

Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

The Black Sloven

Every so often I'm asked to recommend melodies that have specific relationships or associations to periods or events. Many of these requests have to do with tunes that are associated with the American Civil War and the War of Independence — especially the latter, as I reside in New York's Hudson Valley where relics and remains of the Colonial period and the Revolutionary conflict are not uncommon. Some years ago I happened to see an American musician's manuscript copybook from the Revolutionary period, and, in the course of examining the contents I was intrigued by a tune therein called "The Black Seven." A curious title, I thought, attached to, frankly, a rather odd, twisty step-wise kind of tune that was difficult for me to warm up to. "The Black Seven's" melody in the manuscript only spanned the notes from tonic to fifth, save for the quick insertion of a sixteenth note, and an occasional drop to the 5th below the tonic. This is not much melodic headroom for a tune that is eight bars long in the first part and sixteen bars in the second, with repeats for each, as written in the manuscript. As it turned out, the history connected with the melody unfolded in similar kinds of twisty, sinewy turns with odd juxtapositions. In the end, however, it's now one of the first pieces I think of when I'm asked to recommend representative American latter-18th century tunes, despite the fact that its melodic appeal still escapes me. It's the history that is rich and compelling, for the melody proved to be a vehicle for activities not only of pre-Revolution times, but served muster in the conflict and in the first decades of the new nation as well.

All journeys begin locally, as did mine with "The Black Seven." One of our Hudson Valley attractions is Locust Grove, the Samuel F. B. Morse Historic Site, designated a National Historic Landmark and owned and operated by the National Parks Service. Locust Grove is a fairly modest but beautiful Italianate villa designed by Alexander Jackson Davis, who remodeled it in 1851 from an existing structure a few years after Morse (1791-1872) — of electromagnetic telegraph fame — purchased it. The inventor must have loved the property, for he continued to alter and improve the landscape around his home until his death at age eighty. However, prior the estate had been in other hands, primarily — for our tale — the Livingstons, who originally purchased the property, carving it out from the old Schuyler land patent. They cleared the land and farmed it, building a large, rich homestead from scratch on the banks of the Hudson. The Poughkeepsie Livingstons were a cadet branch of a powerful and wealthy extended Hudson Valley family, patrons whose influence stretched from Albany to New York City. Our focus is on Henry Livingston, Jr. (1748-1828), who came of age in the decade prior to the Revolution and, still in his early twenties, purchased Locust Grove from his father, a Scottish immigrant, in 1771. The young man not only managed the large farm operation, but acquired skills as a surveyor (important in Colonial America) and map-maker, and served the community as Justice of the Peace.

Henry was also one of the first from his state to enlist in the newly formed Revolutionary Army, in 1775, not long after hostilities broke out in the northern colonies. He accompanied his cousin's husband, General Richard Montgomery, in his campaign up the Hudson River to take the war to the British in an ill-fated attempt to capture Montreal, acting as Major of the newly formed 3rd New York. The campaign was an arduous one, and when Montgomery fell mortally wounded before the walls of the city the attack was abandoned. Livingston returned from Canada with his health compromised and retired from military life, but still served the cause in the capacity of Commissioner of Sequestration, charged with appropriating lands and holdings of British loyalists and liquidating the assets for the Continental Congress and the war effort. After the war his literary talents came to the fore. Henry was well-read and known for an encyclopedic knowledge and affection for literature and a talent for illustration, and he began to write and publish prose and poetry, garnering a modest reputation for his work. He also proved to be a good-natured man who was involved in family life and who wrote charming and clever poems for his children, of which he had many. Henry's first wife died in 1783 and he remarried, fathering twelve children between his two wives.

