The Folk, the Stage, and the Five-String Banjo in the Nineteenth Century

That the widespread diffusion of popular music made possible by the radio and the phonograph beginning in the 1920's has had a profound effect on folk music is a commonplace truism. But popular music was also exerting a profound effect on folk music in the nineteenth century long before the advent of mass media. In relation to the banjo in particular, interaction between popular and folk traditions was, in fact, a rather complicated two-way avenue.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the banjo was essentially a black folk instrument; by the early years of the twentieth century the five-string banjo was largely a mountain white folk instrument. Between these dates two other traditions of banjo playing arose: minstrel banjo, a popular tradition, and classical banjo, a popular/art tradition. This paper explores the interrelationships between these four nineteenth-century traditions of banjo playing. The ultimate African origin of the banjo is assumed, and the question of if, when, and by whom the fifth string was added is largely ignored, since it has been speculated on by others quite frequently; the focus is on the playing styles associated with the instrument. The white folk tradition is of central interest here, since it is the primary one to have survived into the twentieth century, and therefore this essay concentrates on the relation of the other traditions to it.

A recent paper on the history of the banjo states that "most of the banjo playing styles can be traced with reasonable accuracy."1 This remark may have been intended to apply to modern playing styles, but even here the only style that really can be traced with accuracy is Scruggs-style picking and subsequent bluegrass developments. Earlier playing styles have not been traced accurately at all. What, for instance,

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was the early minstrel style of playing the banjo?

A number of people have speculated on the nature of minstrel banjo playing, and though some of these speculations correspond with what is presented below, none has been substantiated. The most likely sources of information are the many method, or instruction, books for the banjo published in the nineteenth century. Some of these give a vague, general idea of the minstrel style, though after around 1870 most of them concentrate on the “classical,” or “guitar,” style and barely mention the minstrel style. But one method book explains in great detail the essentials of the minstrel style:

Phil. Rice’s Correct Method for the Banjo: with or without a Master. Containing the most popular Banjo Solos, Duets, Trios, and Songs performed by the Buckley’s, Christy’s, Bryant’s, Campbell’s, White’s, and other Celebrated Bands of Minstrels of which the Author was a member. . . . (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1858).

This title indicates clearly that the book is an instruction manual specifically in the minstrel style of banjo playing. Rice himself had had fourteen years of experience as a minstrel banjoist, and his book received a strong endorsement as “the only complete and correct work of the kind ever placed before the public” from a number of well-known minstrel performers.

The early minstrel banjo was a fretless instrument, and the strings were gut and wire-wound silk, borrowed from violin and guitar. Starting in the late 1850’s, the primary tuning was eAEG#B (for playing the keys of A and E) and the alternate tuning was dGDF#A (for playing in the keys of G and D).

Rice identifies and explains “six principal movements” as the essentials of the minstrel style. These are movements of the right hand striking the strings and they involve only two fingers: the thumb and the first finger, or more precisely the nail of the first finger, which always strikes down across the strings. The first movement is called a “half-strike,” which is any single note made with either the thumb or the first finger. A “single strike” is

... made with the back, or rather, the side of the nail of the first finger [striking down] ... on the first string, and the end or ball of the thumb on the short or thumb

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2 The ideas of Elias Kaufman of Buffalo and the American Banjo Fraternity were closest to what I discovered and helped to set me off in the right direction for evidence. I would also like to thank Richard Reuss and Michael Bell for reading earlier drafts of this article and offering valuable advice.

3 The only copy of this which I have found is at the New York Public Library, and their original, in fact, no longer exists; it is only available in a microfiche copy.

4 Rice, pp. [6], [1].

5 Rice, p. 8; the first and fifth strings should be violin E strings, the second a violin A string, the third a violin D string, and the fourth a wire-wound silk fourth string of the guitar—this is typical of the period. Strings were not made expressly for the banjo until the 1880’s—see George C. Dobson’s “Victor” Banjo Manual (Boston: White, Smith and Co., [1887]); copy at New York Public Library.
string. . . . The hand should be bent so that the end of the first finger should point to
the ball of the thumb. . . . the first finger and thumb should come down at the same
time on the first and thumb string; sound the note on the first string by letting the
finger nail slide off, then sound the thumb string immediately after with the thumb. 6

Rice also exhibits the single stroke in musical notation (Fig. 1) 7. The line
immediately above the staff indicates that the left hand is alternately to
hold down the first string at the second fret mark (and the second string
at the first fret mark although the second string is not being sounded

![Figure 1.](image)

here), and then let it up. The line below the staff indicates that the right
hand strikes with the first finger and then the thumb ("x"). It is helpful to
put this movement into a tablature notation (Fig. 2; I = index finger, and
T = thumb).

![Figure 2.](image)

The third movement combines the first two and produces a "strike and
a half" as in Figure 3, 8 or (this is not illustrated by Rice with other
examples, but it actually occurs more frequently than the above in the full
pieces later in the book) Figure 4.

The fourth basic movement is called the "double strike." For this,
"touch the first string with the first finger, and thumb string with the
thumb, as in the [single] strike; then touch the first string again with the

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6 Rice, Correct Method, p. 9.
7 Ibid., p. 12; this and the succeeding examples are slightly edited for greater clarity. The
actual notes sounded on the banjo are an octave lower than the written notes. To best show the
relationship between minstrel and mountain folk playing, the music should be transposed into
the key of C. But, in order to present the original material accurately, this has not been done. Instead,
the tablature shows this relationship even more clearly than mere transposition would, and can be
used to play the music on a banjo tuned to the modern pitch (gCGBD).
8 Rice, Correct Method, p. 13.
first finger and the second string immediately after with the thumb... (Bring the finger and thumb down at the same time, on the first and second strings, sounding the first string first)," as in Figure 5 or Figure 6.9

Rice also points out that the effect of a double strike can be achieved by doing a strike and a half with an added “pulled” note. The “snap, or pull, ... is done by pulling a note with the finger of the left hand, after a note is made on the same [or different] string with the right hand.”10 Applying this to create a double strike figure, give a strike and a half and “then pull or snap the first string with the second finger of the left hand immediately after you make the half-strike”11 (Fig. 7). Rice does not describe “hammering on,” the complementary technique to “pulling off”

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9 Ibid., pp. 9, 13.
10 Ibid., p. [7].
11 Ibid., p. 13.
Figure 5.

Figure 6.

Figure 7.
known to folk banjo players, but another instruction book of the time does. Briggs' Banjo Instructor indicates that when two or more ascending notes occur on the same string, "the first note is struck by the first finger of the right hand; the next note is made by bringing a finger of the left hand down with force upon the string" at the proper fret mark.  

The fifth and sixth movements are the "triple strike," a means of playing "three notes in the time of two," and the "double-double," which is just a double without using the fifth string, the thumb always dropping down to hit one of the other strings.

Nowhere in the explanations above or anywhere in Rice's book are chords mentioned; it is all single note playing, both in the arrangements which closely follow the melody and in those which are more like an accompaniment to the melody. The other method books from the period, though they do not go into the detail Rice does, verify this feature. This is an important fact and worth repeating: minstrel banjo style involves no chords. It is strictly a succession of single notes.

To further illustrate these facts, and to show how the techniques described above are used in practice, Rice's arrangement of Oh, Sally is de Gal for Me, slightly edited, which uses all the most basic movements (half strike, single strike, strike and a half, double strike, and pulling), is shown in Figure 8.

