

## Spirituals and Gospel Songs: Messages of Unity, Hope, and Deliverance

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**ABSTRACT:** *Spirituals and gospel songs have a capacity to instill courage and bring people together. Spirituals helped enslaved Americans of the antebellum American South persevere through unimaginable hardships and look optimistically to a future of freedom. Similarly, gospel songs have inspired strength and Christian harmony for centuries. This essay briefly explores the roles spirituals and gospel songs played at the end of the American Civil War and in the post-war endeavors of The Fisk Jubilee Singers and Moody-Sankey revivalists. The essay also includes analysis of Albert Brumley's popular twentieth-century gospel song "I'll Fly Away," its relationship to spirituals, and its positive reception by African American performers. There are two intended purposes: to indicate how spirituals and gospel songs provide creative insights into specific historical moments and to show how their verses transcend those moments to express broader messages of unity, hope, and deliverance.*

**KEYWORDS**—Civil War, Fisk Jubilee Singers, gospel songs, I'll Fly Away, Moody-Sankey revival, spirituals.

### I. INTRODUCTION

By all accounts, the Sunday morning of April 2, 1865, was seasonably cool, clear, and pleasant in Richmond, Virginia. Richmond was the capital of the Confederate States during the American Civil War (1861-1865). For most of 1864 and the early months of 1865, the Commanding General of the United States Army, General Ulysses S. Grant (1822-1885) had tried unsuccessfully to capture Richmond. Finally, on April 1, General Grant ordered an all-out assault on Confederate General Robert E. Lee's (1807-1870) beleaguered defending forces. In the early morning hours of April 2, Union troops broke through the Confederate defenses twenty-five miles outside Richmond. Realizing he could no longer defend the city, General Lee sent a telegram to the Confederate President, Jefferson Davis (1808-1889) in the capital, alerting him that he should evacuate Richmond immediately. President Davis was attending worship services St. Paul's Episcopal Church that Sunday morning. Around 10:40 a.m., the congregation finished singing "Jesu, Lover of My Soul," from the Anglican songbook entitled *Hymns, Ancient and Modern* (1861) [1]. The eminent English Methodist songwriter, Charles Wesley (1707-1788) composed "Jesu, Lover of My Soul" and it was Jefferson Davis' favorite hymn. Just as the worshippers finished singing, the sexton hurried up the aisle and handed General Lee's telegram to President Davis. According to witnesses, Davis' face suddenly turned ashen. He quickly arose, left the service, and ordered the evacuation [2].

According to witnesses, the entry of the Union army into Richmond on Monday, April 3, 1865, was something of a musical event. People filled the streets, singing and dancing. A Richmond resident named Mary Fontaine described the arrival of the northern army. Fontaine first heard the approach of the thunderous hooves of Union cavalry horses. She then saw columns of Union infantry march into town. The infantry marching band played an English folk ditty entitled "The Girl I Left Behind Me." Fontaine next saw the African American soldiers of the "United States Colored Troops" (USCT), whom Fontaine referred to as "the *Negro* troops," walk

into town. USCT troops were known for singing Christian *spirituals* (or folk hymns) as they marched. In 1867, Colonel Thomas W. Higginson of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment wrote an article in the journal *Atlantic Monthly* describing USCT soldiers singing spirituals in camps and during treks through the countryside [3; 4]. On this special occasion, as they entered the southern capital, the USCT soldiers loudly sang “I Wish I Was in Dixie’s Land.”

The term *Dixie* was synonymous during the Civil War with the American South. The renowned entrepreneur, Daniel Decatur Emmett (1815-1904) wrote “I Wish I Was in Dixie’s Land.” Emmett was an originator of the *minstrel show*, a theatrical form in which white actors in blackened faces performed songs, dances, and comedy routines that were based upon stereotyped African Americans. Minstrel shows were particularly popular in northern states. Emmett’s Virginia Minstrel ensemble began appearing in New York City’s Chatham Theater in 1843. U.S. President Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) first heard “Dixie’s Land” in Chicago, Illinois, in 1859, performed by the Rumsey and Newcomb Minstrels. Lincoln loved the song so much he had it played along his presidential campaign trail the following year. Ironically, a band also played “Dixie Land” at Confederate President Jefferson Davis’ inauguration in February 1861 [5]. The lyrics of “Dixie Land” purport to offer the perspective of a former enslaved person living in a northern state nostalgically reflecting on his former life in the South.

[chorus]

Den I wish I was in Dixie, Hoo-ray! Hoo-ray!  
In Dixie land, I’ll take my stand to live and die in Dixie;  
Away, away, away down south in Dixie,  
Away, away, away down south in Dixie.

Mary Fontaine later wrote that when the USCT troops entered Richmond singing “Dixie,” “it caused our *Richmond servants* [enslaved people] to become completely crazed, they danced and shouted, men hugged each other and women kissed, and such a scene of confusion you have never seen” [6]. Later that day, Chaplain H. S. DeForest accompanied the Union Army’s 11th Connecticut Regiment into Richmond. Reverend DeForest recounted he saw very few whites, but he saw black citizens pour into the streets: “The [former] slaves seemed to think that the day of Jubilee had fully come. How they danced, shouted, shook our hands and thanked God, too, for our coming. . . . It is a day never to be forgotten by us, till days shall be no more” [7]. The USCT’s African American soldiers commandeered the Richmond city jail and released the enslaved people that were being held there. The inmates emerged triumphantly, singing an old spiritual entitled “Slav’ry Chain (Done Broke at Las’).” In 1927, African America composer and music professor at Virginia’s Hampton Institute, Robert Nathaniel Dett (1882-1943) documented the lyrics of “Slav’ry Chain (Done Broke at Las’).”

