Making Authenticity: Polk Miller and the Evolution Of American Popular Culture

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Making Authenticity: Polk Miller and the Evolution Of American Popular Culture

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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ABSTRACT

MAKING AUTHENTICITY: POLK MILLER AND THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE.

By Jacques Bert Martin Vest, MA.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Director: John T. Kneebone, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Virginia Commonwealth University Department of History.

This thesis examines the life and musical career of James "Polk" Miller of Richmond Virginia, a Confederate veteran, and successful pharmacist. Miller claimed to offer the only authentic version of antebellum slave music, and was renowned as a convincing "negro delineator." In his focus on race, performance, and authenticity, Miller straddled a number of cultural currents linking him to his nineteenth century predecessors as well as the cultural milieu of the twentieth century. About the turn of the century, he added a black quartet to his act in order to more fully capture his conception of the "authentic" slave music of his youth, a decision that ultimately led to his failure as a stage performer. Audiences' receptions of Miller's quartet illuminate the dynamic way in which performance and race intersected in the early twentieth century.
Specificity and generality— the tension between these two tendencies presses uncomfortably on the historian, demanding from the history writer a resolution to a conflict of which the history reader is seldom conscious. The specific is, in most cases, banal and relatively unimportant in an historical sense, but lends itself to linearity and digestible narrative. The general often lacks human interest and is, after all, fatally flawed in its hobbling dependence on innumerable instances of the specific. Historical complexity, however, can only be expressed through generalities which collapse the bewildering infinitude of reality into trends, tendencies, movements, and statistics. It is incumbent upon the historian to satisfactorily reconcile these two opposing tendencies in a manner that preserves their virtues, while diminishing the effect of their shortcomings. History should be interesting. The rest can be left to the social sciences.

This project, essentially biographical in character, necessitated a very conscious approach to the questions of specificity and generality. Perennially favored by popular audiences, biographies have been dismissed as pedestrian by historians, ever intent to distinguish their craft from the trifling minutia of the antiquarian and the genealogist. Biography, they argue with some validity, slavishly elevates the individual, ignoring questions of broad historical importance. For their part, historians insist that individual actors and events be mustered only to demonstrate the authority of their generalizations. In and of themselves they are of dubious value. The reconciliation of specificity with generality, then, never presents as insuperable an obstacle as when the historian attempts to combine biography and history. The question arises: "why do it?"

This study of Polk Miller and his Old South Quartette has been, from the start, motivated
by one overriding consideration: my interest in Polk Miller and his Old South Quartette. His centrality in the grand motifs of American history only became clear to me in time. Polk Miller conspicuously exhibited a larger-than-life persona and a stiff-necked resistance to criticism, while his unparalleled capacity for political incorrectness was as offensive to some of his contemporaries as it is now. (Obnoxiousness seldom has such staying power). In all these aspects, Miller displayed the force of personality that always has and always will make for a good story.

While my interest in this project has been principally anchored in the desire for a good "story," it is my sincere belief that that story cannot be satisfactorily expressed as a one-track narrative. Consequently, the first two chapters deal almost exclusively with a biographical summation of Miller's life and work, from his childhood in Prince Edward County, Virginia until the turn of the twentieth-century. Chapters three and four contextualize Miller's career as a stage performer, first against the backdrop of American popular entertainment, and then within the larger realm of the era's ideological climate.

Beyond my desire to merely provide some of the hitherto missing facts of Miller's biography, my research was driven by two questions. First, what "message" was Polk Miller conveying? My assessment of Miller's "message" includes consideration of such overt manifestations as his published statements as well as more subtly sub-textual matters as the historical and ethnic provenance of his music. Secondly, how were Polk Miller and the Old South Quartette received? Unfortunately, reliable sales figures for Miller's records do not exist, but the press offers a record of how he was received by live audiences across the Eastern United States. Through the public's reaction to Miller's idiosyncratic blend of nineteenth century entertainments, a vista is opened on the mind of the early twentieth-century.
I would like to acknowledge the help of those parties without whom this project would have been very difficult to finish. Dr. John Kneebone guided me away from several dead-end roads in my research and tried valiantly to dissuade me from others. His guidance preserved my healthy skepticism when the allure of Polk Miller's self-promotion threatened to lull me into credulity. Dr. Joseph Bendersky has retained my services as his teaching assistant these past two years saving me from the indignity of a blue-collar job at which I was emasculatingly inept. I have often been the beneficiary of his thirty years of professional experience. Dr. Ryan Smith consented to serve as my second reader despite a busy schedule and has been generous in his advice, both academic and otherwise. Dr. Gregg Kimball's time—also preciously scarce—was given to me freely. Joseph Bayless III, has provided endless hours of enlightening conversation, a welcome reprieve from grading and research. I would like to thank John Deal at the Library of Virginia for his help in streamlining my writing and for taking the time to show an amateur how research is properly done. Ken Flaherty graciously supplied an extra copy of his *The Story and Music of Polk Miller and the Old South Quartette*, for my research. Leonard DeGraaf, archivist for the Thomas Edison National Historical Park, helped me to make the best of a wild goose chase. Special thanks are extended to Caleb Carico and Bella Carico, both hardworking scholars in their own right. Their company is sorely missed. My family has provided food, shelter, and money when they were scarce and sanctuary when troubles were legion. Finally, I would like to thank the Architect whose handiwork is the eternally whirring machinations of causality. All of human history is but a manifestation of His underlying order, and the historian's job is to reverse engineer the latter to discern the former.

