Shape-Notes, "*The Sacred Harp*" and the Hollow Square: an American Musical Tradition.

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Slide 1. My colloquium presentation this afternoon examines a 19th century volume of American Protestant hymnody, titled *The Sacred Harp*, the unusual form of musical notation it employs, and traditions surrounding the performance of this music. I also want to consider the historical and social context in which shape-note singing evolved, and to say something about the people who continue this form of singing today. The immediate impetus for this presentation arose out of an exhibit I mounted last spring in the Ames Library, in conjunction with May Term. The exhibit included items from both The Ames Library and the library of Western Illinois University in Macomb.

Slide 2. I should first say something about how I became interested in this topic. As some of you know, I have been a church musician for all of my adult life: first in the Dutch Reformed tradition in which I was raised, and now for more than 40 years as an organist & singer in the Episcopal Church. Through these associations and further reading, I've developed a particular interest in congregational song, both from a musicological point of view, and from the broader cultural perspective of how religious faith finds expression through music, among various ethnic, socio-economic and sectarian groups.

I was actually introduced to shape-note singing however in 1974, while enrolled in a graduate seminar in early American music at the University of Michigan.
At the beginning of the Second World War, the Ford Motor Co. constructed the Willow Run Manufacturing Plant in Ypsilanti, MI for the mass production of military aircraft. A large percentage of the Willow Run work-force was attracted from Southern Ohio, Kentucky and Tennessee, earning the South-Eastern region of Michigan the somewhat dubious nickname of "Ypsi-tucky". During the early 1970's it was still not uncommon to hear local radio broadcasts on Sunday evenings of animated, raucous-sounding, hymn-singing from small evangelical churches in the area. Out of curiosity I attended several of these "singings" (as they were called) and subsequently joined a small band of like-minded graduate students, who attempted, as an academic exercise, to practice this unusual style of music-making. As students, it was also advantageous, that the Clements Rare Book Library at the University of Michigan possessed an enviable collection of early American music imprints, and that our mentor, Professor Richard Crawford was a pre-eminent scholar in the field of American music, and Anglo/American Psalmody in particular.

Slide 3. The music of *The Sacred Harp* is printed in what are called shape notes: a pedagogical tool developed at the beginning of the 19th century, as an aid in teaching music reading to individuals with little or no previous musical education. Basic to this pedagogy, was the theory, that by replacing standard music notation with a few easily recognizable shapes, students would learn to associate these shapes with the intervals of

the musical scale, and no longer need to recognize pitches on the musical staff, or memorize complicated key signatures. This would enable them to sight-sing music quickly.

Slide 4. The shape note system employed four shapes: a right triangle, a circle, a rectangle, and a diamond. A vocal syllable was assigned to each shape, derived from the European practice of solfège, itself a method of ear training, generally attributed to the 11th century, Benedictine monk Guido d'Arezzo. Guido assigned a syllable to each degree of the musical scale as a mnemonic device. The syllables were taken from a medieval Latin hymn, *Ut Queant Laxis,* the six lines of which began with the syllables Ut – Re – Mi – Fa – Sol and La, respectively, while each line of music started on a progressively higher pitch.

Slide 5. The musical scale in Guido's day consisted of 6 tones (hexachord). To extend this scale over the normal compass of the adult human voice, it was necessary to overlap hexachords to achieve what we think of today as two octaves. Guido's scale commenced on "Gamma" the Greek equivalent of the letter G. In Latin, Gamma became Ut. The six-syllables were condensed by the English during the 16th century to a four-syllable system beginning on c or Fa. The scale from c to c' was thus sung as *Fa – Sol – La – Fa – Sol – La – Mi – Fa.*

This was the solfège system the English colonists brought with them to the New World. It formed the basis for music reading and instruction throughout 18th century America, and continued in common use until about 1840.

Slide 6. Combine the syllables fa-sol-la-mi with their respective shapes and the major scale on C looks like this. The musical intervals between fa-sol, sol-la, and la-mi consist of whole tones; while that of la-fa, and mi-fa are semi-tones. These relationships are constant regardless of the actual pitch, the scale series begins on. Apart from the shaped note-heads, other elements of musical notation remained unchanged. This system of shape-notation was deposited for copyright in the Southern District of Philadelphia on August 15, 1798, by William Little and William Smith. It first appeared in print three years later in a volume titled *"The Easy Instructor."*

Slide 7. The title page of the *The Easy Instructor* reads: "A New Method of Teaching Sacred Harmony: Containing the Rudiments of Music on an improved plan, wherein the naming and timing the notes are familiarized to the weakest capacity…With a choice collection of Psalm tunes and Anthems from the most celebrated Authors, with a number composed in Europe and America, entirely new; suited to all the meters sung in the different Churches in the United States. Published for the use of Singing Societies in general, but more particularly for those who have not the advantage of an Instructor."

Slide 8. Little & Smith made a point of stating that while the music in their collection was "suitable to be sung in the different Churches in the United States," its primary purpose was for use in "singing societies" and not for liturgical, or sectarian use. This

claim can be made as well for the majority of hymn tune collections published in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries, including *The Sacred Harp.*

Slide 9. By 1800, singing societies or singing schools were already a venerable New England musical institution. They had arisen out an appeal from Massachusetts' clergymen of the 1720s for improvement in congregational singing, which had severely deteriorated over the course of the American colonial experience. The prevailing Calvinist sentiment of the age prohibited instrumental music from public worship entirely, distrusted harmony, and deemed as compatible to "Reformed" theology, only those texts which were drawn from Holy Scripture, and in particular, the Book of Psalms. To this end, the Psalms had been translated into English verse by the middle of the 16th century. Metrical psalms, served as the textual basis for congregational singing both in Britain and America, well into the 18th century. It is not surprising therefore that the first book published in America was a metrical Psalter, *The Bay Psalm Book*, (Cambridge, 1640). Typical of its day, the Psalter contained no music.