[verse]

Way up inadat valley,  
Prayin' on my knees;  
Tellin' God about my troubles,  
An' to he'p me efa He please.

[verse]

I did tell him how I suffer  
In de dungeon an' de chain;  
An' de days I went wif head bowed down,  
An' my broken flesh an' pain,  
(But bretheren-)

[verse]

Now no more weary trav'lin'  
'Cause my Jesus set-a me free  
An' dere's no more auction block for me  
Since He give me liberty.

[chorus]

Slav'ry chain done broke at las', broke at las',  
Slav'ry chain done broke at las',  
Goin' to praise God 'til I die [44: 112].

The various prisoners incarcerated at the Richmond jail probably learned “Slav’ry Chain” in various contexts. Enslaved people sang spirituals at home, in worship gatherings, and as (*call-and-response*) work songs or *field hollers*. Spirituals travelled from generation to generation orally, as vocal expressions of faith, unity, and commiseration. Perhaps some of the inmates in the Richmond jail learned “Slav’ry Chain” from their fellow inmates. In the book of Acts, the Bible describes a similar situation. Authorities in the city of Philippi (modern Filippi, Greece) arrested the Apostle Paul and his associate Silas for preaching the gospel in the city. The scriptures say the authorities flogged Paul and Silas, placed them in “an inner cell” of the city jail, and fastened their feet in stocks. The same night they were arrested, “about midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose” (Acts 16:25-26 NIV). Paul and Silas walked out of the jail as free men, just as the Richmond inmates would many centuries later. Like Paul and Silas, in their spiritual the Richmond inmates gave the credit to God.

On April 4, 1865, the day after the fall of Richmond, President Abraham Lincoln arrived in the former Confederate capital. He had been monitoring the military developments from a safe location, in nearby City Point, Virginia. President Lincoln brought along his son Tad (1853-1871), who was celebrating his twelfth birthday. Richmond’s formerly enslaved residents surrounded President Lincoln and his son as they walked through the devastated city (fig. 1). The president removed his stovepipe hat when a man stepped into his pathway to offer a prayer. According to historian Burke Davis, after the prayer Lincoln told the crowd “You are free — free as air. You can cast off the name of slave and trample upon it. It will come to you no more” [7] (fig. 2).



**Figure 1.**

Lambert Hollis. *Lincoln in Richmond*, drawing, 1865.  
National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.



**Figure 2.**

Alexander Gardner. *Free Blacks in Richmond*,  
photograph, June 9, 1865.

On April 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, effectively ending the four-year Civil War [7]. The following day, President Lincoln announced Lee’s surrender at the White House in Washington D.C., and the U.S. Marine Band was there to serenade the celebrants. Lincoln turned to the bandleader and said, “I have always thought 'Dixie' one of the best tunes I have ever heard. Our adversaries over the way attempted to

appropriate it, but I insisted yesterday that we fairly captured it. ... I now request the band to favor me with its performance" [8]. Less than a week later, a Confederate sympathizer from the state of Maryland named John Wilkes Booth (1838-1865) shot Abraham Lincoln as the President sat in a box seat at Washington's Ford's Theater watching the musical comedy "Our American Cousin." Ford's Theater is just a few blocks from the White House. President Lincoln died the following morning, at the age of fifty-six. For eleven days, a funeral train carried his body back to his home in Springfield, Illinois, for burial. In a solemn, yet elaborate ceremony at Oak Ridge Cemetery, Lincoln's remains were finally interred on May 4, 1865 (fig. 3). The funeral featured many Christian hymns and songs, such as Samuel Ecking and Lowell Mason's "Peace, Troubled Soul," Georg Friederich Handel's "To Thee O Lord," and, at the very close of the ceremony, Thomas Ken's "Doxology." Decades later, in December 1889, the former Confederate President Jefferson Davis died of acute bronchitis and malaria in New Orleans, Louisiana [43: 50-51] (fig. 4). Davis' funeral also included a performance of "Doxology," as well as his favorite hymn, "Jesu, Lover of My Soul."

Jesu, Lover of my soul, Let me to Thy Bosom fly,  
While the gathering waters roll,  
While the tempest still is high:  
Hide me, O my Saviour, hide,  
Till the storm of life be past;  
Safe into the haven guide,  
O receive my soul at last.

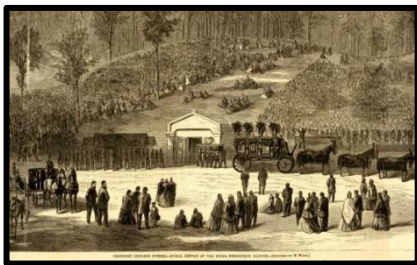


Figure 3.  
*Abraham Lincoln's Burial at Oak Ridge Cemetery,  
Springfield, Illinois, lithograph, ca. 1865.*

