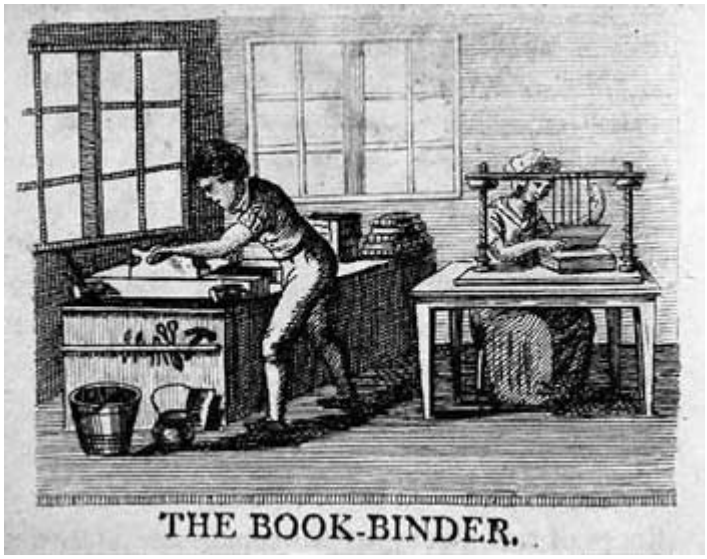
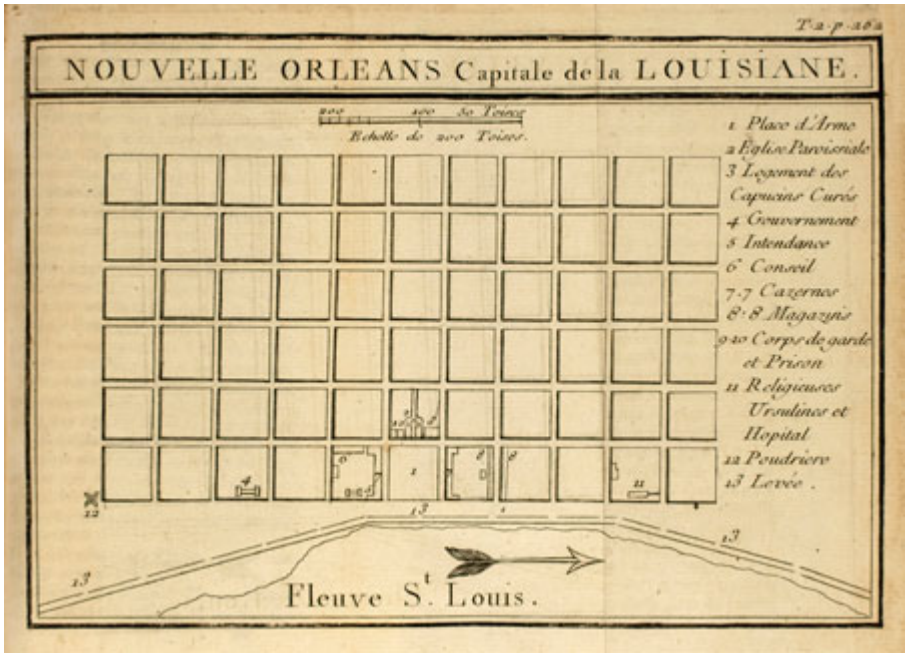
Who Publishes an Early American Book?



Presented as part of the Special Literature Issue

More and more, we point our computers' browsers at what we want to read, instead of lacing up for a walk to the library or the bookstore.

A Newly Discovered Map by Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz



At first glance the map may not seem like the work of one of the best-informed Frenchmen in colonial Louisiana…

The Civil War At 150: Afterword



For God’s sake, let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the death of kings

When we think of the place of Civil War memory in American life, we are apt to think rather narrowly—of reenactors and rebel flags, kitsch and cultural dysfunction. The preceding essays paint a more heartening portrait—of college students poring over the war diary of a free black woman from Philadelphia; of runners marking the Sand Creek massacre; of a National Park Service engaged in reflective self-assessment; of Kentucky rejoining the Land of Lincoln; of a movie industry grappling with the kidnapping of free blacks into bondage; of the dawning awareness that, as a country, we never fully forgot that the war was about slavery, and we never gave up the fight for equality. We are fighting for it still.

