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Stephen Foster: “The Father of American Music”

America Built Monuments to His Music While Overlooking the Racism Behind Some of His Most Famous Songs.



William Spivey Follow 7 min read · 2 days ago

283 8 1



File:Stephen Foster Monument — Pittsburgh — IMG 0791.jpg — Wikimedia Commons

In my youth as a Boy Scout, I sang Stephen Foster songs around the campfire as part of a structured activity. Foster died in 1864, nearly half a century before the Boy Scouts of America was founded in 1910. However, his music did become part of Scouting’s educational tradition. A Boy Scouts of America Music and Bugling merit badge pamphlet discusses Foster and identifies familiar compositions such as “Oh! Susanna,” “Camptown Races,” and “My Old Kentucky Home.”

Foster is one of two songwriters who composed two state songs: The Old Folks at Home (Swanee River) for Florida and My Old Kentucky Home for Kentucky. I’d written previously about The Old Folks at Home, where “darkeys” longed to return to slavery. I didn’t realize until Sanche Llewellyn pointed me to the lyrics of Oh, Susanna, how prolific and racist Foster was.

The Story Behind “The Old Folks at Home” | by William Spivey | Black History Month 365 | Medium

Like many songs that originated in the minstrel era, the lyrics of Oh, Susanna have been cleaned up considerably since the original. Here’s the acceptable version.

Oh! Susanna

(Modernized Text)

> *I come from Alabama with a banjo on my knee,*
> *I’m going to Louisiana, my true love for to see*
> *It rained all night the day I left, the weather it was dry*
> *The sun so hot I froze to death; Susanna, don’t you cry.*
> *Oh, Susanna, don’t you cry for me*
> *cos’ I come from Alabama*
> *With my banjo on my knee.*

> *had a dream the other night when everything was still,*
> *I thought I saw Susanna coming up the hill,*
> *A buck wheat cake was in her mouth, a tear was in her eye,*
> *I said I’m coming from the south, Susanna don’t you cry.*
> *I soon will be in New Orleans and then I’ll look around*
> *And when I find my Susanna, I’ll fall upon the ground*
> *But if I do not find her, this man will surely die*
> *And when I’m dead and buried, Susanna don’t you cry.*

I wonder if the Boy Scouts ever sang the original version? Foster went a little further than singing about darkies (still included). This song went as far as to find humor in the thought of the death of five hundred niggers. The word “telegrap meant steamboat, and “bullgine” meant engine.

Oh! Susanna

Original lyrics

> *I came from Alabama, Wid a banjo on my knee,*
> *I’m gwyne to Louisiana, My true love for to see.*
> *It rain’d all night the day I left, The weather it was dry,*
> *The sun so hot I froze to death; Susanna, don’t you cry.*
> *Chorus:*
> *Oh! Susanna, Oh don’t you cry for me,*
> *cos’ I’ve come from Alabama, Wid my banjo on my knee*
> *I jumped aboard the telegraph, And trabbled down the riber,*
> *De lectric fluid magnified, And killed five hundred nigger.*
> *De bullgine bust, de horse run off, I really thought I’d die;*
> *I shut my eyes to hold my breath, Susanna don’t you cry.*
> *CHO: Oh Susanna &c.*
> *I had a dream the odder night, When ebery thing was still*
> *I thought I saw Susanna A Coming down de hill;*

> *The buck-wheat cake was in her mouth, The tear was in her eye;*
> *Says I, “I’m coing from de south, Susanna, don’t you cry.”*
> *CHO: Oh Susanna &c.*
> *I soon will be in New Orleans, And den I’ll look all round,*
> *And When I find Susanna, I will fall upon de ground.*
> *And If I do not find her, Dis Darkie’l surely die,*
> *And when I’m dead and buried, Susanna, don’t you cry.*
> *CHO: Oh Susanna &c.*

The original title of “My Old Kentucky Home” was “Poor Uncle Tom Goodnight.” Here’s a portion of the original lyrics, with “darkies” changed to “people.”

> *The sun shines bright in the old Kentucky home,*
>
> *’Tis summer, the darkies are gay;*
>
> *The corn-top’s ripe and the meadow’s in the bloom,*
>
> *While the birds make music all the day.*

Foster died the year before slavery ended; many of his songs came from the point of view of enslaved Black people. “Old Black Joe” mourned the loss of his friends who loved their joyous days in the cotton fields, whose hearts were “happy and free,” although their bodies weren’t.