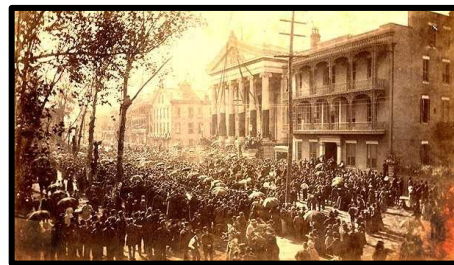


Figure 4.  
*Jefferson Davis' Funerary Ceremony, City Hall,  
New Orleans, Louisiana, photograph, 1889.*

The Confederate defeat in the Civil War and the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which was ratified on December 6, 1865, finally ended slavery in the United States. Nevertheless, racial segregation and inequality were firmly ingrained in American society. For example, President Lincoln's funeral train traveled 1,700 miles from Washington, D.C. to Springfield, Illinois. Along its lengthy, circuitous journey, the train paused in state capitals and larger cities for memorial services and processions, allowing local residents the opportunity to pay their final respects. Howard University professor and Lincoln scholar, Edna Greene Medford, however, points out that "in almost every procession, African Americans were there and were allowed to participate [but] they were put at the back of the line" [9]. African Americans were also present at Lincoln's funeral, but organizers again relegated them to the background, both literally and figuratively. President Lincoln was familiar with African American spirituals. Thousands of formerly enslaved people gathered on the White House lawn on July 4, 1864, and sang spirituals to commemorate Independence Day and the Emancipation Proclamation [10]. No spirituals were heard at Abraham Lincoln's funeral, though.

In 1872, The Fisk Jubilee Singers became the first black choir to perform inside the White House, at the invitation of President Ulysses S. Grant. In 1882, they returned to the White House. Although their program included mostly spirituals, they also presented the blind poet Fanny Crosby's (1820-1915) gospel song entitled "Safe in the Arms of Jesus." Their performance was so touching that President Chester Arthur (1829-1886) was moved to tears [42].

## II. The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the Moody-Sankey Revivals

European Americans introduced enslaved people to various forms of Christian music in the American colonies beginning in the seventeenth century. Over time, African Americans developed their own forms of musical worship, “freely mixing African rhythms, singing, and beliefs with evangelical Christianity” [11]. According to religious scholar Laurie Maffly-Kipp, “spirituals [and] their double meanings of religious salvation and freedom from slavery,” first developed and flourished in slave quarters. This was the same environment in which “black preachers ... polished their ‘chanted sermons’” and their “rhythmic, intoned style” of extemporaneous evangelization [11].

Enslaved Christian men, women, and children often had no choice but to worship clandestinely, in secretive *praise houses* or secluded outdoor *brush arbor* or *bush meetings*. At such meetings, worshippers would stand together and shuffle in a circle, and drag their feet along as they rhythmically clapped, chanted, and sang Bible passages and stories [12]. Some participants might enter an ecstatic, spiritual trance [12]. Enslaved worshippers were drawn to Biblical stories that seemed analogous to their own lives, for instance Moses leading the Hebrew people from Egyptian slavery (Exodus 3-18). Spirituals expressed “the community's new faith, as well as its sorrows and hopes” [12].

The musical term *spiritual* derived from teachings of the Apostle Paul, who encouraged the first Christians to fill themselves with the Holy Spirit; “speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:19 KJV). Interestingly, America’s nineteenth-century enslaved Christians sang in a call-and-response form, as did the original, first-century Christians and earlier followers of Judaism. Historians have long recognized “primitive Christians brought with them from the synagogue” the custom of praising God “in public worship through songs or hymns” [13]. In ancient synagogues, music leaders called *cantors* ritually chanted scriptures from the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, in a single melodic line [14: 68]. Congregants intoned collective responses to the cantor’s prompts. The religious songs of first-century Christians and Jews were in all likelihood quite similar. Both sang psalms (from the book of Psalms) and *canticles* (songs taken from the Bible but not from the book of Psalms) in call-and-response form. Similarly, in the slaves’ clandestine services, song leaders improvised and called out a scriptural phrase or concept and congregants responded in unison. A spiritual called “Go Down, Moses” illustrates this form.

[call] When Israel was in Egypt's land  
[response] Let my people go  
[call] Oppress'd so hard they could not stand  
[response] Let my people go  
  
[call] Go down, Moses  
[response] Way down in Egypt's land  
[call] Tell old Pharaoh  
[response] Let my people go

This version of “Go Down, Moses” first appeared in the 1872 songbook *Fisk Jubilee Songs as Sung by The Fisk Jubilee Singers* (fig. 5). The Fisk Jubilee Singers formed in 1871 at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. The university was established in 1865 to educate “young men and women irrespective of color,” particularly formerly enslaved people, using funds provided by the American Missionary Association. By 1871, the university faced substantial debts, so music professor and treasurer, George L. White (1838-1895) established a nine-member choral ensemble to go on a national tour and raise money for their school (fig. 6). The group took the name “Jubilee” from the Old Testament book of Leviticus, in which God instructs the people

of Israel to periodically observe a “Year of Jubilee” by forgiving debts and releasing slaves (Leviticus 25). The Fisk Jubilee Singers mainly performed spirituals, which previously had rarely been heard outside African American churches and homes.

During the Civil War era, many southern slave states enacted *anti-literacy laws* that prohibited enslaved people from reading or writing. In some instances, exceptions were made for studying the Bible. The purposes of such laws was to prevent the forging of documents required to escape to “free states” and to thwart potential insurrection. Because of widespread illiteracy, enslaved people handed down spirituals orally from generation to generation. Music publishers first began selling written collections of spirituals after the Civil War [15].



