

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

The Mason's (Extraordinary, Extended) Family, Part II

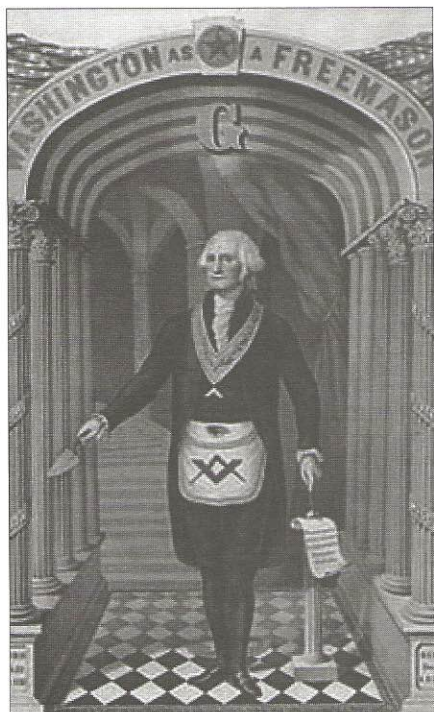
In the last issue of *Fiddler Magazine*, we traced some of the Scottish antecedents of the reel now familiarly known to musicians throughout the world as “The Mason’s Apron.” We left the tune family with some notes on the Irish versions with a similarity of titles: “Carton’s Reel,” “Miss Carbery’s Reel,” “Lady Carby’s Fancy Reel,” and “Lady Carbury.”

The origin of the “Carbury” titles is obscure. There were Irish peers called Lord/Lady Carbery, descended from a family originally from Wales who settled in the city of Limerick in the early 17th century. George Evans was named Baron Carbery of Carbery, County Cork, in 1715, with the title continuing eventually through to George Patrick Evans Freke, 6th Baron, in 1845. In the early 1850s (when the Carbury/Carbery tune titles were first collected) Baroness Carbery, George’s widow, held land in the parishes of Athneasy, Kilbreedy Major, Uregare, baronies of Small-county, Coshma and Coshlea, County Limerick, and in the parish of Athnowen, barony of East Muskerry, County Cork. However, any connection between the various “Lady Carberys” and the tune is unknown. As noted previously, collector P.W. Joyce (1827-1914) had the reel and title from a military piper named Flanagan, from North Kildare. Recent communications from Irish music researcher Conor Ward reveal the tune can be found in several 19th century musicians’ manuscript collections from Counties Leitrim and Longford, including the Leonard-Kernan MS (1844-c.1850) of Abbeyshrule, Co. Longford (as “Lady Carby’s Fancy Reel”), the Patrick O’Farrell MS (c. 1860s) of Aughadowry, Ballinamuck, Co. Longford (as “Lady Carbery’s Reel”), the Stephen Grier MS

(c. 1883) of Gortletteragh, County Leitrim (as “Miss Carbrey”), and the Larry Smyth MS (c. 1900) of Abbeylara, County Longford (as “Lady Carbrey”).

As is often the case, however, the tune was reintroduced to Ireland from other directions. It was printed in various publications of 19th century Boston-based music publisher Elias Howe as “The Mason’s Cap,” a curious substitution of apparel that wants explanation but is perhaps reflective of a rejection of Freemasonry by the publisher himself, since a “cap” is not generally a symbol of the order. “The Mason’s Cap” title appears in no publications other than Howe’s, and, influential as Howe’s *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection/Cole’s 1000 Fiddle Tunes* has been, the “folk process” has rejected the name for the tune. Chicago collector Captain Francis O’Neill, certainly no stranger to Howe’s volumes (as he “borrowed” a vast number for his own great works), eschewed the “Mason’s Cap” title and instead used the familiar “Mason’s Apron” name for the tune when he printed it in his *Music of Ireland* (1903) and *Dance Music of Ireland* (1907).

O’Neill may be partly credited with introducing the “Mason’s Apron” title to Irish repertoire, although it would seem for a time it vied with the “Carbery” titles for prominence in association with the reel, although the Captain perhaps had less to do with “introducing” or “reintroducing” the name than he did “cementing” it in Irish tradition. In the 19th century the “Mason’s Apron” title was still in this process of being wedded to the tune, becoming more dominant as the century progressed. Certainly Howe’s influential and popular publication had given it impetus, but it still was being contested. For example, the tune appears twice in the mid-century Northumbrian music manuscripts of the Lister family (Robert and William Hall Lister), first as “Isla Reel” and again as “Mason’s Apron.” The Rev. Luke Donnellan collected the tune in his south County Armagh parish in the first decade of the 20th century, and, while he put down “Mason’s Apron” as the title, he also put down the alternate title “Roxberry Reel.”