To compensate for the lack of instrumental accompaniment, and the general scarcity of printed music, a form of singing developed known as "lining out"; whereby a church official would sing out a line of text and melody, to be sung back by the congregation, in call and response fashion, line-after-line, sung to a meager repertory of simple tunes committed to memory. By the 18th c., New England congregations sang their metrical psalms in a lugubrious manner with much sliding of pitch and melodic embellishment, under the leadership of a parish clerk who may or may not have been a skilled singer.[5]

The purpose of the singing school was to teach music reading through a series of "classes" lead by an accomplished "singing master." Scholars would study the rudiments of music notation, solfège, the basics of vocal production, and learn to sing music at sight. Upon returning to their respective churches, their mode of singing would presumably be followed by others, and congregations would abandon their old way of singing, in favor of "regular singing."

The "accomplished" singing masters were generally itinerant, self-trained musicians, who travelled from town to town, during off-peak, agricultural seasons, "getting up" singing schools through subscription, and advertising through whatever means they had at their disposal. Classes were held in churches, school rooms, or pretty much any public meeting space. At the close of a 4 to 8 week course, of 2-3 sessions per week, the singing master and his scholars would present a "singing-lecture" to show off their newly acquired skills and to impress the locals. It was not uncommon for scholars to attend singing schools annually, over a period of several years.[6]

Slide 10. Although the singing schools were met with opposition by more conservative clergy and laity, the movement took firm root in New England by the 1730s. It flourished there, spreading southward and westward with the national expansion, and continued to have powerful impact on Protestant hymn singing in the Southern United States well into the 20th century.

Beyond its initial aim of improving congregational singing, the singing school produced a number of other important by-products. The most important was the production of tune books. Between 1730 and 1810, nearly 350 collections of metrical

psalmody were published in America. These volumes – the textbooks of the singing schools - were compiled and peddled by the singing masters themselves. To fill them, they wrote both new music and filled out the collections with earlier compositions "newly arranged and adapted." Their activity lead to what is often termed, the first New England School of American Composers; a group 12-15 singing master/composers active during the second half of the 18th century and early 19th century, with William Billings (1746-1800), being perhaps the best known.

Singing schools provided one of the few venues for the professional employment of musicians outside of major urban centers of Boston, New York and Philadelphia. Even so, most singing masters had to supplement their subscription income with other occupations, such as tanning (in the case of Billings), carpentry, horse-breading, etc.

A further outgrowth of the singing school movement was the notion of public music instruction, and as such it exemplifies the earliest attempts at wide-spread, music education in America. The schools also provided a much welcomed social outlet for the young people, who generally made up the singing classes. One young student from Yale wrote to a friend that "at present I have no inclination for anything, for I am almost sick of the world, and were it not for the hope of going to singing-school tonight and indulging myself in some carnal delights of the flesh, such as kissing, squeezing, etc., I should gladly leave it now."[7] In a society that recognized little separation between religious and secular life, the singing school provided a popular meeting ground for both.[8]

The skills gained through singing school whetted the musical appetites of both singers and congregations for more sophisticated music than simple metrical psalms. It spurred the formation of parish and village choirs and eventually brought about the amateur musical societies that did much, to foster public, music-making during the later 18th and early 19th centuries. All of these increased the demand for more music, inspired further musical composition, and lead to the proliferation of tune books.

Slide 11. The tune books popularized by the singing school tradition followed similar patterns in format and content. They were typically oblong in shape, measuring approximately 6x9 inches, with board covers and leather bindings. Copies of decoratively, engraved title pages often graced the covers. Fonts for printing music existed in America as early as 1752, and the tune books, inexpensively produced in sizable quantities, usually relied on movable type for their contents. The first font for shape notes was patented in 1803.[9]

Slide 12. The music of the tune books was laid out in open score; each voice part on a separate musical staff, with the text underlayment generally set to only one part or staggered among the parts. Additional stanzas might be printed at the bottom of the page.

In this slide, we see the fuging tune "Sherburne" by the Connecticut composer, Daniel Read (1757-1836) as printed in the 3rd ed. of *The Sacred Harp*. Psalm tunes were generally known by names apart from the texts associated with them. The names of towns, states, and countries, events from biblical history, and words descriptive of human experience or emotions were often employed for this purpose. Following the tune name, are the initials C.M. This refers to the poetic meter of the text, in this instance "Common Meter" (4 alternating lines of 8 and 6 syllables). Other meters frequently encountered in

this repertoire include S.M. (8.8.6.6.) and L.M. (8.8.8.8.). In theory any C.M. text could be sung to any C.M. tune. In practice the specific pairing was often a matter of regional custom, or personal preference.

Another feature of this repertoire, with roots in the Middle Ages and Renaissance was the placement of the principal melody or "tune" in the high male, or tenor voice.