Figure 5.

“Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” from *Fisk Jubilee Songs as Sung by The Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk*, 1872.



Figure 6.

An advertisement for a Fisk Jubilee Singers concert in Syracuse, New York.

Over time, spirituals, and songs based upon spirituals, made their way into the hymnals of America’s so-called “mainline Protestant” denominations (a categorization that now includes a few historically African American denominations) [16]. One example, “A Shelter in the Time of Storm,” is actually a *mélange* of an English folksong and a spiritual. Vernon J. Charlesworth (1838-1915) was born in Essex, England. Charlesworth became co-pastor at London’s old Surrey Chapel and the headmaster of Charles Spurgeon’s (1834-1892) Stockwell Orphanage. Charles Spurgeon was an influential and eloquent Baptist evangelist who was called the “Prince of Preachers.” Around 1880, Vernon Charlesworth published a lyrical poem entitled “A Shelter in the Time of Storm” in a minor London journal named *The Postman*. Charlesworth did not write the words to the poem, though. Northern English fishermen, who constantly faced stormy seas and rugged coastlines, were often heard singing the ditty “A Shelter in the Time of Storm” as they approached harbors in tempestuous weather [17]. It was a familiar folksong. When the American singer and composer Ira David Sankey (1840-1908) visited England with a Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899) during the 1880s, he read Charlesworth’s poem in *The Postman*. Sankey provided a tune for the verses and added a chorus based upon an African American spiritual called “Jesus is a Rock in a Weary Land.” Sankey then published the new gospel song in two hymnals, *Sacred Songs and Solos* (1885) and *Gospel Hymns No. 5* (1887).

[verse]

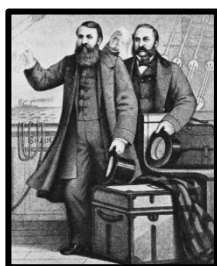
The Lord's our Rock, in Him we hide,  
A Shelter in the time of storm;  
Secure whatever ill betide,  
A Shelter in the time of storm.

[chorus]

Oh, Jesus is a Rock in a weary land,  
A weary land, a weary land;  
Oh, Jesus is a Rock in a weary land,  
A shelter in the time of storm.

Historians claim the term *gospel song* originated with Reverend Arthur Augustus Rees (1815-1884), an Anglican minister from Sunderland, England. Reverend Rees attended a Moody-Sankey revival meeting in London in the summer of 1872. Rees was quite impressed by the content and theological specificity of the songs performed by Ira Sankey. He told his parishioners that Sankey was “singing the gospel” (at the same time, The Fisk Jubilee Singers advertised that they were “singing for Jesus” [18]). In Britain, Christian congregations often sang only conservative hymns from liturgical *Psalms*. The vernacular phrasings and popular styles of American gospel songs and spirituals were an exciting novelty. The term gospel song gained widespread currency with Philip Paul Bliss’ (1838-1876) hymnal *Gospel Songs* (of 1874), and Sankey’s later hymnal *Gospel Hymns and Sacred Songs*.

Between 1872 and 1875, Moody and Sankey toured England, Scotland, and Ireland, and appeared before an estimated 2.5 million people (fig. 7). They then returned to the United States and held revivals from New England to southern California. Their revival meetings in the southern states were required to be racially segregated, against Moody and Sankey’s wishes. In his memoirs, Ira Sankey described a revival held in Meridian, Mississippi: “We have one side for blacks [and Moody] has them sing alone, sometimes just to show the white people how to sing” [46: 308].



**Figure 7.**

*Moody and Sankey bid farewell to England from the deck of the “Spain,” lithograph, 1875.*



**Figure 8.**

Edmund Havel, *Portrait of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, 1873.*

The Fisk Jubilee Singers joined the Moody-Sankey revivals in England and Scotland, beginning in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in November 1873 [19]. During the tour, they collected nearly US\$50,000, which was used to construct Fisk University’s first permanent academic building, Jubilee Hall. Prominent New York architect, Stephen D. Hatch (1839-1894) designed the impressive Gothic Revival structure, which was completed in 1876. A few months before joining Moody and Sankey, the Jubilee Singers performed spirituals at private concerts for the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom William E. Gladstone (1809-1898) and for Queen Victoria (1819-1901) at Buckingham Palace. The English nobleman, Anthony Ashley Cooper, the 7th Earl of Shaftesbury (1801-1885), arranged these small private concerts in April 1873. Lord Shaftesbury led the Freedmen’s Mission Aid Society (the English sister organization of the American Missionary Association, which provided the funds to establish Fisk University). After hearing the Jubilee Singers’ performance, Queen Victoria commissioned a life-sized group portrait of the ensemble and presented it to Fisk University. The portrait still hangs in Jubilee Hall (fig. 8).

One of the Fisk Singers, soprano Ella Shepard (1851-1914) was particularly excited by the prospect of meeting Queen Victoria and seeing her regal attire. However, Shephard wrote in her diary, “I received the greatest disappointment in my life. The Queen wore no crown, no robes of state. She was like many English ladies I had seen in her widow’s cap and weeds [black clothes]” [20]. Queen Victoria also wrote in her journal about meeting the Fisk Jubilee Singers, but in disturbing terms. The Queen wrote, that she had seen “real Negroes” and that two were “quite white, others coffee coloured, and several quite black. They sang extremely well together” [21: 214]. Historian Katie Graber has noted that “despite their divergent societal configurations,” the United States and England during the nineteenth century “shared similar racial discourses” [22: 28]. Still, according to most accounts, during their British tour the Jubilee Singers encountered comparatively little overt racial prejudice. The American historian J. B. T. Marsh (1839-1887) followed their tour. Marsh wrote, “In no

way were they ever offensively reminded, through look or word — unless by some rude American who was lugging his caste conceit through a European tour, or by a vagrant Englishman who had lived long enough in America to 'catch' its color prejudices — that they were black” [23: 73].