None of this is to declare victory. As Barbara Fields said in 1990, the Civil

War will be fought until what was promised is finally delivered. Slavery was defeated only to be replaced by debt peonage and then by whatever it is that we have now. Once it was chain gangs, Jim Crow, and grandfather clauses effectively gutting the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments. Now it is the prison-industrial complex, resegregation, and voter suppression. Such disasters are caused by systemic forces and a massive failure of political will—but not by a failure to remember the war right. Indeed, it is partly because we do remember the war (mostly) right that we can identify these problems *as problems.*

History *can be* empowering but it *should be* deeply humbling. History is our burden as well as our gravity. It is what we live down as well as what we carry forward.

Closing this special issue on the Civil War at 150, I find myself curious about how the war will be remembered fifty years from now, at its bicentennial. I do not mean to speculate on whether we will be touring Gettysburg in flying cars. (Electric cars would be marvelous enough.) Rather, I wonder about the place of the Civil War in a future generation's cultural memory. Here it may be instructive to examine the academy itself, not because the academy drives the culture—it rides the same wave—but because the academy is the tip of that wave, leaning out, breaking first. There are two broad (and largely reconcilable) forces at work in Civil War historiography today. The first is completing the important work of putting slavery and emancipation at the center of the war's causes, conduct, and legacy—and it is trickier work than you might imagine. No serious scholar now denies that slavery caused the war. (Charles Dew iced this case with *Apostles of Disunion* in 2001.) But proving that the South seceded to defend slavery is not the same as proving that the North went to war to destroy it. This case has been made with greater urgency and effectiveness only in the last ten years. Chandra Manning demonstrated how the Union Army became abolitionized from the bottom up; James Oakes has shown that virtually every Northerner, including Lincoln, who pledged "not to interfere with slavery where it already existed" was essentially lying because they, like Southerners, believed that to contain slavery was to kill it; and Caroline Janney has suggested that none of this was ever wholly forgotten in the "romance of reunion." All of these scholars, and a host of others, are heirs to the neoabolitionist tradition, stretching back to W.E.B. Dubois, and holding increasing sway since the Civil Rights Movement.

Toiling beside them has been another group of scholars, the heirs to what has been called the "new revisionist" tradition, who, while emphatically agreeing that the destruction of slavery was a good and a great thing, find little to celebrate in a country that enslaved people for centuries and then had to kill 750,000 in the process of (finally) doing the right thing, which frankly was done rather haphazardly and without sufficient safeguards. This emphasis on the greed, imperialism, and destruction that grew into and out of the war has been called (in informal circles) the historiography's "dark turn." But in truth, the difference between the two schools is simply one of emphasis. The

neoabolitionists see a conflict that can be redeemed by its results: the freedom of four million people. The neorevisionists welcome the results but remain skeptical of the process. Though they tussle occasionally, the two traditions need each other. The neorevisionists keep the historiography from veering into self-righteousness or triumphalism. The neoabolitionists keep the historiography from veering into despondency or nihilism.

It is not a debate that can sustain a fifty-year historiography, however. With the humanities in a (partly contrived) crisis, historians are under tremendous pressure to justify their relevance. Certainly this is why all of us seem to have agreed without talking about it that we should begin to define ourselves as historians of a particular theme as much as a particular place and time. We are historians, then, of happiness, or capitalism, or the environment, or education, before we are historians of the antebellum South or turn-of-the-century Chicago. This gives us some claim to usefulness; in an increasingly global, "so-what" culture, we do not study the past *per se*—we study timelessly important things *in the laboratory of the past.*

We can sometimes diverge on the question of what we think we're accomplishing in our laboratories. Some of us are what I would call "how-things-work" historians. We study, say, the "plantation-industrial complex" because we want to understand capitalism. Others of us are what I would call "social justice" historians. We seek not merely to understand past systems of social injustice but implicitly to overthrow new ones. In both cases, though, the present value is front and center. And this is as it should be. Presentism—turning the dead into political sock puppets spouting a party line—is a historical sin worthy of condemnation. But present value? Our work should better have that. "The Earth belongs to the living," Jefferson said. Or, as Nietzsche noted, "We want to serve history only to the extent that history serves life."

