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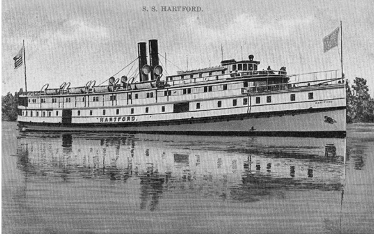
Old Folks' Singing and Utopia

How Abolitionist Musical Antiquarianism and Calvinist Eschatology Gave Birth to Science Fiction on the Banks of the Connecticut River

The "old folks' concerts" (OFCs) of the mid-nineteenth century comprised what is, no doubt, the only American musical craze ever started by senior citizens. By the winter of 1856, these public performances—centered on old, white Yankees singing old Yankee sacred music in old Yankee costume—had become so popular that a front-page headline in the *Boston Herald* declared the phenomenon an "epidemic." Through a subtle connection to mainstream Calvinist Congregationalist beliefs and practices relating to the Christian millennium and apocalypse, the backward-looking old folks' concerts had a direct impact on the emergence of a particularly New English brand of forward-looking, speculative fiction, in the work of one former Congregationalist minister-in-training from Chicopee, Massachusetts—Edward Bellamy.

Let us begin the story of this curious connection with a scrap of paper from a Connecticut River town twenty miles downstream from Hartford: Notice of a "Colored Old Folks' Concert" in the *Middletown Constitution* of May 7, 1862, a Wednesday. Lead stories that day included the propagation of currants, a dinner at Windsor Castle, and the flocking of enslaved people from Maryland to the recently emancipated District of Columbia. "If our citizens want to hear some old fashioned music by people who know how to sing, and want to see some ancient costume, they can do it on Thursday night," said the notice.

The following day, some thirty black members of Hartford's Methodist Episcopal Zion and Talcott Street Congregational churches, old and young, traveled to Middletown, quite possibly aboard the comfortable steamship *Hartford* en route to Old Saybrook (although these singers would have been relegated to the weather deck, due to their insufficiently European ancestry).



SS Hartford

McDonough Opera House

That night the singers took the stage before a large, ethnically diverse audience at the popular, thousand-plus-capacity McDonough Opera House on the southeast corner of Court and Main Streets, now the site of the Italian restaurant *Amici Grill.*

In keeping with old folks' choirs before them, their music came from the heyday of New England's earliest native-born composers, roughly 1770 to 1810, a group that included William Billings, the first to publish a book entirely composed of his own compositions. Unlike the more restrained music heard in most area churches at midcentury, the old folks' music, often sung "with the speed of darting cavalry" (Gilman 36), had a sense of abandon, a groove, and a tumbling melodic drive that Harriet Beecher Stowe likened to an "ocean aroused by stormy winds, when deep calleth unto deep in tempestuous confusion" (Stowe 56) Long maligned by reformers and shunned from church services, the music's reemergence in public life was part of what made the OFCs so exciting to antebellum people.

Also in keeping with common practice, the Colored Old Folks dressed in colonial costume, almost certainly homemade and reportedly "brilliant and in keeping with the parts represented" (*Republican* 4). While the OFCs originated in a simple performance of ancient sacred music by senior citizens in 1853, by 1862 most were costumed affairs, following the lead of semiprofessional touring troupes like that of Robert "Father" Kemp, by far the most famous of the bunch. The "parts represented" included a jumble of familiar Yankee types and historical figures: a spectacled grandmother with her knitting, a yokel farmer, Continental soldiers and, ubiquitously, the king and queen of honorary Yankees, George and Martha Washington. That reviewers noted nothing unusual about the group's dress suggests that these were also the parts the Colored Old Folks represented.

Led by Mr. J. F. Hazard and "Professor" Perry Davis, these singers of African, European, and Algonquian ancestry included in their repertoire Massachusetts composer Jezamiah Sumner's 1798 patriotic "Ode on Sci-

ence," a sprawling and notoriously difficult representative of the early New England repertoire, awash with high notes, tricky florid bits, and a melodic range rivaling that of "The Star-Spangled Banner." It is a composition not sung casually, and one not previously associated, at least in modern histories, with New Englanders of African descent.

Far more popular than the OFC was the minstrel show: typically white men in makeup performing broad, generally unflattering if sentimental impressions of black culture. Given antebellum audiences' familiarity with the practice, it might seem logical to read these black Hartford residents dressed like George and Martha Washington singing "Ode on Science" as a sort of reverse minstrel show. It was not. An anti–minstrel show perhaps, but even with its humorous bits and stage business, the Colored OFC was no burlesque. What, then, *was* this concert all about? We'll return to that, after a brief interlude (in which I introduce a friend).