Although Rice's book was not published until 1858, the technique of playing he explains probably represents the earliest minstrel style. As mentioned above, Rice himself had been playing this way for fourteen years. Tom Briggs published an instructor in 1855 which described, much more sketchily than Rice, the same style, and Briggs had also been playing for a number of years. Joel Walker Sweeney apparently also played in this style at least as early as the mid-1840's. According to one account,

Mr. Fred Mather, a younger contemporary of Sweeney, who later became a minstrel banjoist, writing in December, 1897, said: "I knew 'Old Joe Sweeney' about 1846 or '48 when I was a boy of thirteen to fifteen. He came North with a circus in different years. He taught me how to 'bring down my thumb' and play 'Grape Vine Twist.' "

The reference here to "bring down my thumb," meaning to bring it down from its normal position for striking the short thumb string to be able to strike the second (or third or fourth) string, as in executing a double strike, clearly implies that Sweeney played in the style described by Rice.

Any reader who is familiar with old-time southern mountain banjo

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12 Thomas F. Briggs, Briggs' Banjo Instructor (Boston: Ditson, [1855]), p. 13; copy at the Boston Public Library.

13 Rice, Correct Method, pp. 9-10. Of course, all six of the basic movements can be executed in half the time they are given in these examples. Such timing is common in the songs in Rice's book.

14 Ibid., p. 28.

15 Briggs' Banjo Instructor (Boston: Ditson, [1855]).

16 Arthur Woodward, "Joel Walker Sweeney and the First Banjo," Los Angeles County Museum Quarterly, 7 (1949), 9; the source of this quotation is not given.
Oh, Sally, is de Gal for Me

When I was one and twenty, old mistress set me free, She

Fig. 8a.
playing styles will recognize the style described above. It is frailing, or
more specifically since there are no chords, it is a combination of what
have been called "brushless frailing" and "drop-thumb frailing" (which is
also known as "clawhammer" style).\footnote{See Art Rosenbaum, \textit{Old-Time
Mountain Banjo} (New York: Oak, 1968), pp. 43-46, for a
description of these styles. True folk banjo players tend not to make such fine
distinctions in their
terminology and the terms "frailing" and "clawhammer" are frequently
interchanged. Usage
among city "folk" seems to have assigned the term "frailing" to down-stroking
with chords, and
"clawhammer" to down-stroking without chords.}

The most basic right-hand figures
of the mountain frailing style, without chords, are shown in Figure 9. In the
terminology of the minstrel style, this is strike and a half (or a half plus a
strike) and a double strike. Pulled and hammered notes are another
characteristic shared by the minstrel and old-time frailing styles.

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure9.png}
\caption{Figure 9.}
\end{figure}

It is generally acknowledged that frailing is the earliest mountain banjo
style.\footnote{See, for instance, Cherrill P. Heaton, "The 5-String Banjo in North Carolina," \textit{Southern
Folklife Quarterly}, 35 (1971), 69.} But not so generally known is the fact that non-chordal, or
brushless, frailing is earlier than frailing which employs "brushed" chords.
Typical figures in the latter style are shown in Figure 10 (where B means
to brush down across the strings with the fingernail). That the brushless

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure10.png}
\caption{Figure 10.}
\end{figure}
frailing style is earlier than the style illustrated in Figure 10 has been established by Eric Davidson, who states:

It is clear, on the basis of information obtained from old people, that the clawhammer banjo style [by which he means brushless, drop-thumb frailing] is the earliest remembered style. For example, Wade Ward's mother-in-law, Granny Porter, was asked if Wade's style [clawhammer] is different from that current at the time of her childhood. Granny is now [1962] 85, and in full possession of her very considerable faculties. Her first husband was a very fine banjo player... She replied that Wade's banjo style is the same as that her first husband used and the same that he learned when he was a boy.19

Despite her "considerable faculties," if one should hesitate to accept Granny's assertion uncritically, it would still appear that an active clawhammer tradition existed in the mountains of western Virginia as of the 1880's.

The frailing style without chords is logically the earlier. The banjo played in this way can readily accompany a fiddler playing traditional, frequently modal, fiddle tunes, and in the nineteenth century this role was probably more common than the solo role for the banjo, in both the early minstrel and folk traditions. The arrival of the guitar in the mountains around the turn of the century was what introduced chords into folk banjo playing. To quote Eric Davidson again:

Guitars were unknown there [Virginia mountains] before 1900 according to every local informant asked. The guitar is a chorded instrument... Only very skillful guitar players can fit their instrument to traditional Grayson and Carroll Counties banjo and fiddle music. It was simpler to adapt the older music to the attractive, easy-to-learn new instrument... Chording appeared on the banjo soon afterward, along with fingerpicking. Wade Ward states that when he was a boy there was no chording and no fingerpicking used by Grayson County banjo players.20

The earliest mountain folk style of banjo playing, then, is essentially identical to the early minstrel style. This similarity leads to the hypothesis that mountain banjo playing is a direct descendant of minstrel playing. Old-time mountain banjo players such as Wade Ward, Hobart Smith, and especially Glenn Smith and Fred Cockerham, since they still play fretless banjos, probably sound much like the early minstrel players.

The ancestor, as well as the descendant, of the minstrel style is also worth looking into. The banjo itself was brought to this country from Africa by blacks and was played almost exclusively by them until the 1830's. I have been unable to find any references to white banjo players prior to the 1830's. It seems safe to state that the minstrel playing style was probably derived directly from the folk black playing style, though to document this is difficult. Eileen Southern asserts a direct connection between all aspects of the early minstrel show and black folk practices on the plantation:

19 Notes to Folkways Album FS 3811, Traditional Music from Grayson and Carroll Counties (1962), p. [3].
20 Ibid., p. [4].
To obtain materials for their shows, the white minstrels visited plantations, then attempted to recreate plantation scenes on the stage. They listened to the songs of the black man as he sang at work. . . . The melodies they heard served as bases for minstrel songs, and they adapted the dances they saw to their needs. The musical instruments originally associated with plantation "frolics" became "Ethiopian instruments"—banjos, tambourines, fiddles and bone castanets.21

Constance Rourke stated that Negro humor, songs, and dances were "primal sources" for minstrelsy, that "many minstrels had lived in the South and West and knew the Negro at first hand," and that "minstrelsy kept its Negro backgrounds until after the Civil War." 22 Hans Nathan concluded after studying minstrel banjo tunes that "the minstrel banjo style is very similar to what the slaves played on their banjos and fiddles."23

The most recent writer on minstrel shows, Robert Toll, presents evidence to prove that several aspects of the early minstrel show had direct connections with contemporary black folk practice. As evidence with regard to banjo playing, he presents an excerpt from a late nineteenth-century interview with a minstrel performer who had specialized in portraying Southern Negroes. Ben Cotton claimed that he had studied blacks closely when he worked, probably sometime in the 1840's, on Mississippi riverboats. "I used to sit with them in front of their cabins," he recalled, "and we would start the banjo twanging, and their voices would ring out in the quiet night air in their weird melodies. . . ."24 Toll speculates that from such sessions black banjo playing entered minstrelsy in the 1840's.25

Some other early minstrel banjoists apparently also learned from black folk tradition. Toll implies that E. P. Christy, banjo player and leader of one of the most famous early minstrel troupes, learned his banjo playing from blacks. Christy had "considerable experience with Southern Negroes"; for instance, he had worked with slaves in New Orleans in the late 1820's and regularly visited Congo Square, where the banjo was frequently heard.26 At least one very influential early minstrel banjo player almost certainly learned from blacks: Joel Sweeney. Arthur Woodward strongly implies that Negro slaves on the family plantation taught Sweeney how to play the banjo.26 Sweeney's relationship to minstrel banjo playing is analogous to Earl Scruggs' relationship to bluegrass banjo. His influence was so great that the fact that he learned

25 Blacking Up, p. 46.
from blacks is nearly enough in itself to tie the whole tradition of minstrel banjo to contemporary folk black playing. Sweeney, for instance, taught William Whitlock to play the banjo in 1838.27 Whitlock was the banjoist with the Virginia Minstrels, the group which essentially started the minstrel boom in 1843, and he became a famous and influential banjo player in his own right. In the early 1840's, Sweeney taught another important banjo player, George Swaine Buckley, of the famous minstrel family, and one of the prominent banjoists to endorse Phil Rice's method book in 1858.28 In the late 1840's, Sweeney instructed another minstrel banjoist, Fred Mather, on the intricacies of the minstrel style.29 There were probably many other Sweeney pupils and imitators.