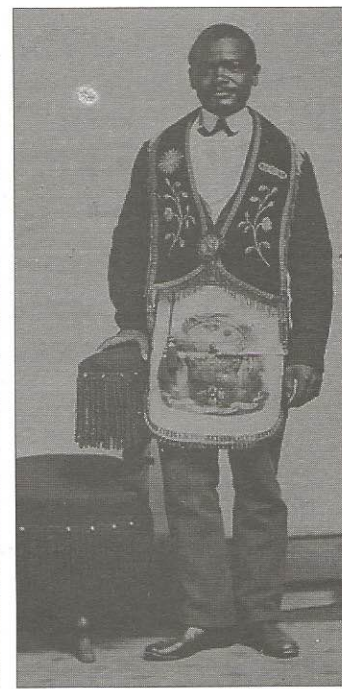
George Washington in Masonic apron



Kentucky Knight Templar



Benjamin Franklin



1872 tintype

Irish-American melodeon player Joe Flanagan (who, with his brother Mike, led the Flanagan Brothers band), recorded “Mason’s Apron” in Camden, N.J., as the second reel in a set issued by Victor Records in 1926 as “The Flanagans at Dinty Moore’s” (paired with “The Swallow’s Tail”). Joe’s name for the “Mason’s” was “The Pig that Tore the Shirt.” A reel formerly popular with pipers called “The White Leaf” is thought to be cognate with the “Mason,” but this is disputed. There are certainly enough points of similarity between the two to suggest a relationship, albeit distanced via the process of aural transmission. Irish musicologist and editor Brendan Breathnach’s source for the tune was a mid-20th century collection compiled by County Monaghan musician Jack Wade, and that scholar certainly noticed the relationship, for he penned the note in his manuscript: “This is the old way of playing it. It is played quite differently now, like many more.”

The 20th century saw the apex of the reel’s reputation as one of the great tunes of traditional music, due to sound recordings. It was recorded in New York early in the 78 RPM era by Brooklyn-born melodeon player John J. “Dutch” Kimmel (1866-1942, for Columbia Records in 1915), and later by County Sligo fiddler Paddy Killoran (1904-1965, Decca 12201, 1939). In mid-century there were virtuostic performances by Belfast fiddler Sean Maguire (1927-2005) and Scottish dance-bandleader Bobby MacLeod (1925-1991), both of whom claimed the same famous set of variations. Maguire’s variation sets are particularly admired, and imitated by those who can master the demanding position-playing. Others who have made exceptional recordings of “Mason’s Apron” include County Clare tin whistle player Micho Russell, Chieftains flute player Matt Molloy, and Country Tipperary accordion player Paddy O’Brien (all settings in the key of G). Maguire (McGuire) can be viewed playing the reel on youtube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=zn70NAPW4hg, and heard playing it with his Four Star Quartet (1950s) at the Irish Traditional Music Archive at www.itma.ie/digitallibrary/sound/masons-apron-sean-maguire-the-four-star-quartet.

Tune families, like flesh and blood families, are more than just immediate relations who share a gene pool, even if taking a different name (think of your nuclear family). They also include step-children, step-parents, half-siblings, cousins, distant grandparents; successes and failures. It’s fun to look at the extended family of a venerable tune like the “Mason,” to see what has happened so far. Let’s take a look at a few of the family who have branched off of the main shoot to become more or less distant relations.

“The Breakdown” is a Scottish reel or hornpipe and dance long popular for Scottish Country Dancing and Scottish and northern English ceilidhs (for a Circassian Circle dance, for example). The title has nothing to do with the American term “breakdown” that is synonymous with “hoedown,” meaning a fast reel, but the title’s meaning in the Scottish/English context is speculative. The name has been applied to other duple time tunes (such as a hornpipe in mid-19th century music manuscript of Northumbrian fiddler John Baty), so perhaps it is the dance that is the driver for the title, not the tune. “The Breakdown” tune that we are concerned with has been around for some time, dating at least to its appearance as a hornpipe in Glasgow publisher James S. Kerr’s *Merry Melodies vol. 4* (c. 1880s). The first strain is cognate with “Mason’s Apron,” following a I, I, vi, vii (lowercase = minor key) progression, while the “Mason” is a not too dissimilar I, I, IV, V, and the melodic material is similar. The defining octave leap in the first measure is an unmistakable clue! The second strain also features distinctive stepwise octave leaps at the beginning of the part (albeit with low note to high octave, the reverse of the opening), and is quite different.

East Anglian fiddler Walter Bulwer’s (1888-c. 1972) “Shipdham Hornpipe” has a first strain nearly identical to “The Breakdown,” harmonically and melodically, and bears the same relationship to the “Mason.” The second strain is a graft entirely different than the Scottish tune. Bulwer named his piece after the village (near Thetford, Norfolk) where he lived all his life, self-employed as a tailor and barber, among other endeavors.

Lady Carbry’s Fancy Reel

Shetland fiddlers play the tune as “Lowrie Tarrell,” in the key of G major, both strains being cognate with the Mason, but different enough to be distinctive. It is an attractive version, and deserves to be less obscure than it has been. Hear fiddlers Tom Anderson and Aly Bain play and compare “Lowrie Tarrell” and “Mason’s Apron” at Tobar an Dualchais: www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/en/fullrecord/97569/1;jsessionid=2678CCFB387F02CBFB47C35DD1772308. Bain played the pair (featuring County Fermanagh’s Cathal McConnel on tin whistle) with his group Boys of the Lough on their now hard-to-find *Second Album*, released in 1974.