The essays collected here betray an academy eager to serve life. Gone is the handwringing over objectivity. Gone is the hectoring tone. There may still be morals stitched into our work, but they are stitched deep, less obvious, more forgiving and more flexible. As academics, we seek to guide, teach, and inform, but we don't have all the answers, and we know that.

The American people have come a long way too. They are content for their heroes to be less admirable; they feel a little less admirable themselves, and they are increasingly comfortable with the simple fact that history is mostly bad news. As Americans, it took us a long while to realize this. (To be fair, Russians had Ivan the Terrible. We had James Buchanan. We could work around him.) But now we begin our survey courses with the depopulation of a continent and end with the betrayed promise of Reconstruction. Everyone has agency; everyone makes a bad end; and students expect little else.

This is as it should be. History *can be* empowering but it *should be* deeply humbling. History is our burden as well as our gravity. It is what we live down as well as what we carry forward. In a tradition stretching back to Shakespeare

and to Homer, history reminds us that we are none of us perfect and that we are all of us going to die. Mostly, history is a way of owning our smallness before time without being paralyzed, of finding ourselves in a flexible existential space, beyond blame, braced to do better, cognizant of the difficulties ahead. History, then, was and remains a morality tale. It is only the moral that changes. Today we often use history to teach the very real value of diversity, of inclusion, of social justice, of speaking truth to power, of exposing capitalism to criticism, of confronting the inescapable reality that good countries do great wrongs that admit of no palliation. But we do so hoping that, fifty years from now, if we're very lucky, the Civil War will have all the relevance of the War of Jenkins Ear. And then, like historians of old, we will sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the deaths of kings and slaves, of midwives and milkmen and everyone in between—if only to remind ourselves how much we have to be thankful for, and how much to be sorry for.

Further Reading

Friedrich Nietzsche, "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life" (1874) in *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge, 1983); Edward Hallett Carr, *What Is History?* (New York, 1961); Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Princeton, N.J., 1963); Leonard M. Marsak, *The Nature of Historical Inquiry* (New York, 1970); David Cannadine, ed., *What Is History Now?* (New York, 2002).

This article originally appeared in issue 14.2 (Winter, 2014).

Stephen Berry is Gregory Professor of the Civil War Era at the University of Georgia. He is the author or editor of four books on the nineteenth-century United States, including *Weirding the War: Stories from the Civil War's Ragged Edges* (2011).

When Money Was Different



Presented as part of the Special Issue: Money

Jacob Perkins had invented a technology so elegant, and so perfect, that security printers would rely on it for the better part of two centuries.

The Narratives of the Later Lives of Frederick Douglass: Old-Age Autobiography Before Senescence



Recasting autobiographical revisions through aging studies enables us to see ambivalences that the dominant aging plot of decline has foreclosed.

[Dixie Land Songster]

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Dixie Land Songster.