Henry was remembered fondly by his eldest daughter who stated that her father would "entertain us on winter evenings by getting down the paint-box, we seated around the table. First he would portray something very pathetic, which would melt us to tears. The next thing would be so comic that we would be almost wild with laughter..." It is no surprise, perhaps, that the well-known holiday poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" ("Twas the night before Christmas..."), first published anonymously in Troy, New York, on December 23, 1823, has been attributed to Livingston. It had long been thought to have been the work of Clement Moore, but several reliable investigations give considerable credence to the contention of the Livingston family that Henry was the author, although he never himself claimed it.

In addition to his literary talents Henry was a musical individual, and, although in exactly what manner is unknown, he probably played the flute. He kept a music manuscript copybook that dates from the 1780s-1790s that mostly consists of secular music along with some hymns. It was obvious he had a fondness for musical theater, for many stage pieces appear in his manuscript. However, the majority of his copybook contains dance music and secular airs. Henry's family connections had given him an entrée into society, not only in the Hudson Valley but in New York City, as evidenced by his collection of theater music he could only have heard in the city. As a young gentleman he also involved himself in social affairs in New York, for a notice survives from the *New York Mercury* of October, 1774, in which his name appears as one of the elected managers of the New York Dancing Assembly for that year (alongside that of his contemporary John Jay, later first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and Governor of New York). Henry Livingston, in short, was an accomplished young landed gentleman, at ease in his society and times; a literary and practical man.

Henry's manuscript book contains a tune he called "The Black Seven," which quickly proved to be a miss-hearing of "The Black Sloven" by which name it is usually known. The "seven" instead

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of "sloven" is particular to Livingston and appears nowhere else, although there are other miss-hearings recorded (e.g. "slauving"). Although not often used in modern times the word sloven can still be found in dictionaries and means someone who is untidy, unkempt; careless in appearance and performance — a slob. The adjective form, slovenly, remains familiar to us. "The Black Sloven" was a very popular tune in 18th century Britain and the Colonies, as evidenced by the number of times it appears in collections and manuscripts. Henry was certainly not alone in writing down the tune for personal use. In America, for example, it appears in the surviving music manuscripts of John Quincy Adams (1767-1848), later 6th President of the United States, but a young Newburyport, Massachusetts, flute player at the time he noted his tunes on paper, around 1786. "Black Sloven" was included in Henry Beck's commonplace book of 1786 — another flute player. Wilkes Allen's copybook of 1790-1801, Rhode Island musician Edward Murphey's c. 1790 copybook, and the Massachusetts manuscripts of Dexter Dean (a commonplace book of 1800, added to by other musicians), harpsichord player Hannah Dawes (c. 1790), Silas Dickinson (1800), Abel Shattuck (commonplace book begun in 1801), and Whittier Perkins (1790), all include "The Black Sloven." John Hoff, a Lancaster, Pennsylvania, fluter, recorded the melody in his 1797-1799 copybook, as did New Hampshire fluter Henry Blake (1776) who had the title as the aforementioned "Black Slauving."

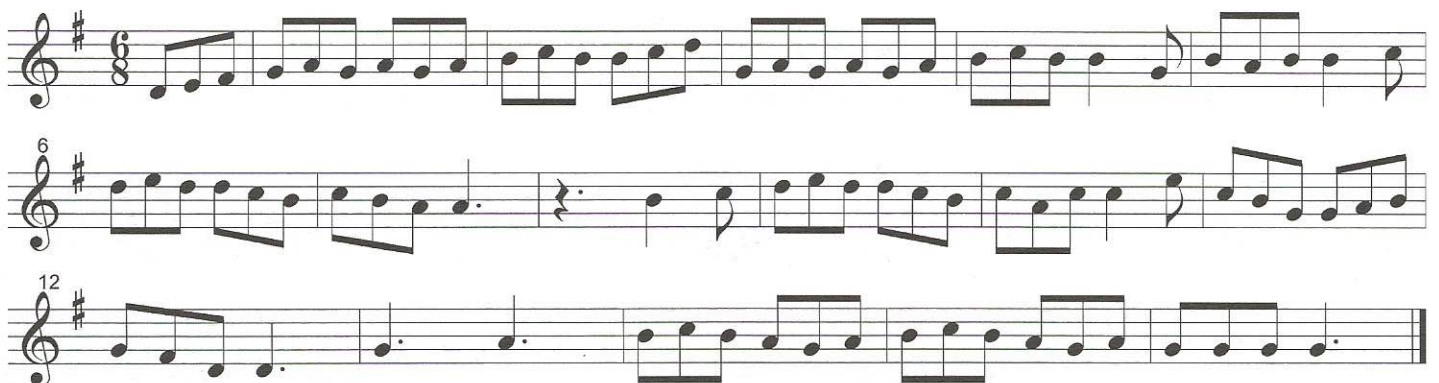
There are others. Ill-fated Connecticut fifer Giles Gibbs, who was killed in the Revolutionary War in Vermont while on active duty, had the tune in his commonplace music book, as did Aaron Thompson, a New Jersey fifer in the conflict. Although fifers included pieces for listening and playing for enjoyment in their copybooks, most fifers' manuscripts include airs and tunes adapted for martial usage. That "The Black Sloven" was used as a marching air is not in doubt, for, in addition to the military fife