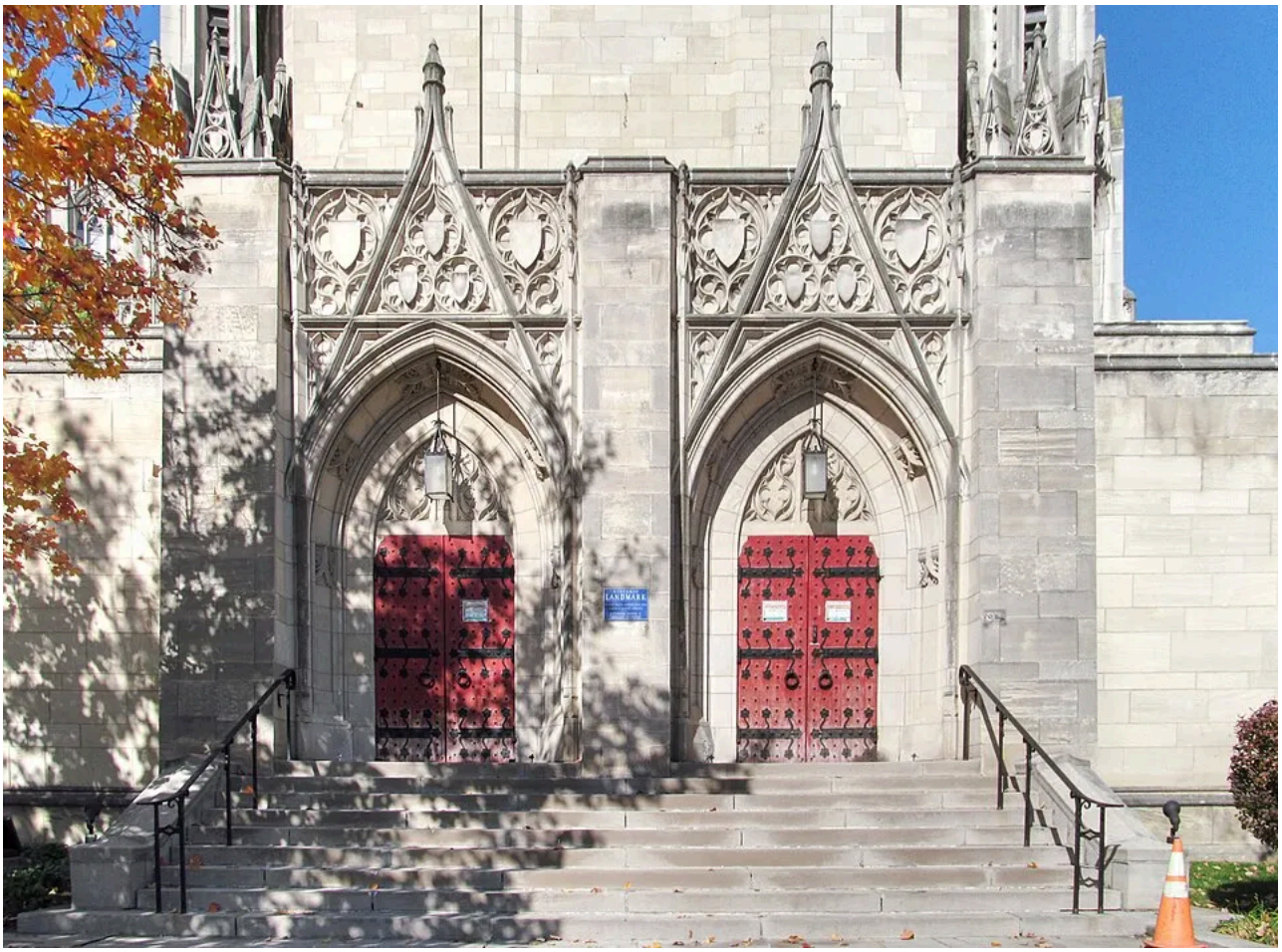
Old Black Joe

> 1.
> Gone are the days when my heart was young and gay,
> Gone are my friends from the cotton fields away,
> Gone from the earth to a better land I know,

> I hear their gentle voices calling “Old Black Joe”.
> *Chorus*
> I’m coming, I’m coming, for my head is bending low;
> I hear those gentle voices calling, “Old Black Joe”.
>
> 2.
> Why do I weep when my heart should feel no pain?
> Why do I sigh that my friends come not again,
> Grieving for forms now departed long ago?
> I hear their gentle voices calling “Old Black Joe”.
> *Chorus*
>
> 3.
> Where are the hearts once so happy and so free?
> The children so dear that I held upon my knee,
> Gone to the shore where my soul has longed to go.
> I hear their gentle voices calling “Old Black Joe”.
> *Chorus*

Paul Robeson, Bing Crosby, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Al Jolson later recorded Old Black Joe. Robeson later changed the song's title to “Poor Old Joe.” Robeson sometimes performed songs containing language and imagery that he later reconsidered. His treatment of “Ol’ Man River” provides a particularly revealing comparison. Initially, he sang the lyrics written for Show Boat, which included a racial slur. Over time, he rewrote the lyrics to give the character greater dignity and to emphasize resistance rather than resignation.

In his hometown of Pittsburgh, a building and museum are dedicated to Foster.



File:Stephen Foster Memorial, Oakland, Pittsburgh, 2021–11–09, 02.jpg — Wikimedia Commons

In Florida, near the Suwannee River, a park is named after him.



