The Banjo In Appalachia: Part 1 of 2
Joel Sweeney May Have Been The First White Musician To Play Banjo In Rural Virginia

By George R. Gibson - 2000

Author's Note: That the banjo was foreign to the Appalachian Mountains until after the Civil War is now a popular belief. It is maintained that the banjo was brought back by soldiers returning from the Civil War, or brought in after the Civil War by professional white minstrel entertainers, who performed in blackface while touring with circuses, medicine shows, on steamboats, or in vaudeville. This fiction has become common currency despite the fact that Kentucky historians and folklorists were apparently not consulted regarding this issue. Jean Thomas and Dr. Josiah H. Combs, Kentucky folklorists, interviewed and collected folk songs from people for whom the Civil War was a vivid memory. None of the people interviewed made reference to the banjo being a newly-imported instrument. Indeed, I can find no such references in Kentucky, during or after the Civil War. I believe the following article will provide a new perspective on the history of the banjo in Appalachia.
George R. Gibson, the author, holding a Fairbanks electric banjo, made ca. 1904. Photo by Carroll Smith of Luke Wales, Florida.

American musical theater began with stage performances of musicians in blackface in the 1840s. The five-string banjo, fiddle, bones, and tambourine were the primary instruments of these musicians, now known as minstrels.

The history of the minstrels has been documented in several books, the best of which is Hans Nathan's Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy. Some musicians and dancers began performing in blackface while traveling with circuses in the 1820s and 1830s. They performed comedy routines and dances that poked fun at enslaved African Americans. African American stereotypes, developed during the minstrel era, persisted well into the 20th century.

During the winter of 1842-43 the four musicians who formed the Virginia Minstrels met by chance in a boardinghouse in New York City and decided to play as a group. Dan Emmett played the fiddle; Billy Whitlock, the banjo; Dick Pelham, the tambourine; and Frank Brower, the bones.

The first confirmed appearance of this group was February 6, 1843, at the Bowery Amphitheater. This performance is commonly accepted as the beginning of minstrel theatre. The
Virginia Minstrels became an overnight sensation, and in May 1843, traveled to England, where minstrelsy also became immensely popular.

Other minstrel troupes were quickly formed, including the Kentucky Minstrels, the Congo Melodists, the Christy Minstrels, the Ethiopian Serenaders, and many more.

Minstrel theatre remained the most popular form of entertainment in America through most of the 19th century. Stephen Foster, composer of My Old Kentucky Home, wrote most of his songs for minstrel troupes. Dan Emmett, who played the fiddle, banjo, and other instruments, became famous for his composition of "Dixie," which became the most popular song of the Confederate South. Minstrelsy, much changed from its early origins, remained popular in schools and local theatres through the 1940s.

Joel Walker Sweeney, a white musician born about 1810 in eastern Virginia, is thought to have given banjo lessons in 1838 to Billy Whitlock, who later became the banjo player for the Virginia Minstrels. Sweeney is said to have learned to play banjo from enslaved African Americans on his father's plantation. He traveled and entertained in
blackface during the 1830s, and later formed his own minstrel troupe. Sweeney is the first white musician to have been documented playing the banjo.

A gourd banjo featured a gourd body with a long handle attached to it, strung with catgut.

References to any banjo players are very rare prior to 1830. The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles, California, contains a banjo attributed to Sweeney. Joel Sweeney's younger brother, Samuel, was an orderly for J. E. B. Stuart during the Civil War. He entertained Stuart and his fellow soldiers by playing banjo. Dick Sweeney, a third brother, also played banjo.

Most contemporary historians interested in the banjo are enamored with the banjo music of the minstrels, which was documented in tutorials published in the 1850s and 1860s. They have, for the most part, ignored the history of Appalachia, while developing theories attributing the origin of mountain banjo to minstrels. I attribute this in part to the "hillbilly" stereotype that grips the popular imagination.

This stereotype portrays the mountaineer as either an uneducated simpleton or an uncouth savage, and certainly does not allow for creativity or racial diversity. I believe the power of this stereotype, which has been perpetuated in the popular media for over a hundred years, explains the absurd lengths to which some have gone to establish minstrels as the deus ex machina for mountain banjo music.
I heard a gentleman whom I know to be educated, literate, and intelligent, struggle to explain the wonderful banjo and fiddle music of the Hammons family of West Virginia. He finally said, "They were, you know, like idiot savants." Such is the power of the Appalachian stereotype.