manuscripts it appears in, a version was played by musicians attached to Colonel Timothy Pickering's (1745-1829) American regiment as it marched from Salem, Massachusetts to Lexington, on April 19, 1775. This version is preserved in an old manuscript music book that was kept at the turn of the 20th century at the Essex Institute at Salem, in which it is called "Col. Pickering's March to Lexington." Pickering, by the way, was later to make his mark in politics as a Federalist and was a member of the "Essex Junto" of the party, but served in the war through several of the major battles and became quartermaster-general of the Continental army. He was at Yorktown for Cornwallis' surrender. His initial foray to Lexington at the head of the Salem men was anti-climactic, however, for he arrived just as the last British soldiers retreated to Boston and his men did not see action.

All of these period manuscripts tell us that "The Black Sloven" was in common use among American musicians, primarily wind instrument players, from the pre-Revolutionary period through the early 19th century (its last manuscript appearance is in Onondaga, New York, musician Daniel Henry's flute tutor of 1817). We might surmise from its step-wise motion and small melodic contour that it was relatively easy to play and thus a piece fiddlers, fifers, and fluters might learn early in their tutelage. It also appears in musicians' manuscripts whose performance environments stemmed from military settings to the drawing room. "The Black Sloven" can even be heard on the only recorded music devices from the period that existed — musical clocks — in particular one by Bucks County, Pennsylvania, clockmaker Joseph Ellicott from around the 1770s. "The Black Sloven" was clearly a popular air in America, but did it originate there?

Like many Colonial melodies, "The Black Sloven" was a British import, and not even a dance tune at that, but rather a song air. It was a popular song vehicle probably for the same reason it

Colonel Pickering's March to Lexington



was a popular stepping stone in instrumental tutors — its step-wise motion and complete absence of any difficult interval leaps insured that it was sing-able to nearly everyone. Numerous records of its use in song exist. In America “The Black Sloven” was sung by popular actor-singer Mr. Wools in New York in concert in the Vaux Hall Gardens in 1769, which had been “newly fitted up” with “a very good Long Room, convenient for a ball or turtle entertainment... contiguous to the garden” (quoted in Sonneck, *Early Concert-life in America: 1731-1800*, 1907). New York’s Vaux Hall was in imitation of London’s famous lavish pleasure garden of the same name, albeit the New York iteration appears to have been short-lived. This establishes the song as popular in New York in the pre-Revolutionary decade. A few years later the following lyric — to the tune of “The Black Sloven” — was heard at the banquet of the Sons of St. George in New York in April, 1771, sung by British-born Joseph Stansbury, a gentleman writer of festive political songs (gifted with a fine voice and pleasant temperament that made him welcome at social occasions). It is a call to act in “loyal opposition” in the face of Colonial grievances; a reminder of affectionate kinship to the mother land, rather than a call for secession:

*Though placed at a distance from Britain’s bold shore,
From thence either we or our fathers came o’er;
And in will, work, and deed we are Englishman all,—
Still true to her cause, and awake to her call.*

Not only those more or less sympathetic with the Patriot cause employed the tune. A song called “The British Light Infantry” was published in the *Royal Gazette* in occupied New York in 1778, written “by the hand of a loyal American refugee” apparently in rebuttal to the publication of a disparaging song in a Philadelphia newspaper on the same subject. The Loyalist version begins:

*For battle prepared in their country’s just cause
Their king to avenge and support all his laws,
Taleo, taleo, taleo, taleo
As fierce as the tiger, as swift as the roe,
The British Light Infantry rush on their foe,
Taleo, taleo, etc.*

The end of the Revolutionary War did not deter the air being set to topical songs. Printer Isaiah Thomas, of Worcester, Massachusetts, issued a broadside ballad in 1787 called “Pegasus of Apollo,” set to the “Black Sloven” air. Its lyric was pointedly in sympathy with the post-Revolutionary insurgency called Shays’

Rebellion (after its most famous leader, Daniel Shays, c. 1747-1825), which developed out of a deep post-war economic depression in the northern states. The song (echoing the sentiments of the just-concluded conflict with Britain) begins:

*Come, come my bold boxers, ’tis Liberty calls,
Hark, hark, how she lustily bawls and bawls!
It is high time, if ever for mobbin ’twas time;
To mobbin, ye chicks of dame Liberty run;
Scour up the old whinyard, and brush the old gun;
Freedom we’ll chime,
While Tag, Rag, and Bobtail,
Lead up our decorum, Huzza!*

*Sure these are the plaguiest of all plaguy times,
When villains must hang for their crimes, their crimes,
And debtors a gauntlope of bailiffs must run;
When rulers will govern, and we must obey,
And low down our gullets is cramm’d every day—
Rap, Rap, ’tis a dun!
The sheriff’s behind him
We’ll gag him, and bind him, Huzza!*

What of the “Black Sloven” in Britain? Neither printed nor manuscript versions seem to predate American ones by very much, although the earliest printing of the air that we know about at this time seems to be in vol. 1 of C. and S. Thompson’s *A Choice Collection of Favourite Hunting Songs* (London, 1770). It was followed soon by a printing — words and music — in *The Universal Magazine* (1771, reprinted with text only in the similarly titled *Universal Songster*, 1825/26; pg. 99). “The Black Sloven” lyric begins:

*Last Valentine’s day, bright Phoebus shone clear,
We had not been a hunting for the space of one year.
I mounted Black Clover, that horse of great fame,
For to hear the horn blow and the words “Tally ho! Ho!”*

Despite the fact that the lyric names the horse “Black Clover,” the song is titled “Black Sloven,” probably because it was associated with the name of a renowned hunting mare of legendary speed. The name “Black Sloven” undoubtedly was partly descriptive — a horse of dark or black color — coupled with a presumably affectionate “slam,” much as we might call a favorite pet a “lazy mutt” — with the affection in the tone of voice. This mare belonged to a Mr. Charles Turner (who died c. 1733), of Clegg Hall, Lancashire. The ancient Clegg Hall was turned into a tavern

The Black Seven

The image shows the musical notation for the song 'The Black Seven'. It consists of three staves of music in G major (one sharp) and 6/8 time. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written in a simple, step-wise fashion. The second staff continues the melody, and the third staff concludes it with a double bar line and repeat dots. The notation includes various note values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests.

in the 19th century called the “Horse and Hounds,” but generally known to locals as the “Black Sloven” in remembrance of Turner and his steed. As an aside, the shell of 17th century Clegg Hall still stands and is slowly being restored. The manor comes complete with its own ghost, the Clegg Hall Boggart, a phantom boy who was killed by his uncle as part of an attempt to usurp the property from his brother. The ghostly boy cries out a warning, “Father, beware!”

