that a young man with proper industry could make a future. I cannot doubt either but whether the experience and change of climate and perfect estrangement from every body for whom you feel any interest would compensate for the accumulation of riches to be left for others to enjoy is a question that I cannot so easily satisfy myself about. You must expect to undergo many hardships that you do not deserve of in a trip so full of uncertainty and adventure. If I had nothing to [tie me] to home and could leave without causing a pain in the breast of any person I should leave behind me, I would start immediately and undergo all the hardships and troubles of the trip mainly for the adventure, but as I am now situated I cannot reconcile it to my mind that I should be evincing a proper respect for the feelings of my good parents and friends who have laid as now so many and lasting objections. These are the only considerations that will prevent me from going to California and the Gold Diggers, and they are mighty reasons with me.”<sup>292</sup>

Morrison decided not to go to California after all. Perhaps Dunning convinced him when he concluded his letter by saying that he was not able to offer Morrison “much assistance in money in case you make up your mind to go.”<sup>293</sup> If he had gone, he would have heard a familiar refrain as other hopeful adventurers trekking their way to California sang his brother’s “Oh!

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<sup>290</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 336.

<sup>291</sup> Ann Eliza Buchanan to Morrison Foster, July 17, 1848 (Foster Hall Collection C484 ).

<sup>292</sup>Dunning Foster to Morrison Foster, December 29, 1848 ( Foster Hall Collection C483).

<sup>293</sup>*Ibid.*



Susanna” like a marching song. The Forty-niners adopted it as their theme song, but they changed the words to suit their situation:

“Oh California! That’s the land for me\_\_\_\_

“I’m going to Sacramento,

With my washbowl on my knee!”<sup>294</sup>

In the first days of February, 1850, Stephen Foster returned home to live in Allegheny City. There were several reasons for his decision to leave Cincinnati, his residence for the past three and a half years. In the first place, cholera ran its course in the city beginning in May of 1849 until it was stifled by the first chilled air in the fall of 1849. As late as April 27, 1849, Stephen Foster appeared unconcerned about the threat of the disease. “Tell Ma she need not trouble herself about the health of Cincinnati as our weather here is very healthy, the cholera not having made its appearance,”<sup>295</sup> he wrote home. Months before it reached Cincinnati, however, Dunning was concerned, writing that the cholera “is hourly expected.” A certain captain named “Smith” who was “a proud and worthy man ....will be here tonight a corpse, having died in a few hours.”<sup>296</sup> The cholera also had a negative effect on business. “The accounts today are to deter boats from leaving for New Orleans.....Business is very much effected, also pork is declining rapidly and will go a good deal lower unless the health of New Orleans improves.”<sup>297</sup>

The cholera that hit Cincinnati in the summer of 1849 was particularly deadly. Stephen was not present during the fatal summer months, because he had returned to Pittsburgh to attend

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<sup>294</sup>*The Atlas*, January 9, 1849, quoted in *Stephen Foster, Youth’s Golden Gleam*, p. 119.

<sup>295</sup>Morrison Foster to I. J. Cist, February 27, 1865 (Foster Hall Collection C583).

<sup>296</sup> Dunning Foster to Morrison Foster, December 29, 1848 (Foster Hall Collection C483 ).

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*

the weddings of old friends. This was the cholera epidemic that took the life of Harriet Beecher Stowe's youngest boy, and led Stowe to write her antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The Board of Health of Cincinnati reported 4,114 deaths by cholera alone in just four months, between the first of May and the first of September, 1849,<sup>298</sup> but the numbers may have been as high as 9,000. Eliza Foster never would have allowed her youngest son to remain in Cincinnati after the cholera hit. It reminded her too much of Charlotte's demise long ago in Louisville, and she could not bear to relive the tragedy.

Dunning Foster returned from the Mexican War weakened by one of the tropical diseases that spent its revenge on the American "invaders." In his poor state of health---- he might have been afflicted with tuberculosis ----- Dunning may have started thinking about getting into another line of work. He retained ghoulish memories of the war in Mexico, for at a "masqued party" held at Mrs. Marshall's house in January of 1849, Dunning's "character was a Mexican soldier with the last remnants of a uniform and less of a face."<sup>299</sup> The returning veteran was summoned to "a party almost every night," but with the advance of the deadly cholera towards Cincinnati, fading health, and the decline in business, happy times were coming to an end.

Dunning eventually decided to sell his partnership, and Stephen had neither the talent nor inclination to take over the Cincinnati business. The budding composer had already decided on a career in music and the music publisher W. C. Peters left Cincinnati in 1849. Foster and Peters had developed some sort of a relationship, but mostly it began to appear that Foster was the one

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<sup>298</sup> This figure of around 4,000 deaths was quoted in the *Memoirs of Dr. Drake*, by E.D. Mansfield, from Ford, *History of Cincinnati, Ohio*, p.98. The husband of Harriet Beecher Stowe, who was a professor at Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati during the 1849 cholera outbreak wrote "During the three months of June, July and August last, more than nine thousand persons died of cholera within three miles of my house." Lyman Beecher Stowe, *Saints, Sinners, and Beechers* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1934,) quoted in Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 365.

<sup>299</sup> Dunning Foster to Morrison Foster, January 13, 1849 (Foster Hall Collection C482).

being taken advantage of by the older and savvier business man. William Cummings Peters moved to Louisville where he had opened up a publishing business years before. Now he settled in the more Southern city, perhaps making a political statement as well as making a business decision in the crucial year of 1849.

Another factor influencing Stephen Foster to return to Pittsburgh was that the political scene was brewing throughout 1849 into what became known as the crisis of 1850. Before the Mexican American War ended, and really before the war commenced, people knew that the addition of new territory in the Southwest could cause a fatal rupture in the nation. It was impossible to expand the United States with the addition of 850,000 square miles of land in the Southern latitudes, without bringing up the question of the expansion of slavery. Would slavery be allowed in the new territories? The abolitionists were hot on the scene since the 1830s, and the compromises that were proffered over the course of the decades were only band aides.

In 1850, the Kentucky Whig Henry Clay and his fellow Whig Massachusetts senator Daniel Webster came up with a compromise solution that they hoped would work, like the earlier one in 1820, to smooth over the nation's difficulties and hold the sections together. The man who actually made the Compromise of 1850 a reality was the Democrat Stephen Douglas, who broke down the Whigs' omnibus bill and got the measures passed one by one. According to the Compromise, California would be admitted to the Union as a free state, but there would be no legal restrictions on slavery in Utah and New Mexico, where it was argued the climate was not conducive to the peculiar institution anyway.

To satisfy the South, the Compromise included a new and more formidable Fugitive Slave Law which compelled Northerners in their own states to become participants in capturing alleged escaped slaves who were hiding out in the free states. Anyone who aided a man or

woman accused of being an escaped slave could be subject to a thousand dollar fine or six months in jail. There were thousands of refugees living in Cincinnati in 1850 when the law was passed. The immediate consequence of the new law was that Cincinnati's blacks left the city in droves, and no one could stop talking about slavery as the free city located directly across from a slave state became, more than ever, a hotbed of agitation. Perhaps this was one more reason for Stephen Foster to leave Cincinnati when he did.

On a personal level, Foster may have wanted to return home because Jane McDowell, also of Pittsburgh, was returning home from Cincinnati too. The pretty Jane McDowell, who was known affectionately as "Jenny," became in song "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair." Stephen Foster began his courtship of Jane in Cincinnati where she had made an extended visit, probably with the intent of securing a husband. The method of courtship under the ruse of visiting relatives was successful. Both Stephen Foster and Jane McDowell would return home to Pittsburgh where they would marry, but they would not live "happily ever after."

Foster had changed from the person he was two or three years before. The minstrel songs he now wrote were sympathetic considerations of the human condition, equally applicable to blacks or whites. What had changed him? He had seen free blacks working as a group or singly in Cincinnati, and he knew they were men, who experienced the same feelings of joy and of anguish that white men felt. He also knew they were nothing like the personas found on the early minstrel stage. These were not rural Jim Crows or even urban dandies. These were simply men. Foster had watched the newer type of minstrel performances which treated the black personae on the stage more sympathetically. He was also affected by the new theory about race, "romantic racialism," that influenced his contemporary in Cincinnati, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Foster also must have heard stories of the runaways, and of the underground railroad in

Cincinnati. In spite of the political conservatism of his family, the young composer had experienced a change of heart, and he was a man dominated primarily by his heart. The heart won out in the conflict between the head and the heart which confounds every man at least once in his lifetime. When he moved to Cincinnati to work as a bookkeeper, his head was in control, but when he returned from Cincinnati to begin his career as professional composer and to marry Jane, for better or for worse, his heart took the lead. And certainly as we shall see, his heart was the determining factor, not his head, when he decided to marry Jane.

## 5.0 NON-COMPANIONATE MARRIAGE

"I dream of Jeanie with the Light brown hair,  
Borne like a vapor on the summer air;  
I see her tripping where the bright streams play,  
Happy as the daisies that dance on her way."

"Jeanie with the light brown hair" was Jane McDowell, the girl affectionately known as Jennie, which is the name that originally appeared in the title of the song in Stephen Foster's manuscript book. Jane McDowell and Stephen Foster married on July 22, 1850, but the marriage that got off to a poor start hardly ended on a sweeter note. The couple separated and reunited sporadically, until each finally settled in different cities in different states. In the nineteenth century, although couples were not always companionable and bad marriages did occur, an open separation such as the Fosters maintained was rare. When a marriage breaks up, the reasons are never simple, even if on the outside they appear to be. Often a complication emerges to confound the equilibrium of the relationship. In spite of the obvious fact that the couple was not emotionally compatible, that Jane was high tempered and Stephen drank and was unable to provide for his family's support, there was another disturbing condition working to undermine the marriage. In the Fosters' case, the mid-century views on absolute gender roles cannot be ignored. In an age that designated "separate spheres" for men and women, Jane went out into the world to work, taking a job as a telegrapher, and Stephen stayed home and played the piano. With gender roles and spaces inverted, the marriage could never work.

## 5.1 JANE MCDOWELL

Jane McDowell was the daughter of a prominent physician of Pittsburgh, Dr. Andrew McDowell. She was one of five daughters who had all come of age at roughly the same time and needed to find husbands. The McDowells had been a well-to-do family, living in an impressive house a few blocks from what is today known as the "point," the juncture of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers. They had a front parlor and a black servant who drove the doctor around and ushered in the guests. The McDowell house was situated on Penn Avenue, the same street where the Fosters had built the family home "White Cottage" some distance to the east many decades earlier. But whereas Stephen Foster had been evicted from his Eden, Jane McDowell was "reared in an atmosphere of luxury," to which being a daughter of one of Pittsburgh's leading physicians entitled her.<sup>300</sup>

Andrew Nathan McDowell, Jane's father, had a long and impressive lineage. Descended from a Scotch-Irish pioneer family, like the Fosters, the McDowells had a president of a college in the family, a professor of Latin and Greek, many doctors, and of course connections with George Washington. Jane's father had settled in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania and her mother Jane Denny Porter, also of Chambersburg, had been a girlhood friend of the dead Charlotte Foster. Jane Denny Porter's father John Porter had established the Porter Foundry Company on the bank of the Allegheny River.<sup>301</sup> The McDowells moved to Pittsburgh in the 1830s where Dr.

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<sup>300</sup> Stephen and Jane's granddaughter Jessie Welsh Rose to Wm. Stevenson, July 7, 1926, courtesy of Mifflin County Historical Society, Lewistown, Pennsylvania.

<sup>301</sup> Jessie Welsh Rose to Wm. Stevenson, July 7, 1926, courtesy of Mifflin County Historical Society, Lewistown, Pa.

McDowell developed a successful medical practice, but they were less conventional than the Fosters. Dr. McDowell had trained a black man in the medical arts.

## 5.2 COURTSHIP

Jane McDowell was born December 10, 1829, making her Stephen's junior by three years. She would have known Stephen before he moved to Cincinnati, but Jane would have been too young for serious courting. In January of 1849, when Jane had just turned nineteen, she visited Cincinnati and stayed with a family that did not "go into society," the Stewarts, a family Dunning Foster wrote was "not generally visited by people that would interest her much." Like the trip that Stephen's sister Charlotte took to Cincinnati, leading on to Louisville twenty years before, the object of this trip was obviously to have Jane see and be seen by eligible young bachelors. It seems she had her eye on at least one of the Foster boys, and was willing to travel all the way to Cincinnati to become better acquainted. Dunning wrote Morrison about Jane McDowell in January of 1849:

"I am sorry that Jane McDowell is not with some of the young ladies that go into society, as I fear she will not have as favourable an impression of our people as she would have were she to see more of them. Mr. Stewart's family is not generally visited by people that would interest her much; however, she appears to enjoy herself very well, and does not complain in any way. She is, by the way, a very sensible and interesting young lady....They often sigh over the friends at Pittsburgh, and wish to be with them, but as yet I have not heard them set a time to go up. They say they will go up when I do, but as that is a very indefinite period, it is not very conclusive as to the time they will be in Pittsburgh."<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>302</sup>Dunning Foster to Morrison Foster, January 13, 1849 (Foster Hall Collection C482).



Dunning need not have worried that Jane would be bored or lonely. Stephen began visiting her regularly at the parlor of the Stewart home in Cincinnati, and obviously she expressed no hurry to return home to Pittsburgh. Foster family legend suggested that Stephen began his courtship of "the very sensible and interesting young lady" in Cincinnati, paying frequent visits to Mr. Stewart's "quiet old fashioned parlor where he found a sympathetic companion in the girl from home."<sup>303</sup> We do not know exactly when Jane returned home to Pittsburgh, but her father died suddenly on May 7, 1849, giving an immediate impetus for Jane to return home. The death of Dr. McDowell also impelled Jane to consider marriage a very urgent matter. Stephen returned home in February of 1850, and the couple was married in July of the same year.

The marriage was not a happy one, which leads us to ask why. As mentioned earlier, it could have been simply that Foster made the decision impulsively, with his heart rather than his head, to marry a woman to whom he was not well suited. Indeed, the facts lead us to believe that neither one was the other's first choice for a mate. A letter written to Morrison by a female friend in 1849 states that Jane McDowell was engaged to "a chap in Lisbon," Ohio. Stephen, we learn, courted a young woman named Martha A. Morse, for whom he had a fond attachment. He took her everywhere in the early months of 1850, but it is not known why they broke up. Death did not shatter the romance, because Martha grew up, married, and had a daughter who lived just outside of Pittsburgh, in Aspinwall, Pennsylvania.<sup>304</sup>

Why Foster married Jane McDowell may simply have been that he was in love with her. Men and women at mid-century believed that love was the "first thing, the beginning and the

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<sup>303</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 348.

<sup>304</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 365.

end, the life of the whole thing." One Pennsylvania man wrote that "Marriage without love cannot fail to be a source of perpetual unhappiness."<sup>305</sup> An earlier generation of Americans had been wary of romantic love, associating it with immaturity and self-indulgence. Marriages in the eighteenth century might have been designed more with economic gain in view, but the next generation took a more positive view of romance. By 1850, romance had lost its negative connotation and emerged as the only acceptable basis for intimacy between a man and a woman. During the 1840s, novels and articles appearing in magazines were preoccupied with romantic love.<sup>306</sup> As romance became essential to domestic harmony rather than a threat to it, falling in love became an increasingly normal part of middle class courtship. But passion, one issue of *Lady's Godey's Book* advised, should not be the overriding influence in romantic love. Passion should be tempered by a sensible viewpoint.<sup>307</sup>

Still, however important love became to courtship, there were other factors at work. Many of the young people in Stephen Foster's "set" were getting married, and that may have surfaced as a factor in pushing him toward marriage. Stephen left Cincinnati and returned home to Pittsburgh in June of 1849 to attend three weddings of old friends. On June 5th, the neighbor girl Susan Pentland married Andrew Robinson, one of Stephen's boyhood friends. And on June 19th Anne Robinson, Andrew's sister, married J. Cust Blair, which was a disappointment to Dunning, for Anne may have been the only girl for whom Dunning felt strong affections.

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<sup>305</sup>Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts, A History of Courtship in America* ( New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984), p. 103.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>307</sup>Article in *Lady's Godey's Book*, Stephen Foster Memorial Room, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Dunning never married. Finally Louisa Bell, a girl admired by Henry Foster, married a man from St. Louis.

A third consideration is the fact that opposites in a courtship do often attract, in spite of the disastrous effects that may result in later years. Dunning had written to Morrison the previous year that Jane was a "sensible lady," and Foster, the struggling song writer, appeared to be anything but sensible. Even so, the attraction may well have been based on the fact that Jane did appear to be a girl with her feet on the ground and her head anywhere but in the clouds, and Stephen may have sensed that he needed that leveling force in a wife. Advice manuals of the day, upon which many middle class lovers so curiously relied, actually stressed the idea that contrasts between husband and wife in temperament were acceptable, as long as the couple shared similarities in background and interests. By following the dictates of the advice manuals, it was hoped, the "marriage of companionship" so idealized by the American middle class could be realized. What lovers expected from the companionate marriage was not "emotional abandon," but the "appreciation of each other other's character and the strong sympathy and similitude of thought and feeling."<sup>308</sup>

A fourth factor compelling Stephen Foster to marry could have been plain old-fashioned jealousy or competition. That suitor competing for Jane's attentions was a friend of Morrison's and one of the old boyhood friends of the Fosters, a member of the youthful club they called the Knights of the Square Table. Stephen Foster's granddaughter Jessie Welsh Rose described the competition that took place in Jane's parlor when Richard Cowan called on Jane on the night that was assigned to Stephen for courting. Mr. Cowan was "a lawyer, wealthy, handsome, and distinguished in appearance. Mr. Foster suffered somewhat from the contrast," according to

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<sup>308</sup> Rothman, *Hands and Hearts*, p. 108

Stephen's granddaughter. "One evening owing to some miscalculation on Miss Jane's part, both called at Dr. McDowell's home at the same hour. Steve came first." The black servant at Jane's house brought Richard Cowan into the parlor, and Stephen "turned his back on the pair, took up a book and read the evening through." At ten-thirty, Richard Cowan got up and pulled his "military broadcloth cape about him elegantly,[ and ]bid the forbidding back of Stephen a low sweeping "Good Evening, Sir." (Cowan had served in the Mexican American War, so the cape must have been several years old.) As soon as Cowan departed, "Steve had risen, was standing by the table pale and stern as she came in. 'And now, Miss Jane, I want your answer! Is it yes? or is it no?'" This, at least, is the story Jane relayed to her granddaughter Jesse Welsh Rose, who revealed it around 75 years after the fact in the *Pittsburgh Post*, for the July 4, 1926 edition, on the one hundredth anniversary of Stephen Foster's birth.<sup>309</sup>

Cowan was eight years older than Jane and had a reputation for being a lady's man. It is unlikely that he would have proposed marriage to Jane in 1850. He drank and caroused and played the field. During the Civil War, he became a senator, but during the summer of 1850, after Jane had accepted Stephen's proposal, Cowan went on fishing trips with Morrison Foster, Bill Denny, and the Blair boys. "They took boat trips up the Allegheny River to Harmar Denny's country home, Deer Creek, a general gathering place of the Denny family, where Annie Denny was the newest attraction for Dick Cowan since Jane had decided against him."<sup>310</sup> In all probability, Jane knew that Cowan was not a serious contender, so she chose Foster. After all, the latter had asked for her hand, and we do not know that Cowan ever did or would have.

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<sup>309</sup>Article in *Pittsburgh Post*, July 4, 1926, from an interview with Jesse Welsh Rose.

<sup>310</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 380.

### 5.3 THE MUSICAL CIRCLE

Both before Stephen Foster moved away to Cincinnati in 1846, and after he returned home and married in 1850, he participated in a tight knit musical group in Allegheny City, where “Singing around the old square piano in the evening was the principal social diversion of all the friends of Stephen Foster and his brothers.”<sup>311</sup> Yet Jane’s name was not associated with Stephen Foster’s musical circle, which included many women, such as the Lightner girls, Jessie and Julia. Jessie had a deep contralto voice, and Stephen brought many of his new songs to her to hear them sung before he sent them to his publisher Firth, Pond, and Company. Jessie Lightner would marry Morrison Foster years later. The group also included Henry Kleber, the German musician and teacher who gave Foster music lessons early on, and from whom Morneweck believed “Stephen learned practically all he knew of theory.” In May of 1850 Kleber opened a new music store called "The Sign of the Golden Harp" at Third Street in Pittsburgh, in which he advertised some of Foster's newest songs: "Summer Longings," "Dolcy Jones," "Dolly Day," and "Oh! Lemuel". The Kleber family lived on Sandusky Street in Allegheny, only a short walk from the Foster's home on the Common. By the summer of 1850 Stephen Foster had earned for himself a reputation as the composer of popular minstrel songs, and his songs "had become the standard of comparison for new minstrels songs" everywhere.

What is apparent in this discussion of Stephen Foster's musical circle in 1850 is that Jane McDowell was conspicuously absent from it. In a period when young women were prized for their musical accomplishments, Jane Foster did not display any. It is not even known whether she liked music, although a middle class girl of the nineteenth century could never maintain even

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<sup>311</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 341.

a semblance of gentility if she admitted that she did not care for music. Musical accomplishments became in the first half of the nineteenth century one of the several artistic endeavors that were considered the badge of the well brought up middle class lady.<sup>312</sup>

If Jane McDowell displayed no musical talents and some said she did not even like music, what was special about her? From what has been written about her, we can presume she was pretty, very pretty. But no pictures of the young Jane survive. A photo alleged to be Jane, showing a middle aged lady with added pounds, gives little idea of what might have drawn Stephen to her. We only know that she had light brown hair, probably long and luxuriant, and beautiful long hair was a prerequisite of feminine beauty throughout the Victorian era.<sup>313</sup> There is some indication in the way her clothing fit her that Jane also had a very appealing figure. A letter dated the day after the wedding took place says that "her wedding dress fit her beautifully.....all of Jane's dresses fit her beautifully, and her other garments were made quite neatly." Again, for middle class Victorian women, fashion and beauty were very important since they were closely linked to the concept of gentility.

## 5.4 MARRIAGE

Stephen and Jane Foster were married by a minister from the Trinity Episcopal Church on July 22, 1850, on a Monday. It was exactly mid-century, a time when marriage enshrined middle class women in a cult of domesticity. Even clothing was designed with a woman's virtue in mind.

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<sup>312</sup> Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women, A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) pp. 186-7.

<sup>313</sup>Ellen M. Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America, a Social History* (New York: Facts on File, 1997), p. 134.

Most obvious were the voluminous yards of fabric that were required to fashion skirts that draped over bird cage like hoops. Besides being fashionable, the hoop skirt, which was at its most expansive in 1850, gave the impression of guarding a woman's chastity. A pattern for a wedding gown from that year in *Lady's Godey's Book* would have advertised a huge hoop skirt, long sleeves that had a sort of second fuller short sleeve that extended from the shoulders to about mid way on the arm that was already covered by the tighter first sleeve. The somewhat elongated waistline would have been tight fitting, made more slender by corset stays and laces that pulled the waistline in at the risk of depriving the victim of enough air and dislocating certain body organs. The tight clothing even caused some girls to faint, which was a common enough practice so that middle class parlors were accessorized with fainting couches.

Agnes McDowell, a sister of Jane who attended the wedding, noted in her letter to another sister who was not well enough to attend, that "Jane & Stephen F, were pretty much frightened. Steve quite pale. They each had to repeat some part of the ceremony after Mr. Lyman, which made it, I think rather embarrassing. Jane repeated her part in a different kind of a voice altogether from her usual tone of voice. It was owing to her strain...."<sup>314</sup> Strain about what? Maybe the nervousness resulted from some inner voice that told her the marriage was a bad idea. But even successful marriages started out with that nervousness. Harriet Beecher Stowe was anxious when she approached her moment of fateful union. "I wish it were over--I can't bear this sort of uncertainty," wrote Stowe less than a month before she married in 1836.<sup>315</sup> There were, of course, many reasons for nineteenth century women to be nervous at their weddings. Divorce was rarely considered an option, even if the option did exist legally. Advice

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<sup>314</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 375-376.

<sup>315</sup>Joan D. Hedrick, *Harriet Beecher Stowe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 98.

manuals warned young women to make their selections carefully. Look into the character of the man, they were told. And they were reminded that a woman should not try to reform a man. What she married was usually what she got.<sup>316</sup>

A young women could be nervous in anticipation of the danger that the marriage bed entailed. All the young women had friends or relatives who had died in childbirth. Marriage marked a serious transition for a young couple, but especially for the woman, who immediately put her life in danger. Deaths from childbirth were so common that a young woman might not survive the year. Abraham Lincoln's only sister Sarah died in childbirth a year and a half after her marriage. She was twenty-two and Lincoln blamed his brother-in-law for not sending for a doctor.<sup>317</sup> Yes, marriage could indeed be a risky business for a woman. But it could be stressful for men for other reasons. While their lives might not be directly threatened, they did have to think of their livelihoods which needed to be secure and sufficient, because with marriage the man assumed the financial burden of supporting his wife and any offspring which would be expected to come along at fairly regular intervals.

Stephen and Jane Foster left immediately after the wedding for an extended excursion to New York and Baltimore. Along the way, they visited relatives in at least three cities in Pennsylvania --- in Chambersburg, Mercersburg, and Paradise ---- and Eliza Foster's family in Baltimore. But the real reason for the "honeymoon" excursion was to enable Stephen to make contact with his publishers, Firth, Pond, and Company in New York and F.D. Benteen in Baltimore, Maryland. At the risk of portraying Foster in a less romantic light, it is fair to assume that a trip to New York was on Stephen's mind months before he even considered marriage.

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<sup>316</sup> Rothman, *Hands and Hearts*, p. 108.

<sup>317</sup> David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), pp. 33-34.



Stephen had published over a dozen songs in the year before his marriage, and they were all successful. He was happy and exuberantly confident for the first time in his life, and Stephen's niece Evelyn Morneweck thought "Stephen's financial prospects were now as good as any of his brothers." That statement may have been true as far as Henry and Morrison were concerned, but certainly not compared with William Jr. whose career with the Pennsylvania Railroad had already demonstrated the marks of success. Dunning Foster was also launched on an exciting career, captaining his own boat up and down the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, but his health was proving a handicap. Still, Stephen felt optimistic about his future because he had royalty contracts with both Firth, Pond & Company and the Baltimore firm of F.D. Benteen. With copyright protection intact, he could feel confident to send copies of his latest song to minstrel performers like Edwin P. Christy of the Christy Minstrels, without fearing that they might try to surreptitiously copyright the songs in their own names. He just had to be sure that he flattered the minstrels by having the publisher print the performer's name on the title page, because that would enhance sales of the songs. Foster quickly recognized the importance of maintaining special connections with the minstrel performers, and keeping them happy.<sup>318</sup>

On September 8, 1850 Stephen and Jane were back in Allegheny where they moved in with the Foster clan, who were all living in brother William's house on the East Common. Stephen continued to be productive, publishing an additional five songs by the first of the new year. Jane, of course, was pregnant, waiting for the nine months to pass. Their daughter Marion was born in April of 1851. She would be their only child. The couple lived with the Foster family, then moved in for several months with Jane's family, then returned to live with the

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<sup>318</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 377.

Fosters. It was a difficult time for a young woman who was used to having more: more servants, a better house, more privacy.

Why, then, did Jane marry Stephen? Probably for some of the same reasons he married her: the timing was right and opposites do attract. But another reason could have been that Jane was impressed by Stephen's new and growing celebrity. His songs were selling, and what was more, people were singing them, in the theaters, in the streets, everywhere it seemed. She may have even believed she loved him. Another reason for marrying, in the woman's case, was that a nineteenth century woman believed she needed to be married to have a complete and worthwhile life. Marriage and family life were set forth as the ideal to which a young woman aspired. An old maid or a spinster was a person to be pitied, a burden on her family for support and a useless waste of a woman's reproductive capabilities and obligations. Advice manuals for young ladies in the 1840s and 1850s extolled the virtues of marriage. Marriage promised to bring a woman happiness, something to do, and someone to love.<sup>319</sup>

## 5.5 DOMESTIC RESPONSIBILITIES

The blessings of marriage did not come without a price, however, as marriage put special demands on the middle-class wife who shouldered substantial responsibilities in the nineteenth century. She was held responsible for the spiritual, moral, and cultural enrichment of the family. Nineteenth century domestic ideology went so far as to ascribe to the middle class wife the noble calling of “great civilizer of man,” which meant that she had a responsibility of maintaining the

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<sup>319</sup> Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America*, p. 36.

moral worth of her husband, while she raised her own children to be upstanding moral and religious citizens of the new republic. The good wife "kept a husband from roving, gave him direction in the world and provided him with an orderly life."<sup>320</sup> Such a responsibility would mean that if her husband failed morally, that is, if he drank excessively, for example, the wife would be somehow held accountable. She was supposed to keep him on the upright path, not through nagging or force, but through love, by providing a comfortable home and a peaceful setting to which the husband could retreat each day. When problems first developed in the Foster marriage, some of the Fosters blamed Jane for not "making a happy home and making her husband happy,"<sup>321</sup> but in later years nobody put the blame squarely on Jane shoulders.

Much of the energies of a nineteenth century middle class wife were focused on the home, which was to be "a bastion of morality, comfort, and refinement, guarding the family against the dark side of an industrializing world."<sup>322</sup> To this end, the good wife directed her efforts towards making the home a retreat from the outside world and a cultural symbol of refinement, social standing, intellect and honor. Of course, creating such a home demanded money. It involved purchasing or renting a house and furnishing and decorating it with the massive, dark, ornate mahogany furniture that Victorians prized as emblems of solidity and stability. Clutter was the hallmark of success and social standing, and with the industrial revolution there were more reasonably priced furniture and decorative arts available to fill every nook and cranny and every bit of wall space. The middle class home would have a square piano in the parlor for the ladies and a library of leather bound books for the father of the house. In this

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<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35

<sup>321</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 425.

<sup>322</sup> Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America*, p. 36

way, the wife would ensure the cultural enrichment of the family by encouraging musical performance and reading. The problem for Jane, of course, was that she never had the home to make beautiful, comforting, or cultured, nor would she have the time later on when she had to go into the public sphere and work for a living. This was because Stephen did not play his part well as the provider of the necessities for the middle class lifestyle.<sup>323</sup>

## 5.6 RELIGIOUS DUTIES OF WOMEN

Middle class wives, by virtue of their superior moral worth, were given the responsibility of instilling religious and spiritual values in the family. Although no record remains of how Jane fulfilled her spiritual obligations, the other women in Stephen Foster's life exemplified this womanly virtue. In the Foster family, the men were rarely religious, yet the women were keenly aware of the state of the soul of their men folk, whom they often exhorted to seek salvation. Wifely duties included not only physical obligations but spiritual responsibilities as well. Assigning religiosity according to gender was the norm for antebellum Americans, who believed that women were more religious by nature. In the Protestant churches, female congregants well outnumbered men, and one medical man in 1847 averred that "woman's was a pious mind, which more readily than man accepted the proffered graces of the Gospel."<sup>324</sup>

Both Ann Eliza and her sister Henrietta sent letters to their father and brothers begging them to save their souls before it was too late. "For yourself my dear brother," Ann Eliza wrote

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<sup>323</sup> Ann C. Rose, *Victorian America and the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992) p. 104.

Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America*, p. 36-39.

<sup>324</sup> Rothman, *Hands and Hearts*, p. 95.

to Morrison in 1848, “I trust and most earnestly pray, that the goodness of God thus manifested to you may constrain you to turn away from every sinful pursuit and every idle vanity and give yourself up soul and body a living sacrifice to Him who died Himself for you.”<sup>325</sup> Henrietta Foster Thornton also wanted to see “all my beloved family in the same saving state.” After she convinced her (second) husband Jesse Thornton to enter into “the fold of Christ,” she went to work on her elderly father, to whom she wrote in the winter of 1849: “Why then should I hesitate...to urge upon you the necessity of immediately seeking to save your immortal soul ..... Let not the Evil one tempt you to put it off, or to neglect, or unbelief, do dear father give up all your doubts, and pray for true holiness, pray to your Heavenly Father to remove your indifference, to give you a realizing sense of your own sinfulness, and utter inability to save yourself, and your need of a Savior.”<sup>326</sup>

These were not simply examples of overly religious sentiments, but the spiritual obligations of nineteenth century middle class women. Eliza Foster did not shirk her spiritual duties to be the moral guide of the family and to uplift or maintain the virtue of her sons. Although they were not living under the same roof in 1847, Eliza wrote to her son Morrison “care of Mr. McCormick, Pittsburgh, Pa.” from Youngstown, Ohio: “Be as religious as you are moral and dutiful and never depart from the course of life you have commenced so may your after years be crowned with [laurels].<sup>327</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Ann Eliza Buchanan to Morrison Foster, July 17, 1848 (Foster Hall Collection C475).

<sup>326</sup> Henrietta Foster Thornton to William B. Foster, Sr., February 19, 1849 (Foster Hall Collection C475).

<sup>327</sup> Eliza C. Foster to Morrison Foster, August 23, 1847 (Foster Hall Collection C479).

## 5.7 THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

Stephen and Jane Foster's marriage lasted almost fourteen years until January 13, 1864, the day on which the composer died in New York City. The couple more or less lived together for the first ten years, separating either when he spent time in New York on business, or when Jane on a few occasions packed up her bags and moved out with their little daughter Marion in tow. Until Stephen Foster moved to New York in 1860, however, the couple was never separated for more than six months. There were numerous break-ups and reconciliations, and, according to the Foster family, several were high tempered separations. But from 1860 until 1864, Stephen Foster lived alone for most of the time, and ultimately died alone in a room in New York City.

What was the source of such a tumultuous relationship? Aside from tempers which were at odds, the unstable and unreliable finances accompanied by Stephen's tendency to solve his problems through alcohol offer some answers. According to Morneweck, "Jane had not only poverty to cope with--Stephen's growing inclination to wipe out all his worries by a closer association with the Devouring Enemy left her the one on whom all the burden fell." Stephen's family blamed Jane's "temperament" for the separations, but in later years their opinion of her had altered: "Temperamental and light minded Jane might have been the first few years of her married life, but the last two years had steadied and matured her." Stephen's sister Henrietta, who also had early on faulted Jane for the problems in her brother's marriage, in later years credited her sister-in-law with "Keeping her family together, and steadfastly guarding the irresponsible Stephen in his strange and unaccountable course." The Fosters believed, furthermore, that Stephen was always faithful to his "Jennie:" "No instance can be found that anyone ever made Stephen Foster waver in the loyalty he owed to 'Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair.'" That may

have been true as far as another woman was concerned, but there were always his alcohol and his melancholy to draw him away.<sup>328</sup>

The young couple had many difficulties to face, not least of which was living together with the entire Foster family in brother William's house in Allegheny City. After staying away about six weeks on their New York honeymoon-business trip combination, Stephen and Jane moved into the house at 605 Union on the East Common, and joined Stephen's mother and father who were already living there. Morrison Foster stayed there, too, when he was not traveling the rivers for the Hope Cotton Factory. With two additional people, the Allegheny house quickly became crowded, but soon there was a new arrival. Stephen Foster's only child Marion was born on April 18, 1851 while the couple was living with the Fosters. Jane's mother and sisters lived nearby, and on August 4, 1851 Stephen, Jane, and Marion moved in with Mrs. McDowell. The reason for Stephen Foster's change of residence may have been necessitated by other factors than overcrowding. Sometimes between the end of February and April of 1851, William Foster, Sr. suffered a major, debilitating stroke that made him "a prisoner to his bed for the remainder of his life."<sup>329</sup> A newborn child in the house would have caused too much noise and commotion for the bedridden and seriously ill man. Jane, too, may have wanted the comfort of her own mother after the baby was born. For whatever reason, Stephen and Jane stayed at the McDowell house up until Christmas, and then returned to the Fosters' place in Allegheny.

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<sup>328</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp.553, 541, 514.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 387.

## 5.8 BOAT TRIP SOUTH

The next time we hear about a change of scenery for the young family is when Stephen, Jane, Marion and a group of old friends boarded Dunning's steamboat the *James Millingar* to take a little pleasure trip down the rivers to New Orleans. In addition to the Robinsons, the Pentlands, and the Lightner girls, all of whom were on board the ship, strangely enough Richard Cowan, Morrison's friend and Stephen's competitor in the suit for Jane, was aboard, too, on this trip south. We have to wonder what, if anything, that meant to Stephen and Jane. Dunning transferred the entire crew to a new ship when the *James Millingar* stopped in Cincinnati, on its return from New Orleans. At Cincinnati, Morrison joined them when they transferred to the *Allegheny* for that ship's maiden voyage to Pittsburgh. Everyone had a great time, and Stephen Foster, it has been claimed, came away with images of the South that he used in his songs. The party was back in Pittsburgh on March 21, 1852.

Many critics believed that this trip was important to Foster's musical development because it was the only time as an adult that he traveled south, and the images that he saw aboard the steamboat, or that greeted him if and when he got off the boat, became distilled into the creation of the southern imagery of his plantation songs. Others have surmised that on this trip Foster disembarked at Bardstown, Kentucky, and visited Federal Hill, the Rowan house that eventually was turned into the historic "Old Kentucky Home" state shrine. Furthermore, it has been suggested that on this alleged visit to Kentucky, Stephen Foster had the opportunity to acquire a sense of the old South, which he transferred to his plantation songs. It is most likely, however, that Foster did not visit the "Old Kentucky Home" when he traveled down the river in 1852. No visit to the house that Foster made famous has ever been documented. Although his brother Morrison said he was "a frequent visitor," it is difficult to ascertain when or how that



would have been possible. The southern flavor in Foster's plantation songs had to come from another source.

About a year later, Richard Cowan wrote from Harrisburg, where he had been elected to the Pennsylvania House of Representatives: "I was out visiting tonight and some of the musical members of the family sang "Old Folks at Home" and the duet from *Romeo & Juliet*. These songs were favorites of our party last winter on our trip to Orleans, and I was vividly reminded of our delightful journey. When we reach'd the warm latitudes, we used to sit on deck to enjoy the moonlight and the sight of the negroes burning brush and cotton stalks at the plantations. Tell Miss Jessie that the duet was well sung tonight, but the second was very different from hers. Indeed, I used to think that Steve must have written that piece of music for Miss Jessie & Mrs. R.-- they sang it so well."<sup>330</sup> Perhaps then, some of Stephen's ideas about the South came from watching the scenes at a distance from the deck on the boat.

## 5.9 THE BREAK UP

At the end of the year, in December of 1852, Stephen's sister Henrietta, now married to Jesse Thornton, visited her family in the house on the East Commons and noticed all was not well between Stephen and his young wife. It was at this time that Henrietta predicted trouble if Jane did not "change her course of conduct." As to exactly what that course of conduct was, we are left in mystery, although Morneweck suggested it was Jane's high temper, which she has us

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<sup>330</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 446-447.

believe cooled down in later years as the young girl matured. "Jane's tempestuous outbursts might have been the cause of their quarreling and might even have driven Stephen away at times, but he came back again." If any excuse was offered for Jane's outrageous behavior, it was that she was "exceedingly pretty and had been spoiled and petted at home." <sup>331</sup>

Stephen Foster may have unwittingly revealed something of his attitude towards his wife or to women in general at this time. On February 14, 1853 Foster wrote a letter from Pittsburgh to the editor of the *Musical World* which appeared in the February 26th edition of the publication. The content of the letter ostensibly dealt with the "fundamental laws of harmony," but has often been considered an embarrassing attempt by the composer at self-promotion and the marketing of his own celebrity. Critics such as William W. Austin dismissed the letter as "humbug, with no deception but no skill." According to Austin, "Foster never again attempted anything of the sort. From this time on he let his publishers and two friends provide all the publicity he was to receive."<sup>332</sup>

The letter appears to reveal more about Foster's attitude towards the opposite sex than about music, showing he had more of matrimony than harmony on his mind. He asked "Might we not have a musical gender?" and advocated dividing chords into genders, "a distinction suggestive of matrimony." To the masculine gender belonged "the sturdy prime and the valorous *fifth*, --- which, when sounded together, to the exclusion of others, suggests trumpets, and 'the big wars that make ambition virtue.'" On the other hand, Foster wanted to represent the "feminine notes of the harmonic family" by "the conciliating *third*, and the complaining, though

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<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*, p.426.

<sup>332</sup> William W. Austin, "Susanna," "Jeanie," and "The Old Folks at Home" *The Songs of Stephen C. Foster from His Time to Ours*, ( Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1975), p. 205.

gentle (minor) seventh, as they seem to lean for support on the sterner notes..." He concluded the letter:

The males, though noisy and boisterous, may be doubled or reinforced with propriety, while the females ( bless their dear hearts) can speak for themselves ..... In support of this idea, is the fact that the seventh has a natural penchant for the third, or sister tone of the succeeding chord, which it usually resolves itself in order to unfold its sorrowful story; a proverbial weakness of the sex, confiding their secrets to each other..... the aforesaid *seventh* can sometimes be used to great advantage in creating *discord*, but it would be ungallant to dwell on this branch of the argument."<sup>333</sup>

If the letter is suggestive of what was going on in Foster's life at the time, *discord* was a gentle explanation. Something happened in May of 1853-- we don't know what--- but "Jane was angry enough to pack up her clothes and leave with baby Marion." The break-up may have had something to do with the fact that Stephen Foster signed a new contract with Firth, Pond & Company on May 5, 1853. The new contract was better than the old one Stephen had with this same publishing house, because it guaranteed Foster a ten percent royalty on the retail price of all copies of his songs that the firm sold. The previous contract paid only 8 percent, but the new contract demanded exclusivity. Stephen could sell his songs only to Firth, Pond & Company under the new contract.<sup>334</sup> Even with a better contract, Jane may have not wanted him to sign the agreement at all. She may have wanted her husband to try another line of work, something closer to home, and steadier. This is only conjecture, but it looks like a good possibility. After she packed up and left with the baby, we do not know where she went to stay, but presumably to

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<sup>333</sup> Stephen C. Foster to editor of *Musical World*, February 14, 1853, published in *Musical World* February 26, 1853. This letter to the editor of a musical journal was not the first or the last time Foster would use literary creativity to publicly suggest inner feelings which he felt society or his family forced him to keep hidden. Letter reprinted in Austin, "Susanna," "Jeanie," and "The Old Folks at Home," p. 205 and John Tasker Howard, *Stephen Foster, America's Troubadour*, p. 220.

<sup>334</sup> John Tasker Howard, *Stephen Foster, America's Troubadour* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1953, 1934), p. 237.

the McDowell house where her mother and sisters were still living. At least the proximity of her mother's house made for a convenient escape.

Stephen responded to Jane's departure with a similarly strong emotional outburst. He sold his furniture to his father for \$75 and packed up and left for New York. That was on June 13, 1853, a month after Jane walked out. But it is possible that part of the demands of the 1853 contract was that he move to New York to work closely with the publisher on the forthcoming publication, the *Social Orchestra*, and Jane may have objected. Since the contract is no longer in existence, speculation is applicable. Jane may not have wanted to live in New York City, since she had a small daughter to raise. She may not have thought the "dangerous city" was a wholesome place for a child.

The trip to New York from Pittsburgh was fairly easy by this time. The previous year, in 1852, the train for the first time made the complete journey all the way through to Pittsburgh from the East, and it took only one day instead of four. Stephen had visited New York in January of 1853, when the *Musical World and Times* reported that Stephen C. Foster, "celebrated composer," had paid them a visit. Foster's stay in New York in January was very brief, but his return trip which he made in June of 1853 was of much longer duration. This time Stephen had "plenty of work to keep him busy" because in January of 1854 Firth, Pond, and Company published the *Social Orchestra*. This hefty anthology included some of Stephen's own compositions along with works by other composers arranged for piano, violin, and flute. Foster spent many tedious months diligently arranging the songs into solos, duets, trios, and quartets that could be performed at intimate social gatherings in the family parlor.<sup>335</sup>

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<sup>335</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 442.

Apparently, Stephen was already having financial difficulties. In July of 1853, after settling into New York less than a month, he requested that Morrison send him a note which Firth, Pond, and Company had issued for \$125. The note was passed back and forth between the two brothers as Stephen signed it over to Morrison for money owed, then realized he was in no position to repay his debts and asked again for the money. This time, though, he promised that Firth, Pond, and Company would soon be advancing him \$500. But Morrison Foster was also having financial difficulties at this time because Pittsburgh could no longer compete as a cotton manufacturer and Morrison worked in Pittsburgh's cotton industry.

Stephen Foster, although working in New York, seems to have been drinking regularly. "Taylor's new saloon great," Stephen told Morrison in a July 8th letter. Morneweck quickly assured her readers that "Taylor's new saloon was not nearly so bad as it sounds." This saloon was an establishment located at the corner of Broadway and Franklin Streets in a hotel where "elegant and dignified ladies in sweeping mantillas are promenading in the magnificent square tiled lobby." No matter how elegant and genteel the establishment, the liquor was most certainly flowing. Foster may have been working diligently arranging the *Social Orchestra*, but he was spending his after hours at the bar. "I am getting along first rate, with plenty of work to keep me busy," Foster wrote home, adding that he still had time for some of the attractions of the great metropolis. He visited New York's Hippodrome, the great circus, and planned on hearing the soprano Sontag in opera the following week. The Crystal Palace which housed the marvelous inventions of the mid-nineteenth century in a steel girded glass encased house was on

his itinerary for the following week. He had spent the Fourth of July on Staten Island and visited friends of the family.<sup>336</sup>

By November of 1853, Stephen Foster was back in Pittsburgh for the opening of a grand musical spectacle called "The Invisible Prince" on which he collaborated with his abolitionist poet friend Charles Shiras.<sup>337</sup> Stephen returned to New York in 1854, and some time during that winter, or possibly later in the spring of 1854, Jane and Marion moved to New York to live with Stephen as a family. Perhaps he was reaping the monetary rewards for the hard work he had done for Firth, Pond, and Company during the summer and fall of 1853. He took up residence in Hoboken, New Jersey at 233 Bloomfield Street, in what was then a fairly new row house, only a year or two old. Jane may have felt that she finally had a home of her own in Hoboken, because she signed a copy of her prayer book, "Jane D. Foster, Hoboken." The Hoboken row house was the only house that Jane would ever share solely with Stephen and Marion. She could not have remained long in her new house, however, because sometime soon Stephen pulled up roots once again and dragged the little family back to Allegheny. One day he called in a furniture dealer, sold all the furniture, and within twenty-four hours Stephen, Jane, and Marion were on a train heading west to Pittsburgh.

Although we do not have the date of this perplexing and unsettling behavior, Morneweck tells us that Stephen wrote "Willie, We have Missed You" to commemorate this particular return trip to Pittsburgh. The song tells the story of a young wife who waits up late into the night for her husband to return. Although the couple's young children have already fallen asleep waiting, the wife stays up to greet her husband with a sentimental and loving welcome. The song was

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<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 443.

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 439.

published in March of 1854. The official story of the conception of the song was that Stephen's mother Eliza heard her youngest son's footsteps on the front porch of the Allegheny house, and recognizing the sound, came rushing forth to greet him with a heart felt embrace. When Stephen beheld his mother at the front door of his old home, the composer broke out in tears and took a few minutes to regain his composure. Thus it was the greeting of a faithful mother, not that of a faithful wife, that inspired the song. The scene perfectly captures the sentimental ideal of love and family in the nineteenth century. The date of the song's publication, however, leaves us to ponder just how long Jane had to enjoy her home in Hoboken. Of course, the song might have been written to commemorate a different homecoming at an earlier or later date. Morneweck's words hardly console us: "We do know that in the first few years of Stephen's and Jane's married life, there are several home comings and several leavings, and Jane went oftener to New York while Stephen was there than the record shows."<sup>338</sup>

There is some concern that Stephen Foster's close attachment to his mother may have been a strong deterrent to a close relationship with his wife. Morrison Foster wrote: "His love for his mother amounted to adoration. She was to him an angelic creature."<sup>339</sup> But close emotional bonds between mothers and sons were commonplace during the antebellum years. Family relationships were based largely on emotional bonds, and both fathers and daughters and mothers and sons formed close relationships. Historian Ann C. Rose pointed out that a close relationship with a son empowered the Victorian mother in a day and age when women had to experience power vicariously through their sons, since they could not directly assume power. "Victorian mothers developed close relationships with their sons not only because fathers and sons

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<sup>338</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicle*, p. 451

<sup>339</sup> Foster, *My Brother Stephen*, p. 44.

frequently experienced conflict with each other, but also because family ties could best be experienced through mothers. In addition, in a society governed by men, close ties with a son brought the middle class Victorian mother that much closer to freedoms she herself could not experience first hand."<sup>340</sup>

During the months when Stephen was in New York and the couple was separated for at least six months, the family worried about their youngest sibling. Henrietta was very concerned about her brother when she first heard the news that Jane and her brother had separated, and she extended an invitation for Stephen to stay with her: "How sorry I feel for dear Stepby, though when I read your letter I was not at all surprised at the news it contained....I last winter felt convinced she would either have to change her course of conduct or a separation was inevitable." What did Henrietta mean by "her course of conduct"? Had Jane done something to offend the Fosters?

During the following winter, in 1854, Dunning expressed his concern over Stephen's chosen path in life: "Have you heard anything from Stephen lately? It is a subject of much anxiety to me, not withstanding his foolish and unaccountable course.--I hope he will continue to make a comfortable living for himself." Maybe Dunning thought going into the music business instead of taking up the opportunity that he had offered Stephen in Cincinnati in bookkeeping was the foolish and unaccountable course. We don't know. The Foster boys were getting themselves established in various businesses and doing well. In 1854, after the new railroad line connected Pittsburgh to the East, William Foster, Jr. was promoted to Vice President of the Pennsylvanian Railroad and moved with his family to Philadelphia. Dunning wrote the family that financially he was doing well, although health was another matter. But they all worried

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<sup>340</sup> Rose, *Victorian America and the Civil War*, pp.164-166, 170.



about the twenty-seven year old Stephen. "Why Stephen's family should all be so concerned about a grown man of twenty seven years may seem strange to some readers, but they were all familiar with their youngest brother's temperament. They knew he was suffering and would accept neither sympathy nor advice from any of his family. He withdrew into himself and hid his hurt as best he could.....lately he had been keeping away from friends and spending his time either alone or in the company of acquaintances he had made along Broadway." The Fosters were in agreement that Stephen was already by 1854 sinking into a kind of lonely despair.<sup>341</sup>

It was in June of 1854, however, that Stephen Foster wrote the song that is most associated with the composer's love for his wife, although he did not officially dedicate "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair" to Jane. This song, Morneweck believed, "indicates more than anything else, that Stephen was reconciled to his young wife, the owner of the lovely tresses." If not, perhaps, he wrote the song in the hopes that it would reconcile her to him. Jennie was the name used by Stephen when he addressed his wife. "Jane was not called Jeanie by her family, but was often addressed by the affectionate diminutive, Jennie. It is more than likely that the publishers suggested to Stephen that he change it to the more euphonious and romantic Jeanie, as more appealing to public taste."<sup>342</sup>

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<sup>341</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 449.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 451-452.

## 5.10 THE DEATH OF ELIZA AND WILLIAM FOSTER

Christmas, 1854, found Stephen at home with Jane and Marion in the Allegheny house, celebrating a happy reunion with the entire clan, except for William Jr. who remained in Philadelphia. But there was much, perhaps too much, pressure placed on Eliza. The house was crowded during part of the year of 1854 because Ann Eliza's son James Buchanan, Jr. moved to Pittsburgh and lived with the Fosters on and off, while he undertook legal studies with a lawyer with Democratic affiliations.<sup>343</sup> Henrietta also showed up with her children and stayed awhile, although Dunning feared that the expenses of the family would be increased because Henrietta's "girls are just at such an age as to require considerable expenses in keeping up appearances in a city." More serious was the threat of cholera to Pittsburgh, which occurred in September of 1854 and which forced the young James Buchanan to return home for a month or so.<sup>344</sup> Dunning was also "much distressed to learn that our dear Mother is likely to have her health injured by her attentions to Pa."<sup>345</sup>

Dunning's concerns were merited because the 1854 Christmas turned out to be the last the family would spend together. In the middle of January, 1855, Eliza Clayland Foster suffered a fatal heart attack while she was out leisurely shopping for some trinkets, including pink ribbon. That July his father William Barclay Foster also passed away. They were buried next to their daughter Charlotte, whose remains only a few years before had been moved to the new Allegheny Cemetery that was opened in Lawrenceville near the old White Cottage.

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<sup>343</sup> Ann Eliza Buchanan to Morrison Foster, June 26, 1854 ( Foster Hall Collection C540).

<sup>344</sup> James Buchanan, Jr. to Morrison Foster, September 25, 1854 (Foster Hall Collection C541).

<sup>345</sup> Dunning Foster to Morrison Foster, December 13, 1854 (Foster Hall Collection C545).

Morrison claimed that his brother Stephen Foster never got over the death of his mother, whom he idolized. But considering all the problems, Stephen Foster seems to have fared pretty well in 1855. He remained in the house in Allegheny, the chores and maintenance of which he took over. Stephen was supposed to pay rent to William Jr. in the amount of \$31 a quarter, but records indicated that his rent was outstanding in later months. In spite of his personal losses in 1855, Stephen managed to write five good songs, which were published by Firth, Pond & Company. Stephen, Jane and Marion now had the house to themselves. Morrison moved out to a boarding house, since the Fosters had no servants and Morrison did not want to ask Jane to cook and clean for him. ( Jane probably did not volunteer, either.) Stephen seemed rather comfortable taking care of the house which was no longer crowded and could be a home for just himself and his immediate family.

The following year 1856 was also a time of death and sadness for the Fosters, which proved very unproductive for Stephen. Dunning Foster died on March 31, 1856 of a slow progressing yet fatal disease that he contracted during the Mexican American War. In March of 1856 he wrote Morrison from Cincinnati that he was “quite weak,” yet did not “feel ill enough for any of you to come here. I made a fatal mistake in remaining here this winter.”<sup>346</sup> Henry, Morrison, and Stephen rushed to Cincinnati and were with Dunning when he died shortly after he had written this letter. Ann Eliza had difficulty coming to terms with the death of her brother Dunning. It was her first loss of a sibling since she had lost Charlotte, “that dear creature.” She became resigned, telling herself and her remaining brothers “the will of the Lord be done: it is always the best....Nothing remains to us but submission to his loss & solemn appropriating to

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<sup>346</sup> Dunning Foster to Morrison Foster, March 17, 1856 (Foster Hall Collection C551).

our hearts the admonitions it brings.”<sup>347</sup> Six months later brother William's wife Elizabeth died in October of the same year. William anticipated the death of his beloved wife, a second time for this husband. Ann Eliza wrote, “William seems fully aware of his situation & has made up his mind to part with her, it being now as he says, but a question of days or months when that must take place. His grief at the prospect he says is beyond expression.”<sup>348</sup>

The sorrows of so many deaths in the family in such a brief time weighed heavily on Stephen Foster, who wrote two campaign songs, but only one parlor song in 1856. The latter some believe was written to commemorate a neighbor's child who had been run over and killed by a horse.<sup>349</sup> "Gentle Annie" was a death song, one of the many consolatory pieces that Foster wrote under the name of sentimental parlor songs, but which were actually mourning songs. Unfortunately, in Foster's own state of belated mourning for the dead parents who had died the previous year, and the brother who had only recently died, he redirected his song writing energies into politics. In 1856 sister Ann Eliza's brother-in-law James Buchanan ran for president of the United States. Foster wrote campaign songs for this Democratic presidential nominee, and it would seem, spent far too much time electing one of America's worst presidents, more out of a familiar obligation than out of political devotion.<sup>350</sup> Foster did not earn royalties for the campaign songs, but he does not seem to have been able to write anything else. His

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<sup>347</sup> Ann Eliza Buchanan to Morrison Foster, April 8, 1856 (Foster Hall Collection C552).

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>349</sup> Martha Morse, the one time companion of Stephen Foster, believed that the song was written to commemorate the untimely death of yet another lovely young lady, a cousin of Stephen's, Annie Evans.

<sup>350</sup> The renowned historian Henry Steele Commager said that Buchanan was “by universal consent the worst president in the history of the country.” ( from John Updike's “Buchanan Dying” quoted in *James Buchanan and the Political Crisis of the 1850s*, in the introduction by Michael J. Birkner, p. 17) Actually, for all the noise and parading Stephen made in Pittsburgh for Buchanan's campaign, he did not win in Allegheny County, although he took the nation as a whole.

manuscript book shows that he began a song for his dead brother Dunning, but could write no more than a few lines and left unfinished the song for "the grieved brother."<sup>351</sup>

## 5.11 THE SELL OUT

When 1857 rolled around, the year proved to be one of major decision for Foster, and, according to many critics, a disastrous year of making the wrong choices. This was the year that Stephen Foster sold out all of his royalty rights for a one time cash advance from the songs he had written for Firth, Pond and Co. and for F.D. Benteen. When one looks at the broader picture, however, it is not entirely clear that the decision was categorically wrong. In 1857, there was an economic calamity in the making, and Stephen Foster was to lose his home-- a second time for the composer. Either event was reason enough for exchanging the future value of his songs for immediate cash advances. On April 13, 1857, William Foster, Jr. sold the two frame houses he owned in Allegheny along with the brick house where Stephen Foster and his family had been living for twelve years. Brother William probably made known his decision to sell the houses months earlier, so Stephen Foster was aware of the unsettling changes to come in the near future.

On January 27, 1857, anticipating that he might need a large cash advance, Stephen made up a list showing how much money his songs were worth in projected royalties. The Depression of 1857 did not hit the nation full blown until the late summer and fall of that year, but the composer may have been aware of signs of the impending depression as early as 1856, especially since depressions were likely to hit the western areas before they struck in the East.

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<sup>351</sup> I have chosen to discuss Foster's involvement in James Buchanan's presidential campaign in a later chapter entitled "Politics of Ambivalence."

Government land sales, bank loans, and domestic trade, for instance, had fallen off as early as the final months of 1856. Another factor was that the Crimean War which had provided an international market for American cereals for the previous two years came to an end in 1856. When peace was restored in Europe, American farmers lost a large part of their foreign market and American shippers soon found themselves in a recession.<sup>352</sup> Most informed about the coming depression would have been Brother William who was intimately involved with the railroad business, and over expansion of the railroads was one of the major causes of the Depression of 1857 in America. William could have hinted to his younger brother that a recession was a possibility in the near future, thereby influencing Stephen's decision to sell out his royalties at the beginning of the year.

Whether or not Stephen Foster anticipated the impending economic crisis, or its severity, he did know that the house in Allegheny would be sold in the middle of April. It is not surprising that about six weeks later on May 30, 1857 Foster accepted the notes for \$1200 from Firth, Pond & Company, as partial payment for the sale of his royalties. Stephen was in such a hurry that "on May 27, three days before the notes were dated, he discounted the three four-hundred dollar notes at the Pittsburgh Trust Company. The twelve hundred dollars were put to his credit at this bank, from whence Stephen drew out money in small amounts over a period lasting until December 29 of the same year (1857)."<sup>353</sup> The twelve hundred dollars was the amount that was left over from the agreed upon price for the copyright sale, which was \$1,872.28. Foster had originally estimated that his future copyright interests were worth at least \$2,786.77; the price the

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<sup>352</sup>Kenneth M. Stamp, *America in 1857* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Stamp gives an excellent account of the Depression of 1857.

<sup>353</sup>John Tasker Howard, *Stephen Foster, America's Troubadour* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1953, 1934), p. 270.

publishers paid him for the upfront cash was two-thirds of Stephen's estimated value. Then the \$1,872.28 amount was reduced to a mere \$1,200 because of the advances Foster had already drawn on his account. Stephen also made the same type of agreement with F.D. Benteen, accepting \$200 for all future royalties on the sixteen songs that the Baltimore company had published for him.

Since Foster was already overdrawn on his accounts with his publishers, he could not ask or expect anything more from them without giving up the rights to his songs. He was in urgent need to have money to pay for room and board, even if the accommodations he offered Jane and Marion would only be a boarding house. (The family moved into several boarding houses after William Jr. sold the house in Allegheny.) Another problem was that Stephen's income from royalties was considerably smaller in the last quarter of 1856 than it had been in prior years. Whereas he had consoled Morrison a few years earlier that he was earning \$500 a quarter, the most recent quarter only brought him \$267.72, an average annual earnings of \$1,070.88. During the previous seven years, from the time he signed his first contract with Firth, Pond, and Company, Stephen had averaged \$1,425.84 a year, an amount that would have kept him and his family in a modest style of comfort, if only he had been able to keep production up. But the muse had not visited him lately, his income was shrinking as a consequence, and Foster did not expect things to get any better. The year 1856 had been unproductive musically for the composer. Morrison Foster was hurting economically as well and could no longer be relied on to help Stephen out. Consequently, Stephen Foster made the best decision he could in the bleak year of 1857.

## 5.12 DEPRESSION OF 1857

The reason William Jr. decided to pull all support from Stephen and his young family at this time points heavily in the direction of the Depression of 1857. In addition to the resentment the oldest adopted son may have felt for the many years the Fosters pressured him for financial support, the decision to sell appears to have been motivated mainly by his business intuition. If he anticipated the Depression of 1857, which he most assuredly did, he would have thought it was a good time to sell in the spring of that fateful year, when the editors and businessmen began to give warnings that "Things cannot last!" Warnings of economic disaster in the newspapers would have been reason enough for William Foster jr. to sell the brick house in Allegheny when he did, but brother William probably had insider information about the over expansion of the railroads. Much of the 1850s had been a boom economy resulting from the feverish construction of new railroad lines, and William Jr. probably agreed with the editor who said such good fortune could not last.

Land speculation had grown out of control in the 1850s when the federal government granted a land subsidy to the railroads consisting of twenty-two million acres from the public domain. After miles of rails were constructed, most of the left over land was purchased by eager investors and farmers. Speculative fever caught on rapidly as settlers secured their land holdings around the rails with a minimum down payment and seven years to pay on credit terms. Land prices quickly inflated especially in the West, where some lots increased in price by ten times in one year. One editor noted that "This was an age in which men sought to grow rich without



labor, and speculation was their favorite means." <sup>354</sup> Some people even suggested that railroads were being built solely for the purpose of encouraging speculation.

By the end of the summer, the leading banks in the country suspended payment and closed their doors. On August 24, 1857, the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company announced that it had to suspend payments. A bank of deposit capitalized at about \$2 million, the company's main office was in Cincinnati, where Stephen Foster was frequently seen attending to the details of his financial obligations when he was working for his brother Dunning in the late 1840s. <sup>355</sup> On September 25, 1857 the Bank of Pennsylvania closed its doors in Philadelphia, setting off a panic in the city. Soon long lines of depositors formed as banks in Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Harrisburg, and Reading announced they would suspend payments.

The accompanying depression was severe and showed no sign of clearing up for a long time. Over 5,000 businesses failed, and stories of bankrupt speculators, bank failures, and the closings of mercantile houses and manufacturing plants filled the papers. Western cities such as Pittsburgh suffered from a drastic decline in land values, and bankruptcy "appeared to be the natural condition of businessmen who owed any money." Railroads fell into the hands of receivers and farmers who had helped finance railroad construction by purchasing railroad stock with mortgages on their farms now faced foreclosures. Urban workers, clerks, mechanics, and factory workers suffered the most, for unemployment was most devastating in industrial cities

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<sup>354</sup> Quoted in Stamp, *America in 1857*.

<sup>355</sup> In a letter by Louis J. Cist, a collector of "rare manuscripts," to Morrison Foster, dated March 1, 1865, Cist explains that he resided in Cincinnati "during the time your brother was there....altho' I regret to say I never made his acquaintance. I have often seen him on the Street, & at the Counter of the 'Ohio Life Ins. & Trust Co.' (of which I was a Teller from 1846 to 1851), and can recognize his likeness in the Photograph you have been kind enough to send me." Quoted in Mornweck, *Chronicles of Stephen Foster's Family*, p. 352.

like Pittsburgh. "Before long the railroad promoters had lost their reputation as the harbingers of the Golden Age."<sup>356</sup>

### 5.13 HOMELESS AGAIN

If William B. Foster, Jr., Vice-president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, had ever wanted to unload the house on the East Common in Allegheny, now, with the depression, he had an excuse. He may have felt that his obligation to take care of the Fosters ended with the death of his adoptive parents Eliza and William two years earlier. Dunning was dead, too, by this time, and Henry lived with his mother-in-law while he worked at the Duquesne Station of the Pennsylvania Railroad, close to the junction of the three rivers.<sup>357</sup> Morrison was still a bachelor who could rather comfortably live in a boarding house, and probably found such a situation tolerable. That left only Stephen, Jane, and Marion. Maybe William, Jr. began to sense that he was an enabler, making it easy for Stephen to shirk the manly duties of the work world that providing a home for his family mandated. William Foster may simply have been tired of taking care of the family, and thought that he had long repaid his debt to the Fosters. Of course, William Jr. was well off by this time. If he had left the one house on the East Common to Stephen, after selling off the others, such generosity might have been considered an act of benevolence, but for some reason he chose not to.

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<sup>356</sup> Stamp, *America in 1857*. Also, for depressions in the West, see Richard C. Wade, *Urban Frontier, the Rise of Western Cities, 1790 - 1930*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996)

<sup>357</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicle*, p. 497.

The loss of his home for the second time in Stephen's life marked the beginning of the composer's final emotional and economic decline. Stephen Foster never really knew the White Cottage, which by this time had been so altered by the new owner's renovations that he could only imagine what it must have looked like when his parents lived there. The brick house at 605 Union Avenue was the only home known to Stephen and to Morrison. The latter found "his belongings scattered" immediately after the sale of the house to a Dr. John S. Kuhn, who bought not only the brick family residence but William's two wooden houses in Allegheny.

Stephen, Jane, and Marion went to board after they moved out of William's house, and at this point in the composer's life problems appeared to accrue and become insurmountable. Foster was strapped for money, but was not capable of writing anything. He was supposed to be living on royalties from the songs he wrote, but he was not producing enough in 1856 or 1857. He composed only "Gentle Annie" in 1856, in addition to the two Buchanan campaign songs. In the following year, 1857, he wrote only a depressing song about a lost loved one, "I see Her Still in My Dreams" (which may have been a reference to his dead mother Eliza), and he arranged "Gentle Annie" for the guitar. With this limited output, there would not be enough money coming in from his publishers to support him and his small family. Besides, while he spent these years unproductively, he was also numbing his increasing anxieties and guilt with drink.