That Appalachians had little contact with the outside world is another pervasive stereotype.

I once resided in Philadelphia and knew an elderly neighbor who had, in over 80 years, never been more than several blocks from home. It would have been laughable had I attempted to write an article using this person as an example of the sedentary habits of Philadelphians.

This type of example, however, has commonly been used to perpetuate the myth that Appalachians had limited contact with the outside world. Unfortunately, I find this type of ignorance in music-related publications. Many examples come to mind, however, one will suffice.

I recently bought a recording of a group that was popular during the 1960s. One song has the following line: "Went to Johnson City. Going to see this wide world o'er."

The writer of the liner notes had the following to say about this:

"... a song whose protagonist's depth of feeling is matched only by the Tennessee limits of his horizon."

The protagonist went to Johnson City, an early railhead, to begin his journey by train. The writer, and not the protagonist, had limited horizons. The writer made his observation from an
assumption of superiority that afflicts many people, when writing about Appalachia.

The Banjo: From Africa To Knott County, Kentucky

Eastern Virginia is known to have had slaves who played banjo. President Thomas Jefferson added as a footnote to his Notes on Virginia: "The instrument proper to them [the slaves] is the banjar, which they brought hither from Africa."

Manufactured banjo, ca. 1860

Reverend Jonathan Boucher, a loyalist who lived in America prior to the Revolutionary War, began a dictionary after immigrating to England. He described the banjo as "a musical instrument... in use, chiefly, if not entirely, among people of the lower classes..."

He further states that the banjo in Maryland and Virginia was "... the favorite and almost only instrument in use among the slaves... The body was a large hollow gourd with a long handle attached to it, strung with catgut, and played on with the
fingers..."

It is interesting to note that Rev. Boucher states the banjo was used among the "lower classes." Newspapers were still referring to the banjo as an instrument of the lower classes during the rise in popularity of blackface minstrels.

The lower classes in the 1700s included slaves, indentured servants, apprentices, and others economically deprived. The class system in the 1700s was based more on economics than race. White indentured servants, for instance, were treated no better than slaves.

Joseph Dodridgedevotes a chapter in his Notes on the Settlement and Indian Wars to cruelty to slaves and servants. He was an eyewitness to several horrendous punishments, and says, "Female servants, both black and white, were subjected to the whip in common with the males."

Paul Heinegg says in Free African Americans of North Carolina and Virginia: "Most of the free African Americans of Virginia and North Carolina originated in Virginia, where they became free in the 17th and 18th centuries, before chattel slavery and racism fully developed in the United States... When they arrived in Virginia, Africans joined a society which was divided between master and white servant: a society with such contempt for white servants that masters were not punished for beating them to death... They joined the same households with white servants; working, eating, sleeping, getting drunk, and running away together."
It would be logical to assume that the music of slaves and indentured white servants began to be shared during this era.

Mr. Heinegg documents 400 free African American families. Many were the result of a union between a white female indentured servant and a slave. Descendants of these families were early settlers on the Virginia and North Carolina frontiers.

Mr. Heinegg says, "Many free African American families in colonial North Carolina and Virginia were landowners... The light-skinned descendants of these families formed the tri-racial, isolate communities of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, and Louisiana." Tri-racial groups had European, Indian, and African American ancestry.

Some free African Americans intermarried with their white neighbors on the frontier, and because of discriminative and punitive laws passed during the rise of virulent racism, began to conceal their African American heritage from their children and their neighbors. By the Civil War era, many of these families had forgotten their African American heritage.

Some early settlers in the Knott County area of Eastern Kentucky were members of a tri-racial, isolated community. The majority of early settlers were of English ancestry, with a minority having German, Scotch-Irish, Irish, African American, French, and Indian ancestry.

Dr. Daniel Drake's letters to his children, published in Pioneer Life in Kentucky, describes in detail his boyhood near Maysville, Kentucky, in the years 1788 to 1800. Mr. Rector, a neighbor whom Dr. Drake refers to as "Old Leather Stocking,"
depended mostly on hunting and trapping for his livelihood.

Dr. Drake recounts, "Deer hunting seemed to have been Old Leather Stocking's cherished pursuit. Its results were clothing, food, and fiddle strings for the banjo."

