

## Where's Wesley?



### The True Story of a Manuscript Hymnal Attributed to the Father of Methodism

In 1739, Methodist founder John Wesley made seven copies of a hymnal for his first class, handwriting them because he was not allowed access to printing presses. Through Wesleyan connections, Englishman Ralph Potts (1751 or 52-1816) came to possess one of these manuscript hymnals, bringing it with him when he immigrated to America and eventually settled in Washington, N.C. Potts passed the hymnal to his son, John Wesley Potts. In the late 1800s, the hymnal came into the possession of John F. Shackelford (1846-1921) of Tarboro, N.C., who made the mistake of loaning it to Robert T. Joyce of Mount Airy, N.C. Joyce in turn sent the hymnal to Washington Duke, the famous tobacconist and benefactor of Trinity College (now Duke University), hoping for assistance paying off his church's mortgage. In the end, Shackelford had to sue for the hymnal's return. The hymnal then spent many decades as a revered family relic, its peaceful existence broken briefly by a 1981 burglary in which it was stolen, but eventually returned.

Or so the story goes. In reality, this saga is a tangled web of truth and legend, passed down orally through generations of the Shackelford family. Ownership signatures in the manuscript, plus a newspaper article and two letters, document the family's traditions. The alleged Wesleyan origins have dominated the manuscript's history, and if they are true, this artifact is a rare find for Methodist and music history. If the story is false, the hymnal is still a valuable document—but what exactly does it document? It is time to set the record straight, to discover what this artifact really is and what tale is really contained within its pages. And what a tale it is: a story of music,

religion, and the lives of common and famous people on two continents. Our journey begins by looking outward, scouring the historical record for information about the hymnal and the people connected with it, but the mystery is ultimately solved by looking inward, analyzing the hymnal's actual musical and textual content. Along the way, we'll observe how everyday objects affect the people they come in contact with, gain insight about the spread of music and religion in both the old and new worlds, and discover the power of close examination of actual artifacts for learning the true story.

## Provenance: Unraveling the Tangled Web

We begin by examining the signatures and newspaper article, saving the letters for later. Six men's names are recorded inside the hymnal's front cover board (fig. 1). According to the dates there, the earliest signature is "Jno Wesley, 1739." The next dated signature reads "Ralph Potts's Book, July 3, 1780, Dunston." An undated printed nameplate records "John Wesley Potts." William Williams of Gates County added his signature but no date. Therefore, his chronological place cannot be unequivocally established, but as we will see, he most likely followed John Wesley Potts. A final inscription records the loaning of the document: "This Book is the Property of John F. Shackelford. Tarboro N.C. October 8, 1897. Loaned to R.T. Joyce Mount Airy N.C. Oct 8th, 1897." It appears some initial leaves (at least two) have been lost, since all of the first three hymns and part of the fourth are missing. It is tantalizing to speculate on whether other lost leaves contained further clues about the manuscript's provenance.



1. Signature page, taken from the front cover board of a manuscript of the hymnal attributed to John Wesley. Courtesy of the Music Library, Fletcher Music Center, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C.

The circa 1898 newspaper article tucked within the manuscript's pages is the

earliest published report of the hymnal. It reads:

*ONE OF SEVEN COPIES*

*A Written Copy of Wesley's Hymns in This State.*

From the Winston Sentinel.

It is learned that Mr. Robert T. Joyce, one of Winston's former citizens now of Mt. Airy, has secured and will loan to the library of Trinity College, one of the seven copies of the hymns of John Wesley, written by the latter in 1739. It is said to have been handed down from Wesley to John Wesley Potts.

When Wesley organized his first class in England, he made the seven copies, all beautifully written, as he was not allowed to do any printing. Ralph Potts brought one to Washington, this State. After a fire in Tarbor [sic] the book was found by John Shackelford [sic].

Mr. Shackelford consents that Joyce shall loan it to Trinity College. Those who have seen the book say the writing and the music notes are almost as well executed as if they were engraved.

The signatures and newspaper article agree regarding the connection to Wesley, but these claims do not match the historical record. There is no evidence of the other six copies, although this alone does not preclude their creation, given the nearly three centuries subsequently elapsed. However, the claim that Wesley "was not allowed to do any printing" is suspect because Wesley printed several other publications in 1739, including three editions of *Hymns and Sacred Poems*. In addition, the signature's format brings its authenticity into question: according to Wesley expert Peter Nockles, Wesley normally neither dated his signatures nor wrote his first name as "Jno."