**Chapter One:**
From Grape Lawn to Gotham.

In February, 1894 Mark Twain appeared before an audience in New York’s Madison Square Garden. Partway through the program, the world-renowned author and humorist paused as he recognized a familiar face in the crowd and then motioned for the anonymous spectator to mount the boards. Over the footlights sprang a sprightly middle aged man possessing the swagger of a farm hand and the rigid personal bearing of an old-time doctor. As the mustachioed stranger straightened his waistcoat, Twain slapped a hand across his shoulder and introduced his guest to the crowd. “Mr. Miller is thoroughly competent to entertain you with his sketches of the old-time Negro, and I not only commend him to your intelligent notice but personally endorse him.”

The stately stranger was none other than Polk Miller, a native Virginian on whom the inscrutable will of the show-business fates had recently bestowed a measure of fame. His stage show- an inimitable mixture of song and lecture delivered in African American dialect- had met with immediate success on his performing debut two years earlier, and had only grown in fame since. Though legions of nineteenth century minstrels and vaudevillians had also exploited black stereotypes for the entertainment of white audiences, a self-conscious didacticism that squared comfortably with the moralizing Victorian sensibility of the day distinguished Miller's show. Expressing disdain for the minstrel's onstage demeanor, Miller presented himself as the consummate gentleman, always appearing in formal attire and playing almost exclusively to middle class audiences.

“Old Times Down South,” as he called it, presented a version of historical memory and

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an understanding of race rooted in an idealized conception of the antebellum South. As he nodded in acceptance of Twain’s New York introduction, Miller could take satisfaction in more than a professional endorsement of himself as an entertainer. His Southern worldview had been affirmed in the very heart of yankeedom. Within a decade, however, Miller did something that horrified audiences, and which resulted in the cancellation of many performances. This unprecedented move on Miller’s part transformed the nature of his show, placing it within a specifically elite Virginian tradition with which his geographically disparate and socio-economically diverse audience could not identify. Miller, chastened by the negative reaction, retired from the road, bringing to close an eminently fascinating, if largely forgotten chapter of the history of American music.

Polk was born James Agnew Miller on 2 August 1844 at Grape Lawn, his family’s estate near Old Burkeville in Prince Edward County. The fifth child of Giles A. and Jane Webster Miller, he was the most recent addition to a family whose claim to elite-status was unquestionable.² His grandfather A.P. Miller had operated a tavern in Old Burkeville from around 1800 until 1822, and had served as justice and as the first commissioner of schools in Prince Edward County. A financial panic in 1837 threw A.P.’s finances into turmoil precipitating the failure of at least one of his firms. The ownership of another company was transferred to Polk’s father in order to protect its assets.³ Despite these economic vicissitudes, the Millers persisted in affluence until the Civil War. By 1860, Giles Miller had acquired over 1300 acres of land in Prince Edward County valued at over $35,000.⁴ Like his father, Giles

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⁴ Tim Brooks, Lost Sounds: Blacks and the Birth of the Recording Industry. 1890-1919 (Champaign: University of
Miller would occupy important offices at the local and state levels serving as a justice in Prince Edward County and as a member of the Virginia General Assembly.

Born into this unequivocally patrician family, James Miller very early exhibited the unrestrained individualism that would characterize his adult life. As a response to a bout of “particularly unruly” behavior he received the sobriquet by which he became universally known-Polk. Though sources conflict over the exact details of how the infant received the name there is accordance on two points. First, the name was taken from James K. Polk, the recently nominated democratic presidential candidate. Second, the Miller family strongly disliked James K. Polk.5

As a youth in Prince Edward County, Miller spent a great deal of time with his father’s slaves honing his talents as an athlete and an outdoorsman.6 More importantly he developed a deep-seated fascination for their speech and music, learning to play that quintessentially African-American instrument- the banjo.7 Miller's willingness to engage with his father's slaves was likely facilitated by his disregard for social convention as well as his natural curiosity in the