#### **5.14 MORE PRODUCTIVE YEARS**

By 1858, Stephen Foster's output had improved. Although he was spending more evenings out at theaters or at the homes of friends enjoying himself, the camaraderie and the pleasant times were beneficial. In that one year he wrote six songs, not enough to satisfy his publishers, but certainly

an improvement over the previous two years. They were parlor songs, and most were about loss, death, and separation. Besides the melodic “Linger in Blissful Repose,” he wrote “Lula is Gone” and followed that with the repetitive sounding “Where Has Lula Gone?” Other titles were “My Loved One and My own or Eva,” and “Sadly to Mine Heart Appealing.” In 1859, Foster published five songs in the parlor tradition and stayed clear of the minstrel medium. He must have been happier because the songs to which he wrote the words are the light hearted and poetic “Fairy Belle” and “Thou Art the Queen of My Song.” The only mournful song was the first one published in 1859, “Linda has Departed”, and his friend William Henry McCarthy wrote the words. The song begins with “Death with his cold hand, Hath robbed me of ev’ry hope,” and ends on the equally dismal note “Linda has departed and left me here to mourn.”<sup>358</sup>

Perhaps it was the happy times with family and friends that made the difference in the mood of Foster’s songs and his productive habits. But he still was not writing enough, and the composer was probably devoting too much time to merriment. “Musical evenings spent at Dr. John Mitchell’s in company with Jessie, Jane and Stephen, Henry and Mary, the Andy Robinsons, the Blairs, and Dick Cowan were hard to give up,” Morneweck explained.<sup>359</sup> There were plenty of attractions in Pittsburgh that year to distract him from his work. Stephen, Jane, Marion, and niece Mary Wick went to Porter’s Pittsburgh Theater to see that “favorite artiste” Miss J. M. Davenport in the part of Adrienne Lecourvre in “Adrienne, the Actress” followed by that “laughable farce, Anthony and Cleopatra.”<sup>360</sup> They attended the popular shows, including

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<sup>358</sup> Saunders and Root, *The Music of Stephen C. Foster, Vol. II*, pp. 52-55.

<sup>359</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p.494.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 502

the minstrel shows and the circus owned by Morrison's friend, the clown Dan Rice. Stephen, however, "loved" the high class musical entertainments:

"Although Dan Rice's circus and all the minstrel shows were equally favored with their presence, Stephen loved the better music presented by Henry Kleber, Professor Rohbock, and William Evens' choral societies. He was impatient of poor taste and careless performance, and to the great embarrassment of Jane and Marion, frequently would stamp indignantly out of the theater at some especially offensive discord by the singer or orchestra."<sup>361</sup>

"When some fancy pianist was performing," Stephen could carry the evening's performance home with him after the concert had ended. "When they reached home, Stephen would go to the piano, dash back his hair from his forehead, flip out the tails of his long-tail blue, and proceed to give a 'fantasie brillante' on 'Jim Crow' or 'Camptown Races' in the frenzied manner of the artist of the evening. Stephen in his gay moods was a clever mimic, and a subtle clown."<sup>362</sup>

Another fun adventure that took place in 1858 was a river boat trip to Cincinnati on Billy Hamilton's *Ida May*. In a letter to Morrison dated November 11, 1858, Stephen wrote:

"Mary Wick[niece], Jane, Marion and I start tomorrow for Cincinnati on Billy Hamilton's boat, the *Ida May*. ....the trip will be a recreation and variety for me. Siss [Susan Pentland Robinson] gets along very well since her mother's death. We had a nice duck supper with her the other evening. She had plenty of jokes about Andy, as usual. "<sup>363</sup>

The comment that Susan Pentland got along well without her mother may have been a reference to questions about himself. Was Stephen getting along well now without Eliza? He seemed to be, but perhaps he needed the reassurance to know that it was alright to get along without mother. If Susan did, then perhaps it was alright for him.

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<sup>361</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 503.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 503.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 503.

During the boat trip, Stephen worked on his music, finishing the song "Parthenia to Ingomar," although he wrote only the music. Stephen's young actor friend, William Henry McCarthy, who composed the words to "Linda Has Departed" contributed the words. William and Stephen used to meet for "lively musical evenings" at the home of Harry and Rachel Keller Woods in the Hazelwood section of Pittsburgh. Stephen Foster also collaborated with McCarthy on "For Thee Love, For Thee." All three songs were published in 1859, which shows that although Foster was still able to write melody, he may have been experiencing a block with his poetry.

Once the boat arrived in Cincinnati, Stephen and Billy Hamilton left the boat to have some fun in the city. Following is a description of their adventure:

On their way down Broadway, they heard music and discovered a party of serenaders in a yard ..... "Why," said Stephen, " they're singing my song, 'Come where My Love Lies Dreaming'." "Yes," responded Billy, "and making an awful bungle of it, too. Let's go over and help them out." Accordingly, Stephen and Billy crossed over and joined in with the singers. After the song was finished, the Cincinnati boys turned on the newcomers and demanded to know why they had intruded. Billy Hamilton introduced himself and stated that his companion was Stephen Foster, the composer of their serenade. The singers scoffed at the idea and began to grow so belligerent that Billy asked them if they knew Cons Miller down at the *Gazette* office. They replied that they did, and Billy asked them if they would take Cons' word for it.....Cons Miller identified them both beyond question and assured the skeptical Cincinnati boys that the brown-eyed stranger was indeed Stephen C. Foster, the composer. Nothing was too good for the visitors after that, and instead of returning to the steamboat, Stephen and Billy spent the evening in the company of their new friends, serenading the entire neighborhood, and otherwise making merry.<sup>364</sup>

We have to wonder what Jane thought about Stephen "serenading the entire neighborhood and otherwise making merry," and endangering his life with such a boisterous crew as the Cincinnati boys. Presumably Jane stayed on the *Ida May* and waited for her husband to return. She could

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<sup>364</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 505.

not have been happy learning that her husband behaved more like an adolescent than a grown man.

### 5.15 BOARDING HOUSE LIFE

During the winter and possibly the spring of 1859, Stephen, Jane, and Marion boarded with a Mrs. Miller in Pittsburgh,<sup>365</sup> but Jane did not stay around much. She took the baby and spent a great deal of time with her own sisters or visited Stephen's sister Henrietta in Warren, Ohio. Henrietta, who had earlier been critical of Jane, now welcomed her sister-in-law into her home and even defended her, crediting Jane with “keeping her family together and steadfastly guarding the irresponsible Stephen in his ‘strange and unaccountable course.’”<sup>366</sup>

Boarding did not agree with Jane and probably contributed to her increasing resentment. Stephen was used to boarding houses, since he spent portions of his childhood in a variety of them; but they would have been highly disagreeable to Jane, and an unpleasant reminder that her status in the society was sinking since her marriage to America's favorite composer. She had grown up in a large, single family house, where the black servant Joe ushered her beaux into the parlor, after which he rushed off with bouquets of flowers for the different McDowell daughters. Jane must have wondered how little Marion would greet her beaux, when her mother and father had no parlor of their own. Single working men and even women lived in boarding houses, but a married couple, especially once they had a child, would have found boarding house living

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<sup>365</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 513.

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 513.

uncomfortable. Apartment buildings would not be built until after the Civil War, in New York City, although tenements for the very poor were constructed as early as 1850.<sup>367</sup>

The famous travel writer Frances Trollope visited America in the 1830s and commented on boarding house life:

A great number of young married persons board by the year, instead of going to house-keeping, as they call having an establishment of their own ....this statement does not include persons of large fortune, but it does include many whose rank in society would make such a mode of life quite impossible with us. I can hardly imagine a contrivance more effectual for ensuring the insignificance of a woman, than marrying her at seventeen, and placing her in a boarding-house. Nor can I easily imagine a life of more uniform dullness for the lady herself; but this certainly is a matter of taste. I have heard many ladies declare that it is “just quite the perfection of comfort to have nothing to fix for oneself.” Yet despite these assurances I have always experienced a feeling which hovered between pity and contempt, when I contemplated their mode of existence.....<sup>368</sup>

Trollope described the communal meals served at the appointed hour in silence and in the company of strangers. She thought the boarding situation was more tolerable for men. They could always escape to their offices or stores or counting houses, their places of business. But for women, the worst thing about it was the boredom:

When it [the meal] is finished the gentlemen hurry to their occupations, and the quiet ladies mount the stairs, some to the first, some to the second, and some to the third stories, in an inverse proportion to the number of dollars paid, and ensconce themselves in their respective chambers. As to what they do here it is not very easy to say: but I believe they clear-starch a little and iron a little, and sit in a rocking chair, and sew a great deal...

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<sup>367</sup> Susan Elizabeth Lyman, *The Story of New York: An Informal History of the City from the First Settlement to the Present Day* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1975), p. 185. New York’s first apartment building, the Rutherford-Stuyvesant, was built on East 18<sup>th</sup> Street between Third Avenue and Irving Place in 1869. Lyman said it was “distinguished from tenements by such amenities as adequate space, light heat, and plumbing.”

<sup>368</sup> Frances Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans* [1827](New York: Vintage Books, 1949 ),pp. 283-284.



In the afternoon the lady resident of the boarding house might go out and pay a few visits, attend church or do a little shopping. "And then she goes home again--no, not home-- I will not give that name to a boarding-house, but she re-enters the cold heartless atmosphere in which she dwells, where hospitality can never enter, and where interest takes management instead of affection."<sup>369</sup>

According to historians Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, the middle class did not like boardinghouses:

the growing middle class did not *like* such housing [boarding houses]. *Respectable* people lived in a "home" of their own, not jumbled up with strangers. Multifamily dwellings smacked of tenement. Boardinghouses with their centrally cooked and commonly eaten meals, threatened family integrity; .....Enforced intimacy mocked middle-class values of family privacy and the sanctity of the home.<sup>370</sup>

Boardinghouses, in other words, were not the ideal for the middle-class lifestyle. This was especially true for the middle-class woman whose image was so completely tied up with home and hearth that it is difficult to imagine any self-respecting woman existing without a private home. In 1848, Ann Fergurson wrote in *Young Lady's Guide to Knowledge and Virtue*:

Let what will be said of the pleasures of society, there is after all, no place like home. [ "No place like home" formed the words to the most popular song of the day by Henry Bishop] How beautiful are the relationships of home! How exquisitely touching to the feelings! All are linked to each other by the most intimate and endearing ties...And as home is that place which has the strongest ties upon the feelings, so it is the place in which woman has the power of exerting her influence in the greatest degree. This is her true and proper station; her duties of home are peculiarly hers; and let it not be thought that in assigning home as the appropriate sphere for action, we are assigning her a mean and ignoble part. It is, in truth, far otherwise. The sphere of her operation may be a limited one; but as many rivers make up the ocean's waters, so the conjunction of many

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<sup>369</sup> Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham, A History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 283-284.

<sup>370</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 970-971.

homes makes up the world; and therefore, in performing her duties at home, she is performing her part in the world at large.<sup>371</sup>

According to the Cult of True Womanhood, a popular doctrine of domesticity in the nineteenth century, the woman's sphere was the "home," and domesticity was one of the four cardinal virtues attributed to the True Woman. "Home replenished the spirit of the world weary husband and protected the innocence of children." At the center of the home was the wife and mother, whose place was "by her own fireside." House work provided a sense of security, as one advice manual on domesticity advised : "there is something sedative in the duties which home involves. It affords security not only from the world, but from delusions and errors of every kind." Domestic chores were supposed to be good for a woman. Housework consisted of "morally uplifting tasks" since the repetitive action of such activities as bed-making encouraged patience and perseverance in a woman.<sup>372</sup>

Stephen may not have minded the boarding house arrangement as much as Jane, but he did realize that he needed a room of his own where he could keep a piano and write his songs. In the Allegheny house he had a piano installed in a third floor room. Therefore, for part of the year 1859, Stephen rented a studio at 112-114 Smithfield Street in downtown Pittsburgh, where he installed a rented piano. The studio was located in an upper level of an office building whose first floor was occupied with Robert Wray's grocery and tea store. This location was comforting and tempting at the same time. In the 1850s grocery stores were the places where liquor was served readily in back rooms, or it could be purchased along with some small items of food. It is easy to imagine Stephen sitting at the piano in the office on the upper level, becoming frustrated,

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<sup>371</sup> Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America*, p.44.

<sup>372</sup> Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," from *The Many-Faceted Jacksonian Era: New Interpretations*," edited by Edward Pessen (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1977), pp. 56-57.

and slipping downstairs for a drink or two to ease the writer's block or the nagging sense that he had been abandoned by the Muse.

Stephen's office was located in the "Bohemian" part of Pittsburgh where the musicians and artisans congregated. Henry and Augustus Kleber now had their own music store at 53 Fifth Street, about two blocks from Stephen's office. There was also John H. Mellor's music store, a favorite gathering place of the musical and artistic types of the city. "Stephen's studio was in the heart of convivial, Bohemian Pittsburgh. He could not escape the cheerful strollers, the visiting minstrels, the old friends of the S.T.[Square Table] who had their offices in the bank block and the law block if he would. And when his spirits and his finances were low, alas, Stephen more frequently wouldn't than would."<sup>373</sup> The old friends of the Square Table who used to meet regularly for convivial evenings of music and poetry and just joking around in Allegheny were now grown up. Morneweck suggested that her uncle spent more time fraternizing with these old friends than working in his studio. If these boyhood friends from the Square Table days were successful men working in the "bank block and the law block" of downtown Pittsburgh, bumping into them may have been uncomfortable for Stephen. Even if he did enjoy their company, their success may have driven him even more to seek solace in drink.

Stephen Foster knew his money would run out in 1860. The contract which had given Firth, Pond, and Company the exclusive right to publish Foster's songs was about to expire on August 9, 1860, and the composer began to look around for other opportunities. A small publication known as *Clark's School Visitor* that was geared to teachers and students began to reprint some of Stephen's songs in 1859 in Pittsburgh. The *Visitor's* editor Alexander Clark published Foster's music with the composer's original poetry, but sometimes the editors created

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<sup>373</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles of Stephen Foster's Family*, p. 514.

special words that would appeal to teachers and their pupils. To the tune of "Uncle Ned," for instance, the *Visitor* editors set the following words:

There's a great deal of pleasure in the school I attend,  
And I do love to go, love to go!  
With pleasure our lessons are all made to blend,  
And we learn what we all ought to know.

Since the words were not Foster's, perhaps the obligation of exclusivity with Firth, Pond, and Company did not apply. When Clark republished "Mass'a in the Cold Ground" in the December 1859 issue, however, he did so with permission of Foster's New York publishers. By early May of 1860, *Clark's School Visitor* had moved to Philadelphia, and Stephen no longer felt any obligations to Firth, Pond, and Company. He made an arrangement with J. W. Daughaday & Co., the publishers of *Clark's School Visitor*, to give them "the entire control" as they would "be the independent proprietors of such songs as I may send you for publication" for one year with the privilege of renewing for one more year. After Stephen Foster's death, the publishers announced that "for the six beautiful songs written for us by Foster, our publishers paid the sum of \$400.00 or \$66 2/3 apiece for the manuscripts."<sup>374</sup>

One of the songs which *Clark's School Visitor* published in their July, 1860 issue was "Jenny's Coming O'er the Green." John Mahon, a friend of Stephen Foster's in New York, told a funny story about this song which shows a possessiveness in Jane that is quite unexpected. According to Mahon, the "Jennie" in this particular song was not Jane, but a young girl of seventeen, whose "form" Stephen appears to have admired. The original first line and title to the song was "Little Jennie's seventeen." Obviously, if the Jennie in the song were only seventeen,

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<sup>374</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 526-527.

this Jennie could not be Stephen's wife, so Jane had her husband change the first line by omitting the reference to Jennie's age. Jane felt she had proprietary rights to the name Jennie, or at least any time Stephen used it in a song. Mahon related the following story:

The history of "Jennie's Coming O'er the Green" he [Stephen] also told me. It was somewhat funny. It appears that he admired a young girl named Jennie {platonic, of course}, and promised to write a song for her. He did so, and began it thus:

Little Jennie's seventeen; Fairer form was never seen

Life and grace are in her mien. Why do I love her so?

But Mrs. Foster did not like such a pointed allusion to the young lady's age, so he changed the first line to: "Jennie's coming o'er the green."<sup>375</sup>

This anecdote brings something else up for consideration. In his youth, Stephen Foster had composed ballads and dedicated them to young ladies. Is it possible that, after he was married, the somewhat shy Stephen continued to ingratiate himself with ladies by offering to write songs that featured their names? And did this habit with the ladies annoy Jane?

As the year 1860 approached, Foster knew that he had to do something. He began to think about moving once again to New York, where he could possibly renew his contract with Firth, Pond, and Company or get established with new publishers. In any event, Pittsburgh no longer was Foster's home. Instead, it had become a painful reminder of "the voices that were gone." Mother, father, and brother Dunning were all dead. Although Henry Foster stayed on in Lawrenceville, he had a wife and children, and he may not have been that close to Stephen. Morrison, the brother Stephen Foster was closest to, suddenly decided to marry. He had remained a bachelor longer than most men of his generation, and now at the age of thirty-seven he married for the first time. He chose Jessie Lightner, the girl who had a beautiful contralto

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<sup>375</sup>John Mahon, "The Last Years of Stephen C. Foster," *The New York Clipper*, March 2, 1877.

voice and sang Stephen's songs readily. Immediately after the wedding in February of 1860, Morrison and Jessie moved to Cleveland, Ohio.<sup>376</sup> At the beginning of March, William Foster, Jr. died in Philadelphia, his head drooped across the shoulder of his son. Pittsburgh had indeed become a lonely place for Stephen.

The war between the states was fast approaching, and even if people could not fathom it, there were disturbing incidents daily appearing in the papers to remind them that the two sections of the country were becoming two nations. In the fall of 1859, John Brown made his raid on Harper's Ferry, an act which some northerners interpreted as heroic but which southerners considered a threat to life, limb, and civilization as they knew it. The Democratic party split over the issue of slavery in the territories, leaving a big gap for the new Republican party to achieve a resounding victory. Under these confusing and terrifying conditions, with the nation on the brink of dissolution, Stephen Foster decided it was time to get out of Pittsburgh, to take his wife and little girl, and move once and for all to New York.

## 5.16 THE GASKILL HOUSE

But first Stephen, Jane, and Marion went northwest, to Warren, Ohio, to visit with sister Henrietta Foster Thornton and her family. They remained in Warren throughout the summer of 1860, after which they moved on to New York. In Warren, Stephen and Jane stayed part of the time with Henrietta, but when her home became too crowded or uncomfortable, the Fosters moved to the Gaskill House. This hotel was fairly new, having been constructed sometime in

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<sup>376</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 528.

1853, and its opening was celebrated with a grand ball. It must have been a nice place when Stephen and his family lived there, since "a huge assembly hall and ball room, reached by a circular stairway, occupied the greater part of the fourth floor." In fact, "Sally Tod, daughter of the Governor, swept down the grand staircase attired in the height of the fashion of that period," while Marion Foster stood by with the proprietor's daughter "watching with awe." Obviously, Stephen could not really afford such a grand hotel. In April and May of 1860, he wrote two letters to his brother Morrison asking for money. "Please send me by return mail \$12- I have received from F. P. & Co. a letter stating that they cannot advance me any more money till I send them the songs now due them....as our present agreement is about expiring. They show a disposition to renew the agreement, but, very properly require payment in music before any new arrangement." In another letter written a month later, Stephen sent Morrison a draft on Firth, Pond & Co for \$50--"which I wish you would hold for ten days, and if you can conveniently, please send me the amount by return mail." Thus, Stephen Foster continued to live from song to mouth, and Jane became increasingly irritated hoping that somehow, once they got to New York, her husband would become more productive and the publishing companies would come through with a renewed contract.

The proprietor of the Gaskill House had a daughter who reported her memories of the Fosters' stay seventy- four years later in 1934. Mrs. C. G. Mygatt recalled that "Mrs. Foster never left her room and Marion always took her meals up to her." There seems to have been some animosity between Jane and Mrs. Schoenberger, the wife of the proprietor of the Gaskill House. "Now and then my mother would talk to her[Jane] but mother was a very busy woman and the hotel kept her busy all the time. She did not have much time for idle conversation." The implication here is that Jane's conversations were an idle waste of time to a hard working woman

like the landlady, but it could have been simply that Stephen and Jane were behind in the rent. Stephen had written to Morrison on May 31, 1860: "I desire to pay Mr. Shoenberger (the landlord) at the end of the month as I engaged to do, and have told him that I would pay him when I would hear from Cleveland."

Late payments or not, Stephen was more popular with the Schoenbergers than Jane. "Mr. Foster would sit in the big public parlor on the second floor in the evening and play and sing. I recall that a Frank Leroy, a photographer of Warren of that time, used to be in the company....I remember Marion Foster, the daughter of Mr. Stephen Foster. We used to go up to the big ballroom and play 'dolls' and have a grand time together. She was a beautiful dancer and her father would stand in the doorway and applaud when Marion danced and kept time with castanets. ...He always wore a high silk hat and was gentle and kind to us. I thought he was a very handsome man." Another daughter of the proprietor recalled "the day they left, when the stagecoach pulled up and Mrs. Foster swept into it, followed by her husband and daughter. "He [Stephen] lifted his hand high and waved goodbye and I know we all felt very badly."<sup>377</sup>

## 5.17 STEPHEN AND JANE IN NEW YORK

In an earlier letter to his brother Morrison, Stephen Foster mentioned, "I expect to be in Cleveland very soon on my way to New York." We don't know if this side trip transpired, or if the composer went directly to New York. By the middle of 1860, Morrison was in the habit of

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<sup>377</sup> Reported by Mrs. C. G. Mygatt to Esther Hamilton of the Youngstown *Telegram*, February 3, 1934, quoted by Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 522-523.



extending money to Stephen. Firth, Pond, and Company refused to advance more money since Stephen's contract was about to run out, and he still owed the publishers several songs.<sup>378</sup> That put pressure on Stephen Foster to hurry to New York to see what type of arrangement he could negotiate with Firth and Pond in person, or if that failed, find new publishers. Consequently, Stephen hurried to New York with his wife and daughter, where the three moved into the boardinghouse owned by a Louisa Stewart on Greene Street. The proprietress of this boardinghouse, like the owner of the Gaskill House, had two daughters who "grew very fond of Jane and Marion, and 'the latter's funny little ways.'"<sup>379</sup>

Reminiscences provided by Stephen's granddaughter that were passed down to her by Jane suggest that Stephen and Jane Foster had an active social life when they first moved to the big city: "After moving to New York, they were at once drawn into musical circles. People entertained musically to a large extent in those days. There were balls, singing clubs, minstrels, concerts, etc., with invitations often to the Fosters."<sup>380</sup> If the socializing and gala lifestyle were in fact true, they could not last. When Stephen Foster arrived in New York in the fall of 1860, his relationship with his publishers was already strained. Firth and Pond were evidently annoyed with him, and had good reason to be from a purely business standpoint. Not only had Foster not fulfilled his part of the contractual agreements in that he did not produce enough songs. At the same time, he tried to enter into contracts with other publishers, while he was overdrawn on his main publisher's advances by almost \$1,500. Firth, Pond, and Company were not really anxious to renew the contract with him in the latter part of 1860. In early February of 1861, they signed a

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<sup>378</sup> Stephen C. Foster to Morrison Foster, April 27, 1860, quoted by Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 523.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 533.

<sup>380</sup> Jessie Welsh Rose, "My Grandmother's Memories," *Pittsburgh Post*, July 4, 1926.

contract with the creator of the famous Virginia Minstrels, Dan Emmett, who was also the author of the immensely popular “I Wish I Was in Dixie.”<sup>381</sup> Stephen wrote a good quantity of songs during his years in New York, but he was forced to sell most of them outright to publishers, minstrels, or whoever would buy them.<sup>382</sup>

The couple’s precarious existence could not have pleased Jane. Howard has suggested that the Fosters probably “boarded during most of the time they lived together in New York,” which, as was mentioned earlier, was not a comfortable way of life for a middle class family.<sup>383</sup> Consequently, after South Carolina fired on Ft. Sumter in April, claiming its independence, Jane claimed her own independence in the summer of 1861 and left Stephen once again. This time she moved with Marion to Lewistown, Pennsylvania, where she stayed with her sister Agnes Cummings and her doctor husband. Marion started school in Lewistown and was “an excellent child in every way.” Jane borrowed money from Morrison and made one more trip to New York in September, but she returned to Lewistown when Marion came down with an illness. Obviously Foster was drinking during these New York years, for Jane sent him money to try various “cures,” none of which was successful. Morneweck described the last years of Jane’s marriage: “The life of Jane Foster during the years of her husband’s residence in New York was one of discouraging traveling back and forth, of staying with her mother and sisters, visiting Stephen’s family, or living in small hotels with little Marion when Stephen had money to send

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<sup>381</sup> Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), p. 270. During the Civil War, the South claimed the song “Dixie” as its own, but later Lincoln requisitioned it for the nation.

<sup>382</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 533.

<sup>383</sup>John Tasker Howard, *Stephen Foster, America’s Troubadour*, p. 311.

her."<sup>384</sup> Jane and Stephen's granddaughter Jessie Welsh Rose described these years as "the dark pages in the life of S.C. Foster," during which "he was utterly unable to provide for his wife and child."<sup>385</sup>

## 5.18 GENDER ROLES IN DEFAULT

In the nineteenth century, men and women performed specific functions, according to their social class and gender, which gave meaning to their very existences and enabled them to fulfill the expectations of their society. Husbands and wives of the middle class were accorded very distinct roles by their peers and the society at large, and if either party defaulted in their obligations, or assumed the mantle of the other, the marriage would not work. In fact, the husband and the wife would feel inadequate if they could not fulfill the roles that society had mandated for them. Men and women were assigned to separate metaphorical spheres, and love and respect could evaporate when one or the other entered into the wrong sphere. The male sphere was the place of work: public, materialistic, and irreligious. The female sphere was the home: private, protected, spiritual, and pious. The woman's role was to nurture and uplift morally, and the man's role was to provide and protect the woman from the ugliness of the rough external world. Jane left the female sphere when she went into the world and worked outside of

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<sup>384</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 553.

<sup>385</sup>Letter from Jessie Welsh Rose to Wm. H. Stevenson, July 7, 1926. Mifflin County Historical Society, Lewistown, Pa.

the home. Stephen trespassed by staying inside, often working from the house at the piano, a musical instrument unofficially assigned to the females.<sup>386</sup>

If Jane fulfilled few of the obligations that were placed on the middle class wife, it was not entirely her fault. She was not given a home to make into a special retreat, and she had no time, even if she did have the talent or interests, for piano playing and singing.<sup>387</sup> She failed as the maternal comforter because she harassed her husband, had explosive displays of temper, and did everything but maintain a peaceful and comforting home. But perhaps she was driven beyond personal endurance. When her husband drank too much, Jane was somehow held accountable for his moral failings—his intemperance, yet her husband's drinking was out of Jane's or any one else's control. Finally, when Jane needed money for herself and her daughter to survive, she went to work outside of the home, and in doing so, she dissolved the gender code. In an age when Amelia Bloomer's fantastic outfit was cause for scandal, considered by some to be so revolutionary that the short pantaloon outfit threatened the moral standing of the republic, Jane wore the pants in the family.

In regards to Jane's reproductive obligations, she failed as well, although we do not know here whether it was Jane's or Stephen's fault that the couple had only one child. In the mid-nineteenth century native born middle class women were bearing fewer children, averaging only 3.6 children per couple, compared to Eliza Foster's generation which produced nearly double that number. This change in the birthrate came about when families moved to an urban environment away from the farm, where a child's labor had been valued more. The drop in the

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<sup>386</sup> Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and Pianos*. (New York: Dover Publications, 1990) p. 222.

<sup>387</sup> Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America*, pp. 36-39.

birthrate was intentional as there were now recognized means of birth control besides abstinence, including preventative mechanisms and abortions.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the child itself, instead of being valued as a small person whose labor could be useful to the family, came to be seen only as an object of love. *Godey's Lady's Book* described the importance of children in the 1860s: "We think them the poetry of the world--fresh flowers of our hearts and homes ---A child softens and purifies the heart, warming and melting it by its gentle presence..."<sup>388</sup> Consequently, in spite of the dangers of childbirth, procreation was viewed as the highest achievement for the middle class wife, and motherhood a woman's highest calling. Until she had delivered a child, she had not achieved her real purpose in life, and giving birth to only one, as Jane had, even in an age when fewer children was the norm, could lower her status as a woman.

In a world of strict dichotomies, Stephen assumed the feminine role. He sang and played the piano, skirted the responsibility of providing for his family, and was guilty of more emotional displays than any female, even in an age known for its high sentimentality. The complement to the Cult of the True Woman was the ideology of the Self-made Man. If the "true woman" was entwined with the home, the self-made man was identified with the outside world of work. By the 1850s, the artisan's world had been "overwhelmed by the imperatives of maximizing individual gain in a competitive market." Businessmen, professionals, and white collar workers relied increasingly on their own skills and abilities to be successful. Hence the philosophy of the self-made man came to dominate by the middle of the nineteenth century, just as Stephen and Jane began their married life.

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<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

The acquisitive antebellum years were indeed anxiety producing, as each man put himself on the line, worrying whether he would make it in the new economy, or whether his status would fall rather than rise with each successive season of his life. These times which saw economic, political, and demographic changes caused many people to seek relief from anxiety in the security of their private homes.<sup>389</sup> By the 1850s, the home came to represent the private sphere against the public. In the home the middle class sought a safe haven, a refuge from life's stresses and the chaotic city, with its increasing number of foreign immigrants. The result was a separation of private and public life, the separation of male and female spheres, the emergence of a cult of domesticity and the parallel masculine cult of the self-made man. Stephen Foster in these troubling times, had no home to serve as a haven, no business to be handed to him, and no safety net. After the helping hand of brother William was removed from the scene, even before the latter's death, Stephen was thrown to the winds of fortune, and in his case, ill fortune, as he was essentially abandoned by his brothers and sisters and his publisher.

### **5.19 WOMAN TELEGRAPHER**

Since Stephen had failed in his efforts to become the self-made man, Jane had to do the unthinkable: she had to become the self-made woman, who was willing to work at the new white collar professions in the public arena to provide security and comfort for herself and her daughter. Some time in 1863, when Jane realized that sufficient and reliable financial support for herself and her daughter was not something that she could ever hope to obtain from her husband,

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<sup>389</sup>Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, p. 153.

she took a job as a telegraph operator at the Pennsylvania Railroad Station at Greensburg, Pennsylvania, a town about thirty miles to the east of Pittsburgh. She forsook the home (not that she really had one, anyway) to go out into the world, and in doing so, she broke the code of her gender. The doctrine of spheres said that the husband was "to go into the world," but the wife was "to superintend the domestic affairs of the household." Jane reversed the ideology and challenged the doctrine of "separate spheres" when she entered the workforce.

In 1846, the year the telegraph was invented, Sarah Bagley of Lowell, Massachusetts became the country's first female telegraph operator. When the Civil War erupted, the absence of men encouraged doors to open for women in jobs such as telegraphy, where a woman's size or "frailty" would not impede her. According to family records, Jane "studied telegraphy with a view to supporting herself and child," but timing was crucial. She received her training just when the value of the telegraph was being recognized for heralding news dispatches from one battlefield to the next, or for keeping union forces informed of where troops were moving or amassing supplies, where medical help was needed, or where and when the enemy would approach.

The details of exactly how Jane Foster obtained her position at the telegraph office are not known, but her granddaughter tells us that "She was given the telegraph office at Greensburg by Andrew Carnegie himself, who supplanted his cousin Miss Hogan in order to do this. Miss Hogan was moved to Allegheny office."<sup>390</sup> Andrew Carnegie was a young unmarried man at the time that he set up and ran the telegraph offices. The lines were run along side of the railroad tracks, and Carnegie was then working for Thomas Scott and the Pennsylvania Railroad.

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<sup>390</sup>Letter from Jessie Welsh Rose to Wm. Stevenson of Pittsburgh, July 7, 1926. Courtesy of the Mifflin County Historical Society, Lewistown, Pennsylvania.

Believing he had more to offer the Union than his 5'3" frame on a field of battle, Carnegie bought his way out of military service in the Union Army by paying a substitute \$850, far more than the going rate of \$300.<sup>391</sup> He used the telegraph to maintain communications between Washington and the Union troops on the battlefield, thereby proving that "telegraphic communication was as vital to an advancing army as the railroad."<sup>392</sup> With a shortage of men during the war, Carnegie opened up the telegraph offices to women, whom he personally trained to use the complex machinery. If there were rumors that the young, unmarried Carnegie had more than a professional interest in Jane, the stories have been hushed up. Andrew Carnegie did not mention the Fosters when he wrote his *Autobiography*, but he seems to have gone to a lot of trouble to get Jane situated in his telegraph office in Greensburg.

The telegraph was greeted as almost a magical creation, because until its invention, news traveled as it had for thousands of years, and only as fast as the conveyer of the information, be it a ship or a horse, could travel. Although middle class women took readily to this line of white collar work, women's earnings were about half of men's earnings, about \$30 to \$50 per month, while men received \$75 to \$100 for the same work. Nonetheless, the earnings were above average for women's pay scales, and welcomed by Jane who could not rely on her husband for support. At the end of the Civil War, Western Union had over 4,000 telegraph offices, and after Jane was widowed, she continued to work as a telegraph operator for much of the remainder of her life.<sup>393</sup>

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<sup>391</sup> Les Standiford, *Meet You in Hell* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005), p. 40.

<sup>392</sup> Joseph Frazier Wall, *Andrew Carnegie* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1977), p. 162.

<sup>393</sup> Stephen and Jane's granddaughter Jessie Welsh Rose in a letter to Wm. Stevenson of Pittsburgh, July 7, 1926, states that her grandmother Jane continued to work in the telegraph office for many years, even after she moved back to Pittsburgh. Courtesy of the Mifflin County Historical Society, Lewistown, Pennsylvania.



There was a story told about how Stephen Foster took the train down to visit Jane when she worked at the telegraph office in Greensburg, and she refused to see him. Jane's assistant would run down to the train station to see if Stephen were on the train. If he were sighted, she would hurry back and tell Jane, who would lock the door at the telegraph office because she did not want Stephen to disturb her at work. Stephen, the story went, would sit outside her office on the steps and serenade her at the closed door while she was trying to get important work done. If this story is true, it can only be described as pathetic. This story is unverified, because it was not known that Stephen Foster, once he had settled into New York in 1860, ever ventured west again to Pittsburgh or to Greensburg. Maybe he tried to visit Jane in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania which was much closer to the East.

There were other embarrassing stories about Stephen and Jane. One was conveyed to Foster's biographer John Tasker Howard, "verbally," by "Mrs. Rose," Stephen Foster's granddaughter. She heard the story, we presume, from Jane herself, but there are no written documents to support it. Jane and Stephen were living in New York at the time of the incident, but Stephen had not returned home for several days, "when Stephen, in the habit of being away from home for several days at a time, finally returned to his wife and child. It was late at night, and Jane and whoever was staying with her heard a picking at the lock of one of the front windows. They were intensely frightened, thinking a burglar was trying to gain entrance. The

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Ken Beauchamp, *History of Telegraphy*, IEE History of Technology Series 26 (London: The Institute of Electrical Engineers, 2001)

Barbara Myer Worthheimer, *We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), pp. 235-238.

*History of Women in Industry in the United States* (New York: Arno Press, 1974) pp. 241-242.

intruder proved to be the unfortunate Stephen, mistaking the window for a door.”<sup>394</sup> The “unfortunate” Stephen was obviously too intoxicated to distinguish the window from the door.

Foster’s songs about marriage are highly confessional, as almost every one of them repeats this same sorry scene. In 1860 Firth, Pond and Company published Foster’s “The Wife or He’ll Come Home.” The words, written by Stephen, are those of the patient wife:

He’ll come home, he’ll not forget me, for his word is always true. He’s gone to sup the deadly cup, And while the long night through, He’s gone to quaff, and talk and laugh, To while the drear night through. He’ll come home with tears and pleading words and ask me to forget.....My heart may break, But for his sake I’ll do all I can do.

Jane was not so patient as this song character that Stephen created. When Stephen Foster stayed out all night carousing with his friends, Jane became distinctly annoyed. One story that has been passed on in the Foster family lore describes another time that Stephen Foster stayed out all night, in this case, “serenading.” When the sun was coming up and he was ready to return home, he stopped off at a poultry conveyer and purchased a live goose to bring as a “peace offering” to Jane. The story has it that when Stephen Foster greeted Jane in the early hours of the morning with a live goose in hand, she looked at the goose, and then at her husband, and could not tell the one from the other.<sup>395</sup>

Like the story about the window and the door, whether this scene is comical or pathetic, or even true, is hard to say. Similar scenarios are reproduced in such comic songs as “My Wife is a Most Knowing Woman” and “Mr. & Mrs. Brown.” Although the words to both these songs were supplied by George Cooper, the sentiment is pure Foster. Cooper was a young bachelor and could not have known through his own experience much about the troubles that were

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<sup>394</sup> Howard, *Stephen Foster, America’s Troubadour*, p. 311.

<sup>395</sup> Emerson, *Doo-Dah! Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture*, p. 204. Quoted from Rose, “His Widow’s Memories.”

possible within a marriage. Mrs. Brown is more hurt than angry that Mr. Brown did not return home until after two in the morning. The wife scolds her husband for being “shameful” and cries out, “Oh! Harry Brown! You’re anything but right,” referring to his intoxicated state. But the real key to understanding Stephen and Jane’s marriage appears to be found in the 1863 song entitled “My Wife is a Most Knowing Woman.” Hence the song will be quoted in its entirety:

Verse 1: My wife is a most knowing woman, She always is finding me out  
She never will hear explanations, But instantly puts me to rout,  
There’s no use to try to deceive her, If out with my friends, night or day,  
In the most inconceivable manner, She tells where I’ve been right away  
She says that I’m “mean” and “inhuman,” Oh! my wife is a most knowing woman.

Verse 2: She would have been hung up for witchcraft, if she had lived sooner I know  
There’s no hiding anything from her, She knows what I do, where I go  
And if I come in after midnight, and say “I have been to the lodge,”  
Oh, she says while she flies in a fury, “Now don’t think to play such a dodge!  
It’s all very fine, but won’t do, man,” Oh, my wife is a most knowing woman.

Verse 3: Not often I go out to dinner, And come home a little “so so,”  
I try to creep up through the hall-way, As still as a mouse, on tip-toe,  
She’s sure to be waiting up for me, And then comes a nice little scene,  
“What, you tell me you’re sober, you wretch you, Now don’t think that I am so green!

Verse 4: She knows me much better than I do, Her eyes are like those of a lynx,  
Though how she discovers my secrets, Is a riddle would puzzle a sphinx,  
On fair days, when we go out walking, If ladies look at me askance,

In the most harmless way, I assure you, My wife gives me, oh! Such a glance,  
And says “all these insults you’ll rue, man,” Oh, my wife is a most knowing woman.

Verse 5: Yes, I must give all of my friends up, If I would live happy and quiet;  
One might as well be ‘neath a tombstone, As live in confusion and riot.  
This life we all know is a short one, While some tongues are long, heaven knows,  
And a miserable life is a husbands, Who numbers his wife with his foes,  
I’ll stay at home now like a true man, For my wife is a most knowing woman.<sup>396</sup>

## 5.20 JANE’S LIFE AFTER STEPHEN

Jane’s life continued to be very difficult for many years, even after Stephen died. She continued to work twelve hour shifts for eleven years at the Greensburg, Pennsylvania telegraph office, from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Her granddaughter Jessie Welsh Rose, described Jane’s hectic schedule:

Many times she told me how she was the first to break the snow down Bunker Hill, Greensburg, on her way to work, and later during this period, when she had taken into her office as messenger boy her sister’s 12 year old son McDowell Cummings, she spent hours after dark delivering messages herself, because she was afraid to send the timid boy into the country alone.

Jane’s responsibilities were not limited to her own care and that of her daughter. Her sister Agnes who had married a Dr. Cummings of Lewistown, Pennsylvania had five children. After the doctor met with “a sudden death in his buggy while attempting to cross the railroad track in front of an approaching train,” Jane took on the support of her sister and her five children, in addition to Marion. In the meantime, Jane’s mother, who had been living in Lewistown, moved

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<sup>396</sup>Saunders and Root, eds. *The Music of Stephen C. Foster, A Critical Edition, Volume 2*, pp. 330-332.

to Greensburg in March of 1864, to be with her daughter and little Marion.<sup>397</sup> Either before or after the move, Mrs. McDowell had lost all of her money, “through the mismanagement of her estate through her lawyer.”<sup>398</sup>

Around 1870 Jane Foster moved back to Pittsburgh, where she met and married a nice, steady man named Matthew D. Wiley. She continued, however, to work at the telegraph office, in the Allegheny depot. But her nurturing and “mothering” did not end when her daughter Marion grew up. Stephen and Jane’s daughter Marion married a Mr. Welsh, and gave birth to the daughter named Jessie (who became the Jessie Welsh Rose mentioned above). For some reason or other, Marion left her daughter Jessie with her grandmother Jane and her step- grandfather Wiley and moved to St. Louis with her husband. Marion did not come back for Jessie, who explained: “My grandmother raised me you know...after she had married again Mr. Matthew D. Wiley..... I always remained with them, was married in their home, and they lived with me until they died.” When Wiley died, he left everything “which a man of small means could bestow” to Jessie. Just why Marion chose to abandon her daughter is not known, but apparently Marion, who taught music, followed more closely after her father in temperament. Jessie wrote lovingly of Jane Foster and Matthew Wiley: “No girl ever had more loving parents than Grandma and Grandpa Wiley were to me.”<sup>399</sup> Jane’s own death was tragic and horrific. In 1903, when Jane

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<sup>397</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 564.

<sup>398</sup> Jessie Welsh Rose to Wm. H. Stevenson, July 7, 1926, courtesy of the Mifflin County Historical Society, Lewistown, Pa.

<sup>399</sup>Jessie Welsh Rose to Wm. H. Stevenson, Pittsburgh, July 7, 1926, Pittsburgh, Pa. Jessie Welsh Rose volunteered some stories which are unflattering to her grandfather Stephen Foster. Apparently, she was defensive about the image which was being presented in the 1930s of her grandmother Jane. A movie version of the life of Stephen Foster which was produced in 1935 portrayed Jane as a cruel and unfeeling shrew whose abandonment of the composer caused him to turn to alcohol and die in misery.

was about seventy-four years of age, her long skirt caught fire over the coal grate in the house, and she burned to death.<sup>400</sup> Thus ended the life of Stephen Foster's "Jeanie with the light brown hair," who was "borne like a vapor on the summer's air."

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Courtesy of the Mifflin County Historical Society, Lewistown, Pa.

<sup>400</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 567

## 6.0 THE EVOLUTION OF THE PLANTATION SONG

Foster's minstrel music presents something of an enigma for modern Americans, especially for people who are concerned with understanding the phenomenon rather than simply dismissing it as an example of nineteenth century racism. Although Foster wrote more than 200 songs during his lifetime, he wrote less than two dozen minstrel and plantation songs. The "minstrel song" was usually fast paced, comic, and musically jaunty, while the slower paced "plantation song," which evolved later, was usually refined, sentimental, and sympathetic in its treatment of blacks. Both the minstrel and the plantation songs made some reference to African Americans, either through the use of black dialect, or through references to plantations or "darkeys," and such props of the South as canebrakes and cotton. Since these songs were often sung on the stage by performers wearing blackface makeup, many Americans today view them as an embarrassment. Yet blackface minstrelsy was the most popular entertainment in antebellum America; and after the evolution of the refined "plantation" genre, songs such "Oh! Susanna," "Old Folks at Home" and "My Old Kentucky Home" were acclaimed far and wide as America's folk-songs and our first truly national music.

Stephen Foster deserves the credit for making a musical medium associated with an oppressed and enslaved group of people into our first truly national music. He managed to take the raucous and often crude minstrel song and transform it into a new medium that would be sentimental enough for the parlor and sympathetic enough in its treatment of African Americans

that the abolitionist Frederick Douglas said that blacks sang Foster's songs often.<sup>401</sup> How did Stephen Foster transform the minstrel song? Foster's sentimental plantation song was a hybrid of the jaunty minstrel and the sentimental parlor song, and the message relayed in Foster's plantation songs touched a chord of sympathy in all classes and races of people. While many of the early minstrel songs were denigrating to blacks, Foster's plantation songs were sympathetic and usually respectful in their treatment of blacks. They were even antislavery by virtue of their sentimentality, which was a powerful political weapon in antebellum America.

## 6.1 EARLY MINSTRELSY: DADDY RICE AND JIM CROW

One of the first images that white Americans got of blacks on the minstrel stage was of the Jim Crow character who was created by Thomas Dartmouth Rice around 1830. Rice, who was affectionately known as "Daddy" Rice, the father of minstrelsy, created Jim Crow in a two-step process. That is, Jim Crow began his life in Cincinnati, but he was finalized in Pittsburgh, where Stephen Foster as a small child may have seen Rice perform on the stage. The mythic story of the creation of Jim Crow is just that, more myth than fact, yet accepted and handed down for years as the truthful antecedent of minstrelsy. Supposedly, Rice created Jim Crow by modeling him after a crippled black stable-hand he came across in either Kentucky or Cincinnati. According to Rice's much repeated story, the future minstrel was walking down a street in Cincinnati when he heard the stable-hand singing "in a unmistakable dialect" the following refrain:

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<sup>401</sup> Ken Emerson, *Doo-Dah! Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), p. 15.



“Turn about an’ wheel about an’ do jis so,  
An’ ebery time I turn about I jump Jim Crow.”<sup>402</sup>

Rice not only adopted the song, but as he watched the crippled man make frustrated attempts at

dancing, Rice developed the contorted stage persona who became known as Jim Crow.

Edward LeRoy Rice, the son of the famous minstrel, described the origination of the minstrel phenomenon in his 1911 book entitled *Monarchs of Minstrelsy, Daddy Rice to Date*. Edward was clearly enamored of the minstrel stage, and when he spoke of his famous father, it was the way we speak of more recent innovators in popular music, such as Elvis Presley or the Beatles. People of Edward LeRoy’s generation believed that Daddy Rice had created something uniquely American, and if anyone had suggested to Edward that his father’s unique music was offensive to blacks, he would not have known what that person was talking about.<sup>403</sup>

Thomas Dartmouth Rice was born into a poor family in New York City in 1808. He served as a supernumerary at the Park Theater, but soon became an itinerant performer along the Ohio River. Sometime between 1828 and 1831, he created the character of Jim Crow and started the national craze for blackface minstrelsy. Rice was not the first minstrel performer to appear in

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<sup>402</sup> Thomas Dartmouth Rice, “Jump Jim Crow,” quoted in Edward LeRoy Rice, *Monarchs of Minstrelsy, from Daddy Rice to Date* (New York: Kenny Publishing Company, 1911) p. 27.

<sup>403</sup> Probably, he would not have cared. In the first paragraph of the introduction to his book, Edward LeRoy mentioned the biblical story of Abel and Cain, and said that after Cain treated Abel in a very unbrotherly fashion, well, then Cain could not be Caucasian anymore and he became black. It was written tongue in cheek, but painful to modern readers, nonetheless. From Edward LeRoy Rice, *Monarchs of Minstrelsy, from Daddy Rice to Date* (New York: Kenny Publishing Company, 1911.)

blackface make-up. George Washington Dixon, who created the popular urban dandy character Zip Coon , debuted in 1827 in blackface as part of a circus act in Albany, and actors in traditional theater were known to appear in blackface make-up in the eighteenth century. But Rice “gave the first entertainment in which a blackface performer was not only the main actor, but the entire act.”<sup>404</sup>

Edward LeRoy said his father soon realized that his Jim Crow character “might admit of higher than mere street or stable-yard development.” He saw that Jim Crow had national possibilities as he asked himself, “might not Jim Crow and a black face tickle the fancy of pit and circle, as well as the Sprig of Shillalah and a red nose?” Daddy Rice was intrigued by the marketing potential of the song’s style to low and highborn (pit and circle) and to the Irish (Sprig of Shillalah) who would make up the urban audience members. Already by the third decade of the nineteenth century, Pittsburgh was established in manufacturing enough to have a population of steady workers to make up the audience for Rice’s minstrelsy. As LeRoy tells it, “The old theater of Pittsburgh [Old Drury] occupied the site of the present one, on Fifth Street. It was an unpretending structure, rudely built of boards, and of moderate proportions, but sufficient, nevertheless, to satisfy the taste and secure the comfort of the few who dared to face consequences and lend patronage to an establishment under the ban of the Scotch-Irish Calvinists.”<sup>405</sup>

In Cincinnati, Rice had fashioned the song and dance part of the act, based on the spastic movements of the crippled stable hand. But once Rice came to Pittsburgh, Cuff, a black worker on the wharf along the Monongahela River, became the model for the comic elements. Cuff worked as a porter for Griffith’s Hotel on Wood Street in downtown Pittsburgh in the vicinity

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<sup>404</sup> Carl Wittke, *Tambo and Bones* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 20.

<sup>405</sup> Rice, *Monarchs of Minstrelsy*, pp. 1-100.

where Stephen Foster in later years rented an office space for composing his minstrel songs. Cuff was “an exquisite specimen of his sort--- who won a precarious subsistence by letting his open mouth as a mark for boys to pitch pennies into, at three paces, and by carrying the trunks of passengers from the steamboats to the hotel.”<sup>406</sup>

Rice’s costume for his stage introduction of Jim Crow came from Cuff; that is, Rice “borrowed” Cuff’s rags, “an old coat forlornly dilapidated, with a pair of shoes composed equally of patches and places for patches on his feet, and wearing a coarse straw hat in a melancholy condition of rent and collapse....” After Rice appeared on the stage and took the show “with a thunder of applause” in Cuff’s clothes, as if on cue ( and it must have been prearranged), Cuff made his own appearance on the stage in a ridiculous state of undress. He walked onto the stage from behind the curtain and implored Rice, amid an explosive uproar of laughter: “Massa Rice, gi’me nigga’s hat---nigga’s coat---nigga’s shoes-- gi’me niggas’s t’ings-- -- Steam boat’s comin’!”<sup>407</sup> The next day, according to Edward LeRoy Rice, the Jim Crow song was on “everybody’s tongue.” According to the critics: “Clerks hummed it serving customers at shop counters, artisans thundered it at their toils....Boys whistled it and ladies warbled it in parlors and house maids repeated it to the clink of crockery in kitchens.” That was the official story of how Negro minstrelsy got started. Where truth ends and fabrication begins can never be known. The description of the song’s spontaneous popularity reminds us of an exuberant newspaper “puff” written twenty years later about Foster’s song “Old Folks at Home”, which was also on every body’s tongue as soon people heard it.<sup>408</sup>

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<sup>406</sup> Blacks still worked on the waterfront in Pittsburgh in the 1830s.

<sup>408</sup> Rice, *Monarchs of Minstrelsy*, pp. 1-100.

Legend and fact get confused again in the story of “Jump Jim Crow’s” initial publication. Edward LeRoy Rice believed that his father Thomas Dartmouth Rice immediately contacted William Cumming Peters who was then publishing and selling music on Market Street in downtown Pittsburgh. Since Rice was rehearsing his comic minstrel songs at the corner of Third and Market Street, it seemed only natural that the two would have made a connection.<sup>409</sup> Edward Leroy Rice states that Peters, who was a composer, devised a piano accompaniment for the melody that Rice sang for him.(Rice was said to have been musically ignorant.) After an artist John Newton created an elaborate title page for the song, the “Jump Jim Crow” song sheet became the “first specimen of lithography ever executed in Pittsburgh,” according to Edward LeRoy, with a portrait of his father Daddy Rice on the cover. The problem with the story is that, although reasonable, Peters’ biographer Richard D. Wetzel found no evidence to support the legend that William Cumming Peters published “Jump Jim Crow.”<sup>410</sup>

Rice remained in Pittsburgh for two years in the early 1830s and followed Jim Crow’s phenomenal success with performances of “Clare de Kitchen,” “Lucy Long,” and other very popular Ethiopian or “nigger” songs. As a child of nine, around 1835, Stephen Foster and the neighborhood children fixed up a barn into an amateur theater and put on blackface performances of their own. The Fosters claimed that Stephen was the child star of the shows, in which he sang “Coal Black Rose,” “My Long Tail Blue,” and “Zip Coon,” in addition to

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<sup>409</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-100.

The full title to Rice’s hit song of 1832 was “Clare de Kitchen, Old Folks, Young Folks,” and as William W. Austin suggested, Foster certainly owed a debt to Rice in this case. William W. Austin, “*Susanna*,” “*Jeanie*,” “*The Old Folks at Home*” (Chicago: The University of Illinois, 1975, Reprinted 1989) p. 15.

<sup>410</sup> Wetzel, “*Oh! Sing No More That Gentle Song*,” *The Musical Life and Times of William Cumming Peters* (1805-66), p. 82.

performing the astonishingly popular “Jump Jim Crow.” Whether Stephen Foster was old enough to have seen or remembered the great minstrel star “Daddy Rice” when he first came to Pittsburgh is not known,<sup>411</sup> but he must have seen some minstrels who played in Pittsburgh, because Stephen was said to have been a great mimic, and his childhood performances were much applauded. Stephen Foster probably did meet and see Rice perform, but at a later date. Sometime before 1845, Rice returned to Pittsburgh, at which time Rice’s family believed that the teenaged Stephen Foster met the famous minstrel and wrote two songs for him. “Daddy” Rice, according to his grandson’s account, rejected them because they were too sympathetic to the slaves.<sup>412</sup>

Morrison Foster described the children’s amateur minstrel show in which Stephen made his debut as the show’s “star performer”:

“The Theatre was fitted up in a carriage house. All were stockholders except Stephen. He was regarded as a star performer, and was guaranteed a certain sum weekly. It was a very small sum, but it was sufficient to mark his superiority over the rest of the company. “Zip Coon,”

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<sup>411</sup>Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up, the Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 30-31.

<sup>412</sup>The Rice family believed that Stephen Foster met their famous “Daddy,” when the latter returned to Pittsburgh sometime before 1845, when Stephen was in his late teens composing popular minstrel songs for his friends in Allegheny City. D. J. Rice, the grandson of Thomas D. Rice said that the young Stephen brought his grandfather “some farcical negro songs with the hope of their acceptance.” Rice refused the songs, including one called “Long Ago Day” about a dying slave because, according to D. J. Rice, it was too antislavery and Rice’s audiences in the South would not approve. Quoted by D. J. Rice, “Two Stephen C. Foster Songs” (New York, J. Fischer, 1931) from John Tasker Howard, *Stephen Foster, America’s Troubadour*, p. 125 and William W. Austin in “*Susanna*” p. 14.

Whether or not Foster composed “Long Ago Day” is uncertain. Deane L. Root and Steven Saunders questioned the authorship of the song in *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, but the words to the chorus, “Massa Sorrow, You can’t dig me out de grave, You will hev to buy or borrow When you needs anudder slave,” were certain to bring tears to the audience. Saunders and Root, *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Vol. II, pp. 472-423.

“Long-tailed Blue,” “Coal-Black Rose” and “Jim Crow” were the only Ethiopian songs then known. His performance of these was so inimitable and true to nature, that, child as he was, he was greeted with uproarious applause, and called back again and again every night the company gave an entertainment, which was three times a week.”<sup>413</sup>

Most of the songs Morrison lists were George Washington Dixon’s creations, but they would have been in Rice’s repertoire whether he wrote them or not. Dixon was singing “Coal Black Rose” and “My Long Tail Blue” in New York in 1827 and 1828, even before “Daddy” Rice got into the act. Stephen also could have learned any of these minstrel songs from one of the comic songsters which published the words to the most popular minstrel tunes and made them readily available to the public. In January of 1837, when Stephen was ten years of age, he wrote his father requesting a copy of one of the these song books. “I wish you to send me a commic [sic] songster for you promised to,” he wrote his father from Youngstown, Ohio where he was staying with his sister Henrietta.<sup>414</sup>

Lithographs of the rural Jim Crow character on the covers of the early minstrel songs appear to be racially insulting to us today. But when W. T. Lhamon analyzed previously ignored or lost plays from minstrelsy’s early days for his book *Jump Jim Crow*, he concluded that the stage persona Jim Crow was a charismatic character with positive attributes. Lhamon did not view the minstrel stage solely as a place for racial denigration. Rather, he believed the Jim Crow

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<sup>413</sup> Foster, *My Brother Stephen*, p. 25.

<sup>414</sup> Austin, “Susanna,” “Jeanie,” *The Old Folks at Home*,” p. 7.  
January 14, 1837 letter by Stephen Foster to father William B. Foster, from Youngstown, Ohio.  
Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 121.

performances provided the setting for “white fascination with blackness in the Atlantic world.” Thus, the fascination with black culture began with the Jim Crow character and continued through the generations to jazz, rhythm ‘n’ blues, rock ‘n’ roll, and hip hop. Although Lhamon admits that blackface was racist and “therefore deserves condemnation,” he credits Rice and Jim Crow with bringing black culture into white culture, which in itself he considered a positive development. “Through Rice’s art, he amalgamated societies and cultures. Every night he blacked up, he embodied a character who stitched filiation across class, region, even nationality, and race.”<sup>415</sup>

## **6.2 BLACKFACE : MEDIATOR OF CLASS, RACE, AND ETHNIC TENSIONS**

Blackface minstrelsy is a very complex form of entertainment. Ever since the Civil Rights era, musicologists and historians underscored what appeared to be racial denigration implicit in the genre, and they undertook a serious investigation of what they considered to be a peculiar American cultural phenomenon. Yet explication was not easy, because analysis of minstrelsy involves political, cultural, gender, social, economic, and psychological factors. Despite the all too familiar stage backdrop of the stereotypical Old South, minstrelsy was an urban phenomenon, created by urban men and performed for an audience of working class city dwellers enjoying their leisure entertainments in the city. Alexander Saxton believed that what made minstrelsy popular was that it provided a “window” into the culture of the new cities,

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<sup>415</sup> W. T. Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics and Street Prose of the First Atlantic Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003)

through which “appeared cultural identifications and hostilities, ethnic satire, and social and political commentary....”<sup>416</sup>

Minstrelsy was a northern urban phenomenon, in spite of a natural tendency for people to associate the minstrel songs and stage with plantations and the South. The entertainment developed at the same time that what historian Edward Pessen called the “urban revolution” occurred in America. Even though most people continued to live in the country, rapid increase in the growth of cities, especially in the “West,” defined the decades of the 1830s to the 1850s. Cities as centers of employment in commerce and industry were also attractive to heterogeneous groups of immigrants. In western cities like Cincinnati and Pittsburgh, where minstrelsy got its start and thrived, urban populations increased anywhere from 350 to 2000 percent, far beyond the national average. This unanticipated and sudden growth in the diversity of the populations was responsible for many of the problems that besieged the newly emerging cities.

During the second quarter of the nineteenth century, the populations of the cities became increasingly diverse as hundreds of thousands of mostly Irish and German immigrants moved in. The free black populations in the cities, while relatively small, increased at the same time, from about 320,000 to almost 500,000. Between 1832 and 1850, the years when minstrelsy was at its height of popularity, over 100,000 immigrants poured in annually, whereas immigrants numbered fewer than 15,000, and disease. Almost half were from Ireland, brought in to work on the canals, the railroads, and at other unskilled jobs at the foundries and forges. They crowded

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<sup>416</sup>Alexander Saxton, “Blackface Minstrelsy,” from AnnMarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, eds. *Inside the Minstrel Mask, Readings in Nineteenth Century Blackface Minstrelsy*, (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), p. 68.



into city slums, amidst crime, filth, prostitution and increasingly, they took over the work that had been done for years by blacks.<sup>417</sup>

Ethnic and racial tensions resulted naturally as this diverse group competed for jobs and living space. Anti-Catholicism became increasingly vicious after 1830, but the Irish in turn became more anti-black and anti-abolition. As tensions mounted, outright physical fights and riots erupted between the Irish, the native born working class, and the blacks. The middle and upper classes were another source of tension for the working classes, but these opposing classes fought each other openly only on rare occasions. Usually they were able to mediate their tensions vicariously on the minstrel stage.

Minstrelsy became a venue where urban working men could vent their frustrations against the upper class elites and the lower class blacks. Men from the working or mechanic classes comprised the audience for the early minstrel shows. In spite of their ethnic differences, these men did identify as a class in some manner, adopting a white masculine mechanic culture that appealed to both native born artisans and ethnic laborers. The mechanic culture had its own style that was oppositional to the style and mores of the middle class, which were marked by strivings for gentility and material acquisitions that would ascertain their social stature.<sup>418</sup>

Gentility may have been a priority with the middle classes, but it did not count for much with the mechanic class. Working men averaged about \$300 a year, a salary insufficient for maintaining a middle class lifestyle, even when their wives, who might be shop girls or a seamstress, worked or took in boarders. They usually shared houses with others or rented rooms,

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<sup>417</sup> Richard D. Wetzel, "Oh! Sing No More That Gentle Song," *The Musical Life and Times of William Cumming Peters* (Warren, Michigan: Harmonie Park Press, 2000), pp. 3-7.

<sup>418</sup> Rosemarie K. Bank, *Theatre Culture in America, 1825-1860* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 82.

and the trappings of gentility were far from the tradesman's mind. The travel writer Fanny Trollope commented on the non-genteel behavior of the working class in her *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, which was published in 1832,<sup>419</sup> and as late as 1842 Charles Dickens reported in his unfavorable account of American life that a "substantial number of tradesmen, mechanics and artisans were still eating with their knives."<sup>420</sup>

The crude masculine environment of minstrelsy was especially appealing to nineteenth century Americans repressed by a Victorian cultural etiquette. For many, especially the ethnic working classes, middle class Victorian entertainments were too restrictive and feminized to allow for a zone of comfort. The Jacksonian and the antebellum societies sported two faces. The face of the working class society was masculine and rude, characterized by tobacco chewing and spitting, fist-fights and cock-fights.<sup>421</sup> The face the middle class presented was genteel and feminine, a "flowery" and sentimental world that was not attractive to the mechanic or immigrant working classes.<sup>422</sup> Minstrel shows, especially the early Jim Crow variety, "manufactured the allure of the low" and appealed to the lower classes.<sup>423</sup> They competed with P. T. Barnum's phenomenally successful museum of freaks and oddities, real and humbugs, that attracted the same type of audience. As minstrel stage personas aped the lowly and represented "a slumming from within," the mechanic and working classes began to see that an underclass

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<sup>419</sup> Pamela Neville-Sington, *Fanny Trollope, The Life and Adventures of a Clever Woman* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1998), p. 166.

<sup>420</sup> Charles Dickens, *American Notes*, quoted in *Theatre Culture in America*.

<sup>421</sup> Wetzel, "Oh! Sing No More That Gentle Song, *The Musical Life and Times of William Cuming Peters (1805-66)*, pp. 3-7.

<sup>422</sup> Titles of important histories of mid- nineteenth century America are the *Feminization of American Culture* and *The Feminine Fifties*

<sup>423</sup> W. T. Lhamon, *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics and Street Prose of the first Atlantic Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003)

culture, which could stand on its own, was a viable alternative to middle class respectability. Hence working class people, along with a smaller group of repressed middle class men who craved a less restrictive environment, gravitated to the minstrel shows.

Minstrelsy and its burnt cork make-up, however, served a function in the antebellum society which was threatened by class rivalries. As the working and the middle classes gravitated in opposite directions, tensions brewed and minstrelsy substituted racial antagonism for class conflict, thereby toning down the risk of social disorder. According to Alexander Saxton, minstrelsy mediated class tensions that might have become violently explosive if they had been brought out openly on the stage. Instead, the performers wore blackface masks while they satirized the upper classes, and thereby relieved social tensions.<sup>424</sup> If working men eased their class frustrations by attacking blacks vicariously on the minstrel stage, the upper and middle classes were relieved. That was better than having the workers direct their attacks against them.

One time the working classes did not ease their anxieties vicariously on the minstrel stage was during the Astor Place Opera riot that erupted in New York in 1849. The riot ostensibly broke out over a contest between a British and an American actor who were playing in simultaneous productions of Hamlet, but in reality class conflict was the cause, and the results were deadly. The Astor Place Opera House, the bastion of the rich, featured the British actor William Charles Macready, at the same time that the Broadway Theater, which catered to the working class, featured the American actor Edwin Forrest. The working classes had secretly infiltrated the Astor Place Opera House to hiss at McCready and attack him with rotten eggs, but

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<sup>424</sup> Alexander Saxton, "Blackface Minstrelsy," from *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, eds. Bean, Hatch, etc. (Hanover: N. H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), p. 71.

the elites were prepared with the Seventh Regiment and several hundred police on the outside. When the riot ended, twenty-two lay dead, and one hundred fifty wounded, and the community was made aware that there did indeed exist in New York City “what every good patriot had hitherto felt it his duty to deny---a high class and a low class.”<sup>425</sup>

Mid-century was a particularly problematic time for class struggles. Even in Pittsburgh class tensions became apparent when the impresario of humbug P. T. Barnum brought the genteel European lady of song to the western city to sing. Jenny Lind, the Swedish “nightingale,” arrived in Pittsburgh by steamboat as part of Barnum’s western tour of America. Lind was scheduled to perform on a Friday evening in 1851 at the new Masonic Hall which had just opened at Fifth Avenue. As the well dressed cultured people of Pittsburgh who had bought their high priced tickets walked towards the theater, the working class men followed and converged around the music hall. Friday was payday and the workers had already stopped off at their favorite saloons by the time the concert was scheduled to begin. Besides being inebriated, they were angry that Barnum had hiked up the prices through his method of auctioning off the concert tickets. As soon as Lind began to sing, rough men surrounded the theater, jeered, and threw stones, some of which broke Lind’s dressing room window. The diva escaped through a back door to her hotel and canceled the concert planned for the next night in Pittsburgh. She left the next day for Baltimore. The story of Jenny Lind’s reception in Pittsburgh showed that industrialism had caused dangerous splits in the social fabric of the republican nation.<sup>426</sup>

Minstrelsy came into its own when the frustrations of the new factory and wage systems were first becoming apparent to working men, and when the barriers between the classes began

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<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*, p.765, quoted from a Philadelphia newspaper.

<sup>426</sup> Gladys D. Shultz, *Jenny Lind, the Swedish Nightingale* ( New York: J. B. Lippencott Co., 1962), p. 275.

to seem impossible to breach. In previous decades, a young man could begin as an apprentice, become a journeyman, and eventually advance to the rank of master of his trade. This model of upward mobility was replaced by one of endless hours of boring, repetitive labor in the confines of a factory that offered neither ego fulfillment, pride, nor comforts, and barely a livelihood. A man could work all his life and never rise far above the position at which he started. By the 1850s, the native born worker was also threatened by the tens of thousands of immigrants who came into the country each year to compete for his mechanized job. Poverty and uncertainty plagued the workers as the costs of living rose and wages remained stationary. The frustration of the wage system and the limited opportunities it presented to the worker could be worked out vicariously on the minstrel stage in an inversion ritual behind blackface makeup.

