

## William Walker: Shaper of Southern Song

Charles W. Steele, DMA

William Walker may not be a household name among many church musicians and organists. However, Walker did play an important historic role in American sacred music. In this presentation, we will touch briefly on the system of shape notes and on shape note collections as well as William Walker's life and contributions to the development of the shape note tradition in America.

The shape note phenomenon traces its origins to the psalm singing of New England. Congregational singing in the churches in the early eighteenth century, in the opinion of the clergy and musicians of the day, had fallen into a deplorable state. To improve the situation, the idea of the singing school developed. These events were held at schools and churches as a form of music education for teaching congregations the skills to sing by note, instead of rote. An easy system was needed to teach people to learn to quickly read music. An early system for use in the schools was developed by John Tufts in his *An Introduction to the Singing of Psalm Tunes*.

In 1801, William Little and William Smith of Philadelphia, PA, devised a system wherein each syllable of the scale had a specific shape, a rather ingenious idea as it provided a visual aid for reading music and learning intervals. Their collection, *The Easy Instructor*, is considered the first shape note collection. Rather than using conventional notation, the two men devised a system in which the four syllables – fa, sol, la, mi – were each notated with a different note-head shape. A great advantage to this system was that the singers did not have to learn key signatures in order to sight sing. One only needed to know the shapes of the notes and the intervals. The invention of shape notes led to a proliferation of published music collections using the system. According to one researcher, approximately 95 four shape collections were published in the US between 1798 and 1859.<sup>1</sup> The compilers of the various collections often borrowed extensively the music and information from other collections because there were no copyright laws at the time. Some of well-known shape note collections include *Kentucky Harmony*, *Virginia Harmony*, *Columbian Harmony*, *Union Harmony*, *Sacred Harp*, *Hesperian Harp*, and *Knoxville Harmony*.

Shape note singing schools developed as a way to teach the new music reading system to the public. The schools were led by traveling teachers who traveled to communities to hold a two-week session at a school or a church. The school was not only an educational and musical event, but a social event as well. Two weeks of attending the singing school would be an anticipated social event in rural America. In addition, the schools offered the opportunity for some "courting". Qualifications for leading a singing school were not strict. Some of the teachers, for background, had only the experience of attending a shape note singing school. One of the significant persons who traveled and taught singing schools was William Walker, the focus of this presentation.

William Walker (1809 – 1875) was born in the Cross Keys area of Union County in South Carolina. Today, Cross Keys is literally a wide place in the road. During the time his family resided in this area, they attended Lower Fair Forest Baptist Church. The fact that Walker attended this church is celebrated in modern times by a plaque placed on the side of the church's present building.

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Stanislaw, *A Checklist of Four-Shape Shape-Note Tunebooks* (New York: Institute for Studies in American Music, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York), 49-54.

When Walker was 18 years old, his family moved to Cedar Springs, which was located near the Spartanburg, SC, area. Walker attended Word Academy, considered a fine school in its day. Students at the school received a classical education that included Latin, algebra, and geometry. Walker was a life-long Baptist and served the church in many capacities, among them that of being a song leader. In 1839, he was involved in the organization of what became First Baptist Church in Spartanburg, SC.

Walker married Amy Golightly in 1835; Amy's sister was married to Benjamin Franklin White, who later published the *Sacred Harp* shape note collection. Walker was known to be a supporter of education. He pledged money toward the establishment of the Female Academy in Spartanburg, SC, and took part in the cornerstone laying at Wofford College, also located in Spartanburg, SC. He was a businessman and operated a bookstore. Probably as a result of his bookstore business, he was known to have an extensive library.

Little information is available about Walker's early musical training; it is known that he learned some folk songs from his mother. Most likely, Walker received his musical training by attending Singing Schools. Evidently, he had a bright mind that allowed him to absorb the musical style and other aspects of music as they were presented in these "schools". Walker served as a singing instructor for 45 years, traveled extensively, and collected tunes. In his writings, Walker mentioned that he had traveled thousands of miles in the Middle Southern, and Western States and taught a number of singing schools.

Not only is 1835 the year Walker married Amy, it is the same year he published his first and most popular shape note collection, *Southern Harmony*. After its initial introduction in 1835, *Southern Harmony* underwent several revisions, the final one being the edition of 1854. Walker published three additional collections during his lifetime: *Southern and Western Pocket Harmonist* (1836), *Christian Harmony* (1866), and *Fruits and Flowers* (1869). *Southern Harmony*, during the years of its publication, was obviously the most popular. Walker later claimed that 600,000 copies of it had been sold.

*Southern Harmony* is among one of the important collections published in the shape note tradition. Harry Eskew cites several reasons why *Southern Harmony* is significant: 1) its use as a textbook to learn to read music, 2) its role in continuing early American psalmody, and (3) its function as a "musical companion for numerous word-only hymnals."<sup>2</sup> Eskew also notes that *Southern Harmony* is "significant as a repository of melodies from oral tradition" and that "Walker and other rural-oriented singing school teachers/compilers drew from the rich oral tradition of the Anglo-American folksong to provide melodies for many hymn texts."<sup>3</sup> Walker, in the preface to the first edition of *Southern Harmony* in 1835, states that he had "composed the parts to a great many good airs, (which I could not find in any publication, nor in manuscript) and assigned my name as author."<sup>4</sup> It may be surmised that many of these "airs" were popular melodies or folk tunes of the day that were passed on by oral tradition. Hymnologist Austin C. Lovelace recounts that "when Walker was going around doing singing schools, he always asked if anyone had some good tunes. He would then write them down and claim them as his own."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Harry Eskew, "The Significance of William Walker's *Southern Harmony*" (lecture, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, 16 April 1993), 7-11.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>4</sup> William Walker, *The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion*, with an introduction by Glenn C. Wilcox (Philadelphia: E. W. Miller, 1854; reprint, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1987), iii.

<sup>5</sup> Austin C. Lovelace, telephone interview with author 1 July 2005.

Sources of texts and tunes are indicated for some of the hymns, though often no source is documented for either. Glen Wilcox relates that approximately one-fourth of the hymn texts were by Isaac Watts.<sup>6</sup> Of the 341 tune names in the index, Wilcox maintains that about 250 of them can be attributed to 110 composers with the remaining tunes being anonymous.<sup>7</sup> For the 1854 edition, Walker added seventy-three tunes to his collection. It is interesting to note that, according to Eskew, approximately half of the tunes Walker added in 1854 were “in the style of the folk hymn.”<sup>8</sup>

*Southern Harmony* incorporated some important “firsts” in the history of hymn tunes. The 1835 edition marked the first time the text “Amazing Grace” and the tune NEW BRITAIN were united in a shape note collection. The tune had appeared in other sources prior to *Southern Harmony* and was known by various names, including HARMONY GROVE, SYMPHONY, and REDEMPTION. One often sees the tune frequently referenced to the 1831 collection *Virginia Harmony*, where it was paired with the text “There is a land of pure delight.” The tune also appeared in the *Columbian Harmony* of 1829 in two different versions, GALLAHER and ST. MARY. It also was included in Joseph Funk’s *A Compilation of Genuine Church Music*, published in 1832 in Winchester VA. William Caldwell of East Tennessee used the tune in his 1837 shape note collection *Union Harmony*. Here it was called FRUGALITY and is notated in common meter rather than in triple meter. Walker’s pairing of this tune with John Newton’s text created what has become one of the world’s most well-known hymns.

The *Southern Harmony* edition of 1840 included the first appearance of the tune WONDROUS LOVE with the text “What wondrous love is this.” The 1854 edition also includes one of the early appearances of DOVE OF PEACE. Perhaps even more remarkable, *Southern Harmony* includes what might possibly be the first published music by a woman composer in America. Walker credited the tune PROMISED LAND to “Miss M. Durham,” who, according to Harry Eschew, has been identified as Matilda Durham (1815-1901) of the Spartanburg, SC, area. She was a singing teacher and a writer of Baptist religious articles and tracts.

There are a number of folk hymn tunes which Walker’s collection helped to preserve and popularize such as BEACH SPRING (called FOUNT OF GLORY in *Southern Harmony*), DETROIT, DISTRESS, HOLY MANNA, MIDDLEBURY, RESIGNATION, RESTORATION, and STAR OF THE EAST.

The inclusion of the American tunes in this remarkable shape note collection has helped to preserve them for future generations. Unlike its popular counterpart, *The Sacred Harp*, which has undergone a number of revisions over the years of its existence (even as recently as 1991), *Southern Harmony* has had no additions or corrections to its music since the final version of 1854. As it stands, *Southern Harmony* is a repository of musical styles and tastes of nineteenth-century America, particularly of southern and rural America. Eskew remarks that “no wonder *Southern Harmony* was so popular: the hymns ... were united with tunes which had circulated among the people for years in oral tradition, and they were furthermore printed in easy-to-read, shape-notation!”<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately, over the past four to five decades, a number of American folk hymn tunes have appeared in new editions of denominational hymnals. This phenomenon prompts one to

---

<sup>6</sup> Glen Wilcox, Introduction to *The Southern Harmony and Musical Companion* by William Walker (Philadelphia: E. W. Miller, 1854; reprint, Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1987), v.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, iv.

<sup>8</sup> Harry Lee Eskew, “William Walker’s *Southern Harmony*: Its Basic Editions,” *Latin American Music Review* 7, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 1986): 142.

<sup>9</sup> Harry Eskew, “William Walker, 1809-1875: Popular Southern Hymnist,” *The Hymn* 15, no. 1 (January 1964) 9.

reflect on what factors may have led to the increased presence of these tunes in the hymnals of the late twentieth century. Communications by this author with several persons who served on editorial boards of different hymnals help provide some possible answers to this question.

David W. Music, a member of the editorial board of *The Baptist Hymnal* (1991), suggests three main factors he believes are responsible for the growth in the number of shape note tunes incorporated into more recent hymnals. Outlining these factors, Music states:

The increase in the number of shape-note tunes is due to a number of factors including (1) the bicentennial of the USA in 1976 with church musicians seeking to honor their country by searching out some of its native expressions: I think this parallels the English folk song recovery that occurred with the 1906 English Hymnal (2) the broadening of the base of congregational song to include a wider diversity of styles and types than before (including black spirituals, world hymnody, American Indian pieces, Taize, Iona Community, plainsong, newly-written hymns, etc.) ... (3) in a few cases these melodies have become familiar outside the church (or at least outside the hymnal) and have subsequently been incorporated into them; a good example is RESIGNATION (My shepherd will supply my need), which everybody learned from the Virgil Thomson choral arrangement, later realizing what a great congregational text and tune combination this is. Perhaps related to this was the increased respectability gained by these often very simple tunes through their use by significant American composers such as Thomson and Aaron Copland.<sup>10</sup>

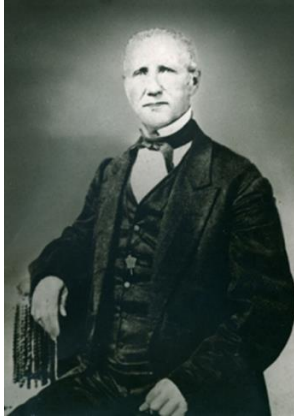
*Southern Harmony* stands out for its inclusive quality and for the music it contributed to our culture in bringing shape note singing and its literature to the South. Tunes from *Southern Harmony* and similar collections are a significant part of our hymn heritage. Their appearance in modern hymnals began to blossom in the 1970s and 1980s as editors and committees, who were preparing new hymnals, strove to reclaim some of America's hymnal heritage. In addition, since that time there has been a corresponding increase in the amount of organ literature composed that is based on American shape note tunes. Many of the tunes used in these compositions are found within *Southern Harmony*. Prior to this time, there were very few well-known works for organ based on these tunes; among the few were Samuel Barber's *Variations on Wondrous Love* and the two collections by Gardner Read, *Six Preludes on Old Southern Hymns, Set 1 and 2*.

Organists and choral directors can facilitate keeping these traditional tunes alive by the use and performance of organ, choral, and instrumental music based on them. These tunes are a part of our national musical heritage and should be passed on to the coming generations.

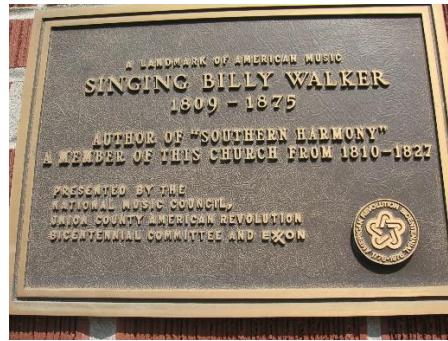
The author has available a significant listing of organ works based on shape note tunes. If interested in obtaining copy, please email Charles W. Steele at [cwsorgan@comporium.net](mailto:cwsorgan@comporium.net).

---

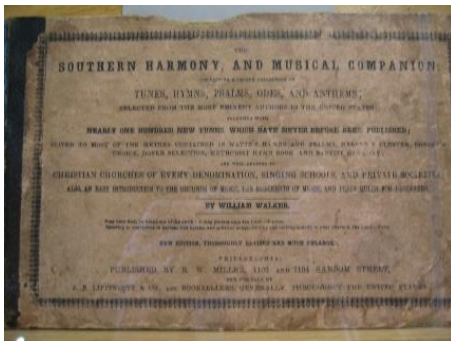
<sup>10</sup> David W. Music, email to author 18 August 2005.



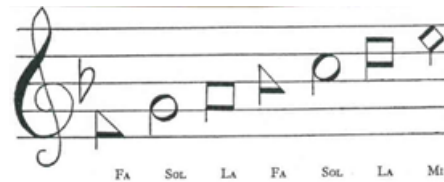
William Walker  
Photo from *White Spirituals  
In the Southern Uplands*,  
George Pullen Jackson, University  
of North Carolina Press, 1933



Plaque on today's Lower Fair Forest Baptist Church



Cover of an original copy of *Southern Harmony*



The musical scale in the Four Shape System  
(from *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands*)



William Walker's grave in Spartanburg, SC

*Photos by Charles W. Steele.*