Slide 13. Tune books included an introductory chapter, titled *The Rudiments of Music*[11] in which the basic elements of music notation and harmony were laid out, accompanied by practical lessons in vocal production, solfège and sight-singing. These were copied nearly verbatim from one tune book to another, and shared as their source, a British treatise, John Playford's *A Briefe Introduction to the Skill of Musick* (London, 1654). The introductory material concluded with a short essay by the compiler, expounding the scriptural mandate for singing, the musical benefits gained from singing "by note", and the advantages of this particular tune book over previous volumes. The rudiments were frequently, the only theoretical training a singing master had, apart from with having attended singing school himself.

Slide 14. Once the scholars gained some sufficiency in the rudiments, they were presented with a selection of psalm tunes of increasing difficulty to test and hone their musical skill. The simplest tunes were called "plain" or "common tunes"; short straight forward melodies consisting of four musical phrases, set in note-against-note harmony, corresponding rhythmically to poetic meters of their accompanying texts. These were the melodies that the colonists had brought with them from England, and which had long suffered through the practice of lining out. One of the most widely known tunes of this type is the "Old Hundred Psalm Tune"[12] or as it is often called in America, "the Doxology." The familiar melody is again in the tenor voice.

Slide 15. A more elaborate form of psalmody and the one most frequently encountered in the later shape note repertoire was the fuging tune.[13]Originating in England during the 1750's, they made their first appearance in American tune books a decade later. Fuging tunes also generally consisted of a 4-line stanza and began much like plain tunes, except at the half way point, the texture changed with the voices entering in a staggered order, reminiscent of the European fugue technique. After each voice made its entrance, the tune concluded in a chordal fashion. In performance, the fuging section was repeated, giving the whole an ABB structure. It is estimated that nearly 1000 fuging tunes found their way into the repertoire by the end of the first decade of the 19th century.[14]

Slide 16. More elaborate still were compositions styled anthems or odes.[15] These were longer works, generally set to prose texts. Anthems were often sectional, with vocal solo and duet passages, or alternating passages of chordal and fuging texture. They occasionally displayed dramatic elements such as musical text painting, or sudden shifts in meter, or mode. In practice, they served as display pieces, intended to show off the ability of the singers, and along with the fuging tunes, formed the basis of the New England church and civic choirs' repertoire during the latter half of the 18th century.

Slide 17. The early years of the 19th century witnessed the emergence of yet another type of tune; one which gained great popularity among compilers of shape-note collections. Folk hymns were adapted from traditional, secular songs and ballads, handed down orally, and in wide circulation among the English and Scots-Irish settlers of Appalachia and the South. Because the original song texts frequently shared the same poetic structures as metrical psalms they could easily be substituted with religious texts. Over a period of time these melodies, often plaintive and modal in nature and harmonized in a native idiom, came to rival the older plain tunes in popularity. Many found there way into the mainstream of American, Protestant hymnody, and continue to have a place in contemporary, denominational hymnals.

Among the folk hymns derived from the shape-note tradition, "New Britain" or "Amazing Grace" is perhaps the best known. John Newton's common meter text was first published in an English volume, titled *Olney Hymns* (1779). Like the earlier *Bay Psalm Book*, it contained no music. The anonymous tune, "New Britain" made its American, debut in William Moore's *Columbia Harmony* (1829) but to a different set of words. The two were paired for the first time in William Walker's *Southern Harmony and Musical Companion* (1835).[16] The first appearance "New Britain" in *The Sacred Harp* occurred in the 3rd edition of 1859.

Slide 18. The music of the singing school tradition has a strange sound to modern ears. This is due in large part to the compositional technique at the basis of the music itself, although traditional performance practices influence the sound as well. I have already noted that the composers of this repertoire, were largely self-taught, and seldom had formal musical training beyond of the realm of the Singing School and the "rudiments" contained in the tune books they studied. While we might think of this as a limitation, they did not necessarily see it that way, and it speaks to their individuality, and to the way they approached the craft of musical composition. In an often quoted excerpt from the preface to William Billings' *New England Psalm Singer* (1770), the composer is not the least disconcerted by his lack of musical training. On the contrary, he revels in his musical independence. He states,

"Perhaps it may be expected by some, that I should say something concerning rules of composition; to these I answer that Nature is the best dictator. For all the hard, dry, studied rules that ever were prescribed, will not enable any person to form an air… It must be Nature that lays the foundation. Nature must inspire the thought. For my part, as I don't think myself confined to any rules of composition, laid down by any that went before me, neither should I think (were I to presume to lay down rules) that any one who came after me were in any ways obliged to adhere to them, any further than they should think proper; so in fact, I think it best for every composer to be his own carver."[17] Billings goes on to say however, that in his music he strives to strike a balance between nature and musical science. "But perhaps some may think I mean and intend to throw art entirely out of the question. I answer, by no means, for Art is displayed the more Nature is decorated. And in some forms of composition, dry study is required, and art very requisite. For instance in a fugue, where the parts come in after each other with the same notes; even there Art is subservient to Genius, for Fancy goes first, and strikes out the work roughly, and Art comes after, and polishes it over."[18]

William Billings was one of the most prolific and inventive of the native born, American composers of the 18th century. His thoughts on musical composition fairly summarize the compositional esthetic and practice of the singing school composers. His compositions show up frequently in the tune books of later compilers and served as models for subsequent generations of amateur composers. Some general characteristics of this music include: melodies consisting of only five or six pitches, in which the major or minor mode is often obscured; bass, soprano, and alto vocal parts are crafted independently of each other and against the principal melody in the tenor, in an attempt to provide each voice part with melodic interest; resulting harmonic structures are derivative and do not necessarily propel the music forward, or establish tonality. Another aspect these tune's harmonic ambiguity, is the preponderance of open cords (lacking the third scale degree) particularly on strong beats and at cadences. This often gives the music an overall archaic sound reminiscent of music from earlier centuries.