The steed Black Sloven’s fame was well established by the 18th century, and although his origins are rather obscure, they coincide with the very beginnings of organized horse racing in Britain. Mathew Thomas Baskerville remarks in his *Itinerary* upon King Charles II (“The Merry Monarch”) and his favorite horses at the racecourse at Burford Downs, probably describing events of around 1690:

*Next for the glory of the place,
Here has been rode many a race;
King Charles the Second I saw here,
But I’ve forgotten in what year.
The Duke of Monmouth here also,
Made his horse to swete and blow;
Lovelace, Pembroke, and other gallants
Have been ventring here their talents;
And Nicholas Bainton on Black Sloven,
Got silver plate by labour and drudging.*

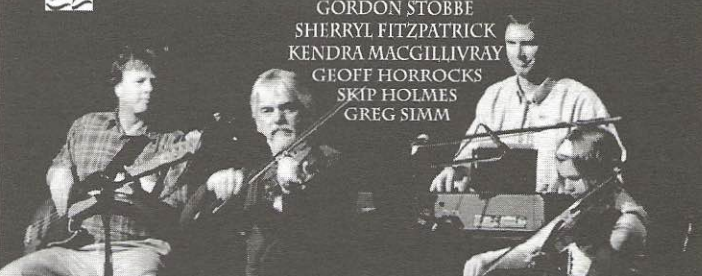
[“Origins of the Turf,” *The Gentleman’s Magazine*]

It is unclear whether Turner’s Black Sloven is the same horse ridden by Bainton for the prize in the c. 1690 race, however, it appears that “Black Sloven” became a popular name for horses perhaps for a century. There were many equine Black Slovens — a post-Colonial example can be found in an advertisement entered in the local newspaper from Windham Connecticut in 1792, which offered a “noted imported horse” named Black Sloven who would “cover” mares, presumably for a fee. The name evidently still had cache at that time. Perhaps the name Black Sloven for horses can be likened to naming a dog “Rover” — it’s a bit anachronistic, as the original Rovers were probably prized hunting dogs, but it’s a name instantly recognizable to all as a dog’s name. At one time, perhaps, so too was Black Sloven associated with the horse.

An instrumental version can be found in the Brown manuscript, a fiddler’s manuscript made in Elgin, Scotland, around 1775. The uniqueness of this version is that it was set in scordatura tuning,

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AEAC# (low to high), which old time American musicians will recognize as “Black Mountain” or “Hangman” tuning (from the names of two famous breakdowns typically played in that tuning), and Norwegian fiddlers will recognize as “troll tuning” for the Hardanger fiddle, employed for *fanitullen* tunes (also called the devil’s tunes). David Johnson, in his book *Scottish Fiddle Music in the 18th Century* (Edinburgh, 1984), directs that it be played slow, and suggests it was a lullaby, although he does not explain or elaborate this assertion. The “Black Sloven” does not appear in any other musician’s manuscripts in either Scotland or England, which is curious given its popularity in America at the same time.

Despite the fact that “Black Sloven” was an English import, both air and title appear to have hit a responsive chord in Revolutionary America. We might speculate that the name “Black Sloven” falls into a similar category as “Yankee Doodle,” in that it is ostensibly a disparaging epithet, but was reconfigured by Colonials as a source of pride. One might make fun of a Yankee Doodle or a Black Sloven, but they could be melded into a force to be contended with. It was perhaps this sentiment that led to the naming of an American privateer the Black Sloven. She operated out of New London, captained by one James Young, and on the night of May 8, 1782, the Black Sloven captured the British schooner Betsey, bound for New York with a cargo of gunpowder and lumber, to local acclaim.

[Andrew Kuntz is the author of a book of old time songs and tunes called *Ragged But Right* (1987) as well as the on-line tune encyclopedia “The Fiddlers’ Companion” (www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers). When not researching tunes, he enjoys playing in Irish music sessions.]

The Black Sloven

