

# Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

## Where's the Fire?

British and Irish musicians in the eighteenth century produced much in the way of "tuneage" in the service of, and often dedicated to, the aristocratic class. Although the endless litany of "Duke so-and-so's reel" or "Lady x's strathspey" sometimes seems like pandering to us today, such craftings were first and foremost a business decision on the part of composers who were trying desperately to cobble together a living from teaching music, making and selling instruments, selling sheet music, and occasionally playing for balls and other events. It was difficult to make a living and support a family strictly on the proceeds of one's musical endeavors, then as now. As patrons, the role of the aristocracy was crucial to the support of the local musician.

In America there was no noble class, although aristocratic status was bestowed on the landed and moneyed, and those with political influence. It was this new American "aristocracy" that carried on the traditions of the "Hunt Ball," the debutant's "coming out party," the Grand Soirée, and similar events, at which musicians (often anonymous and African-American) found employment. However, even as these events took place, there was the beginning of phenomena which, in the nineteenth century, were to supplant the influence of the individual with power and privilege, at least as it influenced the life of the working composer and musician. For, with the development and empowerment of the middle class, power and wealth were gradually redistributed, and organizations instead of individuals became the primary locus of influence. In particular, the mid-nineteenth century saw the rise of several important and locally powerful middle class institutions: the civil police force, organized militia, and fire companies (and although organized militias certainly predate the nineteenth century, the

early nineteenth century saw their development as social institutions as well as military ones).

The police, militias, and fire companies served the public in different ways, but they had in common the possibility of a structured status path for young men, who were induced to "serve" rather than to be conscripted (or even tricked into joining or "pressed" into service). This status was cemented by notions of civic pride and sacrifice for the collective good of the local community, and thus received a good deal of formal and informal support from that community. Part of the support was shown through social events for the purpose of supporting the organization and reinforcing membership through public honors, raising funds for the organization's development, and spotlighting its function in and for the community. Thus we have, for example, nineteenth century militia units sponsoring public dress parade exhibitions (a popular picnic event), policemen throwing banquets, and firemen organizing balls – many of these events promoting social interaction that included venues for musicians (much as did the old aristocratic Hunt Balls and other events).

Of the three civic organizations mentioned, it was the militia (largely through fife repertory) and firemen who were perhaps the most influential in fiddle tradition. However, military events like parades, being outdoors, required the volume of massed bagpipes, fifes, or the (new in the nineteenth century) brass band for musical accompaniment. Police banquets seemed ever to be about speeches and honors. Firemen, however, were in the best position to provide fertile ground for local musicians to exploit, for, unlike the police or militia, the firemen were fixed to their stations where they awaited emergencies. Since there was relatively more unstructured time available to the occupants of these stations, they often became a nexus of community social life, serving as informal gathering places where relationships developed and information was shared. Fireman's balls as fundraisers became yearly events throughout the English-speaking world, as this excerpt from the *Feilding Star* (New Zealand) illustrates:



Aug 25, 1898 - What will probably be an annual event was the social and dance which was held in the Assembly Rooms last evening under the auspices of the Feilding Volunteer Fire Brigade, a most enjoyable dance being the result. Upwards of fifty couples were present and dancing was kept up with vigor until a late hour this morning to excellent music supplied by Mr. R.F. Haybittle's orchestra.

The older East Coast cities led the way in the development of fire companies. Since we take a look below at a few melodies that have Pennsylvania connections, let's take a brief look at the rise of Philadelphia's fire organizations, whose history begins with the civically ubiquitous Benjamin Franklin, who in 1736 established the Union Fire Company. Philadelphia had suffered a conflagration in 1730 that billowed from Fishbourn's wharf on the Delaware River, to consume not only the wharf but homes across the street. Only the absence of a wind that night allowed it to come under control. Alarmed, the city imported fire-fighting equipment from England, and Franklin organized the first thirty men into his company. When others also wanted to join he urged them to form their own companies and to locate so that they would cover different parts of the city. He gave suggestions for fire safety in his *Gazette* (along with creating a lasting adage):

*In the first Place, as an Ounce of Prevention is worth a Pound of Cure, I would advise 'em to take care how they suffer living Coals in a full Shovel, to be carried out of one Room into another, or up or down Stairs, unless in a Warmingpan shut; for Scraps of Fire may fall into Chinks and make no Appearance until Midnight; when your Stairs being in Flames, you may be forced, (as I once was) to leap out of your Windows and hazard your necks to avoid being oven-roasted.*

Franklin's companies were volunteer organizations that raised private funds for the upkeep of their equipment and a place to store it. Publicly funded fire companies were a much later development, with Cincinnati, Ohio, awarded the distinction of, in 1853, establishing the first full-time paid professional fire department in the United States (and the first in the world to use steam fire engines). Philadelphia formed its municipal fire department in 1871.

When Philadelphia musician Francis "Frank" Johnson (1792-1844) was in his hey-day, it was the private fire brigades that served the city. Born in Martinique, he emigrated to Philadelphia in 1809, where he acquired considerable skill as a violinist and keyed bugle player, and by the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century he had already made a name for himself as a musician and band leader. He made his living performing for balls, parades, and dancing schools, but gained notoriety in 1818 when one of the most famous music publishers of the day, George Willig, issued Johnson's *Collection of New Cotillions*. Eventually Johnson (who was Caribbean-American) led an all-black orchestra that toured the United States and Europe. Not coincidentally (for our discussion of social organizations), Johnson was Trumpeter of First Troop, City Cavalry and Bandmaster of the 178th Regiment, Pa., Volunteer Infantry – militia units.

Robert Waln, in his book *The Hermit in America*, gave a brief sketch of Johnson in 1819: "In fine, he is the leader of the band at all balls, public and private; sole director of all serenades, acceptable and unacceptable; inventor-general of cotillions; to which add, a remarkable taste in distorting a sentimental, simple, and beautiful song into a reel, jig or country-dance."

In 1822 he had a hit with a melody called "The Philadelphia Fireman's Cotillion," which was "re-

spectfully dedicated to Members of the Fire Association." The work included a bit of imitative material that amazed audiences as Johnson's bugle was heard to "distinctly cry, 'Fire!' 'Fire!'" His composition was inspired by the performance of the firemen in fighting the conflagration at



Frank Johnson

## Fireman's Quickstep





*The Philadelphia Orphan's Asylum*

the Philadelphia Orphan's Asylum on January 24, 1822. The building on Cherry Street and Schuylkill Fifth Street was rela-

tively new, and the building loans had just been paid off when a fire broke out in the boiler room in the basement. It resulted in the total destruction of the property and the death of twenty-three of the ninety orphans living at the home. The public responded to the tragedy with an outpouring of money — and perhaps Johnson's composition debuted at a fund raising event — so that the home was soon rebuilt.

Johnson's piece survived in tradition and became associated with a companion dance called "The Fireman's Dance," a "circle quadrille" dance. The 2/4 time music was printed in the key of D in Benjamin Lovett's issue of the Henry Ford Orchestra's dances called *Good Morning: Music, Calls and Directions for Old-Time Dances*, and in Robert Benford's *Pioneer Dances*. It is perhaps the same "Fireman's Dance" that appears in Trifet's *Cornucopia*

## Philadelphia Fireman's Cotillion

## Fireman's Dance Cotillion

of Music (1888). *Good Morning* was a copyright-free dance manual, first published in 1925, and its contents soon began to be serialized in local newspapers. It went into several reprints, as late as the mid-1940s. The "Fireman's Dance" was recorded on a folio of 78 RPM records issued in the late 1930s or early 1940s (*Early American Dances* #119-B) "as revived by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ford" (it can be heard at [www.archive.org/details/EarlyAmericanDances--mr.Mrs.HenryFord](http://www.archive.org/details/EarlyAmericanDances--mr.Mrs.HenryFord)). [Ed note: this web url is case-sensitive.]

The music was provided by the Ford Orchestra, and included called figures. There is some speculation that the caller is auto magnate Henry Ford himself, who campaigned to "revive" square and contra dancing as a "wholesome" alternative to modern jazz dancing and jazz culture. However it may also be the aforementioned Lovett, who was a local Detroit dancing master whom Ford often hired to call his dances. The Ford Orchestra's "Fireman's Dance" is nearly identical to the first two parts of Johnson's published piece. On the recording, the third part has been replaced by a short melodic interlude that features the clanging of an alarm bell, which keeps the spirit of Johnson's imitative section, and adds a bit of novelty for the dancers. The Ford Orchestra changed its lineup over the years, but in its earlier iterations included Clayton Perry on violin, along with dulcimer, cimbalom, and sousaphone. The cimbalom was played by Billy Hallup, a Gypsy whom Ford employed as he remembered the instrument from his youth. Later, Jasper Bisbee played fiddle for the band.

A distanced and simplified derivative of Johnson's tune is the "Fireman's Quickstep," a march or dance tune that appears in a volume called *The American Veteran Fifer* (1905) where it is credited to one (Alburton) A.F. Hopkins, "National Fife Major" (of the Association of Civil War musicians). The volume was a collection of music drawn from Civil War and post-Civil War martial sources, and is still used as a source by fifers and re-enactment musicians. Little is known about Hopkins, save that he served with Co A, 154th Ohio Volunteer Infantry during the Civil War, and that he appears to have edited the volume. It is the first strain that is derivative of Johnson's piece, and, while the second strain is musically different, it too features a fire alarm-like motif.

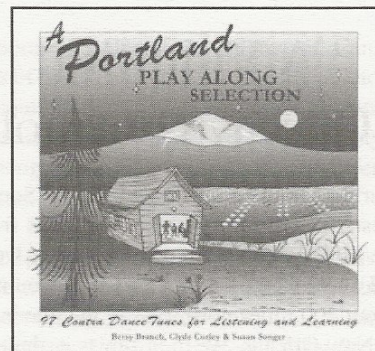
Last we have "The Fireman's Dance Cotillion" which, while having a similar title to Johnson's composition, is melodically unrelated. It comes from the playing of Jehile Kirkhuff, a fiddler who lived near Rush, Susquehanna County, Pennsylvania, in the north-east corner of the state. Jehile was a musically precocious child who first performed at the age of nine at a social event at the local Grange Hall. Young Jehile came from a musical family, where his grandfather and Uncle Jehile also played, although he also learned from other local fiddlers. He had a wide and varied repertoire that encompassed southern breakdowns and northern contra dance tunes, popular songs, tin-pan-alley tunes, and local melodies (including some German tunes). Although he became blind about the time he entered adulthood, he retained in memory a host of tunes he had learned from older tune books. "Fireman's Dance Cotillion" may be one of these, although his source is unknown.

Although Jehile stayed relatively close to home most of his life, he traveled to Crockett, Texas, for the 1954 World Championship of fiddling, in which he placed first, edging out Smokey Butler, a local old time Texas style player.

Later in life Kirkhuff came to the attention of folklorists, and was visited in 1970 in his home (separately) by Alan Jabbour and R.P. Christeson, each of whom deposited the tapes of their visits with the Library of Congress. Some time after, Ed Berbaum followed and recorded still more hours of tapes, and has made them available for listening at <https://public.me.com/edwardberbaum>, including "The Fireman's Dance Cotillion." Jehile died in 1981.

[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](http://www.ibiblio.org/fiddlers)). When not researching tunes, he enjoys playing in Irish music sessions.]

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