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Dixie's Land.
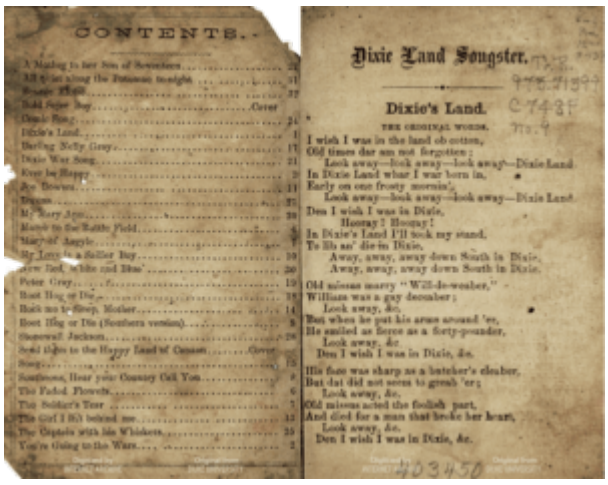
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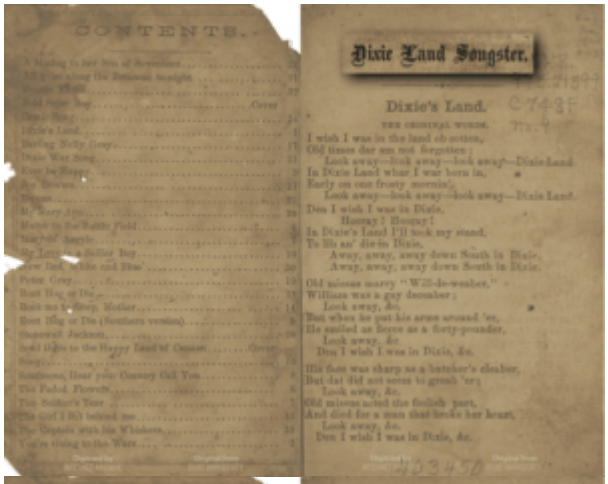
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In Dixie's Land I'll took my stand,
To lib an' die in Dixie.
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Dixie Land Songster.

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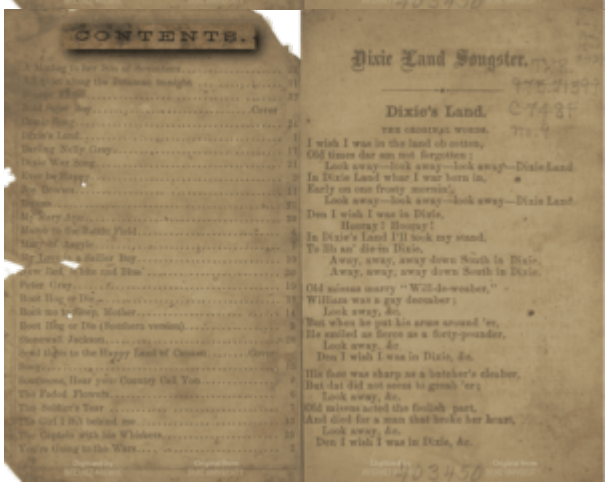
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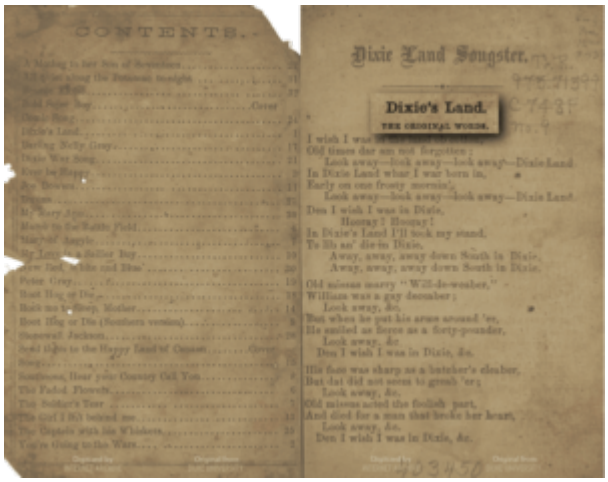
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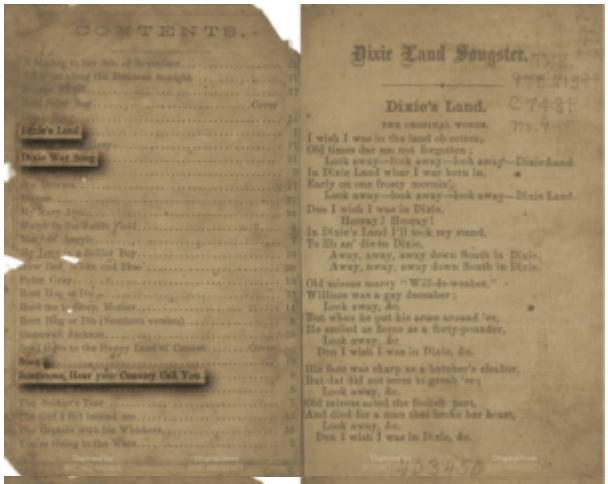
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Dixie Land Songster.

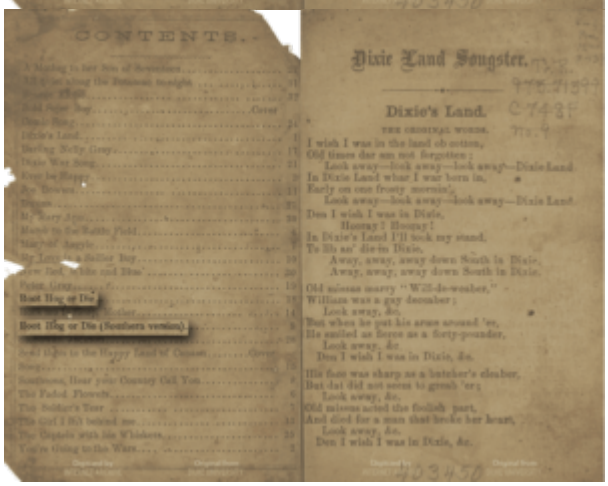
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Dixie's Land 1

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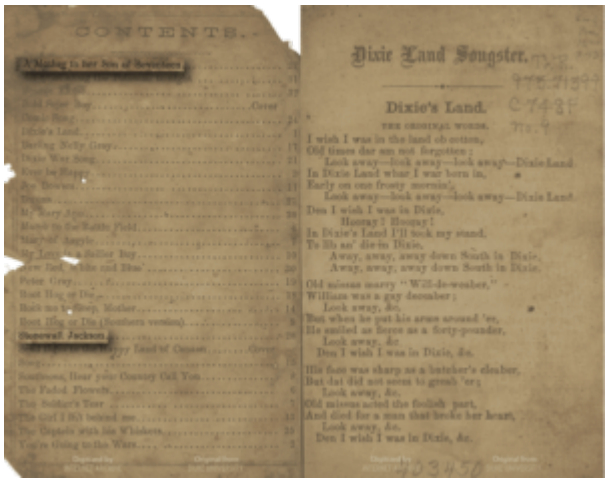
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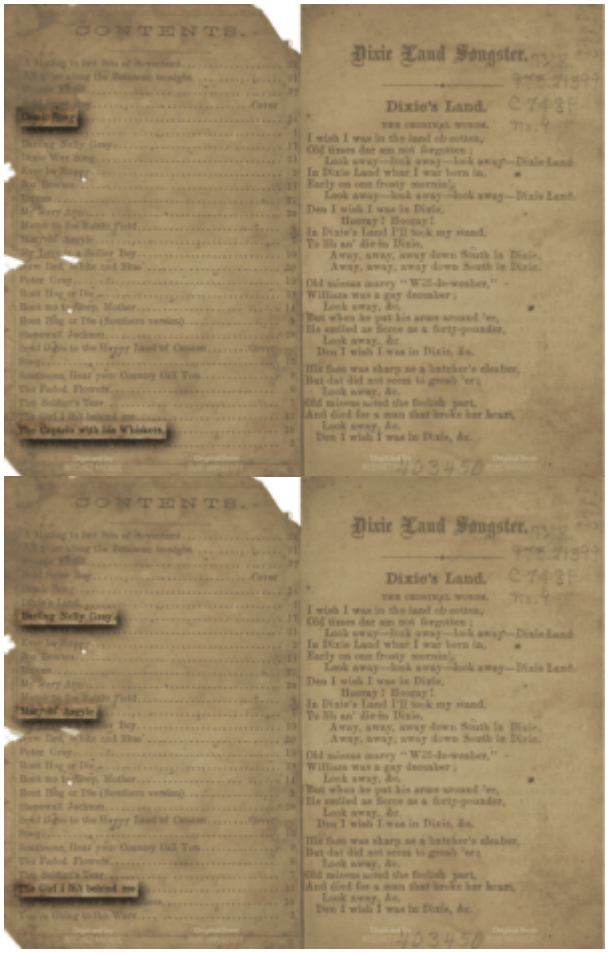
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As the preceding slides suggests, Confederate songsters did not shy away from "foreign" material. For instance, "Mary of Argyle" is a much-loved, centuries-old Scottish folk song. Similarly, "The Girl I Left Behind Me" can be traced to eighteenth-century Dublin. Yet both songs emphasize indeterminate longing and a deep desire for a far-away lover. As a result, these are perfect love songs for the Confederate national moment—no matter where they came from.

"Darling Nelly Gray" is also a song of longing, but its inclusion in a Confederate songster is surprising given that it was written by Benjamin Russell Hanby, an ardent abolitionist. The song tells the woeful tale of an unnamed Kentucky slave whose lover, Nelly Gray, has been sold further south. Even in *The Dixie Land Songster* version, the lyrics are in the first person, meaning that a Confederate reader might find him- or herself singing, "Oh! my poor Nelly Gray, they have taken you away / And I'll never see my darling any more. / I'm sitting by the river and I'm weeping all the day / For you're gone from the old Kentucky shore." Would Confederates have missed the irony of such a performance? (After all, southerners would have been the "they" who took Darling Nelly Gray away.) Perhaps. Or perhaps not. It is possible that Confederates simply ignored the political message of the song and enjoyed its lilting melody and somewhat vague, Christian lyrics.

Blackface minstrel airs, British folk tunes, and patently abolitionist songs:

such is the stuff of Confederate songsters, which provide a heterogeneous record of literary and musical nationalism in the making. As Confederates struggled to imagine a new political community, popular song had a particular purchase on the hearts, minds, lips, and ears of new southern nationals.

But these songsters also embody a paradox. Though partisans of a white-supremacist, pro-slavery, and anti-democratic republic, Confederates seem to have been more or less comfortable with an admixture of diverse genres, traditions, and sources—especially if that admixture could be used for Confederate nationalist ends.

Such irony wasn't lost on one pro-Union reader. The Boston Athenaeum's copy of the *Third Edition of the Bonnie Blue Flag Song Book*—another Blackmar and Brother publication—includes a particularly agitated piece of marginalia. Next to the lyrics for "Annie Laurie," another Scottish folk song, someone has written "stolen—how mean to try to palm this off as Southern Literature!" It may have been mean but it was also wholly commensurate with the rather messy musical, popular, and print cultures of the American Civil War.

Further Reading

Much of the best work on songsters has emerged from bibliography and folklore. Irving Lowens' *Bibliography of Songsters Printed in America Before 1821* (Worcester, Mass., 1976) is an excellent starting point, despite its tight historical frame. Foundational pieces of folklore include Alfred M. Williams's "Folk-Songs of the Civil War," *The Journal of American Folklore* 5:19 (1892): 265-283, and Cecil L. Patterson's "A Different Drum: The Image of the Negro in the Nineteenth-Century Songster," *CLA Journal* 8 (1964): 44-50.