Some general stylistic evidence also links minstrel style banjo not only with contemporary black practice but also with its African antecedents. We cannot now hear a minstrel banjo player to know exactly what his playing style actually sounded like, but the minstrel style was shown above to be pretty much the same as old-time brushless frailing, which tends to be a rather percussive way of playing a stringed instrument, a fact acknowledged by such folk names for the style as "rapping" or "knocking" a banjo. It is this fact which ties minstrel style to black instrumental technique in both America and Africa. Harold Courlander says of American folk black instrumental style, in general, that "it is almost as though every instrumental device is intended to produce a percussive effect... . Alan Merriam has put forward the view that in African music there is a strong percussive tendency, not only in the use of the voice but of stringed instruments as well."

S. S. Stewart, a prominent nineteenth-century player, manufacturer of, and writer on the banjo, also discussed the origins of the minstrel style. He stated that the "stroke style," which was one of the standard names for the minstrel style, "was originally the 'Old Dan Tucker,' 'Walk Along John,' plantation Negro style of banjo playing."

Regarding the origins of the minstrel show, Richard Dorson states that "unquestionably Negro folk sources contributed to this entertainment." However, Dorson does question how true to these sources the minstrel

27 Nathan, Dan Emmett, p. 115.
28 Edw. Le Roy Rice, Monarchs of Minstrelsy, from "Daddy" Rice to Date (New York: Kenny, 1911), p. 18.
31 The Banjo Philosophically (Philadelphia: Stewart, [1887]), p. 7; bound at the end of the second volume of Samuel Swain Stewart, The Complete American Banjo School, Parts 1 and 2. (Philadelphia: Stewart, 1887); copy at the Boston Public Library. If the minstrel style of playing did indeed copy black folk style, this supports the view that the short thumb-string was a feature of the banjo as it existed in black tradition, when the banjo had only four strings, prior to its adoption by white minstrel musicians. A banjo, with whatever total number of strings, without such a high-pitched string next to the lowest would necessarily have been played in a different style, in which case black folk style and minstrel style could not have been the same.
show remained, since "the blackface performers who capered and sputtered before paleface audiences rarely studied their originals."\textsuperscript{32} It is important here to make a distinction between very early minstrel performers and later ones. The very early performers, by and large, did study their originals; the later performers probably did not. The characters, the structure, the instrumental, singing, and dancing techniques, the kinds of songs and stage patter—all aspects of the minstrel show—very rapidly became stage conventions, and all that was required of the performer was mastery of these conventions, not a study of the originals. With regard to banjo playing in particular, it seems likely that after the first generation of minstrel banjoists, there was not much direct input from black folk tradition. Later minstrel banjoists were taught by, or imitated, the early ones. But this fact does not alter the probability that the minstrel style of playing had its origins in black folk tradition.

Now, if the minstrel banjo style was a fairly close imitation of contemporary folk black style, there exists the possibility that the earliest folk white style, which also closely resembles the minstrel style, is in terms of its actual manner of transmission, more a direct descendant of black folk style than of the minstrel style. At least a couple of writers have postulated this line of transmission.

Archie Green suggested to Gene Bluestein that "the early penetration of the mountain areas by railroads using mainly Negro labor was a major source of contact" and could have been the means of transmitting the banjo from blacks to mountain whites.\textsuperscript{33} If read between its lines, this suggestion acknowledges that there were few blacks in the mountains; one must find evidence that they were brought in, for one reason or another, to be able to establish much contact between blacks and mountain whites. Bluestein accepts Green's suggestion mainly because he believes that mountain style and minstrel style banjo are not closely related, and that mountain style banjo may be like pre-minstrel black style. But since the early minstrel style and the early white mountain style were shown above to be essentially identical, exploring the possibilities for transmission from minstrel show to mountain whites is a more logical and fruitful approach.

A black folk banjo tradition continued to exist in the nineteenth century, though by the end of the century it was apparently well on its way to extinction.\textsuperscript{34} But the amount of contact that mountain whites had with banjo-playing blacks was probably much less than the contact they had with the banjo playing of the minstrel show, which was a very widespread and pervasive phenomenon in the mid-nineteenth century.

In 1843, the Virginia Minstrels (Dan Emmett, fiddle and banjo; Billy


\textsuperscript{33} Bluestein, "America's Folk Instrument: Notes on the Five-String Banjo," Western Folklore, 23 (1964), 246. C. P. Heaton recycles this suggestion in her important article, "The 5-String Banjo in North Carolina," p. 65.

\textsuperscript{34} The author is preparing a separate study of the black banjo tradition in the nineteenth century.
Whitlock, banjo; Frank Brower, the bones; Dick Pelham, tambourine) banded together to become the first troupe to put on a full-scale minstrel show, a whole evening devoted solely to minstrel acts. All of these performers had had previous theatrical experience in black-face; all through the 1830’s, minstrel acts, including banjo players, had appeared as one part of an evening’s entertainment, or as one act in a circus. The Virginia Minstrels and their full-scale minstrel show were a true hit in 1843, and the minstrel boom was launched. In the mid-1840’s, “in response to the seemingly insatiable public demand, innumerable minstrel troupes appeared.”

Although it is hard for us to realize today the impact that this new form of entertainment must have had when it burst on the scene in the mid-nineteenth century, a few quotations from students of the minstrel show will convey some idea. The minstrel show “rapidly became one of the most common and financially successful forms of American entertainment.” In fact, practically the only public entertainments outside of the large cities in the mid-nineteenth century were the lecture, the circus, and the minstrel show. With so little competition, “minstrelsy literally swept the nation in the 1840’s, from the White House to the California gold fields, from New Orleans to New England, from riverboats and saloons to 2500-seat theaters. For over half a century it remained the most popular entertainment form in the country.” By the 1850’s, the country was truly in the grip of a “minstrel craze,” which lasted until 1870 and only gradually tapered off after that. In addition to regular minstrel shows, “many ‘nigger dancers,’ banjoists, and Ethiopian celebrities were performing individually, in the saloons and concert halls, with circuses and elephant shows.” “Everywhere it played, minstrelsy seemed to have a magnetic, almost hypnotic impact on its audiences. ‘A minstrel show came to town, and I thought of nothing else for weeks,’ Ben Cotton recalled of the first time he saw minstrels in the 1840’s in Pawtucket, Rhode Island.”

The phenomenal impact of minstrelsy makes it the most likely conduit for transmitting the banjo to mountain whites, especially when one considers the penetration of the minstrel show into even the most rural areas of the country. As early as the late 1830’s, Joel Sweeney “bought a horse and buggy, and traveled from town to town playing and singing”; he gave “concerts in the Southern States, appearing in barns and churches, and traveling by coaches.” Through the late 1840’s Sweeney continued to

35 Toll, Blacking Up, p. 30; Nathan, Dan Emmett, pp. 116-118.
37 Toll, p. 31.
38 Wittke, pp. 54-55, 62.
39 Toll, p. v.
40 Wittke, pp. 64, 58.
41 Toll, p. 33.
travel "chiefly through the South" with his own and other minstrel shows. By the 1860's, "scores of companies ... were touring all the provinces" and "rural sections of the country." These touring companies played at "every little town and village, for which the arrival of a traveling minstrel show once was the event of the theatrical season." In 1879, one commentator stated that "no one who has travelled much in the United States, particularly in the smaller towns and villages, can possibly have failed to hear the expression, 'Our people are so fond of the minstrels!' Of particular importance is the fact that "minstrelsy always enjoyed its greatest vogue in the South."