In *Demons of Disorder* musicologist Dale Cockrell argued that minstrelsy was “expressive of the common person’s politics.” Rather than a means of denigrating blacks, he suggested that the purpose of minstrelsy was to work out the tensions between the common people and the middle class in urban Jacksonian America. Relations between the classes were “set off through the image and reality of race.” A song like “Jim Crow” that appeared on the early minstrel stages from 1829 to 1843 was “noise” that “jangled the nerves” and, more importantly, “promised subversion” of the social order. In explaining the song as “noise” or disorder, Cockrell traced the cultural meaning of minstrelsy back to the symbolism of charivari and carnival. As he attempted to explain (and perhaps apologize for?) minstrelsy, Cockrell asked, “Could it be that ‘Jim Crow’ was not, then, a song about African Americans so much as one that promised a new code, as the ritualized Demons of Disorder who were not attempting to

demean those of black skin, but were adopting the visage of the Other in an effort to reconfigure a hard world?”<sup>427</sup>

Cockrell thought that minstrelsy was “many things to many people, of all ranks, races, and genders.” To the upper classes, minstrelsy was about “racial inferiority,” worthy of a laugh, but to the common workers, the “racial feature of Jim Crow was less clear, where issues of identity, representation, and race are more complicated.” Cockrell noticed that the lower class whites intermingled frequently with blacks, and that they worked, played, and loved together. For that reason, in his analysis of the early phase of minstrelsy, Cockrell did not emphasize the enmity between the races. Rather, Cockrell thought “Jim Crow” shared characteristics with the western folk hero Davy Crockett----- “braggart, fighter, dancer, fiddler.”<sup>428</sup>

William Mahar in *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* also saw the minstrel stage as a place of social inversion, where class antagonism found release in a make-believe display of lower or mechanic class victories over upper and middle class dominance. On the minstrel stage, the working class Mose could invert the social hierarchy, at least temporarily, behind the mask of burnt cork. All would return to its rightful order with capital at the helm, once the working man emerged from the darkness of the theater, but for a few hours the laborer or mechanic could be seated at the top in a realm of inverted social order. Mahar analyzed Ethiopian sketches that were performed on the minstrel stage during the antebellum period and concluded that since the plots did not deal with slavery, “minstrelsy’s various genres must have served more complex social

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<sup>427</sup> Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder, Early Blackface Minstrels and their World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) pp. 81-82.

<sup>428</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82.

and cultural purposes even during the antebellum period when the slavery debate was a more prominent political and moral issue.”<sup>429</sup>

Mahar argued that the real concern of minstrelsy was “class rather than race,” finding that behind the masks lay “serious concerns about social, cultural and economic issues.” Thus, in the Ethiopian sketches he analyzed, the blackface servant, employee, and dandy often outsmarted the upper class antagonist. The role reversal strategy found in the minstrel plays has a long history in comedy. Even the plots in Mozart’s comic operas owe much to this tradition, wherein the servant outwits the master, but in the end everyone is reconciled and forgiven. “Those characters [in the minstrel plays] were successful,” argues Mahar, “not because they were seen as African Americans, but because they were the clever instruments of an egalitarian audience’s need to feel some form of superiority with respect to other classes and races.”<sup>430</sup>

Mahar thought the idea behind minstrelsy was to make fun of professionals or businessmen, so that they would appear too ridiculous to be taken seriously. If the boss becomes the object of ridicule, then his tyrannies over the worker cannot be taken as seriously or felt as painfully. In the plays the low status individuals assumed power for short periods of time, but the joke was successful because no one really believed that the lower status person could or would take charge. “Thus, lawyers and judges were ridiculed by having their jobs performed by lower class individuals who could not even pronounce or use the vocabularies of their superiors,” and no one felt threatened by the game.<sup>431</sup> At the end of the minstrel show, no one got hurt and the

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<sup>429</sup>William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1999), p. 208.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 190-194.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 190-194.

classes were reconciled. The comedy in the skit created “an individual release which is also a social reconciliation. That is why the theater became a safe ground for satire.”<sup>432</sup>

Laughter was perhaps the main point of minstrelsy, and Eric Lott in *Love and Theft* noticed that Americans whole heartedly enjoyed minstrelsy. They would not sit through the shows night after night if racial denigration were the only reason for the productions. The title alone to Eric Lott’s book, *Love and Theft*, explains a great deal about minstrelsy as an art form. Lott argued that white Americans were attracted to and ultimately captivated by certain aspects of black culture, hence the “love” in the title, and they surreptitiously adopted it (the “theft”) into their own culture, especially in popular culture. Thus, in spite of the denigration of blacks that the art form involved, Eric Lott argued that white Americans were attracted by specific forms of “blackness.”<sup>433</sup> Even if the faces were painted and distorted, the moves exaggerated, stereotyped and misconstrued, Lott said most people in the audience thought they were seeing something of the real thing of blackness, and they enjoyed it. Whites enjoyed black musical instruments, the rhythms, and the dance movements of minstrelsy and paid to see the shows and committed hours of their leisure time to watching them.<sup>434</sup>

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<sup>432</sup> Northrup Frye discussed why we laugh in his article on humor. Jeffrey Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee, eds. *The Psychology of Humor* (New York: Academic Press, 1972)

<sup>433</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft, Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 38-55

The same attraction between the racial cultures exists today when white middle class kids choose to wear overly large clothes and dance hip hop and sing rap music. And it existed a half century back, when Elvis Presley sang to white teen age girls in a rich baritone that mimicked in tonal and musical quality something of the black musician’s voice.

<sup>434</sup> The same attraction between the racial cultures exists today when white middle class kids choose to wear overly large clothes and dance hip hop and sing rap music. And it existed a half century back, when



It may be true that minstrelsy mediated class antagonism, and also true that white Americans enjoyed certain aspects of black culture while they continued to denigrate blacks, but that does not explain why white men painted their faces black in imitation of slaves on Southern plantations or urban black dandies. Why blackface, and not something else? Or some other group to denigrate? Exactly why African Americans were selected to play the underdog on the minstrel stage, I believe, had much to do with the political, social, and economic fear that infected the environment of antebellum Americans. Minstrelsy started and peaked during the years when slavery and blacks became an issue of intense concern to white Americans, and when immigrants, especially the Irish, were growing into a dominant presence in northern American cities.

Minstrelsy got its start around the same time that William Lloyd Garrison inaugurated his abolitionist newspaper the *Liberator*, and the slave Nat Turner led a rebellion. Both occurred in 1831. It was also the same time that large numbers of Irish began arriving in America. The Turner slave rebellion in Virginia was particularly brutal, resulting in the murder of at least sixty white men, women, and children, many in their beds. Although the insurrectionists were immediately caught and twenty strung up, the incident was not forgotten. Its memory plagued southern society, making southerners more defensive of their peculiar institution, and more afraid. “In times of crisis or unusual racial fears, as in the immediate aftermath of Nat Turner’s rebellion in Virginia,” historian Edward Pessen tells us, free blacks “were brutally beaten by roaming gangs of whites and forcibly dragged into slavery by white

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Elvis Presley sang to white teen age girls in a rich baritone that mimicked in tonal and musical quality something of the black musician’s voice.

‘manstealers.’”<sup>435</sup> When Garrison’s newspaper began to preach immediate abolition in the same year as the rebellion, southerners as well as northerners became fearful that the abolitionists would create havoc.

While southerners feared slave uprisings, the northern working classes, especially the immigrants, feared their economic and social order would be overturned. If the abolitionists were successful, the immigrant workers feared they would lose their jobs to freed blacks and compromise their status. They might find themselves not only competing in the job market with ex-slaves, but working and socializing with them on a basis of equality. The fact that some blacks and whites were friends, or lived together and sometimes even loved one another, as Dale Cockrell as pointed out, does not change the fact that the working classes, especially the Irish, competed with freed blacks for low paying demeaning jobs. They feared the freed blacks and as a consequence were willing to make black personas on the minstrel stage into objects of ridicule.

Fear sets off all sorts of strange behaviors, the least of which is the desire to ridicule the object of fear in order to make it appear less frightening. But people also want to know their enemy, the one they fear.<sup>436</sup> Once abolition and the slave issue began to threaten the unity of the nation, the slave himself and blackness became objects of curiosity, at the same time they became more hated. As Foster remarked in one of his songs written during the Civil War when black soldiers were being turned into soldiers: “dis union which de’re forefadders hab made, worth more den twenty millions ob de colored brigade.” To many concerned and fearful people,

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<sup>435</sup> Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America, Society, Personality, and Politics* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1977) p. 39.

<sup>436</sup> After September 11th, book stores suddenly piled the tables high with books about Middle Eastern cultures. Americans started inquiring about the Koran and the beliefs of the people by whom they felt threatened. They asked themselves, what were Middle Easterners like?

it seemed that blacks were causing all the trouble: they threatened the existence of the Union and destroyed the peaceful relations that had allowed the two sections to coexist for at least half a century. At the same time, they threatened the working man with economic competition. Blacks thus became objects of denigration on the minstrel stage and scapegoats for all sorts of frustrations that the whites were experiencing.

In addition to the threat of civil war, economic concerns formed the basis of northerners' fear of abolitionism in the North and the Midwest. Pittsburgh newspapers in the 1850s mention over and over again that white workingmen would lose their jobs and what limited social status they had attained if abolition were achieved. Freed blacks would work for lower wages than white men and demean labor, which is what blacks did in the South. Northern workingmen would be relegated to the same social rank as blacks, and their children would attend church and school with black children, and ultimately intermarry.

The Irish felt the most threatened by the prospect of freed blacks. They had come to America to fill the need for intense, back-breaking labor to build the nation's canals and railroads. Although they were poor, the Irish felt that at least they were not on the absolute bottom rung as long as African Americans were there to fill that slot, and they intended to maintain the status quo. Animosities between the Irish and African Americans reached a boiling point by the middle of the nineteenth century, but relations were not always hopelessly ugly. The great Irish liberator Daniel O'Connell was initially on the abolitionists' side, but he could not attract Irish Americans to the cause, nor could he draw them away from the Democratic party.

Their anti-English bias had drawn even America's earliest Irish immigrants to the party of Jefferson and later to the court of Andrew Jackson.<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>437</sup> Conversation with Van Beck Hall, University of Pittsburgh, March 23, 2007.

When Irish workers encountered African Americans at the jobs they themselves desired, they fought to displace them, not because they were black, but because the Irish wanted jobs.<sup>438</sup> The blacks fought back, calling the Irish “White Niggers,” while they urged employers not to hire such violent, hard drinking, and unreliable workers as the immigrant Irish. But “it was a lost cause” for the free blacks, according to historian Edward Pessen.<sup>439</sup> “In the nation’s largest cities in the decade after 1837 Negroes were rapidly displaced by Irish and to a lesser extent other European immigrants, even in low-status occupations of hackney coachmen, draymen, stevedores, barbers, cooks, stewards, and house servants.”<sup>440</sup> The Irish, who would stop at nothing to protect their livelihoods, naturally became fierce opponents of abolition.

John Finch, an English man traveling in America in 1843, noticed “that the Democratic party, and particularly the poorer class of Irish immigrants in America are greater enemies to the Negro population and greater advocates for the continuance of Negro slavery than any portion of the population in the free states.” Finch attributed this attitude to labor competition. Finch described how the Irish in America defended slavery, fearing that wages in America would be as low as those in England if the slaves were emancipated:

Competition among free white working men here is even now reducing our wages daily; but if the blacks were to be emancipated, probably hundreds of thousands of them would migrate into these northern States, and the competition for employment would consequently be so much

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<sup>438</sup>Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 95-96. Ignatiev informs us that the Irish had to learn to form a solidarity based on color, because that was not their experience in their homeland where the white English were their oppressors.

<sup>439</sup> Pessen, *Jacksonian America, Society, Personality, and Politics*, pp. 33-38, 43, 54-55.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

increased, that wages would speedily be as low, or lower here, than they are in England; better, therefore for us, that they remain slaves as they are.<sup>441</sup>

Slavery allowed whites on the lowest rung of the socioeconomic ladder to enjoy a status superior in crucial respects to that of the most exalted blacks. As members of the privileged group, white workers united and excluded free African Americans from mechanic and tradesmen jobs, waterfront positions, and from all trade unions.<sup>442</sup> Free black workers got caught in the middle and became the scapegoats for the frustrations of the native born and the immigrant whites. As the working classes competed with each other for the better jobs and fought their bosses for higher wages, they fought the blacks to keep them out of the competition altogether. As a consequence, by the 1830s and 1840s, just as minstrelsy began to thrive, free blacks experienced “a remarkable deterioration in the[ir] socioeconomic conditions.....”<sup>443</sup>

Both the native born and the Irish who feared job competition, threats of civil war, and racial amalgamation needed to make blacks into an image that was less threatening. They did this by turning them into objects of ridicule on the minstrel stage, thereby dissipating their fears with laughter. As a consequence, the two types of black characters created for the stage were made to appear so ridiculous that they could not threaten anyone in the white audience. The rural Jim Crow was extremely ignorant and wore tattered clothing or rags. He talked funny too. The urban

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<sup>441</sup>John Finch, *Notes of Travel in the United States* (London 1844), quoted in Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, p. 97.

<sup>442</sup>Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, p. 100.

<sup>443</sup>Gary Nash, *Forging Freedom, the Formation of Philadelphia's Black Community, 1720-1840* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988) pp. 140-145, quoted in Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White*, p.100.

dandy, Zip Coon, was made to appear ludicrous by juxtaposing high urban culture in his dress and affectations with the way he walked and talked, using malapropisms frequently.

The black personas on the early minstrel stage could never be truly admired, for the black minstrel characters were not given traits that white Anglo Saxons admired as manly virtues. They might be admired for outsmarting their social betters through shrewdness and cunning, but never for being of superior intellect. They were never heroic, even when by their wiles they came out ahead. They could be pitied, but never command real respect. The white man in the audience could always look with condescension upon these blackface characters. They could always feel superior to the blackface character on the stage, so that they could not be looked on as a threat. Most whites in the North and Midwest had rarely seen blacks, but on the minstrel stage they made sure that they would see them in the image that white men wanted to see of blacks, an image that was no longer threatening.

### **6.3 SCIENTIFIC RACISM**

The success of the minstrel shows was based on the racism that underpinned nineteenth century American society. Belief in the superiority of the white race was necessary to buttress the minstrel stage. How could anyone laugh at blackface comedians if they did not believe in the natural inferiority of blacks? How could the Irish and other poor working class whites maintain any sense of dignity if they did not feel superior to someone, the blacks at least? Without blacks to denigrate, America's entire social fabric might have unravelled. If working class men had not been able to unite on race and denigrate blacks, their antagonisms towards their white social betters might have been greater, erupting often in such violent scenes of aggression as that

displayed at the Astor Place Opera or the less deadly display at Jenny Lind's concert in Pittsburgh.

Virtually every one in antebellum America was a racist, although few men would have used that word as a form of criticism. A doctor writing for the *Philadelphia Journal of Medical and Physical Sciences* in the 1820s, at the same time that minstrelsy was born, said that the

“black races are substantially different” from and inferior to “the Caucasian in mental condition, as well as in bone and nervous systems, skull dimension, and internal bodily organs.” Thus some men of the medical community believed that they had physical evidence of inferiority in members of the African race. Andrew Jackson's Attorney General Roger B. Taney in 1831 wrote that blacks were a “separate and degraded people,” and an 1840 census purported to show that the insanity and mental retardation rate among free blacks was many times higher than that found in enslaved blacks.<sup>444</sup>

Racism, meaning the belief that each race carried within itself distinct racial characteristics denoting inferiority or superiority, was prevalent. Most white Americans believed that the races coexisted in a hierarchical pattern with the white race on top, Asians and Indians in between, and blacks on the bottom. The idea was broadly accepted in America, of course, because it justified black slavery and the destruction of native Americans. In Europe, the new theories justified the colonization of less technologically advanced peoples of the world. Consequently, many men and women in the middle of the nineteenth century were eager to discuss the origins of race, and “ethnology” was hailed “the science of the age.” When George Robins Gliddon came to Pittsburgh with “historical evidence” explaining Egyptian ethnology,

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<sup>444</sup> Pessen, *Jacksonian America*, p. 42.

he drew “large audiences” to his lectures in 1847. Educated nineteenth century men wanted “scientific” knowledge to “prove” their belief in a hierarchy of races, and they found many willing to provide it.<sup>445</sup>

Before Darwin’s theories became known, there were two theories about race that attracted attention, neither of which were egalitarian. Monogenists, whose beliefs were more in keeping with the Bible, believed all humans descended from one common source, after which the races degenerated at a different pace, with the darker races losing out in intelligence and moral development because of the effects of climate. Polygenists, on the other hand, argued that the races were created separately according to God’s plan and from the beginning had been endowed with different attributes and unequal abilities. The races, according to polygenist theories, developed according to a hierarchical order that had been pre-determined by the Creator, and neither environment nor education could change that fixed order.<sup>446</sup>

Nineteenth century polygenists such as Samuel George Morton and Louis Agassiz conducted “scientific” studies to “prove” the separate genesis of the races and to deny the unity of mankind. Morton collected and measured the interior capacity of the skulls of different races of people. He ranked the human races by cranial capacity in descending order: Caucasian, Mongolian, Malay, Native American and Negro at the bottom. Caucasians were distinguished by their high intellectual endowments, while native Americans were “slow in acquiring knowledge; restless, revengeful and fond of war; the Ethiopian (Negro) is joyous, flexible, and indolent, the lowest grade of humanity.” In 1849 he published his very influential conclusions in

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<sup>445</sup> William Stanton, *The Leopard’s Spots, Scientific Attitudes Toward Race In America 1815-1859* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 87-89.

<sup>446</sup> Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2001), pp.104-107.



an often reprinted catalogue.<sup>447</sup> He threw out the beliefs of such old fashioned thinkers as the Jeffersonian Albert Gallatin, who dabbled in anthropology in his old age, but clung to the idea that all of mankind sprang from one solitary source. Morton, on the other hand, smugly asserted that each race sprang up on its own in its own geographic environment. Neither climate, geography, nor time could have any effect on the characteristics of the races.<sup>448</sup>

The polygenist scientist Louis Agassiz went further than Morton's rankings to emphasize his belief that the Negro represented the lowest stage of human development. "The brain of the Negro," Agassiz told his Charleston, South Carolina audience in 1847, "is that of the imperfect brain of a seven month's infant in the womb of a White." Since Agassiz did not consider the idea of evolution, the stage of development of the races was set and immutable. In contrast to teachings of the Bible and the monogenists, Agassiz and Morton believed in the theory of separate creations which denied that all men were descended from one single line of humanity. He published his "findings" in his famous study *The Natural History of the United States of America* around the late 1850s, just before Darwin came on the scene.<sup>449</sup>

Charles Darwin in 1859 overturned the polygenist ideas of the separate creation of the races, but not the idea that the races were different and unequal. "Darwinism rendered irrelevant the hypothesis of a multiplicity of human species," but the "differences" between blacks and whites, although they "might not be permanent," continued to exist, as did a deep-rooted bias that would today be criticism as "racism."<sup>450</sup> Belief in the inequality of the races continued to be widely accepted in the nineteenth century, even by men who favored abolition. The abolitionist

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<sup>447</sup> Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, p. 145.

<sup>448</sup> Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103

<sup>450</sup> Stanton, *The Leopard's Spots*, p. 186.

Theodore Parker, for example, believed that people with dark skin were inferior. Abraham Lincoln, too, believed that whites were the superior race, yet he abolished slavery. Most whites, even those who thought that slavery was abhorrent and immoral, believed that the races existed in a hierarchy. One man to disagree with these race theories was the black physician Martin Delaney. After he bled hundreds of sick people, black and white, with cups and leeches, he concluded that all the blood was the same. Delaney tried to use his medical knowledge to explain that racial differences were nothing more than differences in the pigmentation of the skin, but few white men would listen.<sup>451</sup>

#### **6.4 THE THREE ACT MINSTREL SHOW**

The earliest performances of blackface entertainment, such as the Jim Crow act, were performed by a single entertainer like “Daddy” Rice. By the 1840s, however, minstrelsy had evolved into a three act performance with blackface minstrels playing specific plantation instruments, standing in a semi-circle around the interlocutor, the main attraction who stood in the middle. The minstrels who sat at each end of the semicircle were known appropriately as Brudder Tambo and Brudder Bones, because they played such “plantation” instruments as the tambourine and the bones. The “interlocutor” who stood in the center of the company acted as a sort of “master of ceremony” or a dignified straight man to the “end men,” who told the jokes and wore brightly

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<sup>451</sup>Dorothy Sterling, *The Making of an Afro-American, Martin Robison Delany 1812-1885* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971)

colored clothes and heavy make-up around their eyes and their lips.<sup>452</sup> The Brudders Tambo and Bones gave hilarious “stump speeches” about political topics, while they used exaggerated body movement to tell their jokes, which often centered around current event topics, or anything fashionable. Phrenology, the popular mode of studying a man’s character by feeling the contours or bumps on the head, was always good for a few laughs. Marriage and women’s rights were other topics that were open to jest, as minstrel jokes were as misogynistic as they were racist. Women’s rights were condemned because women, like blacks, provided an example of an inferior group whose very subjugation assured white working men of their superior status.<sup>453</sup>

The two minstrel groups who are credited with turning minstrelsy into a full scale show with a standard format are the Virginia Minstrels and the Christy Minstrels. Dan Emmett and the Virginia Minstrels, who debuted on February 6, 1843 at the Bowery Amphitheater in New York, hold the dubious honor of giving the first professional blackface group performance.<sup>454</sup> They came up with “the idea of forming a novel kind of [musical] ensemble consisting of fiddle, bones, banjo, and tambourine,” with the blackface minstrels playing these plantation instruments.<sup>455</sup> The Christy Minstrels, who debuted later in New York in 1846, are credited with the idea of having the blackface minstrels stand in a semi-circle with an interlocutor in the center and comic end-men telling jokes. According to Carl Wittke, “The Christy Minstrels gave

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<sup>452</sup> Toll, *Blacking Up*, p. 52.

<sup>453</sup> Robert C. Toll, “Social Commentary in Late Nineteenth Century White Minstrelsy,” from AnneMarie Bean, James V. Hatch, and Brooks McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask, Readings in Nineteenth Century Blackface Minstrelsy* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), pp. 87-88.

<sup>454</sup> New York Herald, February 6, 1843 quoted in Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*, (University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, 1962), p. 118.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*, p.116.

the minstrel show the stereotyped form which it kept to the present time, with its semi-circular arrangement of the performers in the first part, the interlocutor in the center, and the end men with bones and tambourines at the extremes.”<sup>456</sup>

The first act of the minstrel performance opened with the entire company appearing on stage in a fairly large semi-circle. The banjo and the fiddle along with the tambourine and the jawbones became the standard plantation instruments of the minstrel performers. In addition to the jokes, comic songs were interspersed with serious songs and individual dance acts. Songs were performed in blackface and sung in dialect, but the minstrels also sang sentimental ballads in standard English without their blackface masks. The musical star of the first act was usually a tenor who sang the sentimental romantic ballads without blackface.<sup>457</sup> The first act usually closed with the entire cast singing and dancing.

The second act of the minstrel show was known as the olio, and it offered a variety of entertainments, thus casting itself as the predecessor of the variety or vaudeville show. Men sang and danced, acrobats jumped about, and specialty acts filled the theater with musical sounds (or noises) made from the scraping of combs or glasses.

The third and final part of the minstrel show, at least up until the mid-1850s, was usually a skit set on a Southern plantation where the entire minstrel troupe in colorful plantation costumes closed the show with a loud song and dance number. In later years, the last part was

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<sup>456</sup> Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, p. 52.

<sup>457</sup> Toll, *Blacking Up*, p. 52.

altered to close with non-plantation satires of current events and comedic stunts like pie throwing.<sup>458</sup>

## 6.5 FOSTER'S SENTIMENTAL MINSTRELSY

By the time Stephen Foster became involved with the minstrel show, it had reached its full fledged form with three acts and numerous performers standing in a large semi-circle on the stage. Foster wrote minstrel songs primarily for Edwin P. Christy and the Christy Minstrels, a troupe that like Foster, specialized in sentimental and refined minstrelsy. After Foster's brief involvement with minstrel shows as a child performer in the amateur theater the children fixed up, the composer became involved with minstrel songs in his teen years when he began to compose them for an intimate circle of youthful friends, the so-called Knights of the Square Table. Some of Foster's greatest minstrel songs emerged from this intimate environment, including "Oh! Susanna." The Knights met at different friends' houses in Allegheny and practiced Stephen's songs from about 1845 to 1846. The neighborhood boys and girls, who were the performers in these informal gatherings,<sup>459</sup> were interested in making social contacts and having fun rather than participating in professional entertainment. Only after Stephen Foster met and connected with the minstrel performers in Cincinnati did he get involved with minstrelsy on a professional basis.

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<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54

<sup>459</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 316-317.

In May of 1850, two months before Foster married, Henry Kleber's newly opened store on Third Street in Pittsburgh advertised the sale of Foster's sheet music. The list included minstrel songs like "Dolly Day," "Oh! Lemuel!," "Dolcy Jones," "My Brudder Gum," "Gwine to Run All Night," "Angelina Baker," and "Away Down South." Mixed in with these were a few parlor songs, including "Stay, Summer Breath," "Summer Longings," and "Soiree Polka." Of the ten songs promoted, all but three were minstrel songs. After his marriage, however, Foster had six songs published in six months, none of which were in the minstrel tradition. He may simply have felt more inclined to write romantic, sentimental parlor music once he married. Or, he may have wanted to disassociate his name from low class minstrelsy, or from minstrel performers who were clearly taking advantage of his naivety. But it is also possible that he may have felt pressured by his wife and his mother to become known as a composer of white man's music that contained respectable lyrics rather than what Foster himself called "the trashy and really offensive words" that were found in some minstrel songs.<sup>460</sup>

Foster's minstrel songs, of course, never were "trashy negro songs." They were too sentimental. If a song or poem were sentimental, it brought tears to the eyes, evidence that a man or a woman was feeling sympathy and hence, according to the popular theories of the day, was morally and perhaps socially superior. Songs, poems, stories, or plays that were sentimental had a moral agenda. Tears demonstrated that the listener felt sympathetic through a vicarious experience of the pain of others, which in itself was ennobling. The idea of investing moral value in feelings, or tears, could be found in the views of the eighteenth century philosopher David Hume who argued that inherent within all human beings was "some internal taste or feeling which distinguishes moral good and evil," and intuitively chooses the good. This choice

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<sup>460</sup> Stephen Foster to E. P. Christy, May 25, 1852. Quoted by Morneweck in *Chronicles*, pp.398-399.

demonstrates that man is morally superior to the brutes.<sup>461</sup> Another philosopher who placed a high value on feelings was Adam Smith. Although better known for his *Wealth of Nations*, his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* published in 1759 argued that the more responsive we are to our feelings, the better off we and the society will be.<sup>462</sup> Other books which advocated the free expression of feeling were Henry MacKenzie's *The Man of Feeling* and Laurence Sterne's novel *Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, also published in 1759.<sup>463</sup> These books, although published in the 1700s, were influential in encouraging the development of the nineteenth century sentimental society.

To antebellum Americans, sympathy was a powerful force. From the 1830s to the 1850s, many abolitionists believed "moral suasion" alone would be enough to persuade men to free their slaves, without the necessity of resorting to legal compulsion or warfare. William Lloyd Garrison, the pacifist publisher of the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*, believed he could eradicate the sin of slavery by using his editorials to consciously and continuously hammer away at wrong thinking in the society.<sup>464</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe relied on moral suasion in her tear inducing book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; and although she did not convince the slaveholders, she did make white northerners aware of the evils of slavery when she made whites feel the suffering of blacks. Even Abraham Lincoln believed that sympathy could reveal truth. In a speech addressed

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<sup>461</sup>David Hume, *Essays, Moral and Political* (Edinburgh : R. Fleming and A. Alison for A. Kincaid, 1741) p. 198.

<sup>462</sup> Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), from *The Adam Smith Library* ( New York: A.M. Kelley, 1966 Reprint)

<sup>463</sup> Henry MacKenzie, *The Man of Feeling* (New York: George Jansen, 1805)

Laurence Sterne, *Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (Worcester, Mass: Isaiah Thomas, 1795)

<sup>464</sup>Henry Mayer, *All On Fire, William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* ( New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998)

to southerners in 1854, he argued that “human sympathies, of which [men] can no more divest themselves than they can of their sensibility to physical pain ....manifest in many ways their sense of the wrong of slavery, and their consciousness that, after all, there is humanity in the negro.”<sup>465</sup> Stephen Foster, whose plantation songs had sympathetic black personas singing their hearts out, also must have engaged the antislavery cause through sympathy or sentimentality.

Understanding the power of sentimentality makes clear why Foster’s plantation songs had such universal appeal. It also explains how songs like “Old Folks at Home” and “My Old Kentucky Home,” rather than denigrating blacks, which the early minstrel songs had done, created sympathy for the suffering of blacks and in so doing, actually benefited the antislavery cause. In 1848, Stephen Foster wrote his first effectively powerful plantation song that was sympathetic to blacks. In “Nelly Was a Lady” he created a black female character who was a “lady” and a “dark Virginia bride” at a time when marriage of slaves was not legally sanctioned. The black male protagonist who sang the lament for his beloved wife expressed the pain he felt at her death in the same way a white man would. According to the cult of sentimentality, that capacity for “feeling” elevated the humanity of the black character in the song.

In “Old Folks at Home,” published in 1851, Foster again showed that blacks could feel with the same intensity that whites could. The loss in this song centered on the universal theme of home, but not any particular home or geographic space. It was about the struggles of all mankind, black and white, for that elusive “home” which is defined by its oppositional, worldly flux. In “My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night,” the final song in this trio of great plantation songs, Foster made whites feel the utter desolation that is possible as long as human bondage exists, and conflated that feeling with the hopelessness of the human condition.

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<sup>465</sup> Harry V. Jaffa, *A New Birth of Freedom* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.) p. 326. Quoted from Lincoln, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, p. 264.



Another very sympathetic song in the tradition of tragic “plantation” songs was “Darling Nellie Gray,” written in 1856 by Benjamin R. Hanby, whose father was active in the Underground Railroad. The song told the tale of a female slave sold away from her home in Kentucky and her loved ones: “The white man bound her with his chain, They have taken her to Georgia for to wear her life away, As she toils in the cotton and the cane.” Her despairing black lover, who died of a broken heart, welcomed the angels of death who could release him from the pain of losing his darling Nellie: “Oh! I hear the angels calling and I see my Nelly Gray.” These songs about dead black women were, according to historian Charles Hamm, “cast in the same mold” as “The Hazel Dell” and “Lilly Dale,” songs about dead white girls.<sup>466</sup> But when the white ladies died, it was because some disease had taken the bloom from their cheek, not because they were dragged away to die in slavery.

Hamm explained the importance of the new direction in minstrelsy: “Suddenly, the minstrel song has taken on a new dimension. The singer ...is not delineating some ridiculous, grotesque, marginally human creature, but is communicating grief over the loss of a loved one.” Hamm explained the transition in minstrelsy to the new type of sympathetic plantation song:

The core of the minstrel repertory during the 1840s and ‘50s was this new type of “plantation song,” with musical and poetical ties to sentimental balladry, and with gentler and more sympathetic treatment of black characters. Most popular were portraits of Southern slave women. We have a whole gallery of them, the prototype most probably being Sanford’s Miss Lucy Neal.” Stephen Foster contributed a sizable collection, including “Melinda May” (“No snowdrop was ebber more fair, She smiles like de roses dat bloom round de stream, And sings

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<sup>466</sup> Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays, Popular Song in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979) pp. 136-138, p. 215.

like de bird in the air.”), “Angelina Baker” (Ebry time I met her she was smiling like de sun, But now I’m left to weep a tear cayse Angelina’s gone”), and “Nelly Was a Lady.”<sup>467</sup>

The minstrel song thus evolved from a medium that was geared toward a working class audience and was denigrating to blacks to one which was refined enough for the middle class parlor, and actually antislavery in its directive by virtue of its sympathy or sentimentality.

Minstrelsy was not a static art form. Stephen Foster’s contributions to the medium were most prominent in the years 1848-1852, when the “plantations song” was infusing minstrelsy with a sentimental core, and when minstrel songs were sympathetic to the slave. ( Foster’s “My Old Kentucky Home,” although published in January of 1853, was written at the end of 1852.) Stephen Foster’s songs were the most well known of the minstrel or plantation songs that were sympathetic in their portrayals of blacks, and Foster was in the vanguard in this important transformation of the genre. Minstrelsy changed over time, as fashions and art forms do, to meet the demands of its audience. It did not change out of courtesy to blacks, obviously, yet as sentimentality became the hallmark of mid-nineteenth century literature and theater, the result was an improved representation and a less denigrating image of blacks on the stage. Thus sentimental minstrelsy had political ramifications as well.

Winans divides minstrel songs into three phases. Early blackface songs, such as those originated in the 1830s by Thomas Dartmouth Rice, the creator of the Jim Crow character, were performed on the stage as part of a solo act. These songs, including “Jump Jim Crow,” “Old Zip Coon,” “My Long Tailed Blue,” “Clare de Kitchen,” and “Coal Black Rose,” were not flattering portrayals of African Americans. Stephen Foster was a small child when he first heard and imitated these songs in the amateur stage production that the neighborhood children of

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<sup>467</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

Allegheny put together. But childhood performances aside, Stephen Foster was not affiliated with these negative burnt cork productions.<sup>468</sup> Winans acknowledged that these early minstrel songs, while being very popular, “at best, poked gentle fun at blacks, but more often heavy ridicule was involved. The minstrel show and its songs created stereotypes of blacks that have plagued American society ever since.”

Comic songs made up the second grouping of minstrel songs, and dominated minstrelsy from about 1843 to 1847, according to Winans. These songs made their appearance when minstrelsy transformed into the three act standard format. Since a prime reason for minstrelsy was, of course, to make people laugh, the comic minstrel song had its *raison d'être*. An example of a song from this second period is the comic love song, “Miss Lucy Long.” Unfortunately, some of these songs overplay the comic and in the process take away all dignity from the song persona. When the narrator asked Lucy Long to marry him, she answered that “she’d rather tarry,” and her would-be suitor decides, that rather than be stuck with a “scolding wife,” he’d “tote her down to Georgia, and trade her off for corn.” Miss Lucy is “handsome” but her smile “is grinning just like an ear ob corn.” It does not seem possible that the black protagonist in the song could be seriously capable of loving Lucy, or that Lucy Long deserves real love. The words in the song were often created to support the staging of the show. In minstrelsy, the “wench” or female parts were always played by cross-dressed men. Consequently, Lucy is “tall” and her feet might be “large,” thus emphasizing the characteristics of the male performer who is playing the part of Lucy. Subsequent verses descend more completely into the absurd: “My Mamma’s got de tistic, and my Daddy’s got de gout.” The humor in the song degrades Lucy to

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<sup>468</sup> Winans, “Early Minstrel Music, 1843-1852,” from Bean, Hatch, and McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, p. 149.

such a degree that it is impossible to feel that Lucy is a real human being deserving of consideration or sympathy.

Stephen Foster did contribute some comic minstrel songs in imitation of the style popular in this second stage of minstrel song development, but even his comic songs were not as crude as others in the genre. “Oh, Susanna!” appears on first glance to fit into Winans’ category of comic minstrel songs. “It rained all night de day I left, De wedder it was dry; The sun so hot I froze to def--- Susanna, don’t you cry.” But Susanna is not a genteel character: “De buckwheat cake was in her mouf, de tear was in her eye” makes her into an impossibility. She can’t be a sentimental creature with a tear in her eye while she chews on a “buckwheat cake.”<sup>469</sup> Uncle Ned also fits this category of song, but already the character is more sentimental. Uncle Ned is an elderly black man, who deserves sympathy for his age and worn out condition. He can no longer work and must “lay down de shubble and de hoe.” He “had no wool on de top of his head’ and “He had no teeth for to eat de corn cake.” Although Ned is dying ---- “He’s gone whar de good Niggas go—sympathy is not yet the dominant element in this song that was published early in 1848.<sup>470</sup>

Sentimental songs composed from 1848 - 1852 made up the third grouping of minstrel songs, according to Winans. These were the years in which Stephen Foster wrote the majority of his sentimental tear inducing “plantation” songs, such as “Old Folks at Home” and “My Old Kentucky Home.” But even Foster’s lively minstrel songs, produced during this period, were genteel. Most of Fosters minstrel songs written after 1848 only make gentle fun of his characters, and the overriding sentiment is one of joy and delight in life. These songs included “Dolcy Jones” (1849), “Nelly Bly” (1849), “Oh! Lemuel!” (1850), “Dolly Day” (1850), and “Angelina

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<sup>469</sup> Saunders and Root, *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Vol. 1, p. 43. pp. 29-31.

Baker” (1850). “Camptown Races” (1850) stands out from the other jaunty minstrel songs, and not just because of its obvious fame. It is one of Foster’s few songs that defies explanation, and is in fact open to a variety of interpretations.

Some of the sentimental minstrel songs were vaguely antislavery in sentiment. Such songs, not by Foster, included “Miss Lucy Neal,” “Mary Blane,” “Cynthia Sue,” and of course “Nellie Gray,” which appeared even before 1848. “Miss Lucy Neal,” published in 1844, was about a couple who were separated by the slave system. Although comic elements were allowed to remain in these early examples of sentimental minstrelsy, they did not overwhelm the mood of the song. After reassuring his bride that he would never leave her, the narrator sings out to Miss Lucy Neal:

“Oh! Dars de white man coming, to tear you from my side  
Stan back! You white slave dealer, She is my betrothed bride.  
De poor nigger’s fate is hard, De white man’s heart is stone,  
Dey part poor nigga from his wife, And brake up dare happy home.”<sup>471</sup>

In “Mary Blane,” a song with a similar theme, Mary was taken away and sold by her master. In “Cynthia Sue,” a man laments that he was being separated from his loved one as a result of his own sale.

Winans established 1848, the year Foster published “Nelly Was a Lady,” as the official date for the beginning of sentimental and sympathetic minstrelsy. From 1848 to 1852, Winans noticed an increased number of sentimental and tragic love songs and a decrease in the number

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<sup>471</sup>Winans, “Early Minstrel Music 1843-1852,” from Bean, Hatch, and McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, p. 152.

of comic songs. There were no longer any real nonsense songs. The main change was that the sentimental mode was becoming firmly established, and love songs included songs about children and home as well as romantic love. About this time a song entitled “Virginia Rosebud” became one of the most popular songs of the period. It was the story of a black child who was stolen away, and it was sung in black dialect and in burlesque Italian opera style. Charles Hamm wrote of this: “The whole thing is totally bizarre and totally American.”<sup>472</sup> During this third stage of minstrelsy, however, the most common story in the songs was of “a black man grieving at the death of his mate, with the black characters, especially the women, given sympathetic treatment.”<sup>473</sup> This was the model for “Nelly Was a Lady.”

This sympathetic stance towards blacks on the minstrel stage did not last, however. As Hamm wrote, “the gentle, lyric plantation song was to endure for scarcely more than a decade. In the years immediately preceding the Civil War, the minstrel song became strident,”<sup>474</sup> and in the process, it lost its sympathetic treatment of blacks which was a defining characteristic of the plantation song. Historian Robert Toll agreed that the minstrel shows had been “sensitive to charges that slavery was brutal, oppressive and undemocratic.”<sup>475</sup> All of that changed as the theater managers attempted to cater to the whims of their audience, who by 1854 were looking for a scapegoat to pin the problems of the disintegrating union on.

Toll said that minstrelsy’s message about race resulted from a careful gauging of the attitudes of the audience, and that the script would be adjusted over time and place to suit the

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<sup>472</sup>Hamm, *Yesterdays*, p. 211.

<sup>473</sup> Winans, “Early Minstrel Music 1843-1852,” from Bean, Hatch, and McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, p. 159.

<sup>474</sup>Hamm, *Yesterdays*, p. 139.

<sup>475</sup> Toll, *Blackening Up*, p. 66.

audience it catered to. Before the mid-1850s, minstrel portrayals of blacks revealed an “ambivalence about slavery by portraying both positive images of plantation blacks and negative condemnations of the cruelty and inhumanity of slavery in the same show.”<sup>476</sup> By 1855, when slavery became the focus of the struggle that threatened the union, the minstrels’ objections to slavery disappeared, leaving only contrasting caricatures of contented Southern slaves and unhappy free blacks or urban dandies. Underpinning the negative message from the minstrel stage was probably the anxiety that working class whites felt about the stability of their own socioeconomic status and of the state of the union. Stephen Foster, however, had ceased writing minstrel or plantation songs by the time this negative transformation occurred. He wrote his last minstrel song “My Old Kentucky Home” in 1852, and then avoided the genre until 1860, at which time he returned to it only hesitatingly.

## 6.6 EDWIN P. CHRISTY

Foster’s decision to turn away from minstrelsy was probably influenced by the composer’s unfortunate experience with the minstrel performer Edwin P. Christy of the famous Christy’s Minstrels. Although many minstrels performed Foster’s songs, Stephen Foster did establish a special relationship with Edwin Pierce Christy, no matter how ultimately disastrous the relationship turned out to be in later years. Edwin Pierce Christy was born in 1815 in Philadelphia.<sup>477</sup> For a brief time during his youth he joined a circus and in 1843 he organized the

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<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>477</sup> Saxton, “Blackface Minstrelsy,” Bean, Hatch, and McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, p. 68.

Christy Minstrels. They started out in Buffalo, New York, where “Ned” (Edwin Pierce) was a banjo and tambourine performer in local bar rooms and hotels. The troupe came to New York City where they set up at Mechanic’s Hall on lower Broadway. The Ethiopian Serenaders had left an opening when they embarked on a European tour in 1846. By the next year, the Christy Minstrels had not only filled the void but had surpassed in popularity all the other minstrel troupes. In New York City they leased Mechanics Hall for what ended up being a nearly ten year run on Broadway, when “E. P. Christy was the unchallenged leader of his profession.”

Edwin Pierce Christy’s relationship with Stephen Foster began at some time while the young composer was living in Cincinnati and contacting the many minstrel performers who passed through the city. “At this time, Stephen had an agreement with E. P. Christy to allow Christy the privilege of singing Stephen’s songs prior to publication.” Christy paid Foster \$10 or \$15 to be known as the performer of the song, with the Christy name printed on the title page of the sheet music, in a configuration such as “As Sung by E. P. Christy” or “Christy’s Minstrels.” This agreement applied to “Oh! Boys, Carry Me ‘Long,” “Massa’s in de Cold Ground,” “Old Dog Tray,” “Ellen Bayne,” “Farewell, My Lilly Dear,” and “Old Folks at Home.” But Foster’s name usually appeared on the title page as the song’s composer.<sup>478</sup>

This was not the case with the title page of “Old Folks at Home,” which read “WRITTEN AND COMPOSED BY E. P. CHRISTY.”<sup>479</sup> For some reason Foster sold Edwin P. Christy the right to claim authorship of the song, rather than simply performance rights. Why

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<sup>478</sup> Conversation with Deane L. Root, March 23, 2007. It is likely that Christy would have sung Foster’s songs on the minstrel stage, without paying him for the privilege anyway. Christy felt he was giving Foster’s songs publicity, which was payment in itself. If an unpublished song showed potential for popularity, Christy paid people to sit in the audience and write out the words and music while another minstrel was performing it. This type of thievery was common practice before copyright protection was well established

<sup>479</sup> Saunders and Root, eds., *The Music of Stephen C. Foster, A Critical Edition*, Vol. 1., p. 191.



Foster made this decision is not known precisely. It seems that the composer may have been influenced, among other factors, “by the attitude of several high-class musical journals which had joined in a common disparagement of negro melodies.”<sup>480</sup> The remorse over his decision must have been painful because, as Foster admitted, it was at his own suggestion that Christy’s appeared as the composer of “Old Folks.” And the song continued to be published with the wrong name throughout Foster’s life. The following was excerpted from the letter Stephen Foster wrote to E. P. Christy on May 25, 1852:

E.P. Christy, Esq.

Dear Sir:

“As I once intimated to you, I had the intention of omitting my name on my Ethiopian songs, owing to the prejudice against them by some, which might injure my reputation as a writer of another style of music, but I find that by my efforts I have done a great deal to build up a taste for the Ethiopian songs among refined people by making the words suitable to their taste, instead of the trashy and really offensive words which belong to some songs of that order. Therefore I have concluded to reinstate my name on my songs and to pursue the Ethiopian business without fear or shame and lend all my energies to making the business live; at the same time that I will wish to establish my name as the best Ethiopian song-writer. But I am not encouraged in undertaking this so long as “The Old Folks at Home” stares me in the face with another’s name on it. As it was at my own solicitation that you allowed your name to be placed on the song, I hope that the above reasons will be sufficient explanation for my desire to place my own name on it as author and composer, while at the same time I wish to leave the name of your band on the title page. This is a little matter of pride in myself which it will certainly be to

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<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 398.

your interest to encourage. On the receipt of your free consent to this proposition, I will if you wish, willingly refund you the money which you paid me on that song, though it may have been sent me for other considerations than the one in question.....I find that I cannot write at all unless I write for public approbation and get credit for what I write.<sup>481</sup>

Very respectfully yours,

Stephen C. Foster

This letter tells us several things about Foster and about the state of minstrelsy in the early 1850s. Foster had been ashamed to be associated with the genre, because the early minstrel songs were crude and musically uninspired, and as the composer himself said “trashy.” He had some intention of writing music “of another style” that would appeal to the middle and upper classes, rather than to the working and lower classes who were originally the prime audience for minstrel songs. But the popularity of “Old Folks at Home” with every class of people convinced Foster that he could confidently associate his name with plantation songs without any damage to his reputation. The genre had changed. Even minstrel theaters were being made refined, and to a great degree, Foster was responsible for the change.

Foster as an artist had more than money on his mind as the reward for his compositions. He wanted and needed the recognition of his talents. Even though Firth, Pond, and Company knew Foster was the composer of the “Old Folks at Home” and consequently paid the royalties to the right man, that was not enough. Foster asked Christy to release him from the arrangement they had made, and to have his, Foster’s, name printed on the title page as the composer. Edwin Pierce Christy refused and wrote on the back of the letter his feelings regarding Foster, “which

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<sup>481</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 398-399.

was that Stephen was mean and contemptible, and a vacillating skunk and plagiarist!”<sup>482</sup> No one knows for sure how much Christy paid Stephen Foster for the privilege of claiming authorship of “Old Folks at Home.” Morrison Foster put the figure at \$500, but a New York friend of Stephen claimed the composer himself admitted he had sold out for a mere \$15. The latter figure is probably closer to the truth.<sup>483</sup>

## 6.7 REFINED MINSTRELSY

The Christy Minstrels had established a reputation for chaste performances and refined songs. An advertisement for Christy’s characterized the troupe as:

“Far famed and original band of Ethiopian Minstrels...whose unique and chaste performances have been patronized by the elite and fashionable in all the principal cities of the Union...respectfully announce that they will give a series of their popular and inimitable concerts, introducing a variety of entirely new songs, choruses, and burlesques. Admissions, 25 c.”<sup>484</sup>

These minstrels were popular because they combined Foster’s refined plantation songs with the “robust comedy, song, and dance of the Virginia minstrels,” creating an attractive blend that drew audiences back again and again.<sup>485</sup> Foster’s songs appealed to middle class patrons, so that even women could enjoy minstrel performances featuring Foster’s songs. Refinement in the

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<sup>482</sup> Stephen Foster’s letter to E.P. Christy, Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 400.

<sup>483</sup> Harold Vincent Milligan, *Stephen Collins Foster, a Biography of America’s Folk-Song Composer* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1920), p. 15. John Mahon gave the figure of \$15.

<sup>484</sup> Wittke, *Tambo and Bones* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 51.

<sup>485</sup> Toll, *Blacking Up* p. 38.

songs was extended to their characterization of blacks as human beings deserving of respect.<sup>486</sup> After 1850, as Edwin P. Christy began to use more and more of Foster's songs in his shows, his shows became even more refined. "Everything Foster wrote was romantic, sentimental and emotionally moving," noted Robert Toll.<sup>487</sup> Soon, other minstrel troupes saw the advantage of refinement and started upgrading their images. The Ethiopian Serenaders, following the example set by the Christy Minstrels, decided to emphasize respectability and high culture in their shows by calling them "blackfaced concerts."<sup>488</sup>

In 1850, *Lady's Godey's Book* singled out Foster's minstrel songs as the standard to which all other minstrel songs and their composers would be compared. *Godey's* was the preeminent nineteenth century women's magazine, the most revered guide to refined lifestyles, fashion, manners, and proper displays of sentimental behavior in and outside of the parlor. This acceptance of Foster's minstrel songs by the magazine meant that the songs were considered refined enough for a middle class lady's parlor. Their refinement made Foster's songs attractive to antebellum Americans, who were striving for status reinforcement. In a relatively new society based on democratic principles, without established aristocracies, refined music and culture were the credentials of the new middle classes. Indeed, genteel manners and entertainments were the proof that the middle class was deserving of the status and wealth it had attained.

How minstrelsy changed from a crude entertainment for the working class to an entertainment that was refined enough for the middle class and their families was a development that was engineered in part by the impresarios' desires for greater profits. Working class men had comprised the major part of the audience for the early Jim Crow minstrel shows. With the

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<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>487</sup> Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, p. 37.

<sup>488</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

increase in the number of wage workers and the Jacksonian era's emphasis on the common man, new theaters for such specialty entertainments as minstrelsy, circuses, and freak shows were built and filled with working class men who by their sheer numbers were becoming a powerful voice in the creation of popular culture in the cities. The Bowery Theater in New York became a favorite haunt for workers, where the shows were adapted to suit working class tastes. Walt Whitman, the working man's poet, wrote of the Bowery Theater in 1830 that it was "placed from ceiling to pit with its audience mainly of alert, well dressed, full blooded young and middle aged men, the best average of American born Mechanics."<sup>489</sup> Dan Emmett of the Virginia Minstrels described the boisterous behavior of these working class men at the Bowery Theater:

"When their mouths were not filled with tobacco and peanuts, they were shouting to each other at the top of their voices...Their chief pastime between the acts, when not fighting, was to catch up a stranger or countryman, and toss him from hand to hand over their heads until forced from fatigue to resist."<sup>490</sup>

This working class audience displayed little self control, reserve, or gentility. When attending a theater performance, they behaved abominably. They believed in "audience sovereignty" and called out to the performers requests for their favorite songs and encores. They ate when and where they pleased, and chewed and spit tobacco. Sometimes they walked right up on the stage and participated in the performance.<sup>491</sup>

The middle class was not so fond of the working class as Walt Whitman was. They saw in this mechanic class a fearsome group of men who spent much of their free time in saloons,

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<sup>489</sup> Walt Whitman, quoted in Richard L. Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences, from Stage to Television, 1750 – 1990* (Cambridge, UK: University of Cambridge Press, 2000) p. 47.

<sup>490</sup> *New York Mirror* 10, December 29, 1832 quoted in Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences*, p. 50.

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

rude theaters, or gambling dens. As a consequence, as mid-century approached, the middle class insisted on removing themselves from the offensive environments that were filled with the working classes. Their goal was to segregate themselves in their own theaters and opera houses, where they could enjoy shows with foreign born actors or foreign language operas, but mostly what they hoped for was to rub elbows with a more refined audience which did not display crude habits like tobacco chewing and spitting during the show. The middle classes were increasing in numbers during these years, and they demanded more exclusive and refined environments.

The theater impresarios and the minstrel companies concluded that the best way to increase their ticket sales would be to upgrade their performances and theaters to appeal to the tastes of middle class men and the ladies. Theater managers had finally realized that attracting the females would double their ticket sales. Not only would they try to draw in a better class of men; they would also make a welcoming environment for the wives. This was indeed a novel idea. The minstrel show had traditionally been a haven not only of the working classes but also a haven for masculinity. Before mid-century, the only women who frequented theaters were thought to be of the “dangerous” classes: prostitutes, actresses, or lower class women. But all of that changed in the late 1840s and 1850s as entrepreneurs began to “redefine the theater as a place safe for mothers and children.”<sup>492</sup> By the middle of the nineteenth century, theaters, even minstrel theaters, emphasized that they could provide an environment that would be decent enough for the ladies.

Temperance and moral decency were stressed when minstrel troupes such as Charley White’s Melodeon claimed that “all business is concluded at a reasonable hour [and] every representation in the Saloon is chaste, moral and free from vulgarity and all objectionable

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<sup>492</sup>Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences, from Stage to Television, 1750-1990*, p. 67.

allusions. No improper person (male or female admitted). No bar allowed on the premises. FRONT SEATS RESERVED FOR LADIES.<sup>493</sup> Gentlemen are most respectfully requested not to beat time with their feet.” In 1857, Christy and Wood’s Minstrels opened a new hall in New York that had “a marble facade and floors, pianos and brocade sofas in the foyer, magnificent chandeliers, and other luxuries comparable to those in the best theaters.” The *Spirit of the Times* reported, “the ladies will be enraptured with the new house, and indeed they appeared so last night.”<sup>494</sup> By the 1850s, then, the major minstrel theaters and even P. T. Barnum’s Museum and Circus had undergone makeovers that refined their images and performances. Ladies, gentlemen, and even presidents loved the newly improved minstrel shows in the 1850s, including Presidents Polk and Lincoln. In 1828, Francis Trollope had claimed that “ladies are rarely seen” at the theaters, but they could be seen even at the minstrel theaters after 1850.<sup>495</sup>

The same could not be said for blacks, who were not usually seen at the minstrel theaters. Minstrel audiences were overwhelmingly white, as Foster’s “Brudder Gum” knew. The song begins “White folks I’ll sing for you...” There was no mention of a colored gallery in the minstrel playbills as there often was for other types of theater performances. And there was no mention of contemporaries seeing blacks in the audience.<sup>496</sup> Pittsburgh’s black abolitionist Martin Delaney took up his pen “reproving in a very severe style ( too severely we think),” said the *Pennsylvania Freeman*, “not only the minstrels, but also the newspapers that praised their

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<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90

<sup>494</sup> Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences*, quoted from *The Spirit of the Times*, p. 90.

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

performances.”<sup>497</sup> In contrast, Frederick Douglass did like Foster’s plantation songs, although he did not like minstrel performers.<sup>498</sup> Douglass thought many of Foster’s songs were sympathetic to the plight of the slaves, and, as a consequence, he said free blacks and slaves used to sing them often.

Although Stephen Foster was not the first or the only composer to write refined minstrel songs, he was the preeminent composer in the genre. His songs, more than any other composer’s, were associated with the transformation of minstrelsy from a crude to a refined medium of entertainment. Music historians such as Charles Hamm and theater historians such as Richard Butsch credit Foster with influencing this makeover. Butsch wrote, “The popularity of Stephen Foster’s minstrel ballads for young women playing parlor pianos also helped to establish the respectability of minstrelsy.”<sup>499</sup> More importantly, Stephen Foster himself took credit for the change. In May of 1852, he wrote E. P. Christy: “I find that by my efforts I have done a great deal to build up a taste for the Ethiopian songs among refined people by making the words suitable to their taste, instead of the trashy and really offensive words which belong to some songs of that order.”<sup>500</sup>

Stephen Foster’s minstrel songs were refined, but even more importantly they were sentimental and sympathetic. Alexander Saxton admitted that antislavery messages could be

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<sup>497</sup>Dorothy Sterling, *The Making of an Afro- American, Martin Robison Delaney, 1812-1885* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971), p. 58.

<sup>498</sup> Eric Lott, *Love and Theft, Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 15. Douglass managed to separate the songs from the blackface performers, who were “the filthy scum of white society, who have stolen from us a complexion denied to them by nature, in which to make money, and pander to the corrupt taste of their white fellow citizens.” Printed in the *North Star*, October 27, 1848.

<sup>499</sup>Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences*, p. 90.

<sup>500</sup> Stephen C. Foster to Edwin P. Christy, May 25, 1852, quoted by Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 398-399.



portrayed on the minstrel stage “through the essentially white identity of romantic and nostalgic songs, European in tradition and style, which quickly became a staple of minstrel repertory. Performed in blackface, yet dealing seriously with themes of parted lovers, lost children, and so forth, these songs both invited identification with the situation of the slave and suggested that slavery might be the cause of separation or loss.”<sup>501</sup> Foster’s “plantation songs” or “minstrel ballads,” as they were also known, were romantic, nostalgic, sentimental and refined, whether they were performed on the minstrel stage or in the ladies’ parlors.

But what does writing refined sentimental minstrel songs have to do with restricting racism in the songs? In other words, how did the refinement reverse the racism of earlier minstrelsy? It seems that it did, by virtue of its sentimentality. Sentimentality was useful in arousing sympathy, including sympathy for slaves. Since sentimentality was a trademark of respectability, refined people liked sentimental songs. Refinement at mid-century involved enhanced displays of sentimental emotion, as the “man of feeling” was very much in vogue in the sentimental age. Musicologist Dale Cockrell explained how the sentimentality in Foster’s “Old Folks at Home” created empathy with the white audience: “...the song’s protagonist has real feelings, in spite of being a slave. He is full of nostalgic longing for past happy days, for his mother, and for his childhood home. These kinds of sentiments were held by many in the audience, and they were asked by this song to project their own feelings onto those of a slave. In the process the slave was somewhat humanized.”<sup>502</sup> The sentimental song had to show sympathy for the slave’s suffering, if it alluded to the slave at all.

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<sup>501</sup>Saxton, “Blackface Minstrelsy” from Bean, Hatch, and McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, p. 79.

<sup>502</sup>Dale Cockrell, “Nineteenth Century Popular Music,” Nicholls, eds., *The Cambridge History of American Music*, pp. 171-172.

## 6.8 MINSTRELSY ABANDONED

After Foster wrote his greatest sentimental plantation songs, including “Old Folks at Home” and “My Old Kentucky Home,” he more or less renounced minstrelsy. By the end of 1852 or the beginning of 1853, Foster decided to put minstrelsy and plantation songs on the shelf, where they would remain for nearly seven years. This fact is crucial to understanding Foster’s position on minstrelsy and his attitude towards blackface. During the years when Foster’s greatest songs in the plantation / minstrel tradition were first published, from 1848 to 1852, the minstrel stage was fairly sympathetic to the plight of the slave. The minstrels in their skits deplored the forced separation of loved ones and the hopelessness of the slave’s condition. If not actually advocating abolition, they did mention freedom as an ideal that in some cases could only be achieved in the heavenly afterlife. But they also portrayed slaves as married, traveling, working, and living like any white person, and feeling the pain that any white person would feel. Minstrel shows, however, had to play up to public opinion and to placate especially the anxieties of their paying audience. Consequently, by 1854, the minstrel shows changed.

In 1854, the Kansas Nebraska Act destroyed the equilibrium of the nation by allowing for the possibility of slavery to exist anywhere, North or South. The new law said that it was unconstitutional for Congress to decide where slavery could or could not exist. Hence the Missouri Compromise which had in 1820 established boundaries for the slave states was abrogated. The Kansas Nebraska Act also unbalanced the long entrenched political parties, the Whigs and the Democrats, and opened up a space for the emergence of the new Republican Party. The new law, which was the handiwork of the Democratic senator Stephen A. Douglas, also ignited a mini civil war in Kansas by establishing the doctrine of popular sovereignty. The doctrine may have started out with good intentions, but it had a bad record in fact, since the

territory of Kansas soon became “bleeding Kansas” when the pro and anti- slavery factions violently fought out the future condition of their state.

The bloody confrontations in Kansas made it apparent that the slave situation was threatening the status of the Union. Rather than blaming the problems on slavery, the minstrel audience put the blame on the shoulders of slavery’s victim, the black slave himself. In 1854, the minstrel show became politicized and completely altered its image of blacks. “Confronted with a choice of preserving the Union or supporting black Emancipation, they soon eliminated all but the most servile and disparaging images of blacks from their shows.” Even the Christy Minstrels, the troupe that had promoted a genteel and sympathetic portrayal of blacks, changed its temper in 1854, the year Edwin Pierce Christy retired from minstrelsy and turned the show over to George Christy. Now when they put on a parody of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in the final third of their minstrel show, the Christy Minstrels radically altered Stowe’s script and called it “Life Among the Happy.” ( The official name of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s dramatic novel was *Uncle Tom’s Cabin, or Life Among the Lowly.*) Stowe’s protagonist was a “tragic figure, in fact a heroic figure in the Christian mold,” yet the new minstrel stage Tom was “more worthy of laughter than humanistic concern.”<sup>503</sup>

Mel Watkins in his book *On the Real Side, Laughing, Lying, and Signifying* describes the changes that manifested themselves in minstrelsy during the years that Stephen Foster *did not* contribute to the medium. Watkins said the change began “about 1853.” This is true if we remember that “My Old Kentucky Home,” the song inspired by Stowe’s antislavery *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, was published in January of 1853 but written in the previous year. Watkins concurs with

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<sup>503</sup>Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: Laughing, Lying, and Signifying* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994) p. 95.

Winans, and thereby clears Foster of an association with minstrelsy during the time that it projected a negative portrayal of blacks:

“From about 1853 to the Civil War, then, nearly all vestiges of black humanity were excised from minstrel performances. During this period the portrait of the plantation was made even more idyllic, and the stereotype of black males as childlike, shiftless, irresponsible dolts was heightened. Freed blacks, in particular, came under pointed attack. They were invariably pictured as inept, hopelessly inadequate souls, who longed for the guidance of white men and the security of the “ole plantation,” or, perhaps worse, as arrogant, near-bestial reprobates who, with disastrous consequences, foolishly took on “white ”airs and lusted after white women. The comic, degrading image of blacks had almost reached its peak. America’s most popular entertainment form had become a forum in which white performers posing as blacks actively lobbied for the continuation of slavery by presenting degrading, consciously distorted comic stereotypes intended to “prove” that slavery and black subordination were justified, or even more insidiously, to demonstrate that blacks actually preferred serfdom.”<sup>504</sup>

Of course, Foster’s songs were not deleted from the repertoire of the minstrel stage. But their performance style changed now in many cases so that rather than offer a sympathetic portrayal of blacks, they offered a negative one. No longer were songs such as “Oh Boys, Carry Me ‘Long” sung in the “pathetic” style, the manner in which Stephen Foster had directed Christy to perform it. The sentimentality which had made Foster’s songs into powerful yet subtle tools of sympathy for the oppressed was being perverted by 1854 so that even a song such as “Old Folks at Home”, when performed on the minstrel stage at least, were used to denigrate rather than to create empathy. Foster clearly had reason to avoid the minstrel stage when he did.<sup>505</sup>

By 1854, minstrelsy as better off being avoided. As Watkins explained above, the minstrel show had changed and was now, as it had been in the 1830s, insulting to blacks. But there were additional reasons. The political situation was unstable and volatile. And Edwin P. Christy, the minstrel performer who had caused the young composer so much grief by publicly claiming authorship of “Old Folks at Home” retired from the stage that year. After the

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<sup>504</sup>Watkins, *On the Real Side*, p. 94.

<sup>505</sup> Conversation with Deane L. Root, March 23, 2007.

composer's disastrous relationship with Christy, Foster probably had no intention of getting involved with another minstrel performer. Besides making political statements, minstrel songs were too much entwined with the reputation of the minstrel who performed them on the stage. Stephen Foster probably felt more comfortable dealing directly with his public, without

competing with a performer who wanted his name to appear on the title page and who gave the song its initial public presentation. Writing parlor songs would only necessitate satisfying music publishers and the young maidens who were the main purchasers of sentimental songs. Both of these had to be less demanding than minstrel performers. And as Dale Cockrell has pointed out, parlor songs could be profitable with royalties guaranteed.<sup>506</sup> Stephen would not produce minstrel songs until 1860, and then he would write only a few.

Blackface minstrelsy, as an art form with a function, was finished by middle of the 1860s. It had worn out its purpose. Minstrelsy had functioned as a scapegoat for the fears and frustrations of insecure working class men to vent their frustrations on a class of people who were even lower than themselves on the socioeconomic ladder. As the Civil War resolved the problem of the slavery question, the old standard minstrel show with plantation "darkies" came to a close. Whites continued to entertain with blackface make-up, but less and less was the Southern plantation "darkie" the focal point of minstrelsy. After the Civil War ended, they even stayed away from "Negro subjects" to avoid competition from real black performers.<sup>507</sup> When Dan Bryant and Henry Wood sang Foster's songs on the minstrel stages in New York in 1863, they sang in standard English and when they sang sentimental ballads on the minstrel stages, they preferred to do so without the masks. In 1866, the *Black Crook* debuted with scantily

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<sup>506</sup>Dale Cockrell, "Nineteenth Century Popular Music," David Nicholls, ed., *The Cambridge History of Popular Music*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) pp.172-173.

<sup>507</sup> Toll, *Blacking Up*, p. 135.

dressed ladies and lively music and it was an immediate sensation. Comedy and variety acts took over, and little was left of the minstrel show except the tradition of blackface make-up. As Hans Nathan wrote of the minstrel show the year after the Civil War had ended: “It had become more and more an efficient variety show....”<sup>508</sup>

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<sup>508</sup> Hans Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*, p. 228.

## 7.0 FOSTER'S PLANTATION SONGS

The plantation songs were the culmination of Stephen Foster's genius. In what appeared to be a solution to a dilemma, the question of the minstrel stage or the parlor, he combined the jaunty minstrel tune and the sentimental parlor song into the hybrid plantation song, which combined the best characteristics of each. A song in the plantation style was sentimental, refined, sympathetic, and pathetic. It could even elicit tears. Included in the genre were such well known and best loved titles as "Old Folks at Home," "My Old Kentucky Home," "Oh! Boys, Carry Me 'Long," and "Old Black Joe." On the title pages of the sheet music, these songs were called either Plantation Songs or Ethiopian Songs. Originally Foster wrote his plantation songs in black dialect, but later he published them in standard English, thereby minimizing the differences between the minstrel and the parlor song. He also in this way ensured that the feelings elicited by the song would be regarded as the feelings of any man, black or white. In this way, he closed the gap of the races and projected a mood with which whites and blacks could identify. Foster also, by writing them in standard English, guaranteed that the songs would be welcomed in the parlor.

Foster's plantation songs made reference to the South and utilized the props of a Southern plantation to emphasize a pastoral image. Foster's choice of a Southern plantation background for his songs did not mean that he had a political preference for the South or for slavery. The South for Foster represented the ideal of the rural past facing the onslaught of

industrialization and urbanization. Foster adopted the southern plantation or just the South as the metaphor for the pre-industrial state. Other antebellum artists who wanted to capture the comparatively pristine pre-industrial state on their canvases emphasized the New England countryside or the majesty of the Hudson River. The following is a discussion of *some* of Foster's plantation songs.

### 7.1 NELLY WAS A LADY

Stephen Foster's first plantation song to successfully combine the minstrel song with the refined music of the sentimental parlor song and use sentimentality as its directive was the 1848 publication "Nelly Was a Lady." Foster wrote this song utilizing black dialect. The song is in fact a funeral dirge with a beautiful melody, which offers the audience glimpses of the love possible between a black man and his "dark Virginny bride." The song's blackface protagonist was a river worker, toting "de cotton wood" all night, yet singing of his true love by day. The protagonist demands respect for his black bride, and the chorus repeatedly requests that the funeral bell be tolled to honor his dead wife. Edwin Pierce Christy was already singing songs in the tradition of refined minstrelsy, but Foster was the man who could actually give the plantation songs political power. With Foster, sentimentality coalesced the melody and the words even in dialect into a manifesto for sympathy: "Nelly was a lady ---Last night she died, Toll the bell for lubly Nell--- My dark Virginny bride." The black protagonist in the song received the sympathy from the white audience because he demonstrated that he suffered when his wife died. The suffering ennobled the black man, since it revealed a sensibility that was the same as whites displayed when they were bereaved.



Bereavement was a very important and reverential state in the antebellum society, and a grieving black man could be respected for his suffering. "Now all dem happy days am ober."<sup>509</sup> Nelly was uplifted, too, by Foster's characterization of this black woman as "a lady" and a "bride," two accommodations blacks were not accorded in the antebellum society. Black slaves could not be legally married, and the idea of class -- a lady -- was lost on a subject who had not even been granted a free status. The inconsistency became obvious: how could a lady not be free? Were not ladies free agents by virtue of their class designation? Foster utilized the standard ideas of class, gender, and race to project a new doctrine of egalitarianism.

