

Supply Belcher – American Composer
By Hill Grimmett
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Supply Belcher was born in Stoughton, Massachusetts, a town south of Boston, in March or April 1751. (His birthday is listed in various sources as March 29 and April 9, so take your pick.)

Supply Belcher was the grandson of Jonathan Belcher (1681-1757), who was a native of Cambridge, MA and graduated from Harvard in 1699. Jonathan Belcher was Governor of Massachusetts and New Hampshire (and Maine) from 1730-1741, and later of New Jersey.

(Keep in mind: this was an appointment by the Crown and not an elected office. Governor Belcher was removed from his New England post based on accusations of malfeasance from local citizens. He managed to clear his name before the royal court, and was then assigned to New Jersey.)

A muster roll of the Minute Men from Stoughton states that a Private Belcher and a Corporal Billings marched on April 19, 1775, the day of the “shot heard round the world” when the British troops attacked the fledgling American rebels in Concord and Lexington. Belcher would eventually rise to the rank of Captain under General George Washington.

Supply Belcher ran a tavern in Canton, MA (adjacent to Stoughton) 1778-1785. He and his family moved to Maine in 1785, which then was part of Massachusetts and not a separate state or territory. They settled first in Hallowell, on the Penobscot River south of Augusta, and then in 1791 moved to Farmington, which is about 40 miles northwest from Hallowell. He died in Farmington on June 9, 1836.

A side note: In 1786, William Billings founded the Stoughton Musical Society. This was a year after Supply Belcher left Stoughton. Some sources claim Belcher had attended singing schools taught by Billings; others claim not.

In Farmington (Maine), Belcher purchased a tavern and became a tavern-keeper. He also served in public office, including town clerk, selectman, and teacher. As a musician, he was a violinist, singer and composer.

Belcher played a part in the history of Farmington: he was involved in its incorporation as a town in 1793, and served in several capacities. He was Farmington's first representative to the legislature – the General Court of Massachusetts. He was involved in building the first meeting house in Farmington, organizing the first school, and is credited with forming the town's first choir.

Belcher composed at least 75 pieces, which appear in *The Harmony of Maine*, published in 1794. It is his only publication. The only tune of his in *The Sacred Harp* is Conversion, p. 297.

The contemporary American composer John Cage (1912-1992) based his 1978 composition *Some of the Harmony of Maine* on the works of Belcher, specifically *The Harmony of Maine*. Scored for organist and three assistants (one for each register), Cage's work is 45 minutes in length and is dedicated to the contemporary organ specialist Gerd Zacher.

A note on names: “Supply” is a name like Prudence, Chastity or Hope, based on Biblical virtues and attributes, as in “God shall supply.” The family name Belcher may be from belle-cheer, or good cheer, although that seems to me a dubious etymology.