

A DEEP ROOTED TRADITION RETURNS
SHAPE NOTE MUSIC & SACRED HARP SINGING
IN NEW JERSEY, 1801 TO 2011

Prepared for the
Asbury Park Sacred Harp Demonstration and Singing School
at the Convention Hall Grand Arcade
in conjunction with the Smithsonian Institution's *New Harmonies*
March 19th, 2011
Dr. Thomas B. Malone, Singing School Master

A DEEP ROOTED TRADITION RETURNS: SHAPE NOTE MUSIC & SACRED HARP SINGING IN NEW JERSEY, 1801 TO 2011

Compiled by
Linda Griggs, 2011

One of the most wonderful, bizarre and obscure components of American roots music is Sacred Harp, the four-part harmony, a capella, folk-type singing that taught legions of Americans to sight read using its shaped notehead system.

Shape note singing, also known as fasola singing after the names of the shaped notes, is now generally called Sacred Harp singing after the most used of its many tune books, *The Sacred Harp*, which has been in print continuously since 1844.

This music, with its appreciation of minor keys and dispersed harmonies, now sometimes called “power chords,” has been sung since colonial times. It was nearly wiped out in the north by the mid 1800's by Lowell Mason and the "Better Music" movement.

It persisted in both White and Black churches in the South and is one of the roots of gospel, bluegrass, and country. Hank Williams, the Louvin Brothers and Ralph Stanley all sang Sacred Harp. It returned to New Jersey with the Great Migrations and was still being sung here in the 1970's. It is now enjoying a revival in popularity.

Sacred Harp harmony has little of the sweetness of Victorian music or parlor songs that use close harmony in support of the soprano melody line. Instead, its broad

harmonies are sung with equal vigor by the alto, bass, tenor and treble parts. It is participatory, social singing. There is no choir-audience relationship and the singers take turns leading their favorite tunes. It is a profoundly democratic, American music. It comes as no surprise then that it was referenced in modern composition by Aaron Copland and Charles Ives.

Shape note singing has a long history in New Jersey, and New Jerseyans played an important role in its development.

Its first book, the book that most often travelled with the Singing School Masters who spread musical literacy and launched a tradition that continues unbroken for over 200 years, had its origins in Hopewell, New Jersey. Singing School Masters had been around since the colonial period but once the shape-note system was patented, they are said to have most often used this book or one of its editions.

The *Easy Instructor* appeared in 1801 and was the product of the efforts of William Smith and William Little. In his *Music in New Jersey, 1655-1860: a study of musical activity and musicians in New Jersey from Its First Settlement to the Civil War*, Charles H. Kaufman states, “There appears little doubt that William Smith, co-compiler of the highly important *Easy Instructor*, was a New Jerseyan and a resident of Hopewell.”

The Easy Instructor, or
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 metres 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.

By William Little & William Smith.

Copy right secured according to Act of Congress.

ADVERTISEMENT.

THE Publisher of this work meeting with great encouragement in the first edition of the "*Easy Instructor*," is induced to publish a second edition, and having added the flats and sharps, so that the Singer may take his choice, either to sing by characters, or by line and space, he hopes to meet the approbation and patronage of the friends to Vocal Music. Vocal Music is, without doubt, a pleasing and useful Science, when rightly understood and well performed—being peculiarly adapted to the solemn worship of the great Parent of the Universe. In a Christian Land, little need be said in recommendation of Sacred Music. Its importance will be readily acknowledged and duly felt by almost every denomination of professing Christians.

Hopewell, near Trenton, 1803.

Much less is known about William Little. He wrote the tune Hopewell which appeared in the first edition of the book and there is evidence, although inconclusive, that he may have been from Scotch Plains so Kaufman feels “one can make a strong case for

New Jerseyans as compilers of the *Easy Instructor*.

Another resident, from an old Hopewell family, Zephaniah Stout composed the song, *Amwell* which appeared in the earlier editions of *The Easy Instructor*.

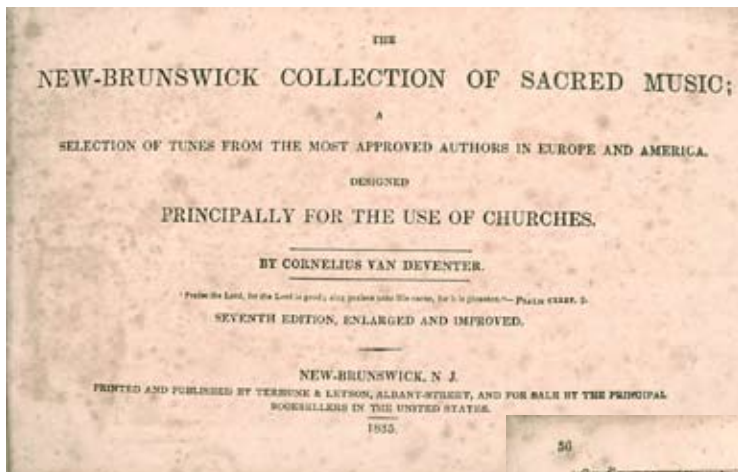


The New-Brunswick Collection of Sacred Music is considered by some the most important tune book published in New Jersey. It retained its popularity for many years going through eight editions and remaining in print from 1817 to 1841. The authors of the first edition were John W. Nevius, a carpenter, auctioneer, bandleader and judge from New Brunswick, Cornelius Van Deventer, a music teacher, also of New Brunswick and John Frazee, of Rahway. All three are described as “teachers of sacred music in the State of New-Jersey”.