Slide 19. I stated that the texts of the earliest, American sacred music were drawn exclusively from Scripture. By the second half of 18th century these strictures had lessened somewhat. The Psalm paraphrases of Isaac Watts, "composed in the language of the N.T.", along with devotional poetry by other English writers such as John Newton, Charles Wesley, William Cowper, and Philip Doddridge, gained in popularity and found wide representation in American tune books after 1770. In the shape-note repertoire they figured even more prominently. Equally popular among the compilers of Southern tune books however, were highly subjective texts derived from Appalachian, camp-meeting revivals known collectively as the "Second Great Awakening."

The texts of *The Sacred Harp* are often somber. They speak of the brevity and uncertainty of this life, and the hope of a better life beyond the grave. They talk of judgment, redemption and triumph over sin, justification through faith, and personal salvation. The poets also speak however of love of family and friends, and rejoice in the natural world around them. This is down-to-earth theology, addressed to people whose existence is inextricably tied to the soil.

Slide 20. From the 1790s onward, the rough-hewn music and unfettered, compositional style of the "Yankee tune-smiths" came under increasingly harsh criticism from classically trained musicians, who had come to dominate the urban musical scene in the Northeast. Particularly vocal in this respect were Lowell Mason and Thomas Hastings, both composers and compilers of sacred music and proponents of a "cultivated", scientific music, based on European models. Mason is frequently credited with being the father of American music education, having served as Superintendant of the Boston Public Schools between 1838 and 1845. He was adamant in his opposition to the singing school movement, promoting instead, a broad public system of education based on the principles of Johann Pestalozzi.

Hastings, who is perhaps best known as the composer of the hymn tune "Toplady" to the text of "Rock of Ages" published an influential, *"Dissertation on Musical Taste"* in 1822, in which he emphasized the superiority of German music over that of all other nations.

The "better music boys" as they have been called, asserted that the music of the amateur composers of the previous generation was crude and filled with error, and

generally unworthy of public esteem. Shape-notes as an instructional method received particular criticism, being called variously "buckwheat notes," "dunce notes" or "patent notes." It seems ironic then, that tunes by both Mason and Hastings appeared regularly in populist, shape-note compilations such as the *Southern Harmony* and *The Sacred Harp*. And further irony indeed is the fact that the publishers of Mason's own volume, titled *The Sacred Harp or Eclectic Harmony* (1835) and its sequel *The Sacred Harp or Beauties of Church Music, Vol. II* (1840) "contrary to the express wishes of the authors" issued an edition in "Patent Notes, "in the belief that it would be more acceptable to many singers in the West and South, where patent notes are extensively used."[20a]

Slide 21. The spread of shape note music coincided with expansion of the United States. As the "better music" movement became entrenched in the urban Northeast, singing masters found them selves relegated to rural localities and the frontiers of Pennsylvania, the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee and Ohio.

The southward and westward migration can be traced in the titles of collections published along the expansion route. Shape notation found fertile ground in the South and West where there were fewer cities of sufficient size to support a sophisticated musical culture. *The Missouri Harmony* (1820), compiled by the Tennessean, Allen Carden for example, is known to have circulated widely in the lower Midwest[21] and copies of this volume show up in library collections from Cincinnati to Kansas City. There is also evidence that Peter Cartwright[22], Abraham Lincoln[23] and possibly John Wesley Powell[24] were all acquainted with this volume. By 1860 more than 30 shape-note, tune books had been compiled by Southerners, many of which were printed in Cincinnati.[25] The most influential of these were *The Kentucky Harmony* by Ananias Davisson, and William Walker's, *The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion,* which is purported to have sold 600,000 copies between 1835 and 1860.[26]

Slide 22. The Sacred Harp was compiled in 1844 by Benjamin Franklin White (1800-1879), and Elisha Joel King (1821-1844), both residents of Hamilton, Georgia.[27] The title, recalling the biblical King David and the Old Testament, Book of Psalms, refers to the human voice; mankind's nature-given musical instrument. White was born in 1800 in Spartanburg, SC, the eldest of 12 children. With only 3 months of formal schooling, he was largely self-educated. His early biographer, Joe S. James wrote in 1911 that White "took up the science of music without a preceptor. He would sit for hours at a time and look at the freaks of nature, its system of regularity and harmony with which it did all its work, and would watch and listen to birds as they sang from the branches of trees, and learned as much or more from these observations than he did from other men's works."[28] White was also very likely a product of singing schools and his rudimentary understanding of music theory gleaned from the introductory material of some unidentified tune book. The October 23, 1844 publication notice for The Sacred Harp appearing in the Columbus [Georgia] Enquirer noted that B.F. White and E.J. King are both "gentlemen, extensively known as music teachers."[29] White married Miss Thurza Golightly. Her sister Amy was the wife of William Walker (also of Spartanburg, SC), and compiler of The Southern Harmony & Musical Companion. White is believed to have contributed significantly to this volume as well, although he was not credited with such by Walker.