The touring minstrel shows traveled both overland and by steamboat. In 1858 Spalding and Rogers, circus entrepreneurs, built the steamboat, Banjo, for presenting minstrel shows. This boat "carried the thrum of banjoes and jangle of tambourines to the hinterland of the nation." Spalding and Rogers had previously built the James Raymond, a steamboat designed to present minstrel shows and tow the Floating Palace, their waterbound circus. During the 1850's this entourage would start down the Ohio from Wheeling, West Virginia, "often making landings in two or three towns a day." The boats would then proceed "down the Mississippi and the whole navigable lengths of the Cumberland and Tennessee Rivers ... Frequently, fist fights and brawls occurred at the lawless backwoods landings." This route covers, among other regions, most areas of West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee.

Some writers have tried to show direct connections between old-time mountain banjo pickers and the minstrel showboat tradition. For instance, Margot Mayo's description of the background of Rufus Crisp, an old-time trailer from the Kentucky mountains, includes the following passage:

Rafts, push boats and, after 1837, steamers transported produce and people. Rufus remembers when [perhaps 1880's] the steamboats the Frank Preston, the Mountain Boy, the Mary L. and Cando were familiar sights on the Big Sandy [a tributary of the Ohio which is navigable well back into the Kentucky hills]. There is no evidence that showboats came to Prestonburg, but they did play the river towns of the Big Sandy near Catlettsburg. Mountain folk who visited these towns were certainly exposed to the popular songs of the period. They surely brought some of these songs back into

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42 Woodward, "Sweeney," p. 8; Rice, Monarchs, pp. 51, 22.
43 Wittke, pp. 79, 94, 125.
45 Wittke, p. 82. Toll partially disputes this. He maintains that, before the Civil War, the minstrel show "enjoyed its greatest popularity in Northeastern cities" (p. 12). However the information included in Wittke and other sources about routes and itinerary leads one to accept Wittke's assessment. The biggest and best minstrel troupes did indeed tend to stick to the northeastern cities, but many other companies toured widely, especially in the South.
the hills. This may explain why many of Rufus’ songs have traces of showboat and minstrel songs.48

In conjunction with this passage, some comments made by the Hammons family of West Virginia are very interesting. The Hammonses were asked about the origins of their music and they replied in this fashion:

_Burl_ [who plays banjo in several styles, including old-time brushless frailling]: Yeah, they originated way down there in Kentucky, from where they [his ancestors, at mid-century] was born and raised, a batch of ‘em, they made a lot of them tunes and brought ‘em here to this country [eastern West Virginia]—Now there’s where the better part of all of ‘em originated from, if you want to know the truth. _James_: Big Sandy River—Catlettsburg—down in Kentucky.49

Certainly the fiddle tunes and ballads of their family tradition did not all originate in Catlettsburg, Kentucky—most belong to long-standing Anglo-American tradition—but the entrance of the banjo into their traditions might have. Showboats traveled up the Big Sandy, and Catlettsburg, at the confluence of the Big Sandy and the Ohio, was a regular showboat stop; undoubtedly the earlier Hammonses were exposed to minstrel and other stage music.

Clearly, the minstrel show reached into the rural and mountain regions of the South. But it would have influenced mountain musicians even if it had not done so. As important as the various kinds of traveling entertainment were as musical influences on country people, the movement of these people to and from cities and towns contributed at least as much to forming their musical world. Bill Malone notes that

by thousands they have ventured into such cities as Louisville, Memphis, Nashville, Atlanta, New Orleans, and Houston.... Whether they came to visit or stay, they were exposed to a multitude of musical influences that in time would be taken back to their rural homes. In the mid-nineteenth century one of the more popular urban musical sources was the minstrel show, which contributed a brand of humor and stage patter, banjo styles, and very popular songs... that have endured in the rural tradition.50

The impact of the movement of people extends beyond their visits to the city. Rural and mountain folk, in the nineteenth century, did not stay indefinitely in the same area; they moved around quite a bit. The history of the Hammons family is probably typical. In a series of more than a half-dozen moves in the course of the century, they lived in various areas of Virginia, Kentucky, and West Virginia, and in at least one of these areas they were certain to have come in contact with minstrel shows.51

48 Notes to Folkways Album FA 2342, _Rufus Crisp_ (1972), p. 2.
51 See Fleischhauer and Jabbour, _Hammons Family_.

At least one prominent old-time mountain banjo player had direct contact with the latter day minstrel show. Hobart Smith, of Saltville, Virginia, a virtuoso banjo (and fiddle and guitar) player with a marvelously clean and complex frailing style, said that during the 1930's he had played in a minstrel show for a couple of years, and that he had "played my own music."\(^5\)\(^2\)

Furthermore, minstrel style banjo playing was not only to be heard in minstrel shows, per se; it was also a regular part of that other extremely popular form of entertainment in the nineteenth century, the circus, and was frequently found in yet another pervasive, traveling entertainment institution, the medicine show. Early in the century, even before the minstrel show as a separate form developed,

Negro or blackface singing, dancing, and repartee became a rather common part of the circus performance. When the "concert" or after show came into being such minstrel performances were relegated to that portion of the total exhibition. With the advent of the side show, Negro minstrels became a customary part of the side-show personnel, and have continued to this day [1959].\(^5\)\(^3\)

A close connection quickly sprang up between minstrels and circuses, and was especially strong in the 1850-1880 period. "Many performers passed back and forth from the sawdust ring to the minstrel semi-circle. . . . There was scarcely a circus, a street fair, or a patent medicine show which did not carry one or more blackface performers."\(^5\)\(^4\) Several of the most important early minstrel banjo players were among those performers who frequently appeared with circuses as well as minstrel shows. Joel Sweeney, Dan Emmett, and Billy Whitlock all performed in circuses, beginning before the advent of the full-scale minstrel show and subsequently throughout their careers.\(^5\)\(^5\) These men and others helped to make minstrel banjo playing a permanent part of circus entertainment in the nineteenth century.\(^5\)\(^6\) The circuses, traveling by wagon, rail, and boat, reached into every corner of the country, playing in the North during the summer and in the South during the fall and spring.

Another kind of traveling show which effectively transported musical ideas into rural areas was the medicine show. Before the arrival of the radio and the phonograph in the 1920's, "medicine shows and circuses were the main sources of entertainment in rural areas."\(^5\)\(^7\) Malone notes that "The 'physick' wagon, with its glib-talking 'doctor' and cargo of patent medicines, was a familiar phenomenon to rural Americans as late as

\(^{52}\) Notes to Folk-Legacy Album FSA-17, *Hobart Smith* (1964), p. 4.


\(^{54}\) Wittke, p. 65.


\(^{56}\) For more on minstrel banjo in the circus see Wittke, pp. 41-42; Nathan, pp. 59-60, 65 (n. 31), 66 (n. 32), and 120-121; Chindahl, pp. 40, 108-110; and Kunzog, p. 33.

the 1930's [and as early as the early nineteenth century]. Nearly all of the medicine shows employed an entertainer—often blackface—to warm up the crowd by singing, cracking jokes, or playing an instrument.’’

Malone does not mention the banjo here specifically, but other sources leave no doubt that the instrument most often associated with the medicine show was the banjo. Violet McNeal, ex-medicine show “doctor,” describing the typical small medicine show of the late nineteenth century, stated that “the equipment of most traveling pitchmen consisted of a folding table, a banjo, and a gasoline torch.” At one point, “to ballyhoo the crowds,” she herself “hired a blackface comedian who played and juggled a banjo,” though most of her pitching was done on a more sophisticated level.

Even poet James Whitcomb Riley, in his youth (1870’s), traveled with a medicine show as a singer and banjo player.

