

American Singing Schools – A Brief History
By Hill Grimmatt
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Before there was *The Sacred Harp*, before there was “shaped note singing”, before there was even a United State of America, there were singing schools.

The first singing schools in the America were developed in attempt to revitalize the church singing that had become so bad that in 1720, a group of ministers in the Boston area, including Cotton Mather, Peter Thatcher, John Tufts, and Thomas Walter, published and preached the need for a new approach to congregational singing. They advocated for the development of singing schools to improve both the musical literacy and the quality of singing done in local churches.

To understand how things might have come to such a pass, consider a brief history of church singing in the New England colonies: The Puritans followed the teaching of John Calvin, and the only music used in church was sung Psalms. The colonists sang English versions of the Psalms, set metrically.

Collections of Psalms had been published in England, including the Church of England’s Psalter, *The Whole Booke of Psalms* published in 1562 by Thomas Sternhold and John Hopkins. In 1640, the first English book published in the New World was the so-called *Bay Psalm Book*, properly known as *The Whole Booke of Psalms Faithfully Translated into English Metre*.

Keep in mind that these books contained the text only. The singing was actually done using a few commonly-known tunes, and the method known as “lining out.” The leader, usually a Deacon, would read, or probably chant, a line or two of the Psalm. The congregation would then sing the same line(s) and so it would go. As you can imagine, lots of times the pitching was poor, and the singing often very slow and ponderous. That allowed for lots of vocal ornamentation by those so inclined, and over the years, the entire “tradition” had become unworkable. A minister by the name of Thomas Symes wrote in 1723:

Hence you may remember, that in our Congregation we used frequently to have some People Singing a Note or Two, after the rest had done. And you commonly strike the Notes not together, but one after another; One being half way through the second Note, before his Neighbour has done with the First, &c.

And so, to remedy these difficulties, began the singing school, which intended to teach students how to read music and how to sing effectively as a congregation. This became known as the movement for “Regular Singing” (i.e. “singing by rule”), and developed in the 1720’s and 1730’s in New England. By 1733, Jonathan Edwards and his congregation in Northampton, MA, had become became great supported of this movement, along with many others.

Singing by rule was highly controversial, mostly because it was a change, and any change of the structure and order of worship apparently scandalized and upset many people. Many pastors wrote long tracts and delivered many sermons either for or against singing by rule, or “singing by note”. Some argued that regular singing was faithful to the traditions of David and the Temple (!) and some argued that

There is a Mathematical Sweetness and Pleasancy in Sounds. This is no other than the Doctrine of Concords, to which there are required more Sounds than one, so proportioned and distanced in certain Intervals, as to create a pleasant Harmony and Agreement. The Pleasure arising from this Mathematical Sweetness or Agreement of Sounds, is a more Intellectual Pleasure; that from the Physical Sweetness, a more Sensual. Hence not only all Men, but the very Brutes too are capable of receiving a Delight in a single pleasant Sound or Voice, but none of the Brutal Race, nor all of the Humane are capable of relishing the Melody arising from the harmonious Agreement of a Diversity of Sounds. This requires a tuneful Soul, as well as a good Ear. (Thomas Walter, “The Sweet Psalmist of Israel”, about 1720)

Gradually, more and more congregations adopted the notion of singing by rule, and choirs were formed. The choirs had a designated leader, often with some music training; they met and practiced outside the church services. That in and of itself was controversial: some considered such “social” activities frivolous and thus sinful.

Two other developments came together to bring the musical scene in the American colonies closer to what we know today as *The Sacred Harp*. First, the musical style known as English Parish music, or West Gallery Music, which had become immensely popular in rural England in the first half of the 18th century, crossed the Atlantic and took root in the colonies. This music used some of the aesthetic of the Baroque movement, and increased the repertory beyond the Psalms.

William Tans'ur's *Royal Harmony Complete* (1754) was one of the most popular collections of these tunes, and it was reprinted in Newburyport, MA by Daniel Bayley in 1756. Several tunes in *The Sacred Harp* are shared with the West Gallery tradition, including Milford (1760), Aylesbury (1718), Mear (1720), Silver Street (1780), St. Thomas (1770), Wells (1724) and Amsterdam (1742).

The second, enormous development was the Great Awakening. In the 1730's and 1740's, Americans throughout the colonies turned out by the thousands to hear charismatic itinerant and local preachers proclaim the necessity of the New Birth. Jonathan Edwards, with his enthusiasm for Regular Singing, was probably the leading theologian of the movement, and wrote of the experience of the New Birth as “...God's absolute harmony and perfect proportion.”

Singing was an important part of the revivalist events, and Isaac Watts' poetry, already popular in England, became one of many vehicles for the expression of emotion and power of the Awakening. But even in the midst of this great change, the use of the Psalter remained the norm for worship in church.

Enter William Billings. Beginning in 1770 with the publication of *The New-England Psalm-Singer*, Billings began to produce an enormous body of work and also to train and encourage others both in composition and in the development of singing schools. The existing, quiet institution of the singing school teaching Regular Singing was transformed into a vibrant, enormously popular venue for learning and singing the emotional, powerful music of Billings, Oliver Holden, Timothy Swan, Daniel Read, Supply Belcher, Jacob French, Jeremiah Ingalls and others.

Billings' *The New-England Psalm-Singer* was the first book written by an American and published in (British) North America. Between 1770 and 1805 (when Jeremiah Ingalls' *The Christian Harmony* was published in Exeter NH), at least 50 books of hymns were published in New England, Vermont, and New York.

Now the singing school as an institution came into its own. Towns and parishes would hire Billings or his students, as well as other composers and musicians, to come and spend several weeks teaching the congregation to sing and read music. The school would meet daily, or at least several times weekly, for several weeks, usually during the summer after the crops had been planted. Often there was a community concert at the end of the period at which the group would demonstrate its new-found skill. The livelier and more ornamented fusing tunes were especially popular fare for that purpose, and some of the complex anthems served as show-pieces for the new choirs.

Billings and many other composers of the period wrote extensive introductions to their books. As a result, we know far more about their thinking about the music and how it should be sung than we otherwise might. For example, Billings wrote

Suppose a company of forty people, twenty of them should sing the bass, and the other twenty should be divided according to the discretion of the company into the upper parts. Six or seven voices should sing the ground bass (i.e. an octave below what is written –HG), which sung together with the upper parts, is most majestic, and so exceeding grand as to cause the floor to tremble, as I myself have often experienced. Much caution should also be used in singing a solo (sic); in my opinion 2 or 3 at most are enough to sing it

well. It should be sung as an echo, in order to keep the hearers in agreeable suspense till all the parts join together in a full chorus, as sweet and strong as possible.

Other cultural creations remain from that period: Billings created The Old Stoughton Musical Society, formed in Stoughton about 15 miles southwest of Boston in 1786. It is the oldest choral performing organization in the United States. They have been singing Billings' compositions since the Society was founded and their archives contain a record of Billings himself teaching a singing school in Stoughton as early as 1774.

During this period, the seating convention we still use today was adopted, so that singers sat by parts in a square, facing each other. This was high controversial at the beginning, because men and women could see each other. And indeed, the entire singing school movement represented a more or less unprecedented opportunity for socializing between the young men and women of the community. No doubt that helped its popularity, although it also raised many eyebrows at the time.

After 1800, the singing school moved south and west throughout the new nation, fueled and being fueled by the Second Great Awakening, which reach it's peak in the 1820's through 1840's. Many of the early composers had roots in the northeast; for example, Lucius Chapin (1760–1842) was a furniture maker from Springfield, Massachusetts. He moved to southwestern Virginia during the 1790's. Around 1812, Chapin published a series of plain tunes, settings for the spiritual ballads of Watts.

Large numbers of tune books continued to be published, and the centers of publishing moved west and south, to Philadelphia, Cincinnati, the Carolinas and Georgia. The most important Southern tune collection prior to *The Sacred Harp* was William Walker's 1835 *The Southern Harmony*, published in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

There are quite a number of conflicting claims in the literature about where and when the tradition of all-day singings with dinner on the grounds came into being. What is certain is that by 1850 this tradition was well-established throughout the south and as far west as east Texas. According to one source, the *Southern Musical Convention* was the first Sacred Harp musical convention, organized by B. F. White and others in 1845. It was held at Huntersville in Upson County, Georgia, but faded away after 1870.

The oldest surviving annual singing is the *Chattahoochee Musical Convention* in Georgia; it was organized in 1852 in western Georgia at Macedonia Baptist Church in Coweta County. The convention missed a few sessions during the War Between the States, but has met annually since resuming after the war. The next oldest is the *East Texas Musical Convention*, held near Henderson, Texas, which had its 150th anniversary in 2005; this was, however, only its 148th actual singing, again due to missing a couple of years during the War Between the States.