North American cousins are numerous, but of them all, the reel “Jack of Diamonds” is most clearly derivative of both strains of “Mason’s Apron.” “Jack of Diamonds” was printed in Marion Thede’s *Fiddle Book* (1967) (a version can also be found in *Fiddler Magazine*, vol. 11, No. 3, 2004), but has been in aural transmission for some time with fiddlers in the Midwest and Southwest. It is a popular contest tune in the key of A major, and graced the repertory of Texas fiddler Benny Thomasson and others.

Alva Belcher (1819-1900) was a black fiddler and storekeeper from Delhi, New York, who had a regional reputation in the Catskill region and western Hudson Valley in the nineteenth century. The tune named for him, “Belcher’s Reel,” is a compound made up of the first strain of “Mason’s Apron” with an entirely different second strain than in previous examples, albeit one that was a “floating” strain on a stock I, IV, I, V, chord progression. It was in circulation as a dance tune in the Greene County, NY, area in the early 20th century. Writer Simon Bronner (*Old Time Music Makers of New York State*, 1987) records: “At a time when local musicians rarely gained wide renown, Belcher was a name called for in villages from the Catskills well into central New York. [He] formed a string band that included white players, and his style incorporated the Anglo-Celtic influence on the area. Indeed...Belcher’s tunes and phrasings passed into the oral tradition beyond the county’s borders” (p. 16). Similarly, “Picnic Romp,” included in Ira Ford’s *Traditional Music in America* (1940) is the

now-familiar composite of the “Mason’s Apron” first-strain with an altogether unique second strain.

The North American “Wake Up Susan” tune sub-family, whose members are sometimes called “Hop Up Susan,” “Up Jumped Susie,” “Wake Susan,” or “Wake Up Susie,” is exceptional among “Mason’s Apron” derivatives, as the familiar first strain is finally married to an equally worthy second strain. The second strain is new, albeit with an opening similar to the second strain of the Scottish “The Breakdown.” Both begin with an octave leap that is reversed from that of the first strain; that is, they go from low to high octave on the tonic note at the beginning. It’s rhythmically very strong and melodically interesting, and matches the character of the “Mason”-derived first strain, echoing wide interval jumps in a complementary way.

Of course, there is a wide variety in “Wake Up Susan” versions, and not all start that way, but the main stream of the melody in the tradition has the aforementioned characteristics. It is widespread in North America, but dating it is curiously elusive. Samuel Bayard thought it to be of black-face minstrel origin using strains from the British Isles, yet he was unable to find it in old-country sources (a curious lapse, given the popularity of “Mason’s Apron” and “The Breakdown”). Hans Nathan, Dan Emmett’s biographer, thought the Irish reel “The Night We Made the Match” contributed melodic material to the family, apparently on the strength of the opening descending octave leap in that tune; the remainder is dissimilar.

The earliest marriage of tune and title for “Wake Up Susan” is in William Bradbury Ryan’s *Ryan’s Mammoth Collection*, printed in Boston in 1883 by Elias Howe, for whom Ryan worked. The popularity of the volume and its successors (including *Cole’s 1000 Fiddle Tunes*, 1940) helped ensure wide dissemination of the reel, but it resonated in the tradition quickly, as evidenced by the variety of titles attached to it. Penn State professor Samuel Bayard, collecting in southwestern Pennsylvania, found it part of

Shipdham Hornpipe

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the traditional repertory in the region under a variety of titles, including “Hell on the Potomac,” “Hell on the Wabash,” and “Hell on the Rappahannock.” The “Hell on the (insert place-name)” name is a “floating” title used for a variety of tunes and usually idiosyncratic to one particular fiddler or another, but nevertheless a popular naming convention. Bayard’s “Hell on the Potomac,” collected from a fifer named Thomas Hogg in 1948, is a version in the key of G of “Wake Up Susan” in both parts.

Sam Bayard cast a wide net in his analysis of tunes, and found associations between melodies that others find obscure or cannot credit, but he is more often than not correct. One of his sources, the formidable rural matron Sarah Armstrong, had two tunes that he found with similarities to the Mason/Wake Susan tune families, although determined that there was not enough evidence to either rule them in or out of cognate status. One of Sarah’s tunes, “Cottage by the Sea” (from *Hill Country Tunes*, 1944), has a first strain that seems similar to the “Mason,” but it takes a bit of head-

scratching before one recognizes it. The second strain is entirely different. Another of her tunes, “Sarah Armstong’s Reel” (also from *Hill Country Tunes* and currently popular at some old time jam sessions) has a first strain that is reminiscent of the second strain of “Wake Up Susan” with similar-sounding interval leaps. This is congruent with his notion that interesting melodic material was often detached from a tune to become combined with other melodic material to form new melodies.

[The author would like to sincerely thank Conor Ward for communications and materials from Irish manuscript sources used in this article.]

[Andrew Kuntz maintains two on-line databases, *The Fiddler’s Companion* (www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers) and his current project *The Traditional Tune Archive* (www.tunearch.org). When not researching tunes, he enjoys playing in a variety of old time, Irish, and French-Canadian music sessions.]

Wake Up Susan