Besides Wesley's alleged signature, the earliest dated inscription is "Ralph Potts, July 3, 1780, Dunston." Ralph Potts was born in Northumberland, England, in 1751 or 52, and thus could not have been a member of Wesley's supposed "first class" of 1739. Potts's life in England remains obscure. He was baptized into the Church of England at Eglingham, Northumberland, but the parish registers give only his name, his father's name (also Ralph), and the date, July 3, 1752. The historical record is then silent until March 17, 1787, when Potts became a United States citizen, taking the oath of allegiance in Portsmouth, Va., as recorded by the Norfolk County Circuit Court. He must have immigrated not long after signing the hymnal in 1780, since three years of United States residence were required before taking the oath. Potts did not, however, settle permanently in Portsmouth: an 1856 essay in the *Annals of Southern Methodism* on "Methodism in Washington, N.C.," states that Potts, "being a merchant of high standing and incorruptible business habits, was induced to come [to Washington, N.C., in Beaufort County] after pushing his fortune, for a certain length of time, in Portsmouth, Va."

Indeed, by mid-1792 Potts had moved to Washington, N.C., where he would leave a

legacy for the town in general and its Methodist church in particular. The aforementioned 1856 essay waxes eloquent: "the Methodist Church in Washington owes the very sap of its existence at this day to his faith, his liberality, to his ... unparalleled devotion to its interests." Arriving on the tail of the congregation's short-lived 1791 revival, "Father Potts" threw himself into the church, beginning by marrying Mary Hinton, widowed daughter-in-law of the congregation's founders, Sarah and Dempsey Hinton. He went on to fund erection of their first chapel, dedicated by Methodist bishop Francis Asbury in 1803. On June 9, 1806, Potts, then one of seven trustees, officially gave the building and space for burial grounds to the congregation "for and in consideration of the love & esteem which he hath and beareth for the Worship of God and promoting and Spreading of the Gospel of Christ."

Potts's importance among the Washington Methodists is further emphasized by his role as their primary contact for Francis Asbury, receiving mail for the circuit rider and housing him when he arrived. Asbury's February 1, 1802, diary entry shows the bishop's consistently favorable opinion of Potts, noting his arrival "to the hospitable shelter of Ralph Potts (of Alnwick, Northumberland) where we had all things richly to enjoy." The men's shared English heritage was dear to the bishop's heart, for Asbury wrote on March 9, 1801, "Ralph Potts, a Northumbrian (Old England) but American-made Methodist, received us as the angels of God." Asbury's identification of Potts as an "American-made" Methodist is significant: it suggests Potts converted to Methodism after leaving his native land, and thus had no Wesleyan connections in England. Furthermore, the 1856 essay that spills so much ink praising Ralph Potts is conspicuously silent on the hymnal or any Wesleyan connections, especially given its passing but specific mention that another church father, Thomas Robason, was "a member of the Wesleyan connection in England."

Ralph Potts died March 30, 1816, leaving his estate to his brother William Potts and sister Ann Scott, both of England; his stepson Joseph B. Hinton; and his three surviving children, now orphans (their mother died in 1806): Ann, Sally, and John Wesley. His will records money, property, slaves, and personal items, but no mention is made of any books, let alone a Wesley hymnal.



2. Map of North Carolina locations in the hymnal's story. "Geographical, statistical, and historical map of North Carolina," drawn by F. Lucas Jr.,

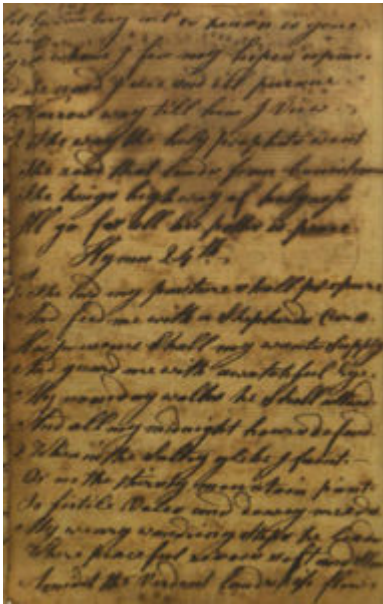
Kneass, sc. (1822). Courtesy of Verona Joyner Langford North Carolina Collection, J. Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C. Click image to enlarge in new window.