"Nelly was a Lady" represented a transition from Foster's earlier minstrel songs, and was different from "Uncle Ned" which was published earlier in the same year as "Nelly." "Uncle Ned" was an elderly black man, somewhat genteel, who was "dead long ago, long ago." Since he was too old to work, he "lay down de shubble and de hoe, hang up de fiddle and de bow." Like other black characters who appeared in minstrel songs, only death relieved "Uncle Ned" from hard work. "No more hard work for poor Old Ned, He's gone whar de good Niggas go." Ned was in poor health, or a bad state of disrepair, when he died. He was blind, toothless, and incidentally bald, but the sympathy is lost more or less on Uncle Ned because the disparaging elements compete with the pathetic in the characterization of the old slave. Interestingly, the disparagement is not based on race, but on old age. When Foster wrote "He had no teeth to eat de corn cake, so he had to let de corn cake be," an image is conjured of a disappointed toothless old black man salivating over the corn cakes that he cannot chew, not a sympathetic picture really. When Foster wrote that "He had no wool on de top ob de head, De

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<sup>509</sup>Steven Saunders and Deane L. Root, "Nelly Was a Lady," *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Vol. I., pp.48-51

place whar de wool ought to grow,” Foster somehow makes Uncle Ned a little less deserving of the sympathy that is due all humanity.<sup>510</sup>

## 7.2 OLD FOLKS AT HOME

By the time Stephen Foster wrote “Old Folks at Home,” the composer had given in completely to the directive of the sentimental. Newspapers reported that the song commonly known as “Swanee River” was on everyone’s lips, sung by people high and low. The music publishers had to keep the presses running constantly to keep up with the demand. The problem, of course, was that, as mentioned earlier, Stephen Foster’s name did not appear as composer on the title page of “Old Folks at Home.” In a moment of wrong decision making, Foster sold Edwin P. Christy the right to claim that he, the minstrel, was the composer of what could possibly have been Foster’s greatest plantation song. If Foster ever regretted marrying Jane, if he ever regretted devoting his life to music, we do not know. But this was one case where we know for a certainty that the composer had his regrets.<sup>511</sup>

Morrison Foster gave the official anecdote about how the name of a small river in northern Florida, the Suwannee, was chosen for the song. Stephen wanted “a good name of two syllables for a Southern river.” Morrison suggested Yazoo, but Stephen declined it, saying “that has been used before.” Then Morrison suggested Pedee, to which Stephen responded “I won’t have that.” Finally, Morrison pulled an atlas from the top of his desk and pointed at the

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<sup>510</sup> Saunders and Root, *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, “Uncle Ned,” pp.28-31.

<sup>511</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 398.

Suwannee. At that moment Stephen exclaimed “That’s it, that’s it exactly!”... “as he wrote the name down; and the song was finished, commencing, ‘Way Down Upon de Swanee Riber.’”<sup>512</sup> It was probably Pedee that Stephen Foster refused as having “been used before.” The Pee Dee, a river in South Carolina, did in fact already have a song written about it. A popular minstrel tune published in 1844 by a Boston publisher was entitled “Ole Pee Dee.”<sup>513</sup> Stephen Foster would have been about eighteen when it was published, old enough to have been familiar with the song.

Foster’s “Old Folks at Home,” published in 1851, was actually a “home” song, which was a category of sentimental parlor song. The most popular song in antebellum America was “Home Sweet Home,” written in 1823 for the opera *Clari* by John Howard Payne and Henry R. Bishop. Jenny Lind sang the song repeatedly during her 1850 American concert tour promoted by P. T. Barnum. The nightingale’s performance was relished because of the sentiment it evoked, and the tears it brought to the audience. But the song may have referenced the strain that the social order was experiencing in the 1820s when it was written. Theater historian Bruce McConachie explained the popularity of the lost home theme in terms of the breakdown of the paternalistic family circle. As urban populations increased after 1820, many of the elite began to idealize the simpler, slower paced world of their youth and to fear the urban masses who with their unions and worker’s parties were demanding more rights while breaking the tradition of paternalism. McConachie argued that “this nervousness” over the dissolving threads of social hierarchy “found expression through the idealization of a lost home. Love of home was the truly distinguishing characteristic of American life in 1840.” Although “Home Sweet Home”

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<sup>512</sup> Foster, *My Brother Stephen*, p. 47.

<sup>513</sup> Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*, p. 179.  
Foster, *My Brother Stephen* p. 47.

remained popular throughout the nineteenth century,<sup>514</sup> the theme of paternalism went out of style with the age of Jackson. The new generation of elites was more concerned with establishing their status through their abilities to make money, which led to a shift away from paternalistic social relations towards social relations based on the triumph of market capitalism.<sup>515</sup> In other words, those who made the money ruled.

In Foster's "Old Folks at Home," the black protagonist is "roaming." Since blacks were not usually free to roam in antebellum America, the word referenced the physical displacement of the antebellumites, who were moving from the country to the city, crossing the ocean to America, and moving vertically up and down the social and economic ladder. "Roaming" was also an all encompassing metaphor for the transformation from a state of pastoral innocence to one of urban corruption. Thus, the link between the city and the frontier was expressed in the "traveling" which the narrators in the minstrel songs were often doing. Foster's "Oh! Susanna" was "gwine" to Louisiana and his narrator in "Old Folks" was roaming "all up and down the whole creation." The metaphorical journey became the central theme for the plantation songs.

The words are so simple in the song, but simplicity was admired and preferred by the people of a democratic republic. Ornate characteristics even in music reminded antebellum

Americans of the pretensions of aristocracy. The songs mentioned loves ones who were far away "Way down upon the Swanee Ribber." Foster used tropes of the rural: the little farm, "Little hut among de bushes," "de bees a humming all round de comb." The protagonist roamed

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<sup>514</sup> Bruce A. McConachie. *Melodramatic Formations: American Theater and Society, 1820-1870* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992) p. 33.

<sup>515</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 32, 33, 59.

far and wide “Still longing for de old plantation, And for de Old folks at home.”<sup>516</sup> To Foster, the South untouched by industry was a metaphor for the world of pastoral innocence, out of which America in the 1850s was emerging at a rapid pace never to return. Pastoral innocence was the state which antebellum artists idealized and hoped to capture in their art. The South represented the natural, unadulterated pure state, unsullied by the corruption of the city. Pittsburgh and other Northern cities represented the world sullied by industry, but the South, somewhere across the river in its pre-industrial state, represented the Arcadian myth of the pastoral, even if it were marred by slavery. Thus, in Foster’s songs, the rural past was idealized and reappeared metaphorically as the South.

The South, then, represented something other than slavery. Saxon wrote that “The South became symbolically their old home: the place where simplicity, happiness, all the things we have left behind, exists outside of time.”<sup>517</sup> To confuse Foster’s South with the institution of slavery would be simplify an idea of far greater complexity. The western world was undergoing a process of rapid industrialization and urbanization, and as the two worlds collided, the old and the new, the rural and the urban, it was apparent that the industrializing urban world would win out. The sorrow in the song, and in others like it, comes as a paeon to the primitive, pristine, and pastoral. The old world order, however comforting its image, was threatened by the chaos and instability the new order brought with it: class conflict, a dissolving nation state, and nature corrupted by industry.

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<sup>516</sup> Saunders and Root, *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Vol. I, pp. 191-194.

<sup>517</sup> Saxton, “Blackface Minstrelsy,” Bean, Hatch, and McNamara, eds., *Inside the Minstrel Mask*, p. 75.

Foster's most popular plantation songs, "My Old Kentucky Home," "Old Folks at Home," and "Old Black Joe" had the word "old" in their titles. "Old was fashionable," writes Bryan F. LeBeau in his study of the world of Currier & Ives. The famous lithography firm published at least eighteen prints with "old" in the title in the 1860s, such as "The Old Farm Gate" published in 1864. "Most pictured a scene of rural peace and plenty in a by-gone day, and men, women and children living contented peaceful lives."<sup>518</sup>

Antebellum artists wanted to create an ideal world situated in a rural past. The genre artist William Sidney Mount was "committed to the idea of creating paintings that emphasized rural simplicity, with more than a trace of nostalgia." Similarly, the rural prints of Currier & Ives were characterized by the sentimental theme that "home is best found in the country." Both the Currier & Ives prints and the genre paintings of Mount placed their images of an ideal American society in a rural past found in the New England countryside. LeBeau explained the urban dwellers' fascination with the rural ideal: "Many people who lived in cities had spent their childhood on family farms. Moving to the city, with its quite different and hectic way of life, no doubt kept alive fond, even nostalgic memories of an earlier life."<sup>519</sup>

Like other antebellum artists, Foster created an ideal world situated in a rural past. The difference between Foster's plantation songs and Mount's genre paintings and Currier & Ives prints is that Mount and Currier & Ives emphasized the ideal rural setting in the New England countryside, but Foster, because he wrote for the minstrel stage, placed the ideal rural setting on a Southern plantation. Yet both the New England countryside and the Southern plantation are tropes, non-real idealities, that represent places in the past of pristine innocence untouched by

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<sup>518</sup> Bryan F. LeBeau, *Currier & Ives, America Imagined* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), pp 166-169.

<sup>519</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 166-169.

the chaos of urban existence in the present.<sup>520</sup> One should recognize that the plantation backdrop found in Foster's songs is influenced by the urban dweller's fascination with the rural past. Why the Old South paradigm was projected onto the minstrel stage was simply that the minstrel shows were played to an urban audience, and the Old South as the city's hypothetical opposite, became all the more attractive.

### 7.3 MY OLD KENTUCKY HOME

Stephen Foster's handwritten notebook, in which he wrote out most of his songs from 1851 until he moved to New York in 1860, shows that "My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night," published in January of 1853, was conceived and written as an Uncle Tom song in 1852, soon after Harriet Beecher's Stowe's phenomenal antislavery book made its appearance in the antislavery newspapers and in book stores. But Foster had the artistic sense to change the words from the way they appeared in his manuscript book. Originally the chorus to "My Old Kentucky Home" ended with "Poor Uncle Tom, Good Night." (He may have felt pressured to stay out of the abolitionist crusade by his Democratic sisters and brother Morrison, or as an artist, he may have wanted to stay on neutral ground. But it is also possible that this was Foster's subtle way of expressing what he really felt politically.)

The theme of "My Old Kentucky Home" is separation of loved ones, and like the popular song "Darling Nellie Gray," the separation was caused by the slave system. In Harriet Beecher Stowe's book, Uncle Tom was sold to the wicked Simon Legree, because even good

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<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.* The theme of this book is emphasized in the title. Currier & Ives prints showed America as antebellumites imaged it should look, as a rural fantasy rather than as an industrializing reality.

plantation masters got into financial difficulty or died. After the kindly plantation owner St. Clair died in a knife fight, his heartless widow sold Uncle Tom away from his family and his Old Kentucky Home. Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1852 realized her crusade would be more successful if she damned the slave system rather than the slave masters. “Tis summer, the darkies are gay” tells us that the slaves could be contented when the family was left intact and food was plentiful: “the corn top’s ripe” and “the young folk roll on the little cabin floor.”

Just as it was with white antebellumites, or the Fosters in their early home the “White Cottage,” “All [was] merry, all happy and bright [until] Hard Times comes a knocking at the Door.” Foster would deal with hard times for the white working classes in his 1855 song “Hard Times, Come Again No More.” The two songs have similarities. Each has at root a system that is responsible for the suffering: slavery for blacks and laissez faire capitalism for whites. The Fosters’ fortunes, like that of many antebellum Americans, were dangerously enmeshed with the boom and bust economic cycles that followed in the wake of land speculation and monetary policies that were beyond the ordinary man’s control.

To create a sympathetic situation in “My Old Kentucky Home,” Foster emphasized the separation of loved ones that the slave system often demanded. Whites could identify with suffering caused by separation of loved ones, whereas the enslavement of black men and women did not really seem to bother many people, nor did slavery in itself elicit much sympathy. But the separation of families, even black families, was something everyone could identify with because many of them had undergone the same experience. “The time has come when the darkies have to part, Then my Old Kentucky Home, good Night!” Hopelessness and doom were predicted: “No matter ‘twill never be light,” Foster warned for he did not envision here, at least, an end to slavery. The same theme rebounds in this song that appears in many of his other songs:



hopelessness or “My Hopes Have Departed Forever” syndrome. Uncle Tom’s future, and that of all slaves, is clearly stated:

The head must bow and the back will have to bend,  
where ever the darkey may go.  
A few more days, and the trouble all will end,  
In the Field where the sugar canes grow.<sup>521</sup>

Death, not freedom, would bring an end to the slave’s troubles.

The chorus of “My Old Kentucky Home” is somehow out of sync with the rest of the song: “Weep no more, my lady, Oh! Weep no more today! We will sing one song for the Old Kentucky Home, for the Old Kentucky Home, far away.” The Rowan family claimed that the Federal Hill house that Charlotte Foster visited shortly before she died in Louisville was the inspiration for the song. Although Foster’s manuscript book disproved this claim,<sup>522</sup> Federal Hill became known as “The Old Kentucky Home” and Kentucky in 1935 adopted the song as its official state song. Yet I can only conclude that the lady to whom the song cries out “Weep no more” was the composer’s mother, Eliza Foster. On January 15, 1853 Firth, Pond, and Company advertised “My Old Kentucky Home” as “just published,” and Morneweck speculated that it was “doubtless composed in the fall of 1852.”

A letter written on August 25, 1852 by G. W. Barclay from Kentucky notified the Fosters that they would have to make arrangements to have their eldest daughter Charlotte’s remains “removed and deposited in some suitable resting place.” Charlotte was buried in Louisville where she had died twenty-three years earlier. On September 11, 1852 Charlotte was re-interred

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<sup>521</sup> Saunders and Root, *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, pp.235-237

<sup>522</sup> Stephen Foster’s handwritten manuscript book showed that the words to “My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night” were altered from their original intention, which was an “Uncle Tom” song. “Poor Uncle Tom, Good Night” were the way the words appeared in their first draft in his manuscript book. Stephen Foster Memorial, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

in the new Allegheny Cemetery near the old White Cottage in Lawrenceville area of Pittsburgh. The removal and re-burial would have brought torrential tears to Eliza, who was given a lock of Charlotte's red-golden hair to preserve as a memento.<sup>523</sup> Stephen was at the dock with his brothers when his sister's body was brought back to Pittsburgh, and he must have conflated the long lost Charlotte with the loss experienced in the "Old Kentucky Home, far away." Even the title to the song reinforced this notion. Eliza in the fall of 1852 finally had her chance to say good night to her long lost daughter and Kentucky.

#### 7.4 OH! BOYS, CARRY ME 'LONG

One plantation song with a true antislavery lineage was "Oh! Boys, Carry Me 'Long," published in 1851. This is one of the songs that Morrison Foster identified as having been developed from strains of music Stephen Foster heard when he was a child attending services at a "church of shouting colored people."<sup>524</sup> Foster legend claims that the child Stephen attended black church services with Olivia Pisa, the mulatto French Indian "bound" servant employed by the Fosters when they lived in the White Cottage in Lawrenceville. An African Methodist Episcopal Church, which was located in Pittsburgh's downtown triangle on Front Street, burned down in Pittsburgh's great fire of 1845 that destroyed acres of the downtown. It is probably true that the young Foster heard strains of the music that ended up in "Oh! Boys Carry Me 'Long" at Olivia Pisa's church, but he was very young when the family moved out of White Cottage. He may

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<sup>523</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 419, 424

<sup>524</sup>Foster, *My Brother Stephen*, pp. 49-50.

have gone to the black church in Allegheny City with Olivia Pise, or he might have attended the one in Pittsburgh since the Fosters lived in boarding houses for a few years after they moved out of the White Cottage. Morneweck wrote: "Lieve [Olivia] was with the family while they lived in the White Cottage, and she may have served them from time to time after they moved to Allegheny. It was with Lieve that Stephen loved to attend church services of shouting colored people"<sup>525</sup> But it is also possible that he was inspired to write this song from a completely different source.

"Oh! Boys, Carry Me 'Long" would have been performed on a minstrel stage with a lead singer and background chorus. The song shows sympathy for the dying slave, and as Robert Toll has pointed out, minstrel performances in the first half of the 1850s were sympathetic to the condition of the slave. But the slave's situation is hopeless: freedom for the black man in the song can only be achieved through death. Sympathy is culled by the situation, as abandonment in old age is a situation with which whites can identify. The slave is an old man who has lived beyond his stage of usefulness, yet he is cognizant of mind enough to direct his own burial. The black man "hoed the fields," planted the cotton and tobacco, and "minded the corn." Now he bids farewell to all, master and "boys," because as he says, there is "No use for me now."<sup>526</sup>

A Jamaican antislavery poem entitled "Carry Him Along" was published in London in 1834. Not only was the title similar to Foster's but the plots of the songs were similar. "Carry Him Along" described a pitiful situation in which men are directed to carry an old, worn out slave down to a "Gulley" where he will be left, still alive, to die. The slave, who wears only a frock, is carried on a board, and the master orders the board and the frock to be returned to be

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<sup>525</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 103

<sup>526</sup>Saunders and Root, *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, pp.168-172.

used again. In the West Indian song the slave is objectified, as the words in the title are “Carry Him Along,” whereas Foster’s title gives more agency to the black protagonist, who says “Carry Me ‘Long.” There are two voices in the West Indian poem, for one voice commands “Take him to the Gulley! But bringee back the frock and board.” A second voice pleads, “Oh! Massa, massa! Me no deadee yet!”<sup>527</sup> In Foster’s song, the black protagonist is in charge and he is directing his own burial. “Carry me long, Carry me till I die, Carry me down to the burying ground, Massa, don’t you cry.” There is something eerie about the song, for the protagonist is directing the “boys” to carry him until he has died, not to abandon him while still alive at the foot of the mountain or cavern, which is what happened in the Jamaican poem.

The similarity of “Oh! Boys, Carry Me Home” to the West Indian song only seems to confirm Morrison Foster’s contention that Stephen Foster was inspired to write “Oh! Boys” after hearing the music at the “colored” church of their West Indian servant Olivia Pisa. Perhaps she sang the song to the young Foster, after she had learned it from other West Indian blacks who had immigrated to America, or perhaps he heard the song performed in Olivia’s church.

It is also possible that the adult Foster could have had access to the poem in its published form. The poem appeared in print in 1834 in the book *Journal of a West India Proprietor* by Matthew Gregory Lewis. George Shiras, Foster’s abolitionist friend with whom he was spending time in the early 1850s, may have introduced Stephen Foster to the book. Since Shiras wrote poetry for the oppressed and downtrodden, he would have been interested in this sort of poem, and may have had a copy of Lewis’ *Journal*. It is also possible that the song / poem may have

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<sup>527</sup>Mathew Gregory Lewis, *Journal of a West India Proprietor*, (London, 1834) from *Africa, Africa, Extracts from British Travel Accounts and Journals of the Seventeenth, Eighteenth, and Nineteenth Centuries Concerning...the British West Indies*. Roger D. Abrahams, John F.Szwed (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983) pp. 298-299. I came upon this source while researching the history of Jamaican slave songs.

been reprinted in the abolitionist newspaper the *National Era*, the paper which serialized Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* before it went to the press in book form, or in William Lloyd Garrison's *The Liberator*. Shiras could have had subscriptions to these abolitionist papers, or at least had access to them.

The highly sympathetic "Oh, Boys, Carry Me Long!" was written in the mode of a funeral dirge, a literary form of which the somber Shiras would have approved. Whereas Foster's death songs usually avoided the subject of the burial altogether, this song dealt openly and directly with burial. Foster gave special instructions to the minstrel Edwin P. Christy to sing the song in a pathetic style, thereby endowing the song with the abolitionist's weapon, sentimentality. "Remember, it should be sung in a pathetic not a comic style," he wrote Christy. Dying for the slave meant a return to the "happy home," which ultimately meant freedom in the afterlife. Foster in 1851 did not envision a happy future for the slave on this earth when he wrote: "Dere's no more trouble for me; I's gwine to roam in a happy home, where all de niggas am free." Evelyn Morneweck believed that this song showed that her uncle, although naturally inclined toward freedom, was "decidedly fatalistic about the institution of slavery. He seemed to regard it as an intolerable burden under which the black race stumbled helplessly and hopelessly. With a kind master, he pictured them carefree and happy enough, but he seemed to glimpse no freedom ahead for them in this world."<sup>528</sup>

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<sup>528</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 409.

## 7.5 FAREWELL, MY LILLY DEAR

Another plantation song published in the same year as “Oh Boys, Carry Me ‘Long!” remarked on the separation of loved ones, but this time not because of death. Stephen’s composition “Farewell, My Lilly Dear” has a beautiful expansive melody line. It is about the separation of a man and a woman and the protagonist’s loss of home. Foster does not explain what has caused the separation exactly, except to say “Old Massa sends me roaming.” This vague explanation puts the blame on the institution of slavery, rather than on any one person or event. “Lilly” lives in Tennessee, and the protagonist says farewell not only to his beloved Lilly, but to the state of Tennessee as well. Why Foster chose Tennessee probably had something to do with the fact that Morrison Foster had just returned from the southern state where he was conducting business for the Hope Cotton Mill.

Morrison left Pittsburgh on October 31, 1850 to make “an extended survey of wages, hours and working conditions” in Laurenceburg, Tennessee where the Hope factory maintained a small branch cotton mill. All of the Pittsburgh mills, including the Hope Mill in Allegheny, had been closed for several months since the Pennsylvania legislature had passed the ten hour day law. The new law benefited the workers, but the Pennsylvania mills could no longer compete with the mills in the South where workers labored 13 or 14 hour days at low wages. Even worse was the mill owner in Nashville who told Morrison “he could support a Negro [slave] for \$26 a year.” By December 17, 1850, Morrison was back home in Allegheny where he must have

regaled Stephen with details about his travels and the South in general. “Farewell, My Lilly Dear” was copyrighted in 1851.<sup>529</sup>

It is not clear where the protagonist in “Farewell, My Lilly Dear” was going, but like the protagonist in “Old Folks at Home” or in the lighthearted “Oh, Susanna!” he was “guine to roam the wide world, in lands I’ve never held, with nothing but my banjo to cheer me on the road.”<sup>530</sup>

Clearly the song was meant for the minstrel stage presentation, with the props supported by the song’s words, in this case the banjo, which the minstrel performer would be playing. But, as explained earlier, more complex meanings, both physical and metaphorical, were attached to the protagonist’s “roaming.” Besides the actual geographic movement that antebellum men and women experienced, roaming suggested a personal transformation that involved moving out of one class or category and moving into another. Class was a dynamic factor in American society at this time, so that a poor man dreamt of becoming a rich man on the morrow. A man could wander to a new city, and without family crests or antecedents, reinvent himself into a greater or lesser man. America at mid-century was in a constant flux, and Foster’s “roaming” was a metaphor for the opportunities for change in class, status, and wealth that tantalized white men and women. For the black song persona to go “roaming,” however, meant that he had to change his status from non-free to free. By giving his black song persona the ability to roam, Foster gave him his freedom, because only a free man was allowed to roam in both the physical and the metaphorical sense of the word.

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<sup>529</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 383.

<sup>530</sup> Saunders and Root, *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, pp. 211-214.

## 7.6 MASSA'S IN DE COLD GROUND

Foster followed “Farewell My Lilly Dear” with “Massa’s in De Cold Ground,” copyrighted in 1852. Both songs were published by Firth, Pond, & Co., and their title pages stated that they were “Sung by Christy’s Minstrels.” The song seemed to say that blacks had feelings too because when the master is dead and buried, “dat mournful sound” of wailing slaves can be heard, “Round de meadows am a ringing, De darkeys’ mournful song” In contrast to the feeling slave, the unfeeling mockingbird sings “Happy as de day am long.” In the sentimental age, a sigh, a tear especially, was evidence of moral superiority, and in the case of the slave, made him more like the white man. But there is some irony here. Foster tells us that the slave is so sad about the death of his master that he “cannot work before tomorrow cays de tear drops flow.” Like a white man who is all too sensitive, he cannot work and instead spends the day “pickin on de old banjo.” Was that the way for the slave to spend his day after the master was put “in de cold, cold ground”? A white man can take the time to mourn, but the black man was supposed to work all the time. Perhaps there is a subtle message here. This slave was released from his labor once his master was buried in “de cold, cold ground.” This song, like many of the minstrel songs, makes sense only when it is realized that it was designed to be “sung by Christy’s Minstrels” on the stage in front of a live audience, and consequently the song can only be half understood without the props and stage settings.<sup>531</sup>

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<sup>531</sup> Morrison Foster believed that his brother Stephen associated the Massa’s death in this song with the death of their father, William Barclay Foster. William did not die until the middle of 1855, but he had suffered a stroke around 1851 that confined him to his bed until his death.



## 7.7 GLENDY BURKE

Foster returned briefly to the now contentious medium of minstrelsy in 1860, when he wrote four new minstrel and plantation songs, “Glendy Burke,” “Old Black Joe,” “Down Among the Cane Brakes,” and the “Shanghai Chicken.” Foster was leaving Pittsburgh for the last time, with plans of settling down in New York, and he probably wrote the songs to have something to sell when he got to the big city. With the exception of the “Shanghai Chicken,” the other songs were written in standard English, which shows that Foster did not intend to restrict their usage to the minstrel stage. ( They could still have been used on the minstrel stage, however, because by 1860, minstrel performers were not always singing in dialect.) By this date, too, Foster had made his plantation songs genteel enough for white girls to sing and play in their parlors, and the plantation song’s acceptance in the parlor, and even on the concert stage, removed the stain that had been associated with minstrel music.

The first minstrel song Stephen wrote in 1860 was the “Glendy Burke,” a song ostensibly about a steamship, but really a going away song for himself. Just as Foster was about to leave for New York, he wrote almost bitterly: “I’ll take my pack and put it on my back, When the Glendy Burke comes down. I’m going to leave this town.” The chorus shouts Foster’s determination to get out of Pittsburgh, but with a senseless direction. He was going to New York, but he wrote “Ho! For Lou’siana!” ( Maybe the *Glendy Burke*, which was an actual boat, was bound for the deep South.) I’m bound to leave dis town; I’ll take my duds and tote ‘em on my back, When de Glendy Burke comes down.” Why go to Louisiana, if the song protagonist was looking for an easier life? “I can’t stay here, for dey work too hard,” the song’s protagonist croons, but the truth was Foster could not stay in Pittsburgh because he did not work hard enough.

## 7.8 OLD BLACK JOE

After Foster moved to New York in 1860, he created one of his plantation masterpieces. The publication of “Old Black Joe” in the same year lends credence to the idea that the move must have summoned the muse. The idea of Joe, however, came from the composer’s memories of Pittsburgh. According to Foster legend, Joe was modeled after an old black servant who worked at Jane McDowell’s house, driving her doctor father around and carrying in the bouquets of flowers that Jane’s suitors, including Stephen, brought to the house. The real Joe died before the song was published, but Stephen kept his promise to the old black man to “put him into a song.” Black Joe in the song is responding to the angels who are beckoning him: “I’m Coming, I’m Coming for my head is bending low; I hear those gentle voice calling, Old Black Joe.” The black Joe speaks in standard English, not in dialect. The voices calling to him are “friends [that] come not again” or “forms now departed long ago.” Even Joe’s children have “gone to the shore where my soul has longed to go.” Joe could be any old man, white or black. There is no mention of slavery or freedom from forced labor. The only mention of the southern association is to be found in “the cotton fields away.” Joe coalesces the races. Blacks and whites alike are mortal, grow old, and lose friends and family. The races are not so different after all, and angels speak to everyone. Joe maintains and exudes a certain dignity; although his “head is bending low,” he is a man facing his Creator being welcomed, regardless of color, into the heavenly afterlife.<sup>532</sup>

Foster followed “Old Black Joe” with the plantation song “Down Among the Cane-Brakes.” This last song, however, was really a sentimental parlor song about lost home, youth, mother, and dead loved ones, performed with the language and the props of the minstrel stage.

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<sup>532</sup> Saunders and Root, *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Vol.II, pp. 99-102.

The protagonist mourns the “happy days” of his youth when he “could laugh and play,” a time in the past that will “come back no more.” This song belongs in the white woman’s parlor, obviously. Except for the fact that Foster sets home “Down among the cane- brakes, on the Mississippi shore,” we would never know it as a plantation song in the minstrel tradition. The protagonist speaks in white man’s language, too, just as Black Joe does. Clearly by 1860 Foster was out of the practice of writing minstrel songs, and was only too willing to turn his attentions to the feminine arena of the parlor and parlor songs.

## 8.0 PIANO GIRLS AND PARLOR SONGS

Charlotte Susanna, the eldest Foster daughter who died when the composer was three, was the epitome of the ideal nineteenth century “piano girl.” James Huneker coined the expression in 1904 to describe the young woman who learned to play the piano in order to make herself into an ornament of her class, and perhaps to better enable her to attract a husband.<sup>533</sup> It is probably demeaning to call Charlotte a piano girl because she was more talented than the usual image of the piano girl suggests. The typical piano girl could play sentimental parlor songs upon request and perhaps a few of the more complicated piano arrangements of concert music. She could play other instruments as well, if they were approved for the ladies, and she was trained to sing. But she was not expected to be a genius at either the piano or singing, just to be a masterful performer in the parlor. Although not concert performers, the strivings of these amateurish piano girls supported the music publishing business and Stephen Foster.

Foster’s name is irrevocably tied to the minstrel and plantation genre, to songs like “Camptown Races,” “Old Folks at Home, and “My Old Kentucky Home.” Yet most of the more than two hundred songs that Foster wrote were parlor songs that would be performed by the piano girls in their home, not on the minstrel stage. The songs that comprised the parlor genre included genteel and wistful songs such as “Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair” and “Beautiful

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<sup>533</sup> James Huneker, *Overtures* ( New York: Charles Scribner’s , 1904), p. 285 Quoted from Judith Tick, *American Women Composers Before 1870* ( Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1983, 1979), p. 218.

Dreamer,” but also sad sentimental songs like “Gentle Annie” about dead loved ones. These songs which I have called “mourning songs” made up a sizeable contribution to nineteenth century parlor songs, yet they have been ignored, denigrated, and misunderstood. The early twentieth century ushered in a reaction against the sentimental lugubrious products of the mid-nineteenth century, and writers such as Foster biographer Harold Vincent Milligan denigrated Foster’s sentimental songs without trying to understand them:

“The other [non-minstrel] songs of this year [1850]” wrote Milligan, “were sentimental effusions of no great importance, except in so far as they indicate that Foster had ambitions aside from that of the Burnt Cork stage.....They drip with melancholy sentiment, but in that respect they are not different from other poetic ebullitions of the day. The lyricists of the ‘40’s and ‘50’s concerned themselves chiefly with fair maidens who met untimely deaths, voices from by-gone days, and flowers that faded all too soon.”<sup>534</sup>

Harold Vincent Milligan dismissed an entire genre of song that he himself admits was a dominant presence in the nineteenth century, without asking why the songs existed and what purpose they filled in the sentimental antebellum society. Those songs which emphasized death and loss accurately reflected the anxieties that obsessed antebellum Americans, and it can be concluded that they served an important function in the society, or they would not have been so popular. An analysis of these sentimental, tearful “effusions” and the society in which they flourished reveals that in some way they eased the anxieties and assuaged the pain of loss that the mid-nineteenth century Americans experienced so intensely.

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<sup>534</sup> Harold Vincent Milligan, *Stephen Collins Foster, A Biography of America’s Folk-Song Composer* (New York : G. Schirmer, 1920) p. 56.

## 8.1 CHOOSING THE PARLOR

Stephen Foster never composed in exclusively one genre, but he did appear to emphasize one genre over another during certain periods in his life. From the mid-to-late 1840s, for example, Foster placed more emphasis on the comic minstrel songs, written in black dialect. Immediately after he married in 1850 he appeared to favor sentimental parlor songs. It was during the first years of Foster's marriage that he wrote such pretties as "Ah! May the Red Rose Live Away!", "Molly, Do You Love Me?" and the lullaby "Sweetly She Sleeps My Alice Fair." From 1851 to 1853, however, he also published some of his greatest plantation songs: "Old Folks at Home," "My Old Kentucky Home," and the lesser known but still greatly favored "Massa's in de Cold Ground," and "Oh! Boys Carry Me Long." Although examples of the hybrid plantation tradition, these songs were sentimental and refined enough to be presented in the parlor. From 1854 through 1859, however, Foster devoted himself exclusively to the production of parlor songs, avoiding any connection to minstrelsy or blackface whatsoever.

According to Morrison Foster, Stephen "had no preference for that [minstrel] style of composition. His poetic fancy ran rather to sentimental songs."<sup>535</sup> But the decision to abandon minstrelsy was more involved than was apparent to Morrison, as it meant a transition in gender, class, and race. An exclusive devotion to parlor songs removed Foster from the realm of the masculine to the sphere of the feminine, from the raucous to the genteel. He exchanged a working class audience for a middle class one, and the public stage for the private parlor, the essential space of the middle class home. He also passed out of the black world into the white

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<sup>535</sup> Foster, *My Brother Stephen*, p. 41.

world, and he gave up the hedonistic freedom of minstrelsy for the strictures of Victorian society and mores. Most of the parlor songs were composed for the enjoyment predominantly of white middle class women, and they were written in the sentimental mode, which was the badge of the new middle class.

The problem once again came down to image and class. The minstrel songs satisfied the “vulgar” tastes of the working class masses, while the parlor songs represented the refined tastes of the middle class. Although there is no known record of the thoughts of his mother Eliza Foster on the matter, it would seem that Stephen Foster may have felt pressured to turn away from the minstrel stage by Eliza’s preference for gentility. Or, perhaps Jane or his marriage had some impact on his decision. Others who were inclined to force the genteel tradition on Foster were music critics. In spite of the phenomenal success of the plantation song “My Old Kentucky Home,” when the concert singer Anna Zerr included it on her program in 1853, one music critic compared Zerr’s choice of music to “picking up an apple core on the street.” The editor of New York’s *Musical World and Times* in January of 1853, at about the same time that “My Old Kentucky Home” came out, deplored the talented Foster’s propensity for writing Ethiopian melodies, and expressed the hope that he would turn his attention to a higher type of music. The editor of the publication then informed the public that Foster had assured him that henceforth he intended to write “white man’s music.”<sup>536</sup>

“Mr. Foster possesses more than ordinary abilities as a composer; we hope he will soon realize enough from his Ethiopian melodies to enable him to afford to drop them and turn his attention to the production of a higher kind of music. Much of his music is now excellent, but being wedded to negro idioms it is, of course, discarded, by many who would otherwise gladly welcome it to their pianos. We were glad to learn from Mr. F.

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<sup>536</sup>William W. Austin, “*Susanna*,” “*Jeanie*,” and “*The Old Folks at Home*,” *the Songs of Stephen C. Foster from His Times to Ours* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989, 1975), pp.242-246.

that he intends to devote himself principally hereafter to the production of White's men's music."<sup>537</sup>

But there were other pressing reasons to put minstrelsy on the shelf. Foster was working very hard in 1853 for his New York publishers Firth and Pond, putting out a huge compendium of music that had nothing to do with minstrelsy. The publishers brought out *The Social Orchestra* in February of 1854, a month or two later than anticipated. The timing, however, was right. The *Social Orchestra* was white man's ( and woman's) music and that was just what the music critic of the *Musical Times* had wanted Foster to produce in January of 1853. The opinion of the music critics and the pressing demands of his publishers would have reinforced Foster's desire to abandon a music genre that was already causing him pain and embarrassment. As has already been noted, Stephen's relationship with the minstrel performer Edwin P. Christy ended on a sour note when the performer publicly claimed authorship of "Old Folks at Home," and that was enough justification for wanting to leave minstrelsy.

Musicologist Dale Cockrell pointed out another fact that would have influenced Foster in his decision to turn his efforts to writing parlor songs. Parlor songs were actually profitable. Foster did not receive royalty payments from the minstrel performers when they performed his songs on the stage. He only benefited indirectly from their shows through the publicity, which would convince the audience to go out and buy the songs. The minstrel performers made more money on minstrel and plantation songs from ticket sales to the shows they personally performed in than the composer would ever have dreamt. As Cockrell has pointed out, more money could be made in the long run for the composer of songs which could be sold as sheet music with royalty protection. Of course, minstrel performers sang not only comic jaunty minstrel songs, but also the ever popular sentimental plantation songs, like "Old Folks at Home" and "My Old

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<sup>537</sup> *Musical World*, January 1853, Austin, "Susana," "Jeanie," and "The Old Folks at Home," p. 204.



Kentucky Home.” These plantation songs would be welcomed in the parlor, making them profitable products when sold as sheet music.<sup>538</sup> But with pure parlor songs, those about love and dying maidens, Foster did not have to depend on the minstrel’s performance at all, nor did he have to see the minstrel’s name on the cover of the sheet music. Even if the sentimental parlor songs were not always his biggest sellers, their sheer number and their guarantee of royalty payments from his publishers made them look like a good bet.

Adding politics to the equation---as discussed earlier, by 1854 the minstrel stage had turned against blacks and soon John Brown was hacking men to pieces in Kansas for holding slaves ---- it is not all surprising that the composer made a complete break from plantation and minstrel music when he did. Then he turned his attentions wholeheartedly to the production of parlor songs and brought out such gems as “Jeannie with the Light Brown Hair,” “Come with Thy Sweet Voice Again,” “Maggie by My Side,” “Old Dog Tray,” and “Hard Times Come Again No More.”

## 8.2 THE PIANO GIRLS

Parlor songs were designed to suit the tastes and needs of the ladies. The primary purchaser of parlor music was what the music critic James Huneker referred to as the “piano girl” in his 1904 music publication *Overtones* to describe the “idle young daughter” who learned to play the piano in order to make herself into an ornament of her class.<sup>539</sup> These “girls” usually belonged to the

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<sup>538</sup>Dale Cockrell, “Nineteenth Century Popular Music,” David Nicholls, ed., *The Cambridge History of Popular Music*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.172-173.

<sup>539</sup> Huneker, *Overtones*, p. 285, quoted in Tick, *American Women Composers Before 1870*, p. 218.

upper and middle classes, as they were the only ones who could afford the sheet music, the pricey pianos, the music lessons, and the leisure time to practice. Prices marked on Foster's song sheets put their cost at from 25 cents to 38 cents, which was an expense too high for the average working man's daughter. As time went on, some of the less well-to-do learned to play the piano, and Timothy Dwight, editor of the premier musical publication of the nineteenth century, believed that any man who could afford it saw to it that his daughters had music lessons.<sup>540</sup> For the most part, however, with the costs involved in acquiring accomplishments, they were not meant for the non-leisured classes.

The "piano girls" acquired the art of piano playing as a sign of respectability and gentility, and perhaps, they thought, to better enable them to make an advantageous marriage. They were often in their teens, as once a girl married and had a home of her own she usually did not have much time to devote to music practice. But she was expected to entertain the family and pass on the tradition, seeing to it that her own daughters acquired the appropriate skills at the vocal arts and at the keyboard. Whereas women in earlier generations had been valued for their work on the farms or their skills in performing household duties, but by the middle of the nineteenth century middle class women were prized more for their accomplishments, which were viewed as decorative evidence of the family's status. The accomplishments in a women's arsenal included needlework, painting, the ability to converse in a foreign language, and musical skills. These women who were turned into "automatons" at the piano were allotted the compensation prize of being the cultural and moral arbiters of the home. In return, they performed, and taught their daughters to perform, music that would be morally uplifting and refined. Through tasteful

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<sup>540</sup> Arthur Loesser, *Men, Women and the Piano, a Social History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1954) pp. 260-265.

musical performances, the women brought gentility into the home, which was an emblem of the emerging middle classes.

Although musical performance in the home was considered a feminine pursuit, musical instruments were gender specific. Young women were supposed to sing, but they were restricted to playing only certain instruments. They could play the piano, the harp, or the guitar, but instruments such as violins which could disfigure the girl's face, or any instrument that made her look ungainly or unattractive, was unacceptable for a women to play. The idea was that a young lady should look graceful and genteel when she played a musical instrument. Women who could not afford a piano could learn to play the more portable melodeon, which was fairly popular by the 1840s, but was found more often in smaller towns or villages.<sup>541</sup> Stephen Foster, however, owned a melodeon which he used as a young man at serenading parties.<sup>542</sup> Although men did play the piano-- both Stephen and Morrison Foster played --- men were usually expected to play the instruments that were off limits to the ladies. Timothy Dwight, editor of the *Musical Journal* in the middle nineteenth century, noted that "men play on the German flute, violin, clarinet, etc. And that serenading is not infrequent."<sup>543</sup> Most importantly, though, men should not become overly fond of musical performing, for that was definitely for women.

Musical skills were encouraged in young women because many nineteenth century mothers believed that skill at the piano or the vocal arts would make their daughters more successful in the marriage game. Maria Edgeworth in the early 1800s complained of forcing girls into the drudgery of tedious music practice and asked one mother: "Would not you, as a

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<sup>541</sup>Loesser, *Men, Women, and the Piano*, pp.267,268, 518.

<sup>542</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 505.

<sup>543</sup>Loesser, *Men, Women, and the Piano*, pp. 267-268.

good mother, consent to have your daughter turned into an automaton for eight hours in every day for fifteen years?" The mother replied: "I would give anything to have my daughter play better than anyone in England. What a distinction! She might get into the first circles in London! She would want neither beauty nor fortune to recommend her! She would be a match for any man who had a taste for music..."<sup>544</sup>

Whether musical skills actually did make a women more marriageable is debatable, but the belief was firmly entrenched in the middle classes. True or not, the myth that female accomplishments were a necessity continued to thrive. "A young lady is nobody, and nothing without accomplishments; they are as necessary to her as a fortune. They are indeed considered as part of her fortune, and sometimes are even found to supply the place of it. Next to beauty, they are the best tickets of admission into society which she can produce, and every body knows, that on the company she keeps depends the chance of a young woman's settling advantageously in the world."<sup>545</sup>

Stephen Foster's mother Eliza told the story in her journal of one famous Pittsburgh girl who impressed a suitor through her superb musical skills. Mary O'Hara, the daughter of Pittsburgh's wealthiest businessman James O'Hara, is known through her daughter Mary Croghan Schenley, who donated the three hundred acres of land that became Schenley Park in Oakland, a section of Pittsburgh. Eliza Foster, in her inimitable way, described the scene of courtship around the piano that brought Mary O'Hara together with the wealthy Kentuckian William Croghan, a descendant of one of the early settlers of the area. Mary O'Hara was visiting relatives in Philadelphia, and William Croghan was on business in Philadelphia. Traveling a

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<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, p.281.

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid.*, 520.

distance to meet a mate was a tradition in the early part of the nineteenth century for the young ladies to meet eligible bachelors who might not be waiting around in their own backyards. Mary O'Hara had two suitors in attendance in the parlor of her Philadelphia relative, when Eliza Fosters described the scene:

“Miss O’Hara was in the midst of another song, when the bell rang and Mr.Croghan made his appearance....He remained perfectly quiet until she had completed her song, and turned toward him, when after saluting her, he observed “Will you have the goodness to learn this little song for me? At the same time handing her the song. The last line of each verse read, “thou shalt be mine and I will be thine.” And some few parts were marked with a pencil. She looked over the song and the already deep blush upon her cheek was greatly heightened. Still she could command, and relegate her countenance and manner so that she soon looked up at him with perfect self-possession, saying “I have already learned this song, Mr. Croghan. It was once a favorite of my sister’s. I will run it over for you.” [Another suitor, the less favored Mr. Tillotson was also in the parlor when Mary O’Hara’s relative said:] “Mr. Tillotson begs that you will favor him with a song accompanied by the guitar, before he takes his leave.”.....Mr. Tillotson rose and presented the instrument [guitar] to her, which she [Mary] played with the same ease and brilliance of execution that she did the harp or piano, only with it she made more powerful use of her voice. [After Mary finished her song, Mr. Tillotson, feeling somewhat defeated in his efforts, left, giving William Croghan the opportunity he was waiting for.]

“My dear Miss O’Hara,” said Mr. Croghan, in a frank and candid manner when they were alone, “as this is the first opportunity I have found, permit me to make known to you the sentiments of my heart. I have deeply loved you since the first moment I saw you....”<sup>546</sup>

Thus music leads the heart, and Mary O’Hara married William Croghan and moved to his plantation in Kentucky. Through such stories the myth of accomplishments lived on, and middle class families continued to pay for music lessons and purchase sentimental songs in keeping with the idea of making their daughters more successful in securing a suitable husband.<sup>547</sup> What

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<sup>546</sup> Foster, “Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh,” pp. 130-135.

<sup>547</sup> Loesser, *Men, Women, and the Piano*, pp. 282, 268

many of these anxious mothers failed to notice was the fact that the beautiful Mary O'Hara had more to offer than musical "accomplishments." She was also very rich.

### **8.3 THE BUSINESS OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

Whether the young women were pursuing husbands or enhanced status, or both, an entire business developed as a result of this "frenzy for accomplishments." The young ladies needed pianos, sheet music, private music lessons, and schools of music. They also needed elaborately decorated parlors in which to display their accomplishments and their beautifully crafted pianos. The most desirable piano in American homes at mid-century was the oblong shaped "square" piano, with four heavy carved legs. The cabinet came in a choice of fine wood finishes, either mahogany, walnut, or a very pricy rosewood. The instrument which would serve as the focal point of the parlor should also be "fine toned," as was the one William Foster Jr. purchased for his sisters in 1828.

Pianos were in great demand at mid-century, when Chickering was in the lead, selling one thousand pianos per year. The Steinway Company, however, opened its shop in New York in 1850, and soon was outselling Chickering. Ten years later the father and four Steinway sons opened a new "ware room and manufactory" which was six stories high and comprised "the entire block fronting Fourth Avenue and extending from Fifty second to Fifty third Streets" in New York City. "The principal building covers eleven city lots, eleven other lots being used for the purpose of seasoning lumber," of which there was reportedly two million linear feet on hand. The new Steinway factory employed about 350 men to produce "some thirty Square and five

Grand Pianos” every week, while “about six hundred pianos [were] constantly in course of construction.”<sup>548</sup>

Steinway’s mass production capabilities made it possible to provide the middle class with the symbol of respectability that they wanted in their parlors at a fairly reasonable price. With the new method of parts manufacturing, hammers, keys, and sound boards could be made separately in specialty firms and shipped to the local piano maker who made the cabinets and put the parts together. Since parts manufacturing lowered the retail price of the piano, more families could afford one. The piano was the middle class “ideal” and came to represent “the family’s participation in that life’s benefits.”<sup>549</sup> Next to the announcement in the *Pittsburgh Post* for the new Steinway piano manufactory, appropriately enough, appeared an advertisement for “Hoop Skirts, Large and Small.”<sup>550</sup>

Pianos could be purchased in Pittsburgh in the first half of the nineteenth century, but bringing them over the mountains from the East where they were manufactured was difficult. Still, several piano dealers made a good living importing the heavy products that were in great demand. Henry Kleber, Stephen’s friend and perhaps early teacher, was an agent in 1848 for Nunn & Clark’s grand and square pianos at Wardwell’s Furniture Rooms, 83 Third Street in downtown Pittsburgh. Stephen Foster purchased the piano he kept in his downtown office from Kleber. Another piano dealer was Frederick Blume, who marred his reputation when he “was arrested and fined for abusing and beating his wife, Charlotte,” who worked with him selling

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<sup>548</sup>“Opening of Steinway & Sons New Manufactory,” *Pittsburgh Post*, 1860, from *Boston Musical Times*, 1860.

<sup>549</sup> Loesser, *Men, Women, and the Piano*, pp. 389-391.

<sup>550</sup> *Pittsburgh Post*, 1860.

pianos. For this act, Mr. Blume earned a new reputation as a “cowardly blackguard.”<sup>551</sup> Earlier in the century, Charles L. Voltz had opened a store on Wood Street and sold pianos by J.A. and W. Geib of New York “on consignment.” He must have had enough business because if a customer walked into the store at meal time, the customer was asked to come back later. William Cumming Peters was another of the early dealers in pianos in Pittsburgh. He opened a store in 1823, but sold out to John H. Mellor and William Smith, who continued the lucrative business of selling pianos to the young ladies of Pittsburgh.<sup>552</sup>

These “piano girls” needed sheet music, which had to be produced cheaply, rapidly, and in large quantities, to be sold to homes all around the nation. All of these things depended on advances in technology. Lithography supported the sentimental song business, because it allowed for the creation of beautiful sheet music covers with sentimental pictures that made the sheet music more attractive and marketable to its primarily female customers.<sup>553</sup> Fast steam driven presses developed in the 1830s put out the sheet music quickly, at a fair price, and in large enough quantities to satisfy the growing demand.

To turn a young lady into an accomplished one required more than purchasing pianos and sheet music. A young woman needed lessons in voice and the instrument of her choice, usually the piano, to become a skilled amateur performer. Vocal training could be acquired at the numerous singing schools that opened with frequency, even in Pittsburgh. Singing schools could meet almost anywhere, in a private home, or a room at the meeting house, or in the house of the music teacher. Two meetings per week for three months were considered an average term at the

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<sup>551</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 321.

<sup>552</sup> Wetzel, “Oh! Sing No More That Gentle Song,” *The Musical Life and Times of William Cumming Peters (1805-66)*, pp. 14-16.

<sup>553</sup> Ronald Pearsall, *Victorian Sheet Music Covers* (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company) pp. 9-11.



singing schools in the early part of the nineteenth century. There were often in the city one or more especially popular teachers, who like Evans of Pittsburgh, opened school after school, never making much money but keeping himself and his students very busy.<sup>554</sup>

Young women also could receive music lessons at an exclusive female seminary. There were several of these that opened in Pittsburgh, and many in the eastern part of the United States where Charlotte was sent away to school. At the end of the year, a demonstration would be made of the students' musical accomplishments in an appropriately feminine atmosphere.<sup>555</sup> Eliza Foster described one such occasion at the Pittsburgh school of the famous Mrs. Brevost, where her eldest daughter Charlotte attended with the aforementioned Mary O'Hara and the daughters of William Foster's early business partner Ebenezer Denny. Mrs. Brevost "was gentle as a dove but her gentleness was mixed with firmness and earnestness of purpose. She had been educated in Paris and presented at the court of Louis 16<sup>th</sup>e and Marie Antoinette."<sup>556</sup>

The demands placed on the girls by Mrs. Brevost were exacting, for they had to show off more than their "accomplishments." Mary O'Hara explained: "For my part, I have so many things to do. I fear I shall fail in all of them. In the first place, I have to exhibit my knowledge of French, arithmetic, globes, and penmanship; and after the candles are lighted, I must play a long difficult piece on the piano, then another long piece on the harp, then sing by myself to the

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<sup>554</sup> James A. Keene, *A History of Music Education in the United States* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1982) p. 21.

Edward Baynham, *The History of Music in Pittsburgh, 1758-1958*, unpublished manuscript at the Carnegie Library in Oakland in Pittsburgh, Pa., pp. 40-41.

<sup>555</sup> Advertisements for "Female Seminaries" and academies appeared frequently in the *Pittsburgh Gazette* in the 1820s through 1840s. They offered such courses as mentioned above.

<sup>556</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 29.

guitar, and then dance and sing in a trio, and I don't know what all."<sup>557</sup> Eliza described Mary O'Hara's performance in a appropriately feminine atmosphere:

"The harp of Mary O'Hara was now produced thickly entwined with wreaths of fresh roses. Mary herself stepped gracefully, slightly curtseyed, took her seat, and bending herself backward in an attitude of pride, her fingers swept the strings with such power in the more forcible passages, and again with tenderness and touching melody the gentler strains, that she seemed rather an old practitioner, than a novice. ....As the numbers vibrated from beneath her hand, she sang clearly and sweetly without trembling or moving her features in affected gestures. She was a girl of high spirit, genius, brilliancy, and wit..... She was next on the floor alone and danced a solo exquisitely. Then she and Jane Wilkins executed a duet upon the piano, and afterwards she sang a song and accompanied herself upon the guitar. Again she appeared with Jane Wilkins and Miss Porter, in a pas-de-trois, still looking unwearied, bright, and happy. The young ladies then, with noiseless steps, danced a cotillion. After they were through all they had to perform to show Miss Brevost's superiority as a teacher, the evening closed with a concert of music, in which they were assisted by one or two young gentlemen."<sup>558</sup>

Even if they attended a proper school, the young ladies needed a parlor in which to enshrine the piano and show off all that they had learned. The parlor was a necessity for acting out "the rituals of the sentimental culture."<sup>559</sup> A descendent of the formal eighteenth century drawing room, the Victorian parlor was usually located on the first floor at the front of the house, and was used for entertaining, courting, weddings, and funerals. By the middle of the nineteenth century, most of the middle class houses had some type of formal parlor. Harriet Beecher Stowe even had two. The front parlor was for public display, but the parlor in the rear of the house was

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<sup>557</sup>Foster, "Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh," pp. 111, 103-104.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 103-104.

<sup>559</sup> Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America, a Social History*, p. 53.

where the family gathered around the piano. Eliza Foster also entertained in “double parlors” in her Allegheny house, but both probably faced towards the front.<sup>560</sup>

#### 8.4 PIANO GIRLS IN FICTION

The piano girl was so popular that she became an icon of popular fiction, appearing in the novels of Jane Austen, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Louisa May Alcott. Nineteenth century literature was filled with piano girls, who tried to use their piano skills to marry well or improve their social status. They were not expected to be too expert or professional. This idea comes across in Jane Austen's presentation of characters with keyboard skills in both *Pride and Prejudice* and in *Emma*. Austen showed that real talent and accomplishment on the piano was not what was wanted. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen notes that a plain girl named Mary does not get praise for her excellent rendition of a long concerto. Instead, “Mary, at the end of a long concerto, was glad to purchase praise and gratitude by Scotch and Irish airs at the request of her younger sisters...” Another girl, Eliza, whose playing was mediocre, yet “easy and unaffected, had been listened to with much more pleasure, though not playing half so well.”<sup>561</sup> Thus simplicity and authenticity in piano performance were valued over real talent and genius. Piano historian Arthur Loesser concludes that piano playing was thus thought of as a “trivial thing, [which] could be unpleasantly overwrought by too much cultivation.” A performance that was “pleasing, but not capital” by a young lady who did not try too hard was the right thing. Scotch

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<sup>560</sup>John F. Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility, Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990) p.180.

Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 423.

<sup>561</sup>Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, quoted in Loesser, *Men, Women, and the Piano*, p. pp. 273-276.

airs were better than concertos. A little singing and piano playing is an ornament to a pretty girl, but an ugly one can not use the pianoforte to escape her damnation.<sup>562</sup>

In the novel *Emma* by Jane Austen, Jane Fairfax is not well off financially but very skilled on the piano. She cannot afford a piano, but when she plays “a new set of Irish melodies” Jane Fairfax, who is an orphan, manages to get a lot of attention, especially from the males in the room. Still we find that Jane has no future except to teach or be a governess with her expert piano skills. She is secretly engaged to marry a man who is himself a devotee to music and who does not excel in the manly virtue of money making. Thus Austen shows that talents without money go unappreciated.<sup>563</sup>

William Makepeace Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* gives a harsh opinion of the girl who tries to use her accomplishments to get ahead. She is considered the equivalent of the “confidence man” who is trying to pass herself off as something she really is not, trying to use her musical skills in lieu of family credentials and money. *Vanity Fair*, published 1846-1848, recounts an endless succession of cruelties inflicted by people in pursuit of money and gentility. Throughout the book, there are references to piano playing. The action takes place within the circles of good society, but Thackeray shows almost all music to be of the most trivial kind. The character Becky Sharp, who does not have wealth, is presented as a accomplished pianist, yet Thackeray associates her piano playing with guile and immorality. Amelia, a character in *Vanity Fair* who does not play the piano as well as Becky, is portrayed as being superior morally and as a

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<sup>562</sup> Loesser, *Men, Women, and the Piano*, p. 276.

<sup>563</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma*, quoted in Loesser, *Men, Women, and the Piano*, pp. 277-279.

consequence is liked more by her readers for her insufficient talent and good heartedness. Amelia only has a “little store of songs.”<sup>564</sup>

Thackeray discussed the purpose of piano playing in Chapter 3 of *Vanity Fair*: “What causes young people to come out but the noble ambition of matrimony?....What causes them to labor at pianoforte sonatas, and to learn fair songs from a fashionable master at a guinea a lesson, and to play the harp if they have handsome arms and neat elbows...but that they bring down some desirable young man with those killing bows and arrows of theirs.” Thackeray criticized the girl without money who developed expertise at the piano in order to catch a rich husband or one of superior social status. Thackeray suggested in his novel that such girls should be punished. In *Vanity Fair*, Becky Sharp soon gave evidence of being interested in marrying Amelia’s brother, “trying to lure him with her music, singing to her own piano accompaniment.” But Becky’s musical talents eventually contributed to her downfall when she got involved with “the great and sinister Lord Styne.”<sup>565</sup>

Another famous fictional piano girl was the character Beth March in Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*. In contrast to the fictional piano girls mentioned above who had more mercenary motives for playing, Beth was portrayed as an innocent child who only played the piano because she loved it. After his own daughter who played the piano died, the rich neighbor invited the March girls over to play, because he did not really want his grandson Laurie to become “too fond” of music, a female pursuit. “The boy neglects his music now, and I’m glad of it, for he was getting too fond of it,” said the grandfather. Beth, the musical sister, was thrilled with the offer and came to Mr. Laurence’s house almost every day to play, “and the great drawing room was

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<sup>564</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 276.

<sup>565</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, (New York: Dodd, Meade, & Co., 1943 ) Chapter 3.

haunted by a tuneful spirit that came and went unseen.” Like Stephen Foster’s sister Charlotte, the fictional Beth contracted a fatal disease while she was caring for a sick child. And like Charlotte, the fictional Beth was nineteen when she died.<sup>566</sup>

## 8.5 STEPHEN FOSTER’S PIANO GIRLS

Stephen Foster grew up in the culture of the piano girls and amateur singers, literally surrounded by them and their music, as sisters, friends, relatives, and neighbors. Sisters Eliza and Charlotte played the piano, along with several other instruments, and Charlotte sang. His youthful neighbor in Allegheny, Susan Pentland, was also a piano girl. Stephen used her piano to compose songs which she then played and sang. He visited her regularly, probably as much to borrow the piano as out of reasons of friendship. After Susan Pentland grew up and married, she still performed Stephen’s songs, but now she was known as “Sis Robinson.” Other piano girls or singers were the Lightner girls, Jessie and Julia. Jessie sang duets with Susan Pentland Robinson, and Stephen Foster wrote three duets for the duo to sing: “Turn Not Away,” “Wilt Thou Be Gone, Love?” and “The Hour for Thee and Me.”<sup>567</sup>

Stephen and Morrison, as young men, were in contact with piano girls and songstresses who met at each other’s houses in Allegheny for social occasions and musical entertainment on a weekly basis. Morneweck explained that “This group of happy amateur musicians took turns meeting at the different homes, which explains why so many old friends have said that Stephen

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<sup>566</sup>Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women* (1868) (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., 2004) pp. 68, 396.

<sup>567</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 423,373,387,328,330,340, 341.

Foster composed certain songs at their piano.” Eliza Foster often had the neighbors over at her house in Allegheny, where piano music, singing, and laughter made for a joyous evening of entertainment. After Henry married a girl from nearby Lawrenceville, Stephen and Morrison visited often at the home of Henry’s mother-in-law, Mrs. Burgess, who had a piano. Henry’s wife Mary played the piano very well, and when Henry and Mary moved in with the Fosters at the East Common, Mary brought her piano with her.<sup>568</sup>

Julia Muarry, whose portrait was painted by the famous artist James R. Lambdin in 1849, was very beautiful. She had “a sweet voice” but was known more for her fickle ways with men than her vocal abilities. Stephen Foster wrote and dedicated the song “Wilt Thou Be Gone, Love” to Julia, probably at the time that she jilted Morrison Foster to marry a Baltimore man. Another of the “belles” who “played the piano and sang” was Mary H. Anderson of Pittsburgh, who was very fond of Morrison. Her teacher was the German composer and teacher Henry Kleber, who wrote and dedicated a song to his talented female student. The Keller sisters, Rachel, Mary, and Margaret, were all musical and their home on Penn Street was “a favorite gathering place for the glee club.” Before and after Mary Keller died, Stephen wrote and dedicated songs to her. Even Jane McDowell’s “hospitable home had become a favorite gathering place for the [Knights of the Square Table] club,” while Jane’s father was still alive in 1848. Dr. McDowell “was a genial host to his daughters’ young friends.” Apparently, some of the McDowell daughters were musical, even if Jane did not have a reputation as a piano girl.<sup>569</sup>

In Cincinnati, Foster visited the homes of other piano girls, to whom he dedicated lovely, sometimes romantic parlor songs. To Miss Sophie B. Marshall, Stephen wrote and dedicated

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<sup>568</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 423,373,387,328,330,340, 341.

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 423,373,387,328,330,340, 341.

“Stay Summer’s Breath.” Another talented girl in Cincinnati was the raven haired beauty named Eliza Russell, who played the piano whenever Stephen visited the Russell home. Miss Mary Irwin was a relation of the Judge Irwin family and Dunning Foster’s partner Archibald Irwin. She sang very well and was often “the prima donna” of the occasion, as she was one evening in early April of 1848, when “singers and performers began to assemble” and “they danced around the piano.” Stephen wrote and dedicated “What Must a Fairy’s Dream Be?” to Mary H. Irwin. Even cousins of the Fosters on Maryland’s eastern shore and in Bardstown, Kentucky were piano girls. According to Morneweck, “There was music wherever Morrison, Stephen, and Dunning went.”<sup>570</sup>

## 8.6 PARLOR SONG CHARACTERISTICS

Parlor songs made up a large portion of the songs Stephen Foster’s social group enjoyed. They were designed to be performed by trained female amateurs in the home, preferably in the parlor, for an intimate audience of friends and family. The songs were usually published individually as sheet music, and decorated with elaborate lithographs and fancy lettering on their title pages. The young ladies who bought the songs took care of them by binding the individual sheet music in leather volumes, which had the girls’ names engraved in gold tool on the cover. In this way, they could ensure that their music would stand up to years of practice and performance in their homes.<sup>571</sup>

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<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 423,373,387,328,330,340,341.

<sup>571</sup> The Center for American Music at the University of Pittsburgh has an ample collection of these beautifully bound and tooled leather volumes of sheet music. The female names on the cover are often important names for Pittsburgh, such as are found in the names of townships and city streets. For



Certain characteristics of the songs guaranteed that they would be welcomed in the parlor. First of all, parlor songs avoided unnecessary ornamentation and had simple piano accompaniments. There were several reasons for this simplicity, not least of which was the antebellumite's concern with emphasizing the feeling of the songs. The last was a "Romantic" notion, and romantics felt that ornamental melody lines would distract from the purity of the song, because it would take away from the listener's ability to feel the pathos in the song. Only by maintaining its simplicity could the melody bring out the true sentiment of the text and capture the emotions of the listeners. Of course, a simple melody line and the simple accompaniment that went along with it were easier for the piano girls to perform. Yet another reason for the clean melody line was that even though some sentimental songs could claim influences from Italian opera, the sentimental songs were supposed to be American, and ornamentation reminded people of the pretense and extravagance of Italian opera.

The words to the parlor songs were very important, since the sentiment in the song was derived from the combination of the music and the text, and the words emphasized the emotions.

A writer in 1834 explained the importance of words in conveying sentiment in song:

"Sounds produced [by singing] become the audible signs of real emotions, and on this principle, expression is based.....particular passions and feelings--- such for instance, as love or hatred---cannot be expressed by sounds, without the aid of words. Poetry, therefore is joined to music, to enlarge the sphere of its operations by becoming its interpreter. On this account vocal music is superior to instrumental music; It has a wider range of application, and exerts a more direct influence upon sentiment and passion. It is only, however, when both are judiciously combined, that the full force and effect of music sounds can be appreciated."<sup>572</sup>

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example, a girl with the surname Irwin had her name engraved on a beautifully bound volume of sentimental songs. This piano girl must have been related to Archibald Irwin who was in partnership with Dunning Foster in Cincinnati and to Judge Irwin.

<sup>572</sup>*Knickerbocker* 4, October 1834, p. 286, quoted by Karen Ahlquist in *Democracy at the Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997) p.86.

Thus vocal music was preferred in the mid-nineteenth century to instrumental music because of the belief in song's superior ability through the text to convey emotions and reach the heart.

The most influential model for Foster's parlor songs and for the sentimental song genre in general was the Irish poet Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies*. According to music historian Charles Hamm, "The *Irish Melodies* share the distinction with the songs of Stephen Foster of being the most popular, widely sung, best-loved and most durable songs in the English language of the entire nineteenth century." What made Moore's music successful with nineteenth century young ladies, according to Hamm, was its emphasis on the emotions, and the fact that the words of his songs were "written in the first person, describing situations and emotions from within, from the point of view of a person experiencing these emotions."<sup>573</sup> Like Foster's songs, Moore's were sad, emotional, and poignant, with a sadness that emanated not only from the plaintive melodies, but from the poems and their subject matter. Both composers employed nostalgia as a mechanism to elicit tender emotions, but while Moore emphasized the lost grandeur that once was Ireland's, Foster's nostalgia was more general. Both men pined for days gone by, and tended to see the past as infinitely better than the present.

Thomas Moore began with traditional Irish airs, the songs of his homeland. He wrote the poetry to fit to the music, which he sometimes changed to suit the words. Moore's songs made use of the large interval leap and the inverse dotted rhythm or the Scottish snap, both of which were utilized by Stephen Foster in his sentimental songs. The first volume of *Irish Melodies* was published in Dublin and in London in 1808. The book was so successful that an additional nine volumes quickly followed. Soon a Philadelphia publisher put out pirated

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<sup>573</sup>Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays, Popular Song in America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979), pp 43-44.

editions of each of the books, and it was not long before the books found their way west to Pittsburgh, and into the Foster's home.<sup>574</sup> Charlotte Foster often sang Moore's songs for they had been mainstreamed into America's music during the first quarter of the nineteenth century. "Tis the Last Rose of Summer," "Believe Me, If all Those Endearing Young Charms," "The Harp that Once through Tara's Halls," "Come, Rest in This Bosom," and "Oft in the Stilly Night" were performed constantly in American parlors.<sup>575</sup>

## 8.7 METAPHORICAL LOSS

One defining characteristic of the sentimental parlor songs of the nineteenth century seems to have been their emphasis on loss. In addition to the actual physical losses that antebellumites experienced when their loved ones died early or moved far away, they also experienced metaphorical losses, such as youth, the past, and pastoral innocence. Some themes such as "Lost Home" and "Dead Mother," which were popular in parlor songs, could have had both a physical basis in reality, as they did for Stephen Foster, and a metaphorical significance, suggestive of love, security, continuity, self-identity, and the metaphysical sense of place. Both the actual physical losses (death or separation) and the metaphorical themes (lost youth) showed up as the subject matter of the sentimental song genre. Foster's sentimental songs dealt with these losses either singularly, or more often, collectively. "Old Dog Tray," for example, was about lost youth and departed loved ones. "A Dream of Mother and My Home" mourned

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<sup>574</sup>Howard Mumford Jones, *The Harp That Once... the Life of Thomas Moore* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1937) p. 110.

<sup>575</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 110.

lost home and a lost mother. “Willie My Brave” emphasized the loss caused by the separation of lovers, but also death which caused the separation. The subject matter of loss, as a defining characteristic of the sentimental song genre, was, however, an experience that was very real to antebellum men and women.

Antebellum Americans dealt with their feelings of loss through mourning or pining for that which was lost, whether the object lost was a dead loved one, by-gone days, or pastoral innocence. Like Thomas Moore who mourned the glories of a past civilization, they mourned a pristine society that had been altered by changes wrought directly or indirectly by industrialization. Indeed, the world into which they were born was radically different from the one in which they lived, and they were not sure they really liked the new world. They may have welcomed the technological advances that the age of industry brought them, but they could not abruptly let go of their past, because in many ways the new industrial order as the “machine in the garden” offended their sensibilities.<sup>576</sup>

Mid-nineteenth century Americans felt a sense of alienation in both the metaphorical and the physical sense. In the metaphorical sense, their republican pastoral ideal was being destroyed by a sooty urban centered reality, but they also felt the alienation of actual physical displacement. As the new industrialization broke families apart forcing the young to leave their homes in the country in search of work in the cities, they felt displaced and isolated. American born youths moved in large numbers to the constantly expanding cities, but when their numbers failed to satisfy the labor needs of the new factories or the expanding railroads, immigrants and their sons and daughters were welcomed onto America’s shores transforming the demographics of the cities. When Foster lived in Pittsburgh and Allegheny City, almost half of the population was

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<sup>576</sup>Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964). This is a major theme of Marx’s book.

foreign born, many of whom felt an even greater sense of displacement than the native born.<sup>577</sup> Consequently, it was only natural for antebellum Americans to eulogize the past and view the “by gone days” as superior to the time and place of the present.

Increasingly, America became a strange and unfamiliar place, and anxieties multiplied. Mid-nineteenth century Americans were plagued by a variety of insecurities. Social insecurity developed in part from no longer knowing one’s place in society. As class structures became increasingly fluid, and as Americans moved frequently, no one could be certain who their neighbors were or from whence they had come. People also suffered from economic insecurity in the boom and bust cycles of the antebellum economy, never knowing if they would be going up or down in life. Antebellum Americans were also plagued by the threat of the dissolution of their beloved Union, and the vision of holocaust that Civil War entailed. The threat plagued Americans for almost thirty years, from the time John C. Calhoun threatened the North with his theory of nullification until the firing on Ft. Sumter made another compromise an impossibility.

## **8.8 DEATH OF THE YOUNG AND THE BEAUTIFUL**

Many of Foster’s parlor songs are poetic versions of light hearted love set in a background that emphasizes the natural: flowers, song birds, moon light, beauty both earthly and celestial. He heard musical effusions of sentimental love in the songs performed by his older sisters, and at the age of seventeen in 1844, he composed his own. “Open Thy Lattice, Love” was very beautiful music Foster set to a poem by George P. Morris that he came across in published form in the

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<sup>577</sup> Allegheny Centennial Committee, *Story of Old Allegheny City*, p.97.

*New Mirror*.<sup>578</sup> The young composer dedicated this song of lighthearted love to his neighbor in Allegheny City, “Miss Susan E. Pentland.”<sup>579</sup> In subsequent compositions, however, Foster usually wrote the words to the songs himself. He had a special talent for writing words that antebellum Americans could identify with and he knew instinctively how to blend the words and the music into songs that became paeans to the sorrow of the human condition.

Indeed, a good portion of his sentimental songs engaged the public at the deepest level. Songs such as “Gentle Annie” dealt with the death of a young girl and reached to the depth of the antebellum soul to assuage the pain of loss that affected Foster’s generation in overwhelming numbers. Because these songs were often misunderstood outside of the context of the era in which they were written, they have been denounced for their saccharine, morose, or tearful qualities. Death of the young and the beautiful, however, was prevalent in antebellum America and the bereaved needed consolation. It was not without reason that Foster asked in one of his loveliest songs, “Why should the beautiful die?”<sup>580</sup>

Just about everyone in the nineteenth century could say that he or she had lost a loved one to an untimely death, and so the society was in a state of actual mourning at all times. Industrialization could have indirectly played a part in this, too, because industry brought with it, in addition to technological advances and increased material comforts, crowded and unsanitary living conditions. The result was a proliferation of new diseases, like tuberculosis and cholera, which increased the death rate in the cities.<sup>581</sup> According to a study by Yasukichi

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<sup>578</sup> Austin, “*Susanna*,” “*Jeanie*,” and the “*Old Folks at Home*,” p. 151.

<sup>579</sup> Saunders and Root, *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Vol 1, pp. 7-8.

<sup>580</sup> “Ah, May the Red Rose Live Always” (1850). Saunders and Root, *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Vol. 1, pp. 90-93.

Yusuba, “evidence shows that the death rate increased in the few decades before the Civil War.” Yusuba argued that since city mortality increased, the overall mortality in the United States may have increased since the urban population was increasing.<sup>582</sup>

Compounding the problem was the fact that in both rural and urban areas, East and West, the birth rates were declining in the decades leading up to the Civil War. With new knowledge of contraceptives and birth control, women were giving birth to fewer children in the years from 1840-1860 than had earlier generations. Eliza Foster gave birth to ten children before 1830, and buried four. Mary Lincoln gave birth to four sons in the 1840s and 1850s, but only one survived her.<sup>583</sup> Yusuba concluded that the result of the diminishing number of births in the antebellum years was a tragedy of inverse proportion, for the birth rates declined just as death rates increased.<sup>584</sup>

Many of those who contributed to the increased numbers of deaths were just children. The death of children was, of course, the most dreaded grief, especially when fewer were being born, yet virtually every family experienced it. The result for the parents was a world that had lost its logic. Recent studies of grief revealed that when the child dies before the parents, the parents can no longer make sense of their world. The world becomes a scary place where the

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<sup>581</sup> Margaret Humphreys, “Tuberculosis, the Consumption and Civilization,” Kenneth F. Kipple, ed., *Plague, Pox, and Pestilence* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1997) p. 137

<sup>582</sup> Yasukichi Yusuba, *Birth Rates of the White Population in the United States 1800-1860*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1962), pp. 98-100.

<sup>583</sup> Walter Licht, *Industrializing America: the Nineteenth Century* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 76

Jean H. Baker, *Mary Todd Lincoln, A Biography* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1987) p. 129.  
<sup>584</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 137, 187.

natural order, that is, the parent dying first, has been reversed, and the parents live in a kind of dread.<sup>585</sup>

Life was precarious for adults, too, and young women frequently feared childbirth. Ann Eliza Foster sent her sister Charlotte a letter informing her that one of their acquaintances, Mrs. Shaler, who had given birth to twins the previous week, was now dead: “She has left seven children with those little hopeless twins and the oldest of them is only fourteen...”<sup>586</sup> At the end of her letter, Ann Eliza added some additional morbid news: “Mr. Pride’s eldest daughter about fourteen is also dead; her disease was consumption.” Death at any age was common in the antebellum society, but knowing that only increased the anxieties of the living. When Harriet Beecher Stowe was asked by her sister-in-law to write a book portraying the evils of slavery, Harriet replied, “I will, if I live.” There was always that conditional in every person’s plans for the future. Letters to loved ones began with a list of who was well and who was sick in the family and whether there were any deaths in the neighborhood.

## 8.9 MOURNING SONGS

Many of the sad songs which Stephen Foster and other nineteenth century composers wrote I have called “mourning songs.” These tear-inducing songs about dead loved ones such as “Gentle Annie” and “Where Is thy Spirit Mary?” were written to assuage the pain of the living and commemorate the dead. These “mourning songs” were popular with people who felt that

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<sup>585</sup> Clare Jenkins and Judy Merry, *Relative Grief: Parents and Children, Sisters and Brothers, Husbands, Wives, and partners, Grandparents and Grandchildren talk about their Experience of Death and Grieving* ( London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2005) pp. 119-123.

<sup>586</sup> Eliza C. Foster to Charlotte Foster, July 5, 1828 (Foster Hall Collection C404).



they had no choice but to become resigned victims to an all powerful and often cruel fate. They served an important function in the nineteenth century which should not be denigrated.

The songs used their sentimentality to ease nineteenth century Americans through their losses, particularly when the dead loved one was a child or a young adult. Lydia Sigourney was one of the most recognized female poets of the nineteenth century. Indeed, magazines like *Godey's Lady's Book* competed with other women's magazines in the 1840s for an exclusive contract with the poetess whose favorite topic was death. Sigourney wrote such poems as "Death of an Infant" to console mothers who were grieving over their children.<sup>587</sup> Sigourney's poetry commemorating dead children served a purpose in the sentimental age, just as songs of dead young woman, weeping or dead mothers, and dying soldier boys did. The sentimental discourse of her times and Foster's sad sentimental songs had perfectly good reasons for their existence.

With so much death around, the antebellumites created a society that was obsessed with death, and the mourning songs were appropriate for that society. Antebellumites' obsession led to a sort of death cult.<sup>588</sup> When death was imminent, everyone in the family participated in a deathbed watch in the hopes that the dying would have an "ecstatic" death, that is, one that was accepted with joy rather than simple resignation. Those who stood watch over the deathbed considered themselves privileged, and afterwards wrote down the details of the last words and activities of the deceased. The bereaved in antebellum America were also concerned with maintaining a proper protocol of public mourning, demonstrated through the clothing they wore.

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<sup>587</sup>Gordon S. Haight, *Mrs. Sigourney, the Sweet Singer of Hartford* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930) pp. 78, 108.

<sup>588</sup>Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977)

As a consequence, they even had mourning departments in their stores where specialty “crepe” clothing could be purchased in various shades of black, depending on who died. There were precise rules of etiquette dictating who should wear what, and for how many months mourning attire was mandatory. The stores sold coordinating black jet mourning jewelry and special mourning stationery that was bordered in black. Funerals were elaborate and undertakers were prosperous.<sup>589</sup>

Mid-nineteenth century Americans were more willing to express their feelings openly, including grieving intensely than were previous generations who had lost friends, relatives, and children. In fact, to have grieved ostentatiously would have been considered impertinent to earlier generations, since it would have been viewed as questioning Divine Judgment. There were several reasons for revealing more demonstrative displays of emotion. By the nineteenth century, many believed that feeling intensely had moral value, and that “feeling” sympathy or even pain was morally uplifting. The newer Protestant evangelical religions emphasized that strong feelings were evidence of salvation. Finally, antebellumites were Romantics who valued knowledge intuited through feeling (the heart) over knowledge gained through reason (the head). The experience of sorrow, evidenced through tears, they believed, ennobled a man or woman. For this reason, antebellumites allowed themselves to feel and even luxuriate in representations of pain, at least vicariously, in literature, or in poems and songs.

One example of this intense luxuriating in grief is found in the novel *Emily Hamilton* by Sukey Vickery. In this early nineteenth century novel, the heroine confided that her melancholy sensations were actually pleasing to her: “The house of mourning, my dear Mary, is instructive.

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<sup>589</sup>John Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1971) pp.63-79.

I would not exchange my present melancholy sensations, this sweet pensiveness which is far from being unpleasing, for all the giddy mirth I ever experienced.”<sup>590</sup> From this example, it is easy to conclude that antebellumites valued their sad sentimental songs for the same reasons. When the songs brought tears to the eyes of the listener, the experience became “instructive,” making mourning and sentimental songs of loss all the more valuable and popular.<sup>591</sup> Stephen Foster displayed tears in his eyes when he played and sang highly emotional songs, but his society did not fault him for such a display of sentimentality, nor did it make him appear unmanly.

## 8.10 CONSOLATION LITERATURE AND SONGS

According to historian Ann Douglas, Victorians created an entire genre of literature devoted to consoling the bereaved. In her discussion of consolation literature, Douglas included novels, biographies, mourner’s manuals, prayer manuals, mourning poetry, and hymns. The purpose of the consolation literature, according to Douglas, was “to reach and comfort those suffering bereavement or loss.”<sup>592</sup> Through such popular consolation novels as *Stepping Heavenward*, (1869), *The Empty Crib: The Memorial of Little George* (1873) and *Agnes and the Key of Her*

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<sup>590</sup>Emily Hamilton, by Sukey Vickery quoted in Herbert Ross Brown, *The Sentimental Novel in America 1789-1860* (New York: Pageant Books, Inc. 1959) p. 124.

<sup>591</sup> Vivian Zelizer believed men and women at mid-century may have actually grieved more at the deaths of their children than previous generations. Zelizer argued that since women in the 1850s gave birth to fewer children, four on the average rather than six or seven, they felt more pain when the child died, and hence were more given to expressive grief. Vivian A. Zelizer, *Pricing the Priceless Child: the Changing Social Value of Children* (Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 11.

<sup>592</sup>Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture*, p. 208.

*Little Coffin* (1837), bereaved parents found emotional and moral support. These novels used euphemisms and taught their readers to sentimentalize death. Death became a voyage, and heaven became a destination where people would go and continue to live and love, a place where family members would be reunited after death.<sup>593</sup>

Consolation literature found its largest readership among women, to whom it offered comfort through detailed descriptions of a continuation of the pleasures of life after death. Heaven was used interchangeably for “going home,” a euphemism for dying. Death was never portrayed as ugly or grotesque, even when sickness left the body wasted and the last hours of life were a torment. Mothers who had lost their children were especially pleased with Emanuel Swedenborg’s earth centered vision of heaven in his book *Heaven and Hell* published in the middle of the previous century. He offered a consoling vision of heaven where “flowers could be touched and smelled, food could be eaten, and bodily pleasures could be enjoyed.”<sup>594</sup>

To Ann Douglas’ genre of consolation literature, I have added “mourning songs.” Like the consolation poems and novels, the “mourning songs” were meant to mitigate the pain caused by the death of a loved one.<sup>595</sup> On one lithographed sheet music cover, angels hovered above a dying man who wore a smile of beatitude and resignation as the angels escorted him to heaven. Through the discourse of sentimentality, the loved ones were “peacefully sleeping” and at “home” instead of being dead. Transforming the dead children into “angels” through

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<sup>593</sup>The realistic heaven was part of the Swedenborgian ideal of heaven, which was popular with Victorians. Colleen McDannel and Bernhard Land, *Heaven: a History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988)

<sup>594</sup> McDannel and Lane, *Heaven, a History*, p. 320.

<sup>595</sup>Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) The nineteenth century was the age of “the beautiful death,” according to Aries.

sentimentality made their death easier to bear. Stephen Foster contributed to the genre with the now incredible sounding titles “Little Ella’s an Angel” and “Tell Me of the Angels, Mother.”<sup>596</sup>

Certainly Foster’s mourning songs and poetry were meant to console the living. Even grief stricken parents who have lost children in recent years found consolation in poems and songs. Paul C. Rosenblatt, the author of *Parent Grief* and an authority on grieving, has noted that “A number of parents, particularly women, found verses from the bible, condolence card messages, the writings of other bereaved parents, or songs so significant that they not only noted them but saved them, often in a scrap book or a box of memorabilia.” One mother named “Bonnie,” who had lost a daughter, recorded the effect one song had on her grief:

“I was just going to mention the song that has been so neat: “If you Could see me Now”...The words are just beautiful, and you can just imagine her up in heaven...A [coworker] taped it, just the one song for me, and I’ve played it many times. The first few times I played it I just cried and cried and carried. It was such a release to me.”<sup>597</sup>

Rosenblatt explained the special power of songs as providing “a sense of having shared the language and feeling of loss with many others, not only others in the audience (if a parent is at a concert) but all others who have heard the song and were touched by it.”<sup>598</sup>

The idea behind consolation literature and mourning songs, then, was consolation through community. The bereaved were to reach out to other bereaved families who had suffered in the same manner and thereby be consoled. One parent who had buried three children in the Allegheny Cemetery in Pittsburgh wrote a letter to the author of *The Empty Crib*:

“My dear Sir, If it ever falls in your way to visit Allegheny Cemetery you will see there a flower on three little graves. Anna, aged 7 years; Sadie, aged 5 years; Lillie, aged 3 years; all died within six days, and all of scarlet fever [ Georgie of *The Empty Crib* also had died of scarlet fever.] It sometimes may reconcile us to our own affliction to hear of one

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<sup>596</sup> “Heaven Our Home,” Stannard, ed., *Death in America*, pp. 70-80.

<sup>597</sup> Paul C. Rosenblatt, *Parent Grief: Narratives of Loss and Relationship* ( Philadelphia: Brunner/ Mazel, 2000) p. 182.

<sup>598</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

still greater elsewhere and this is the reason why I, a perfect stranger, venture to trespass upon you in your sore bereavement, and to tell you of my heartfelt sympathy.”<sup>599</sup>

The Allegheny Cemetery contains three hundred acres of beautiful grounds and sloping hill sides that hint at ethereal vistas beyond and a tranquility offset only by the sound of the leaves rustling in a soft breeze. When it was built in 1844, the cemetery was the sixth rural cemetery in the nation. Mt. Auburn near Boston was the first, opened in 1831, followed by ones in Philadelphia, Brooklyn, Albany, and Rochester. John Chislett, an Englishman who had moved to Pittsburgh in the 1830s, designed it as “a Romantic landscape” where various tombs and gravestones mingled to create “a total work of art.” Although tombs built in the latter part of the nineteenth century intruded on the landscape with “considerable pomp,” when the Fosters were buried in the Allegheny Cemetery the stones were simple markers of remembrance.<sup>600</sup>

The decision to build the new nondenominational cemetery east of the city in Lawrenceville was a joint effort of the First Presbyterian and the Trinity [Episcopal] churches to resolve the problem of their “adjoining and overcrowded burial grounds in the center of the triangle [downtown Pittsburgh].” There were both practical and ideological considerations in the decision to build a rural cemetery. The old burial sites were overcrowded and becoming a health concern for the living. The deceased infected the water supplies and caused the city to be an unhealthy place. They offended the sensibilities of the sentimental generation too, when the

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<sup>599</sup> “The Empty Crib” poem by Cuyler, reprinted in “Heaven Our Home” from David E. Stannard, ed., *Death in America*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975) pp. 81-82.

<sup>600</sup>Walter C. Kidney, *Allegheny Cemetery, a Romantic Landscape* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh History and Landmarks Foundation) pp. 26-27.

bones of the dead would protrude from the earth when least expected. People in the sentimental society wanted to continue their illusion of what Philip Aires called “the beautiful death.”<sup>601</sup>

Accordingly, everything surrounding death at the Allegheny Cemetery was made to appear peaceful and beautiful, especially the burial site, and the cemetery, even to this day, appears conspicuously a mirage of tranquility in the midst of an older, crowded section of Pittsburgh. These new rural cemeteries camouflaged death so completely that relatives of the dead peacefully strolled through the cemetery to visit their loved ones in an atmosphere promoted almost as a “resort excursion.” They had paths with pastoral names, green hillsides, and graveyard flowers. In keeping with the objective of sentimentalizing death, the severe tombstones found in older cemeteries were replaced by new anthropomorphic designs. By the 1840s, when the Allegheny Cemetery opened, statues of “weeping female figures” marked family plots, and tearful verse decorated the elaborate gravestones which were decorated with weeping willows and urns.”<sup>602</sup>

Eliza Foster found comfort in walking in the Allegheny Cemetery, as she did one Ash Wednesday. “Being too soon for service she strolled among the monuments thoughtfully saying as she contemplated some of them, Alas, how many whose names were written in the first pages of my manuscript lie entombed like these ! Whose stone is this?” After strolling through the burial grounds, remarking on this stone and that, which reminded her of friends now gone, she came upon “a stone to tell us where three infant Fosters lie.”<sup>603</sup> Yes, Eliza and William Foster,

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<sup>601</sup> Aires, *The Hour of Our Death* , pp. 409-468.

<sup>602</sup> James Stevens Curl, *The Victorian Celebration of Death* (Detroit: Partridge Press, 1972) p.25.

<sup>603</sup> Foster, “Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh,” pp.206-207.

like the man who wrote a sympathy letter to the author of *The Empty Crib*, had also buried three infants in the Allegheny Cemetery.

### **8.11 RECREATING THE PAST THROUGH MEMORIES AND DREAMS**

Antebellum people, who were described above as being sensitive to loss and fully engaged with it, softened their painful realities through mourning and nostalgia, which went hand in hand. Since they were obsessed with loss, they eulogized the past which was the time when what they had lost still existed. They became a people devoted to mourning, whether what they had lost was a dead loved one, days gone by, or youth and happiness. They created memories of things and people who were lost as a way of reincarnating what no longer existed. In doing so they became nostalgic for things that were lost and past. Nostalgia was a means of letting go of the past, while holding onto the memory which could be sweetened when it was remembered.

During bereavement, antebellum men and women could use nostalgia to create an enduring memory of the loved one that would last through time. The creation of a nostalgic memory was a device for the successful conversion of grief, which is painful, into mourning which is characterized by acceptance and healing. The ego, in its desire for self-preservation, remembers in order to forget. In his now classic analysis of grief “Mourning and Melancholia” published in 1917, Sigmund Freud draws a distinction between bereavement, which is painful, and mourning, which is healing. For healing to occur, the dead must be replaced by something “equivalent” yet different. ( Replacement does not mean that another living person must take the place of the dead loved one.) This replacement becomes the recipient of the feelings that the dead person had once elicited, and the replacement signifies the finality of the loss. The



mourning songs by reminding the bereaved of the lost object participate in the creation of the replacement, which could be the memory of the dead loved one, thereby bringing on healing. In this way the debilitating grief is transformed into restorative mourning or healing.<sup>604</sup> Mary Louise Kete in *Sentimental Collaborations* preferred to use the term “restoration” rather than a “replacement,” when discussing mourning in the sentimental age. The most successful restorations occurred, she said, through the production and circulation of a remembrance. According to Kete, a remembrance is a “token” of the lost person. This “remembrance” does not displace the dead but consoles the living as it carries within it some essential aspect of the person being remembered and something of the person remembering. Kete believed the sentimental poem was such a remembrance that attempted “to close the gap” made by the loved one’s death. Other remembrances included the posthumous portraits of dead children, elaborate grave markers, and strange as it may sound, hair pictures made from the weaving of strands of hair of the dead into a picture of flowers.<sup>605</sup> Of course, Foster’s songs about dead loved ones also served as very effective remembrances.

After death, the bereaved learn to replace the dead person with the memory of the loved one. The dead then live again in memory, and when people sing mourning songs, the dead are remembered. Remembrance is an integral part of the funeral ritual, for remembering helps “to close the gap.” When people gather together at funerals, sometimes after having traveled great distances, it is for the purpose of commemorating and remembering their dead loved ones. People at funerals talk about the dead person. They reveal their own memories which are then

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<sup>604</sup>Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”(1917), from *General Psychological Theory* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997) pp.164-179.

<sup>605</sup>Mary Louise Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000) pp.9-17, 53.

multiplied to become second hand memories for all the people in attendance at the funeral. Remembrance is often the final request made by the dying In Henry Purcell's opera, *Dido and Aeneas*, the protagonist's last words are "Remember me, Remember me, but forget my sins." Thus she asks for remembrance and salvation at the same time. Gravestones with the names carved into them are made in stone or granite so that the dead shall never be forgotten, conceivably, and an unmarked grave is tragic because there is no remembrance created. Even when what is lost is not a dead person, memory can suffice to replace what was lost or to bring it back. The ritual of mourning is the same, whether loss commemorates "happy days" that will never return, or a separation, or youth.

The key then to mourning is memory, and Foster used this concept readily. Stephen Foster's mourning songs usually did not describe a heavenly after life or have angels in attendance at the death bed. The composer worked instead very subtly through the creation of a remembrance or a dream to restore that which had been lost. In this way, he achieved for the listener or singer a solace in regards to the loss, whether death or separation was responsible for taking the object out of existence. At least four insignia are the conveyors of the past for Foster: dreams, memories, melodies, and nature. In the 1850 song "Lilly Ray," Foster never mentioned the word death or dead, although he referred to Lilly Ray as "a gentle form passeth away." Lilly was the "lonely, departed one," but Foster was able to bring her back as he brought back the happy days of the past by resorting to "dreams" or "visions." In dreams, Lilly lived again; she was recreated. So that the dream becomes the remembrance, the replacement that Freud talked about, or the restoration with which Kete was concerned.

When slumber's dreamy light, O'er me is thrown  
Calling in visions bright, Days that are gone,  
While round my drooping heart, Joy seems to play  
Fondly I dream of thee, Sweet Lilly Ray <sup>606</sup>

Another song in which dreams were the purveyors of the past is "Old Dog Tray." Although the dog's fidelity to his master is emphasized, the real point of the song is that "The lov'd ones, the dear ones have all passed away." Yet Foster tells us that they can be replaced:

It brings me a dream of a once happy day,  
Of merry forms I've seen, upon the Village Green. <sup>607</sup>

In "Come with thy Sweet Voice Again" the dream was again called to action. Loss was signified by "Bright visions long vanished," yet these "bright visions" could be summoned by dreaming: "Let me dream in the lap of thy sighs." In the song "Ellen Bayne," "forms long departed" reappeared in dreams. Again, in "Thou Art Queen of My Song" youth and love are gone: "the days of summer bright and gay," gone along with "The days of love we so fondly while away." Yet dreams can restore the joy that is past: "But still while I'm dreaming the smiles are o'er me beaming." As Kete has explained about the antebellum attitude towards the dead, "the dead were present and re-presentable in an infinite number of forms."<sup>608</sup>

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<sup>606</sup>Saunders and Root, eds. *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Vol. I, pp. 130-133.

<sup>607</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 262-265.

<sup>608</sup> Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations*, pp. 65-66.

Victorians also believed that dreams offered an opportunity to find “more of inner truth than we can find in waking hours.” In “Linger in Blissful Repose” and in “Beautiful Dreamer,” Foster advanced a spiritual conception of sleep and dreams. William Martin Wilkinson, a devotee of spiritualism and a Romantic who preferred intuited to rational truth, explained that during sleep “the spirit walks about, and has a new power of vision, other and superior....now that it has lost for the time the judgment of the intellect.”<sup>609</sup>

In some of Foster’s songs, melody was a catalyst for the dreaming state, that is, the replacement. Melody seemed to usher in the dream state and the reinstatement of Lilly Ray in the third verse of the song:

When Liquid melody falls on my ear,  
Then I impulsively dream thou art near<sup>610</sup>

In songs such as “Old Memories,” memory served to replace what had been lost. Foster tells us that even when departed smiles do not return, memories “never depart” and instead preserve early joys “now gone.”

Fondly old memories recall round my heart,  
Scenes of my early joys, that never depart.<sup>611</sup>

Thus “memories” can be permanent in a world where everything else is transitory.

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<sup>609</sup>William Martin Wilkinson, *Spirit Drawings: a Personal Narrative 1869*, quoted in Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians*, p. 111; pp. 105-106.

<sup>610</sup>Saunders and Root, eds., *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Vol. I, pp.132-133.

<sup>611</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp.278-282.

Two of Foster's songs which qualify as mourning songs were "Gentle Annie" and "Where is Thy Spirit, Mary?" These songs, which commemorated dead young ladies, were written in the first person with the bereaved speaking to the dead one, and both songs utilized nature to restore the dead. Foster wrote "Where is they Spirit, Mary?" in 1847 for Mary Keller, a girl who sang his songs when he tried out new melodies for his young friends in Allegheny City. Foster asked "Where is thy spirit?" Mary's friends believed it "lingered in the air," but Foster's poetry said that Mary's spirit lingered in the melody of "an old time ballad, Low and plaintive was the strain." The next time Foster asked where Mary's spirit dwelled, the composer found it in the songs of the spring birds: "spring birds now returning, with their music fill the air, And we know by that sweet warning, That thy spirit lingers there."<sup>612</sup>

In Foster's song "Gentle Annie," written in 1856, death is never mentioned, only alluded to in the mention of the "tomb" in the last stanza. Annie "wilt come no more," but she reappears in neither dreams nor in memories. There is a suggestion that something of Annie's spirit will be present in the "wild flowers scattered o'er the plain, While they mingle their perfume o'er thy tomb." Both Mary's and Annie's spirits have found pantheistic reincarnations, in the voice of the spring birds for Mary, which is a natural element, and in the perfume of the flowers over Annie's grave. In "Gentle Annie" Foster offers communal resolution for the bereaved when he switches in the chorus to the plural, "Shall we never more behold thee, never hear thy winning voice again?" As mourning is considered a collaborative effort, through his sentimental "mourning songs," Foster was able to unite the bereaved to find comfort in community.<sup>613</sup>

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<sup>612</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. I, pp. 24-27, Vol. II, pp. 2-9.

<sup>613</sup> Kete, *Sentimental Collaborations*, pp. 65-66. Kete believed that circulation of poems on the death of children "facilitated a collaboration among members of the community on the sentimental subject." The poems, along with the gravestones and hair pictures are there to preserve the memory of the dead

Foster was a true antebellum artist, when he located Mary's and Annie's spirits in natural elements. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Nature is so pervaded with human life, that there is something of humanity in all, and in every particular." All was united through the non-material spirit: "that behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present." Furthermore, nature and mankind are conjoined forever: "that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build up nature around us, but puts it forth through us."<sup>614</sup> Nature for antebellumites was all powerful and all pervasive, as Herman Melville's Ahab showed when he succumbed to the forces epitomized by the whale. In a similar manner, the Hudson River artists showed man as small and insignificant, when they did decide to put man into their nature canvasses. Foster never made the spirit of a human being insignificant, however. Mary, Annie, the song of the birds, and the perfume of the flowers all mingled in a loving and equitable collectivity.

## 8.12 SPIRITS, ANGELS, FAIRIES, AND VAPORS

Foster's women, as they appear in the songs, are sprightly with light foot steps, or have, like "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair," a vapor-like weightlessness that can be borne on the "summer air." This lightness is appropriated and duplicated in the melody as well. Women in songs are phantoms: spirit like, fairy bells, ethereal, which makes one think that they are as much

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children. Foster's mourning songs would function in the same way as the poems about dead children. "The poems refigure the dead child as a living one. This remembered child helps to reconstitute the grieving parent as it continues through the power of the sentimental artifact, to share in the sentimental collaboration."

<sup>614</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Spirit," from *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson*, (New York: Barnes and Nobles Classics, Reprint 2004) pp. 41-43

dead as alive. Angels, spirits, fairies, and vapors, all incantations of women in Foster's songs, have to do with the Romantic's morbid fascination with the idea of the possibility of connection between the living and the dead. Some of Foster's women also have a "winning voice," as did Jeanie and Gentle Annie, and a voice, the clairvoyants tell us, can connect the dead with the living.

Ironically, it was the recent inventions of science that encouraged the belief in an intensely realistic spirit world. The remarkable discoveries of science contributed to a greater belief in the miraculous, the extraordinary, and the unexplainable in nature. The existence of spirits needed no further proof after the images of fairies and spirits appeared in photographs in the so-called spirit photos. Another scientific invention that encouraged belief in the miraculous was the telegraph. That anyone could get a reply to a message sent to Europe in less than an hour conflated science and religion. In other words, why should communication with the dead be different from communication with people over long distances by the telegraphic wire? Weren't they equally mysterious?<sup>615</sup>

Nineteenth century Americans' fascination with the supernatural, the mystical, and the occult was encouraged, not only by science, but also by Romanticism and religion. Nathaniel Hawthorne's stories presented eerie examples of the occult, and in Charlotte Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, the ghost of Kathryn lures her beloved Heathcliff to join her in the grave. Romanticism encouraged the cult of the heart and the belief in the superiority of the imagination over rational facts. Since the Romantics accepted irrational means of knowing, they left the door open to beliefs in angels, spirits, and fairies. Victorian religion utilized cherubim, angels, and archangels to help God in the administration of heaven. "They never leave us, in sorrow they sympathize, in

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<sup>615</sup>John Morley, *Death, Heaven and the Victorians* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1971)pp.103-7.

joy they rejoice, in prayer they unite with us.....”<sup>616</sup> Above all, angels ministered at the deathbed, and the Scriptures bore testimony to the existence of a spirit world.

Stephen Foster associated the word vapor with his relationship with his wife Jane or “Jeanie,” whose form or hair was “born like a vapor on the summer air” in his parlor song “Jeanie With the Light Brown Hair.” The word vapor was an alternative expression for the spirit in the Victorian era. To those antebellumites who believed in the highly popular fad of spiritualism, a vapor represented the fading connection with a past life. One attendee at a séance described without embarrassment how a “beautifully formed hand rose up from an opening in a dining table and gave me a flower....[which] gradually seemed to dissolve itself into a vapor.”<sup>617</sup>

In 1861, Foster wrote the song “A Penny for Your Thoughts,” when he was living on his own in New York. Foster again associated Jane with vapors, because when he asks in the song “What think you now of Jenny Dow?” (Jenny was a nickname for his wife Jane, and Dow is obviously connected with her family name McDowell ) Foster wrote that “Fair are her wavy locks as vapors on the hill.” In likening her hair to vapors, Foster seems to suggest that his wife’s existence was ephemeral and unsubstantiated, which as far as their relationship was concerned, was factual.

In keeping with their fascination with fantastic phenomena, nineteenth century Americans were also attracted to fairies, and Foster satisfied their interest with song titles like “I’d Be a Fairy” and “Fairy Belle.” Fairies were prominent in Scotch and Celtic folklore<sup>618</sup> and

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<sup>616</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>617</sup> *Ibid.*, p.105.

<sup>618</sup>Christine Gallant, *Keats and Romantic Celticism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) pp. 2-9, 83-113.



were popular at mid-century when William Allingham published a lengthy poem entitled *The Fairies* and Hans Christian Anderson published his book of fairy tales around the same time. Owing to a familiarity with Shakespeare, antebellum people would have known Titania and King Oberon, rulers of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and also Ariel, the nature fairy in *The Tempest*. They also were familiar with Edmund Spenser's *Fairy Queen*. In nineteenth century literature, fairies were often pictured as gossamer winged creatures that fluttered among flowers in children's books. But fairies were also associated with the souls of the dead and fallen angels.<sup>619</sup> The word would not yet take on the connotation it has today, that of derogatory term for a homosexual man, until the later decades of the nineteenth century. Nor was Tinker Bell known when Foster wrote "I'd Be a Fairy." Tinker Bell was the sprightly fairy that appeared as a speck of light that followed Peter Pan around, the boy who never wanted to grow up.<sup>620</sup>

Why Foster characterized the women in his songs as lightweight and fairy-like is difficult to understand. Perhaps the spirit like women in Foster's songs were modeled after his oldest sister Charlotte who died before Foster was old enough to know her. She would have provided the model for the ghostly women that dance around in his sentimental parlor songs.

### 8.13 CHARLOTTE, THE MODEL PIANO GIRL

Foster's oldest sister Charlotte, of course, was the image of the piano girl that most impressed Foster's psyche. Since she died when the composer was three, his image of her was more

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<sup>619</sup>William Allingham, "The Fairies," 1850 on line source, <http://www.sff.net/people/doylemacdonald/1-fairie.html> The Victorian Web: Literature, history, Culture in Age of Victoria <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/pva/pva239.html>

<sup>620</sup> *Peter Pan*, a play by Sir James M. Barrie debuted in 1904.

ghostlike than real. Although he probably would not have remembered her, the family preserved Charlotte's letters and the composer's niece suggested that he read them and that his mother Eliza spoke of Charlotte often. Eliza Foster in her journal shared a precious memory of the musical performance of the nine-year old Charlotte. A Mrs. Feibiger who was visiting the Fosters at their home White Cottage asked Charlotte to perform for her:

“Come, Charlotte,” said Mrs. Feibiger, “before I ride, sing and play some of those favorite little airs of yours.” Charlotte lifted her soft blue eyes and looked sweetly at Mrs. Feibiger. She did not whine, nor look affected, nor did she undertake to excuse herself by saying she had a cold, or other such reprehensible device, but walked modestly to the piano, and seating herself, played and sang “There's Nothing True but Heaven” in a manner that touched the feelings and moved the hearts of all present.<sup>621</sup>

When Charlotte turned eighteen, she, like Mary O'Hara, was sent away, not to Philadelphia, but to Louisville and Bardstown, Kentucky where she was expected to make a suitable marriage. In Bardstown she stayed with the Rowan family, cousins of William Barclay Foster, who were the owners of Federal Hill, the “Old Kentucky Home” shrine. Unlike the O'Hara girl, Charlotte was not wealthy, but the Fosters hoped that their daughter's beauty and musical talents, as well as family connections, would surmount the family's embarrassing pecuniary situation, and that she would return home with an engagement at the very least.

When she first ventured to Kentucky, Charlotte was the belle of every ball, and she refused to come home. Eliza Foster warned her daughter: “Mr. Baldwin told Mr. Foster the other Day you were the Belle of Louisville. Now is the time to bring her home, said he as much as to say before her value is lesson'd.”<sup>622</sup> Her parents were aware that the summers in Kentucky were not salubrious and they pleaded with Charlotte to come home, but steadfastly she refused to

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<sup>621</sup> Foster, “Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh,” pp. 118-119.

<sup>622</sup> Eliza C. Foster to Charlotte Foster, October 4, 1828 (Foster Hall Collection C395-1).

leave the delightful life she had made for herself in Kentucky. Charlotte's father wrote in the summer of 1829, warning her that "the weather is getting very warm; and there is danger of ill natured folks both here and at Louisville charging your visit to a course that a young lady would not like to acknowledge."<sup>623</sup>

It was at this time that the oldest brother William Foster sent the gift of the piano to the Fosters in the hopes that the piano would bring his wayfaring sister back. "It must have been a day of rejoicing when it [the piano] was brought home. It is well I was not there, I should have behaved like a fool," Charlotte wrote home to her mother, but still she did not return to Pittsburgh. Charlotte was too busy and popular in the homes of the Kentucky elite, where she said, "they kept me playing constantly and singing.....The girls think 'Go, My Love' and 'Like the Gloom of Night Returning' more beautiful then any they have ever heard, and would you believe it, they think I sing delightfully."<sup>624</sup> Eventually, Charlotte grew homesick and gave in to the pleadings of her parents. She returned to Pittsburgh, but found only depression and illness there. When some Kentucky friends of hers were marrying, she used that as an excuse to take the first riverboat back to Kentucky.

The Fosters still hoped that Charlotte would find a suitable marriage partner in Kentucky; so they allowed her to return. Although there were some interested beaux, and some suggestions of marriage proposals, Charlotte on her last trip to Kentucky seemed to have been relegated to the position of nursemaid to the sick in the home of her Louisville cousins the Barclays. First she nursed the elder daughter of the Barclays, Georgiana, who recovered; then the baby became ill,

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<sup>623</sup> William Barclay Foster to Charlotte and Ann Eliza Foster, c/o J.G.Barclay, Louisville, dated June 2, 1829

<sup>624</sup> Charlotte Foster to Eliza C. Foster, August 12, 1828 (Foster Hall Collection C402 ).

and finally Mrs. Barclay herself fell victim to the illness. It was not long before Charlotte was struck down with the same illness, whatever disease it was.<sup>625</sup>

On October 13, 1829, one of the Barclays, a cousin of William Barclay Foster, sent frantic messages to the Fosters in Pittsburgh, telling them that their daughter was ill and that they should come at once. Charlotte had been well until she tended to the illness of Mrs. Joshua Barclay. It is interesting that, while Charlotte could attend to all three sick people, there was no one to care for Charlotte. The Fosters sent Ann Eliza, another piano girl, to nurse the beautiful and much loved Charlotte, but it was useless and all too dismal.

Even in dying Charlotte was the piano girl, who sang on her death bed. Atkinson Hill Rowan described in romantic detail Charlotte's last hours in a letter which is very much an accurate artifact of the society's macabre culture. This was more than his way of sentimentalizing Charlotte's death and sparing pain to the bereaved family. Knowing details of the deceased's last moments was important because "it was deemed essential that death's presence be recognized" for one to have a "triumphant" death and to be welcomed into the realm

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<sup>625</sup> We do not really know what disease afflicted the Barclays and ultimately Charlotte. The Fosters believed it was cholera, but Charlotte in her letter home wrote that Mrs. Barclay's eldest daughter was sick with "bilious fever." Charlotte probably did not die of cholera, if we go by the circumstances and the symptoms of the disease that took Charlotte's life. Most accounts of cholera set the date for its first appearance in America as 1832, and this was 1829. Ann G. Carmichael in "Cholera: Pandemic Pestilence" stated that cholera imposed a relatively quick death, painful, and ugly. "Death comes within hours of the onset of illness," yet Charlotte lived a week from the time urgent messages were sent to the Foster family in Pittsburgh. Carmichael's descriptions of cholera deaths were far from Atkinson Hill Rowan's sentimentalized account of Charlotte's death. "The victims, rather than ethereal, alive with passion and intensity, were ghastly, emptied of life in the most repulsive ways." Atkinson Hill Rowan described a "serene" death with no "convulsions." If his description of Charlotte's death was not a complete fabrication, she did not die of cholera. Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years, the United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, 1962), pp. 91-110. Ann G. Carmichael, "Cholera: Pandemic Pestilence," Kipple, ed., *Plague, Pox, and Pestilence: Disease in History*, pp. 142-144.

of the eternal.<sup>626</sup> In a letter addressed to Ann Eliza from his home Federal Hill, Atkinson Hill Rowan described Charlotte's death:

She was more tranquil, yet did not sleep, but seemed as attentive as at any time during her illness to the movements of her friends, occasionally speaking to them, and about an hour before day, when all were silent, she sang a song preserving with much melody and great accuracy, every note, but her voice was then so thickened that she did not articulate sufficiently plain for the words to be heard, or for the song to be recognized.<sup>627</sup>

Rowan attributed her demise to “a deep melancholy, not perceivable when she was in health,” but which exhibited itself “in the wild, plaintive and touchingly tender songs which she always sang.” In keeping with the traditions of the “age of the beautiful death,” Charlotte had friends and relatives surrounding her around the clock, watching and waiting for her great and final departure.<sup>628</sup> Charlotte removed a ring from her finger and asked that it be given to her sister Ann Eliza, then she offered “prayers for blessings” upon all the family and friends. The young grief stricken Rowan assured Ann Eliza that her sister's death was peaceful:

Never, never have I seen anyone die so easy, no convulsions, not the writhe of a feature--there she lay serene, placid, & quiescent---all the innocence of her soul complexioned out in a countenance which seemed chastened by the tranquility of a sweet sleep, so lovely, that could her last breath have been observed by her friends, they could have not and would not have believed that her gentle spirit had flown.<sup>629</sup>

When Charlotte Foster died, she was not engaged to anyone. Although she was paraded about in the best homes of Kentucky, where she had ample opportunity to display her remarkable musical talents to a number of suitable beaux, she did not find a husband. This fact

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<sup>626</sup>Lewis O. Saum, “Death in the Popular Mind of Pre-Civil War America,” David E. Stannard, ed., *Death in America*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975) pp. 42-45.

<sup>627</sup> Atkinson Hill Rowan to Ann Eliza Foster, November 19, 1829, quoted in Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 73-74.

<sup>628</sup> Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 430-470.

<sup>629</sup> Atkinson Hill Rowan to Ann Eliza Foster, November 19, 1829, quoted in Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 73-74.

brings up the question of just how valuable accomplishments really were in making a young lady marriageable. Charlotte Foster's musical accomplishments managed to attract a great deal of attention in Kentucky, but they did not result in an engagement. There are many unanswered questions about Charlotte, including whether she really wanted to get married. When Charlotte first reached Kentucky a friend from Pittsburgh inquired whether she was engaged yet. Charlotte answered on August 12, 1828, attempting not to appear anxious: "Does he suppose the whole of a young lady's time and thoughts must be taken up with plans for matrimony? Can I not enjoy the pleasures of traveling, making new friends and observing the different manners and habits of those I meet without thinking of getting married?"<sup>630</sup>

Charlotte had no money when she arrived in Kentucky. It is most likely that brother William paid for her passage because she asked him to, and once in Kentucky, she had a tough time keeping up appearances. Eliza Foster wrote advising her daughter "If you want money you had as well borrow some from one of the Ms. Barclays so that you may not go meanly dress'd but at the same time keep your clothes together and mend them."<sup>631</sup> Charlotte did not even have a piano at home before brother William bought one for the Fosters. She had wanted one, however, and once suggested a conniving way of obtaining one in a letter to her father: "Mr. Valtz will trust you for a year and if at that time it cannot be paid for let him take it back."<sup>632</sup> Charlotte may have optimistically believed that a year hence she would be married to a man wealthy enough to supply her with a piano and a home of her own. By the beginning of October of 1828, however, Charlotte despaired of making any suitable match whatsoever: "When I

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<sup>630</sup> Charlotte Foster to Eliza C. Foster, August 12, 1828 C402

<sup>631</sup> Eliza C. Foster to Charlotte Foster, no date (Foster Hall Collection C404).

<sup>632</sup> Charlotte Foster to William B. Foster, Sr., July 3, 1828 (Foster Hall Collection C405).

consider I have neither wealth nor beauty to attract I know I should be more humble in my expectations, but let the consequences be what it may I cannot help it.”<sup>633</sup>

Two weeks later, however, Charlotte wrote home again confidentially telling her mother that she had received a marriage proposal from the eldest son “at home” of Judge Rowan. Charlotte turned him down because, she said, she did not love him:

As for me I believe I am to be an old maid. I am too hard to please, but is it not better to be one than married without loving. I will tell you a secret about my late visit to Federal Hill. I told you JR [ John Rowan, Sr.] had two sons at home, the eldest is about twenty-five a lawyer, very clever and generally considered handsome now it must remain between you and I if I tell you he wish'd me to engage myself to him but as usual I could not love him and would not do him or myself the injustice to make promises I was not inclined to perform, you may conclude I was glad to get to Louisville again, I suppose he would think I was glad to get the son of a Senator of the United States and so distinguish'd a man as John Rowan, but I cannot let considerations of this kind influence me when my happiness for life depends upon it...I hope my dear mother will let what I have said go no further as it would appear like boasting in me....<sup>634</sup>

It was from this letter written in confidence to her mother on October 18, 1828, that the legend developed in the Foster family that Charlotte had received a marriage proposal from the young John Rowan, the son of the Senator and Judge.

The legend appears to have resulted from an incorrect reading of the letter. What Charlotte meant to say, I believe, was, “I suppose he would think I was glad to get a proposal from the son of a Senator of the United States, the son whose father was as distinguished as Senator John Rowan,” meaning the father Judge John Rowan, who became the United States Senator from Kentucky in 1826. Senator Rowan entertained important political figures at his home, including Martin Van Buren and Henry Clay, and Charlotte always revered the middle-

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<sup>633</sup> Charlotte Foster to Eliza C. Foster, October 4, 1828

<sup>634</sup> Charlotte Foster to Eliza C. Foster, October 18, 1828 (Foster Hall Collection C396).

aged Senator. “I sometimes listen to his conversation until I am lost, and fear to draw a breath lest I should lose a word,” Charlotte wrote.

It is more likely that Atkinson Hill Rowan proffered the marriage proposal, rather than the youngest son John. Senator Rowan did have three sons. The eldest was William Lytle Rowan, who was born in 1802, yet William was not a lawyer and he was already married when Charlotte visited Bardstown in 1828. The two at home were Atkinson Hill Rowan, born in 1803 and John Rowan, Jr. who was born in 1807. Since John was about twenty- one when he met Charlotte, he was too young for marriage. Also, Charlotte only mentioned her cousin John Rowan in connection with her younger sister Ann Eliza, who accompanied her to Kentucky on at least one occasion: “there is not one I believe she likes as well as C. D except our cousin John (Rowan). He is one that few girls could be with and not admire.”<sup>635</sup> But she mentioned Atkinson Hill Rowan many times in her letters. He visited her at Louisville, and when she was ill he brought her a scrapbook to look over. Atkinson Hill Rowan would have been about twenty five in 1828, just the age Charlotte mentioned in her letter. She also said that this unnamed suitor was a lawyer, and Atkinson Hill Rowan was already a lawyer in 1828. ( He was studying law in 1826.)<sup>636</sup> About six months after Charlotte’s death, in April of 1830, Senator Rowan acquired a position for his son as an emissary of President Jackson in Spain, but shortly after he returned

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<sup>635</sup> Charlotte Foster to William B. Foster, Sr., June 22, 1829 (Foster Hall Collection C442 ) According the information given by Randall Capps in his biography of the Rowans, the young John Rowan was no prize husband. He married a petite southern belle seven years after Charlotte died, and fathered ten children. But he had difficulty sticking to any line of work, dueded, and drank. He died when he accidentally fell from the second story window of his home Federal Hill, apparently not sober enough to know he was sitting on the window ledge.

<sup>636</sup> Randall Capps, *The Rowan Story, from Federal Hill to My Old Kentucky Home* (Bowling Green, Ky: Homestead Press, 1976), p. 19.



home from Madrid, Atkinson Hill died when a cholera epidemic swept through Bardstown, taking the lives of eight of the Rowans on July 27, 1833. Although he was thirty when he died, he had never married. And it was this Rowan who wrote the tear stained letter to Ann Eliza describing the last hours in the life of the lovely Charlotte.<sup>637</sup>

Whether Charlotte regretted turning down Atkinson Hill Rowan's marriage proposal, if indeed he was the Rowan brother who proposed, is anyone's guess. She indicated in her letter home that she was not in love with him, but Charlotte may not have found love in her heart for any man.<sup>638</sup> Morneweck wrote that Charlotte was engaged to William Prather, the brother of her girlhood friends, but that fact is unsubstantiated. The Prathers were among the first families of Louisville, and Charlotte was impressed. In October of 1828 she described a dinner party she attended at the Prather's home: "When I speak of the "Pallace" I mean Mr. Prathers. It is call'd so and they the Royal Family." In comparison, Charlotte thought the Rowans "live in a plain but farm like way, just in sight of town." The Rowan home Federal Hill, which had been completed only ten years earlier and named for then struggling Federalist party, apparently did not impress Charlotte as much as the "Pallace."<sup>639</sup>

Morneweck wrote that William Prather paid a visit to the Fosters in Pittsburgh, suggesting that he came to ask for Charlotte's hand. Charlotte's correspondence, however, shows that William Prather was traveling east to Philadelphia to escort his sister Julia "to school to

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<sup>637</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>638</sup> Charlotte Foster to Eliza C. Foster, October 18, 1828 ( Foster Hall Collection C396).

<sup>639</sup> Foster family letters. The correspondence mentioned that Ann Eliza went horseback riding with a beaux whose named was something like Mr. Gottship.

Miss Turnbull's," at which time he was to stop at the Fosters.<sup>640</sup> There is no evidence of any proposals other than the mysterious proposal made by the unspecified Rowan brother, which Charlotte turned down. William Prather was Charlotte's beau at a party she attended, but Hill Rowan was also in attendance. She never mentioned an engagement, only that the Prathers honored her with a special party: "I had a party given expressly for me by Mrs. Prather....Indeed people in this country are too kind to me, I am afraid I shall be spoil'd."<sup>641</sup>

Charlotte returned to Pittsburgh in November of 1828, where she spent a rather unhappy winter. The Fosters by this time were having serious financial difficulties, making the situation anything but enticing for a young spirited girl who loved music and an elegant lifestyle. Consequently, when spring arrived Charlotte returned to Kentucky with Ann Eliza, ostensibly to attend the May, 1829 wedding of Matilda Prather. Afterwards, Ann Eliza returned to Pittsburgh but Charlotte stayed on in Kentucky. She seems to have lost much of her popularity and her confidence, and ended up a nursemaid to the sick Barclays. William and Eliza Foster in one of their letters advised Charlotte to reconsider the marriage proposal that "a certain person" had made the year before, but Charlotte already considered the opportunity lost: "You and my dear Father's kind advice in a letter I received at Bardstown with regard to a certain person I try to abide by, but I think you have mistaken his politeness in thinking it anything more than passing

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<sup>640</sup> Charlotte Foster to Eliza C. Foster, June 1, 1829 (Foster Hall Collection C445) William B. Foster, Jr. to Charlotte Foster, August 23, 1829 (Foster Hall Collection C445). That the Prathers visited the Fosters was also mentioned by brother William, but he was "too much engaged professionally" to have had the pleasure of "becoming acquainted with them."

<sup>641</sup> Charlotte Foster to Eliza C. Foster, October 18, 1828 (Foster Hall Collection C396).

compliment, for my own part I do not look upon him as any thing more than a friend and am very certain he is that as well as the rest of the family.”<sup>642</sup>

On September 4, 1829, Charlotte wrote one of the last letters of her brief life, this one, to her brother William. In the letter, she reflected on what appeared to be her permanent state of maidenhood: “I expect you begin to think it is almost time I was out of the way, and in a house of my own but I beg you will not be thinking there is any prospect of the kind, for I really and candidly think you have the pleasure of my company many years yet as Miss Foster, either the gentlemen are very hard to please as I am sometimes. When I reflect seriously upon the subject I come to the conclusion I certainly must be an old maid for any one who is worth having can find girls enough who possess both riches and beauty, the most powerful attractions neither of which I possess; the conclusion must be I must remain as I am or be more humble in my expectations.” Next she asked her brother for “some of the one thing needful [money]. I have repeatedly asked cousin Joshua [Barclay] and he has already been so generous to us that I cannot ask him and I will not be able to get home until I have some articles for traveling which are indispensable.”<sup>643</sup>

Charlotte died the next month at the age of nineteen with no marriage prospects in sight. It is unclear whether Charlotte could have secured a future on her musical talents or not, as it is not even clear which Rowan brother proposed marriage, nor how serious the proposal was. Neither is there evidence of a marriage proposal from William Prather or from any other men from Kentucky or Pittsburgh. In spite of all the parties Charlotte attended in Kentucky, there

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<sup>642</sup> Charlotte Foster to Eliza C. Foster, August 12, 1829 (Foster Hall Collection C440).

<sup>643</sup> Charlotte Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., September 4, 1829 (Foster Hall Collection C447).

seemed to have been few beaux with serious intentions. Charlotte's prideful balloon had burst and she was brought to face the reality of being nothing more than a poor piano girl.

Charlotte Foster, like Mary O'Hara, was indeed the well trained and accomplished piano girl who lived and died young in the first decades of the nineteenth century.<sup>644</sup> Unlike Mary O'Hara, however, Charlotte was not rich and she did not find a husband in Kentucky. Maybe she was not in love with the one man who did offer her a proposal of marriage. But Charlotte's situation was more complex than that. There is the nagging sense that talent, beauty, and musical accomplishments were not enough to make a girl marriageable in the greedy antebellum world. At the very least, the usefulness of accomplishments in acquiring a husband is certainly open to debate. Money was what really counted. The sad story of Charlotte and the image of this long lost sister playing and singing her favorite mournful melodies of the Irish balladeer Thomas Moore---- "Come, Rest in This Bosom" and "Oft in the Stilly Night" ---- lived on in the family lore of the Fosters. Charlotte became the model for the ghostlike women in Stephen Foster's sentimental songs, young ladies who floated like vapors and for whose "departed smiles the sad heart will yearn."<sup>645</sup>

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<sup>644</sup> Mary O'Hara Croghan also died young, at the age of twenty-four. She had already given birth to two children, including the famous Mary Schenley.

<sup>645</sup> "Old Memories," Saunders and Root, eds., *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Vol. I, p. 280.

## 9.0 POLITICS OF AMBIVALENCE

Of the many questions that plague the scholar of Stephen Foster, one of the most perplexing is that of the composer's politics. The only thing that can be said for certain is that members of his family were Democrats. His father and his brother Morrison were fiercely loyal to the Democratic party, but Stephen Foster's politics are more difficult to determine. All correspondence relative to the matter has been lost or destroyed. So once again, we turn to the songs, which reveal a man who vacillated between the beliefs of his overpowering family and his own personal sympathies. In Stephen Foster, we see a man whose sentimental nature made him sensitive to the sufferings of the "downtrodden," but whether the downtrodden included slaves, we do not know. Perhaps he was sensitive to the feelings of slaves, until slavery and the slaves seemed to be the cause of national dissolution. Stephen Foster, like other Democrats of his time, may have feared that the cost of saving these particular downtrodden---the destruction of the Union and civil war ---was too great a price to pay.

Another possibility is that Foster was a man with few strong political convictions, a man who was easily swayed by the political opinions of those around him. When he was in his middle twenties, he worked closely with George Shiras, the publisher of an abolitionist paper, at which time he wrote songs which were sympathetic to the slaves. A few years later, in 1856, he wrote a campaign song for presidential contender James Buchanan which attacked the abolitionists, who were represented by the opposing party, the Republicans. At the time of the 1860 presidential election, Foster wrote a song that suggested he favored the Democratic

candidate Stephen A. Douglas. Once the war began, Foster wrote pro-Union songs and he even dedicated a song to “Father Abr’am” in 1862. The following year, however, he wrote music to which his sister Henrietta set a poem eulogizing Lincoln’s enemy, the Copperhead Clement C. Vallandigham. After Lincoln welcomed black troops to fight in the Union Army, Foster wrote a minstrel song which said the “Colored Brigade” just was not worth fighting over. Indeed, the only constant in Foster’s politics was his vacillation and inconstancy. How do we account for Foster’s peculiar political vacillation? Do we simply dismiss it as part of his personality? (Remember that Edwin P. Christy had accused the composer of being a “vacillating skunk!”) Or do we try to understand his motivations in terms of the pressures put on him by the national crisis ( the approaching Civil War) and his family’s politics (Union Democrats) ?

## **9.1 FERVID DEMOCRATS**

The Republican Party emerged in 1856 with John C. Fremont as the party’s first presidential contender. They held their first national convention in Pittsburgh where they advertised themselves as the party of “free men, free labor, free soil” and captured the vote of the smoky city’s workingmen. Although these early Republicans were not abolitionists, the Fosters remained true to the Democrats, who promised to keep the Union intact and prevent civil war at all costs. If that meant leaving the South and the slaves alone, so be it. Although the Democrats were willing to go along with the demands Southerners placed on the nation and as a consequence were attacked as traitors and Copperheads, the Fosters remained fervid Democrats throughout the national crisis.

Copperhead was the insulting name that Northerners assigned to fellow Northerners, usually Democrats, who held opinions that were sympathetic to the South during the Civil War. Morrison and Henrietta Foster were definitely Copperheads, who openly attacked Lincoln's war policies. Like historian Thomas J. DiLorenzo, they questioned whether Lincoln was justified in suppressing Constitutional liberties and imprisoning men who objected to his war policies or the tactics he used to enforce them. Morrison and especially Henrietta Foster, as Peace Democrats, wanted Lincoln to end the war and stop the senseless sacrifice of young men. Like many Americans of their generation, they had family members fighting on both sides, and they would agree to any terms with the South to see the return of peace to the nation.

The Foster family's connection to the Democratic Party went back to the days when William Barclay Foster became a devoted follower of Andrew Jackson and the then new Democratic Party. The senior William Foster had his reasons, many of which were personal. When Andrew Jackson refused to renew the charter on the bank of the United States, he closed down the monstrous institution that William Foster blamed for the foreclosure of his home. But even before that time, William risked and lost a fortune outfitting Jackson for the Battle of New Orleans.

William Senior was still listed as a Federalist when his son Stephen was born. Like a later day Whig, William favored internal improvements that would increase trade and wealth in the West. Yet when the hero of New Orleans took the presidency with a new party created in the image of the Western pioneer, William Sr. got hooked. He was not bothered by the Republicans, who emerged on the scene only in the last year of William Foster's life, when he was an invalid confined to his bed. The Anti-Masons, opponents of Jackson in the 1830s, were William Foster's political enemies. The Foster men were Masons, and William Foster's correspondence is

peppered with personal vendettas against the Anti-Masons and the anti-Jackson coalitions. William Foster's politics, which seemed to be colored by the personal and the local, revealed little interest in the big national issues of the day. Yet a preference for the local over the national was not unusual for the times. Nor was a steadfast commitment to one party.

Once the Fosters were established as Democrats, they never faltered in their commitment to their party. William Foster was involved with local politics, serving as mayor of Allegheny and as state representative for Allegheny and Butler counties from 1824 to 1827. He also served in politically connected local positions, like canal commissioner, and he handled land claims and disputes for war veterans. For his personal and his family's needs, the patronage connections were absolutely essential. In the 1840s, they provided son Henry Foster with a clerkship in Washington worth about \$1200 a year, until he was turned out when the Whig President Zachary Taylor replaced Democratic President James Polk. Henry enjoyed the lively, urbane lifestyle of a Washington official, never working too hard, and partying with the belles at the local balls.<sup>646</sup>

After William Foster's death, the benefits of the Democratic connections continued to trickle down to the family. The Fosters by this time were even more firmly indebted to the Democrats because sister Ann Eliza married the young theology student Edward Buchanan, whose much older brother was James Buchanan, then United States Senator on the Democratic ticket. When Buchanan became a contender for the presidency in 1856, the Fosters got involved with the campaign. Whether or not Stephen really wanted to campaign for James Buchanan, he had little or no choice in the matter. Whereas once the family depended on brother William, they increasingly turned to sister Eliza's brother-in-law James, if not for money, then for



recommendations that would bring jobs or government positions to the Fosters. No one would deny that having a well connected brother- in- law in Washington was financially beneficial.

Like brother William, James Buchanan was much older than Stephen, almost thirty years his senior, making him more a father figure than a brother. He may have been ineffective in holding the nation together, but his Democratic political connections and even his signature brought good fortune to the Fosters. Buchanan, for example, helped Henry Foster get positioned in Washington. Although James Buchanan “declined interfering with the appointments of Allegheny County,” he did volunteer a letter of recommendation to a national post for “Henry B. Foster,” which he addressed to “His Excellency Franklin Pierce.” James Buchanan’s letter assured President Pierce that Henry was “a reliable & active Democrat, a gentleman of great respectability & highly esteemed in the city of his residence.”<sup>647</sup>

James Buchanan never married, for some strange reason that has not been clarified, and as a consequence of his permanent bachelor state, he became very close to his nieces and nephews. <sup>648</sup> As a bachelor, he lavished gifts, money, and political appointments on his impecunious relations. When his brother, the Reverend Edward Buchanan, moved to Paradise, Pennsylvania with his wife Ann Eliza, Senator James Buchanan bought them a large house, so that they could move out of the boarding house they were renting. In later years, Ann Eliza’s daughter spent a great deal of time with her president uncle, although she was not the favorite niece who lived at the White House and took over the duties of first lady. <sup>649</sup> James Buchanan set up Ann Eliza’s son and the president’s namesake James Buchanan in a clerkship in an

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<sup>647</sup> Henry Foster to William B. Foster, Jr., March 12, 1853 ( Foster Hall Collection C533). This letter is in part a copy of a letter of recommendation written by James Buchanan to President Franklin Pierce.

<sup>648</sup> Buchanan, who never married, had been engaged, but after breaking up with his fiancé, the young woman died so suddenly that people suspected she would be groomed for suicide.

<sup>649</sup> That was Harriet Lane, the daughter of Buchanan’s sister Jane.

impressive law firm in Pittsburgh. And when ex-President James Buchanan died, he left quite a large fortune to his brother Edward to be enjoyed by his wife Ann Eliza and their children.<sup>650</sup> It would have been financial suicide for the Fosters not to have campaigned for James Buchanan.

## 9.2 BUCHANAN GLEE CLUB

To help James Buchanan win the presidency in 1856, Morrison and Stephen formed the Buchanan Glee Club. Morrison was the treasurer of the club, and Stephen was its musical director. Thus Stephen's sole business with the Buchanan campaign involved writing songs and conducting a "political marching and singing band" that would hurrah! Buchanan and his running mate Kentuckian John Breckinridge into the highest office in the land. Music and midnight torch light parades were as important in bringing in the votes as anything else in the nineteenth century, and probably more important than ideology.<sup>651</sup>

The new Republican party, which held its first national convention two years before in Pittsburgh, conducted midnight parades that were even louder and more boisterous than the parades the Democrats put on. The Democrats may have filled the night air with the clang of brass instruments, and the irritating sounds of off key, inebriated singers, but the Republicans had their own noisy parades, whose tactics Meade Minnigerode described in *Presidential Years*:

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<sup>650</sup>Morrison Foster, "Morrison Foster's Scrapbook," Stephen Foster Memorial, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pa.

<sup>651</sup> Meade Minnigerode, *Presidential Years* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1928), quoted by Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 474.

The campaign went on, in a blare of Fremont torchlight parades in the North; political clubs which marched from town to town, from one huge mass meeting to another, recalling the Whig processions of 1840...giving the famous new staccato cheer, distributing handbills, shouting for “Bleeding Kansas” and for “Free Labor, Free speech, Free Men, Free Kansas and Fremont,” drowning out the Buck and Breck[inridge] of the Democratic Buchaneers with the promise to “take the Buck by the horns...And the Democrats laughed at the Republicans “shrieks for freedom,” and made a point of decorum and quiet dignity.<sup>652</sup>

It is not certain just how decorous the Fosters’ Glee Club Democrats were. Billy Hamilton, a member of the Buchanan Glee Club, described the club’s serenading experience in Lawrenceville, when the Democratic “serenaders” got into a fight with men from the volunteer fire department, who were obviously affiliated with the opposing political party:

In a twinkling, our peaceful body of serenaders was transformed into a howling mob. Foster, his brother [Morrison], myself and other vocalists hastened out of the crowd. We were all too small for our ages and had no business around where any fighting was going on. We always left that to our body guard and they protected us most effectually in that case. None of us was hurt, and few of the members of the guard suffered but the firemen were completely routed and driven back into their headquarters. They had attacked the wrong crowd that time.<sup>653</sup>

The firemen were probably affiliated with the nativists, and campaigning for the Republicans or for Millard Fillmore’s American party. The latter attracted voters from the anti-Catholic and anti-foreign cadre which was large in Pittsburgh. Many of the nativists were violently opposed to the Democrats who traditionally represented foreigners and Catholics.<sup>654</sup>

Stephen Foster wrote the words to a Buchanan campaign song entitled “The Great Baby Show or the Abolition Show.” He fitted the words to a popular tune, “Villikins and his

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<sup>652</sup> *Ibid.*, quoted by Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 474.

<sup>653</sup> *Pittsburgh Press*, July 11, 1895, by William (Billy)Hamilton, quoted by Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 475.

<sup>654</sup> Nineteenth century voting practices were traditionally based on ethnic and religious affiliation rather than on policy or ideology. The Democrats in the mid-nineteenth century attracted Catholics and foreigners, while the Protestants and native born Americans voted Whig. See Michael F. Holt’s *Forging a Majority: the Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh 1848-1860* for details about the voting habits of Pittsburghers.

Dinah,”<sup>655</sup> a song everyone would have known well enough to sing along with. This was unusual for Foster, who sometimes used the poems that others had written, but who always wrote his own music. The object of attack in the song was the abolitionists, but what really goaded Foster on was the huge procession the Republicans staged on September 17, 1856. It reportedly attracted some 100,000 spectators and participants, and Stephen went out of his way to satirize and attack the Republicans’ handiwork. Stephen Foster and the Democrats attacked the Republicans on many issues, but most viciously and insultingly for being abolitionists.