White was a self-made man in the best 19th c. American tradition. Following his move to Harris County, Georgia from South Carolina around 1840, White became the mayor of Hamilton, Georgia. He served as clerk of the inferior court of the county, and held the rank of major in the local militia prior to the Civil War. He also supervised a local newspaper, *The Organ,* which provided him a venue for publishing songs of his own composition; many of which subsequently appeared in The Sacred Harp. In 1845, he founded the *Southern Musical Convention*, the first of many organizations designed to foster shape-note singing in the South. During White's lifetime, The Sacred Harp went through three revisions (1850, 1859, and 1869) - edited by a committee under White's leadership and published through auspices of the *Southern Musical Convention.* The Whites had fourteen children, nine of which lived to adulthood and most of these became singers, or music teachers. Benjamin White was said to be a deeply religious individual, hardworking and generous to a fault. He died accidently at age of 79, the result of a serious fall. He was buried in Oakland Cemetery in Atlanta, Georgia.

Much less is known about Elisha King, except that he was born of well-to-do, plantation owners in Wilkinson County, Georgia, and also had a reputation as a singing teacher, and a hymn tune arranger. The share of songs he contributed to the first edition of *The Sacred Harp* is larger than that of any other composer, including B. F. White.[30] Elisha King died on August 31, 1844, at the age of 23, only two months following the publication of *The Sacred Harp*.

Slide 23. In addition to their own compositions, White and King borrowed material from earlier tune books for inclusion in *The Sacred Harp.*[31]Of the 263 songs that appeared in the first edition, a considerable number had appeared in Walker's *Southern Harmony.* Other tunes were taken from Ananias Davisson's *Kentucky Harmony* (1816), and Andrew Wyeth's, *Repository of Sacred Music, Part Second* (1813). In essence, this first edition of *The Sacred Harp* was a compendium of American psalmody that had been popular among shape-note compilers over several decades. White was not entirely retrospective in his musical tastes however. In later editions of *The Sacred Harp,* he included many songs by contemporary Southern musicians. By the 4th edition, nearly half of the total 477 pages of music were composed by living musicians, including more than 70 from Georgia and Alabama alone. Many of these tunes were of the folk-hymn variety.

Slide 24. *The Sacred Harp* has a complex publication history which I will not elaborate on in detail, except to make a few points. The earliest revisions merely increased the volume in size through the addition of supplements, to the point that the book became unwieldy to hold while singing. With the 5th edition (1884) however, a winnowing process began. The editors deleted infrequently sung tunes, replacing some with newly composed music. Later editions attempted to correct textual errors, or to bring the printed page into line with current performance practices. Others were of a more bibliographic nature, such as adding historical and biographical notes about the music and composers.

Slide 25. There are two versions of *The Sacred Harp* in common usage today - the Cooper edition and the Denson edition, both named after their initial editors. The two are differentiated largely by regional preference, but also by claims of historical authenticity,

and to a lesser extent by musical content. The Cooper edition for example, includes numerous songs from the mid- to late 19th century, composed in a relatively sweet harmonic idiom. It also includes a number of folk-hymns not found in the Denson edition.

Slide 26. *The Sacred Harp* stands out from nearly every other American volume of sacred music, if only for its shear longevity: 165 years of continuous publication. But equally important, is the nearly iconic place that *The Sacred Harp*, has held in rural southern culture, almost from its beginning. It is often stated in shape note lore, that during the century following its initial publication (roughly 1850-1950), the second most frequently found book in a Southern, American home, after the Bible was *The Sacred Harp*.[32] While this claim cannot be proven categorically, it does evoke the relative importance of shape-note singing to southern culture of the period.

Southern rural life of the 1840s was probably little different from that of rural New England a century before, and the singing schools of Davisson, Walker, and White (and by extension, the tune books they published) served the same functions as those of William Billings and his generation. Walker's bold claim to have sold 600,000 copies of his *Southern Harmony & Musical Companion* within the first 25 years of publication attests to the popularity of this particular volume. The fact that White oversaw four revisions of his book - again within 25 years - implies significant sales and points to the popularity of *The Sacred Harp* as well. Many older Southern singers today, state that the book has been used by their families over several generations.

It is likely that during the Civil War, shape-note singing took a back seat to far more pressing concerns, but it was not forgotten. In a letter, quoted in Buell Cobb's 1978 study, *The Sacred Harp: a tradition and its music,* a young Confederate soldier, William Jefferson Mosely writes from Richmond, Virginia in 1863 to his mother in Macon, Georgia about singing among the troupes:

"…there are some boys here that start playing cards and gambling as soon as they draw their money and in two days they haven't got a cent. Now I've been in the war for two years and I don't know one card from another, but I do know my notes, and we have some of the best singings around the campfire I have ever heard, since Troupe Edmonds and E.T. Pound used to teach singing school…Ma, you and the girls get out the old *Sacred Harp* song book, turn to the old song invocation on page 131, sing it and think of me".[33]

The song Mosely refers to is a paraphrase by Isaac Watts, of a portion of the New Testament, Epistle to the Romans, set to an early 18th century plain tune, titled "Mear". It does not require much stretch of the imagination to read into these verses the devastation of the South and the plight of the Confederate cause.

"Will God forever cast us off? His wrath forever smoke,
Against the people of His love, His little chosen flock?

Where once Thy churches prayed and sang, Thy foes profanely rage;
Amid Thy gates their ensigns hang, and there, their hosts engage.