John Frazee’s contribution seems slightest in comparison. Only one tune, *Ionic*, is attributed to him but he is clearly proud of his association with the book and the many singing schools he taught and mentions them in detail in his, “The Autobiography of Frazee, the Sculptor.”

His contributions to American culture are fascinating. He started his career carving gravestones but became the first known, American born sculptor to carve a bust in marble and be given a commission from congress which until then had favored European sculptors. He went on to oversee the building of US Customs House in New York City (now a branch of the National Museum of the American Indian) contributing to its exterior ornamentation, oculus and interior dome. When he became dissatisfied with the American Academy of Art whose wealthy and conservative controllers discouraged young talent and limited access to art information, Frazee became one of the fifteen founders of the National Academy of Design, still active. He later became a candidate for the first political party representing labor, the Working Men’s Party. The “workies” advocated free public schooling, a shorter, ten hour work day, doing away with imprisonment for debt and other men’s suffrage issues.

John Frazee had been indentured as a child and was entirely self taught.

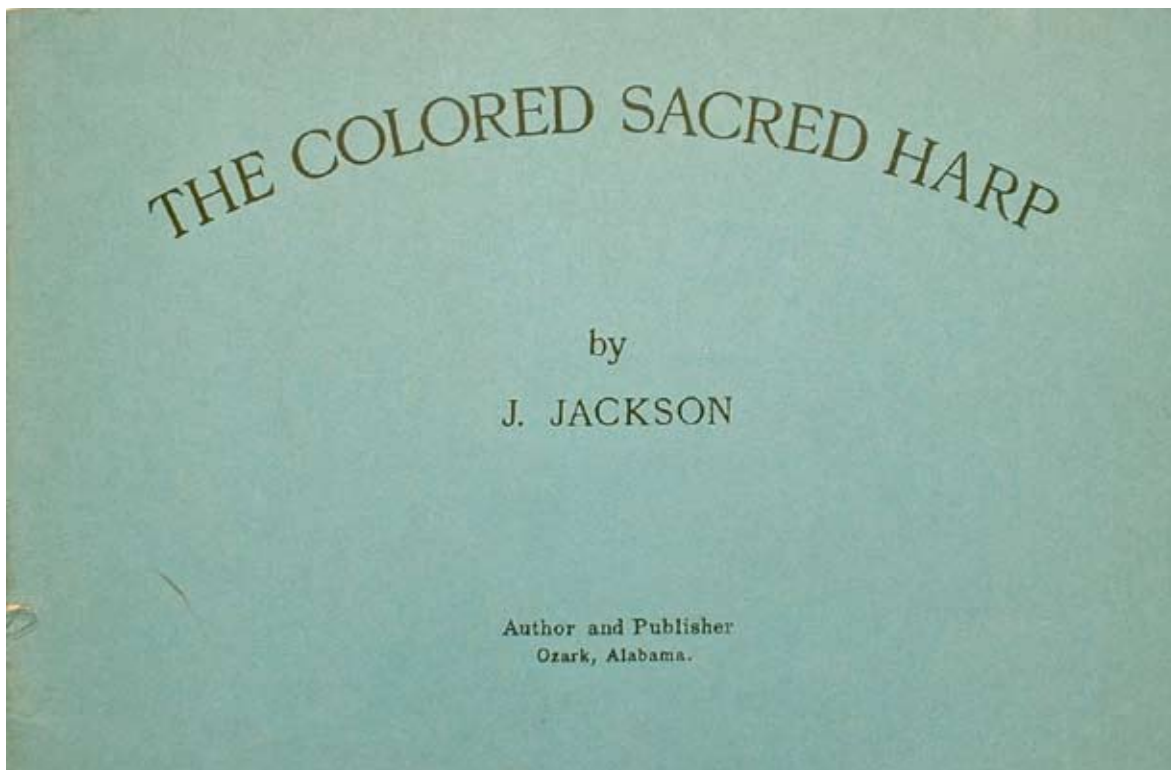


Lowell Mason, of the “Scientific Music” or “Better Music” movement, factors into the history of Sacred Harp in New Jersey. He is known for bringing music education to the American public schools and for his European-inspired compositions, ironically, some of which were included in later editions of the Sacred Harp, against his strong objection. He is less well known for deliberate attempts to replace shape note singing, derided as “dunce notes” or “buckwheat notes,” with European style hymns in standard notation. It is worth noting that as he was replacing a capella singing, his family was in the business of selling pianos and organs. Lowell Mason moved to his estate in Orange, New Jersey, died in 1872, and is buried in Rosedale Cemetery.