At least two old-time white banjo players and one black player performed in medicine shows in this century. Uncle Dave Macon had played extensively with medicine shows before joining the Grand Ole Opry, and Tom Ashley picked banjo and sang in medicine shows between 1913 and 1943. Gus Cannon traveled with various “doctor shows” between 1914 and 1929.

To sum up the evidence relating to the transmission of the banjo into the mountains, the immense popularity and widespread diffusion of the minstrel show, and of the circus and medicine show, which also frequently featured minstrel banjo playing, made it virtually impossible for city or country folk in mid-nineteenth century America to escape repeated contact with the minstrel style of banjo. This evidence lends rather conclusive support to the initial hypothesis, based on the consanguinity of the early minstrel and early mountain styles, that the mountain banjo tradition is the direct descendant of the minstrel tradition.

This conclusion raises another question, of course: when did the banjo make the transition from minstrel stage to mountain cabin? There are several ways to approach this question, the first being to trace the mountain tradition back as far as possible. The older mountain banjo pickers recorded and interviewed in the last twenty years can take us back to the turn of the century. This group would include such men as Hobart Smith (learned banjo 1904, style: clawhammer), Wade Ward (learned 1903, clawhammer), Tom Ashley (learned 1905, frailing), Rufus Crisp (learned 1895, fretless clawhammer), Gaither Carlton (learned 1901, brushless frailing), Bascom Lamar Lunsford (learned 1895-1900, up-

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59 *Four White Horses and a Brass Band* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1947), pp. 101, 259.
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picked), Buell Kazee (learned 1906, brushless frailing), Glenn Smith (learned around 1900, fretless clawhammer), and many others.63

Typically, these men learned to play as boys or young men from someone in the previous generation, who had probably learned how to play in the 1880's. Hobart Smith, from the Virginia mountains, is a representative example. He explained:

I started playin’ the banjer when I was seven years old [1904]... Now, I call my style of banjer pickin’ the old-timey rappin’ style. I learned it first from my daddy.... My father and mother was both banjer pickers.... I’d get around old folks that played a banjer and I’d listen to that and was just as full of music as I could be.64

Given the usual distance between generations, Hobart’s father must have learned his banjo picking in the 1880’s; the reference to the “old folks” might even be evidence that the tradition goes back at least to the 1870’s. Another example is Clarence “Tom” Ashley, from northwestern North Carolina. He learned to play the banjo in 1905 at age eight from his Aunt Ary and Aunt Daisy, who apparently learned to play in the 1880’s. Aunt Ary played in standard clawhammer style, which is what Ashley learned, while Aunt Daisy had her own variant of the technique; she picked up on the fifth string with the thumb rather than down.65 Each of the other banjo players mentioned above has a somewhat similar story to tell, establishing an active tradition as far back as the 1880’s. Uncle Dave Macon’s banjo playing career also extends back into the 1880’s. He was born in 1870 and was taught the banjo in his early teens by entertainers who stopped at his father’s hotel in Nashville.66

One other source establishes the existence of a banjo tradition in the Kentucky mountains in the 1870’s. In a personal reminiscence, Dr. Marion Mayo discussed dances held in Allen, Kentucky, in the “early post-Civil War days.” “A lone fiddler or banjoist often supplied the music. Banjo picking and dancing were often seen at our elections.”67 Judging from the style of Rufus Crisp, who learned from this tradition in 1895, the banjo picking referred to was fretless clawhammer.

The mountain banjo tradition has now been tentatively traced back as far as the 1870’s. There is at least one much earlier reference to a white, apparently folk (as opposed to professional minstrel) banjo player from the mountain area. In 1840, Dan Emmett was a musician with the Cincinnati Circus Company, and, as told by Circus manager, C.J. Rogers,

64 Notes, Hobart Smith, pp. 1-2.
66 Norman Tinsley, Notes to RBF Records Album RF 51, Uncle Dave Macon (1963), p. 2.
67 Margot Mayo, Notes, Rufus Crisp, p. 2.
“while we were traveling in Western Virginia [Emmett] found a banjo player by the name of ‘Ferguson,’ who was a very ignorant person, and ‘nigger all over’ except in color.” Ferguson was hired as a roustabout and taught Emmett how to play the banjo. But while this seems to show some very early penetration of the banjo into the mountains, I do not think the establishment of the tradition can be dated from this early period. Given the conservative nature of any folk music tradition, some strong stimulus, such as the extremely popular minstrel show provided (after 1843), would be necessary to initiate significant adoptions of new instruments, songs, and playing styles, and even then the change would not occur rapidly.

Another approach to the question of when the banjo entered the mountains, involves studying the changes which occurred in minstrel shows and in minstrel banjo playing. Starting with the basic similarity of the earliest mountain playing style and the early minstrel style, if important changes occurred in the minstrel style introducing elements which were not a part of the early mountain style, then the establishment of the mountain tradition must have taken place before those changes. Several such changes did occur, one of them being the introduction of frets.

A number of investigators have provided evidence that the early mountain tradition involved playing fretless banjos. Art Rosenbaum states categorically that “the first banjos played in the mountains were fretless.” Fleming Brown discusses the early period of the mountain banjo tradition as “the era of the fretless banjo, before the machine made banjo infiltrated the mountains.” Eric Davidson notes that until sometime between 1900 and 1920, “there were no fretted banjos in Grayson and Carroll counties [in western Virginia],” and that even though some old-time clawhammer banjo players, like Wade Ward, have switched to fretted instruments they “complain that the modern banjo frets are sometimes annoying to them.” Elsewhere Davidson states that many of the banjos being played in the mountains as late as 1909 were fretless. C. P. Heaton notes that the early fretless tradition was so strong that even though banjos have had frets for nearly a hundred years, “many North Carolina mountain banjoists continue to favor fretless instruments.” Frank Proffitt of Reese, North Carolina, continued the tradition of making and playing fretless banjos until his death in the 1960’s.

To a certain extent, this propensity for fretless banjos may be attributed to the fact that many of them were homemade. But the desire
for fretless banjos was strong enough to cause some mountain banjoists to alter manufactured, fretted banjos. Rufus Crisp learned to play fretless clawhammer banjo in 1895. He had been given a fretted banjo in 1923 but "he had filed off the frets because 'he couldn't hit the right notes' on a banjo with frets." 74 Other old-timers have been known to do such things as cover the fingerboard of a fretted banjo with sheet copper, metal from a large tin can, or linoleum in order to achieve a smooth playing surface. 75

The evidence presented above suggests that early mountain banjos were indeed fretless. This can help date the arrival of the banjo in the mountains, because the switch to frets by minstrel and other non-folk banjo players can be fairly well dated. C. P. Heaton states that "all banjos prior to about 1880 were fretless." 76 Norman Howard cites an article by H. Y. Leavitt in the New York Sun, June 24, 1901, for his contention that Henry C. Dobson added frets to the banjo in 1878. 77 The method books are also helpful. In the 1870's, they do not mention raised frets, but in an 1881 book, S. S. Stewart discusses both raised and level frets (markings on a smooth fingerboard), stating that beginners prefer the raised while experienced players prefer the level. 78 An 1884 method book recommends raised frets but notes that they may have to be installed, indicating that banjos are still not standardly manufactured with them. 79 By 1888, Stewart admits that "those who approve of frets are becoming the majority," which considering his hostility to frets is probably an understatement. 80 One concludes, then, that banjos with raised frets began appearing around 1880 and became fairly standard sometime during the 1880's. Since the early mountain tradition utilized fretless banjos, its origins must have pre-dated this period.