Father Kemp

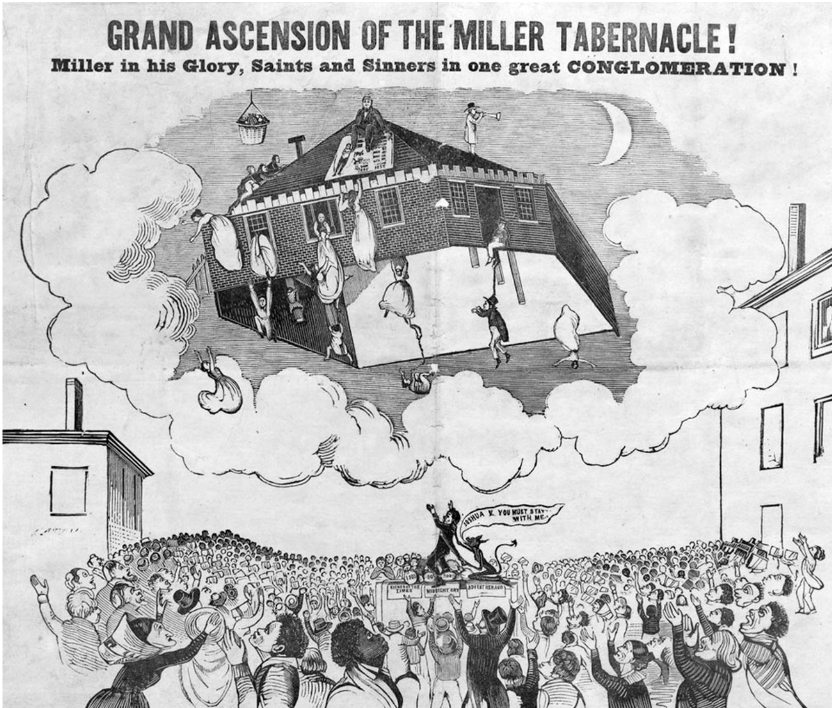
PERRY DAVIS.

About a ten-minute walk northwest up the hill from the opera house is Wesleyan University's Mansfield Freeman Center for East Asian Studies, where I first performed a version of this piece and where, from a west window, you can see the grave of the university's first instructor of music, Jacob Huber. Born in Switzerland and raised in Pennsylvania, Huber had come to Middletown when Wesleyan opened its doors in 1831. In an institutional environment not known for its friendliness to antislavery activism or to black people generally, Huber was active in the abolition movement, worshipped with members of the town's sizeable black community, and, in 1838, cofounded the

Connecticut Antislavery Society with Jehiel and Amos Beman of Cross Street Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, a hub of black community and political activism. I can't confirm it, but I believe that Jacob Huber was in the audience at the McDonough Opera House that night in 1862. And I can't confirm *this* either, but true or not, it will move us forward. There's a story that some two decades earlier, one night in October 1844, the professor had been found wandering out there in the graveyard, robed, having given away his earthly possessions, in expectation of the apocalypse, Christ's second coming, predicted for that day by Baptist lay preacher William Miller, and, along with it, the raising of the dead, including Huber's first wife, Mary Ann Smith.

In addition to the great social concerns of mid-nineteenth-century New England (antislavery, temperance, the so-called woman question), there was a fevered concern about the end times, the apocalypse, and the millennium. Would the world as we know it end suddenly and dramatically, as Professor Huber and other so called pre-millennialist Millerites suspected? Or was the biblically prophesied millennium a period, possibly inaugurated upriver by the Great Awakening of the 1740s, in which humanity, with New England at the fore, could so reform and perfect the world as to make it hospitable to Christ's eventual return and rule, as many postmillennialists believed? On the opposite page, an apocalyptic image of chaos in the streets and the Millerites being taken away to heaven, we can see clearly the ridicule and vitriol directed by many at Miller and his followers. But we can also see, perhaps less clearly, the fear they inspired: fear of chaos, miscegenation, even fear that they might be right. Ridiculed as it was, this was no small fringe movement, but a major current in New England culture. Thanks in part to American culture's recurrent premillennialism, sudden and violent apocalypse like that predicted by William Miller would become a staple of twentieth-century science fiction, but the OFCs were decidedly more connected to the other view

Jacob Huber



Grand Ascension of the Miller Tabernacle

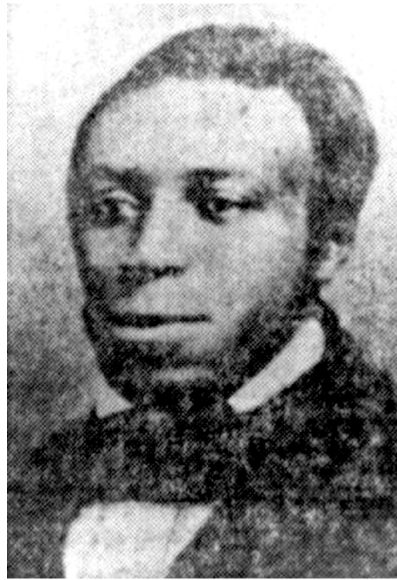
of the millennium. They took place under the great postmillennial umbrella of reform, when a drive to make everything ever better was connected not only to commercial concerns and ideas of ingenuity but to a sacred urgency, with which even antiquarianism itself was taken up as a progressive project.

With their humorous Yankee interludes and antiquarian costumes we might imagine the Colored Old Folks trying to accommodate themselves to white people and white taste. We might imagine they were just playing. But while there was an element of play, and it was clearly meant to be entertaining, the concert was no joke. You don't just sing "Ode On Science" for no reason, or without either considerable practice, long familiarity, or both.