The Fisk Jubilee Singers had a diverse repertoire. Although known for performing spirituals, they also sang secular anthems and a few works by gospel songwriters associated with the Moody-Sankey revivals, such as Philip P. Bliss. At their first appearance with Moody and Sankey at Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the Jubilee Singers performed “There Are Angels Hov’ring ’Round.” “There Are Angels Hov’ring ’Round” was a camp meeting favorite in the antebellum (prewar) South. It may have first appeared in the “Second Advent movement” songbook entitled *Millennial Harp* of 1843. Philip P. Bliss wrote a new arrangement three decades later, which the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang in a call-and-response form.

There are angels hov'ring 'round,  
There are angels hov'ring 'round,  
There are angels, angelshov'ring 'round!

To carry the tidings home,  
To carry the tidings home,  
To carry, carry the tidings home.

To the New Jerusalem,  
To the New Jerusalem,  
To the New, the new Jerusalem.

Let all that heareth come,  
Let all that heareth come,  
Let all who, all who heareth come.

Many of Dwight L. Moody’s key associates served in the Union army that helped end slavery in the United States. Ira Sankey volunteered for the 12th Pennsylvania Regiment and Philip P. Bliss served in the 149th Pennsylvania Infantry, for example. Dwight L. Moody, though, never served in the military and he explained why: “Surely, if Christians were forbidden to fight to preserve the Person of their Lord and Master, they may not fight to preserve themselves, or any city they should happen to dwell in. Christ has no kingdom here. His servants must not fight. The Christian may not go to ‘the front’ to repel the foe – for there he is required to kill men. ... Better a thousand times to die than for a Christian to kill his fellow. I do not say it is wrong for a nation to go to war to preserve its interests, but it is wrong to the Christian, absolutely, unutterably wrong” [24]. Though Moody’s convictions were pacifist, he was also anti-slavery and an ardent abolitionist, and he sympathized with the mission of The Fisk Jubilee Singers. Each member of the original Jubilee Singers either was a descendent of a formerly enslaved person or had been personally enslaved, including Mary Eliza Walker Crump (1857-1928), Maggie Porter (1853–1942), and Thomas Rutling (1854-1915) (figs. 9-11).



**Figure 9.**  
Mary Eliza Walker Crump.



**Figure 10.**  
Maggie Porter.



**Figure 11.**  
Thomas Rutling.



Dwight L. Moody began his career as an evangelist in 1858 by starting a Sunday School for impoverished youth in an abandoned railroad car in “the Sands” slum of north Chicago. Within a short time hundreds were attending, so Moody moved into a larger converted saloon and dance hall. President-elect Abraham Lincoln stopped by Moody’s Sunday School service in 1860, on the way to his inauguration [25: 73-74]. In early 1864, Moody constructed his own building, the Illinois Street Church, and prominent business and political leaders came to hear him speak, such as future presidents Ulysses S. Grant and James A. Garfield (1831-1881). During the Civil War, the United States Christian Commission of the YMCA (Young Men’s Christian Association) sent Moody to minister to General Grant’s Union troops serving on the front lines in Kentucky and to meet with Confederate prisoners held at Camp Douglas, south of Chicago [26].

Dwight L. Moody first met Ira Sankey, when he saw him inspire an audience with his singing at the YMCA 1870 National Convention in Indianapolis, Indiana. Without hesitation, Moody invited Sankey to join his mission in Chicago as a song leader and soloist. For two years, they sharpened their collaboration, before sailing for England in June 1872 to begin their British tour of crusades and revivals [27]. Moody-Sankey revivals were seamless evangelical teamwork. Sankey selected fervent gospel songs he knew would ideally complement Moody’s impassioned sermons. The pithy verses, repeated choruses, and uplifting themes of Sankey’s gospel songs were easy for congregations to learn and remember. Dwight L. Moody understood the power of music to unite large groups while touching the souls of individuals. He explained, “I feel sure the great majority of people do like singing. It helps to build up an audience – even if you do preach a dry sermon. If you have singing that reaches the heart, it will fill the church every time. There is more said in the Bible about praise than prayer and [songs] are essential in deepening spiritual life” [28: 198-199].

When Moody returned to the United States following his successful years in the British Isles, he was an internationally famous revivalist. He was in great demand and requests for new crusades poured in. Moody and Sankey did all they could, and eventually appeared before more than one hundred million people in Europe and the United States. They also mentored others to emulate their revival pattern, including Major Daniel Webster Whittle (1840-1901). Major Whittle served in the Union army during the Civil War and he was severely injured at the Battle of Vicksburg in 1863. While he was recovering from his injuries in his hometown of Chicago Whittle met Dwight L. Moody. Whittle later described the encounter. “A big meeting of some kind was being held [at Moody’s church building], and with some help, I was able to attend, although I was still weak from loss of blood and with my arm in a sling. I was called upon to speak and as I got slowly to my feet, feeling shy and embarrassed and weak, a strong voice called out — ‘Give him three cheers, boys,’ for every heart was bursting with patriotism in those days. [A]nd the one who called out, ‘Give him three cheers’ was Dwight L. Moody, and that is what his friendship meant to me from that moment onward; stimulating, encouraging, appreciating in a twinkling the whole situation” [29]. Major Whittle decided to follow Moody’s example and, after the war ended, he became a traveling evangelist and revivalist. Phillip P. Bliss was his musical associate [45].