The Great Migrations brought Southern Blacks to the North beginning around 1910. Sacred Harp came back to New Jersey with them.

Buell Cobb in his 1978 book, *The Sacred Harp: A Tradition and Its Music*, noted that there was a monthly singing in Vauxhall with an annual convention for Union County and a monthly and annual singing in Newark. Author Joe Dan Boyd found that both groups sang from the Cooper edition of *The Sacred Harp* with Newark also singing from *The Colored Sacred Harp*, a book of original compositions compiled in 1934 by Judge Jackson of Ozark, Alabama.

It is assumed that these singings passed on with the aging singers but they were, in the late 60’s, active enough for Ruby J. Lee, president, and Julia Lewis, secretary, to arrange for a representative, Mrs. Ouchie Cox, to attend the Alabama & Florida State Union Sacred Harp Singing Convention in Dothan, Alabama. This outpost of northernmost Sacred Harp tradition bearers appear to have been the closest thing to a Sacred Harp diaspora.



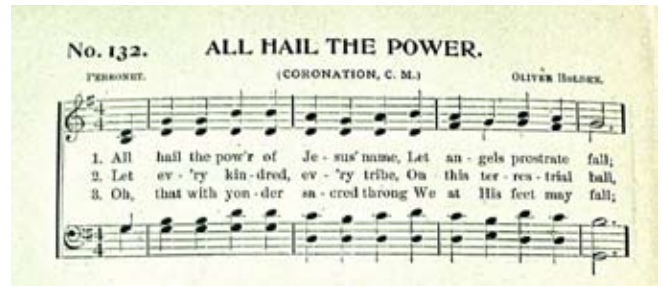
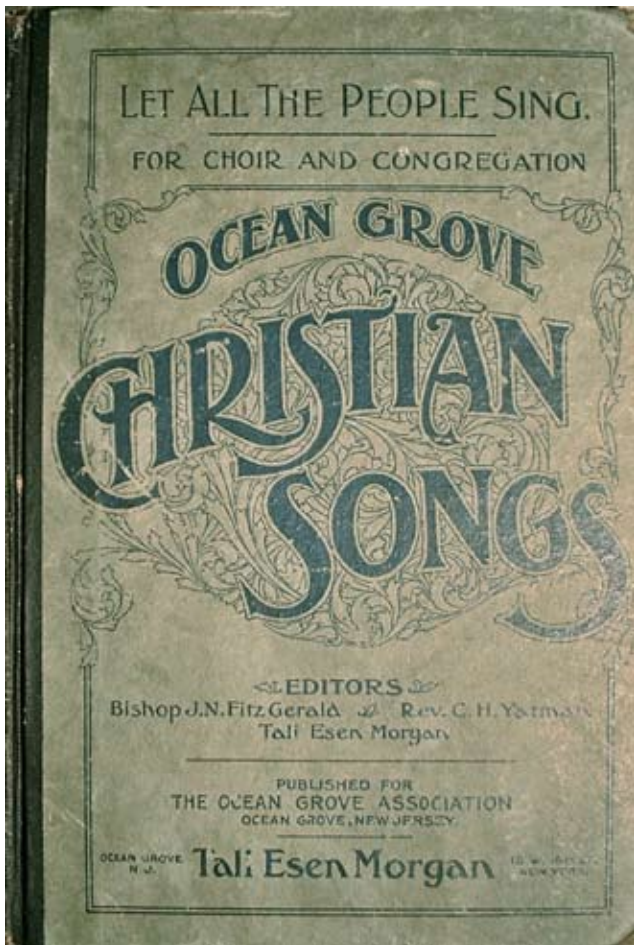
Those familiar with church music on the Jersey Shore will undoubtedly wonder if there is any connection between Sacred Harp and the music of Ocean Grove. Ocean Grove was founded after Lowell Mason's "Better Music" movement by prosperous clergy and congregants accustomed to singing to the accompaniment of a piano or organ.

Nevertheless, Sacred Harp and Ocean Grove both share songs that were not written for them specifically but are adapted to their tastes. For example, *All Hail the Power* which appears in *Ocean Grove Christian Songs* has harmonies that are close and sweet. In *The Sacred Harp* this song is known as *Coronation* and its harmonies are characteristically dispersed and vigorous.

Sacred Harp singings were revived in New Jersey in the early '90s. There are currently monthly singings in Princeton and Montclair.

Monthly singings tend to last under three hours, while conventions are usually two days with all day singing, dinner on grounds and up to 100 songs a day being sung. Montclair will host the 19th annual Garden State Sacred Harp Convention at the Friends' Meeting House on May 13 and 14, where often 100 or more people gather to sing.

After a full day of singing 'dunce notes' in Montclair, you might want to visit Lowell Mason's grave. He's buried about three miles away.



courtesy of Sacred Harp Publishing

All images courtesy of Richard Hulan except where noted

My sincere thanks to Richard Hulan and Warren Steel, authors of *The Makers of the Sacred Harp*, Buell Cobb, Wade Kotter, Gina Balestracci, Roland Hutchinson and Tim Eriksen but any mistakes are mine.