More important are the changes which took place in the minstrel show after the Civil War. In the late 1870's, minstrel companies increased in size and large national traveling companies became more common. Even the names of some of the more prominent troupes reflect their expanded size: Haverly's "Mastodon Minstrels" was organized in 1878 and Leavitt's "Gigantean Minstrels" in 1881. 81 The most critical change in relation to

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74 Mayo, Notes, Rufus Crisp, p. [1].
76 "Banjo in North Carolina," p. 64.
77 "The Banjo and Its Players, Collected from Various Sources" (New York, 1959; typescript, at the New York Public Library, Music Division), p. 38. This work is primarily concerned with classical banjo players.
78 Stewart's Thorough School for the Banjo (Philadelphia: Stewart, [1881]); copy at the Boston Public Library.
80 The Banjo, A Dissertation (Philadelphia: Stewart, [1888]), p. 58; copy at the New York Public Library.
81 Rice, Monarchs, pp. 120, 158.
the question in hand was that these companies “staged more lavish production numbers, and featured more ‘refined’ acts,” so that by the early eighties, “the large, refined traveling company dominated minstrelsy.”

This refinement meant the disappearance of “raucous material,” that is, the imitations of plantation life, which were the core of earlier minstrel shows and which prominently featured the early minstrel style banjo playing. The minstrel show was completely transformed. “It went from small troupes concentrating on portrayals of Negroes to huge companies staging lavish extravagances and virtually ignoring blacks.”

In the 1880’s, companies like Primrose and West’s put on refined, lavishly costumed shows, “often performed without blackface.” In 1882, Milt Barlow left this troupe, and “his Negro characters went with him. Even while he was there, the company rarely did any plantation material.” So by the 1880’s minstrelsy had reached “a stage where it was distinguished from other entertainment only by its name.”

Even as early as 1871 the original minstrel format concentrating on the plantation was somewhat old hat and the subject of revivals. In that year one minstrel troupe advertised a show “delineating the legitimate plantation festivities as distinguished from the pseudo-operatic style now so much in vogue.”

As summed up by Wittke, “the trend toward ‘bigger and better’ minstrelsy set in with a vengeance in the late ‘seventies and during the ‘eighties, with the result that the traditional minstrel show, modified rapidly in almost every detail, was transformed into a burlesque or variety bill.”

The decline in the plantation scene core of the minstrel show meant the decline of the early minstrel banjo style, and since the mountain style of banjo apparently was derived from this early minstrel style, the mountain tradition must have been established before the early minstrel style disappeared from the stage, that is, before the 1880’s.

Not only did banjo playing in general occupy a much less prominent position in minstrel shows, but that which remained was in a different style from the early minstrel style. The early, or “stroke,” style was gradually replaced by the “guitar,” or “classical,” style of playing, which, as the name implies, is essentially the application of classical guitar techniques to the banjo. Norman Howard attributes to Frank Converse, a mid-nineteenth century minstrel banjoist, the comment that in the late 1850’s and early 1860’s, a minstrel group called the New Orleans Serenaders “‘pulled’ [picked up on] the strings, guitar style, which surprised me,—while I ‘struck’ them.” Converse himself soon began

82 Toll, Blacking Up, pp. 135, 152.
83 Ibid., p. 135.
84 Ibid., p. 154.
85 Ibid., p. 155.
86 Tambo and Bones, p. 103.
playing in this style. Through 1864, the banjo method books only explain the “stroke” style of playing. In 1865, an instruction book written by Frank Converse was the first American book to explain the guitar style. Until the early 1870’s, the typical method book explains both stroke and guitar styles, giving either equal emphasis, or greater emphasis to the stroke style. In an 1872 instructor, both are again explained, but the emphasis is now on the guitar style, and this arrangement becomes typical for the rest of the century. Although the stroke style continued to be mentioned in most method books from the 1870’s on, it was gradually relegated to a very minimal position.

Joel Chandler Harris provides some evidence that by the mid-1880’s the typical minstrel banjo player was using the guitar style. He noted that one Edward McClurg, whom he presented as a kind of representative minstrel banjoist to show how far the minstrel style of the period was from plantation style, played Home, Sweet Home and The Mocking Bird with variations. These two tunes are the standard “show-off” tunes in the method books of the time, and they were intended to be played in the guitar style. Harris’ specification that they were played with variations, which is how they appear in the method books, is a clue that they probably were not even playable in stroke style. Apparently, then, guitar or classical style was introduced in America in the 1860’s and by the 1880’s it had largely supplanted the stroke style on the minstrel stage and in the parlor music tradition toward which the method books were directed. Again this points to a pre-1880’s date for the establishment of the mountain banjo tradition, which involves stroke style rather than guitar style in its early years.

The earliest traces of the mountain tradition itself, the introduction of raised frets, the changes in the minstrel show, and the introduction of the classical banjo style all argue for a pre-1880 beginning for the mountain banjo tradition. Other factors limit how much earlier than 1880 it could have begun. Except for the man who taught Dan Emmett how to play, I

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89 Septimus Winner, Winner’s New School for the Banjo (Boston: Ditson, 1872); copy at the New York Public Library.
90 Sometimes the stroke style was called “thimble” playing, because some performers used a metal finger pick called a thimble (somewhat similar to present day steel finger picks, though worn over the back [nail] of the finger). The thimble was supposedly invented in 1848 by Tom Briggs, a famous early minstrel banjo player (Rice, Monarchs, p. 46). Rice says that it came into general use three years later but the first mention of it I found in the method books was in an 1871 book, and its use was discouraged there (George C. Dobson, Dobson Brothers’ Modern Method for the Banjo [Boston: White and Co., 1871], p. 10); copy at Boston Public Library. In general, the thimble was rarely mentioned in the method books.
can find no evidence of the banjo in the mountains prior to the Civil War. The conservatism of the mountain folk music traditions would make this logical; it is not surprising that more than fifteen years would elapse between the establishment of a prominent position for the banjo in the popular music tradition and the adoption of the instrument into the mountain folk traditions.

Just as World War I helped to spread a twentieth-century folk music form, the blues, the Civil War probably played an important role in transmitting the banjo to the mountains.\(^2\) First, the war was very disruptive of Southern life and culture, and such disruption allows new traditions to be established more easily than under normal circumstances. More important, as in any war, the soldiers in both the Confederate and Union Armies would have been exposed to a variety of influences not available in their local communities. Mountain men fought in both Union and Confederate Armies. Men from Confederate states comprised about three percent of the Union Army; most of them came from Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina.\(^3\) The other mountainous border states, Kentucky and what, in 1863, became West Virginia, were Union states. The exposure to music, however, was very similar in both armies. Neither army provided any system of recreation or entertainment to help fill the long periods of inactivity; soldiers were left to their own devices to amuse and entertain themselves.\(^4\)

Soldiers stationed near cities went to see professional theatre presentations, and “farces, varieties and minstrel shows were far more attractive to soldier visitors to cities than were good plays.”\(^5\) Minstrel theatres remained open in both the North and the South during the war. “In Richmond, for example, just before its surrender in 1865, Budd and Buckley’s Minstrels and Brass Band were ‘received nightly with shouts of applause.’ . . . [These theatres] provided recreation for wounded soldiers and, perhaps, served to keep others out of mischief.”\(^6\) Sometimes, minstrel shows played at army hospitals. A nurse in a Union hospital in Pennsylvania told of visits by a minstrel show and other entertainers. Healthy soldiers also went to see minstrel shows. One Union soldier noted in his diary for August 21, 1863, that he “Went to the minstrels in town [Vicksburg] tonight.” Another Yank, in New Orleans, recorded on

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\(^2\) “There is little doubt, however, that the War [WWI] played a large part in spreading the blues, throwing men from different states and regions into close association. . . .” Paul Oliver, The Story of the Blues (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1969), p. 31.


\(^4\) Bell Irvin Wiley, They Who Fought Here (New York: Macmillan, 1959), p. 144. This book is a combination and condensation of Wiley’s Billy Yank and The Life of Johnny Reb, the Common Soldier of the Confederacy (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943), both of which are well grounded in primary sources such as soldiers’ diaries and letters.