No prophet speaks to calm our grief, but all in silence mourn;

Nor know the hour of our relief, the hour of Thy return."[34]

Slide 27. Following the Civil War singing schools resumed the work of teaching rural youngsters "their notes" and provided a respite from the hardships of Southern Reconstruction. But since shape-note singing had always been a communal activity, it is not likely that it would have survived if it had not been for the concerted efforts of regional organizations that promoted the activity almost from the beginning. The Southern Musical Convention had been established in 1845 by White, to promote and protect his publication interests, as well as to serve as an editorial board for future editions of the *Sacred Harp*. Over the course of the second half of the 19th c. and well into the next, similar conventions sprung up across the South, promoting various editions of the *Sacred Harp*, or in some cases competing tune books.

Sacred Harp conventions (as events) met annually, established by-laws, elected officers and kept detailed records of convention proceedings, even down to the minutiae of documenting the sequence of who led what songs. Annual conventions could last from 2-3 days, and depending on the size of regional memberships, might attract upwards of several thousand singers.

Far greater in number than regional conventions, were the local "singings" that continue to take place periodically in rural churches, courtrooms or community centers wherever shape-note singing is practiced. These one day events are generally held on the same weekend every yea, and often mark the annual homecoming for a local church or community, when local natives gather or return to decorate graves in a nearby cemetery, visit with friends and enjoy the music that sustained former generations of family and community. It is also customary in many rural Southern areas to have shape-note singing at funerals, much like the Dixieland bands that occasionally lead funeral processions in the African-American districts of New Orleans.

Slide 28. I should also add that while for much of its history, shape-note singing in the South has been a predominantly white musical practice there are accounts of "vibrant Sacred Harp singing among African-Americans prior to 1880."[37] In that year, the *Henry County* [Alabama] *Convention*, the first convention of African-American Sacred Harp singers was organized. This was followed by similar conventions in Alabama's Clay, Dale, Geneva, Pike, and Union counties. The year 1924 saw the founding of the joint *Alabama and Florida State Union Sacred Harp Convention*.

Currently, the majority of African-American shape-note singers favor the Cooper edition of *The Sacred Harp*, although in 1934, Judge Jackson of Ozark, Alabama published *The Colored Sacred Harp,* a volume containing both traditional shape-note repertoire, and songs influenced by later gospel music styles. The Jackson book is still used to some extent by the *Wiregrass Sacred Harp Singers*, of Southeastern Alabama.

Slide 29. A day-long, Sacred Harp singing typically begins between 9:30-10:00 a.m. When the singers have assembled and seated themselves according to voice part, the day begins with an opening song, an invocation, and a brief organizational meeting. A committee determines the order, in which singers are invited to take turns leading the "class in a lesson" (the traditional terminology for singers and songs), and a recording

secretary is appointed, who logs the name of each leader and the tunes, he or she leads. All singers present are encouraged to lead a lesson. There is generally no audience in shape-note singing. This is participatory music-making and not a concert. The leader comes to the center of the singing formation known as the "hollow square", generally with book in hand, announces the page number of the song to be performed, sounds an opening pitch or triad, and leads the song by beating time with a simple vertical motion of the hand. The music is traditionally sung through first "by note" (the syllables fa, sol, la, and mi) and then repeated with the text.

Slide 30. The class frequently mirrors the leader's hand motion, as if to lend support or affirmation. When the song is finished the leader leaves the square and the next leader approaches. There is no applause. The officers may call a brief recess in the morning or afternoon, but the only extended break in singing comes at noon, when everyone proceeds to outdoor tables or a fellowship hall for an abundant, potluck style "dinner on the grounds."

In an hour or so after the dinner table is cleared, the singers return to the singing room and continue the rotation of leaders. A "memorial lesson" may be included, in honor of singers or community members who have died during the past year. Indeed, some annual singings are themselves memorials to beloved singers and family members. Singings usually conclude at about 4:00 p.m., depending on the number of leaders present. Following announcements of forthcoming singings, there is a closing song and a prayer of dismissal. Over the course of a day-long singing as many as 80-100 songs may be sung in this fashion. It is customary for no one song to be repeated during a singing.

Slide 31. Performers of shape-note music place a high value on traditional performance practices - transmitted orally, and handed down over generations. These traditions influence pitch and intonation, melodic ornamentation and rhythm. Other practices include the doubling of vocal parts at the octave above or below, beating time in conjunction with the leader, or the rhythmic tapping of feet.

Singers who have performed this music for many years, who have descended from families of shape-note singers, or who learned to sing shape-notes in communities with a strong Sacred Harp history, are often accorded front row seats in the assembly, and find themselves emulated by outsiders, or novice singers attempting to assimilate the style.

Commercial recordings of this repertoire, performed by classically trained vocalists, frequently sound bland or over-engineered. But when performed by a band of experienced, traditional singers, with pitch and intonation un-tempered by modern keyboard instruments, in a room with naturally resonant acoustics, the musical texture comes alive, with an accumulative effect that can be truly riveting.

Traditional shape-note singing does not depend on an accompanying instrument, or even a simple pitch pipe to establish tonality. The key signatures in the musical score are only a printing convention, and are largely irrelevant to actual performance. This is not to imply that traditional singers possess "perfect" pitch. They do however, over time, develop an intuitive sense of relative or memorized pitch. If a song leader pitches a tune either too high or too low, for all the parts to sing comfortably within their respective voice ranges, the class may stop singing, collectively adjust the pitch and restart. Some

groups actually have developed this collective pitch memory to such a degree that they can automatically pitch a song at the mere mention of a tune name.