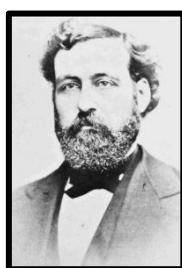


Figure 12.  
Philip Paul Bliss.

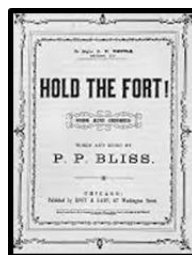


Figure 13.  
“Hold the Fort!”  
original sheet music, 1870.

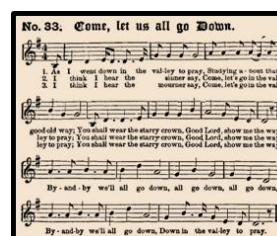


Figure 14.  
From *The Story of the Jubilee Singers: With Their Songs*, 1880.

In 1870, Whittle and Bliss attended a church service in Rockford, Illinois, and the minister asked Whittle if he would say a few words. Major Whittle decided to speak about a battle he had witnessed. In October 1864, the Union army of General William Tecumseh Sherman (1820-1891) was camped on the

outskirts of Atlanta, Georgia. Confederate commander John Bell Hood (1831-1879) sent a division under Samuel G. French behind Sherman's army to destroy the rail line and supply depot equipping the Union troops. Sherman then dispatched brigades under John M. Corse to defend the depot and rail line. After hours of artillery bombardment and a fierce frontal attack, French sent Corse a demand for surrender: "I have placed the forces under my command in such positions that you are surrounded, and to avoid a needless effusion of blood I call on you to surrender your forces at once, and unconditionally. Five minutes will be allowed you to decide. Should you accede to this, you will be treated in the most honorable manner as prisoners of war." General Corse quickly responded, "Your communication demanding surrender of my command I acknowledge receipt of, and respectfully reply that we are prepared for the 'needless effusion of blood' whenever it is agreeable to you."

French was unaware that Corse had received a relief signal: "Hold the fort, I am coming." General Sherman's soldiers had sent the message by signal flags from atop Kennesaw Mountain, a few miles from the battle. According to one account, when Corse's men saw the relief signal, "Cheers went up. Every man was nerved to a full appreciation of the position. And under a murderous fire, which killed or wounded more than half the men ... they held for three hours until the advance guard of Sherman's army came up [and] French was obliged to retreat" [17: 150-151]. Major Whittle compared the military challenge that Corse's men faced with the spiritual challenges that Christians face. Whittle told the worshippers in Rockford that when all seems lost, a savior is there to rescue you. There is a way of escape. Whittle's story inspired Philip P. Bliss to write the words and melody for "Hold the Fort" the following day [47] (fig. 13).

Ho, my comrades! See the signal waving in the sky!  
Reinforcements now appearing, victory is nigh.  
'Hold the fort, for I am coming,' Jesus signals still;  
Wave the answer back to Heaven, 'By Thy grace we will.'  
Fierce and long the battle rages, but our help is near;  
Onward comes our great commander, cheer, my comrades, cheer!

The lyrics of African American spirituals also contained symbolic signals and imbedded or coded messages that communicated ways of escape to enslaved listeners. Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) was born into slavery in Maryland, but he escaped to Massachusetts in 1838 and went on to become an important abolitionist, writer, and diplomat. In his 1855 book entitled *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass revealed that certain spirituals, which seemingly referred only to escaping from earthly struggles to an eternity in Heaven, also signified escaping from slavery to freedom in the North or Canada. Douglass wrote, "A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of [the spiritual] 'O Canaan, sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan,' something more than a hope of reaching Heaven. We meant to reach the North, and the North was our Canaan" [30: 100].

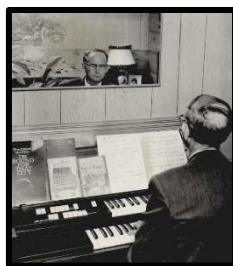
Historians have identified two general types of coded spirituals: 1) *signal songs*, which informed listeners that an important event (such as an escape attempt) was coming; and 2) *map songs*, which contained directional information to assist people on their pathways to freedom. "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" is an example of a signal song (fig. 5). Its lyric "Swing low, sweet chariot, comin' for to carry me home" could be interpreted by hearers as *conductors* (or *chariot drivers*) would be available to help enslaved people escape to freedom. Conductors were free people who guided runaway slaves along the *Underground Railroad*, the name given to various clandestine routes leading out of slave states to the North. The spiritual "Follow the Drinking Gourd" was also a map song, *drinking gourd* referred to the Little Dipper constellation, which contains the "North Star" (Polaris), a celestial fixed point in the northern night sky used for millennia for navigational purposes [31]. The words of The Fisk Jubilee Singers' spiritual "Down in the River to Pray (Come, Let's All Go Down)" also served as a guide, particularly the first verse. "I went down in the valley [or river] to pray, studying about that good old way. You shall wear the starry crown, Good Lord, show me the way" (fig. 14). Escaped former slaves often went down into valleys and walked in river currents to hide their tracks and conceal their

scents from tracking dogs. “Starry crown” symbolizes the North Star, the Little Dipper, or another celestial signpost.