Christian McWhirter's recent *Battle Hymns: The Power and Popularity of Music in the Civil War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012) is the best single-volume study of the "Singing Sixties." Kirsten M. Schultz's essay "The Production and Consumption of Confederate Songsters" in Mark A. Snell and Bruce C. Kelley, eds., *Bugle Resounding: Music and Musicians of the Civil War Era* (Columbia, Mo., 2004): 133-168 usefully distills her excellent and exhaustive doctoral dissertation. I have also written at length about Confederate literary nationalism in general and "Dixie" in particular: *Apples and Ashes: Literature, Nationalism, and the Confederate States of America* (Athens, Ga., 2012).
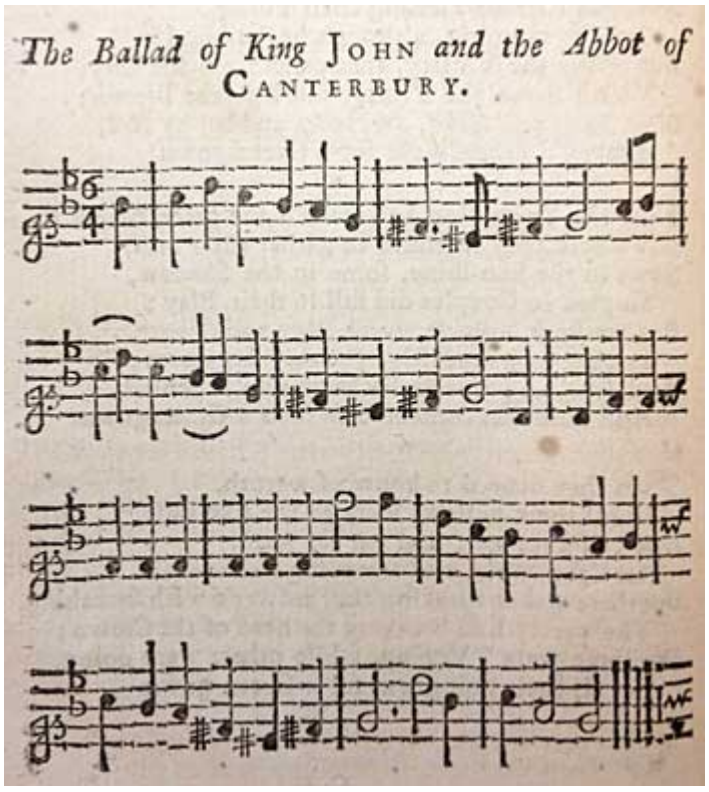
On the relationship between popular poetry and song, see Ray B. Browne's early study "American Poets in the Nineteenth-Century 'Popular' Songbooks," *American Literature* 30:4 (1959): 503-522 and Michael C. Cohen's engaging essay "Contraband Singing: Poems and Songs in Circulation during the Civil War," *American Literature* 82:2 (2010): 271-304. And Faith Barrett's *To Fight Aloud Is Very Brave: American Poetry and the Civil War* (Amherst, Mass., 2012) shouldn't be missed.

Finally, there are important collections of songsters at the American Antiquarian Society, the Boston Athenaeum, the Huntington Library, and the University of Texas at Austin, among many other archives.

This article originally appeared in issue 14.3 (Spring, 2014).

Coleman Hutchison is an associate professor of English at the University of Texas at Austin. He is the author of *Apples and Ashes: Literature, Nationalism, and the Confederate States of America* (2012), and the co-author of *Writing About American Literature: A Guide for Students* (2014). Hutchison is currently at work on a cultural biography of "Dixie."

Musical Sleuthing in Early America


The Ballad of King JOHN and the Abbot of CANTERBURY.

While the lyrics conveyed forceful messages to the eighteenth-century public, the music also spoke to listeners.

Amos Fortune, Free Man: New Uses for a Children's Classic



When historical novels are presented as works of historical interpretation, they can also serve as tools that help students learn to "read like historians."

Catastrophe and Colony: Looking South



There is a rich tradition of writing in Spanish on colonial catastrophe, illness, and violence.

The City in Frames: Otis Bullard's Moving Panorama of New York



Like countless other men of his generation, Bullard began his working life as an artisan and ended it as a businessman.