\(^5\) Bell Irvin Wiley, Billy Yank, p. 177.

\(^6\) Wittke, Tambo and Bones, pp. 83-84.
January 24, 1865, that he "went to the morning Star minstrels in the Evening."\textsuperscript{97} Informal music making, however, was more important than professional entertainment. Music was the most common diversion in both armies, and Civil War soldiers have been called "the 'singin'est' soldiers in American history."\textsuperscript{98} While informal singing of popular songs (many from minstrel shows)\textsuperscript{99} was the most common form of music, instrumental music was also important, and soldiers of both armies entertained their comrades with fiddles, banjos, guitars, and other instruments.\textsuperscript{100} Although there were military bands, the instrumental music that Johnny Reb used most frequently and perhaps enjoyed most thoroughly came...from one or two messmates who had brought highly cherished fiddles and banjos from home and who at night labored away at familiar tunes about the campfire. A good fiddler was a popular personage in any outfit, and a mess that could boast a violin-flute combination or a fiddle-banjo duet was the object of widespread envy.\textsuperscript{101}

In 1862, one D. P. Hopkins, a banjo player, noted in his diary that he and a fiddle-playing sergeant had played a concert and a stag dance.\textsuperscript{102} A contemporary war sketch, entitled "Night Amusements in a Confederate Camp," shows a large audience watching a black man dancing in front of a fire, accompanied by a white man playing the banjo.\textsuperscript{103} Kennedy's Louisiana Battalion put together a "minstrel band" which was "in great demand not only for camp 'hoe-downs,' but for civilian programs as well."\textsuperscript{104}

Probably the most famous banjo player of the Civil War was Sam Sweeney, brother of Joel. W. W. Blackford, a member of General Stuart's staff, mentions Sweeney several times in his \textit{War Years with Jeb Stuart}.\textsuperscript{105} Sweeney collected around him a number of experts, not only in music but in theatricals and tricks of various kinds, and they added much to the pleasure of camp life. Sweeney [sic] and his banjo and his negro melodies were the favorites; and Sweeney always carried his instrument slung at his back on marches and often in long night marches, the life of the men was restored by its tinkle.

We had at headquarters a capital band of singers who were accompanied by Sweeney on

\textsuperscript{97}Wiley, \textit{Billy Yank}, pp. 176-177.
\textsuperscript{98}Wiley, \textit{They Who Fought Here}, p. 144.
\textsuperscript{99}Wittke, p. 205.
\textsuperscript{100}\textit{Billy Yank}, p. 157.
\textsuperscript{101}Wiley, \textit{Johnny Reb}, pp. 157-158.
\textsuperscript{102}Ibid., p. 167.
\textsuperscript{103}\textit{They Who Fought Here}, p. 155.
\textsuperscript{104}\textit{Johnny Reb}, p. 157.
\textsuperscript{105}(New York: Scribner's, 1945), pp. 51, 162; see also pp. 50, 89; cited in Woodward, "Sweeney and the First Banjo," p. 11.
his banjo... and occasionally by... other instruments. But the main standby was Sweeney and his banjo and every evening at the Bower [Stuart's headquarters in 1862] this formed a part of the entertainment.

After Stuart's death, Sweeney was apparently transferred to General Fitz Lee's headquarters, "where he continued to play and sing for his battle-weary comrades." Many soldiers must have heard and been inspired by Sweeney's playing.

The musical abilities of soldiers like those just mentioned were also put to use in staging actual minstrel shows. "Frequently the talent of various organizations was combined for the preparation of elaborate minstrel or variety programs." For instance, a Mississippi soldier recorded in his diary in 1863 that "McLaw's Minstrels, a company composed of young men from Barksdale's Brigade... have been playing 3 times a week for the last month to large audiences." In 1862 and 1863, Flourney's Texas Regiment put on "a kind of Negro show called the Lone Star Minstrels" in the Pine Bluff Court House. And programs have survived for theatricals staged by Confederate prisoners at Johnson's Island in 1863; one of these advertises the "Island Minstrels," and specifically mentions a banjo-player ("Mr. 'Joe Sweeney' Cronin"). The Yanks also put on dramatic performances and "minstrels and comedies seemed to be the most popular shows among both performers and audiences."

Between opportunities to see professional minstrels, informal banjo playing around camp, and soldier-staged minstrel shows, the Civil War soldier in either army probably had ample contact with the banjo. Upon returning home, veterans from the mountains may have brought the banjo back with them; or, at least, they could have helped create a greater demand for the new kind of music at home. By the end of the war, minstrel banjo playing had existed in popular tradition long enough to have begun influencing some mountain musicians; perhaps the war and the returning soldiers broke down any remaining resistance and provided the additional stimulus needed to establish a new tradition.

Many of the lines of argument presented above are, inevitably, speculative; but taken cumulatively they allow one to conclude that the mountain banjo tradition was probably established between 1865 and 1880.

Mountain banjo playing has gone through some changes itself since 1880. One of the most far reaching has been the introduction of finger-picking styles, which have culminated in bluegrass banjo picking. These finger-picking styles are older than has frequently been assumed. Burl Hammons, of West Virginia, plays tunes in two- and three-finger picking styles which he learned sometime between 1900 and 1920. As Alan Jabbour put it, "if it is not dispelled already, I hope this... will put

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106 Woodward, p. 10.
107 Johnny Reb, pp. 164, 382 (n. 58), 166.
108 Ibid., illustration opposite p. 152.
109 Billy Yank, pp. 175-176.
to rest the lately current notion that two- and three-finger banjo-picking styles are of recent origin.¹¹⁰ Smith Hammett, of North Carolina, and others were also using three-finger styles very early in this century.¹¹¹ Jabbour makes an extensive comment on the origins of finger-picking styles:

The history of these two- and three-finger picking styles is not clear, but they were widely disseminated through the Upper South and elsewhere by the early 20th century. . . . Though it cannot be proved, modern internal evidence points to the middle or later 19th century for the origin of Southern two- and three-finger picking styles. The tunes preferred in these styles, to judge from the field recordings of this century, were either song tunes or instrumental tunes of the clog and schottische variety. In the former the picking style enabled the banjoist to play arpeggiated chords behind the melody; in the latter, the melodies themselves tended to be arpeggiated. In American instrumental tradition this sense of arpeggiation and implied chordal patterns can be fairly certainly dated from the 19th century. It first turns up in the 4/4 hornpipes of the early 19th century and becomes more pronounced with the clogs and schottisches of a generation later. Allowing for a little cultural lag in Southern rural traditions, the last half of the 19th century is a likely period for the rapid spread of the musical ideas and the concomitant banjo picking styles throughout the South.¹¹²

I would like to add to his comments by pointing out that the arpeggiated playing style he describes is much like the "classical" or "guitar" banjo playing styles current in popular and parlor music late in the nineteenth century. The typical banjo instruction book designed primarily to teach the "guitar" style featured hornpipes, clogs, schottisches, and "most popular songs of the day" among the tunes offered.¹¹³

The tune which Jabbour's note accompanies is Wilson's Clog played by Burl Hammons. He plays it in a three-finger picking style, but one which sounds not at all like bluegrass picking. In fact, it sounds like nothing so much as the classical banjo playing which can be heard at rallies of the American Banjo Fraternity, preservers of the classical tradition, in Lewistown, Pennsylvania, every spring and fall. The nineteenth-century method books are filled with exactly this kind of music. Therefore, although Burl Hammons says he first heard and learned the song mentioned above from a man who played it on the guitar, there is a strong possibility that folk finger-picking styles originated in, or were at least influenced by, the classical banjo styles of popular tradition. The same kind of time lag which occurred between the introduction of minstrel style banjo playing into the popular tradition and its introduction into folk tradition would place the beginnings of finger-picking styles among

¹¹² Hammons Family, p. 30.
¹¹³ See, for instance, George C. Dobson, Dobson's Universal Banjo Instructor: Containing a Complete Elementary Course, and a Great Variety of Reels, Jigs, Hornpipes, Walk-Rounds, Waltzes, Polkas, Schottisches, Marches, and a Number of the Most Popular Songs of the Day (Boston: Ditson, 1882); copies at the New York Public Library and the Library of Congress.
folk banjo players around 1890, since the guitar style entered popular tradition around 1870.