In addition to verbal attacks on the abolitionists, “The Great Baby Show or the Abolition Show” suggested several other denigrations. In the mid-nineteenth century, baby shows, where parents proudly paraded their new offspring, were a popular form of competitive amusement. Foster took advantage of the baby show idea by suggesting that many of the followers of the Republican party were mere youths, who did not know what they were doing. Foster expressed the antagonisms of his geographic area and of his politics, as he lashed out in the song at “gemmen ob color,” whom he lumped together with “jokers and clowns.” Foster tried to insult the Fremont crowd, saying “they had young men on horseback, so nice and so gay, Aged Seventeen years on this Seventeenth Day.” The Republican procession also had “grim border ruffians,” the abolitionists who attacked and murdered the pro-slavery families in Kansas. In addition, Foster’s song lashed out at people of New England stock, which was a common prejudice among Midwesterners.

They had Ohio Yankees of Western Reserve,  
Who live upon cheese, ginger cakes and preserves.

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<sup>655</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 477.

Abolition's their doctrine, their rod and their staff.

And they'll fight for a six pence an hour and a half.<sup>656</sup>

Evelyn Morneweck explained the Midwesterner's distaste for Yankees:

Stephen's sarcastic reference to Ohio Yankees of Western Reserve is based on the fact that the northern section of Ohio was originally owned by the state of Connecticut and was known as the Western Reserve. This largest element among the early settlers of this reserve were the Connecticut Yankees from the mother state. They were thrifty, hard working people who gained for themselves a reputation for drawing a hard bargain. Hence, Stephen's scornful line, "They'll fight for a six pence an hour and a half." Moreover, the term Yankee was one of reproach to the Union Democrats of Pennsylvania or Ohio, as it was associated, in their minds, exclusively with the abolitionists of New England, and they resented most emphatically the Southern custom of lumping all Northerners under the name. It takes a long time for sectional animosities to die out, and even many years after the Civil War, if you wanted to get a rise out of a Pennsylvania Democrat, all you had to do was call him a Yankee.<sup>657</sup>

What was really bothering Stephen Foster was that the Fremont procession of September 17, 1856 was a phenomenal success, and coming so close as it did to the November 4th election date, he and the other Democrats must have realized that they were in trouble. The Republicans had attracted working class men, traditionally the constituents of the Democrats, and they would be the determining factor in Allegheny County's vote. So Foster had lashed out in a nasty campaign song, using the weapon he could best handle. The *Pittsburgh Gazette* said the procession was "successful even beyond the most sanguine anticipation of the warmest friends of the cause of Freedom." It was "the greatest political convention of the people, ever held in Western Pennsylvania, and probably in this State." On Wednesday, the 17th of September, "every avenue leading to the city was crowded with every description of conveyance," as trainloads of people from the outlying areas augmented the size of the local Fremont crowds.

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<sup>656</sup> Saunders and Root, ed. *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Vol. II, pp. 12, 13.

<sup>657</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 480.

“The windows of every house on the line of the procession were crowded with ladies, waving banners and handkerchiefs,” and the streets were decorated with brightly colored flags and decorative “mottoes.” The procession represented “nearly every profession, art, trade and employment,” but the tradesmen took the starring roles. “The stalwart blacksmith was hammering out his iron, the carpenter was pushing his plane, the moulder was preparing his moulds, the engine builder was turning his lathe”<sup>658</sup>

The motley crowd of humanity that made up the procession was estimated to have extended from seven to nine miles in length, moving cumbersomely down the streets of Pittsburgh at the rate of 3 miles per hour. Included in the actual procession were at least 10,000 people, 1700 horses, and 400 wagons and vehicles of every kind. Most irritating to Stephen and Morrison Foster was probably that the Fremont people set up their convention on the North Commons, in Allegheny, right in the Fosters’ own neighborhood. Four stands were set up, with speakers busy at every one. Stores and shops were shut up for the occasion, and manufactories closed down. The *Pittsburgh Gazette* found the key to Fremont’s success in Pittsburgh’s workingmen:

Our convention was a great success. It has cheered the hearts of the friends of Freedom and carried dismay into the ranks of the Pro-slavery party. The procession gave unmistakable evidence that the workingmen, the mechanics, the farmers, and the laborers are with us. Only one week ago, the Buchanan men, after the labor of weeks, held a convention, and their procession contained only some fifteen hundred persons, with a few banners and no exhibition of the trades, or manifestation that the masses were interested in their cause.<sup>659</sup>

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<sup>658</sup>*Pittsburgh Gazette*, September 18, 1856.

<sup>659</sup>*Ibid.*, September 17, 1856.

Foster's second campaign song, "The White House Chair," which was published in the *Pittsburgh Post* on September 29, 1856, reflected the concern which was paramount in the minds of Northern Democrats, the threat of disunion:

Let all our hearts for Union be,  
For the North and South are one;  
They've worked together manfully,  
And together they will still work on.  
Then come ye men from ev'ry state,  
Our creed is broad and fair;  
Buchanan is our candidate  
And we'll put him in the White House Chair.<sup>660</sup>

Foster's anti-abolition and pro-union songs reflected the themes and fears that appeared over and over again in 1856 in the Democratic newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Post*. Pittsburgh Democrats feared that abolition would allow thousands of freed slaves to move into Pittsburgh and take jobs away from whites. One newspaper article warned about the slaves, "They are mechanics!," while another suggested that abolition would lead to a reduction in wages for the white workers who would have to work for abolitionist wages. The Democrats tried to put themselves on record as favoring freedom: "Could slavery be abolished and the negroes removed to a separate home and country we would rejoice at it," they cried out sympathetically, but in the end economics ruled. Abolition, they feared, "would be to subject the white laboring classes to an irresistible and most ruinous competition with cheap negro labor."<sup>661</sup> The white working class also feared social equality and racial amalgamation. They did not want to see that [black] "children shall go to the same schools with the white children. That their men shall labor

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<sup>660</sup> Saunders and Root, ed. *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Vol. II, p. 11.

<sup>661</sup> *Pittsburgh Post*, November 1856.

together in the same occupations....That their people shall mingle in the same churches ... That they shall go to the ballot boxes together.”<sup>662</sup>

Stephen Foster could attack the abolitionists in a Democratic campaign song because the Democrats of Pittsburgh viewed the abolitionists as bloodthirsty fanatics and madmen who would stop at nothing to have their way, neither murder, mayhem, nor fratricidal warfare.<sup>663</sup> They blamed the warfare in Kansas on the abolitionists, who, they said, had no respect for the law of the land, which was popular sovereignty, a doctrine acceptable to many Democrats.<sup>664</sup> “Nothing but grim visaged war will suit abolition and pro-slavery agitators,” warned the Democrats, “for without their pabulum...they will sink to the level of peaceful citizens and be heard of no more!”<sup>665</sup>

In spite of the economic ruin, civil war, and bloodshed that the Democrats predicted, the Fremont Republicans won in Allegheny County because of the vote of working class men. The main strategy of the Republicans was to prove that the Democrats attacked free labor. The Republicans emphasized the idea that Southerners thought labor was something only black slaves were supposed to do, and this turned the workingmen and tradesmen of Pittsburgh, who were a powerful constituency in Allegheny County in 1856, towards Fremont’s camp. The *Gazette* quoted a South Carolinian gentleman who said that “Slavery is the natural and normal condition of laboring man, whether white or black.” He even said working men were not “fit for self-government.” In the end, the Republicans denounced the Democratic party for being “so

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<sup>662</sup> *Ibid.*, November 1856.

<sup>663</sup> *Ibid.*, March 1857.

<sup>664</sup> *Ibid.*, September 16, 1856.

<sup>665</sup> *Pittsburgh Post*, March 29, 1856



thoroughly under Southern control..... that Southern hatred of free labor becomes its most prominent characteristic.”<sup>666</sup>

The 1856 presidential election in Pittsburgh came down to whether slavery or freedom would prevail. “Where slavery rules, men decay! Where labor is in disgrace, and under the lash, freemen languish.” <sup>667</sup> Some historians believed that an anti-Catholic bias in Pittsburgh was the key to the victory of the Republicans in Allegheny in 1856, but contemporary newspapers point to a different factor.<sup>668</sup> When the *Gazette* quoted a Southern Democrat who called Northerners “Greasy Mechanics, filthy operatives .....struggling to be genteel, and small farmers who do their own drudgery,” that was more than the men of Pittsburgh would take. The following day, the Republican newspaper reported that Allegheny County “has probably given over 5,000 majority for Fremont. We can hurrah over our own county, if over nothing else.” <sup>669</sup> James Buchanan won the presidency in 1856 because he appeared to be the compromise candidate, “a national man equally acceptable to both North and South...” and the mindset of Americans in the 1850s was geared towards compromise. <sup>670</sup>

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<sup>666</sup> *Pittsburgh Gazette*, “The War Upon Free Labor,” September 13, 1866, and *Pittsburgh Gazette*, September 17, 1856.

<sup>667</sup> *Ibid.*, November 4, 1856.

<sup>668</sup> This is the argument found in Michael Holt’s *Forging a Majority: the Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848-1860*.

<sup>669</sup> *Pittsburgh Gazette*, November 4, 1856.

<sup>670</sup> *Pittsburgh Morning Post*, April 3, 1856.

### 9.3 CHARLES SHIRAS, ABOLITIONIST FRIEND

If Foster's song "The Great Baby Show" sounded vicious, it should be remembered that campaign songs in the mid-nineteenth century were expected to be. Yet there seemed to be something personal at work here. For only a few years back Stephen Foster had flirted with the antislavery cause, when he was involved in a close personal and professional relationship with the Pittsburgh abolitionist Charles Shiras. A boyhood friend of Stephen and Morrison, Shiras was one of the "nice young men"<sup>671</sup> and one of the Knights of the Square table who gathered frequently for evening musical soirees in the Allegheny homes of the neighborhood boys. It was for these gatherings that Stephen had composed his first minstrel songs. Foster renewed his friendship with Charles Shiras when they were grown men, living within a few blocks of each other in Allegheny. Shiras had married and fathered a child, but he still lived with his mother in her house. He invested in real estate unsuccessfully, while he wrote poetry and published two weekly newspapers. One, *The Evening Day Book*, was "more literary in nature" and may have served as a venue for his own poetry. The *Albatross*, which Shiras introduced in 1847, was an abolitionist newspaper. Shiras was the champion of the oppressed, the white workingman and the black slave.<sup>672</sup>

Shiras' best known poems were "The Popular Credo," more popularly known as "Dimes and Dollars," which was a labor manifesto, and the antislavery poem "The Blood Hound's Song." Shiras wrote the latter song in October of 1850 in reaction to the new Fugitive Slave Law that was enacted to propitiate Southerners when the Compromise of 1850 was being

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<sup>635</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 283.

<sup>672</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 406

hammered out. The new law demanded that people in the free states assist in the arrest of any black or mulatto suspected of being an escaped slave. The law, which was greeted with outrage by most Northerners, contributed greatly to the ultimate failure of the Compromise, and carved out an indelible passage way to Civil War. “Dimes and Dollars” was a marvelous poem, and the publisher W. H. Whitney included it in a collection of Shiras’ poetry entitled *The Redemption of Labor* that he published in 1852, the same year that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s masterpiece *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* went to press.<sup>673</sup>

Mid-century America, in addition to seeing the turmoil of the slavery issue bubble to the surface, was also the time of embryonic labor struggles, which were already evident in Allegheny City and Pittsburgh. Industrialization had long before refashioned Pittsburgh into a new and sootier image, increasingly peopled by immigrant groups of diverse ethnicities who labored in the city’s new and ever expanding factories. The struggle for the slave’s emancipation was ultimately tied to the struggle for the dignity and rights of free white labor, evidenced by the fact that the new Republican party which was associated with abolitionism had as its slogan “free soil, free labor, free men.”<sup>674</sup>

Jane McDowell Foster claimed that Stephen composed music for “Dimes and Dollars!” or “The Popular Credo” but that the song was never published. It is possible that the publishers turned it down because it was too radical and threatened to cause a disturbance between Pittsburgh’s capitalists and working class laborers.

“Dimes and Dollars! Dollars and Dimes!  
An empty pocket’s the worst of crimes!  
If a man is down, give him a thrust  
Trample the beggar into the dust!

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<sup>673</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 406, 431.

<sup>674</sup> Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: the Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970, 1995. This is the theme of the book.

Presumptuous poverty's quite appalling,  
Knock him over! Kick him for falling!  
If a man is up, Oh! Lift him higher  
Your soul's for sale, and here's a buyer!<sup>675</sup>

Charles Shiras met the abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Frederick Douglass when they came to Pittsburgh in 1847 to gauge a sense of antislavery's strength in the city and to gather recruits for their cause. Shiras met Garrison for a hike in the hills of New Brighton, Pennsylvania, just north of Allegheny City,<sup>676</sup> at which time Shiras was inspired to start his own antislavery weekly, the *Albatross*. The paper was short lived, although it was picked up later and reinvented under the editorship of Pittsburgher Jane Gray Swisshelm as the antislavery paper *The Saturday Visiter*[sic].<sup>677</sup> Foster maintained a close relationship with Shiras from 1850-1853, the years when he published "Old Folks at Home" and "My Old Kentucky Home."

Shiras' daughter Rebecca, who was only two at the time of her father's death, believed that her father provided the words to some of Foster's greatest plantation songs. She informed the reporter from the *Leader* who interviewed her in 1879: "I know that it [ "Old Folks at Home' ] was composed in this very house, between the years 1850 and 1852. My father and Foster were fast friends, the latter spending nearly all his time at our house. Foster would compose the music and my father the words, but in all cases Foster was forbidden in any way to attach my father's name to the songs, as father, or in fact, no one else at that time, considered them worth anything, and he would not allow his name to appear in connection with any such

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<sup>675</sup> Charles P. Shiras, "The Popular Credo," *The Redemption of Labor* (Pittsburgh: W.H. Whitney, 1852) quoted by Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 431.

<sup>676</sup> Ken Emerson, *Doo-dah! Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture* ( New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), pp. 121-122.

<sup>677</sup> Arthur J. Larsen, *Crusader and Feminist: letters of Jane Gray Swisshelm, 1858-1865* (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1934)

trash.” Charles Shiras’ mother reaffirmed the idea: “I know my son wrote many of the songs and helped to write many more of the songs. Right in that front room yonder he and Stephen would sit night after night...”<sup>678</sup>

Exactly how much Shiras contributed to Stephen’s plantation songs may never be known, but the conclusion drawn by Charles Shiras’ nephew George Shiras, III probably provides the best solution to the mystery: “The *Leader* interview as a whole gives the impression that Stephen Foster came often to the Shiras house over a period of years and that a good deal of work went on there. Thus it is at least possible to suppose that Stephen consulted or worked with Charles on the words for a number of the songs.”<sup>679</sup> Charles Shiras died in 1854, a young man cut down in the prime of his life. It is encouraging to think that Shiras’ life served a broader purpose in influencing Stephen Foster to look more sympathetically upon the antislavery cause, and as a result, to mark his greatest plantation songs with a subtle antislavery trajectory. Shiras’ daughter contended that the composer spent “nearly all his time at our house,” and it is unlikely that the two “nice young men” could have spent so many hours together without a transferal of ideas. Furthermore, the sentiment of the songs suggests that it was Shiras who had the upper hand, at least for a while, in countering the influence of Foster’s conservative Democratic family.

Stephen Foster did collaborate with Charles Shiras on a ballad type song “Annie, My Own Love,” in the spring of 1853. But Shiras’ words did not suit the light heartedness of Stephen’s music, according to Morneweck, and the song did not sell well. Stephen shared with Shiras whatever royalties the song did bring in, but he must have been convinced not to

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<sup>678</sup> *The Leader*, February 23, 1879, quoted in George Shiras III, *Justice George Shiras of Pittsburgh* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1953), p. 18.

<sup>679</sup> Shiras III, *Justice George Shiras of Pittsburgh*, pp. 16-18.

collaborate with Shiras on any more parlor ballads. In November of that same year, however, Shiras and Foster did collaborate on a big musical show, or “spectacle” as the more flamboyant musicals were known. The show was called *The Invisible Prince or the War of the Amazons*, at a time when books often had two alternative titles. The play had three performances from November 9 through November 11, 1853, at Foster’s Theater in Pittsburgh, run by a Joseph C. Foster, who had no known connection to the Foster family. The performance of November 11th was reserved as a benefit performance for Charles Shiras, whose health was failing and who needed money for the support of his widowed mother and young wife. All the proceeds in the benefit performance were to go to Shiras. “The Knights of the Square Table [Foster’s friends from his youth in Allegheny] made a gala affair of Shiras’s benefit and they all sold tickets to everyone who could be induced to buy them.” The show was held over for a few additional days, playing into the middle of the next week, and according to the review, “turned out admirable.”<sup>680</sup>

*The Invisible Prince* was followed immediately at Foster’s Theater with a performance of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, making its premier appearance in Pittsburgh on November 17, 1853. Musical selections incorporated in the stage adaptation of Harriet Beecher’s Stowe’s novel included Foster’s “My Old Kentucky Home” and “Old Folks at Home.” Whether or not it was propaganda to promote the show, the *Dispatch* on November 22, 1853 advised the public to visit the performance “before Judge Grier issues his injunction against its further performance.” “An attempt was said to have been made to close the show because of its tendency to stir up

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<sup>680</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 436

sympathy for the negro slaves, give offense to the people of the South, and bring into disrepute the institution of slavery.”<sup>681</sup>

Morneweck believed that Foster’s songs when performed in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* enhanced the crusading power of the play; hence she credited her uncle with unwittingly promoting the antislavery cause. “The singing of Stephen’s negro melodies in the Pittsburgh, and probably in all other productions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as long before the Civil War as 1853, indicates that these tender, sorrowful compositions helped to create sympathy for the colored people, and added to the great influence of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s play.”<sup>682</sup> Shiras died shortly after collaborating with Foster on the production of *The Invisible Prince*.

With Shiras’ passing, so passed Stephen’s interest in antislavery. By 1856, when James Buchanan was running for President of the United States and Stephen Foster was writing songs for his brother-in-law’s campaign, the composer reversed himself and attacked the Republican abolitionists so vehemently that it appears that something other than politics was driving him. Possibly the composer was venting his personal frustrations over the deaths in the family and his insecure financial situation. Stephen’s mother and father were dead. His brother Dunning Foster died in March of 1856, from complications from the disease he had contracted while serving in the Mexican American War. In all probability, Stephen Foster was nearly broke because he had written almost nothing in 1856 and only a few songs during the previous year with all the deaths in the family. It is not unusual for unconscious psychological motivations to determine the conscious actions of a man.

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<sup>681</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 438

<sup>682</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 439.

The Buchanan campaign may have served as a diversion for the entire Foster family, shielding them from painful thoughts of their recent losses. “It was a good thing for all the Fosters that the excitement of the presidential campaign came along to turn their thoughts forcibly outward and away from their recent losses,” Morneweck suggested.<sup>683</sup> The Buchanan campaign kept Stephen Foster busy, but it did not make him productive in a way that would solve his monetary problems. In the six months following the death of his father, Foster published just two songs, “The Village Maiden” and “Comrades, Fill No Glass for Me.” The Maiden song was a sorrowful tale of a young bride that ends with the tolling of the funeral bell. The second song was an interesting case of self expression and a temperance song at the same time. The words appear to be highly confessional. Foster’s parents were dead, but he felt that he had failed to live up to the expectations they had placed “in their child.” He was depressed and guilt stricken.

When I was young I felt the tide,  
Of aspirations undefiled,  
But manhood’s years have wronged the pride,  
My parents centered in their child.<sup>684</sup>

After brother Dunning’s death was added to the macabre list later in the year, Foster lost sight of his Muse. Even the song he tried to compose to commemorate the memory of his dead brother remained incomplete, just a few lines in his manuscript book: “Blow light, ye wandering zephyrs, ye willows, gently wave, Let peace forever linger, Around my brother’s grave.”

Yet peace did not come to Stephen Foster in 1856. He was the head of the house on the East Common where he was living with his wife and daughter, but he fretted over finances and

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<sup>683</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 474.

<sup>684</sup> Saunders and Root, eds., *The Music of Stephen C. Foster, Vol. I*, p. 450.



his inability to produce. With an income dependent on royalties, he had to produce at least a dozen new songs in a year to make the contract worthwhile, and yet he produced almost nothing that year. Perhaps his father William left him with a little money to carry him through the year, which may have enabled him to squander some of his time for a while, or he may simply have been too disturbed to write. With a heavy heart, fretting over finances and personal losses, Stephen vented his frustration in song at the new Republican party and the abolitionists. All in all, it appears that Stephen Foster's involvement in the Buchanan Glee Club was very little motivated by politics and was rather a chance to drown out his sorrows in musical participation, drink, and boisterous merriment. But first and foremost, it was a financially motivated familial obligation.

#### **9.4 PITTSBURGH'S SOUTHERN CONNECTIONS**

The Fosters in 1856 voted the Democratic ticket when the majority of Allegheny County voted for Fremont and the Republicans. Besides the family connection to James Buchanan and the fact that the Fosters were longstanding Democrats, there were other reasons for their political allegiance. Especially for Morrison Foster, a vote for Buchanan meant taking a stand for the South. Morrison was an old time Pittsburgher who could not forget that the city had for years maintained successful economic connections with the South. Of course, Morrison had personal connections to the South through the cotton industry, but Pittsburgh's business relationship with the South had been established years earlier. When the Allegheny Mountains formed an insurmountable barrier for trade with the East, before the canals and the railroads redirected Pittsburgh's commercial focus, Pittsburgh looked to the West for its trading partners. As

Catherine Elizabeth Reiser explained, “Instead of relying upon the East as a market, people on the western side of the mountains looked to Pittsburgh for economic leadership. The region, consequently, had more in common with the Mississippi Valley than with the East, and all eyes turned Westward. The Mississippi River system was the common bond which united Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania to the West, and this attachment persisted until internal improvements made possible cheap transportation eastward.”<sup>685</sup>

Reiser could just as easily have written of Pittsburgh’s “strong attachment to the South” rather than the West, because it amounted to the same thing. From the vantage point of the impending Civil War, Pittsburgh’s relations with the South are of more interest. Since the city’s initial trading contacts were made by the rivers which ran South, Pittsburghers developed business and leisure relationships with the South early on. Like Cincinnatians, they believed that their economic well being depended on maintaining good relations with their Southern brethren, and they flirted with the South in a dangerous fashion until mid-century.

Pittsburgh was connected to the South through her cotton industry, which grew at a phenomenal rate until about 1850. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the city had more than a half-dozen cotton mills, most of which were located in Allegheny City. These mills had a rather large demand for cotton, thus creating a linchpin connecting the northern city with the South. In 1800, the textile business in Pittsburgh was valued at less than \$50,000. By 1826, the year of Stephen Foster’s birth, over a million yards of cotton cloth were being manufactured in Pittsburgh.<sup>686</sup> By 1850, there were five large cotton factories plus many smaller ones, that

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<sup>685</sup>Catherine Elizabeth Reiser, *Pittsburgh’s Commercial Development, 1800-1850* ( Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1951) p.2

<sup>686</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

consumed 15,000 bales of cotton annually and produced yarns, sheeting, batting, and other cotton manufactures amounting to \$1.5 million. The cotton industry was an important part of Pittsburgh manufacturing. Eleven window glass factories accounted for only \$600,000 in products in 1850, less than half of the value of what the textile companies produced. Only iron out-produced cotton in Pittsburgh at mid-century, with forty-five large iron establishments that employed over 5,000 men and produced \$6.5 millions worth of iron products.<sup>687</sup>

As the South increasingly devoted itself to cotton production and Pittsburgh to her manufactures, trade between the South and Pittsburgh only increased. Yet by 1860 Pittsburgh had turned the city's commercial focus away from the South and instead toward the East.

This redirection had to do with the development of canals and railroads. In 1825 construction began on the Erie Canal, which connected the major waterways of the East to the those of the West, and the next year Pennsylvanians started construction on their own Pennsylvania State System of canals. This 395 mile system of canals and railroads cut travel time from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh down to five or six days and made it as cheap to transport goods in an eastern direction as it had been to ship goods south to New Orleans.<sup>688</sup> Twenty-five years later, the railroad made the canal system obsolete. By 1852, complete railroad connection opened up between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, bringing the East and the West even closer. Stephen Foster's brother William was influential in "creating a corporation to construct a railroad from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh..... strongly resisted as it was from certain quarters."<sup>689</sup> The canals, together with the railroads, served a very important function in that they redirected

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<sup>687</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.191-2

<sup>688</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>689</sup> *Pennsylvania Railroad Men's News*, August 1897, Vol. 9, No. 8, p. 261.

the focus of Pittsburgh's commerce from the South to the East. Ultimately, this commercial redirection affected a political reorientation by ensuring the allegiance of Pittsburgh and the Midwest to the North during the Civil War.

In addition to Morrison's and Pittsburgh's historical ties to the South through business interests, the Fosters' devotion to the Democratic party may have had something to do with religion. In the nineteenth century political affiliations were often based more on ethnic and religious identity than on ideology. The Democratic Party was the one favored by immigrants and Irish Catholics, and the Fosters had Scotch Irish Presbyterian ancestry on William Barclay's side. But Eliza Clayland, who was raised in the Episcopalian Church in Maryland, was fond of Catholics too, and even sent her daughter Charlotte to a Catholic school in the East that had been established by the sainted Sister Elizabeth Seton when Eliza herself was a girl in Baltimore.<sup>690</sup> The Fosters living in Allegheny City also had friends who were foreigners, like the German born musician Henry Kleber. Since the Republican Party had absorbed the remnants of the old American Party and the anti-foreign Know-Nothings, the Republicans were clearly identified as anti-Catholic and anti-foreign, and the Fosters would not vote that ticket.<sup>691</sup>

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<sup>690</sup>Foster family letter, September 26, 1828 C399. Charlotte Foster was impressed by the Catholic Cathedral in Bardstown, Kentucky, which she described as "the finest public building I have seen, since our own Church."

<sup>691</sup>Michael Fitzgibbon Holt, *Forging a Majority: the Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh 1848-1860* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969)

## 9.5 THE SHANGHAI CHICKEN SONG

John C. Fremont did not win the national election in 1856, but four years later Abraham Lincoln became the first Republican in a long line of them to take the White House. Allegheny County once again voted whole heartedly for the Republicans, but this time all the free states of the North did as well. It was not that Lincoln was so popular ( he won only forty percent of the popular vote), but that the South had broken up the Democratic Party, making a Republican victory a foregone conclusion. There were now four contenders for the presidency: Stephen A. Douglas, the Northern Democratic candidate; John C. Breckinridge, the South's own Democratic candidate ( who only four years early had threatened disunion); John Bell, the Constitutional Union Party candidate; and, of course, Abraham Lincoln on the Republican ticket. Without some miraculous intervention, Lincoln had to win, even without taking a away and establish their own country, something they had been threatening for thirty years.

If Stephen Foster voted at all in this election, he probably placed his “bet” on Stephen Douglas, the moderate Democratic candidate who stood in the middle of “de ring” politically, somewhere between the pro-Southern Breckinridge and the radical Lincoln. Far and wide, Douglas was the choice of New Yorkers, where he was especially popular with the Irish Catholics. Fernando Wood, the Democratic mayor of the city, and even his Democratic competitors from the Tammany group wanted Douglas. “The Little Giant received twice as many votes in Manhattan as did Lincoln, although the Republicans carried New York State.”<sup>692</sup> Douglas would have appealed to Stephen Foster because he was a Democrat who was in favor of maintaining the union at all costs. Even though his Kansas Nebraska Act proved to be the most

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<sup>692</sup> George J. Lankewich, *American Metropolis, A History of New York City* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), p. 100.

volatile legislation leading up to the Civil War, Douglas managed to maintain his image as a compromise candidate. He was responsible for implementing the Compromise of 1850, and ten years later, as the nation moved relentlessly toward war, he tried to arrange a compromise that would keep the South in the Union without bloodshed. Slavery was not a moral issue for Douglas but one of expediency. If he personally disliked the institution, he did not place it above the Constitution or the Union.<sup>693</sup>

That Stephen Foster cast his ballot or even favored Douglas is an assumption based on one of his minstrel songs. “Don’t Bet your Money on de Shanghai” published in 1861, was one of Foster’s last contributions to the minstrel genre. The piece appears to be enigmatic unless a political interpretation is allowed. Seeing the song as political satire also clues us into a new understanding of Stephen Foster, as a man who probably enjoyed a good laugh from behind the symbolism he engaged in his song. He may have felt that this was a safe and clever way for a composer, who preferred to be non-committal, to deal with politics. He may also have sensed that it allowed him freedom of political expression in the face of big brother Morrison.

In 1859, a San Francisco criminal named Johnny Devine made headlines in the national newspapers with the sobriquet “Shanghai Chicken” because he scratched and clawed his victims to a particularly vicious end. He was a young New York tough who was himself shanghaied to the San Francisco waterfront where he became a leader of the gangs that supplied the captains of the merchant’s ships with unwilling sailors. The waterfront was then the most dangerous part of San Francisco, and journalists around the nation were fascinated with its stories. In later years

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<sup>693</sup> Gerald M. Capers, *Stephen A. Douglas, Defender of the Union* ( Boston: Little, Brown Publishers, 1959).

Devine lost his hand in a bar room brawl, but he replaced it with a functional hook that made him even more feared and dangerous. He was hanged in the 1870s after he shot a German sailor.<sup>694</sup>

Foster adopted the name of this popular figure of the underworld for his song “Don’t Bet Your Money on de Shanghai.” Firth, Pond, and Company published it in 1861 with a large rooster pictured on the title page. The song ostensibly involved a moneyed bet on the results of a cock fight, and what appeared to be a lot of nonsense. Foster wrote “De shanghai’s tall but his appetite is small, He’ll only swallow ebry thing that he can overhaul.” Johnny Devine, the waterfront tough, was not a tall man, but Abraham Lincoln was. Lincoln became the new president in 1861, the year the song was published, he was 6’4,” and many feared he was about to “overhaul” the Constitution and the institutions of the South. Foster, politically moderate, advised, “Take de little chicken in de middle ob de ring, But don’t bet your money on de Shanghai.” The little chicken could have been the Northern Democratic candidate Stephen A. Douglas. In contrast to the lengthy Lincoln, Douglas was 5’5” and stood “in de middle ob de ring” on politics, in comparison with the extremes of the Republican Lincoln and the Kentuckian John C. Breckinridge.

Betting on the outcome of political elections was not new to the Foster boys, who as members of the Knights of the Square Table and even as young men placed bets “on every possible occasion” over electoral results. Morrison Foster bet “a new pair of boots” on who would become Canal Commissioner one year and on who would win the presidential election in 1852.<sup>695</sup> Similarly, the idea of portraying presidential hopefuls as clawing and scratching

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<sup>694</sup>Information on Johnny Devine from internet sources for “Shanghai Chicken.” San Francisco History, The Barbary Coast, Ch. 9 “God Help the Poor Sailor.” <http://www.sfgenealogy.com/sf/history/hbtbc9.htm>

<sup>695</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 428.

roosters was not a novel idea. An 1844 political cartoon portrayed the contending presidential candidates for that year's election in just such form. The cartoon entitled "Political Cock Fighters" showed two roosters engaged in mortal combat with outstretched wings and flying feathers, but in the place of the roosters' heads, the cartoonist had drawn in the faces of the candidates Henry Clay and James K. Polk. Standing around the ring were other famous political figures, including Daniel Webster, who said, "I'll bet one of my best Chowders on the Kentucky Rooster."<sup>696</sup> If the Shanghai Chicken was meant to be Lincoln, then Foster was wrong when he said that the Shanghai Chicken "can't fight a bit." He fought for four bloody years.

Foster was living in New York City during Lincoln's presidential campaign and election. After reviewing the songs the composer wrote while he lived in New York, it is possible to conclude that his politics followed the convoluted pattern that New Yorkers took during the early 1860s. Like most New Yorkers, Stephen Foster favored Douglas, the Northern Democratic candidate who stood in "de middle" politically, but once Lincoln won the election, Stephen Foster and his fellow New Yorkers stood by their President. Foster wrote soldier songs for the Union boys, and when Lincoln needed more soldiers in 1862 to volunteer their services and their lives, he wrote "We are Coming Father Abr'aam, 300,000 Strong," which he dedicated to the President. In the same year, Foster produced "That's What's the Matter" which blamed Southerners for turning into a "rebel crew." Late in 1862, however, after Lincoln had announced the Emancipation Proclamation and many New Yorkers turned against the President, Foster supplied the music for a Copperhead campaign song entitled "Sound the Rally" that his sister Henrietta composed. After Lincoln advocated employing blacks in the army, Foster wrote the

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<sup>696</sup>"Political Cock Fighters," 1844, from article by Gary J. Kornblith, "Rethinking the Coming of the Civil War: A Counterfactual Exercise," from *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 90, No. 1 ( June 2003), p. 82. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division (LC-USZ62-1972)



music to a comic minstrel song which expressed the sentiment held by many working class New Yorkers that blacks were not worth the destruction of the Union. The only constancy to be found in Foster's politics seems to be that the composer reflected the vacillating political opinions of his fellow New Yorkers during the Civil War.<sup>697</sup>

## 9.6 MORRISON FOSTER'S VOTE AND COTTON

Morrison Foster, in contrast to his brother Stephen, voted for John C. Breckinridge, the Democratic candidate for the South. The more we learn about the Fosters' family connection to James Buchanan, however, this fact begins to appear less surprising, but still no less odious.<sup>698</sup> Even the Democrats in the North viewed Breckinridge voters as traitors, because it was apparent that the Breckinridge vote would be useless and only serve to bring the Republicans to power. The *Pittsburgh Post* pleaded with its readers just before Lincoln's election to vote for Stephen Douglas. The paper called Breckinridge a traitor to the party and the country because, the editorial exclaimed, a Republican victory was just what the Southerners wanted. It would give them the choice of secession. The writer claimed, "If Mr. Breckinridge had not been nominated,

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<sup>697</sup> The Draft Riot in July of 1863 showed the attitude of New Yorkers towards blacks after Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation and the draft. Blacks in New York City were beaten and murdered.

<sup>698</sup> Wetzel, "Oh! Sing No More that Gentle Song, *The Musical Life and Times of William Cumming Peters, (1805-1866)* p. 386. The subsequent history of John C. Breckinridge made Morrison's vote appear even more odious. Soon after the Civil War broke out, Breckinridge joined the Confederate Army and as major general fought in such important battles as Shiloh and Chickamauga. He was appointed Secretary of War for the Confederacy by Jefferson Davis, and ran away to Europe after the South's defeat. Later, he returned to Kentucky where he practiced law until his death of natural causes.

he, Mr. Douglas, would have beaten Mr. Lincoln in every State but Vermont or Massachusetts.”<sup>699</sup>

Possibly, there were thousands of Democrats in Pittsburgh who, like Morrison Foster, favored Breckinridge either because of their Copperhead leanings or because Breckinridge had been James Buchanan’s Vice- President. A powerful political machine that centered around James Buchanan continued to exist in Pennsylvania even as his presidency was ending. Henry D. Foster, who ran for governor of Pennsylvania in 1860 on the Democratic ticket, was connected with this political machine. The gubernatorial candidate, a cousin of William B. Foster, was known to be a secret supporter of Breckinridge: “he has not manhood enough in him to say openly that he is for Breckinridge; but these fellows know their man, and have him in their special keeping.”<sup>700</sup> Henry D. Foster maintained connections with his Democrat voting cousins, and even introduced William B. Foster to President Polk when the former visited Washington in 1846. In later years, Henry D. Foster was one of the pall bearers at brother William’s funeral in Pittsburgh in March of 1860. And it is very probable that Morrison Foster was on a friendly basis with his cousin Henry.

On November 7, 1860 the *Pittsburgh Gazette* published the election results. Lincoln took a majority in the state of over 70,000 and a 10,500 majority in Allegheny County. The Democratic contender for governor Henry D. Foster lost the state and the county to the Republican candidate Curtin. Considering the voting pattern of the majority of Pittsburghers, we

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<sup>699</sup>*Pittsburgh Post*, September 8, 1860.

<sup>700</sup>*Pittsburgh Gazette*, August 28, 1860.

have to wonder, what was Morrison thinking when he voted for the Southern Democratic candidate Breckinridge? Was his vote a complete anomaly for Pittsburgh?

Morrison Foster was already living in Cleveland when he voted for Breckinridge, but he may have returned to Pittsburgh to place his vote in the 1860 presidential election. It is most likely that he was already under the political influence of the Ohio Copperheads, when he decided to vote for the Southern Democratic candidate. But in many ways Morrison was in agreement with the ideas of conservative Pittsburgh Democrats. An analysis of the opinions expressed in the *Pittsburgh Post* reveals that Pittsburgh Democrats in November of 1860 had an agenda that was determined mainly by conservatism and fear that the Union would be destroyed if the Republicans came to power.<sup>701</sup> Pittsburgh Democrats would do anything or make any compromise to keep the nation intact, as they viewed the United States as the “sole remaining hope of the world,” the “haven of the oppressed” which would be destroyed along with “the beacon for all democratic nations.”<sup>702</sup> Before Lincoln’s election, one editor warned: “We care not a weight of a straw for the political offices, nor the heart burnings of politicians, but we do care for the stability of the Union, and the welfare of our people, hence our anxious appeal to their better judgment.”<sup>703</sup>

Morrison Foster probably based his decision on what he believed would be the economic consequences of losing the South in a sectional war. He still believed the economic well being of the nation and of the Midwest depended on maintaining good relations with their Southern brethren. Morrison was concerned that the secession of the slave states would mean a great

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<sup>701</sup>*Pittsburgh Post*, November 3, 1860.

<sup>702</sup> *Ibid.*, November, 1860.

<sup>703</sup> *Ibid.*, November 1860.

financial loss to the nation. Already a depression had begun in Pittsburgh in November of 1860, soon after Lincoln's election and the following February an editorial entitled "The Poor" stressed the suffering of the people of Pittsburgh. The editor warned, "There must be a great deal of suffering in this city which does not meet the eye of the casual observer. There are probably ten thousand persons out of employment."<sup>704</sup>

On February 28, 1861, Morrison Foster published an article entitled "The Uses of the Slave States" in *The Plain Dealer*, a Cleveland newspaper. Concerned only with the economics of the situation, Morrison argued that the slave states were too valuable to the North to be lost. He pointed out that the goods produced in the slave states by slave labor amounted to over \$200,000, and when the total from both the free and slave states was computed, the slave and free state products were valued at over \$300,000. Morrison Foster said that "the natural prejudices of our people against slavery in its general sense" had blinded people to the fact of the mutual dependence of the North and the South, but Morrison wanted it known that he was "not one of those who have adopted this error."<sup>705</sup> Morrison Foster was still championing "king cotton," even though he no longer worked for McCormick's cotton factory. His conscience never bothered him that he was buying a product picked and packed by men who sweated under the threat of the lash. He looked only at the bottom line, and saw that the cotton business was very important to the American economy, as it had been to himself personally.

The cotton business in Pittsburgh came upon hard times by 1850, and went into a rapid decline, as a result of a new law enacted in 1848 that set a ten hour limit for work in the cotton

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<sup>704</sup> *Ibid.*, November, 1860 and February, 1861.

<sup>705</sup> Morrison Foster, "The Uses of the Slave States," *The Plain Dealer*, February 28, 1861, Cleveland, Ohio. Scrapbook of Morrison Foster, Stephen Foster Memorial, University of Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh, Pa.

factories. The owners of the businesses, claiming they could not remain in business under the new law, closed down the factories until they could force the female “operatives” to work for less pay or to work the old hours without additional pay. The strike that ensued lasted through much of the summer. When the Penn Factory on River Avenue reopened on July 31<sup>st</sup> and some of the girl operatives tried to go back to their work, they were greeted with hisses and threats from the girls who continued to remain on strike. When someone threw boiling water out of a window on to the strikers standing outside below, the strikers cut down the gate and broke into the building with axes.

By the end of August, however, the strikers were defeated. The girls went back to work after they agreed to take a ten to sixteen percent reduction in their pay in return for the ten hour day. There were arrests, a trial, and convictions, but none of the girls served time or were punished.<sup>706</sup> Nobody won in the end. The Pittsburgh cotton factories could not compete with the lower labor costs of the Southern mills, and they eventually closed down. Pollard McCormick asked Morrison to find a buyer for the Hope Cotton Factory, so that he could “devote all the money he could raise to iron and steel.” Although Morrison managed to sell the machinery for \$45,000, nobody had cash for the property and McCormick advised Morrison to sell it for a “Methodist Seminary—it would make a noble location.”<sup>707</sup> Eventually, the cotton mill ended up in the hands of a James H. Childs, who kept the business going into the early 1860s, making “seamless” cotton bags.<sup>708</sup> McCormick went into the iron business, which left Morrison out of work.

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<sup>706</sup> Baldwin, *Pittsburgh: The Story of a City*, pp. 226-227.

<sup>707</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 442.

<sup>708</sup> *Pittsburgh Post*, 1862 advertisement

In 1859, Morrison Foster moved to Philadelphia at the request of his older brother William. The dependable older brother did not have long to live. He was in a declining state of health, and he needed Morrison more for moral support than anything else; but he gave Morrison some work to do while the latter figured out what his next step in life would be. In 1860, Morrison returned to Pittsburgh, still without a job. On February 23, 1860 he married Jessie Lightner, the girl who sang Foster's parlor ballads to perfection, but who had Southern relations known to be "secessionists" in Georgia and Missouri. William Foster, Jr., too ill to attend the wedding, died about ten days later on March 4, 1860 from an infected "carbuncle on his neck." He was fifty-two.<sup>709</sup> Morrison and Jessie Foster packed up and moved to Cleveland where Morrison, like his boss McCormick, got involved in an iron business.

## 9.7 COPPERHEADS IN CLEVELAND

Cleveland was very prominent in the Copperhead activities of the Midwest and in the nation as a whole, and Morrison entered into the city's politics "almost immediately after Jessie and he removed there." Morrison's marriage to a lady with Southern connections and his involvement with the Cleveland Democrats just as the Civil War erupted made Morrison and Jessie the objects of "the unconcealed hostility of their Republican friends and neighbors." They ended up limiting their socializing to a restricted circle that included men like Clement C. Vallandigham,

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<sup>709</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 519. The success that William Foster, Jr. had achieved during his lifetime was proven by the fact that William's funeral was held at the home of J. Edgar Thomson, president of the Pennsylvania Railroad, who was appointed guardian of William's two children. Thomson was sort of a brother-in-law, married to the sister of William's wife Elizabeth, also deceased. William left the Foster Coal & Iron Company to be operated by J. Edgar Thomas, Thomas A. Scott, and Edward C. Biddle for the benefit of his children.

or the famous New York clown Dan Rice, an old friend of Morrison's. Both men were Copperhead sympathizers. Evelyn Foster Morneweck said the Fosters, including her father Morrison, were "Union Democrats," but others would have called them Copperheads:

The opposition of the Union Democrats was difficult and painful. They were convinced that the South could not be brought back into the Union by force of arms. Each disagreement with the policy of President Lincoln was immediately seized upon as treason by the Republicans. The Union Democrats accused Lincoln of usurpation of power, of assuming the role of a dictator not granted him by the Constitution. Because of the Union Democrats' opposition to the majority of measures proposed by the Lincoln administration, they were the objects of venomous attacks from the Republican newspapers. Morrison came in for his share, not only because of his attendance at the Democratic convention, but because it was known that Jessie's youngest brother Ike had joined the Confederate Army...he died at Lost Mountain, Georgia in 1864.<sup>710</sup>

## 9.8 SECRETARY OF WAR FLOYD

The Fosters, like many other Civil War era families, including the Lincolns, were a divided family, with relatives taking different sides in the great battle for the nation. Henrietta's husband joined the Union army, yet Morrison's wife Jessie had a young brother who died serving in the Confederate army. In 1862, Stephen Foster wrote the Civil War song "That's What's the Matter" in which he attacked Southerners with the words "the friends we held as brothers true have turned into a rebel crew." The song "almost caused a complete break between himself [Stephen] and his brother's wife, Jessie."<sup>711</sup> In February of 1861, Morrison became irritated with James Buchanan's policies and published a criticism of his sister's brother-in-law in the *Pittsburgh Post*

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<sup>710</sup>Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p.549.

<sup>711</sup> *Ibid.*, p.547.

that insinuated that the President was a captive in the pocket of certain political manipulators.<sup>712</sup> The war caused friends as well as family members to part company. Anne Eliza Buchanan and her minister husband, who headed the Trinity Church, Oxford in Philadelphia, suffered the ire of their congregation because of what became known as the Floyd debacle which occurred in Pittsburgh during Buchanan's last days in the presidency.<sup>713</sup>

President Buchanan's Secretary of War was John Floyd, a native of Virginia. (His cabinet in fact was made up of a majority of Southerners.)<sup>714</sup> As soon as Lincoln's victory at the polls was assured, Floyd gave orders to take cannon and a variety of other ammunitions and artillery from the Arsenal in Pittsburgh and to ship them to forts in the South. The people of Pittsburgh immediately sent telegrams to Washington, frantically begging to have the orders rescinded. Terrified citizens asked, "Shall Pennsylvania be disarmed with impunity and Charleston be allowed to seize on Federal arms with which to overthrow the Union?" Fearing that Buchanan would leave their city defenseless in case of an attack by the Southern foe, the writer urged men to barricade the streets before the arms were allowed to leave the city. On January 3, 1861, Floyd's orders were countermanded, and the guns removed from the steamboat *Silver Wave* that was ready to sail South.<sup>715</sup> Floyd left Buchanan's Cabinet and joined the secessionists, but President Buchanan's reputation had been tarnished with allegations of treason.<sup>716</sup>

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<sup>712</sup>*Pittsburgh Post*, February, 1861. Morrison's criticism of Buchanan appeared in the form of a parody of Knowles' play the *Hunchback*.

<sup>713</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 455.

<sup>714</sup> Eric H. Walther, *The Shattering of the Union, America in the 1850s* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 2004) pp. 116-117.

<sup>715</sup> George Thornton Fleming, *History of Pittsburgh and Environs*, Vol. 2 (New York and Chicago: American Historical Society, 1922) pp. 96-97.

<sup>716</sup> Reiser, *Pittsburgh's Commercial Development, 1800-1850*, p.96.



The *Pittsburgh Post Gazette* of February 15, 1861 noted with a sense of outrage that the “Great robbery perpetrated by Floyd, President Buchanan’s Secretary of War, is a narrative of fraud and speculation, on the part of a trusted officer, which is without a parallel in the history of the country.” The editor of the paper went on to say that “what will add to the public indignation is the statement that the President was duly apprised of the rascally proceedings of his Cabinet officer, by persons cognizant of the facts, but he persistently refused to call him to account.” The entire Democratic party fell into disfavor in Pittsburgh because of what was viewed as Buchanan’s corruption and association with traitors: “The robbery of Floyd is only one among a large number of proofs of the corruption and venality of the so called democratic party.”<sup>717</sup> Assuming the complicity of James Buchanan in the Floyd debacle, members of his brother Edward’s new church “passed him on the street without speaking to him” and abandoned their church, and Stephen Foster’s sister Ann Eliza Buchanan felt the sting of humiliation from the scandal. Rather than bemoaning the loss, however, Ann Eliza simply dismissed her husband’s truant flock by saying they were not Christians anyway.<sup>718</sup>

## 9.9 CLEMENT C. VALLANDIGHAM

Morrison Foster, in the meanwhile, was living in Cleveland with his wife Jessie, where he became increasingly engaged with Copperhead ideology. The longer the war continued and the depression in the upper Mississippi Valley deepened, the Copperheads in the Midwest became

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<sup>717</sup> *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, February 15, 1861 “The Great Robbery at Washington.”

<sup>718</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, 531.

more outspoken. When the Ohio River trade had collapsed, farm prices declined, businesses closed, unemployment became widespread, and bankruptcies plentiful. Pittsburgh had fallen into a similar depression at the outbreak of the war, but because of her industrial strength, the war actually benefited the city as soon as Pittsburgh geared up for war production. The Midwestern cities like Cleveland that depended on the sale of their farm surpluses to the South suffered the most when their trade was interrupted by the war, and they placed the blame on the Lincoln administration.<sup>719</sup>

The most intense attacks on President Lincoln were made by the Ohio peace advocate Clement C. Vallandigham. Morrison and Jessie Foster often welcomed the Copperhead congressman into their home in Cleveland, where Morrison worked with Vallandigham's political cronies. Stephen's sister Henrietta absolutely worshipped Vallandigham, and Richard Cowan, the man who courted Jane McDowell before she married Stephen Foster, supported him as well. Cowan, a Democrat, became Senator Cowan of Pennsylvania during the Civil War and the *Pittsburgh Post* declared itself "the especial defender of Senator Cowan" for the latter's devotion to Vallandigham.<sup>720</sup>

Copperheadism was not unknown in Pittsburgh, either. As in Ohio, economic woes and the prospect of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation increased the popularity of the Copperheads, who predicted a dismal economic situation in Pittsburgh if freed slaves were pitted in competition against white labor. One Copperhead in Pittsburgh accosted the editor of the *Chronicle* for referring to them by the name which was applied to "poisonous reptiles." But, the Copperhead continued, "I am one of the ten thousand Democrats of Allegheny, any of whom has

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<sup>719</sup> Reiser, *Pittsburgh's Commercial Development, 1800-1850*, p. 39.

<sup>720</sup> *Pittsburgh Post*, 1863.

a right to repel the insult, if he sees fit.... You say Copperheads are assailants of the administration and defenders of the rebels...that they are fomenting discontent..... You say there are plenty of this kind of people in Allegheny County and that they hold secret meetings.” The writer acknowledged that there were indeed plenty of his kind, but he said they were not secret about it.<sup>721</sup>

Clement C. Vallandigham was born in 1820 in New Lisbon, Ohio where his father was a Presbyterian minister.<sup>722</sup> Later he attended Jefferson College in Washington, Pennsylvania, the same school that Stephen Foster attended for one week. He opposed the continuation of the Civil War, which he blamed on Lincoln and the abolitionists. Vallandigham’s followers were particularly angered by Lincoln’s suspension of habeas corpus and civilian rights, but the Copperheads’ moment in the sun came when Lincoln announced that he would issue an Emancipation Proclamation. Many Democrats had sat quietly by the sidelines, resigned to accepting Lincoln’s policies, because Lincoln was, after all, their President, and not as radical as some of the other Republicans. But the Emancipation Proclamation convinced them that Lincoln was really controlled by the radicals.

By 1863, Vallandigham’s forces ranted against the Emancipation law enacted in January and against the “unfair” draft that came into affect in March of that same year. Vallandigham wanted Lincoln to call off the troops and to negotiate immediately for peace and reunion, with slavery left intact. He was not appalled by slavery. He saw “more of barbarism and sin in the continuance of this war than in the sin and barbarism of African slavery.” In a speech he gave

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<sup>721</sup>“Copperheads Once More,” *Pittsburgh Post* article, 1862.

<sup>722</sup>Geoffrey R. Stone, *Perilous Times: Free Speech in Wartime* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), p. 98.

before Congress on January 14, 1863, Vallandigham proudly claimed “I am one of that number who have opposed abolitionism or the political development of the antislavery sentiment of the North and West, from the beginning.”<sup>723</sup>

Vallandigham’s haranguing speeches caused trouble wherever and whenever he gave them. In March of 1863, in response to Lincoln’s Conscription Act, he gave an incendiary speech at the Democratic Union Association in New York in which he threatened violence unless Lincoln renounced the draft. Stephen Foster may have attended the speech, especially if his brother Morrison suggested that he do so. He was living in New York at the time, and the political environment of the city was in tune with Vallandigham’s Copperheadism. Especially in agreement were the New York Irish, who had no intention of fighting and dying for the freedom of blacks. Vallandigham defended his speech in a letter he wrote to the *New York Times*: “The ballot box and not the cartridge box is the instrument for reform and revolution,” Vallandigham argued a few days after he had urged men to resist conscription.<sup>724</sup> Two months after Vallandigham gave his New York speech, the murderous Draft Riots broke out in the city, which left hundreds of blacks and whites dead and millions of dollars in property damage.

General Burnside then issued General Order No. 38, which was intended to squelch open criticism of the government. At two-thirty in the morning of May 6, 1863, Union soldiers forced their way into Vallandigham’s house in Ohio. They broke through the panels in his bedroom door and arrested him, while his wife screamed hysterically, fearing that her husband would soon

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<sup>723</sup>Clement C. Vallandigham, Congressional Speech, January 14, 1863, published in the *Pittsburgh Post*, January, 1863.

<sup>724</sup> Clement C. Vallandigham, letter to the *New York Times*, March, 1863, quoted in Stone, *Perilous Times*, p.100.

Vallandigham’s phrase “the ballot box and not the cartridge box” suggests the black activist Malcolm X’s “ballots or bullets” speech given one hundred later.

be facing the firing squad. Instead, they subjected him to a two day military trial, which found him “guilty as charged.”<sup>725</sup> Seeing that Vallandigham had a large and vociferous following, President Lincoln decided to commute the sentence from imprisonment to banishment to the Confederacy. When Vallandigham was shipped to Tennessee, however, the Confederates were uncomfortable having him around, so they allowed him to escape to Canada.

### **9.10 HENRIETTA FOSTER, PEACE ADVOCATE**

Vallandigham’s arrest and his forced exile had the effect of coalescing the Copperheads into crusaders with a cause and a virulently-loud mouthed martyr. Copperheads from around the country, including Henrietta Foster, rallied to Vallandigham’s side, castigating President Lincoln and General Burnside. Ohio Democrats got so carried away that they decided to run Vallandigham for governor of Ohio while he was in exile in Niagara Falls. At a meeting in Albany, when the incendiary crowds asked whether the war was being waged to suppress the rebellion or to suppress the liberties of the people, some Republicans began to wish that Burnside had never issued Order No. 38. Lincoln, however, had his reasons for clamping down on Vallandigham. The President wanted to restrict Vallandigham’s activities in order to protect the young and impressionable soldier boys. Lincoln believed the Ohioan’s speeches encouraged army desertions, of which there were plenty. With his own peculiar brand of genius, the

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<sup>725</sup> Stone, *Perilous Times: Free Speech in Wartime*, pp. 96-99.

President summed up the problem: “Must I shoot a simple-minded soldier boy who deserts, while I must not touch a hair of the wiley [sic] agitator who induces him to desert?”<sup>726</sup>

Stephen’s sister Henrietta, a Peace Democrat, was influenced by a sympathetic heart that did not like to see suffering on either side. After her first husband Thomas Wick died of tuberculosis, she married Henry Thornton, who was a Union captain in the commissary department of the Army of the Potomac. During the war, with her husband away, Henrietta frequently brought herself and her children to stay with Morrison and Jessie Foster in Cleveland, where she fell under the spell of the Copperheads. She wrote poetry to ease the suffering of the young men and their families from both the North and the South: “her grief was for friend and foe alike, for the unholy, the unchristian method of settling a misunderstanding between men born brothers.”

<sup>727</sup> In a later generation, Henrietta would be called an antiwar activist. She collected a fund to get Vallandigham released from jail, while she published poetry denouncing Lincoln and his war policies.

Henrietta’s anti-war poem was entitled “Five Hundred Thousand Dead,” which she presumably wrote to counter her brother Stephen’s militant pro-Union songs “We are Coming Father Abraam, 300,000 More” and “We’re a Million in the Field,” both of which were published in 1862. While Foster’s songs encouraged the soldiers to volunteer, Henrietta preached the opposite.

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<sup>726</sup> Frank L. Klement, *The Limits of Dissent: Clement L. Vallandigham & the Civil War*. (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1970) p. 181.

<sup>727</sup> Morneweck, *The Chronicles*, p. 540.

Dear land of mine, for thee my tears are shed,  
Five hundred thousand of thy sons lie dead!  
If blood were needed this great strife to end,  
An ocean has already flowed in vain,  
Then how much more is yet required to wash  
The grievance out, and bring us peace again!

In “Five Hundred Thousand Dead” Henrietta played up Vallandigham’s peace cause without mentioning the Ohioan’s name. But she also wrote verses addressed directly “To the Hon. C. L. Vallandigham, in Exile,” when he was hiding out in Canada:

Tho’ thou art in exile, Vallandigham, now,  
The Laurel e’re long shall encircle thy brow;  
Tho’ banished, and branded as traitor, thou art  
Yet still doe  
st thou live in the people’s great heart.  
Thine eloquence comes from the Canada shore,  
We hear it above the wild cataract’s roar.<sup>728</sup>

By the fall of 1863, Stephen Foster appears to have reversed his politics. Henrietta Foster had written a poem late in 1863 called “Sound the Rally.” Henrietta’s poem, after it was set to music composed by her brother Stephen, turned up as a campaign song for Vallandigham when he ran for governor of Ohio, while still in exile. This melody,” according to Foster’s niece

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<sup>728</sup>Poem by Henrietta Foster, reprinted in Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 543

Morneweck, “has not been definitely identified.” The same music was applied to a presidential campaign song to elect the General McClellan to the presidency when he ran against Lincoln in the fall of 1864. ( Since Foster died in January of 1864, the composer cannot be held not responsible for the application of his melody to a campaign song for Lincoln’s opponent.)<sup>729</sup>

Some questions come to mind here. Did Stephen Foster really write music that he knew would be set to a campaign poem for Vallandigham, after he had written the song “We’re Coming Father Abr’ aam” which he had dedicated to Abraham Lincoln? If this were true, was he a hypocrite? Or, did Foster’s opinion about Lincoln change in 1863 after the President issued the Emancipation Proclamation? Was he just fed up with the war, which never seemed to end and was so costly in human life? Another possibility is that Foster was so indifferent politically that he wrote music and did not care where or how it was applied. Of course, the least damaging explanation would be that Foster had written the music at an earlier date, and Henrietta supplied her own words to the music without her brother’s knowledge.

Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!

Sound the rally for Vallandigham and Pugh!

Hurrah for the Union and the Constitution too!

The Dictator Lincoln has put us under ban,

He has exiled Vallandigham for speaking like a man;

He scoffs at the people’s rights, we are no longer free,

Unless we stop the despot who strikes at liberty.

Then rally to the ballot box -- rally every man,

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<sup>729</sup> Morneweck quoted William Tasker Howard about the McClellan campaign song, *Chronicles*, p. 544.



Our country cries aloud to us, to save her while we can.  
Though martial law be threatened, the people to defy,  
We will march up like freemen, and cast our votes or die!

Three cheers for our candidates, Vallandigham and Pugh  
The Old Flag, the Union, and the Constitution, too.  
With hearts right, our cause just, our watchword “Liberty,”  
We will wait for October, when Ohio shall be free!<sup>730</sup>

In spite of Henrietta’s campaign poem set to her brother Stephen’s melody, Clement C. Vallandigham did not win the race for governor of Ohio.<sup>731</sup> Morrison Foster believed there was deception and force involved in Vallandigham’s defeat, and he placed the blame on Lincoln’s intimidating tactics at the polls:

The Union ticket, running John Brough for governor of Ohio and Charles Anderson for lieutenant governor, was printed on heavy paper with a colored pattern on the back that looks like wallpaper. Morrison noted in pencil on one of these tickets some local and contemporary implication that is beyond my [Morneweck’s] understanding but which may be clear to a better student of Ohio history: “This ticket (calico backed) is a sample of the means used to intimidate those who wished to vote for Vallandigham.”<sup>732</sup>

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<sup>730</sup>Poem by Henrietta Foster, reprinted in Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 545.

<sup>731</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 545.

<sup>732</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 548.

Morrison Foster was referring to the strong-arm, underhanded methods the Lincoln administration employed to ensure that Peace Party votes were not be counted. Lincoln had a hard time ensuring that Maryland would stay on the Union side. Therefore, during an election that took place in Baltimore, the ballots were made of different colors so that Lincoln's soldiers could stand around, watch how the election was going, and throw out the Peace Party votes. "Many who attempted to vote the Peace ticket in Baltimore were arrested for carrying a ballot of the wrong color. The charge against these men was simply polluting the ballot box." I believe that Morrison meant that the ballots for the contenders were of different colors, and had specific identifiable patterns on their backs. Lincoln's men knew that Brough's voters carried ballots with the wallpaper like colored pattern on their reverse sides. They threw out the Vallandigham voters who were easily identified by the different color and pattern on the back of the ballots they carried.<sup>733</sup>

Morrison Foster was not alone in accusing Lincoln of dictatorial tactics. Many people in the North opposed what they considered Lincoln's disregard for personal liberties.<sup>734</sup> On April 27, 1861, the President suspended the writ of habeas corpus and ordered the army to arrest and imprison anyone who expressly disagreed with him. When Chief Justice Taney issued the opinion that the President had no legal power to suspend habeas corpus, Lincoln became irate and ignored Taney's opinion. The following year, in 1862, Lincoln arrested thousands of anti-war protesters and sent them to prisons without trials. Henrietta Foster was fortunate that Lincoln did not arrest her for her peace poems and her Vallandigham campaign songs.

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<sup>733</sup>Dean Sprague, *Freedom Under Lincoln* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin,1965) p. 204, quoted in DiLorenzo, *The Real Lincoln*, p. 143.

<sup>734</sup>William Rawle, *A View of the Constitution* (Simsboro, La.: Old South Books,1825, 1993), quoted in DiLorenzo, *The Real Lincoln*, p.92.

To Lincoln, all peace advocates were traitors, including Benjamin Wood, one of the brothers of the Copperhead mayor of New York, Fernando Wood. Ben Wood published a Copperhead newspaper, called the *New York Daily News*, in which he called the President an “unscrupulous chief magistrate” whose recent message to Congress was “an ocean of falsehood and deceit.” To stop Wood’s attacks, Lincoln ordered the Postmaster General not to deliver the *New York Daily News*. Ben Wood then hired private express couriers and delivery boys, but Lincoln ordered federal marshals to confiscate the papers in cities throughout the North. At that point, *The New York Daily News* went into bankruptcy.<sup>735</sup> Another interesting victim of Lincoln’s “tyranny” was Francis Key Howard of Baltimore, the grandson of Francis Scott Key. Howard had criticized Lincoln for suppressing civil liberties in Baltimore and for invading the South without the consent of Congress. He was imprisoned for two years without a trial at Fort McHenry, the very place where his grandfather had written the “Star Spangled Banner.”<sup>736</sup>

By the middle of 1863, the war had become increasingly unpopular since the Union army did not appear to be making headway. Even worse, Robert E. Lee was marching his army into the North, no one knew exactly where; but Lee was expected to attack somewhere around Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Pittsburghers became frightened believing that perhaps the Southern general would try to take their city, mainly for the arms at the Arsenal. They spent several days building up defenses around Pittsburgh, anticipating a possible attack. In the meantime, Lee’s army stopped at Gettysburg, which lay just south of Harrisburg. There the armies of the North and the South met in the first days of July, 1863 in a mortal combat that determined the future of the war in favor of Lincoln and the Union army. Lee was defeated at Gettysburg and he turned

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<sup>735</sup> DiLorenzo, *The Real Lincoln*, pp. 144-145.

<sup>736</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 140-147, 153.

his army back southward, while another battle at Vicksburg also ended in defeat for the Southerners.

The unexpected victories for Lincoln's armies led to the rapid decline in the Copperhead following, and ultimately to their defeat. When Henrietta wrote her poem "Sound the Rally," she was indeed too late. The victory at Gettysburg determined Vallandigham's defeat in the Ohio gubernatorial race. The Copperheads' time in the sun lasted for a brief moment. The Emancipation Proclamation of January 1863, the draft announcement which followed in March, and the arrest of Vallandigham in May of the same year came within six months of each other, during which time the Copperheads had become louder and more traitorous, especially after Vallandigham's arrest. Their fall was just as precipitous. The New York City Draft Riot blazoned from July 9-11, 1863, just days after the Union victory at Gettysburg, which proved to be the turning point of the war and the death knell of Copperheadism.<sup>737</sup>

In May of 1871, after the Civil War had ended and the martyred Abraham Lincoln had been reconstructed into almost a divinity, Clement C. Vallandigham publicly announced that his new doctrine was "a settlement in fact of all the issues of the war and acquiescence in the same as no longer issues before the country." The next month, on June 16, 1871 he was staying at the Golden Lamb Inn in Lebanon, Ohio, a quaint town about thirty miles north of Cincinnati. While using a loaded gun to demonstrate a defense for a client accused of murder, Vallandigham accidentally shot himself.<sup>738</sup> The Golden Lamb Inn is still operating in the historic section of Lebanon where a plaque explaining the strange circumstances of his death hangs on the faded

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<sup>737</sup>Eugene H. Rosebloom and Francis P. Weisenburger, *A History of Ohio* (Columbus: The Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1958), p. 194.

<sup>738</sup>*The Lebanon Weekly Star*, quoted in Klement, *The Limits of Dissent*, p. 310. Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 544-546.

wallpaper in the room where Vallandigham's accident occurred. That plaque, and Henrietta's poems, comprise the most articulate monuments to the man whose fame Henrietta was sure would "be toasted by old and by young" for ever after.<sup>739</sup>

Stephen Foster was living in New York City during the Copperhead attacks on Lincoln's policies. We do not know what he was thinking, but it appears that his opinions were divided. Like many New Yorkers, he was strongly Democratic even though New York had renounced Fernando Wood in December of 1861 and voted in a Republican mayor. According to historian George Lankevich, when the South fired on Fort Sumter, Wood had "waved the flag of patriotism as fervently as anyone else did. But he never really seemed to favor active prosecution of the war, and the conflict marked the end of his career as Manhattan's leading political figure." Wood became known as the leader of the Peace Democrats for the remainder of the war, an association which sullied his name with allegations of treason.<sup>740</sup>

In the last year of his life, Stephen Foster may have gone along with the majority voice of New York. In doing so, he would have withdrawn from the extreme Copperheadism of his brother Morrison and the peace advocacy of both Mayor Wood and of his sister Henrietta. Stephen Foster most assuredly felt abandoned by his family and confused by their radical politics. If Foster's ideas were divided, and his opinions uncertain, he only reflected the society he saw around him. When he walked the streets of New York, where he lived out the final years of his life, he saw only too well that the nation was more divided than ever: Democrats against Republicans, North against South, white against black, and poor against rich.

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<sup>739</sup>Henrietta Foster, poem quoted in Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 544.

<sup>740</sup>Lankevich, *American Metropolis*, p. 100.

## 10.0 LIFE ON THE BOWERY

Stephen Foster spent the last four years of his life in New York City, tortured years that corresponded with America's tortured years of the Civil War. What were Foster's final years really like? Harold Vincent Milligan, who published a biography of the composer in 1920, believed that "The world has always demanded dramatic contrasts in its stories. It more than half expects its geniuses to live in garrets and hovels or if need be, in a Bowery Saloon." Milligan thought "the dire descriptions" of the composer's last days were an "exaggeration, made for good copy." But were they?

Personal reminiscences from Foster's friends and acquaintances, and details of New York City's social history appear to corroborate "the dire descriptions." His young lyricist friend George Cooper described Foster as "a man utterly careless of his appearance, having apparently lost the incentive power of self respect." Others said that the composer had holes in his shoes and sold whatever new clothes were given him for drink. Cooper said Foster "drank constantly (although he never appeared to be intoxicated)" and "was indifferent to food, after making a meal of apples and turnips from the grocery shop, peeling them with a large pocket-knife." His drink of preference was "rum" made by "the barkeeper from French spirits and brown sugar."<sup>741</sup> Stephen Foster died in the "charity ward" of Bellevue Hospital, "the last port

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<sup>741</sup> Harold Vincent Milligan, *Stephen Collins Foster: A Biography of America's Folk Song Composer* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1920) pp. 103-105.

of many of the city's human derelicts." His name was entered on the hospital's register as "laborer, evidently because he was poorly dressed and unidentified as belonging to any particular occupation."<sup>742</sup>

A study of the Bowery environment speaks for itself. New York at mid-century, with a population of over a million, was colorful, vibrant, and loud, a mix of contrasts in every way. The city was divided into "two worlds," that of the shamelessly rich and the hopelessly poor. Foster lived with the poor in a room along the Bowery for which he paid 25 cents a night. He was a man who had passed from the "sunshine" to the "shadow" world of existence, having lost his social status, self-respect, and finally hope. Since he had no royalty payments coming in from his old songs, he was forced to live on any cash payments he received from new songs, which he sold immediately. Thus Foster found himself in a desperate situation, writing more and faster than ever before, while he tried to survive on the proceeds from the songs, one song to the next. While many critics dismissed the music that Foster produced during his final years as "pot-boilers," it is important to ask whether they really were that, and nothing more. The music Foster wrote while the Civil War raged all around him was different, certainly, from the nostalgic sentimental "effusions" of the previous decade, but the change was most likely intentional. The new times demanded new music, and Foster's New York songs looked to the future of American music in variety shows, music halls, and musicals.

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<sup>742</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100, 104.

## 10.1 WITHOUT A CLUE

There are few documents to clue us into details about the composer's life in New York. The void is what his family wanted, and ultimately Stephen Foster probably preferred not have his last years scrutinized.<sup>743</sup> Even his songs, which usually supplied the public with some clues about the composer, are not reliable because Foster employed a lyricist to write the words to many of his last compositions. Thus, Stephen Foster lost or relinquished his voice during the final years of his life as he receded into the protective anonymity of the city and withdrew from friends and family. The sounds and sights of "Manahatta," as Walt Whitman referred to his beloved city, proved to be a perfect diversion for a man whose own life was in a flux, and what was worse, what Foster feared the most, in a continuous downward spiral.<sup>744</sup>

When a man is depressed, he eschews old relationships that remind him of better days or of personal failures. Foster spent most of his final years along New York's Bowery in a carnival like environment that members of the working class claimed as their own, but also a place equally claimed by America's dangerous classes. When Elmer Bendiner conducted a study of residents of the Bowery a century after Foster lived there, he concluded that men who live on the Bowery do not leave any reminiscences: "The autobiography of a true Bowery Man would be as unlikely as a first hand account of Heaven or Hell. Those who go there do not send back

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<sup>743</sup>Morrison Foster claimed that he lost "a great many" of Stephen Foster's letters. Foster family letter February 27, 1865 C583 Morrison Foster wrote from Cleveland, Ohio to I. J. Cist of Saint Louis who had requested a letter written by Stephen Foster. Cist was a collector. Morrison sent him one letter, then wrote: "The letter I send is one of the few left of a great many I once had but I was so unfortunate as to leave most of them in Philadelphia several years ago and have as yet been unable to find them."

<sup>744</sup>Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*. Whitman used the more poetic sounding "Manahatta" for his city in his famous book of poems.



dispatches. This is not because the Bowery is devoid of talent.....But [because] Bowery Men have broken off relations with the world and they would regard the laborious effort of telling their story as only ‘vanity and vexation of spirit.’”<sup>745</sup> The Bowery in the mid- twentieth century had degenerated into a “skid row,” but even in Foster’s time, it was already a “red-light district.” Its skid row reputation developed quickly the year after Foster died and the Civil War was over, when the Bowery’s numerous cheap hotels opened their doors to the many crippled, ill, and destitute veterans.<sup>746</sup>

The only documents that we have concerning Foster’s New York years are reminiscences from the people who spent time with the composer in the city. Some of these people knew him on a fairly intimate basis while others had only brief contacts with him. Foster’s two good friends in New York, who did leave us with some reminiscences, were John Mahon and George Cooper. Mahon was a middle aged financially strapped newspaper writer of sorts. Irish by birth, he was married and had several children. In spite of his own pecuniary difficulties, his “apartments” at 311 Henry Street served as a second home for Stephen in New York, and Mahon’s family provided the comforts of a family to Stephen as well. Foster spent many an evening with the Mahons, especially because they had a piano, which Foster must have used to run through his songs. John Mahon claimed that Foster wrote many of his New York compositions at his, Mahon’s, home.<sup>747</sup> Foster also taught the Mahon girls to sing, and when the eldest daughter married, Stephen attended the wedding and “played and sang several of his own

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<sup>745</sup>Elmer Bendiner, *The Bowery Man* (New York: Nelson, 1961), Introduction.

<sup>746</sup> David Isay and Stacy Abramson, *Flophouse: Life on the Bowery* (New York: Random House, 2000) p. xiv.

<sup>747</sup> Harold Vincent Milligan, *Stephen Collins Foster, A Biography of America’s Folk -Song Composer* (New York: Schirmer, 1920), p. 93.

pieces on that occasion.”<sup>748</sup> Mahon had some slight connections with music publishers; and when Foster’s main publishers Firth & Pond turned down his music, Mahon provided connections to new publishers, even if they were of a less prestigious caliber and only paid a pittance. Still, Mahon left us with an account of Foster’s last days in New York in an article he published in the *New York Clipper*, in March of 1877, entitled “Last Years of Stephen C. Foster.”<sup>749</sup>

Another person to whom we are indebted for a personal glimpse of Stephen Foster’s New York years is George Cooper. He made Foster’s acquaintance at one of the local alcohol dispensing groceries, located at the corner of Hester and Christie Streets, where both men could indulge their fondness for drink and cheap food.<sup>750</sup> Cooper lived at 176-1/2 Bowery in New York City, but Cooper apparently lived in one of the safer sections of the Bowery that was home to the working classes and some small businesses. “Embree’s Music Store was located at 134 Bowery” and Cooper’s father “kept a store on the Bowery near Bond Street.”<sup>751</sup> Cooper wrote the lyrics for many of the songs Foster published in New York, writing in between service jaunts in the Union Army. After Foster’s death, Cooper hooked up with the composer Henry Tucker and earned a reputation as the lyricist for such popular nineteenth century songs as “Sweet Genevieve.” He was the one who brought Stephen Foster to Bellevue Hospital, and it is to Cooper that we are indebted for information about the composer’s death. When Harold Vincent Milligan wrote his biography of Stephen Foster, which he published in 1920, he interviewed Cooper, who had to think back over fifty years, but nevertheless came up with very revealing facts.

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<sup>748</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 556.

<sup>749</sup> John Mahon, “The Last Years of Stephen Foster,” the *New York Clipper*, March, 1877.

<sup>750</sup> Milligan, *Stephen Collins Foster: A Biography of America’s Folk Song Composer*, p. 103.

<sup>751</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 558.

There were two others who left reminiscences of Foster many years later, but only from fleeting meetings with the composers, not intimate or long friendships. A Mrs. Parkhurst Duer said that as a young girl she had worked for the Waters Music Publishers, when Stephen walked in one day to request a published copy of one of his songs. Duer gave an account of a very dejected man, who when asked “Is this Mr. Foster?” replied, “Yes, the wreck of Stephen Foster.” One other personal account of Foster was supplied by George W. Birdseye, who met Foster late in 1862 and later wrote a detailed description of the meeting, emphasizing the composer’s drinking habits.

## 10.2 NEW MUSICAL TASTES

Although we have little documented evidence concerning Foster’s private life in New York, we do have his music. Many of Foster’s early biographers claimed that the composer’s last years (with the exception of a few spurts of genius) were artistically dismal, years that are best forgotten. But is it possible that Foster created something new and special during his final years in New York, a new genre whose value has been underestimated or rather not considered at all?

The generally negative opinion about Foster’s New York songs is summed up by Edward G. Baynham in his *History of Pittsburgh Music 1758-1958*:

Foster’s greatest mistake was in leaving Allegheny and all his old friends and acquaintances. In New York he wrote few great compositions, although while there he published about half of all his works..... An exception to the mediocre productions of his later years was “Beautiful Dreamer,” which appeared two months after his death. To the writer [Baynham] this composition has always appeared of somewhat different style from that of other Foster compositions, but there is no evidence to support that he was not its author. Foster wrote much during his last three years because he needed the money, and because publishers were eager to buy his works, especially if they did not have to pay

highly for them. The last they could do because Foster was willing to sell them for a small immediate relief.<sup>752</sup>

Baynham was not even convinced that Foster was the composer of “Beautiful Dreamer,” the one good song he believed Foster wrote while living in New York. Another one to disparage most of Foster’s New York songs was the composer’s early biographer John Tasker Howard.

Writing for *The Musical Quarterly* in 1934, Howard stated:

In his last years he probably received little for the many songs he wrote. He sold them for cash to second-rate publishers. Most of these later songs were worth exactly what the publishers paid for them; they were not by the Foster of “Old Folks at Home.”<sup>753</sup>

Evelyn Foster Morneweck also dismissed the songs her uncle produced in New York, calling the majority of them “potboilers.” Like Baynham, she believed that Foster wrote a lot of “mediocre productions” with the only exception being “Beautiful Dreamer.” Morneweck especially disparaged the songs Foster wrote with George Cooper, believing the Foster-Cooper songs were composed while her uncle was drinking heavily:

Yet, despite his growing intemperance, 1863 was Stephen’s most prolific year; he actually published forty-six songs. Over half of them are gospel tunes, several of them are of rather high order, but the majority are mere potboilers and include those two strange productions “Little Ella’s an angel” and “Willie’s Gone to Heaven.” Stephen collaborated with young George Cooper on twenty-three songs, eight of which were not published until after Stephen’s death. But none of the songs that Stephen and George produced together lived very long, while “Sweet Genevieve” written by George Cooper with the melody by Henry Tucker, is well known even to the present generation and one hears it sung frequently today [1944]....of the forty-six songs published by Stephen in 1863, he wrote the lyrics ....of only seventeen. It seems as though the work of producing both words and music had become an effort for Stephen Foster although his own verses suited his melodies far better than any one else’s.<sup>754</sup>

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<sup>752</sup> Edward Baynham, *History of Pittsburgh Music, 1758-1958*. Unpublished manuscript, 1958, at Carnegie Library in Oakland, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

<sup>753</sup> John Tasker Howard, “Stephen Foster and His Publishers,” *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (January, 1934), p. 77.

<sup>754</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p.553, 554.

Raymond Waters who wrote about Foster's years in Cincinnati in *Stephen Foster, Youth's Golden Gleam*, argued that he produced almost nothing worthwhile after he visited Cincinnati for the last time in 1858:

As he went aboard the *Ida May* [in 1858] he was, we must sorrowfully remind ourselves, a man whose musical genius was dimmed. He had completed nearly all of his great work: those songs which pass beyond period and locality and go straight to the tireless heart of humanity. Except for "Old Black Joe" and "Beautiful Dreamer," his work and all that followed during the next five years in Pittsburgh and New York were sad anticlimax.<sup>755</sup>

Walters then went on to criticize Foster's Civil War songs, mercilessly. Like Morneweck and Baynham, Walters believed that the only song of merit Foster produced in New York was "Beautiful Dreamer."

It is a melancholy fact that he fell from poetical and musical grace; some of his Civil War songs are sad for reasons other than their author intended. Happily, in one of his final songs, he recaptured the first careless rapture. The music of *Beautiful Dreamer* is lovely and the music is matched by the words.<sup>756</sup>

This attack on Foster's Civil War songs is an erroneous and frankly, insulting, claim. On his own or in collaboration with George Cooper, Stephen Foster published about a dozen Civil War songs. Most are delightful, beautiful, or poignant. Even the lovely "Was My Brother in the Battle?," which is about a dead loved one, has a spirited movement to a melody which blends perfectly with Cooper's words. In similar fashion, "We are Coming Father Abr'aam Three Hundred Thousand More" with words by James Sloan Gibbons is a powerful rallying or marching song, and far superior to the same title and lyrics with music composed by Luther Orlando Emerson. Another enthusiastic and stirring song which made great political commentary was "That's What's the Matter" written by Foster alone. The only thing

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<sup>755</sup> Raymond Walters, *Stephen Foster, Youth's Golden Gleam: A Sketch of his Life and Background in Cincinnati, 1846-1850* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1936), p. 135.

<sup>756</sup> Walters, *Stephen Foster, Youth's Golden Gleam*, p.42.

disconcerting about Foster's Civil War songs was the title of the 1863 composition "When this Dreadful War is Ended." Cooper wrote the words, but it is obvious that the song's title was created to compete with one of the war's most popular songs, "Weeping, Sad and Lonely or When This Cruel War is Over," composed by Henry Tucker in 1862 to words contributed by Charles Carroll Sawyer.

The dominant opinion that, with the exceptions of "Beautiful Dreamer" and "Old Black Joe" Foster produced almost nothing of value in New York, is dependent on the idea that nothing changes in the business of music, or the world. This opinion fails to take into account that world and national events affect and mold public tastes, and what the society wanted in the 1860s were Civil War and comic or light-hearted songs, which would help a war weary nation endure its suffering.<sup>757</sup> The Cooper - Foster collaboration of the 1860s produced songs in the new style of music, engaging compositions in their own right. They were indeed new products that satisfied the needs of the times and looked ahead to the songs featured on the stages of vaudeville in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Entertainment venues were changing, as was apparent in 1865 only one year after Foster's death when Tony Pastor took over the old German Volk's Garden located at 201 Bowery. He remodeled the building into a theater that offered clean, family oriented shows.

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<sup>757</sup> An analogy can be drawn with the 1960s and 1950s. The buying public in the 1960s did not want the songs of the previous decade, either. The generation that came of age in the 1960s witnessed terrible turmoil, the Civil Rights movements, car bombings, riots in the streets, and assassinations. They did not relate to the 1950s crooning by adolescents with broken hearts and unfulfilled sexual desire. The riotous and uncertain times of the 1960s demanded new songs, in the same way that the Civil War generation needed a new type of song.

Renamed Pastor's Opera House, the redesigned theater featured magicians, acrobats, sing-alongs, blackface minstrelsy, and comedic and dramatic skits.<sup>758</sup> The new variety show was successful and became the forerunner of the big time vaudeville acts for which Tony Pastor would be remembered.

The music halls, whether they featured minstrels or the new variety type entertainments, were located on lower Broadway within blocks of each other. New York alone had at least ten theaters in which the minstrels performed in the 1860s. Mechanics Hall, where the Christy Minstrels played and later White's Minstrels and Bryant's Minstrels, was located at 472 Broadway. Henry Wood's Marble Hall which seated two thousand was located at 561 Broadway. The Coliseum at 448 Broadway also featured minstrels at one time or another.<sup>759</sup> Before Pastor opened up at the new Bowery location, he ran a more seedy variety show at 444 Broadway during the Civil War years, where drinking and debauchery were the real attractions.

The music publishers were practically right next door to the minstrel halls.<sup>760</sup> Stephen Foster's main publishing house Firth, Pond, and Company broke up in the 1860s, but the ex-partners still maintained their business establishments on Broadway. P. A. Wundermann, who published Foster's old style sentimental songs; S. T. Gordon who published Foster's Civil War song "Larry's Good Bye"; Horace Waters who published the Foster-Cooper comic songs "If You've Only Got a Moustache," "Mr. & Mrs. Brown," "My Wife is a Most Knowing Woman," and "Plenty of Fish in the Sea" were all located on Broadway. The purpose was obvious. A performer like Pastor at his old Broadway location, for example, would have had the chance to

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<sup>758</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham: A History of New York City to 1898*, p. 995.

<sup>759</sup> Wittke, *Tambo and Bones*, p. 67.

<sup>760</sup> *New York Times*, August 3, 1859. Advertisements for piano stores featured lower Broadway addresses.

sing Water's songs right off the presses, and the publisher Waters in turn would have anticipated increased sales at his store from the minstrel's presentation on the stage.

For Stephen Foster and George Cooper, of course, it was easy to walk from the Bowery across to Broadway, where they could stop off at the minstrel halls to sell their songs in manuscript form to the performers, even before the publishers got hold of them. Henry Wood of Wood's Minstrels, a brother of the mayor Fernando Wood, had his music hall at 514 Broadway. He popularized the Foster-Cooper collaborative efforts "Willie Has Gone to the War" and "Jenny June." The title pages of both songs indicated that they had been expressly "composed for & sung by Wood's Minstrels." According to George Cooper's recollections, Henry Wood bought songs from Stephen Foster, on an "as needed" basis. The minstrel performer would catch Foster walking down the street with a new song manuscript in hand, and would call out, "Hello, Steve! What have you got there? Something new?" Then the deal would be struck. If he gave Wood the song in manuscript form, he would have received a one time payment for it.<sup>761</sup> But he could also have walked over to the publisher and brought a copy fresh off the presses to the minstrel.

Frequent interaction with the minstrel performers would have enabled the music publishers to know what the audiences wanted and what to publish. After the songs were performed, members of the audience could walk over to the publishers and buy the sheet music, and that would mean increased sales for the publishers. Information about what the audience wanted would have been passed down to the composer and his lyricist, too. Since Foster was speaking directly with the minstrel performers and the music publishers when he took a stroll

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<sup>761</sup>George Cooper, "Stephen C. Foster," *J. W. Pepper Piano Magazine* 4, no. 20 (May 1902):66; and Milligan, *Stephen Collins Foster: a Biography of America's Folk-song Composer*, p. 104. Quoted in Emerson, *Doo-dah!*, p. 287.



along Broadway, he must have been writing the songs that the public wanted when he chose, for what ever reason, to stay clear of the old fashioned plantation songs. He was in fact looking to the future. Foster, especially with George Cooper, wrote the type of songs that the music publishers and the entertainers wanted.

Cooper had a talent for writing lyrics that inaugurated the new style of popular song that would take hold of the country after the Civil War. Although Cooper wrote in a variety of styles, the Foster-Cooper collaboration was at its best when it produced clever comic songs like “If You’ve Only Got a Moustache” and “Mr. & Mrs. Brown,” songs in a style that Foster on his own never would have produced. These songs seemed custom tailored to a variety or a vaudeville stage. Foster and Cooper also wrote sentimental songs that with Cooper’s lyrics were suggestive of later titles like “Silver Threads Among the Gold” and the Irish songs that were popular in the last decades of the nineteenth century. One difference between the antebellum songs and those published later in the century was that the latter were comparatively optimistic. Rather than pining for days gone by, they demonstrated a hope for the future, in spite of (or because of) what the nation had just lived through. Songs with such pessimistic sounding titles as “My Hopes Have Departed Forever” no longer found a ready audience. Even allowing for separations, growing old, and dying, the newer songs evidenced a type of optimism that was of this world, not dependent on a heavenly reunion in the next.

Foster reverted to his old style when he wrote both the words and the music to “I’d Be a Fairy,” which was published in 1862 when the Civil War was wrecking havoc on the nation. The song was not popular, and the title alone makes us wonder where the analyst’s couch was to be

found.<sup>762</sup> Songs that featured women floating on vapors were no longer popular either. Nor were songs about dead and dying women, particularly since there were now over a half million really dead young men to deal with. And photography and the enormity of the deaths made the scene impossible to sentimentalize away. These were not beautiful deaths anymore. These were grotesque with bodies in rumpled formations, limbs missing and faces distorted, and the camera captured it all. It was too much even for the sentimentalists, and Foster decided to change his tune and write songs for the hour, which favored Civil War songs and comic songs.

By 1862, when the war was well advanced, Foster explained his position regarding his choice of song subjects, in the words of his own song “That’s What’s the Matter,” published by Firth, Pond & Company, which was still a joint business concern. The title page advertised the minstrel who performed it: “Dan Bryant’s Celebrated Song, As Sung by Him with Great Success.”<sup>763</sup> What was the matter, according to Foster, and the reason he decided to write songs in a different style was that “We live in hard and stirring times, Too sad for mirth, too rough for rhymes; For songs of peace have lost their chimes.”<sup>764</sup> Thus, it would seem, Foster made a conscious decision to write a new type of song.

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<sup>762</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, p. 887. About twenty years after this song was published, the term “fairie” was being applied to men whose gender was questionable. A man known as “Jenny June,” the title of a song Foster published in 1863, dressed in drag and paraded around the undesirable neighborhoods of New York City in the 1880s. He was already being referred to as a “fairie.”

<sup>763</sup> Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*, p. 227-227.

<sup>764</sup> Saunders and Root, eds. *The Music of Stephen C. Foster, A Critical Edition*. p. 190.

### 10.3 THE TWO WORLDS

When Foster first moved to New York he boarded at a Mrs. Stewart's with his wife Jane and their daughter Marion. After Jane left him and Foster lived alone, he moved to less homey places. His last known residence was the New England Hotel located on 15 Bowery at the northwest corner of Bayard and the Bowery. After Stephen's death, the family wrote, with a sigh of relieved guilt, that they had inspected the hotel, and that the accommodations were not bad at all, better than they had expected. Yet just a few years prior to Foster taking up residence at that location, it was the site of the Bowery B'hoys riot where in 1857 the Bowery B'hoys battled the Irish gang, the Dead Rabbits, with bricks, bats, and guns. A minister named Lymon Abbott rented a room in a boarding house on the corner of Bayard and the Bowery just to observe the violent spectacle.<sup>765</sup>

A glance at a map of the historical Five Points, America's most notorious slum, shows that the lower part of the Bowery formed the eastern border of the slum.<sup>766</sup> According to the reminiscences of Mrs. Parkhurst Duer, who met Stephen Foster at Horace Water's music and publishing business sometime in the early 1860s, the dejected composer was sleeping on the floor of a cellar on Elizabeth Street in Five Points. Cellar dwellings peaked in the early 1850s as poor immigrants crowded into basements rooms, which were "as thickly covered with bodies as a field of battle could be with the slain," obviously a reference to the Civil War slain. The rooms were usually windowless: "Without air, without light, filled with damp vapor from the mildewed

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<sup>765</sup>Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points* (New York: The Free Press, 2001), pp. 287-289.

<sup>766</sup>Map of Five Points 1855-1867, courtesy of Maryland Mapping & Graphics. Printed in Anbinder, *Five Points*.

walls, and with vermin in ratio to the dirtiness of the inhabitant, they are the most repulsive holes that ever a human being was forced to sleep in,” wrote the *Tribune*. Doctors who worked in the tenement districts claimed to be able to immediately spot one of the cellar dwellers from the “musty smell which a damp cellar only can impart.” “If the whitened and cadaverous countenance should be an insufficient guide, the odor of the person will remove all doubt,” one doctor averred.<sup>767</sup> The Foster family either did not know the less savory details of some of Stephen’s living conditions, or they did not want the public to know.

Middle class families, like the Fosters, knew little about New York except what they read in sensationalist books. These books painted a fearsome place. The most well known and widely read descriptions of the city in the first half of the nineteenth century were contained in the books *New York by Gaslight* and its sequel, *New York in Slices*. George G. Foster (no known relation to the composer) wrote both in the 1850s. Another very popular sensationalist study of New York, published five years after Stephen Foster’s death, was called *Sunshine and Shadow*, by Matthew Hale Smith, a title which aptly described the formidable division that existed in the classes and the lifestyles in New York. According to Smith, “There was born the sunshine and shadow tradition, a way of seeing New York that became the era’s central cliché about the city.”<sup>768</sup> The dichotomy was familiar to Stephen Foster, who for years battled in the shadow of his own two worlds, clinging to respectability all the while knowing he was sinking into the abyss of alcohol and poverty.

Class division in New York in the early 1860s was both obvious and threatening. Everywhere there were signs that the distance between the classes was growing. Where there

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<sup>767</sup> *Ibid.* p. 85.

<sup>768</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, p. 700.

had been only about a dozen millionaires in 1860, New York at the end of the Civil War could boast several hundred millionaires.<sup>769</sup> The December 1860 issue of *Harper's Weekly* published a two page allegorical spread by Winslow Homer, entitled "The Two Great Classes of Society," which represented the "Two Nations" in a series of paired scenes pitting pictures of extravagance against scenes of extreme poverty. One vignette showed a starving mother and daughter hovering over a cradle, which contained a starving infant. This image was contrasted with pictures of elegantly dressed ladies at the Opera.<sup>770</sup> In spite of the literature that focused on the problems of the inequality of wealth in the city, the poor were usually blamed for their unfortunate condition, even as reform minded Americans tried to get the wealthy to assume some semblance of social responsibility. The poor were not only to blame for their poverty, but they were evil and to be feared.

New Yorkers complained of the "increase of crime, the ferocity and frequency of assaults on private citizens at night in this city, and the undeniable imbecility and inefficiency of the police is creating great alarm in the decent and orderly portion of our inhabitants." Many of the respectable classes were moving out of the city--- one moved to Connecticut-- or buying "a couple of revolvers." George Templeton Strong, the snobbish upper side Manhattan dweller said he did not go out at night without a pistol.<sup>771</sup> They did not always agree on the cause for the crime, but they did agree that it existed and was a threat to their own lives and their children's.

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<sup>769</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 877.

<sup>770</sup> Eric Homberger, *Scenes from the Life of a City, Corruption, and Conscience in Old New York* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 22.

<sup>771</sup> George Templeton Strong, *The Diary of George Templeton Strong*, eds. Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988) p. 169.

Some “emphasized the presence of a class of exploiting wealth and a class of exploited poor.” Most blamed the trouble on the degraded foreigners.”<sup>772</sup>

One way New Yorkers at mid-century dealt with the problems of the two worlds was to create a safety zone that would serve the upper and the lower classes simultaneously without posing a threat to the upper orders. It was even hoped that in this newly built zone of safety the upper classes could have a civilizing and restraining influence on the disorderly lower classes, and that the lower orders of society would be morally uplifted by the better classes. Frederick Law Olmsted, the architect of Central Park, understood that the moral imperatives of his new park that arose out of swampy land were supposed to be democratic, but the reality at first clashed with the ideal. The beautifully landscaped park had been conceived as a place of enjoyment for all classes, not just the privileged few. Yet, Olmsted had rules forbidding German singing societies and Irish church suppers on the grounds, and the wealthy immediately bought up the surrounding land and built their mansions facing out onto the park’s luxurious grounds, attempting to exclude the poor by monetary barricades.<sup>773</sup>

Over time, however, Central Park welcomed crowds of people from high and low “who entered at varying seasons to ride, drive, ice-skate, or boat, attempt the weekly concerts, or roam about on its footpaths.”<sup>774</sup> The plan of civilizing the masses through the beauty of the landscape appeared to be working because New York’s intellectual and wealthy people used and enjoyed the park simultaneously with the lower orders. The well-to-do were smug with the thought that

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<sup>772</sup> Edward K. Spann, *The New Metropolis, New York City, 1840-1857* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981) pp., 253-255.

<sup>773</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, p. 994.

<sup>774</sup> Laura Wood Roper, *FLO, a Biography of Frederick Law Olmstead* (Baltimore: Johns’ Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 144.

the park was having a beneficial influence on their social inferiors, yet outside of the park the two worlds continued to coexist side by side, and the discrepancies in the health and beauty, and the differences in the habitability of the two worlds remained unfathomable.

#### 10.4 BOWERY STREET

By 1860, when Stephen Foster moved to New York, horse drawn vehicles carrying a hundred thousand passengers a day brought the middle and upper classes downtown for business and sometimes pleasure, and returned them to the comforts and safety of their own uptown lifestyle at the end of the day. Foster did not live anywhere near the upper or even the middle classes, who lived above Bleeker Street. He lived in one room or another on or near the lower end of the Bowery, a long road that stretched to the southern edge of Manhattan, appearing geographically as a ridge running down through the once densely forested island of Manhattan. Bowery Street was named for the farm, called Bourverij in Dutch, belonging to Peter Stuyvesent, one of the original Dutch settlers of the area. At first people asked for “the road to the Bouverij,” but later they asked simply for the Bowery.<sup>775</sup> At its southernmost point, the Bowery ran into Chatham Street on the east and the slum Five Points immediately to the west.

Five Points had a long history of ever increasing degradation. In the early days of settlement, when the Dutch controlled Manhattan, they used their slaves as a buffer against Indian attacks, until they were no longer needed. At that point, the blacks were forced out and eventually settled around a stinking pond that nobody else wanted. Henry Astor, the man who

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<sup>775</sup> Bendiner, *The Bowery Man*, pp. 41-46.

founded a dynasty on the pelts of small animals, bought the pond and an old drinking establishment next door. He turned them into a slaughterhouse, using the pond as a dumping ground for his animal carcasses. Later, the gentry bought Astor out and filled in the pond, but it was too late to prevent America's most notorious slum from growing up over and around it. It was named Five Points for the strange star-like pattern in which the streets intersected, and it catered to the innocent destitute and the not so innocent thieves, murderers, and gamblers who found comfort in the depravity of the place. By the 1860s, the slum claimed to show evidence of improvement because reform-minded women had set up the Five Points Mission, but that only attracted the few drunks and prostitutes who wanted to be reformed.<sup>776</sup>

Some blocks further to the west beyond Five Points and somewhat parallel to the Bowery ran Broadway, whose upper street numbers, above Bleeker Street, contained the well dressed of the sunshine side of New York. The Bowery extended to Fourteenth Street where it ended abruptly at Union Square, but Broadway continued further northward. Although the denizens of the two parallel streets never mixed on a social level, pedestrian access from the Bowery to Broadway was easy. A man could walk any of the cross streets that ran perpendicular to the Bowery, like Bayard or Canal Street, and eventually arrive at Broadway. Bayard was not always safe, but streets like Mulberry or Baxter that passed through Five Points eventually took the pedestrian beyond Center Street, the border of the slum, all the way to Broadway. Once on Broadway, there were plenty of omnibuses that could carry the pedestrian uptown to the better heeled sections of Manhattan.

The Bowery's moral descent was hastened after 1850 by the proximity and attractiveness of Broadway, which pulled the rising classes away from the Bowery. Like Foster himself, the

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<sup>776</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 47-49.



Bowery was a product of America's transition to industrialism. "In its material and communal development, the Bowery tells a visible story of American society in transition...The gradual emergence of the Bowery as an embodiment of various immigrant subcultures and its evolution as an embodiment of skid row homelessness is related to the shaping dynamic inherent in the late nineteenth century thrust toward industrial capitalism."<sup>777</sup> As more immigrants moved into the vicinity of the Bowery, the street gangs of opposing ethnicities bludgeoned each other and the street's reputation. Stories that featured the brutality of gangs such as the Dead Rabbits, the Plug Uglies, and the American Guards always attracted readers, especially since sensationalist writers made money selling books about the wickedness of the city. The proximity of the slum Five Points also contributed to the decline of the Bowery, in fact and in reputation.<sup>778</sup> By the 1860s, the Bowery was known for the street's "cheap lodging houses [which] showed an urbane toleration for the life-style of transients and down-and-outs."<sup>779</sup>

The Bowery also offered working class New Yorkers, including Five Pointers, opportunities for consumerism and amusement. It was the center for the lower priced retail trade, a "lively commercial avenue, with its elevated and surface transportation, glaring storefront lights and throngs of shoppers milling along the sidewalks." It attracted people who liked the flamboyant, men and women who showed "a certain cocky pride in colorful wickedness, delight in the brash."<sup>780</sup> The loud voices of the hucksters, and the echoes of the bargainners gave the street a sideshow ambience which "lent itself to numerous gimmicks which

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<sup>777</sup> Benedict Giomo, *On the Bowery, Confronting Homelessness in American Society* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989) p. xiii.

<sup>778</sup> Giomo, *On the Bowery*, p. 8.

<sup>779</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>780</sup> Bendiner, *The Bowery Man*, p. 48.

announced, pushed, and shoved commerce down streets and alley ways in a desperate search for a deal.” Although poverty surrounded the Bowery on all sides, part of the street’s magic was “the illusory portrayal of affluence in shop windows, which became portals of style and elegance, enticing the populace while visualizing the stark differences between appearances and [their own] reality.”<sup>781</sup> On the side streets were the open air markets where the poor vendors and the poor customers met on an equal footing. The Bowery offered a unique consumer experience for the penniless window shopper or the shopper with a few dollars to spare.<sup>782</sup>

In the evenings, the attention moved away from the retail outlets to “a more broad-based social consumption of pleasure and vice.” On Saturday evenings, their wages in hand, working people headed for the Bowery to spend their money at beer gardens or at Bowery dime museums. There were also saloons, theaters, concert halls, eating establishments and gin shops.<sup>783</sup> The street was gas-lit with white and more colorful red, blue, and green glass globes. But the brightly colored lights could not hide the seediness beneath the gay façade. The Bowery was active with pawnbrokers and lottery dealers, card sharks, dominoes and dice players, and violent sports like cock fights.<sup>784</sup> There were bands with a variety of instruments and lots of singing. The more genteel German bands played waltzes and schottisches, and German orchestras performed Beethoven. But illuminated signs pointed out the raunchier concert saloons.<sup>785</sup>

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<sup>781</sup> Giamo, *On the Bowery*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>782</sup> Howard B. Rock and Deborah Dash Moore, *Cityscapes, A History of New York in Images* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001) pp. 144-179. For true to life images of the Bowery and its inhabitants, consult this book’s collection of authentic lithographs, photographs, and engravings of contemporary life along the Bowery in the 1850s and 1860s.

<sup>783</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 20.

<sup>784</sup> Ernest A. McKay, *The Civil War and New York City* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990) p. 10

Walt Whitman said the Bowery represented “the most heterogeneous mélange of any street in the city: stores of all kinds and people of all kinds are to be met with every forty rods.”

Besides the native-born, the Bowery attracted immigrants mainly from Ireland and Germany. The Germans settled to the north and east of the Bowery, and the Irish found room in the southern and western parts of the famous street. African Americans who had lived with the Irish in some of the worst tenements were pushed out of the Bowery by 1860. They settled in whatever location would take them in the city, and most concentrated in Greenwich Village.<sup>786</sup> Class did not matter in the Bowery. It was “the cheap side of New York; the place of the people; the resort of mechanics and the laboring classes; the home and the haunt of a great social democracy.” It was a place where “You may be the President..... and you will be jostled and crowded off the sidewalk just the same.”<sup>787</sup>

Along the Bowery, street vendors thronged the boulevard, peddling oysters, hot yams (sold by African Americans,) freshly roasted peanuts, hot corn in season, and sweet baked pears that one lifted by the stems out of syrup filled pans. “Coffee and cake saloons” were good places to warm up and sweeten up the dreary winters.<sup>788</sup> There were Punch and Judy shows, street singers, and jugglers. Street musicians were everywhere including bagpipe players in kilts and the characteristic organ grinder with his well dressed monkey. Young men with their dates, as well as groups of journey men and shop girls, came from all over the city to prance up and

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<sup>785</sup>Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, pp. 994-995.

<sup>786</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 854.

<sup>787</sup>Davis S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995)

<sup>788</sup>Alvin F. Harlow, *Old Bowery Days, the Chronicles of a Famous Street* (New York: D. Appleton, 1931), p.179.

down the streets and to see and be seen. Walt Whitman remembered the exciting day when the butcher Tom Hyer beat the ex-convict James “Yankee” Sullivan in a brutal boxing match. What he said of the Bowery could be said of the minstrel theater: “Things are in their working-day clothes, more democratic, with a broader, jauntier swing, and in more direct contact with a vulgar life” than on Broadway, “its high bred, aristocratic brother, half a mile off.” The Bowery dance halls and saloons, Whitman said, reeked with cigars and German lager, but they were alive with chatter and activity.<sup>789</sup>

## 10.5 BOWERY B’HOYS AND SPORTING MEN

The prototypical inhabitant of the Bowery in the 1850s and 1840s was the “bowery b’hoy” pronounced buh-hoy. Dunning Foster once made a reference to one when he said he was “one of the beaux, not b’hoys of Cincinnati, which reputation I do not covet.”<sup>790</sup> The term “bowery b’hoy” was in common usage since 1834 to describe a working class fellow who “loved fun, adventure, and hard drinking, and a night out with his pals,” including a night at the minstrel show. *The Literary World* in 1849 said minstrelsy “convulse[d] the b’hoys and their seamstress sweethearts.”<sup>791</sup> These working class New Yorkers also had a unique style of dressing and of carrying themselves.<sup>792</sup>

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<sup>789</sup>Walt Whitman’s article “Brooklynmania” was published in *The Brooklyn Daily Standard*.

<sup>790</sup>Foster family letter, January 13, 1849 C482.

<sup>791</sup> *Literary World*, 1849, quoted in Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, p. 758.

<sup>792</sup>“The Soap-Locks” print by Nicholas Calyo, in Harlow, *Old Bowery Days*, p. 178.

He [the b'ho] wore "a black silk hat, smoothly brushed, sitting precisely upon the top of his head, hair well oiled, and lying closely to the skin, long in front, short behind, cravat a-la sailor, with the shirt collar turned over it, vest of fancy silk, large flowers, black frock coat, no jewelry, except in a few instances, where the insignia of the engine company to which the wearer belongs, as a breastpin, black pants, one or two years behind the fashion, heavy boots, and a cigar about half smoked, in the left corner of the mouth, as nearly perpendicular as it is possible to be got. He has a peculiar swing, not exactly a swagger, to his walk, but a swing, which nobody but a Bowery boy can imitate."<sup>793</sup>

George G. Foster in his *New York by Gaslight* said that the "governing sentiment, pride and passion of the B'ho is independence--- that he can do as he pleases and is able, under all circumstances, to take care of himself. He abhors dependence, obligation."<sup>794</sup> He also abhorred the mores and etiquette of the genteel middle class, identified with the working classes, and had a "thorough dislike of aristocracy." The b'ho worked as "a clerk or a junior partner in a wholesale grocery," or he might be "an apprentice, generally to a butcher," usually working the trades dominated by the native born.<sup>795</sup> John Ripley in 1849 described the Bowery boys as "young men of different nationalities, mostly American born," but Alvin Harlow in *Old Bowery Days* described the Bowery boys as rebels, without assigning any nationality to them: they were "anti-Irish, anti-Catholic, anti-British, anti-anything that was exotic or unfamiliar."<sup>796</sup> After 1855, the Bowery b'hoys included American born Irish men, since by that date a large proportion of the Bowery's inhabitants had Irish ancestry.

The b'ho character was so popular that he found his way onto the stage in a play by Benjamin Baker entitled *A Glance at New York in 1848*, which was later redrafted into *New York*

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<sup>793</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>794</sup> George G. Foster, *New York by Gaslight and Other Urban Sketches* (1856) ( Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990 Reprint) p. 204.

<sup>795</sup> Charles H. Haswell, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian, 1816-1860* (New York, 1897) p. 82.

<sup>796</sup> Harlow, *Old Bowery Days*, p. 42.

*as It Is*. The play's star character was the Bowery b'hoi Mose, who was portrayed by Frank Chanfrau, a ship's carpenter who had been born in Five Points at the corner of the Bowery and Pell Street, about a block from where Foster lived. Mose had a stage girlfriend named Liz, whom Abram C. Dayton described in his 1880 reminiscences:

“Her voice was loud and hearty, and she walked with a sense of defiance, dressed in brightly colored clothing which was a cheap way but always greatly exaggerated copy of the prevailing Broadway mode; her skirt was shorter and fuller, her bodice longer and lower; her hat more flaring and more gaudily trimmed; her handkerchief more ample and more flauntingly carried; her corkscrew curls thinner, longer, and stiffer, but her gait and swing were studied imitations of her lord and master, and she tripped by the side of her beau ideal with an air which plainly said, I know no fear and ask no favor.”

In 1848, Chanfrau walked onto the Bowery Theater stage wearing a fireman's red jacket, tight pants, and soap locked hair. At first the parts for Mose were brief, filling in the interludes between full length melodramas, but soon Chanfrau was playing Mose three times in one day, jumping between three theaters in New York and Newark. Mose was representative of an urban type, rather than any one ethnicity. He was also portrayed as a hero, who rescued babies from fires. The Bowery b'hoi and his g'hal Liz continued to be popular with New Yorkers throughout the 1850s.<sup>797</sup>

By the Civil War, the b'hoi was being overshadowed by the “sporting man,” a new type of disreputable man who made his home on the Bowery and flourished into the early part of the twentieth century. Whereas the b'hois had a trade of some sort, the “sporting men spent most of their time gambling, drinking and fighting in saloons that catered to their kind. ....Consistent employment was anathema to the self respecting sporting man,” who preferred to make or lose his fortune at gambling. These men constituted a “new breed of gangsters, more vicious than the former Bowery outfits,” according to historian Susan Elizabeth Lyman “Brutal clubbings,

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<sup>797</sup>Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, pp. 758-760.

gougings, and callous beatings made these groups a particular disgrace to the city.”<sup>798</sup> Primarily native born, they included men with Irish ancestry, but they were less concerned about ethnic heritage than were Bowery b’hoys.<sup>799</sup> Sporting men’s lives were dangerous. They frequently came to the gambling house equipped with “a loaded revolver by their sides, and a well sharpened knife under their hands.”<sup>800</sup>

Sporting men also supported the brothel culture, and enjoyed sporting papers like the *Sunday Flash*, the *Libertine*, or the *Rake*. One of the early contributors to the sporting press was George Washington Dixon, the blackface entertainer who had originated the song and the character of the urban dandy “Zip Coon” in the late 1820s. Although Dixon sang and performed “Coal Black Rose” in 1829 at popular New York theaters, including the Bowery Theater, by the middle 1830s he was drinking heavily and on a downward course. In 1838 he tried to publish a respectable weekly called the *Polyanthos*. When that failed, Dixon started the *Sunday Flash*, a newspaper that offered information about New York City’s sporting life and racy exposes. After his unsuccessful venture catering to the middle classes, the one time minstrel looked to satisfy the tastes of the same type of person who had attended his minstrel performances. Dixon was affiliated with several “flash” publications for sporting men, all of which wrote exposes of brothels meant to titillate the publication’s male readers. The only women talked about in the “flash” press were prostitutes.<sup>801</sup>

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<sup>798</sup> Lyman, *The Story of New York: An Informal History of the City*, p. 190.

<sup>799</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 806, 816.

<sup>800</sup> Anbinder, *Five Points*, p. 195.

<sup>801</sup> Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002) pp. 164-168.

## 10.6 HUCKSTER CHILDREN AND THE LITTLE BALLAD GIRL

Young women who became prostitutes in New York may have started their careers as child hucksters, selling freshly cooked sweet corn on the street. “Here’s your hot corn, smoking hot, smoking hot, just from the pot!” they would be heard crying out in the street. George Templeton Strong said he heard the hot corn cry at every corner in the late summer and early fall months in the middle 1850s, but he may have been thinking of the popular temperance song “Little Katy, or Hot Corn,” that everyone was singing. Some of the verses were sexually suggestive. The most famous child victim in temperance literature was Little Katy whose pitiful character was shown at the Bowery Theater, Purdy’s National, and Barnum’s Museum at the same time in 1854. Even Wood’s Minstrels performed the song *Hot Corn*, which featured a twelve year old girl who was beaten to death by her drunken mother when she failed to bring money home.<sup>802</sup> These young huckster girls often took to a life of prostitution, once they reached puberty. The night trade offered ten dollars a week compared to a dollar a week taken in sewing shirts. George Foster wrote that “nearly every house and cellar is a groggery below and a brothel above.”<sup>803</sup>

Once the Civil War began, young girls seemed to be working more, peddling flowers, boxes, mantillas, and ready made clothing. It was probably the fear that his own daughter would end up in circumstances similar to these huckster girls that inspired Foster to write “The Little Ballad Girl.” The song tells the story about a young girl who hawks broadsides of song ballads

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<sup>802</sup>John W. Frick, *Theatre, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp. 157-158.

<sup>803</sup>George C. Foster, *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches* (1856) (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990) p. 420.



in the streets of New York. When Foster was destitute, he probably imagined the ballad girl as his daughter Marion. Foster composed the song “expressly for Clark’s School Visitor” for their December, 1860 edition. It could be sung by one or two voices, as it involved a conversation between the customer and the young huckster. The potential customer asked: “Ho! Little girl, so dressed with care! With fairy slippers and golden hair! What did I hear you calling so loud, Down in that heartless motley crowd?” And the little huckster answered: “ ‘Tis my father’s song, And he can’t live long; Everyone knows that he wrote it; For I’ve been down at the hotel door, And all the gentlemen bought it.”<sup>804</sup> Perhaps Foster imagined that Marion would have to hawk “Old Folks at Home,” the song everyone knew Foster had written, even though Edwin. P. Christy’s name appeared on the title page as composer.

## 10.7 GROCERIES AND GROGGERIES

Not surprisingly, drink was common in such an environment and required no excuse. As one female resident of lower Manhattan explained, “If you lived in this place you would ask for whiskey instead of milk.”<sup>805</sup> The Bowery neighborhood offered many local bars, but in the nineteenth century, grocery stores as well as saloons sold alcohol by the glass. There were dozens of such establishments to choose from. The more impoverished the street, the more drinking establishments to choose from. The streets such as Mott and Bayard which were closer to the Bowery had only sixteen or eighteen liquor sellers and these were mostly groceries, which

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<sup>804</sup> Saunders and Root, eds. *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Volume II, p. 111.

<sup>805</sup> Incident related in *The House of Industry Magazine*, 1857 quoted in Anbinder, *Five Points*.

offered food along with the drink. In contrast, Mulberry Street could boast forty- six “groggeries” or saloons, that offered only drink.<sup>806</sup>

According to one person’s recollection, Stephen Foster preferred to drink at the “groceries,” where he could nibble on apples or turnips along with his rum or whatever drink he chose. The groceries were “dark, dirty, depressing looking establishments” that stocked up on nearly everything a tenement dweller would need--- “food, fuel, soap, candles, crockery, pipes, and tobacco, ” and, of course, alcohol. The food was usually kept in barrels or “behind the counter in tin boxes, devoid of their original lacquer from wear of age and use...At the end of the grease coated counter, furthest from the door, a portion is railed off and constitutes the inevitable bar, behind which are ranged some score of tall-necked bottles. A beer barrel stands in the extreme corner, and in these articles we have the most lucrative portion of the grocer’s trade, for no purchaser enters the murky store without indulging in a consolatory drink, whatever be their sex as it may.” George Foster said that in addition to the billiard tables that were placed in the groceries to draw in customers, prostitutes hung around as well, looking for customers, and “fortifying themselves with alcohol for their nightly occupation.”<sup>807</sup>

The most well known of the groceries was Crown’s Grocery, also known as “the most redoubtable stronghold of wickedness on Five Points, if not in New York.” Located below the ground level of a three story frame building, it combined “grogger” and grocery and did a thriving business, selling more drink than food. George Foster described “a cornucopia of sights and smells” that accosted one who descended the stairs and entered Crown’s:

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<sup>806</sup> Anbinder, *Five Point*, p. 220.

<sup>807</sup> Foster, *New York by Gas-Light and Other Urban Sketches*, quoted in Anbinder, *Five Points*, p.377.

“It is not without difficulty that we effect an entrance, through the baskets, barrels, boxes, Irish women and sluttish house keepers, white, black, yellow, and brown, thickly crowding the walk, up to the very threshold---as if the store were too full of its commodities and customers, and some of them had tumbled and rolled outdoors. On either hand piles of cabbages, potatoes, squashes, eggplants, tomatoes, turnips, eggs, dried apples, chestnuts and beans rise like miniature mountains around you. At the left hand as you enter is a row of little boxes, containing anthracite and charcoal, nails, plug-tobacco, &c. &c. which are dealt out in any quantity from a bushel or a dollar to a cent’s worth. On a shelf near by is a pile of fire wood, seven sticks for sixpence, or a cent apiece, and kindling wood three sticks for two cents. Along the walls are ranged upright casks containing lamp-oil, molasses, rum, whisky, brandy, and all sorts of cordials (carefully manufactured in the back room where a kettle and furnace, with all the necessary instruments of spiritual devilment, are provided for the purpose.) The cross-beams that support the ceiling are thickly hung with hams, tongues, sausages, strings of onions, and other light and airy articles, and at every step you tumble over a butter firkin or a meal-bin. Across one end of the room runs a long, low, black counter, armed at either end with bottles of poisoned fire-water, doled out at three cents a glass to the loafers and bloated women who frequent the place--- while the shelves behind are filled with an uncatalogueable jumble of candles, allspice, crackers, sugar and tea, pickles, ginger, mustard, and other kitchen necessaries. In the opposite corner is a sorter counter filled with three -cent pies, mince, apple, pumpkin, and custard--- all kept smoking hot--- where you can get a cup of coffee and plenty of milk and sugar, for the same price, and buy a hat-ful of Americans and Spanish wrappers [cigars] for a penny”<sup>808</sup>

The Irish were more likely to operate saloons, while the Germans more often owned groceries. The saloon had a different ambiance from the grocery. It consisted of “a long, narrow space with a long bar running down one wall and an empty floor opposite” to allow for as many as possible to crowd in at one time. “Sawdust covered the floors to sop up spilt tobacco juice and spilt beer, and a large stove stood at the center of the room to provide warmth during the winter.” Although some saloons offered chairs and tables, usually they provided only standing room. Another difference between the grocery and the saloon was that the saloon predominantly catered to men, whereas women would be found taking a drink in the groceries. The saloon or the grocery could become popular as a home away from home, because the usual tenement or lodging room provided neither space, warmth, nor comfort. Although the upper classes looked

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<sup>808</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

askance at the intemperance of the lower classes, “To those inside the Bowery, the saloon was less an instrument of debauchery than a social mechanism for class affiliation and solidarity. It was the meeting place for the workingman, the unemployed, the homeless, the truncated social hierarchy of American society. The saloon not only sustained these subgroups, but provided them with a facility for social and political engagements, such as labor union meetings, weddings, dances, and christening parties.”<sup>809</sup>

## 10.8 CONCERT SALOONS TO VAUDEVILLE

The newest type of drinking establishment that became popular in the 1860s was the concert saloon. Here a man could find not only alcoholic sustenance, but also the attraction of scantily clad “waiter-girls with low bodices, short skirts, and high tasseled red boots [who] took orders for drinks at the tables.”<sup>810</sup> Frequently they solicited the customers for prostitution and were certainly more enticing to the soldiers visiting the city than the female impersonators featured in the minstrel shows.<sup>811</sup> Sex appeal was a definite part of the attraction of the concert saloons, in addition to the fact that the concert saloons cost 12-1/2 cents, half the 25 cents admission price of the minstrel shows. The irony is that the concert saloons evolved as the minstrel theaters became more reputable and refined. When “third tier” prostitution was eliminated from the more

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<sup>809</sup> Giamo, *On the Bowery*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>810</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, p.805.

<sup>811</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 957.

conventional theaters, the concert saloons thrived on the dollars the Civil War soldiers spent on furlough.

The entertainment provided was varied, hence the beginning of the “variety” show. The concert saloons emerged when taverns converted back rooms or basements into concert halls, and put on specialty acts to encourage the sale of alcohol. The shows included minstrel, ballad, and comic songs, with the addition of comedy acts, acrobats, and dancing in the “variety” tradition .”<sup>812</sup> The lively atmosphere encouraged audience participation. “Patrons sang along with the chorus, singers sat at tables between acts or danced with customers.” Working class saloons were separate from the higher priced gentlemen’s clubs like the Gaiety on Broadway, which advertised itself as “respectable, though by no means stilted in manners.”<sup>813</sup> Concert saloons began popping up in the late 1850s and early 1860s on the Bowery, and then moved over to Broadway. After the Civil War, they cleaned up their act and became family entertainment without the scantily clad girls or the alcohol, and were known as “vaudeville.”

## 10.9 SUNDAY IN NEW YORK

Sunday afternoons on the Bowery could have been fun for Stephen Foster, for while “Broadway is quiet, the lower part of the city still, ... the Bowery is alive with excitement.” Matthew Hale Smith wrote that the “Hebrews” who “have no conscience in regard to the Christian Sabbath” set up stands on the sidewalks of the Bowery and “solicit trade from all passers by” to sell clothing

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<sup>812</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 957.

<sup>813</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 957.

or as the case may be, to buy up used clothing for resale.<sup>814</sup> Morrison sent his younger brother new clothing, but as soon as Stephen Foster received it he usually sold the clothing for drink. He could have sold the clothing on Sunday mornings to the Jewish men in the garment trade on the Bowery. Then he could have walked to one of the lager beer establishments, like the German Volk Garden, where huge quantities of beer in a friendly music filled atmosphere could be had for a fair price.

The lager beer gardens, which were usually patronized by Germans, could hold up to 1,500 people at a time. “All day on Sunday they are filled. People are coming and going all the while. The rooms are very neat, and even tastefully fitted up, as all German places of amusement are.....The music is first class. A piano, harp, violin, drums, and brass instruments are played by skillful performers.” The beer gardens were family entertainment, as husbands, wives, the children, brothers, sisters, cousins and neighbors got together for the occasion. “They bring along a basket of food, as if they were on a picnic. They sing, they shout, they dance; in some places billiards and bowling are added with rifle shooting.” The money was made from the sale of the beer, however, as “the room and entertainment are free to all. ....The long bar, immense in extent, tells the story. Here the landlord, his wife, and maybe his daughters, with numerous waiters, furnish the lager beer which sustains the establishment. The quantity sold in a day is enormous. A four-horse team from the brewery, drawing the favorite beverage, finds it difficult to keep up the supply.”<sup>815</sup>

When Foster wanted to take in a show, the closest was the Bowery Theater, one of several inexpensive playhouses frequented by the working classes on their night out on the town.

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<sup>814</sup>Smith, *Sunshine and Shadow in New York*, pp. 213-214.

<sup>815</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 213-214.

The theater, which opened in 1825 on the Bowery between Bayard and Canal Street, was the most popular and only a short walk from Foster's last place of residence. Its upper galleries were "filled with rowdies, fancy men, working girls of doubtful reputation, and last of all, the lower species of public prostitutes, accompanied by their lovers or such victims as they have been able to pick up." Charles Haswell "saw but two gloved women in the audience" of the Bowery Theater but food was plentiful. "Besides the proper and prevailing peanut, the spectators refreshed themselves with a great variety of bodily nutriment. Ham sandwich and sausage seemed to have precedence, but pork chops were also prominent...the denuded bones were most of them playfully shied at the heads of acquaintances in the pit..."<sup>816</sup>

After six in the evening, however, the Bowery on Sunday would not be a wholesome place. Matthew Hale Smith describes the scene in his *Sunshine and Shadow in New York*, published in 1869:

Leaving the City Hall about six o'clock on Sunday night, and walking through Chatham Square to the Bowery, one would not believe that New York had any claim to be a Christian city, or that the Sabbath had any friends. The shops are open, and trade is brisk. Abandoned females go in swarms, and crowd the sidewalk. Their dress, manner, and language indicate that depravity can go no lower. Young men known as Irish-Americans, who wear as a badge very long black frock-coats, crowd the corners of the streets, and insult the passer by. Women from the windows arrest attention by loud calls to the men on the sidewalk, and jibes, profanity, and bad words pass between the parties. Sunday theaters, concert-saloons, and places of amusement are in full blast. The Italians and Irish shout out their joy from the rooms they occupy. The click of the billiard ball, and the booming of the ten-pin alley, are distinctly heard. Before midnight, victims watched for will be secured; men heated with liquor, or drugged, will be robbed; and many curious and bold explorers in this locality will curse the hour in which they resolved to spend a Sunday in the Bowery."<sup>817</sup>

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<sup>816</sup>Haswell, *Reminiscences of an Octogenarian, 1816-1860*, pp. 188-189.

<sup>817</sup>Smith, *Sunshine and Shadow in New York*, pp. 217-218.

Mostly Foster would have been a voyeur, comfortable looking on everything and everybody, but not feeling that he was part of them or that they were looking at him. He would have felt anonymous in the way he needed to feel. He was back in the minstrel environment, a raucous masculine arena, even though he was rarely writing for the minstrel performers now. The Bowery took him away from the genteel middle class, and brought him smack into the world of the working classes. These were the people who filled the audiences at the minstrel theaters, and the Bowery Theater up the street. They were the people with the rude manners, in a rude world. If he did not like what he saw, he could find relief from reality at the many drinking establishments in the area or he could drift off into a state of reverie, where the composer of “Beautiful Dreamer” found that “Sounds of the rude world heard in the day, Lull’d by the moonlight have all pass’d away!”<sup>818</sup>

### 10.10 FROM COPPERHEADS TO PATRIOTS

As the nation veered towards Civil War, the Copperhead Fernando Wood was serving his third term as mayor of New York. No one knew what to do or even what to expect if Lincoln were to win. As the threat of war intensified, James Buchanan, who never knew what to do in a crisis situation, set aside January 4, 1861 as a “Day of Special Humiliation, Fasting, and prayer.” Businesses in New York closed for half a day and citizens ran to church to pray for the nation. Rowland H. Macy advised just the opposite. Rather than closing businesses, Macy, who had just

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<sup>818</sup>Saunders and Root, eds., *The Music of Stephen C. Foster, A Critical Edition*, p. 238.



opened his new department store, decided that the best way to calm people down was to get them shopping. The store's advertisement ran:

“Tremendous Excitement: The Irrepressible Conflict. R. H. Macy relies upon ENORMOUS REDUCTION from the usual prices as the GENTLE PERSUADER which will not only relieve him, but carry peace and happiness to EVERY HEARTHSTONE, AND LIFT THE CLOUD OF GLOOM which has hung like a pall over the EMPIRE CITY during the last sixty days.”<sup>819</sup>

The businessmen who made up an important part of Wood's constituents had long established relationships with the South that they did not want to disrupt with a civil war. The port of New York had thrived on the cotton trade alone, worth an estimated \$200 million a year, and businessmen were unwilling to overturn the apple cart that brought them windfall profits.<sup>820</sup> The poor foreign-born Irish, who received favors from Wood's Mozart Hall political machine, favored placating the South, too. They had no interest in abolition, because they feared that freed blacks would fill the labor market with men who would work for cheaper wages than they. Businessmen threatened their workers with loss of their jobs if they voted for Lincoln, and in October of 1860 30,000 anti-Lincoln demonstrators marched up Broadway to Fifth Avenue and then down Fourth Avenue and the Bowery, carrying lanterns and wearing the uniform of the Bowery b'hoys --- red shirts. Thus in a surprising political alliance, the wealthy businessmen and the poor workingmen united in their politics, and New York City voted the Democratic ticket in the presidential race.

Considering the political situation in New York City, the news of the fall of Fort Sumter brought with it a surprising turn of events. For the attack on Fort Sumter, quickly followed by Lincoln's call for soldiers, brought out popular support for the President and the war. Even

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<sup>819</sup> Ernest A. McKay, *The Civil War and New York City*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990) pp. 29-31.

<sup>820</sup> McKay, *The Civil War and New York City*, pp. 5-7.

Mayor Wood publicly supported Lincoln, when he offered the President his “services in any military capacity consistent with my position as Mayor of New York City.” After Fort Sumter, the city seemed to be “bursting with pugnacity.” Although Lincoln had not been their first choice, the Irish and the Democrats decided to give their support to the President, who had been, after all, “chosen under the Constitution and laws.” The *Herald* described the mood of the city on the Sunday after the firing on Ft. Sumter, when soldiers were marching off to war:

“The sound of church bells, calling the multitudes to worship the Prince of Peace, was drowned by the roll of drums, calling soldiers to march to the wars. Men, women, and children who ordinarily attend places of worship thronged the streets, to bid good-byes and God speed to their relatives and friends who were marching to defend their country.”

At least in the face of catastrophe, New Yorkers became a united people.<sup>821</sup>

Perhaps if the economy had not taken a turn for the better, New Yorkers would not have rallied around their president. In the early months of the war, New York was threatened with a brief depression, but soon New York’s economy swelled to greater heights than before the war.

In spite of the jeremiads of the business sector, New York was flourishing because of the war by the fall of 1861. Businessmen rallied to Lincoln’s side after the Confederacy announced that it would compete head on by making its tariff much lower than New York’s. Wheat, flour, and corn shipped in from the West to New York City were reshipped to Europe which badly needed the American grown foodstuffs. The new trade route from the West to the East benefited after the war closed off the Mississippi River and the port of New Orleans. New rail lines connecting the Midwest through Pittsburgh to western New York cut travel time to less than a week. “The new routing finished off New Orleans as a contender for leading exporter,” and

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<sup>821</sup>Edward K. Spann, *Gotham at War, New York City 1860-1865* (Wilmington, De.: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 2002), p. 17.

hastened a commercial and hence more sympathetic relationship between the West and the East.

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By March of 1863, a Northerner described the situation in glorious terms.

“Things here at the North are in a great state of prosperity...The large amount expended by the government has given activity to everything and but for the daily news from the War in the papers and the crowds of soldiers you see about the streets you would have no idea of any war. Our streets are crowded, hotels full, the railroads and manufacturers of all kinds except cotton were never doing so well and business generally is active.”<sup>823</sup>

It was obvious now that New York could do quite well without the South. Mayor Wood had been an articulate spokesman for reuniting the nation through compromise. He had been willing to let the South go in peace, and he even advocated that New York make her own grand exit and secede from the Union.<sup>824</sup> His idea of an independent New York City, however, was not well received by New York businessmen, and Wood had to change his tune accordingly. Once the war commenced, he made a stand for the union and disassociated himself from partisan politics. The mayor said “We know no party now,” and Foster reflected the mayor’s phrase in his song “That’s What’s the Matter,” published in 1862: “But when the war had once begun, All party feeling soon was gone; We join’d as brothers, ev’ry one!” The song expressed Foster’s own and New York City’s attitude about breaking off relations with the South. New Yorkers and Foster were aware that devotion to party and politics would have to take second place to loyalty to the nation and Union.

The rebels thought we would divide,

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<sup>822</sup> Spann, *Gotham at War*, p. 17.

<sup>823</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, p. 877.

<sup>824</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 856, 867-868.

And Democrats would take their side;  
They then would let the Union slide,  
And that's what's the matter!

But, when the war had once begun,  
All party feeling soon was gone;  
We join'd as brothers, ev'ry one!  
And that's what's the matter!<sup>825</sup>

Stephen Foster, like many of his fellow New Yorkers in the second year of the war, opposed secession and was willing to renounce “all party feeling” in favor of saving the Union. When Lincoln called for more soldiers in 1862, Foster responded personally by writing the melody to the poem “We Are Coming Father Ab’raam, 300,000 More.” Lincoln needed more men since tens of thousands lay dead, and others were deserting or failing to volunteer. Foster’s song was “Respectfully Dedicated To the President of the United States” on its title page. Although Foster wrote only the music to this song, it is fair to assume that in 1862 he carried the sentiment of the song in his heart.<sup>826</sup>

Although the city had voted Democrat in the 1860 presidential election, the Democratic party divided afterwards as New Yorkers took a more definitive position on the war. In addition to Peace Democrats, like Fernando Wood, there were War Democrats ( Tammany

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<sup>825</sup>Saunders and Root eds., *The Music of Stephen Foster, a Critical Edition*, Vol. 2, pp. 191-192.

<sup>826</sup>*Ibid.* pp. 217-219.

Hall and Regency coalitions) who insisted on running their own candidate C. Godfrey Gunther, a rich fur merchant. In the end, Wood chose to endorse the war to maintain the union, but he already had established his reputation as a Peace Democrat. As consequence, he could not get enough votes to win the 1862 mayor's election at a time when Peace Democrats were looking like traitors. Wood's reputation was already damaged by allegations that "every secret sympathizer with the rebellion would rejoice at his Election."<sup>827</sup> In December of 1861, with the Democrats divided into two camps, the fifty-six year old Republican businessman George Opdyke was swept into office. Although Wood continued to influence New York politics, the city in early 1862 was determined to stand by their Republican President.

### **10.11 "I'LL BE A SOLDIER"**

When Lincoln called for volunteers at the beginning of the war to serve three months' service, New Yorkers quickly organized into regiments. New York's Seventh Regiment was one of the first to answer the President's call and march off to Washington. They were composed of high society boys--- young merchants, bankers, professional men, and clerks. They were the regiment that defended the elites in the Astor Place Opera House Riot. In spite of their enthusiasm, they agreed to serve for only thirty days instead of the requested three months. The New York Stock and Exchange Board paid part of their expenses by allocating a thousand dollars. They wore neat gray uniforms with white cross belts and were accompanied by their regimental bands and three servants in each company.

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<sup>827</sup>Ernest A. McKay, *The Civil War and New York City*, pp. 112-115.

In 1861 Stephen Foster published his first Civil War song, entitled “I’ll Be a Soldier.” The second verse reads, “I’ll be a soldier and join in the fray, With black shining belt and a jacket of grey;”<sup>828</sup> Since Foster was not rooting for the Confederates who wore gray, he must have been referring to the handsomely attired young men in the elite Seventh Regiment when he described a gray jacket, but the color of the belt is open to investigation.

At the Bowery, Stephen Foster could watch men of a different class rush to meet the President’s call for troops. The foreign born of New York formed regiments according to their ethnicity. German Americans met at the Steuben House on the Bowery and formed the Eighth Regiment, which included many German veterans of the 1848 revolutions. Hungarians, Swiss, and Italians who had served under Garibaldi in the reunification of Italy united in the Thirty-Ninth Regiment. Even the Irish responded favorably, when the stated war goal was union, not emancipation of the slaves. Everyone knew that the Sixty-Ninth Regiment was Irish. They enlisted in their own unit under Michael Concoran, the Donegal born Fenian leader. After Concoran was wounded at the First Battle of Bull Run and captured, the Irish Brigade reorganized under Francis Meagher, who had been a leader of Young Ireland agitators in the 1840s. The Irish at this early stage believed that enlistment in the war would demonstrate that they were worthy of citizenship. In addition, the Irish saw the war as an attack on England, their ancestral enemy who was the business ally of the Confederates. Some of the Irish hoped that the war experience in America would prepare them to fight for the liberation of their homeland. Two years later, when the war aims changed, and Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, the Irish of New York rebelled against sacrificing their lives to the Union cause.

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<sup>828</sup> Saunders and Root, eds., *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Vol. II, p. 134.

A very colorful and memorable New York unit consisted of the men of the Eleventh Regiment, who called themselves the Fire Zouaves. These were the Bowery b'hoys, the volunteer firemen, the same who filled up the seats at the minstrel shows. They served under Ephraim Elmer Ellsworth, who set up his recruiting office at Broadway and Elm Street and immediately signed up more than a thousand men. The b'hoys favored brightly colored uniforms when parading down the Bowery as laymen Moses. To fight they wore a copy of the Franco-Algerian Zouaves uniform-- red bellowing trousers, loose tunics, sashes, and turbans. They fought at Bull Run, but denounced their officers after the devastating battle. Frederick Law Olmsted, when he abandoned his Central Park project to serve as Secretary of the Sanitary Commission, said the New York Fire Zouaves were brave, insubordinate in a military sense, and went to pieces on the battlefield. He thought these b'hoys needed more discipline.<sup>829</sup> But some people thought they were too undisciplined to make soldier material. George Templeton Strong, the snob from the upper side of New York, thought they needed to be court-martialed and a few shot. It was, however, the Zouaves' young colonel who was shot. Elmer Ellsworth was a personal friend of Abraham Lincoln, "who thought of this young officer as almost another son." An irate Southerner shot him after he pulled down a Confederate flag hoisted high in Arlington, Virginia. When he died, "the funeral ceremonies were held in the White House," and the President and the nation mourned the first death of a Union commissioned officer.<sup>830</sup>

The tragedy of a military solution was apparent to everyone in New York, for evidence of its bloody consequences was everywhere to be seen in the city. Direct testimony of the war's

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<sup>829</sup>Laura Wood Roper, *FLO, a Biography of Frederick Law Olmsted*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 170.