The heart of the Colored Old Folks' repertoire was sacred music that at least the older among them had grown up singing, in churches they had attended with their white neighbors before the formation of separate black congregations. No one in the audience at McDonough Opera House could have missed the significance of the defiant text: "the British yoke the Gallic chain was urged upon our necks in vain, all haughty

tyrants we disdain." With civil war raging without, they could not have missed the embodiment of shared history and contemporary solidarity voiced in its final words: "and shout long live America!" No one who knew his story could have mistaken for a joke the costumed presence of one likely participant, Holdridge Primus, whose grandfather had emancipated himself by taking the place of a white man, as had Amos Beman's grandfather, on the front lines of a war that had failed to deliver its oft-sung freedom and equality. The old folks' use of "Colored" rather than "African" was deliberate, following the lead of people like *Colored American* editor Samuel Cornish, who, as early as 1837, had written: "In complexion, in blood and nativity, we are decidedly more exclusively American than our white brethren; hence the propriety of the name of our people, Colored Americans, and of identifying the name with all our institutions, in spite of our enemies, who would rob us of our nationality and reproach us as exoticks" (Cornish 2).

I am convinced that, in opposition to the African colonization movement's design to repatriate black people in parts of west Africa, these old folks were saying something along the lines of, "We're not going anywhere. We're *from* here—maybe more genuinely from here than some of you. We want to fight, and we want to vote." In their reportedly fine singing and



James Pennington (left), Holdridge Primus (right)

dignified bearing the group not only performed "Ode on Science," they proved it. And they also proved the words of one of their early pastors, James Pennington, who sought to demonstrate "the fallacy of that stupid theory, that *nature has done nothing* but fit us for slaves, and that art cannot unfit us for slavery" (Pennington xviii). The singers didn't advertise anything beyond entertainment; no political or social goal, no glaring historical fact. They didn't need to: it was all right there in them, in their bodies, their voices, their presence, even their dress, and there could be no larger billboard for their cause. The men, at least, attained the right to serve in the military in 1864, and the right to vote in 1870. Embodying the Founders in costume and song one hundred and fifty years before the hit musical *Hamilton*, the Colored Old Folks of Hartford had come to Middletown to take the United States of America into the future.

In the performance at the opera house, the connection between the OFCs and Calvinist eschatology is clear, but, to tie everything together and make the move to science fiction, we need to travel fifty miles upriver and twenty-six years into the future, from Middletown, Connecticut, 1862, to Chicopee, Massachusetts, 1888.

In January of that year, lifelong resident Edward Bellamy published what would become arguably the most widely read and influential nineteenth-century American novel after *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and a pillar of the speculative fiction to come: *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*.

The novel's protagonist, Julian West, falls into a hypnotic sleep in 1887 and wakes up 113 years later in a socialist (or, to use Bellamy's term, nationalist) utopia. Most of the book consists of West's guided tour of utopian Boston, with its racial and gender equality, where musicians are paid to provide live music twenty-four hours a day, brought to every home through special wires, and where everyone is issued a "credit card," a term coined by Bellamy. Along the way West amuses and horrifies his unbelieving hosts with tales of depravity from his own benighted century of origin.

Looking Backward inspired a slew of Bellamy Clubs, formed to discuss the author's ideas and help make his vision reality. The novel wasn't Bellamy's first attempt to imagine the future, however. That honor goes to his second short story, published in 1876, and written under the influence of the OFCs, especially one I believe he attended a year earlier, celebrating the centennial anniversary of the town of Ludlow, a stone's throw up the Chicopee River from Bellamy's home. The story, "The Old Folks' Party," concerns a group of teenagers from the "village of C." who have weekly

themed club meetings: a singing party, checkers, a pantomime. One week it is suggested that they have an old folks' party, and meet as if fifty years had passed since they last gathered. They spend the week getting into the character of their future selves through observation of their grandparents, imagination, costume, and speculation about time to come. "Before the end of the week, the occupation of their minds with the subject of old age produced a singular effect. They began to regard every event and feeling from a double standpoint, as present and as past, as it appeared to them and as it would appear to an old person" (Bellamy 72). At the party, one old/young man muses, "I really don't believe that more than half the people would be certain that slavery ever existed here, and I'm sure that it rarely occurs to those who do know it. No doubt that company of old slaves at the centennial—that is, if they can find enough survivors—will be a valuable historical reminder to many" (80). A double standpoint. Inspired by the OFCs, this kind of temporal play seems to be something new.

In the progressive antiquarianism of the OFCs, New Englanders sought to embody their ancestors in song and costume, to see their own midcentury world as the old continentals' distant future, full of trains, telegraphy, and the possibility of a fuller realization of freedom and equality. As the nineteenth century wore on, under the influence of millennial

perfectionism and postbellum Yankee triumphalism, New Englanders increasingly imagined themselves and their century as their own descendants' distant past. In the OFCs the present was the past's future. In the fiction of Edward Bellamy, the present was the future's past.

And *that* is the beginning of science fiction.

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PHOTO CREDITS

All quotes are from the author's personal collection unless otherwise noted.

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