### III. “I’ll Fly Away”

The Fisk Jubilee Singers’ highly regarded performances helped preserve spirituals for future generations following the Civil War. John Wesley Work, Jr. (1871-1925) managed The Jubilee Singers during the first two decades of the twentieth century and he published two important collections of their songs in 1901 and 1907. In 1929, African American operatic performer Marian Anderson (1897-1993) gave a landmark concert for an audience of 75,000 (millions more listened in over their radios) in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. She sang a selection of spirituals arranged by African American composers, including John Wesley Work, Jr. For her final encore, Anderson selected Lawrence Brown’s (1893-1972) adaptation of “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.” Spirituals also crossed over into popular forms of entertainment, for instance Hall Johnson’s (1888-1970) Broadway musical *Run Little Chillun*, of 1933, and the music of the widely revered “Queen of the Gospel Song,” Mahalia Jackson (1912-1972). Jackson sang the spiritual “I Been ’Buked and I Been Scorned” in front of an audience of 200,000 just before Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963.

Although the southern U.S. was racially segregated during the first half of the twentieth century, “ethnic-racial boundaries were often vaulted by [gospel] musicians and composers, who inspired and borrowed from one another” [32: 56]. Vanderbilt University professor, George Pullen Jackson addressed the enduring influence of African American spirituals on the hymnody of the American South in his 1933 book *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands*. In his survey, Jackson was principally interested in hymns penned by Albert Edward Brumley (1905-1977) (fig. 15), particularly Brumley’s “I’ll Fly Away,” which shares the freedom symbolism and musicality of spirituals and transcended a segregated society’s dividing lines.



**Figure 15.**

Albert Brumley in his home studio, ca. 1960.

Albert Brumley was born into a poor cotton farming family in far eastern Oklahoma, along the Arkansas border. Between 1925 and 1930, Brumley worked for, and learned from, Eugene Monroe Bartlett (1884-1941) at the Hartford Musical Institute, in Hartford, Arkansas. Eugene Bartlett was a prolific and talented composer; in 1939, he wrote the classic Christian hymn “Victory in Jesus.” Brumley taught in the Hartford Institute singing schools, traveled to singing conventions in Oklahoma and Missouri, and produced hymns and sheet music for the Institute’s hymnals. In the summer of 1928, when he returned to Oklahoma to help on his father’s cotton farm, Brumley penned “I’ll Fly Away.” His initial inspiration came from country-and western singer Vernon Dalhart’s (1883-1948) smash hit of 1924 entitled “The Prisoner’s Song.” Dalhart learned the song from his cousin Robert Massey, a career criminal who apparently heard it while serving time [33: 300]. Brumley explained to his biographer, Kay Hively, “I was picking cotton in 1928. I was out in the field by myself—or at least there wasn’t anyone close to me—and I got to humming this old song, ‘The Prisoner’s Song.’ Where it says ‘if I had the wings of an angel, over these prison walls I would fly,’ ...well, it suddenly dawned on me that I could use the world for a prison and Heaven for freedom when we pass on. And I started working on that theory. ... You’ll notice in one stanza of ‘I’ll Fly Away’ it says ‘when the shadows of this life have grown I’ll fly away...like a bird from prison bars has flown’...I paraphrased that from the old ‘Prisoner’s Song.’” [34: 25-26, 34].

Though Dalhart's song may have been Brumley's starting point, he was undoubtedly also aware the Bible frequently compares salvation to escaping from imprisonment. In the book of Psalms, David encourages "the redeemed of the Lord [to] tell their story." They were previously imprisoned, but "He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness, and broke away their chains" (Psalm 107: 2, 14 NIV). Elsewhere the scriptures say, "Do not be afraid [if] the devil will put some of you in prison" (Revelation 2:10). "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles" (Isaiah 40:31). The poetic verses of "I'll Fly Away" relate to such Biblical imagery, as do the verses of spirituals such as "Slav'ry Chain (Done Broke at Las')."

"I'll Fly Away" includes characteristics shared by both gospel music and traditional spirituals: 1) multiple verses with a repeated chorus; 2) a progression of calls-and-responses; 3) close four-part harmony; and 4) vernacular phrasing. The repeated chorus serves as a commentary to the successive verses, adding greater depth of meaning. "I'll Fly Away" expresses the individual singer's Christian testimony. True believers anticipate taking a spiritual journey to an eternity in Heaven at the end of their time on earth. Therefore, Brumley made liberal use of the personal pronoun contraction "I'll," thereby suggesting a "subjective, experiential faith," rather than more general, "objective themes of faith" [35: 1171]. Still, Brumley intended his songs to be sung by congregations of worshipers, which is a collective enterprise. Albert Brumley was a long-time member of the Fox Church of Christ, in Powell, Missouri. Nondenominational Churches of Christ have a *cappella*, congregational song services and sing in a call-and-response form, similar to the way enslaved African Americans sang spirituals. In both traditional spirituals and Brumley's "I'll Fly Away," calling and responding serves as a type of musical conversation; singers communicate with one another vocally and confirm their shared beliefs.

[verse]

[call] Some glad morning when this life is o'er,

[response] I'll fly away;

[call] To a home on God's celestial shore,

[response] I'll fly away (I'll fly away).