Neither is a subtle, choral blend a goal in this style of singing. On the contrary the music is sung with as much gusto as the singers can muster. To outsiders this can occasionally resemble a shouting match. One traditional singer has stated that "if you can hear the person sitting next to you singing - well, you're just are not singing loud enough!" [36a]

Finally, for shape note singers, the only place to really appreciate the full impact of the music is at the center of the hollow square, surrounded on all sides by singers, whose voices are focused at you. Many singers testify of the overwhelming power of the music, in experiential terms that are quasi-religious.

Slide 32. So, who sings shape note music today? To be sure, there is a sizable faction among the Sacred Harp community, both in the Southern United States and elsewhere, who find in this music, a sincere expression of personal Christian faith. Many, although not all, of these belong to conservative religious bodies that still shun instrumental music in public worship, or who, to quote the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, "seek the old paths, to walk therein". For them, traditional Sacred Harp practices are a natural fit. But the demographics of shape note singing has changed dramatically since the 19th and early 20th century. What was once a predominantly white, rural, and staunchly Christian community has become a diverse community of believers, amateur and professional musicians, academics, folklorists, and people of varied occupation, race, gender and generation, both rural and urban, who enjoy the communal act of singing traditional music, quite irrespective of their individual philosophies or creeds.

A number of factors may account for this diversification of community. The folk music revival of the 1960's and 1970's is certainly among them. Public concerts and hoot 'n nannies on college and university campuses across the nation introduced Appalachian music traditions to young audiences, who would otherwise never have been exposed to such music. Much the same can be said for the availability of commercial and field recordings of shape-note music, either in modern arrangements, or of more or less, traditional performances.

The American Bi-centennial spurred much interest in things "early American" among academics, the nation in general, and the media. More recently, the "Amazing Grace" craze and motion pictures such as *Cold Mountain* have drawn attention to, or included examples of shape note singing, whether audiences were aware of what they were listening to or not.

In a complex and pluralistic society, nostalgia for simpler times, a quest for cultural roots, and venues for religious expression and community outside of organized religious or sectarian boundaries, may also account for some of this music's appeal to certain segments of the population. I am acquainted with a number of Southerners - and believe me they are anything but fundamentalist Christians - who find in this music, a deep cultural resonance – their musical roots, so to speak. The shape-note community is quick to affirm its non-sectarian origins and welcomes anyone who wishes to participate. Shape-note singing can now be found regularly in at least 34 states, Canada, the U.K. and even Japan. One prominent shape note scholar refers to this expansion as the "Sacred Harp Diaspora."[39] Since 1995, detailed minutes of nearly 3000 annual, local and regional

singings have been filed with the *Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Association.* These are indexed by location and date and are available online at http://fasola.org/minutes/search/ .[40] On September 19, 2009, I attended the 25th Annual, *Illinois State Sacred Harp Convention*, in Taylorville, IL. Shape-note singing takes place on many university campuses. As part of May Term of last year, Martha Tyner of the School of Music and I hosted what we hope will become an annual *Illinois Wesleyan, Sacred Harp Singing.*

Slide 33. Recent scholarly literature on shape-note singing and repertoire is impressive. I am aware of at least six, major monographs (as well as book chapters and a cookbook) published since 1978, several theses & dissertations, and numerous scholarly articles and essays in the fields of musicology, ethnomusicology and anthropology. A search of the World-Wide-Web on *The Sacred Harp* produces some good overviews of the subject. Warren Steel[41] and Steven Sabol[42] both maintain websites, compiling links to articles on historical aspects of *The Sacred Harp*, shape-note singing in general, "how-to" articles on traditional singing practices, and related topics. The *Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Society,* via its website *Fasola.org*, sponsors two "Google Group" list-serves for discussion and Q.& A.[43] There are commercial sites for the purchase of tune books, recordings and DVDs of traditional singing, as well as a large number of "You-Tube" video-clips of shape note singing, and photo-sharing groups.

Further media attention has been provided through *National Public Radio*, articles in *Time Magazine,* the *Christian Science Monitor,* the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*, and by various state, arts commissions and memory projects.[44] And for those who feel the desire for a thorough Sacred Harp immersion experience, *Camp Fasola* located near Nauvoo, Alabama offers annual, weeklong summer camps for both children and adults.[45]

Slide 34. I want to conclude by stating that the study and practice of shape-note singing provides me with a venue to combine my personal and academic interests in sacred music, early American music, historical performance practice, and music bibliography. And besides, its' just a whole lot of fun! Thank you for allowing me to share my research with you.

Notes:

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2. William Little and William Smith, "The Easy Instructor" (1801). *Anthology of the American Hymn-Tune Repertory*: *the Colonial Era to the Civil War.* Ed. Mark D. Rhoads. [n.d.] http://www.bethel.edu/~rhomar/HymnalPages/EasyInstructor.html

3. "Lennox" from William Little and William Smith, *The Easy Instructor* (1801). *Anthology of the American Hymn-Tune Repertory*: *the Colonial Era to the Civil War.* Ed. Mark D. Rhoads. [n.d.] http://www.bethel.edu/~rhomar/TunePages/Montgomery.html

[4.] William Billings, frontispiece to *New-England Psalm-Singer* (1770), as reproduced in Karl Kroeger and Hans Nathan, eds., *The Complete Works of William Billings*, vol. 1. Boston: The American Musicological Society & The Colonial Society of Massachusetts; (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, c1977-1990).

[5.] *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980 ed. s.v. "Psalmody: Early Developments," by Richard Crawford.