Nonetheless, Ralph Potts must have passed the hymnal to his minor son, John Wesley Potts, as indicated by the pasted-in nameplate. John Wesley Potts himself lived only nineteen years after his father's death, but accomplished much in his short life, briefly attending the University of North Carolina, and subsequently earning a medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania. His wife Paulina C. Potts died while he was in medical school, apparently leaving no surviving children. Around 1831, John Wesley Potts moved to nearby Tarboro in Edgecombe County, which jurisdiction he represented at the North Carolina House of Commons from 1832 to 1835. John Wesley Potts married Lucy Nelson Boyd on Oct. 4, 1834, in a double ceremony shared with Lucy's sister Mary, and Thomas P. Hawkins. The newly wedded bliss would not last long, however. The following summer, on July 13, 1835, John Wesley Potts died in Little Rock, Ark., attended by his brother-in-law Thomas Hawkins. The newspaper obituaries do not tell the men's business in Arkansas; perhaps they had traveled to make their fortunes in that newly opened territory.

From John Wesley Potts's death in 1835 until 1897, nothing is positively known about the manuscript's whereabouts. John Wesley Potts did not register a will, an entirely plausible situation given his young and probably unexpected death. His worldly possessions were likely retained by his widow, but the historical record makes no further note of Lucy Potts or her descendants. Lucy may have remarried, thus changing her surname and making her difficult to trace. The manuscript's signature, "William Williams, Gates County," probably refers to its owner for at least some of the years from 1835 through 1897. Gates County, North Carolina, is only about seventy miles from Tarboro (fig. 2), and several men named William Williams did indeed live there during these years, but only the barest facts are recorded about any of them, leaving this owner's story shrouded in mystery.

In 1897, the manuscript resurfaced in Tarboro, now the property of well-to-do businessman and mill owner John F. Shackelford. From this point forward the historical record unabashedly claims the manuscript as a Wesley relic. Two traditions explain how Shackelford acquired the manuscript; both are suspicious, and neither likely came directly from Shackelford. The 1898 newspaper article preserved with the manuscript states Shackelford found it "in Tarbor [i.e. Tarboro] after a fire." The newspaper cites its original source as the Winston Sentinel, a town nearly 200 miles from Tarboro, and the content overall appears not to have come from Shackelford's testimony. In 1982, almost a century later, then-owner Joe Grayiel recalled being told "a man gave [Shackelford] a satchel of books and the hymnal was among them." If either story is true, how did Shackelford or the newspaper learn about the manuscript's origins and purported history as one of seven copies? The newspaper's statements about the manuscript's connection with Ralph Potts and Potts's residence in Washington are accurate, but if the manuscript was simply

"found," how was Potts's residence in Washington established, several counties away and over seventy years after his death? It is plausible this information was discovered through local connections, particularly since John Wesley Potts lived in Tarboro as an adult. Perhaps the true story is more innocuous: the Shackelfords collected relics (to this day, similar artifacts are preserved in the family home) and John Shackelford simply bought the purported Wesley relic, perhaps from William Williams.



3. Hymns 23 and 24, left page, with text; Hymns 23 and 24



right page, with music. Courtesy of Ms. Gwenda Grayiel Moore. Scan courtesy of Digital Collections, J.Y. Joyner Library, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C.

However he acquired it, Shackelford nearly lost the manuscript in 1897 when he loaned it to fellow mill owner Robert T. Joyce, a prominent citizen and



Methodist in Mount Airy. Joyce was apparently something of a historian, for he wrote a short history of Mount Airy for the time capsule placed in the cornerstone of the town's Methodist church building at its 1894 groundbreaking. Joyce "was to take [the hymnal] to Trinity College to attempt to verify that it was written by Wesley," according to a 1982 newspaper article. Less than a year after Shackelford's loan, on August 4, 1898, Joyce did indeed send the manuscript to Washington Duke of Durham, N.C. Rather than requesting authentication, Joyce sought assistance to pay off the mortgage on Mount Airy's new Methodist church building. After suggesting that the hymnal was a gift ("I send you by today's Registered mail a hymn book that will explain it's self... I obtained consent to let you have this for Trinity College"), he proffered a thinly veiled request for needed funds ("To a further statement utterly disconnected with this, I would state for your generous consideration the fact that we owe \$2235.00 on our Methodist Church."). Joyce's communication is preserved with the hymnal, along with a second letter dated January 27, 1898, from R.T. Miller of Cincinnati to Joyce asking, "Can I buy the manuscript Wesley Hymnal referenced in Winston Sentinel, for my collection of Wesleyana?" Nothing further is known, including whether Joyce responded. The January 1898 date is curious because it precedes Joyce's August 1898 letter to Duke. Perhaps the year was actually 1899, and Miller mistakenly wrote 1898, as people sometimes do at the beginning of the year. Regardless, the manuscript did not stay permanently in Trinity College's possession, but returned to the Shackelford family, whose tradition states Shackelford raised a lawsuit to get the manuscript back.