Recordings may also have had an influence on the origin of folk finger-picking styles. Archie Green states that the first recorded folk banjo player using a three-finger style was Ernest Thompson of North Carolina, recorded in 1924. But recordings of three-finger classical style banjo playing were available beginning in the late 1890's and continuing through the mid-1920's. At the turn of the century, Vess Ossman's recordings were popular enough to make him something of a recording star, and later Fred Van Eps occupied a similar position. Such recordings may have helped spread finger-picking among folk banjoists, though this is tenuous since it is unlikely that many "folk" had the early cylinder and disc record machines. However, classical banjoists were also frequently heard on the concert stage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Having tried to cope with several of the major questions regarding the history of the five-string banjo, I will close with one more example of how consideration of minstrel and classical banjo traditions can throw some light on mountain folk tradition. The use of many different tunings by mountain banjoists has engendered some speculation as to the origins of this practice. The most obvious precedent is the long-standing tradition of variant tunings among fiddlers. Considering the close connection between the fiddle and the banjo in the minstrel, the black, and the white folk instrumental traditions, banjo players would logically have developed their own system of variant tunings. Another factor in the development of variant tunings involves the difficulty of playing above the first position on a fretless banjo; different tunings would permit different melodies to be played in the first position.

In addition to these factors, the minstrel and classical traditions also offer a precedent. The "standard" tuning in these traditions changed over the years, and at any given point in time there were alternate tunings as well as the standard one. The earliest method book, published in 1851, gives the tuning as cFCEG (strings 5 through 1). In 1855, the standard tuning was given as dGDF#A, with a statement to change to other (undefined) tunings to play in keys other than G and D. In Rice's method book (1858), eAEGB is the standard tuning (for playing in A and E), with dGDF#A as an alternate (to play in G and D). In an 1864 book, dGDF#A is standard, and both eAEGB and cFCEG are alter-

115 Howard, "Banjo and Its Players," passim.
116 See Rosenbaum, *Old-Time Mountain Banjo*, p. 16; Mayo, Notes, Rufus Crisp, p. 3; and Fleming Brown, Notes, Hobart Smith, p. 5.
118 Briggs' *Banjo Instructor*, p. 9.
nates. In Frank Converse’s 1865 instruction book, the tuning is eAEG#B and here for the first time is mentioned the use of the “raised base.” This “raised base” (fourth string raised one whole tone) produces a variant of the standard tuning: eBEG#B. For nearly twenty years after 1865, instruction books generally presented the eAEG#B tuning as standard, with dGDF#A as an alternate, and with the possibility of a raised base with either of these, giving a total of four common tunings in use.

In the late seventies or early eighties the tuning of the banjo in the minstrel and classical traditions was elevated to its primary modern tuning. By 1884 one method book stated that “it is now customary to tune in C Major [gCGBD],” although the player had to “read [the music] as if tuned in A Major.” Another 1884 book stated that gCGBD “is the pitch now used by nearly all Banjoists.” Again the raised base is sometimes employed (yielding dGGBD, the modern “G” tuning), and eAEG#B is an alternate tuning. The discrepancy, in the classical tradition, between the actual notes sounded in the C-tuning, and the written music (called “A-notation”) persisted until sometime between 1910 and 1920, when A-notation was replaced by “C-notation.” Just how much effect all of these variant tunings and changes of tunings had on the folk tradition is not clear, but at least they are an additional precedent for the variant tunings of that tradition.

In summary, the early minstrel banjo playing style, here fully explained for the first time in this century, turns out to be essentially the same as the brushless, drop-thumb frailing, or clawhammer, style that was the earliest mountain folk style. This minstrel playing style probably was adopted directly from the black folk tradition of banjo playing. Mountain white folk tradition, however, appears to have come directly from the minstrel tradition, through its widespread exhibition in minstrel shows, circuses, and medicine shows (all of which reached even the most rural sections of the country). The earliest traces of the mountain tradition, plus changes which occurred in the minstrel tradition, lead to the conclusion that the mountain tradition was established between 1865 and 1880. Later, classical banjo style may have been the origin of folk finger-picking styles.

119 Septimus Winner, *Winner’s New Primer for the Banjo* (New York: Pond, 1864); copy at the New York Public Library.
120 *Converse’s New and Complete Method*, p. 4.
122 George L. Lansing, *Banjo Songs* (Boston: Delano, 1884); copy at the New York Public Library.
123 Some of the tunings mentioned above, dGDF#A, eAEG#B, and gCGBD, for instance, are technically not separate “tunings” but rather different pitches of the same tuning, since the intervals and relationships between the strings are the same in each case. However, they establish a principle of “re-tuning” just as much as if all the relationships between the strings were altered.
To generalize a little about the findings presented above, they provide an interesting study of the interchange that occurs between folk, popular, and even art traditions. Initially, only a folk tradition (black banjo playing) existed. The banjo was popularized on the minstrel stage, and this popular tradition fed back into folk tradition, or rather initiated a new folk tradition (mountain white banjo playing), and also gave rise to an art tradition of sorts (classical banjo consistently worked at becoming an art tradition). The most significant aspect of these transactions is the fact that, since black folk tradition virtually disappeared, popular tradition was the medium which shifted a folk tradition from one folk group to another. In addition, the art tradition (classical banjo) fed back into the popular tradition and changed the nature of minstrel playing, and this development in turn appears to have influenced the later white folk tradition by the introduction of a new style (finger-picking), which by mid-twentieth century had become, with modifications, the dominant style (bluegrass). Such are the convoluted ways of cultural transmission.

*Postscript*

Since this article was written, I have had several conversations with people (notably Alan Jabbour and Tommy Thompson) familiar with traditional music in the piedmont sections of North Carolina, indicating that clawhammer banjo playing is an active style among whites in that area, as well as in the mountains. This is important information and should alter the notion commonly held, by myself and many others, that drop-thumb frailing is strictly a mountain style. As far as I know, this information had not reached print at the time this article was written; in fact, everything written about clawhammer or frailing as playing styles has assumed or stated that these are specifically southern mountain styles. Heaton, in her article on North Carolina banjo playing, for instance, explicitly equates “traditional” with “mountain” banjo playing, and all of the people and places she mentions, before her discussion of bluegrass, are from the mountains except Charlie Poole, who was, of course, a finger-picker.

The existence of a clawhammer tradition in piedmont North Carolina, and perhaps other non-mountain areas, has interesting implications. Alan Jabbour, in a conversation with me on October 24, 1975, indicated that he feels that it provides a basis for arguing that there was, some time in the nineteenth century, a direct transmission of the banjo and the clawhammer style of playing it from blacks to whites in the piedmont, and that whites thereafter carried the style into the mountains. This theory is bolstered by the recent discovery of several black, as well as white, clawhammer banjo players in the North Carolina piedmont area (see Cecelia Conway and Tommy Thompson, “Talking Banjo,” *Southern Exposure*, 2:1 [1974], 63-66; Bruce Bastin, “‘Back Before the Blues . . .’; Pre-Blues Secular Music in North Carolina,” *Sing Out!*, 24:3 [1975], 13-16; and Christopher Lonnell, “Pre-Blues Black Music in Piedmont North Carolina,” *North Carolina Folklore Journal*, 23 [1975], 26-32).
Knowledge of the above facts causes me to regret having limited the geographical range of my discussion to the mountains. However, this knowledge does not cause me to alter the basic thesis presented here.

Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan