

# Fiddle Tune History

By Andrew Kuntz

## Good Stuff... by George!

I have long admired Edgar Lee Masters' collection of poems entitled *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), as would anyone who has strolled one of the old graveyards that dot the landscape, and taken some moments to ponder the worn stones. It was Masters' inspiration to take the common act of pondering the unknown and to give voice to his quasi-fictional deceased, whom he had speak with honesty and without guile, and in so doing wove a complex tale of small-town life. I was reminded of his poems when I accessed a significant on-line resource, the c. 1730-1910 music manuscript collections digitalized and made available through a partnership of the Center for Popular Music and the American Antiquarian Society. In fact, the collection of 232 manuscript thumbnails (found at <https://archive.org/details/americanmusicmanuscripts&tab=collection>), lined and a-row, remind me of *Spoon River Anthology* as they, like the stones in the graveyard, are legacy objects of considerable mystery.

Sometimes a bit is known about the music manuscripts in the American Vernacular Music Manuscript (AVMM) collection, perhaps from a notation on the cover, or from clues gleaned from contents or context. Often, however, we have anonymous manuscripts, or perhaps a name or two, and maybe a date. Like the headstone, it is evidence of existence of the deceased. This leaves us in a position akin to the pondering graveyard-stroller, tempted to imagine possible backgrounds on the thinnest of information.

Of course, the biggest difference between the stroller of grave-stones and the on-line manuscript "stroller" is that in the latter we

have access to additional, powerful, and crucial information – the musical contents. We can easily tell how much musical education the scribe might have had, the level of playing skill (as revealed in the notation), elements of style or genre, and sometimes purpose. This is already a lot more information than one gleans from a headstone. Yet, frustratingly, this often leads to even more contextual questions and more speculation, and a desire to know the author of the manuscript in a depth not possible. While we concede the inevitable frustration a music manuscript will bring, there are pleasures to be obtained in the struggle to know.

I was quite taken with one music manuscript in the AVMM collection, authored by a musician—a fiddler—by the name of George W. Allen, self-titled *Clogs, Hornpipes, Reels & Jigs by George W. Allen* [<https://archive.org/details/ClogsHornpipesReelsJigs>], consisting of 102 tunes, every one signed "by Geo. W. Allen." A watermark on some of the pages indicates they were originally blank sheet music sold by Carl Fischer in New York, which dates them to no earlier than 1873, when the company was established, but otherwise there is little direct evidence as to the date of the manuscript or its origin (other than the composer's name).

The contents reveals a number of tunes with Irish-sounding names like "Crowley's," "O'Connor," "McShane," "Shea's," "O'Callahan's" and several others, along with Irish place-name titles, such as "Belles of Clonmell," "Fiddler of Bandon," "Galway Lasses," and "Humors of Cork." While Irish-sounding titles predominate, there are other titles as well that reveal different influences. A few of the titles refer to New York City place-names: "City Island" (a part of the Bronx) and "Coney Island." One composition is entitled "On the Elevated," which also helps date the manuscript, for the elevated railway in New York commenced with the West Side and Yonkers Paten Railway in 1868, followed by the Manhattan Railway in 1875. There were elevated railways in Boston by 1887 and Chicago in 1892.

## Over the Mountains

George W. Allen

A few more titles reveal the influence of minstrelsy: “On the Elevated” is noted as a “Dar-  
kie” tune; “Old Uncle Leek,” “Snapping Turtle,” and “In dat Shining Hour” are patently  
“straight jigs”—syncopated 2/4 dance tunes similar to those printed in *Ryan’s Mammoth*  
*Collection* and popular stage pieces in the 1880s.

Thirty-five of the tunes are in the key of A major, followed by 18 in D, and 17 in G.  
Twenty-one are in minor or minor-mode (mostly E minor). However, interspersed are  
tunes in the more difficult flat keys: B Flat major, G minor, E Flat major, C minor, and  
F major all are represented by at least one tune. There are 35 hornpipes and 12 clogs, 19  
jigs, and 25 reels, seven slip jigs, and a highland fling.

Despite all the Irish-sounding names and dance forms, one gets the distinct impression  
that George M. Allen did not learn his music in Ireland. Rather, he seems to have been  
an aficionado of Irish music, knowledgeable but not a dilettante. He seems to have thor-  
oughly known Irish style—his compositions include rolls and grace notes, Irish melodic  
elements, phrasing and other clues—and one can imagine he might have been a regular  
session player. His knowledge of Irish titles is evident as well; he has “Humors” and  
“Trips to,” “Delights” and “Fancies,” and some of the titles of his original compositions  
seem lifted from Irish repertory, such as “Paddy’s the Boy,” “Katty’s Gold Ring,” and  
“Rakes of Bandon.” However, each one is an original composition. Yet he is not a musi-  
cal “native speaker.” Allen’s compositions as a whole seem imitative and a bit too studied  
to be natural. His jigs, in particular, are not up to the par of his duple-time compositions,  
and lack the inspiration of some of his other work. Many are pedestrian – imitative, but  
soulless. A few of his slip jigs are simply schottisches written in 9/8 time. His fondness  
for the key of A seems a bit out of keeping with Irish genre.

In fact, his American “minstrel” compositions are among his best. They show a good  
command of syncopation, melodic interest, period chromaticism, and work quite well  
as fiddle tunes. On the whole, Allen seems to have been a musician, probably from New  
York, who perhaps lived in an Irish community, and perhaps was of Irish descent or mar-  
ried into an Irish family. There is much evidence of relationships with numerous people:  
O’Connor is a name given to four of his compositions, as is Crowley; Katty or Kitty is  
also mentioned in four titles. There is a Kelly, Lynch, Kenney, David Gunne, Tim O’Shea,  
Miss Carroll, Miss Burns, and Peggy (twice). This is a community, and Allen seems com-  
fortable with them.

There are two more manuscripts by Allen in the AVMM collection. The second MS,  
entitled *Piano. Reels, Clogs, Hornpipes, Jigs, vol. 1*, is an expanded version of the first  
manuscript, with the addition of another 25 or so tunes. All compositions are again signed  
“George W. Allen” and all are written with simple piano accompaniment (left-hand root  
and chord only, no bass runs). Allen changed the key of several of the tunes from the first  
manuscript, presumably to favor playing on the piano, and we can assume that he was  
familiar enough with the instrument that he could play his dance tunes in the right hand  
while chording in his left.

The third Allen manuscript is quite different. Entitled *Dance Music Compositions*, it is a  
volume of late-19th century popular dances and includes original compositions of varso-  
viannas, schottisches, polkas, marches, mazourkas, lanciers, polonaises, and a “castinet  
dance.” A few compositions are dated “1896.” These are much more sophisticated com-  
positions than his earlier works; most have several parts with key changes, and a number  
require sustained position playing. It is the work of a talented and accomplished violinist.

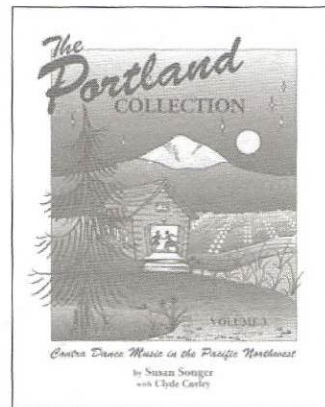
Unlike old printed material, when we look at historical music manuscripts we are looking  
at a personal presentation, the bespoke collection of an individual whose personality is  
embedded in the manuscript. Some manuscripts seem patently for personal use, to record  
the tunes a musician cared not to forget, to be returned to for personal enjoyment at times  
of leisure. Other manuscripts seem to be “working” manuscripts, meant to be shared  
with a small group for a purpose (as in collections of fife marches). Allen’s manuscripts  
seem to be completely audience-driven, and are as close to a printed collection as pos-  
sible. It is impossible not to think that Allen was imagining the latter two manuscripts as

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printed collections or readying them for publication; the first is less “publication-ready” but still seems intended for general audiences. Perhaps he had approached music publishers with them and tried to have them published.

Here you go, George. At least a few of your best works have made it into print.

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

*The Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University (Murfreesboro, TN) holds more than a million items related to American vernacular music traditions. The materials include early American sheet music, songsters, and broadsides; sound recordings; and published scholarly books and periodicals. For more information, visit [www.mtsu.edu/popmusic/](http://www.mtsu.edu/popmusic/).*

*The American Antiquarian Society (Worcester, MA), founded in 1812 by Revolutionary War patriot and printer Isaiah Thomas, holds the largest U.S. collection of books, pamphlets, broadsides, newspapers, periodicals, music, and graphic arts material printed through 1876. For more information, visit [www.americanantiquarian.org/](http://www.americanantiquarian.org/). For music-related items, enter “music” in the search box.*

## The Hole in the Wall

George W. Allen

Musical notation for "The Hole in the Wall" by George W. Allen. The piece is in 2/4 time and D major. It consists of four staves of music. The first staff starts with a treble clef, a key signature of two sharps (D major), and a common time signature. The melody is written in eighth and sixteenth notes. The second staff begins with a measure rest of 5. The third staff begins with a measure rest of 9. The fourth staff begins with a measure rest of 14 and ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

## Peggy's Favourite

George W. Allen

Musical notation for "Peggy's Favourite" by George W. Allen. The piece is in 2/4 time and B-flat major. It consists of four staves of music. The first staff starts with a treble clef, a key signature of two flats (B-flat major), and a common time signature. The melody is written in eighth and sixteenth notes. The second staff begins with a measure rest of 5. The third staff begins with a measure rest of 9 and includes a fermata over a note. The fourth staff begins with a measure rest of 14 and ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.