The hymnal passed from Shackelford to his daughter Maud Leggett, then to her heir Joseph Grayiel, resting as a revered relic for many decades until the family home (by then recognized in the National Register of Historic Places as the Redmond-Shackelford House) was burglarized on October 30, 1981. Police initiated an international search, but the hymnal didn't go far: on February 16, 1982, Tarboro's newspaper, *The Daily Southerner*, announced the artifact's recovery via a clandestine meeting at an abandoned house in nearby Rocky Mount, N.C. Upon Grayiel's death, the manuscript passed to his niece Gwenda Grayiel Moore, whose initiative to investigate the long family traditions and bring the artifact to wider attention resulted in the research recorded in this article.

Provenance, then, raises significant doubts about Wesley's connections to the manuscript. Ralph Potts, as the first recorded owner, is the most likely creator, but the historical record is entirely silent regarding Potts's musical activities, much less a hymnal. Let us, then, turn our gaze inward for a detailed look at the manuscript itself: close examination of the hymnal's musical and textual content provides specific evidence as to dating, creation circumstances, and use, ultimately identifying it as an artifact of eighteenth-century psalmody.

## The Manuscript's Own Pages: Key to the Mystery

As the name implies, psalmody originally encompassed only singing of the biblical Psalms, but over time the scope broadened to include extra-biblical sacred texts. This sacred music-making tradition emerged in the Church of England in the late seventeenth century and eventually spread throughout Protestant congregations and to America, Scotland, and Wales. At that time, congregational singing had degraded musically, including slow, dragging tempos, spurring formation of parish choirs. In cities, the choirs consisted of charity children, but in rural areas a small group, often young men, would come together to learn music in order to lead and improve congregational singing. These rural choirs might receive tutelage from the resident clergyman, if he was knowledgeable, or from itinerant singing masters who also peddled books of music and musical instruction. Individual musicians created manuscript music books, copying their own parts from the parish's single copy of a printed hymnal, notating other pieces of particular interest, or trying their own hand at composition or poetry. The current document appears to be one such endeavor, containing 223 texts, 194 tunes, twelve pages of music theory instruction, and an index.



4. Hymn 126, from Milgrove's Sixteen Hymns. Courtesy of the Music Library, Fletcher Music Center, East Carolina University, Greenville, N.C.

Because psalmody was transmitted through a fluid mix of printed books, manuscript compilations, and oral tradition, hymn tunes and texts were frequently mixed and matched, and tune names likewise varied. Therefore, the best way to identify tunes is by the melodic content, and texts should be identified by the opening words (text incipit) rather than the title. Nicholas



Temperley's *Hymn Tune Index* uses these methods to catalog English-language hymn tunes printed up to 1820 and was the primary resource for analyzing the manuscript, supplemented by an early version of Nikos Pappas' *Index of Southern and Western Sacred Music* and full-text searching of sacred poetry collections. Analysis of every hymn tune and text reveals a particular selection whose very inclusion is evidence against Wesleyan connections and facilitates dating, particularly by identifying two pieces of art music and three printed sources for the content

The simple presence of hymn 151, "The Despised Nazarene," is an argument against Wesleyan origins. John Wesley denounced this text in the preface to his 1787 *A Pocket Hymn Book, For The Use Of Christians Of All Denominations*, explicitly naming it along with only one other hymn ("that which begins 'A Christ I have, what a Christ I have'") and calling it "doggerel double distilled." Despite the two hymns being "hugely admired and continually echoed from Berwick-upon-Tweed to London," Wesley had no love for the texts, saying, "I earnestly entreat all our preachers not only never to give them out, but to discountenance them by all prudent means, both in public and private." Wesley's criticism may have been partially due to his disgruntlement over Robert Spence's 1783 *Pocket Hymn Book*, which included these two hymns but was otherwise largely pirated from one of Wesley's own hymnals. Regardless, the manuscript's inclusion of "The Despised Nazarene" is evidence it was not created under Wesley's guidance.

Two other pieces contradict the 1739 date associated with the alleged Wesley signature because they are not actually hymns but the melodies from oratorio arias composed after 1739. Hymn 154, entitled "A Celebrated Hymn," is "The Hymn of Eve" from Thomas Arne's *The Death of Abel* (1744). Hymn 157, "Pious Orgies," is from one of George Frederic Handel's most popular oratorios, *Judas Maccabaeus* (composed 1746, premiered 1747). These selections must have been copied into the hymnal after 1744 and 1747.

Three printed hymnals (ca. 1754-1768), all from England, were identified as sources for sections of the manuscript's content by their sharing a number of the same texts, tunes, and tune names in close proximity or the same sequence, a strong indicator of copying since tunes and texts were frequently recombined in the eighteenth century.

Aaron Williams' *The Universal Psalmist*, probably the first (1763), second (1764), or third (1765) edition, is the apparent source of hymns 80 through 90, detailed in Table 1. The minor deviations in tune names may suggest imprecise copying or the existence of an intermediate source, a distinct possibility since *The Universal Psalmist* was in wide circulation, including a version printed in the colonies under the title *The American Harmony* (multiple editions 1769-1774) by Massachusetts Anglican parish clerk Daniel Bayley.

# Table 1: Hymns in Manuscript and Aaron Williams, *The Universal Psalmodist* (1763-1765)

First leaflet (manuscript)	Tune name (manuscript)	Hymn number (manuscript)	Hymn Tune Index tune code	Hymn Tune Index tune code	The Universal Psalmodist tune name
To that they die	George's tune	80	995d	YTOTK1	St. George's
Behold the Glories	Thorley tune	81	2850	BTGOTL2	Thorley
Bliss my soul adore	Harmon tune	82	2209	BMBAZM1	Harmon
Come thou almighty	St. Clements tune	83	2942	CTAKRE1	St. Clement's
To servants of God	Halifax tune	84	1699f	YSOQYM1	Halifax (1699)
The Voice of my beloved	Bright Sublimations	85	2822	TVOMBS1	Bright Sublimations
Come Let us join our	Wotton Flavel	86	1564b	CLUJOC1	Wotton Flavel
Rejoice the Lord is King	Troy Tune	87	2851	RTLKY2	Troy
Avoid my heart	Bray Tune	88	995a	AMHAMT1	Bray
Jesus Christ is risen	For Easter day	89	485 (variant unaccounted for in HTI)	JCBTH2	Easter Day Hymn (485a)
Sinners obey the Gospel	Kingsbridge	90	2213a (variant unaccounted for in HTI)	SOTGWR3	Kingsbridge

Table 1

The second printed hymnal represented is Benjamin Milgrove's 1768 *Sixteen Hymns as they are sung at the Right Honorable the Countess of Huntingdon's chappel in Bath. Book I*. The Countess later (1781) seceded from the Church of England but aligned herself with Whitefield, not Wesley. As shown in Table 2, the manuscript's hymns 124-130 occur in the same sequence in *Sixteen Hymns*, though only seven of the sixteen hymns were copied. *Sixteen Hymns* does not include tune names, and the manuscript follows suit. The tunes in *Sixteen Hymns* contain three or four parts, and the penman transcribed the two lower parts almost verbatim, but omitted the upper parts. The only notable, though inexplicable, difference in the transcription is the frequent omission of anticipatory "graces" (melodic embellishments) before cadences (ends of musical phrases). The texts are also carefully transcribed, with the first verse placed between the staves of music, just as in *Sixteen Hymns*, even though this is otherwise uncommon in the manuscript.

## Table 2: Hymns in Manuscript and

# Benjamin Milgrove, *Sixteen Hymns* ... (1768)

Text incipit	Hymn number (manuscript)	Hymn number (Sixteen Hymns)	Hymn Tune Index tune code	Hymn Tune Index text code
How shall I speak	124	Hymn 1	3212	HSISM51
Lord thine Image	125	Hymn 3	3214a	LYTTHL2
Take this poor heart	126	Hymn 4	3215a	TMPHUA1 (variant)
O patient Spoiled Lamb	127	Hymn 5	3216a	OPSLMH1
O Dearest Lord take	128	Hymn 8	3218	ODLTTM1
Rise up my Spouse	129	Hymn 9	3219	RUMSTB1
He comes be Comm	130	Hymn 16	3226a	HCHCTJ1

Table 2

Bookseller and publisher of Methodist connections Thomas Butts provided a third printed antecedent, for hymns 142 through 149, in his 1754 *Harmonia-Sacra*, as detailed in Table 3. The omission of a tune name for the manuscript’s hymn 143 in both sources supports the connection between the manuscript and the 1754 edition of *Harmonia-Sacra* specifically because later editions include a tune name for this selection. *Harmonia-Sacra* is also the earliest printed source to associate the texts, tunes, and tune names for hymns 146, 148, and 150.

## Table 3: Hymns in Manuscript and Thomas Butts, *Harmonia-Sacra* (1754)

Text incipit (manuscript)	Hymn number (manuscript)	Tune name (manuscript)	Hymn Tune Index text code	Hymn Tune Index text code	Tune name ( <i>Harmonia Sacra</i> )
Buried in Shadows	142	Brentford	1990	BISCOTN1 (variant)	Brentford
Father our hearts we	143	—	1813	FORWLJ11 (variant)	—
Father God who Sc'nt	144	Radcliff	1827	FGWSDM1	Radcliff
Come ye wary sinners	145	Magdalen	1832	CYWSC1	Magdalen
Sweet is the memory	146	Bristol	642b	SITMOT1	Bristol
With Earnest longing	147	Papouch's	2258	WELOTM2	Papouch's
Happy and thy Days	148	Ousdell	2256	HSTDAE1	Ousdell
Sinners obey the	149	Invitation	1830a	SOTGWED	Invitation
Ah woe is me	150	Wodnesbury	2266	AWIMCT1	Wodnesbury

Table 3

A collective look at the earliest date each tune appeared in any printed source suggests further specifics of the creation timeframe. Of the 194 tunes, 125 (75 percent) were first printed from 1746 to 1775. The tunes cluster particularly thickly in the 1750s and '60s, with 73 of the tunes (44 percent) first printed from 1754 to 1763. These dates are incongruent with the 1739 creation proposed by the alleged Wesley signature, but, remembering that printed volumes are often used for some time after publication, they accord nicely with creation beginning in 1780, the year Ralph Potts signed the hymnal.

An increasing degree of correlation to printed sources in the hymnal's later sections suggests additional creation details. Hymn 80 is the first hymn with a specifically identified printed antecedent, and many hymns before number 80 are not found in their exact combination of tune and text in any English-language hymnal printed before 1820. Of the twenty-two unidentified tunes, six appear before hymn 30. These early hymns might represent a local repertory, perhaps from an itinerant singing master who provided initial or intermittent choir leadership, or even composed by Ralph Potts himself, and therefore most likely were entered in England, because singing schools were common in England but not in Virginia and North Carolina, and also because Ralph Potts's inscribed place of residence was Dunston. The later hymns were likely added as Potts continued as a psalm singer, encountering these tunes and texts either aurally or in written form. Potts's residence when he entered these later hymns is ambiguous, but America's lesser access to goods and travelers slightly favors creation in England.

The frequency and distribution of duplicates and the variations in layout reinforce the argument for creation over time. Of the manuscript's 223 texts, 71 repeat texts already included, reducing the number of unique texts to 152. Only rarely are the tunes using the same text grouped together, even though grouping would have saved both space and effort, especially given that there is little duplication among the tunes: 183 of the 194 hymn tunes are unique, and

even among the repetitions, only two are nearly exact duplicates; the others are variants.

The hymnal uses several different content layouts. From the beginning through hymn 122, the layout is very consistent: text on the left, corresponding music on the right. After hymn 122, both layout and content shift. Seven canons are inserted between hymns 122 and 123, and from hymn 123 forward, one verse of the text is generally written between the staves of music, with additional verses often present on following pages. Hymns 152 through 154 and 156 through 158 consist of the previously noted oratorio arias plus four anthem-style pieces, and hymns 196 through 225 are texts only with no corresponding music.

As a rule, the manuscript contains only two or three verses of each text, even if more are needed to form a complete thought, apparently constrained by space. For example, hymn 24's text is obviously a versification of Psalm 23, yet it breaks off halfway through (fig. 3). Odd as this practice may seem, it is not abnormal. English country psalm singers often copied only a few verses to jog their memory and sang the rest by heart. Likewise, tunebooks printed in America between 1698 and 1810 often included only one stanza.

## Ralph Potts's Musical Life in England and America

Further examination of the hymnal provides information on Potts's choirs on both sides of the Atlantic and suggests psalmody reforms were working in the English parish where Potts first learned psalmody, as evidenced by the parts included, "moods in psalmody" used, rhythmic features employed, near absence of futing tunes, inclusion of music instruction material, and absence of camp-meeting songs.

The particular musical parts contained in the hymnal suggest it was initially used by a man (Ralph Potts) in a parish choir of men and, at least at times, women and/or children. Each hymn is dutifully headed "Tenor," but most selections actually contain two parts: tenor and bass. In eighteenth-century psalmody, the tenor and bass were the most important parts (the bass provided the harmonic foundation and the tenor carried the melody) and, at least in theory, were sung by men. The two upper parts (alto and soprano, assigned to women and children) did not contain the melody and were often considered optional, even though most printed hymnals included all four parts.

Though most selections stand fairly well with only tenor and bass, hymn 126, copied from Milgrove's *Sixteen Hymns*, does not (fig. 4). The second half opens with a brief imitative section. In *Sixteen Hymns*, the tenor enters first, followed by the two treble parts in turn, and finally by the bass. The manuscript's presence of only tenor and bass parts gives the unmusical impression that the tenor sings alone for four full measures before the bass

entrance.

“Moods in psalmody” are a theoretical principle of eighteenth-century psalmody similar to modern time signatures. They are notated via similar symbols and indicate the meter (number and subdivision of beats in each measure). Unlike modern time signatures, however, moods also imply tempo, a carryover from earlier times. The manuscript’s musical instruction helpfully defines the moods in psalmody:  $\text{C}$  and  $3/2$  are “Adagio, Very slow”;  $\text{C}$  and  $3/4$  are “Largo, a little quicker”; and finally,  $\text{C}$  and  $3/8$  are defined as “Retorted, very Quick.” An additional mood, even quicker than retorted time, occurs fifteen times in the manuscript, denoted by  $2/4$ . The instructional material also distinguishes between “common time,” with measures divided into two or four beats, and “triple time,” with measures divided into three beats. Table 4 demonstrates the preference for the quicker moods and triple time, where the three main beats resist equal grouping, giving the music rhythmic thrust.

## Table 4: Moods of Psalmody: Frequency of Occurrence

Mood	Tempo	Frequency of Occurrence
Largo triple (3/4)	Quicker	64
Largo common $\text{C}$	Quicker	45
Adagio common $\text{C}$	Very slow	38
Adagio triple (3/2)	Very slow	19
Quickest common (2/4)	Quickest	15
Retorted common	Very quick	5
Retorted triple (3/8)	Very quick	4
Other or not indicated	N/A	4

Table 4

Modern scholars sometimes classify psalm tunes according to their rhythmic composition. The oldest rhythmic style is the “common-tune,” not to be confused with the common time mood, although, like common time, it consists of measures equally divided into groups of two or four beats. Furthermore, common-tune style is characterized by long note values of equal length and stress without written embellishment. This “old way of singing” grew slower and slower over time, creating the situation reformers hoped to rectify by forming parish



choirs and writing new tunes with varied note values and rhythmic motion. The manuscript includes only nine hymns in the common-tune style, plus three additional hymns in triple time which contain only note value of a half note or longer. This preference for tunes with quicker tempos, rhythmic variety, and triple time, in conjunction with the earlier observation that seventy-five percent of the manuscript's tunes were first printed between 1753 and 1784, suggests the choir was leading the congregation in learning the newer tunes.

Despite their desire to remedy the old way of singing, some clergy believed choirs were rather too successful in reforming parish music because choirs, once trained, were not content merely to lead basic psalmody but sought to perform complicated anthems and even dabbled in secular music. Around 1740, the "fuging tune" emerged. These imitative pieces became popular among musicians and a thorn in the flesh of church officials who complained of their complicated nature (excluding the congregation from joining in), overly lively character (inappropriate for solemn worship), and propensity for each part to sing different words simultaneously (obscuring the text). The manuscript, however, contains very few fuging tunes, suggesting this choir stayed true to its role of encouraging congregational singing. The manuscript's seven canons and six anthems might represent a small deviation, if they were used during services rather than on non-worship occasions.

Reformers would have been pleased that at least one choir member took active interest in music fundamentals, filling twelve pages with basic music theory. As might be expected of personal notes, the information is broad-ranging, skipping from topic to topic. It includes tables typically found in psalmody instruction materials; explanations of clefs, key signatures, musical notation, and intervals; and a mnemonic poem for finding "mi," the note eighteenth-century theoreticians used to identify keys.