Mr. Rector had migrated to Kentucky from near Winchester, Virginia. Dr. Drake wrote, "What he [Mr. Rector] said about the valley of Virginia indicated that it had, at the middle of last century [1750], rather a rude, vulgar, and turbulent population."

Dr. Drake's father came to Kentucky from New Jersey with several of his neighbors. Dr. Drake considered the settlers from New Jersey to be a better class of people than slave-owning neighbors from Maryland and Virginia.

Dr. Drake said of slaves in his 1851 Letters on Slavery: "...they sometimes assemble for public worship; but, in general, they deliver themselves up to visits, gossip, games, laughter, singing, banjoing, fiddling, and dancing..."

Dr. Drake was the best-known physician, teacher, and writer in the Midwest during the second quarter of the 19th century.

Some of the first settlers in the Knott County area had slaves. My Adams and Hammonds ancestors were slave owners in eastern Virginia and moved to Wilkes County, North Carolina, after converting to the (then) new Baptist faith. Moving to North Carolina or western Virginia from eastern Virginia was a migration route for many families. I believe the banjo song, East Virginia, is a musical record of that migration.
Descendants of these families were pioneers in Kentucky, Tennessee, and other frontier states. It was not uncommon for slaves to accompany the early mountain pioneers. Slaves were fewer in the mountains, but were not as separated from their owners as was possible on the large plantations in eastern Virginia.

Detail of minstrel banjo, ca. 1860

One early traveler on the frontier noted that it was common for slaves to occupy the same dwelling as their masters. John M. Stamper said of an old cemetery on Carr Creek in Knott County, "Some of the oldest graves are slave and master, buried side by side."

When I was a boy both blacks and whites attended the African American Baptist Church at Red Fox. Attendance at the same church by blacks and whites has a long history in the mountains. The Minute Books of the Stony Creek Baptist Church in Scott County, Virginia, are reproduced on the Scott County, Virginia, Genealogy web site. The minute books, 1801 to 1814, list black members who were slaves, and some, I suspect, who were free.

The following question was posed in the church minutes for February 26, 1809: "A query to the church concerning a black brother or sister should be taken for a witness against a white sister or brother. The church answers, yes." Numerous members of this church had the surname Gibson, and some were my
ancestors. My great-great-grandfather, James Gibson, came from Scott County, Virginia, to Knott County, Kentucky. He was a preacher at the Old Carr Creek Regular Baptist Church.

Katherine Pettit was a founder of the Hindman Settlement School in Knott County. She and others, including Cecil Sharp, collected folk songs in the area. She is thought to have collected songs from a student, Josiah H. Combs, who enrolled in the school in 1902. Combs was from a musical family, and immediately began collecting songs from his family and others in the area. He collected two versions of "Whoa Mule" from Cullie Williams in 1902.

Williams was an African American who resided in Knott County on Breeding's Creek, which was named for Elisha Breeding. According to Breeding family history, Elisha had several slaves when he moved from western Virginia in 1816. He freed his slaves sometime prior to or during the Civil War, and gave them land on Breeding's Creek. Most African Americans in Knott County have since lived at Red Fox on Breeding's Creek.

Josiah Combs continued his education at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, and at the University of Paris, where his doctoral thesis, Folk-Songs du Midi des Etats-Unis, was published in 1925. D. K. Wilgus used Combs' English draft and the French text to edit, in 1967, an English version, Folk-Songs of the Southern United States.

Mr. Wilgus's edited version includes a 1959 interview with Dr. Combs, in which Combs describes Cullie Williams as follows: "When I was a boy, 'Cull' stayed at our house and worked for us at Hindman, Knott County, about the turn of the century. He was
a great 'banjer' picker... He was intelligent, industrious, and withal a likeable fellow."

The two versions of "Whoa Mule" that Combs collected from Williams are in Wilgus's edited version, along with many other folk songs, including a version of Ellen Smith that Combs collected from my grandfather's first cousin, Dan Gibson. My grandfather, George W. Gibson, and his cousin, Dan, were playing banjo in Knott County by the 1890s. My father, Mal Gibson, learned to play around 1905-10 and used more than 15 different banjo tunings. However, he never used the lowered bass tuning commonly used by minstrel banjoists, nor did any other old-timer I heard in Knott County.