<sup>830</sup> David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p. 306.

devastation was furnished by the thousands of hobbling wounded war veterans on the city's streets, the incessant funeral processions, and the many deserters who fled the battlefields to hide away in the anonymity of the city. Enthusiastic marching songs were replaced by mournful ballads addressed to the soldiers' mothers: "Shall I Never See My Mother," "It was My Mother's Voice," "Mother, I'll Come Home Tonight." Foster added to the genre with "Leave Me with My Mother," "Tell Me of the Angels, Mother," "A Dream of My Mother and My Home," and "Give This to Mother," which was published posthumously after the war. According to one Civil War historian, "Civil War troops were singing soldiers," but the "truly popular songs" were not the stirring marching songs, but the "melodies with tones of sadness and homesickness."<sup>831</sup>

New York's hospitals were jammed with wounded soldiers, especially Bellevue. The chief surgeon Dr. Stephen Smith garnered so much experience tending to the war wounded that he published the pocket sized text "A Handbook of Operative Surgery" that was adopted by surgeons throughout the Union armies. But nursing care was pitiful at Bellevue, where poorly paid and untrained attendants, and sometimes the convalescents themselves, cared for the sick and dying. "Former prisoners, inmates of almshouses, and charwomen accepted the poor pay to help the sick because no other work was available to them. Sometimes prostitutes served as nurses at Bellevue when the police court judge in the Five Points section of the city gave them the option of prison or hospital service for ten days. At other times, female prisoners on Blackwell's Island were brought to Bellevue by barge to help with the nursing."<sup>832</sup>

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<sup>831</sup> James I. Robertson, Jr. *Soldiers Blue and Gray* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1988) pp. 83-87.

<sup>832</sup> McKay, *The Civil War and New York City*, p.66.



## 10.12 DAGUERREOTYPE STUDIOS

Sometime in 1863 Stephen Foster and George Cooper decided to pose for a photograph as if nothing monumental were happening in New York or the nation. Foster and Cooper were dressed in oversized tailed coats with velvet lapels. They could have purchased the coats at the Bowery Clothing Emporium located at No. 8 Bowery “where a large assortment of spring overcoats” were offered “from \$6 upward,” but the prices may have been too steep for these gentlemen.<sup>833</sup> Stephen Foster and George Cooper, the lyricist and “left wing of the song factory,” were trying very hard to look businesslike standing in front of a balustrade railing and a life sized painting of a stylized plant.<sup>834</sup>

Daguerreotype studios seemed to sprout up on every street in New York City. Especially during the war years, soldiers in their spanking new uniforms flocked to them. Antebellumites developed a surreal reverence for photography and attributed something of a magical status to it, because, they thought, it could “capture the physical imprint of the invisible or noumenal.” Most people did not understand how the photograph worked, and conflated the scientific with the spiritual. The novelist Honore de Balzac thought that “all physical bodies were made up entirely of layers of ghostlike images,” concluding that every time someone had his photo taken, “one of the spectral layers was removed from the body and transferred to the photograph.”<sup>835</sup> The photograph, recalling the modus operandi of Stephen Foster’s sentimental songs, preserved the

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<sup>833</sup>*New York Times*, May 9, 1859. Advertisement.

<sup>834</sup>Photo courtesy of Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 376.

<sup>835</sup>David Llewellyn Phillips, “Photography, Modernity, and Art,” from Stephen F. Eisenman, ed., *Nineteenth Century Art, a Critical History* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002).

past or brought it back, in the same way that memories recalled by Foster's sweet melodies brought the past back to life.

### 10.13 THE DRAFT RIOTS

In the last year of Stephen Foster's life the infamous Draft Riots occurred in July of 1863, drenching New York City for four days in chaos, anarchy, smoke, fire, and blood. They erupted after the federal government decided it needed to initiate a draft to bring to the army men who would no longer willingly enlist. For the Irish, rioting became the solution to an unfair draft which spared the rich and forced poor men to fight a war to free blacks. Especially after Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation appeared to have changed the war aims, the Irish withdrew their support.<sup>836</sup> Nor would they honor a draft law that specified that if a man could afford it, he could buy his way out by paying the government or some poor "substitute" \$300.

The new Conscription Act went into effect in March of 1863, four months before Gettysburg, when morale was low because the Union army had yet to prove itself in the field. All white men between the ages of twenty and thirty five and all unmarried white men between the ages of thirty five and forty five were subject to the draft. Although he was not living with his wife, Stephen Foster at age thirty-six in March of 1863 was over the age limit for a married man, and hence, was exempt. The draft fell most heavily on the poor, single young men who could neither afford to pay a substitute, or to pay the government for official exemption. The

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<sup>836</sup>Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) p.6.

working classes were irate over the new law. It seemed that their lives were only worth \$300 while “they pay \$1,000 for negroes.”<sup>837</sup>

The draft riots began on Monday morning on the 13th of July, 1863. Stephen Foster was in New York City, but George Cooper probably was not. He served in the “Twenty-second New York Regiment,” and possibly at Gettysburg, in which case he did not return to New York until his regiment disbanded on July 24, 1863.<sup>838</sup> On the day the rioting began, thousands of workers could be seen marching to the site of the draft lottery on Forty-seventh Street. Along the way, they cut telegraph poles, pulled up railroad tracks, broke store windows, and attacked several police officers, including the superintendent of police, John A. Kennedy, who was beaten on the head until “unrecognizable.” The crowd, including women and children as well as men, swelled to twelve thousand. When they converged on the upper East side, they “hurrahed” the home of the Peace Democrat and future presidential contender George B. McClellan, but attacked the homes of abolitionists, wealthy Republicans, and the offices of the Republican *Times* and Greeley’s pro-abolitionist *Tribune*.<sup>839</sup>

By noon the crowd had turned on the real objects of their rage, the free black population of New York City. A group of rioters set fire to the Colored Orphan Asylum on Fifth Avenue, but the children were pulled out of the asylum from a back door, while the rioters entered

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<sup>837</sup> Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990)

pp. 19-20.

<sup>838</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 556. Milligan, *Stephen Collins Foster*, p. 105. Morneweck stated that Cooper “served in the Gettysburg campaign and returned to New York when the regiment disbanded in July, 1863.” Milligan claimed he served in the 22<sup>nd</sup> New York Regiment, served in Gettysburg, and returned on July 24. Cooper may have served at Gettysburg, but recent authorities have not substantiated this facts.

<sup>839</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

through the front. One child died in the fire. Another group of rioters attacked black men and boys in their tenements along the downtown waterfront.<sup>840</sup> Heated race relations had been brewing for years along the waterfront where the Irish and blacks competed for jobs. A waterfront mob hanged a black man and then burned his body on the second day of the riot. White dock laborers on Wednesday night beat and nearly drowned another black man. Still other blacks were hanged on lampposts while the crowd cheered for Jefferson Davis.<sup>841</sup>

The elite of New York did not waste time. They saw in the riot “the beginning of a new era of violence, resistance to law, contempt of the government, and disregard of all public and private good.” By the second day of the chaos, the merchants, financiers, and businessmen banded together and demanded “an immediate and terrible” display of federal power in New York City to put down the riot. They pressured the Republican Mayor Opdyke into asking Secretary of War Stanton to authorize regiments who had recently served at Gettysburg to march in and put down the rioters. The riot concluded with the elite Seventh Regiment pointing howitzers at the slums of Five Points. The end was all very strange. There was no wholesale punishment of the rioters. Democrats remained in control of politics in New York City, but they were Tammany Hall Democrats. They got the Irish out of the draft by having New Yorkers contribute \$885,000 to a draft fund. If a man could show that he was poor and had a family to support, he would be free from serving in the war. “The Tammany legislation virtually guaranteed conscripts who desired not to serve that they would not be compelled to do so...”<sup>842</sup> After the riot was concluded, the Republican mayor vetoed the Democrat’s appropriation

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<sup>840</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

<sup>841</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>842</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

measure of several million dollars to pay the exemption fees, but the appropriation went through anyway.<sup>843</sup>

Fernando Wood was blamed for the draft riot.<sup>844</sup> On June 3, 1863, Wood had stood up before a large crowd in New York City and defended Vallandigham and free speech. With great histrionics, he lambasted every aspect of the Lincoln administration, crying out that Liberty was the first object and the Union came second. He concluded by announcing, “And I may be the next glorious martyr upon the altar of my country’s freedom.”<sup>845</sup> Wood may have become the martyr to his own foolishness, because the victories of the Union troops at Gettysburg one month later marked the beginning of the end for the Peace Democrats. Wood lost his credibility because of the riot’s timing. Wood, to defend his name, said that he had been out of town when the riot began. Although a Republican mayor was in office when the riots occurred, Wood had remained influential until the Draft Riots scorched his credibility. By the end of July 1863, Peace Democrats like Wood ( and Henrietta Foster Thornton ) were in a distinct minority.<sup>846</sup>

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<sup>843</sup> Jerome Mushkat, *Fernando Wood, a Political Biography* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1990) p. 139.

<sup>844</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>845</sup> McKay, *The Civil War and New York City*, pp.188-193.

<sup>846</sup> Mushkat, *Fernando Wood, a Political Biography*, p. 139.

## 10.14 THE COLORED BRIGADE

The Draft Riots made it apparent that the Irish no longer wanted to fight for the Union cause. The reluctance on the part of the Irish, however, opened the door of opportunity for blacks to join the army and fight for their own independence. After emancipation became law in January of 1863, the administration began to recruit free blacks and former slaves for the Union army. In May of 1863 the Democratic governor of New York Horatio Seymour was unwilling to authorize a black unit. But the Draft Riots in July of that year made it obvious to the governor that the state's draft quota might not be filled without the help of a black unit. In December of 1863, then, advertisements were placed in newspapers that offered pay at \$10 a month and support for the families of black enlisted men, and recruiting agents spread throughout the state looking for black recruits.

What went on in the society was naturally reflected on the minstrel stage, and black soldiers became interesting subjects to impersonate on the stage. Minstrels had opposed the draft law which favored the wealthy and forced the poor to fight. Nonetheless, although their skits sympathized with those who opposed the inequitable draft, they denounced draft dodgers. Still, minstrels never portrayed the Draft Riot in their shows, and preferred to limit their criticism to fact that the law allowed a man to buy his way out of service. When the time came to arm blacks as Union soldiers, the minstrels, surprisingly, favored the idea. "If darkies want their freedom," one minstrel said, "they should be drafted and fight for it."<sup>847</sup> Minstrels did not attack black soldiers by saying blacks would rape and plunder, and thus could not be trusted to be armed. Instead, wrote Robert C. Toll, "Minstrels reduced the threat by laughing at black soldiers." Black

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<sup>847</sup> Pell, "The Slippery Nigger," pp. 34-35 quoted in Toll, *Blacking Up*, p. 117.

soldiers on the minstrel stage were portrayed as comical: “like children who imitate without understanding, these uniformed blacks captured part of the form of the military but none of the substance.” On the minstrel stage, the ideal of strict military discipline was juxtaposed with slapstick misrule in blackface. Black troops given the order to “fall in” jump into a lake. The most popular image of black troops involved the “Black Brigade,” which presented black soldiers on the minstrel stage as cowardly and incompetent. In one song a member of the “Black Brigade” promised to fight the South, but only “by word ob mouth.” “To fight for death and glory, am quite anudder story.”<sup>848</sup> When the minstrel stage commander told the black soldiers to strike for their country and their homes, one minstrel soldier replied, “some struck for der country, but dis chile he struck for home.”<sup>849</sup>

Stephen Foster’s last contribution to minstrelsy was “A Soldier in the Colored Brigade.” The song which fit the formula of black brigade minstrel songs was a collaborative effort of Foster and Cooper. Foster composed the music and George Cooper, who had served in the army, penned the words. They probably intended to sell it to one of the local minstrel performers who were finding in 1863 that black soldiers were a popular topic for the stage. Exactly what Foster’s or Cooper’s attitude to black soldiers was can only be surmised from the lyrics, but whatever they wrote, it had to express the philosophy and politics of the minstrel stage. Although the minstrels officially approved of black soldiers—was not black blood as good as white blood on the battlefield?—minstrels found it necessary with their working class audiences, particularly the Irish, to laugh at the black soldiers. One line makes fun of the black soldier by a statement that

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<sup>848</sup> Song regularly performed by Bryant’s and Wood’s Minstrels in New York, quoted in Toll, *Blacking Up*, p. 120.

<sup>849</sup>“Jumbo’s Courage,” *Negro Melodist* #1, pp.10-11, quoted in Toll, *Blacking Up*, p. 120.

implies a contradiction to nineteenth century audiences: “I’ll be a Colonel in de Colored Brigade” anticipates a laugh at the idea of one so low--a black-- going so high in rank as a Colonel.

The next line also develops the comedy through contradiction:

“With musket on my shoulder and wid banjo in my hand,  
For Union and de Constitution as it was I stand”

The Constitution “as it was” meant the continuation of slavery! Cooper subtly reassures the audience that black soldiers are all right by mentioning in the fourth verse that General Jackson had employed blacks to fight the British at New Orleans, which he did.

If Foster’s song seemed to revert in one line to a mean racism, it was actually less degrading than most of the “colored soldier” songs. The minstrels did not deny that the blacks could fight, but the last line in the song harks back to the philosophy expressed in the Copperhead ideology: “The blacks just were not worth the destruction of the union.”

“Some say dey lub de darkey and dey want him to be free,  
I s’pec dey only fooling and dey better let him be.  
For him dey’d brake dis union which de’re forefadders hab made,



Worth more den twenty millions ob de colored Brigade!”<sup>850</sup>

That summed it up: The Union was worth more than the lives of twenty million black soldiers.

Sometime in late 1863, after Stephen had written his last minstrel song, after the trauma of the Draft Riot had subsided, after the corpses had been removed from the streets, and blacks had been cut down from lampposts, New Yorkers returned to their usual life in the city. Foster, however, seemed to participate less and less in life itself. The city was thriving because of the wartime boom. Sixty-five percent of the nation’s imports came through New York and filled Broadway shops with French lace and other costly objects for those who lived in the Sunshine World, rather than the Shadow World of the slums. People who were engaged in shipping, banking, and real estate prospered. Bank deposits tripled in New York from 1861 to 1865, and real estate values almost doubled. The theaters flourished, both minstrel and legitimate, and P. T. Barnum’s American Museum with his 200,000 curiosities continued to sell tickets to people who wanted to see “curiosities and freaks, automata and living statuary, gypsies and giants, dwarfs and dioramas, Punch and Judy shows, models of Niagara Falls, and real live American Indians.”<sup>851</sup> Although the fashionable Academy of Music also did well, the less elite entertainments like circuses and minstrels and the up and coming entertainment vaudeville felt no loss of ticket sales. In 1863, when the famous midget Tom Thumb married Lavinia Warren, both about three feet tall, the attention they garnered from the public was anything but small.

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<sup>850</sup> Saunders and Root, eds., *The Music of Stephen Foster*, Vol. II, pp. 284-286.

<sup>851</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, p. 644

## 10.15 THE BOWERY MIND

Foster, living in the Shadow side of New York, became increasingly despondent and dependent on drink during his final year of life. In the fall of 1863, Morrison Foster came to New York and attempted to gain from Stephen a promise that he would leave the now increasingly dangerous city and return either to Pittsburgh or join him in Cleveland. Morneweck wrote of this last year of her uncle's life: "Despite his growing intemperance, 1863 was Stephen's most prolific year." Foster published 46 songs, including songs for religious publications, written by a man who had never showed any particular interest in organized religion of any denomination or creed. Although Stephen Foster promised his brother Morrison that he would leave New York, no definite plans for the move were made. Ann Eliza Buchanan even sent her son Edward to New York to bring his Uncle Stephen back to her home in Philadelphia. "Edward was instructed to take no refusal—he was to insist that his uncle return with him." But Stephen put on such a "cheerful and perfectly poised" front that the young Edward did not dare reveal "the real purpose of his coming." Edward wrote home to his mother Ann Eliza, "There was no way that I could broach the matter, without seeming very presumptuous."<sup>852</sup>

What kind of a man would live on the Bowery? Elmer Bendiner answered that question by describing the tormented mind of the Bowery inhabitant at a later point in time, when the Bowery had suffered further degeneration and was classified as a "skid row."<sup>853</sup> Yet the description is somehow apropos for a sensitive and forlorn middle class man like Foster who

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<sup>852</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 419.

<sup>853</sup> Bendiner, *The Bowery Man*, p. 21

resided on the Bowery during the Civil War.<sup>854</sup> Immediately after the Civil War the Bowery's reputation declined even further, as sensationalist stories about the Bowery's debauchery, crime, and homelessness spread widely over the next twenty-five years. Jacob Riis captured the tragedy of abject poverty and tenement life in the vicinity of the Bowery in his photographic study and book *How the Other Half Lives*, which he published in 1890.<sup>855</sup> However, as early as 1872, Arthur Pember had published a series of articles on poverty and homelessness in New York, which included the neighborhood of the Bowery.<sup>856</sup> Foster, living Bowery Street during the war, was already lost, out of place, homeless in the metaphorical sense, and "anesthetized" as often as he needed to be by alcohol.<sup>857</sup> Bendiner, who described the Bowery as the place where life was anesthetized, explained the typical Bowery inhabitant's psychology:

"The first thing is to put yourself beyond all hope or expectation. Preachers may plead with you to see the light, but you have already seen the dark and you prefer it. You count as successful the man who is unassailably secure in his position, fearless of all competition, confident that he can never be toppled; and you know that such a man can be found only among the complete, hopeless abysmal failures. You look at those at the bottom of the heap and know that they cannot be toppled, that no one seeks to take their place, that for them the struggle is over. They are at peace and alcohol will keep them that way."<sup>858</sup>

The Bowery man was filled with guilt for his failure and his destitution. Guilt over poverty was prevalent since the nineteenth century viewpoint on the rapidly growing gap between the rich and the poor was that the poor were poor because they deserved to be. With the

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<sup>854</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.24-25.

<sup>855</sup> Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: 1890)

<sup>856</sup> Arthur Pember, quoted

<sup>857</sup> David S. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, p. 408.

<sup>858</sup> Bendiner, *The Bowery Man*, pp. 24-25.

acceptance of social Darwinism, poverty was viewed as the fault of the poor, a condition brought on by the condemned man's laziness, stupidity, or sin. Especially for Foster who saw his brothers find success in business, the guilt had to be unbearable. A Bowery man, according to psychiatrist Boris Levinson, "is able to accept life and to continue existing on the Bowery because being there is a solution to his problems. His life on the Bowery is an acting out of his conflicts, an undoing and assuaging of guilt."<sup>859</sup>

Bowery men have lost all hope. "They need the sweet delights of hopelessness, and anyone who seeks to energize them with hope betrays them, for he calls their spirit into action; calls them to try, again to lose; calls them again to compare themselves with other men, to assert their worth... When all that they want is for the world to leave them alone, worthless and careless beyond redemption, or competition." Bowery men are those "who no longer aspire, who do not wish to rise on anybody's shoulders, who do not wish to sell more, make more, show more, even give more than others....there they need struggle no longer against the critics, the status-seekers and the status-markers who pigeon hole people...The Bowery is a grotesque limbo beyond good and evil, where there is no first or last, no past or future...a death wherein one may have the delights and torments of being a spectator at one's own funeral.....Each man thinks it is all over. He used to live some other way. There used to be another self. It's all gone now...."<sup>860</sup>

The Bowery man "gradually loses ambition and hope; concern for the well-being of himself and his family, by slow degrees lose their hold upon him.....loss of physical vigor attends this corresponding condition of the mind until at length lassitude and depression of spirits and

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<sup>859</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>860</sup> Bendiner, *The Bowery Man*, pp. 102-103.

constant ennui get such control over him that no power or effort of the will can shake them off.”<sup>861</sup>

Friends and acquaintances became increasingly worried about Stephen Foster’s physical and mental condition, as he was visibly deteriorating. John Mahon and George Cooper were concerned about “his weakness and growing ill health.” Morneweck believed that both offered Foster pecuniary assistance “when his funds were exhausted.” Since Mahon had so little and a family to feed as well, it was probably Cooper, who, having just returned from service at Gettysburg, offered Foster financial assistance. Foster increasingly tried to avoid seeing people he had known from his past. John Wilkins Robinson, a son of Stephen’s childhood friend and neighbor Susan Pentland Robinson, accompanied his mother and father Andrew Robinson on a trip to New York City. Stephen Foster visited with them at the fancy, high priced St. Nicholas Hotel located on Broadway on the other side of the city, and they all went to the theater together. But Foster did not keep in touch, and avoided further contact with the Robinsons. Brother William’s brother-in-law Gilead Smith, a lawyer at 44 Exchange Place, New York, invited Stephen to dinner many times at his home, but Foster never made it to dinner, even after definite dates were set.<sup>862</sup> It was about this time that Foster met Miss Duer at the Water’s Music establishment, and he described himself as “the wreck of Stephen Foster.”<sup>863</sup> Morneweck wrote of her family:

“Although his brothers and sisters tried to keep in touch with Stephen and made every effort to help him, the state of his nerves was such that it did not do to press Stephen too

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<sup>861</sup> Homberger, *Scenes from the Life of a City, Corruption, and Conscience in Old New York*, p. 77.

<sup>862</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 557.

<sup>863</sup> Mrs. Parkhurst Duer, “Personal Recollections of the Last Days of Foster,” *Etude*, 1916 article quoted by John Tasker Howard, *Stephen Foster, America’s Troubadour*, p. 333.

strongly or to intimate that he needed someone to watch over him. Immediately, he drew into his proud shell and evaded the subject. There was no breaking down his reserve; all he wanted was to be left alone in peace. ...The spells of melancholy and utter desolation that at times settled over his spirit were causing Stephen's family as much alarm as his intemperance and the frailty of his physical frame."

Interestingly, Bendiner said Bowery men wanted "the world to leave them alone," and

Morneweck said that all Foster wanted was "to be left alone."

During these last years of his life, Foster let himself become unkempt and disheveled in his appearance. When Morrison visited New York, he asked his brother, "Why are you so careless, Steve? If I went around like that I'd be afraid of being insulted." Stephen answered him, "Don't worry about me, Mitty. No gentleman will insult me –and no other can!" Apparently, Foster remained aware of the class issue to the end. His niece Morneweck noticed "There was a fatality about this answer that reveals Stephen's hopeless acceptance of defeat, his acknowledgement of the futility of even a pretense of pride."<sup>864</sup>

Foster knew he had slid from the Sunshine section of life, to its darkest underside. In his depressed state of mind, he had fallen from grace and was a disappointment to himself, his family, and the world. His last place of residence at the New England Hotel had been built in 1828, and during the course of its life, the structure went through various name changes. In the early 1860s, it was known as the New England Hotel, but in the 1840s the hotel at the corner of Bayard and the Bowery was called the North American Hotel. That Foster made his last home in the hotel in which the Virginia Minstrels had conceived the idea for the minstrel show offers some resolution to the incongruities in the composer's life. Dan Emmett of the Virginia Minstrels recounted the conception of the four-part minstrel show: "All four [of the minstrel performers] were one day [in 1843] sitting in the North American Hotel in the Bowery when one

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<sup>864</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 541-542.

of them proposed that with their instruments they should cross over to the Bowery Circus and give one of the proprietors a charivari as he sat by the stove in the hall entrance.” So it was that the minstrel show began its life at the North American Hotel, where Foster ended his.<sup>865</sup>

## 10.16 CURES AND TEMPERANCE PLAYS

The world was increasingly closing in on Foster and drink became his primary solace. Published reminiscences of Foster from this time period in New York usually mention his devotion to alcohol. Niece Evelyn Morneweck said that “his growing dependence on alcohol” was of greater concern to the family than Stephen’s “frequent financial emergencies.”<sup>866</sup> And it was this period in the composer’s life that his granddaughter Jessie Welsh Rose described as “the dark pages in the life of S. C. Foster,” when Jane Foster was “engaged with the aid of Morrison Foster and John D. Scully ( a brother-in-law) in trying to put her husband upon his feet--a futile effort.”<sup>867</sup> Alcoholic consumption in antebellum America was very high and historian W. J. Rorabaugh looked beyond the personal to sociological reasons for explanation. He considered alcoholism to be a function of the anxieties that afflicted men who failed “to achieve” in a society that increasingly put a great deal of pressure on men to become models of success. “People who have high aspirations set themselves difficult, perhaps impossible targets, fail to meet their own expectations, suffer disappointment from their failure, and thereby become

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<sup>865</sup> Nathan, *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy*, p. 117

<sup>866</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 541.

<sup>867</sup> Jesse Welsh Rose to Wm. H. Stevenson, July 7, 1926. Mifflin County Historical Society, Lewistown, Pa.  
Morneweck, *Chronicles*, pp. 541-542.

susceptible to anxieties.” In other words, high ambition accompanied by failure caused anxiety that led to alcoholism.<sup>868</sup>

Jane sent money to Stephen to pay for “cures” for her husband’s alcoholism. Exactly what “cures” Stephen tried in the 1860s is not known, although opium was used to soothe delirium tremens.<sup>869</sup> The “cures” were offered by mail order advertisements in newspapers and magazines, and they were popular with the wives of alcoholics, who were told that they could buy these patent medicine cures and administer them to their husbands without the unsuspecting spouse ever knowing it. The wife could, for example, surreptitiously put fifteen to twenty drops of one concoction into her husband’s alcoholic beverage, inducing a “nausea and disgust” that would convince the husband never to drink again. The alcohol “cures” themselves consisted of nearly fifty percent alcohol, but in addition, they contained opium, morphine, and cocaine. One doctor said that he despaired of ever seeing a reformed alcoholic. Whenever there appeared to be one, the reality was that the drinker had switched his dependencies and was now addicted to opium.<sup>870</sup>

Many Americans, despairing of the “cures” turned to moral suasion to convince men to renounce alcohol. They formed voluntary organizations like the working class Washingtonians and later the more respectable Sons of Temperance. Both organizations depended on personal pledges of abstinence. Stephen’s father William was a member of the Washingtonians in the mid-1840s. Like Alcoholics Anonymous, the Washingtonians relied on the technique of

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<sup>868</sup> W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) pp. 174-176.

<sup>869</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>870</sup> William L. White, *Slaying the Dragon: the History of Addiction, Treatment, and Recovery in America* (Bloomington, Ill: Chestnut Health Systems/ Lighthouse Institute, 1998) pp. 64-71, 95.



personal confessions among groups of like “sinners,” but these confessions often degenerated into nothing more than sensationalist entertainment.<sup>871</sup> By the 1850s the Sons of Temperance offered a more refined reenactment of the same scenario. When it became apparent that neither the “cures” nor the voluntary associations worked, however, the states made laws to enforce prohibition.

The first state law to prohibit the use of alcohol was enacted in Maine, and it set the example for other states to follow. A vote for or against prohibition was based increasingly on ethnicity, religion, and class. The Irish Catholics wanted to be able to drink, as did the Germans, of whatever religion they were. The elites whether Protestant or Catholic, however, “saw eye to eye on the evils of demon rum” and pushed through a restrictive law in New York in 1855 to curtail the habits of the patrons of the 5,700 licensed liquor groceries, taverns and saloons in New York.<sup>872</sup> By the time of the Civil War, however, mass rallies at Tammany Hall resulted in all of New York’s restrictive laws being abrogated. Then the reformers reverted to their old favorite of moral suasion acted out at the Bowery Theater, within walking distance of Foster’s hotel.

Stephen Foster could not have missed the latest temperance plays. *Ten Nights in a Bar Room* had its debut at the beginning of the Civil War, replacing the preceding decade long popular temperance play the *Drunkard* which played throughout the 1850s at the Bowery Theater.<sup>873</sup> *Ten Nights* written by Timothy Shay Arthur and adapted to the stage by William W. Pratt promoted legal restrictions against drinking. Arthur and Pratt used a time sequence

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<sup>871</sup> Reynolds, *Walt Whitman’s America*, pp. 93-96.

<sup>872</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, p. 776.

<sup>873</sup> John W. Frick, *Theater, Culture and Temperance Reform in Nineteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, U.K: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 128-129, 132-133.

device to show the audience the disastrous effects that alcohol had on everyone who came into contact with it. The story was structured around four deaths, each directly attributable to alcohol. Mary, the daughter of the town drunkard, was killed when someone threw a shot glass in anger. By the end of the play, after the best people fell victim to alcohol, the audience was ready to welcome legalized prohibition. Versions of *Ten Nights in a Bar-Room* played everywhere in the latter part of the nineteenth century, from town halls to opera houses, or simply in churches.<sup>874</sup>

Stephen Foster contributed to the temperance genre in song, even if he was unable to practice what he preached. In 1855 Foster wrote “Comrades Fill No Glass for Me.” In 1863, when alcohol was a serious contender for Foster’s affections, Foster and George Cooper together penned “When the Bowl Goes Round:”

In the bosom dwells no sigh, While the goblet’s brimming high,  
All the world is filled with treasure, While the bowl goes round,  
Darkling sorrows take their flight, in the wine’s rich ruby light,  
And the hours are winged with pleasures, While the bowl goes round.<sup>875</sup>

Foster in these last years of his life may have come to see himself increasingly in the image of Clinton Sanford, whose real name was George Semple, the young alcoholic son of a prosperous Pittsburgh attorney. Eliza Foster described his weakness in her journal: “But many a lovely boy as promising as thou wert, has been sacrificed like thee for want of resolution to

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<sup>874</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>875</sup> Saunders and Root, eds., *The Music of Stephen Foster*, pp. 276-278.

withstand the tempter alcohol. Alas, a pauper's death and an unknown grave were the fate of Clinton Sanford."<sup>876</sup> Foster prayed to his mother to forgive him this one indiscretion.

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<sup>876</sup> Eliza Clayland Foster, "Sketches and Incidents of Pittsburgh," p. 99.

## 11.0 STRANGE DEATH

The mysterious conditions of Stephen Foster's death have plagued some interested admirers for many years. Others are less concerned with the facts of the composer's death, believing it matters less how a man dies than how he lives and what he created while he lived. Still the unusual circumstances of the composer's death do not disappear and instead continue to bother the curious. The official story, relayed by Morrison Foster in his biography of his brother, is that Stephen Foster died from an injury incurred from an accident. On the morning of January 10, 1864, Foster "fainted" in his room at a hotel along the Bowery. When he fainted, he somehow "fell across the wash basin," cutting and injuring himself on the head and neck. He was taken to Bellevue Hospital where he fainted away dead a few days later on January 13, 1864. Versions of this same story were relayed by Stephen's brother Henry Foster and, many years later, by the composer's niece, Evelyn Foster Morneweck. A somewhat different story, however, was reported by George Cooper, Foster's lyricist and friend when they both lived along New York's Bowery and the only eye witness to Foster's so called "accident." Cooper said he found Foster lying on the floor "with blood oozing from a cut in his throat," and he never mentioned any broken wash basin at all. Was Foster's death the result of an accident or do the circumstances suggest darker implications?

## 11.1 THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF STEPHEN FOSTER'S DEATH

The first two almost identical recountings of Stephen Foster's death were related by brother Henry Foster in letters to his friend Susan G. Beach, dated January 23, 1864, and in a similar letter to his sister Anne Eliza, written February 4, 1864.

To Mrs. Beach, Henry wrote:

“He had been going about feeling quite unwell for several days, when on Saturday evening he retired early and requested the Landlord of the Hotel, not to have him disturbed in the morning, about ten o'clock the next morning he opened his door and spoke to the chamber maid to bring him a glass of water, and turned to go back, when he fell as if he had been shot, and cut his head badly, a surgeon was sent for immediately, who dressed his wounds, on Monday and Tuesday he improved and spoke of being out again in a few days, on Wednesday he was propped up in his bed and was having his wounds dressed when he fainted away and never revived again. I have no doubt that owing to the state of his system, and the loss of blood, there was not strength sufficient left him to rally after fainting away.”<sup>877</sup>

To Ann Eliza, Henry Foster wrote that Stephen:

“had retired early to bed on Saturday evening, the following morning opened his door and spoke to the chambermaid and turned to go back to his bed when he fell as if he had been shot striking his head on the chamber, a surgeon was procured immediately and his wounds dressed, he then sent for his friend Mr. George Cooper (as fine a little gentleman as I ever met) who telegraphed to Morrison and I, and persuaded Stevey to go with him in a carriage to the Hospital where he would be better attended to. On Tuesday he was much better, and Mr. Cooper was with him. On Wednesday, he was propped up and after having taken some soup was quite cheerful. When they commenced dressing his wounds and just as the person was washing out the rag, without Stevey saying a word he fainted away and never came to again.”<sup>878</sup>

Henry in both letters has Stephen talking to a chambermaid with the door opened, just as the accident occurred. In the letter to Mrs. Beach, Stephen requested from the maid a glass of

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<sup>877</sup>Henry Foster, letter to Mrs. Susan G. Beach, January 23, 1864

<sup>878</sup>Henry Foster, letter to Ann Eliza, February 4, 1864, quoted by Howard, *Stephen Foster, America's Troubadour*, p. 339-340.

water; and in the letter to Ann Eliza, Henry said that Stephen Foster struck “his head on the chamber.” More than thirty years later Morrison retold the story in the biography of his brother that was published in 1896:

“In January 1864, while at the American Hotel, he was taken with an ague and fever. After two or three days he arose, and while washing himself fainted and fell across the wash basin, which broke and cut a gash in his neck and face. He lay there insensible and bleeding until discovered by the chambermaid who was bringing the towels he had asked for to the room. She called for assistance and he was placed in bed again. On recovering his senses he asked that he be sent to a hospital. Accordingly he was taken to Bellevue Hospital. He was so much weakened by fever and loss of blood that he did not rally. On the 13th of January he died peacefully and quietly.”<sup>879</sup>

Morrison Foster had no chambermaid standing at the door talking to Stephen Foster. His chambermaid “discovered Foster” after she had come to his room to bring him the towels he had requested at some undetermined earlier time. Morrison does have a wash basin, however, rather than a chamber, which is more decorous sounding.

The most important and probably the only reliable account of Stephen Foster’s death is that given by George Cooper around 1920 to Harold Vincent Milligan. Even though many years had elapsed since the events transpired, Cooper was the only eye witness to give a report on the details of Foster’s death. The other accounts were based on hearsay. Morrison and Henry Foster could only have known what was related to them either by Cooper or by the proprietor of the New England Hotel, Mr. Husted. Cooper’s account, as reported verbatim by Milligan in his biography of Stephen Foster is as follows:

“Early one winter morning I received a message saying that my friend had met with an accident;

I dressed hurriedly and went to 15 Bowery, the lodging-house where Stephen lived, and found him lying on the floor in the hall, blood oozing from a cut in his throat and with a bad bruise on his forehead. Steve never wore any night-clothes and he lay there on the

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<sup>879</sup> Foster, *My Brother Stephen*, p. 53.

floor, naked, and suffering horribly. He had wonderful big brown eyes and they looked up at me with an appeal I can never forget. He whispered, 'I'm done for,' and begged for a drink, but before I could get it for him, the doctor who had been sent for arrived and forbade it. He started to sew up the gash in Steve's throat, and I was horrified to observe that he was using black thread. 'Haven't you any white thread,' I asked, and he said no, he had picked up the first thing he could find. I decided the doctor was not much good and I went down stairs and got Steve a big drink of rum, which I gave him and which seemed to help him a lot. We put his clothes on him and took him to the hospital. In addition to the cut on his throat and the bruise on his forehead, he was suffering from a bad burn on his thigh, caused by the overturning of a spirit lamp used to boil water. This had happened several days before, and he had said nothing about it, nor done anything for it. All the time we were caring for him, he seemed terribly weak and his eyelids kept fluttering. I shall never forget it.

"I went back again to the hospital to see him, and he said nothing had been done for him, and he couldn't eat the food they brought him. When I went back again the next day they said 'Your friend is dead.' His body had been sent down into the morgue, among the nameless dead. I went down to look for it. There was an old man sitting there, smoking a pipe. I told him what I wanted and he said 'Go look for him.' I went around peering into the coffins, until I found Steve's body. It was taken care of by Winterbottom, the undertaker, in Broome Street, and removed from Bellevue. The next day his brother Morrison, and Steve's widow, arrived. They stayed at the St. Nicholas Hotel. When Mrs. Foster entered the room where Steve's body was lying, she fell on her knees before it, and remained for a long time."<sup>880</sup>

It is most noteworthy that Cooper has mentioned neither a chambermaid nor a chamber, nor a wash basin or pottery of any kind. He does clearly mention, however, a "cut throat" and a naked composer. The account given by Morrison Foster in 1896 mentions "the wash basin, which broke and cut a gash in his neck and face," while Henry Foster writing in January of 1864 did not even mention the cut in his brother's throat, only that he had "cut his head badly." It is interesting how the choice of words suggests a different situation, that is, the difference in connotation with the word neck and throat. A "gash in his neck," the words used by Morrison Foster, do not immediately conjure the idea of suicide. But "a cut in his throat," the words used by George Cooper, as reported by Milligan, do.

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<sup>880</sup> Milligan, *Stephen Collins Foster: A Biography of America's Folk-song Composer*, quoted in Howard, *Stephen Foster, America's Troubadour*, pp. 340-341.

In 1934, John Tasker Howard in his biography of Foster seemed so overwhelmed by the different stories that he decided to let Henry, Morrison, and Evelyn Foster, and George Cooper relay the facts in their own words, rather than trying to make one standard story from the whole mess. That appears to be the best solution to the problem, which, as can be seen, is that when comparing the various reminiscences, all the accounts are different.

In 1944, Evelyn Morneweck in the *Chronicles of Stephen Foster's Family* once again recounted the story of the composer's weird accident:

“On the morning of January 10 [1864], Stephen rose to get a drink of water, and, fainting from weakness, he fell against the washbowl, which broke and cut a terrible gash in his face and neck. The chambermaid found him lying in a pool of blood. Mr. Husted [owner of the hotel] sent for George Cooper, who came immediately. George said that when he lifted Stephen up the latter gasped, “I’m done for.” He saw that Stephen was in a serious condition and called for a carriage to take him to Bellevue Hospital. Besides the wound in his neck, George reported that Stephen also had a bad burn on his thigh caused by the overturning of a spirit lamp used to boil water.”<sup>881</sup>

Morneweck went back to her father Morrison's story, but she kept the chambermaid in the story. The difference was that this chambermaid was not talking with Stephen at an open door when the accident occurred. She found him “lying in a pool of blood.”

Most recently Foster biographer Ken Emerson has retold the tale in his 1997 biography *Doo-dah!* Emerson combined Henry Foster's story with Cooper's facts, yet he changed the story given by Henry Foster. Emerson wrote that Stephen Foster spoke to the maid “at his door,” which was different from what Henry had written, that Foster “opened his door and spoke to the chamber maid.....” Emerson wrote:

“On Sunday morning, Foster spoke to a chambermaid at his door and then, as he turned back into his room, fell ‘as if he had been shot,’ striking a wash basin or chamber pot that cut a deep gash in his neck. ....George Cooper and a doctor were sent for. When Cooper, who lived only four blocks away, arrived on the scene, he found Foster lying naked (

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<sup>881</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicle*, p.558.



Steve never wore any night-clothes) with a cut throat, a bruised forehead and ‘a bad burn on his thigh.’ The tin boiler used for making hot drinks in the liquor grocery had overturned a few days earlier and scalded Foster ‘terribly,’ but he had neglected to tend his wound....”<sup>882</sup>

Emerson’s refashioning of the story makes more sense given that Cooper tells us Foster was naked when he found him lying on the floor. It becomes apparent that we can not have a naked Stephen Foster standing in an opened doorway speaking to the chambermaid. If we put more credence into Cooper’s story than in Henry’s, we conclude that Foster never opened the door to speak to the maid. She may have heard him fall, and after the fall, he may have crawled out to the hall, where Cooper said he found him lying, “with blood oozing from a cut in his throat.” Maybe he then asked for towels after she found him to clean himself up, or as Henry said, for a glass of water. Henry Foster in his letters related that Stephen had “retired early to bed Saturday evening” and “requested the Landlord of the Hotel not to have him disturbed in the morning.” Did the hotel proprietor relay this information to Henry? And if so, why did Foster not want to be disturbed?<sup>883</sup>

When the fateful telegram sent by George Cooper reached Morrison and Henry Foster informing them that Stephen was dead at Bellevue Hospital, Henry hurried from Pittsburgh and Morrison, from Cleveland to New York City. Jane showed up too, and they all secured rooms at the St. Nicholas Hotel, an upper class establishment on Broadway. ( Andrew Carnegie stayed there when he visited New York.) The Fosters refused to discredit Stephen’s lodgings. They inspected Foster’s hotel after the composer’s death, and Henry Foster reported that “they found

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<sup>882</sup> Emerson, *Doo-dah! Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture*, p. 298.

<sup>883</sup> Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p.557.

the hotel a very respectable place, and the landlord told them that Stephen did not owe him a cent, or any one else that they could find.”<sup>884</sup>

The Fosters could have spoken to the landlord, Mr. Husted, and obtained the details about the chamber or wash basin from him. They could have even questioned the hotel maid, but that is less likely. We can only assume that George Cooper did not suggest it, because he makes no mention of broken pottery in his account of the accident that he gave years later. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing for sure what happened. Even if there had been a broken basin in the room, the maid most likely would have cleaned it up by the time the Fosters got there. We only know that Cooper did not mention a broken wash basin or chamber pot at all. Cooper specifically claimed that when he arrived at the scene, Foster had “blood oozing from a cut in his throat,” and a doctor who had been called to the scene “started to sew up the gash in Steve’s throat...”<sup>885</sup>

Neither Morrison Foster nor Morneweck, who were writing for publication, mentioned that a doctor was called in to sew up the cut in their brother’s throat. Henry mentioned the doctor because he was writing personal letters, but he did not mention the cut throat. Henry wrote that a surgeon had been called in to dress the “wounds” that resulted because Stephen had “cut his head badly.” Henry thus avoided mentioning the fact that his brother even had a cut throat. Years later, Morrison in his 1898 biography of his brother mentioned “the wash basin, which broke and cut a gash in his neck and face.”<sup>886</sup> Perhaps because a surgeon had been called and a coroner’s inquest had been carried out, Morrison could not leave out the pertinent details. In any

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<sup>884</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 558.

<sup>885</sup> Milligan, *Stephen Collins Foster, A Biography of America’s Folk-song Composer*, p.100.

<sup>886</sup> Foster, *My Brother Stephen*, p. 53.

event, the inquest determined that Foster's death was the result of an accidental injury, so Morrison may have felt safe even though the details were different, from one story to the next.

Morrison Foster wrote that Stephen "lay there insensible and bleeding until discovered by the chambermaid who was bringing the towels he had asked for to the room." Henry Foster in the 1864 letter said that "he opened his door and spoke to the chambermaid to bring him a glass of water, and turned to go back, when he fell as if he had been shot, and cut his head badly....." And George Cooper said he found Stephen Foster lying in the hall bleeding from a cut throat and naked. If Foster had indeed opened the door to talk to the chambermaid as Henry described the situation, he would not have been naked. It seems that the chambermaid was conspicuously placed on the scene at the door when the "accident" occurred, to rule out any suspicion of the possibility of a suicide attempt. It also appears that the wash basin or chamber pot could have been broken and lying on the floor, but the pottery need not have caused the wound. If Foster fainted and fell down from a wound already inflicted, the pottery could have broken without actually causing the wound. Or the broken pottery could have been an added detail that did not exist in reality.

## **11.2 SUICIDE A POSSIBILITY**

Of course, it could have been a freak accident that took away the sweet tones and melodious muse from America. We shall never know, and perhaps the Fosters never really knew the truth about the circumstances of their brother's death. The facts, however, suggest suicide, especially to a writer of fiction who is not constrained by the need for hard evidence. When Peter Quinn

included a characterization of Stephen Foster in his novel *Banished Children of Eve*, he made Foster's death a suicide. But Quinn, of course, was writing fiction:

Winterbottom [the undertaker] rubbed his hands. "Mr. Foster," he said, "this is a most delicate matter."

"You have handled it well," [Morrison] Foster said.

"The man who brought your brother to the hospital said he might go to the police. He said that, well, the gash in your brother's throat wasn't the accidental result of falling upon a piece of crockery. He said that it was deliberately self-inflicted; that your brother told him so; and that it was a civic duty to report such an act to the authorities."

"Where is the fellow now?"

"He has taken a trip to Rochester. His expenses were all paid, and he was given something additional. I saw to it."

"I'm deeply grateful." Morrison's words turned to puffs of steam. He shivered.<sup>887</sup>

Stephen's body was already at the undertaker's when Morrison, Henry, and Jane arrived in New York. In fact, it was probably already lying in an iron coffin. Besides the family, there was another man involved in making the final arrangements for Stephen Foster after his death, a businessman who would have had an interest, not only in absolving his own conscience, but in keeping nasty rumors out of the news. According to Morrison Foster, "Under request of his family his [Foster's] body was immediately taken to an undertaker's, by direction of Col. William A. Pond, and placed in an iron coffin. On arrival of his brother, Henry Baldwin Foster and myself, his remains were taken by us to Pittsburgh, accompanied by his wife."<sup>888</sup> Thus, it seems that William A. Pond, the partner in the firm that years earlier had entered into contracts with Foster to publish his songs, still had a large financial interest in the composer in terms of future sales of the songs to which he or his company owned the rights. William A. Pond was

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<sup>887</sup> Quinn, *Banished Children of Eve*, p. 586.

<sup>888</sup> Foster, *My Brother Stephen*, pp. 53-54.

charged with getting the body to the undertaker's "immediately," where it was placed securely in "an iron coffin." It is interesting that Pond, who ignored Foster and published his songs infrequently during the last two or three years of the composer's life, got involved at the very end to ensure that Foster had a respectable reputation in death.<sup>889</sup>

Mrs. Parkhurst Duer's published account of her meeting with Stephen Foster leaves open the possibility of suicide, in the references she made to the composer's state of mind in the last year of his life. If we discount the inaccurate details of dates or places, Howard thought that "her story gives a reasonably faithful picture of Foster during his last days."<sup>890</sup> Mrs. Duer was working in the music store of Horace Waters, when Stephen Foster walked into the store to get a few copies of his songs, and the two became acquainted. The article is worth quoting at length. Several items of importance come to light in this article: that Foster was looking ill towards the end, that he felt rejected by the public, that he wrote his musical ideas down on wrapping paper from the grocery store, and that he slept "in the cellar room of a little house on Elizabeth Street in the Five Points," where he paid no rent. Mrs. Duer did not know the exact date when this meeting with the famous down and out composer took place:

All that this writer knows of Stephen Foster's early days was heard from his own lips, when his troubled existence was drawing to its close. He told of the wrongs he had suffered, of the temptations thrown around him during his years of prosperity and popularity, until all he possessed was gone. With a broken heart, crushed spirit, health destroyed, nerves shattered, he broke away from old associations, and secluded himself, hoping to regain his health, and position in the world. Nobly he struggled to conquer his foe, the "wine cup," by which means, evil companions had sought his ruin.....

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<sup>889</sup> From 1861 until Foster's death in January of 1864, Firth, Pond, & Co., Wm. A. Pond & Co., and Firth, Son & Co. published Foster's songs only infrequently. More often in these years the names of John J. Daly, Horace Waters, S. T. Gordon appear as the publishers on the title pages of Stephen Foster's compositions. Saunders and Root, *The Music of Stephen C. Foster*, Volume 2.

<sup>890</sup> Howard, *Stephen Foster, America's Troubadour*, p. 333.

I shall never forget the day I met him. I was engaged in a large music publishing house on Broadway, New York City, leading a very busy life, although but twenty-one years of age. Every day I met teachers and composers, and wondered if ever Stephen Foster would appear.....One day I was speaking with the clerks, when the door opened, and a poorly dressed, very dejected man came in, and leaned against the counter near the door, I noticed he looked ill and weak. No one spoke to him. A clerk laughed and said:

“Steve looks down and out.”

Then they all laughed, and the poor man saw them laughing at him. I said to myself, “who can Steve be?” It seemed to me, my heart stood still. I asked, “who is that man?”

“Stephen Foster,” the clerk replied. “He is only a vagabond, don’t go near him.”

“Yes, I will go near him, that man needs a friend,” was my reply.

I was terribly shocked. Forcing back the tears, I waited for that lump in the throat which prevents speech, to clear away. I walked over to him, put out my hand, and asked, “Is this Mr. Foster?”

He took my hand and replied: “Yes, the wreck of Stephen Collins Foster.”

“Oh, no,” I answered, “not a wreck, but whatever you call yourself, I feel it an honor to take by the hand, the author of Old Folks at Home, I am glad to know you.” As I spoke the tears came to his eyes, and he said:

“Pardon my tears, young lady, you have spoken the first kind words I have heard in a long time. God bless you.” I gave him both hands, saying: “They will not be the last.”.....

I judged him to be about forty-five years of age, but the lines of care upon his face, and the stamp of disease, gave him that appearance.....Stephen Foster was a man of culture and refinement.....

When this first visit was ended, Mr. Foster thanked me for my interest in him, and said it had done him a world of good to have some one to talk with.....I said if he would bring me the manuscript songs that he had not been able to write out, I would do the work for him at his dictation. He was very grateful, and from that time until he died I was permitted to be his helper. ....When he brought me his rude sketches, written on wrapping paper, picked up in a grocery store, and he told me he wrote them while sitting upon a box or barrel, I knew he had no home. I asked him if he had a room; he said:

“No- I do not write much, as I have no material or conveniences.” He then told me that he slept in the cellar room of a little house, owned by an old couple, down in Elizabeth Street in the Five Points, who knew who he was, and charged him nothing. He said he was comfortable, so I suppose he had a bed. ....a kind manager of a nearby restaurant had arranged to provide him with a hearty dinner every day, and he need not pay for

anything until he was able to do business, and a friend had sent him some medicine which he must take. He looked at me for a moment and that fervent "God bless you" paid for all the planning.....We who were near him had no hope of his recovery, but the few comforts provided lessened the suffering of a dying man. This messenger of song, God had given to the world, was not appreciated, and when overtaken by misfortune, was treated as other great souls in the past, left to die, forsaken by a nation he has blessed by his living.....<sup>891</sup>

Mrs. Duer's testimony described the image of a man who would be only too willing to take his own life. Then there was the strange coincidence that no one seems to bring up. That is, the fact that Mrs. Mahon, the wife of his New York friend John Mahon, died on the same day that Stephen Foster had his fatal accident, on January 10, 1864. The cause of her death is unknown, but it is possible that she had a lingering illness, and that Stephen Foster and other friends and her family knew that she was going to die. Foster may have been despondent over Mrs. Mahon's impending death. John Mahon was in Bellevue Hospital at the same time, being treated for an ulcer. Foster may have felt abandoned.

One curious item was the torn scrap of paper that was found in Foster's purse along with thirty-eight cents when he died. On the paper were written the words "Dear Friends and Gentle Hearts," words that most authors have assumed comprised the title to a new, never to be written song. Yet the words sound like those heard in the introduction to a funeral oration. Could these words have been the beginning of a suicide note? Only one third of suicides leave notes, but this scrap may have been torn from a larger piece of paper. After the rest was discarded, this scrap just hinting at the entire message, could have been preserved out of respect for America's great

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<sup>891</sup> Duer, "Personal Recollections of the Last Days of Foster," *Etude*, 1916, quoted in Howard, *Stephen Foster, America's Troubadour*, p. 333.

man of song. Authorities contend that artistic people often leave poems as suicide notes to be self-expressive in their deaths.<sup>892</sup>

There is some evidence that suicides were not terribly unusual in such times of stress and disorder as existed in the years leading up to the Civil War and during the war itself. Walt Whitman had written an article in 1857 entitled “Suicides on the Increase,” which was published in the *Daily Times*. In this article he speculated that “There is something radically wrong in modern society: while wealth and luxury are on the increase, happiness and contentment are on the decrease.” Thoreau in 1854 wrote in his autobiographical *Walden* that “most men live lives of quiet desperation.”<sup>893</sup> Whitman noted in 1855 that both homicides and suicides were on the rise, as a general malaise seemed to have affected Americans in the antebellum years, beginning with what De Tocqueville described as “the strange melancholy often haunting inhabitants of democracies in the midst of abundance, and of that disgust with life sometimes gripping them in calm and easy circumstances.” Such feelings only darkened with the political collapse of the 1850s, which created widespread alienation and disenchantment. Michael Holt noted that a “genuine sense of crisis troubled Americans living in that decade,” and Walt Whitman did not “believe the people of these days are happy.”<sup>894</sup>

An article published in the *New York Times* on August 3, 1859 deplored “The Alarming Increase of Suicides.” “Their alarming frequency of late has excited much attention and surprise,” wrote the editor. Of the twenty-six suicides the *Times* recorded, “eleven were

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<sup>892</sup> Roger Lane, *Violent Death in the City: Suicide, Accident, & Murder in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Philadelphia* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 108.

<sup>893</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* [1854] (New York, Barnes & Noble, Reprint 2004)

<sup>894</sup> Holt, *Forging a Majority, the Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh 1848-1860*, p. 172. Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, pp. 331-332.



accomplished by hanging, six by the use of the razor or knife, six by poisoning, and three by drowning.” Men committed suicide more often than women and they picked the more violent methods. A study of suicide done in 1876, the Rhodes study, noted that women were more likely to end their lives through hanging, drowning, or poison, but men preferred “throat-cutting, hanging, and shooting.”<sup>895</sup> A variety of causes were mentioned for the twenty-six suicides presented in the *New York Times* article, from insanity to over indulgence in rum. But statistics showed that men who had no wife, whose wives had abandoned or divorced them, and who lived in relative communal isolation outside of their own culture, such as a native born middle class man living among working class immigrants, were more likely to be numbered among the suicides.<sup>896</sup>

Some authorities in the nineteenth century thought that the increase in suicides was related to living in an urban environment. The *American Journal of Insanity* in 1845 noted that “the statistics appeared to demonstrate that urban life was a prime contributing factor in the etiology of suicide.” The editor pointed out that “as many [suicides] have been committed in the same years in the city of New York alone as are assigned to the whole State.”<sup>897</sup> In 1847, the *Journal of Insanity* reported that the disparity between the urban and the rural rates of suicide was continuing to grow. In fact, the suicide rate of New York City alone was almost three times

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<sup>895</sup>Rhodes Study, “Suicide,” 1876, from Howard I. Kushner, *Self Destruction in the Promised Land: A Psychological Biology of American Suicide* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), p. 106

<sup>896</sup>“The Alarming Increase of Suicides,” *New York Times*, August 3, 1859

<sup>897</sup>Reports of the City Inspector of New York, 1805-1843, *The American Journal of Insanity*, January, 1845, in Kushner, *Self-Destruction in the Promised Land*, p. 42.

greater than that reported for the entire state. By 1848, the situation was worse. “The occurrence of suicide has been more than four times as frequent in the city of New York as in all other parts of the state.”<sup>898</sup> The *New York Times* editor also blamed the urban environment. He believed that men in the country were so busy with their daily chores that “they had no time for any mischievous thoughts of ropes, razors, and morphine. Transfer these same people to the cities, and a combination of rising aspirations, leisure time, and temptation to vice would form the train of causes that lead to self destruction.”<sup>899</sup>

Another factor that may have encouraged suicides in New York was that suicides were reported in detail in the New York papers. Even the suicide notes were reprinted in a gruesome tabloid-like fashion. Dr. Brigham, the editor of the *Journal of Insanity*, believed that the publicity given to suicides encouraged them. “A single paragraph may suggest suicide to twenty persons,” wrote the alarmed editor. “Those who inherit a propensity to suicide are vulnerable to imitation if a friend or relation commits suicide. There is good reason to believe that the list of victims of this crime is greatly increased by the publicity which is given by the newspaper press throughout the country.”<sup>900</sup>

Many people suffered from depression in the nineteenth century, although they had another word for it. President Lincoln who steered the nation through the horrors of the Civil War suffered from the disease, which he called the “hypos” or “hypochondriasis,” a word that suggested in the nineteenth century suffering from depression rather than showing a tendency to imagine illnesses. When Lincoln had a particularly severe episode of depression, his friends

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<sup>898</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>899</sup> “The Alarming Increase of Suicides,” *New York Times*, August 3, 1859.

<sup>900</sup> *Journal of Insanity*, 1849, from Kushner, *Self Destruction in the Promised Land*.

removed “all razors, knives, pistols, etc. from his room and presence.” Later Abraham Lincoln learned to use humor to fight off his dark moods.<sup>901</sup> Of course, there was plenty to be depressed about during the war. When Foster was taken to Bellevue where he died, the hospital was already filled to capacity with injured and dying men whose wounds had been received on the battlefields in Maryland, Virginia, and now Pennsylvania. New York hospitals opened their doors when Washington hospitals could no longer accommodate all of the wounded.<sup>902</sup> Stephen’s nemesis, Edwin Pierce Christy, killed himself in 1862. Christy was the blackface performer who would not release Foster from the agreement to have the minstrel’s name appear as author on the title page of “Old Folks at Home.” Christy ended his own life by jumping from a second story window in New York City.

The Fosters already had one suicide in the family only a decade before Stephen Foster’s death. The family would have hushed up the story, if they had been able to. A half brother of Eliza Foster, Dr. Joseph Tomlinson, rose to a prominent position at Augusta College in Augusta, Kentucky. He served for thirty years as “one of the most elegant Methodist preachers of his time” until the college was forced to close its doors during the 1850 debate over slavery. He was later elected president of Ohio University at Athens, Ohio, but he declined the appointment because of severe depression, which developed after his favorite son died from cholera.

“This appointment he declined because of ill health and almost entire mental prostration, produced by what he deemed the greatest calamity of his life--the sudden and melancholy death of a favorite son by cholera....The bold and fearless man became the irresolute and timid child. His energies were prostrated, and soon his friends saw with alarm that he was rapidly becoming the victim of a most melancholy form of mental derangement...This state of things continued until Saturday, June 4, 1853, when the tragical event of his death

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<sup>901</sup>Joshua Wolf Shenk, *Lincoln’s Melancholy* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005) p. 57.

<sup>902</sup> Spann, *Gotham at War*, pp. 71-72.

occurred. We would gladly draw the veil of oblivion over the scene, but the fact has gone abroad--he fell by his own hand.”<sup>903</sup>

Tomlinson was the uncle Eliza Foster took Stephen to visit in Kentucky when the composer was seven years of age.

One of Foster’s last songs is a melancholy poem of remorse, addressed to “dear mother.” “Kiss Me dear Mother Ere I Die” was not an unusual title for a Civil War song. There were many such songs expressing the poignant sentiments of the last emotional contact between a mother and her dying soldier son. But there is something unusual about this one. If the song were about a dying soldier boy, he would be proud even in dying. But the protagonist of this song is guilty, and the song is confessional: “I have been wayward unto thee, Now I can feel it painfully, Patient and kind were thou to me, Kiss me mother ere I die.”<sup>904</sup> This is the voice of the wayward Clinton Sanford, described by Eliza Foster in her journal. Morneweck associated her uncle with the image of Clinton Sanford. Stephen Foster, like the pseudonymous Clinton Sanford, was the son who disappointed by loving alcohol too much.

Suicide for some is a way of being forgiven for sins and being reborn, since what lives on, memories of the dead, are guiltless. Victims of suicide sometimes imagine their own death as a way of living on in other peoples’ memories as a lost object, in the same way that Foster utilized memory to recreate the dead loved ones in his mourning songs. Thus the suicide attempts to convert himself into a lost object, which will live on in the memories of others. George H. Pollack suggested that those who had experienced an extreme loss, particularly in their youth, or even a more recent loss such as a divorce, are more likely to be attracted to

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<sup>903</sup>Dr. Redford, quoted in Morneweck, *Chronicles*, p. 93.

<sup>904</sup> Saunders and Root, eds., *The Music of Stephen C. Foster, Vol. II*, pp. 414-417.

suicide because they fantasize that after death they will become an object of loss for others, and they hope, a revered object.<sup>905</sup> Even if they have disappointed loved ones during their life, in death their memory can be born anew and cherished.

Failure to achieve what the new nineteenth century market revolution promised led many antebellum men into a cycle of despair and guilt. Emile Durkeim's now classic study of suicide published at the end of the nineteenth century looked at suicide as the solution to social misplacement. According to historian Roger Lane:

“It was Durkeim's central contention [in his book *Suicide*] that suicidal behavior was associated in complex fashion with social status and that it was more common among the rich than the poor. He also argued that it was often precipitated by sudden changes in circumstance that were great enough to leave the individual in a condition of ‘anomie,’ lost in a novel world without traditional rules or experience as guides. These two propositions are in fact linked; anomie is more likely to beset mobile, sensitive, and highly placed persons than ordinary members of the working class.”<sup>906</sup>

Such a description would have fit Stephen Foster, a sensitive, artistic, native born man of the upper or middle class living along the Bowery in an urban environment under lower level socio-economic conditions.

Guilt would have plagued Foster, too. In America men could be “self made” ever since Henry Clay used the term in 1832 to describe an upwardly mobile individualistic success story. Throughout time, as Joshua Wolf Shenk has pointed out, “people had been made, primarily by the circumstances of their birth. Children of farmers had grown up to work the land. Children of the elite had assumed their parents' mantle. But in the early-nineteenth-century United States, the political and religious freedoms of the new republic combined with the new economic reality,

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<sup>905</sup>George H. Pollock, “Childhood Parent and Sibling Loss in Adult Patients: A Comparative Study,” pp. 77-78 quoted in Kushner, *Self Destruction in the Promised Land*, p. 139.

<sup>906</sup>Lane, *Violent Death in the City, Suicide, Accident & Murder in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Philadelphia*, p. 22. This is Lane's interpretation of Durkeim's *Suicide*.

allowed young people to construct lives of their own.” The change resulted from the so-called market revolution which altered the way people worked, lived, and consumed. As the number of wage earners increased, along with the number of stores, factories and cities, the idea of personal success replaced the earlier sense of community obligation.

The freedom each man now felt to re-invent himself, however, brought with it strange new psychological afflictions. “At the same time that ‘self-made’ entered the nation’s lexicon, so did the notion of abject failure.”<sup>907</sup> This was especially true when a man failed to achieve what he was taught by the new culture was a possibility and birthright of American citizenship. Life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness came to mean, or had always meant liberty to pursue wealth. When a man could not attain it, he blamed himself, and society blamed him, too, for his failing. If he turned to drink, as Foster most assuredly did to console himself for his shortcomings in the market oriented economy, he became even more culpable.

The literature of the day encouraged a culture of achievement, which included spiritual, moral, and financial improvement. One brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe ( not the famous preacher Henry Ward Beecher) was stricken by an overwhelming guilt when he looked for spiritual perfection and failed to find it. Consequently, he picked up a rifle and shot himself. Other men were simply spurred on to achieve in more material terms, because the antebellum society was driven by a fanatical desire for monetary success. An Illinois newspaper carried an article that urged: “Push along. Push hard. Push earnestly...you can’t do without it. The world is so made--socially is so constructed that it’s a law of necessity that you must push. That is if you

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<sup>907</sup> Shenk, *Lincoln’s Melancholy*, pp. 74-75. From Scott Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

would be something and somebody...”<sup>908</sup> But middle class men who lived along the Bowery or in Five Points did not want to push any more or to be “somebody.” They wanted the world and all its ceaseless demands to leave them alone, and to disappear. They wanted to exit. Alcohol provided a temporary exit, until the next day arrived and brought with it the same problems, or pain. There were some men who lived along the Bowery who wanted a permanent exit.

### 11.3 CONCLUSION

Foster exited this world, but left behind an enduring legacy. He gave America a music and a poetry that perfectly reflected the concerns, moods, and demographics of the antebellum people. His personal despair reflected the mood of the nation as it struggled to stay together in the face of greater forces that ultimately pulled it asunder. Foster sang of the loss of the pastoral ideal to the ever more powerful forces of industrialization. He sang of migration, as both native born and immigrants abandoned the tranquility of their farms for the deafening sounds and squalor of the urban world. He sang of all the loss that afflicted these people, loss of home, families, children, nation, and peace.

Foster modeled a pastoral paradigm that contained huts and flowers and song birds, not a place for a Southerner or a Northerner, but a place of beauty for everyman, of whatever race. He developed sympathetic communication between blacks and whites in a society that envisioned only separateness of the races. He keenly empathized with the suffering of the

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<sup>908</sup> *Illinois State Journal*, January 8, 1853, from Shenk, *Lincoln's Melancholy*, p. 73.  
882 Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America*, pp. 112-113.

oppressed and used the culture's dominant modus operandi, sentimentality, to make others share that feeling, which simultaneously uplifted the oppressor and soothed the oppressed. His plantation songs perfectly blended not only the diverse genres of song but of class as well, when the middle class brought the working class music into their parlors. His songs also united the races when he showed that blacks and whites felt the same emotions. Ultimately his songs spoke of a perfect unity where there was no masque at all, just the one spirit of humanity united in sorrow, sympathy, and love.

Because there is little documented evidence about Foster and he is known more through his "myths," I tried to provide an understanding of our American poet-composer by studying *his* America. By analyzing the historical context in which he lived, loved, created, and died, I tried to understand his actions, beliefs, values, and decisions in terms of the traumas and anxieties as well as the joys and beauty that colored the lives of antebellum Americans. Men may be a reflection of their times, but Foster seemed to be so on a very personal level. When the most popular song in antebellum America was "Home Sweet Home," Foster lost his home and home became the defining ingredient in his tormented psychology, which he worked out by writing the greatest home songs the world has ever known. When men, women, and the nation seemed to be in a constant flux, on the move and in transition physically and metaphysically, Foster wrote songs in which the protagonists were "roaming" "all up and down the whole creation." Whatever men were looking to find ----- home, family, security, the pastoral ideal, happiness, freedom, or self-fulfillment----- Foster's music was there to guide them in their search and ease them through their anguish.

Antebellum America was in a stage of transition and crisis as it anticipated one of the greatest traumas it had or would ever know. Walt Whitman, when he saw his country on the



brink of a collapse, thought that what America needed was a poet to hold the nation together: “Poetry became his way of simultaneously healing himself and healing the nation.”<sup>909</sup> Hence Whitman became America’s poet when he published *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, but he could not stop the ever increasing strains of division that tormented the nation. Whitman may have eased Americans through the crisis that led up to the war, in some small way. Certainly, he wanted to. Foster, too, through his songs, may have eased Americans through the crisis that led up to the Civil War, from unity to division back to unity again, although he did not live to see that ultimately joyous day. He did live to see the turning point in the Union victory at Gettysburg, and he did live to see the slaves freed. He knew that the world he had known would be altered forever, maybe in such a way that he feared he would no longer fit in. Foster’s sympathetic plantation songs and his parlor ballads that immortalized vapor-like women were voices of by-gone days, and whether he was ready or willing to move onto a new stage of national and personal development can only be a subject of speculation. He gave the nation love and solace, and we can surely in our hearts give it back to him.

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