But what of the Washington Methodists? Singing was important in American Methodism. Though the only explicit mention of singing in Washington is an incidental statement that figurehead Sarah Hinton "not only sang and prayed in public, but exhorted also in the presence of all conditions of men," the context implies that music was not rare, but a normal activity not worth mentioning. Furthermore, it seems unlikely Potts would have learned psalmody, brought the manuscript with him, and not continued to make music in Washington. Indeed, as a church leader, it would have been normal for him to not merely participate in singing but to lead it, and the manuscript indicates he certainly had the knowledge and ability.

As we envision Ralph Potts leading American Methodist singing, one style is strikingly absent: the camp meeting song. Camp meetings were integral to American Methodism from around 1800, including in Washington, for two young men were converted at a nearby town's camp meeting in 1806. These open-air meetings featured "lively," emotional singing with simple texts and melodies, frequent use of refrains, and texts full of personal pronouns like "I" and "my." In the manuscript, the texts balance their focus among the individual, the group, and

God and his works; refrains and choruses are nowhere to be found; and the presence of canons, composed art music, and music theory rudiments furthermore suggest the calmer, more studied approach characteristic of the Church of England, English Methodists, and earlier American Methodists.

## Conclusions

Provenance, correlation with printed works, and musical content analysis all indicate this hymnal is not a Wesley relic but the personal possession of Ralph Potts and an artifact of eighteenth-century psalmody. Yet, a perplexing question remains: when and how did the story of Wesleyan connections originate? This tale likely emerged in the years between John Wesley Potts's 1835 death and Robert T. Joyce's 1898 letter to Washington Duke, mixing a bit of truth (Potts's emigration from England, status as a Washington Methodist patriarch, and naming of his son after the Methodist founder) with a bit of legend (Wesley's authorship and Potts's Wesleyan connections). The mysterious William Williams, John Wesley Potts' widow Lucy, or other, unrecorded, owners are the most likely candidates for creating or contributing to the story, which may have grown up over time, gathering embellishments as oral traditions tend to do. John Shackelford or Robert T. Joyce are also possibilities, though it seems more likely the Wesley connection was created prior to their involvement. Despite the Wesley story's spuriousness, it was largely responsible for the careful preservation of this document and the colorful glimpse it provides into the history of everyday people and eighteenth-century psalmody.

## Further Reading

For additional information on psalmody, see Nicholas Temperley's *The Music of the English Parish Church* (Cambridge, 1979). Temperley's [The Hymn Tune Index](#) of hymn tunes printed with English-language texts up to 1820 is available free online and as a print publication (New York, 1998). Two scholarly compilations of psalmody contain representative music and valuable introductory material: Nicholas Temperley and Sally Drage's *Eighteenth-Century Psalmody, Musica Britannica* vol. 85 (London, 2007) provides an English focus, while Richard Crawford's *The Core Repertory of Early American Psalmody, Recent Researches in American Music* vol. 11-12 (Madison, 1984) takes an American perspective.

Many hymnals and other primary sources referenced in this article are now digitized and available for viewing and full-text searching via Google books and electronic subscription packages such as [Early English Books Online](#) and [Eighteenth Century Collections Online](#).

On Ralph Potts and the artifact's history, an 1856 article attributed to John S. Long discusses Potts at length, providing a valuable early source: ["Information From an Old Record; Or, Methodism In Washington, N.C.,"](#) *Annals of Southern Methodism* (1856): 239-257. Potts is also mentioned in

Francis Asbury's journals, referenced below, and his American citizenship is recorded in Elizabeth B. and Bruce Wingo's *1784-1884: 100 years: Naturalizations and Declarations of Intention: Norfolk Borough/City; Norfolk County (Now Chesapeake); Princess Anne County (Now Virginia Beach); Portsmouth; Eastern District Court Virginia* (Norfolk, Va., 1987). Ralph Potts's will is transcribed in Betty J. Camin's *Beaufort Orphans* (Raleigh, N.C., 1984-1985) and his real estate transactions, including donation of the church building and property, are recorded in the Beaufort County deed books, which are housed in the Beaufort County, N.C., courthouse or may be examined via microfilmed copies in libraries. Many other books on Washington, N.C., history reference Ralph Potts and the early Methodists, but accuracy of this information is spotty and it is best to go back to the earlier sources.

For more on Francis Asbury and early Methodism in North Carolina, see the excerpts from his journals compiled in *Francis Asbury in North Carolina: The North Carolina Portions of the Journal of Francis Asbury* (Nashville, 1964) or read all three volumes of his journal for a broader view: *The Journal of Francis Asbury, Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York, 1852).

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