[6.] *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians,* 1980 ed. s.v. "Singing-school," by Richard Crawford, David Warren Steel.

[7.] Irving Lowens, *Music and Musicians in Early America*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1964), 282.

[8.] H. Wiley Hitchcock. *Music in the United States*: *a Historical Introduction*, 2nd edition. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 8.

[9.] *Anthology of the American Hymn-Tune Repertory*: *the Colonial Era to the Civil War.* Mark D. Rhoads, editor. [n.d.] http://www.bethel.edu/~rhomar/index.htm#hymnals

[10.] "Sherburne" from B.F. White and E.J. King, *The Sacred Harp*. *Facsimile of the 3d ed., 1859, including as a Historical Introduction: the Story of the Sacred Harp, by George Pullen Jackson*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1968).

[11.] William Walker. *The Southern Harmony Songbook ... Reproduced, with an introduction by the Federal Writers' Project of Kentucky, Works Progress Administration; sponsored by the Young Men's Progress Club, Benton, Kentucky*, (New York: Hastings House, 1939).

[12.] "Old Hundred" from B.F. White and E.J. King, *The Sacred Harp*. *Facsimile of the 3rd ed., 1859, including as a Historical Introduction: the Story of the Sacred Harp, by George Pullen Jackson*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1968).

[13.] "Delight" from B.F. White and E.J. King, *The Sacred Harp*. *Facsimile of the 3rd ed., 1859, including as a Historical Introduction: the Story of the Sacred Harp, by George Pullen Jackson*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1968).

[14.] Figure attributed to an unpublished study of the fuging tune by Irving Lowens. Cited in Beuchner, Alan C., *The New England Harmony: a Collection of Early American Choral Music,* (New York: Folkways Records and Service Corp., 1964).

[15.] "David's Lamentation" from B.F. White and E.J. King, *The Sacred Harp*. *Facsimile of the 3rd ed., 1859, including as a Historical Introduction: the Story of the Sacred Harp, by George Pullen Jackson,* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1968).

[16.] "New Britain" from William Walker. *The Southern Harmony Songbook ... Reproduced, with an Introduction by the Federal Writers' Project of Kentucky, Works Progress Administration; Sponsored by the Young Men's Progress Club, Benton, Kentucky*, (New York: Hastings House, 1939).

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[18.] Ibid.

[19.] Lowell Mason http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Lowell_mason.jpg

[20.] Thomas Hastings http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Hastings_(composer)

[20a.] Lowell Mason, *The Sacred Harp, or the Beauties of Church Music, Vol. II,* (Cincinnati: Wm. T. Truman, 1840)
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[21.] Peter Ellertsen, "The Untaught Melody of Grateful Hearts: Southern Appalachian Folk Hymnody in Illinois, 1800-1850," *The Journal of Illinois History,* (Winter 2002), 261.

[22.] Peter Ellertsen, "American Folk Hymnody in Illinois, 1800-1850," *Conference on Illinois History, Springfield, Illinois, October 14, 2000*, by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency (Springfield, 2000)
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[23.] Carl Sandberg, *The American Songbag*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1927), 152-155.

[24.] From the obituary of Mrs. John Lindsay. *The Decatur* [Illinois] *Herald*, (Jan. 5, 1928). The deceased is said to have attended singing schools lead by John Wesley Powell "…soldier and the explorer of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado. His niece was the late Maude Powell, the violinist, Maj. Powell's pupils used to sing the geography lessons. Children of the pioneers remember some of those old rhymes."

[25.] David Warren Steel, "Shape-note Singing Schools" in *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1989).
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[27.] *Anthology of the American Hymn-Tune Repertory*: *the Colonial Era to the Civil War.* Mark D. Rhoads, editor. [n.d.]
http://www.bethel.edu/~rhomar/HymnalPages/SacredHarp.html

[28.] Buell E. Cobb, *The Sacred Harp: a Tradition and its Music*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1978), 71-72.

[29.] Ibid, 67.

[30.] Ibid, 69.

[31.] "Pilgrim's Farewell" from B.F. White and E.J. King, *The Sacred Harp* (Philadelphia: T.K. & P.G. Collins, 1844) in *Anthology of the American Hymn-Tune Repertory*: *the Colonial Era to the Civil War.* Mark D. Rhoads, editor. [n.d.] http://www.bethel.edu/~rhomar/index.htm#hymnals

[32.] Kiri Miller, *Traveling Home: Sacred Harp Singing and American Pluralism,* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 98-99.

[33.] Cobb, 76.

[34.] Ibid, 77.

[35.] James B. Wallace, "Stormy Banks and Sweet Rivers: a Sacred Harp Geography," *Southern Spaces,* June 4, 2007 http://www.southernspaces.org/contents/2007/wallace/1d.htm

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[38.] Ethel Wright Mohammed, "Double Springs Sacred Harp Singing, 1874" http://www.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~mudws/2springs.html

[39.] Miller, 28.

[40.] Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Association, "Minutes of Sacred Harp Singings," 2009 http://fasola.org/minutes/search/

[41.] Warren Steel, "Sacred Harp Singing", 2010 http://www.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~mudws/harp.html

[42.] Steven L. Sabol, "Sacred Harp & Related Shape-note Music: Resources", 2009 http://www.mcsr.olemiss.edu/~mudws/resource/

[43.] Sacred Harp Musical Heritage Association, “Mailing Lists”, 2009
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