File:Stephen Foster FCCSP sign01.jpg — Wikimedia Commons

Stephen Foster has been honored for generations as a founding figure of American popular music, celebrated for melodies that became part of the nation’s cultural identity, even as many of his lyrics reflected the racial stereotypes of 19th-century minstrel shows. Born in Pennsylvania in 1826, Foster wrote more than 200 songs, including “Oh! Susanna,” “Camptown Races,” “My Old Kentucky Home,” “Old Folks at Home,” and “Beautiful Dreamer.” His work helped establish songwriting as a profession in America, and his melodies endured long after his 1864 death.

His honors have been substantial: in 1940, he became the first composer inducted into the Hall of Fame for Great Americans, and that same year, the U.S. commemorated him on a postage stamp. The University of Pittsburgh dedicated the Stephen Foster Memorial in 1937, housing collections and exhibits devoted to his life and music. He was inducted into the Songwriters

Hall of Fame in 1970. In 2010, the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame inducted him. A 2005 Grammy Award for Beautiful Dreamer: The Songs of Stephen Foster, a tribute album featuring his compositions, further demonstrated the continuing appeal of his music.

Foster’s legacy has also become a test of how Americans choose to remember their cultural heroes. Several of his best-known songs emerged from the minstrel tradition, which frequently portrayed Black people through caricature, dialect, and sentimental images of enslaved people who appeared content with their circumstances. These songs helped popularize his work, but their depictions of Black life obscured the brutality of slavery and reinforced paternalistic ideas about race.

The conflict became particularly visible in Pittsburgh, where a bronze monument erected in 1900 depicted Foster seated above a Black man identified as “Uncle Ned,” who played a banjo and appeared to inspire the composer. In 2018, following a unanimous recommendation by Pittsburgh’s Art Commission, the statue was removed from public display. The decision did not erase Foster’s musical achievements; it reflected a reassessment of how public monuments communicate racial hierarchies and whose experiences they honor.

Foster’s story shows how American cultural recognition can preserve artistic achievement while overlooking the prejudices embedded in the work it celebrates. His melodies helped shape a national musical tradition, and songs such as “Hard Times Come Again No More” express hardship and longing in ways that continue to resonate.

Perhaps Foster saw the end of slavery coming. He wrote about longing for its return even before it was gone. Foster spent his last couple of decades in Pennsylvania and New York, states that outlawed slavery in 1847 (Pennsylvania) and 1827 (New York). Maybe Foster longed for enslaved

people as he had in his home growing up. “Old Black Joe” was reportedly inspired by a Black servant who worked in the home of Stephen Foster’s future wife’s family.

Stephen Foster’s legacy reminds us that American history rarely fits neatly into categories of heroes and villains. His melodies helped shape the nation’s musical identity, and songs such as “Beautiful Dreamer” and “Hard Times Come Again No More” continue to move listeners generations after his death. Yet some of his most famous compositions drew upon a minstrel tradition that portrayed Black Americans through racial caricatures, sentimental stereotypes, and a romanticized vision of a society built on slavery. Foster’s musical gifts do not erase those realities, just as the racism embedded in some of his lyrics does not erase his influence on American songwriting. The removal of his Pittsburgh monument in 2018 reflected a growing recognition that honoring an artist involves more than celebrating his accomplishments; it also requires examining what his work represented and whose experiences it marginalized. We need not erase Stephen Foster from American history, but we also should not preserve an uncritical version of his place in it. We can appreciate the beauty of his music while confronting the prejudices of the culture that produced it. Perhaps the most honest way to remember Stephen Foster is to recognize both the songs that helped define America and the America that those songs sometimes misrepresented. Writing this story makes me wonder what songs Scouts sing today around campfires.

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Written by William Spivey

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10 Reply

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2 days ago

Human beings are, and always have been, contradictory creatures. Thanks for this article.

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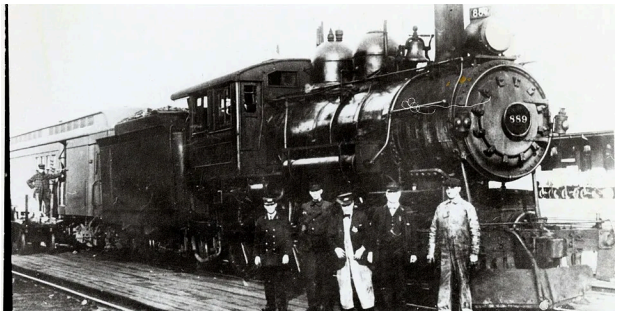


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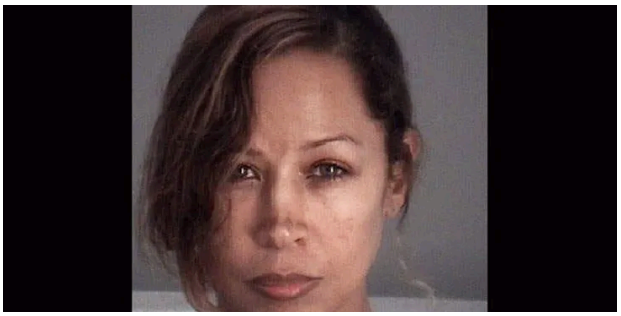


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