[verse]

[call] When the shadows of this life have gone,

[response] I'll fly away;

[call] Like a bird from prison bars has flown,

[response] I'll fly away (I'll fly away)

[verse]

[call] Just a few more weary days and then,

[response] I'll fly away;

[call] To a land where joy shall never end,

[response] I'll fly away (I'll fly away)

[chorus]

I'll fly away, Oh Glory

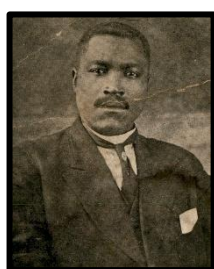
I'll fly away; (in the morning)

When I die, Hallelujah, by and by,

I'll fly away (I'll fly away).

Many Christian (and secular) singers and groups have recorded "I'll Fly Away." The first was Reverend James M. ("J. M.") Gates (1884-1945), who recorded the song on February 7, 1940, in Atlanta, Georgia, for Bluebird Records (fig. 16). Reverend Gates was an African American minister at Atlanta's Mount

Calvary Baptist Church. He made many commercial recordings of his sermons and gospel songs beginning in the 1920s. Reverend Gates introduced “I’ll Fly Away” with the words, “I want to talk to you this morning from a song that I’ve been a-hearin’ so long: ‘I’ll Fly Away.’ And I’ve been thinking about that song, and the grammatical phrases of that song. And I want you to sing it, Brother and Sister Smith. I want you to sing that song. And then I want everybody to help you sing it. Sing it now! Open your mouth and sing!” [36]. The Selah Jubilee Singers, of Brooklyn, New York, was the first professional gospel quartet to record “I’ll Fly Away,” for Decca Records in 1941 (fig. 17). Historians believe The Selah Jubilee Singers learned Brumley’s song from a southern gospel group with whom they toured, perhaps The Soul Stirrers (of Houston, Texas), The Dixie Hummingbirds (of Greenville, South Carolina), or The Norfolk Jubilee Singers (of Norfolk, Virginia) [37: 196]. Between 1940 and 1955, at least thirteen African American performers recorded “I’ll Fly Away” and many more in following decades, “solidifying [it] in the canon of African-American gospel music” [37].



**Figure 16.**  
Reverend J. M. Gates, ca. 1940.



**Figure 17.**  
The Selah Jubilee Singers, ca. 1941.

In part because so many African American performers recorded “I’ll Fly Away,” several music researchers incorrectly assumed that either Brumley based his song on a traditional spiritual or that his song was actually a lost spiritual that he had somehow rediscovered [38: 58-61; 39: 82-83]. To a degree, this is understandable because “I’ll Fly Away,” as already mentioned, shares formal characteristics with traditional spirituals, but also because Brumley’s lyrics seem so similar to many spirituals. Samuel Floyd (1937-2016), author of *The Power of Black Music*, wrote that there are two types of spirituals: *sorrow songs* and *jubilees*. Sorrow songs “speak of the past and present trials and tribulations suffered by the slaves and their Savior.” Jubilees “express the joyful expectation of a better life in the future” [40: 41-42]. Brumley’s repeated refrain, “I’ll fly away,” and his metaphor comparing the soul freed by death to a bird who has finally flown from its prison bars place his song firmly in the jubilee category. Perhaps the best known of all traditional spirituals, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” is also a jubilee. In its verses, the singer expresses the same desire to fly away to Heaven (Floyd 1996: 213; Kehrberg 2010: 198).

[chorus]  
Swing low, sweet chariot,  
coming for to carry me home.  
Swing low, sweet chariot,  
coming for to carry me home.

[verse]  
I looked over Jordan, and what did I see,  
coming for to carry me home?  
A band of angels coming after me,  
coming for to carry me home.

“I’ll Fly Away” is a twentieth-century gospel song and “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” is a nineteenth-century spiritual. They are expressions of different historical moments. Yet they contain the same message, a

message that is still relevant, a message that some might say is timeless. As one astute commentator observed, songs like these are “but the vocal expression of the simplicity of faith: nothing but patience for this life — nothing but triumph in the next” [3].

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Willie Hubbard, Jr. is an African American evangelist in the state of Maryland. He wrote a recent article about how racial attitudes affect the church’s mission in America. Hubbard wrote that he is “able to understand both sides of the matter [having] been blessed to worship with — and serve — all races in the Lord’s church. [I]t is true that different races and cultures often view things differently and through various cultural experiences, [but] as children of God, we should aim to learn from each other’s cultures” [41]. Spirituals have a special power to instill hope and unite people. As they sang spirituals, enslaved people of the antebellum South put aside their daily suffering for a moment to envision liberty — either *physical* liberty in the free northern states or *spiritual* liberty in Heaven one day. The Fisk Jubilee Singers’ lived to enjoy that physical liberty and their efforts to popularize spirituals both hearkened back to the suffering of their ancestors and inspired future generations with a poignant, powerful cultural legacy. Albert Brumley’s popular gospel song “I’ll Fly Away” is just one example of the long-lasting influence of spirituals and their ability to transcend social limits. Spirituals and gospel songs are important historical musical genres, but their greatest significance goes beyond that. They speak of a better life awaiting in the future, when temporary troubles pass away. There is no doubt that Willie Hubbard, Jr. would agree that this is a lesson “we should [all] aim to learn.”

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