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6 Throughout his life, Polk Miller would remain an avid hunter and outdoorsman. Miller's surviving scrapbooks would seem to suggest that by the late 1880s he was an acknowledged expert on the outdoors and his wisdom was regularly given voice in the era's periodicals. Game laws, the training of hunting dogs, gun selection, even conservation all fell within his area of expertise. In the late 1880s Miller served as Vice President of the Virginia Field Sports Association before being elected as president of the organization in 1889. Miller was further able to capitalize on his reputation as both a druggist and an outdoorsman to promote his signature line of dog remedies. In his capacity as a veterinarian pharmacist he was possibly more widely known than as a musician. From an unidentified clipping in his scrapbook: “Polk Miller, of Richmond, Va., is probably the most famous sportsman in the state of Virginia. He knows a dog from A to Z. He has studied their every requirement, and therefore when the reader is informed that he has made a specialty of dog remedies, and that his remedies sell as standard throughout the country, this is not to be wondered at.” Eventually, Miller names his pet remedy line "Sergeant's" after a favorite hunting dog, and after his death the company was sold off. The company is still in operation under the name Sergeant's Pet Care Products, Incorporated and purports to be "one of America's oldest and most respected manufacturers and marketers of pet supplies.” Miller's role as an outdoorsman and a purveyor of pet remedies is an area worthy of research, but outside the purview of this study. It cites the 1868 establishment of Polk Miller & Company as their founding date. Forest and Stream (New York: November 1, 1888.) Forest and Stream (New York: November 13, 1890.) Polk's Small Scrapbook. Website of Sergeant's Pet Care Products, Incorporated: http://www.sergeants.com.
world around him.

The rural environs of Miller’s childhood, however, offered but a dismal prospect for the future. Being the youngest of five brothers,\(^8\) his hopes for inheriting an adequate estate were minimal. In 1860 he moved to Richmond where he assumed an apprenticeship in the drug firm Meade and Baker.\(^9\) In later years Miller would joke about his experiences as a druggist’s apprentice. A Roanoke, Virginia, paper recounted a "discourse" delivered by Miller at the 9 September 1891 meeting of the Pharmacist’s Council.

He said drug clerks of the present day didn't know what work was, such as scrubbing, cleaning mirrors, etc., and told of his own experience in saturating two of his three shirts in one day, and trying to save the third by putting the New York Herald inside the bosom, but in an hour the Herald could have been read through the shirt.\(^{10}\)

For the next three decades Polk Miller’s banjo would languish as its owner discharged the duties of soldier and citizen. When the conflagration of war ignited the Union in 1861 Miller had not reached his majority, but by the age of nineteen he had enlisted with the home guard with whom he reportedly participated in repelling the attack on Richmond by Dahlgren’s Raiders. Miller himself was probably the source of an anecdote that related the circumstances surrounding his enlistment with the regular army. As retold in several retrospective newspaper articles, the First Lady of the Confederacy, Varina Davis, patronized Miller’s employer, the drug firm of Meade and Baker, where the young apprentice waited on her. Flushed with excitement an ebullient Miller once told the First Lady that he was going to enlist with the Confederate forces, much to her consternation. Several days later an order from Jefferson Davis arrived, directing the young man to remain in his position at the store. Miller disregarded the order and enlisted. Likely apocryphal the story is nonetheless consistent with Miller's impish, irreverent

\(^{10}\) Unidentified Roanoke Newspaper, September 11, 1891.
attitude to the mandates of societal expectations.\textsuperscript{11}

Miller's tenure at Meade and Baker ended in 1864 when he joined the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Richmond Howitzers as a private. He was stationed north of the James River until he was sent to the Shenandoah Valley that August, where he served under Jubal Early. The following winter, he was shipped back east where he helped man the earthworks around Petersburg until the city's evacuation that spring. Following Appomattox and a short stint farming in Amelia County, Miller returned to Richmond.\textsuperscript{12}

Now employed by the drug firm of Powhatan Dupuy, he made preparations to strike out on his own. In 1868 he started Polk Miller & Co., a mail-order drug supplier while still in the employ of Powhatan Dupuy, but in 1871 he quit the firm in order to open his own drugstore. Originally operating out of a building at Fifth and Marshall Streets, the enterprise eventually outgrew the structure and was moved to 834 Main Street.\textsuperscript{13}

Having achieved a degree of financial security, Miller married Maude Lee Withers on 29 November of the same year soon thereafter joining her church, Richmond's Second Presbyterian, on "confession of faith."\textsuperscript{14} In subsequent years Miller experienced unmitigated financial success, operating his drugstore and watching as his mail-order business flourished. In 1887 he was made a deacon at Second Presbyterian Church, and his wife was made president of the Lady's Benevolent Society, a philanthropic organization associated with the Church. Both appointments

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{Confederate Military History Vol. IV}. Miller's son, Withers authored a short biographical sketch of his father which conflicts on some points with this source. Notably, Withers Miller contends that his father rushed off to join the Confederate Army as soon as he reached his majority. It is more likely that the cited source is more accurate on this matter.
\textsuperscript{14} Wyndham Bolling Blanton, \textit{The Making of a Downtown Church,: The History of the Second Presbyterian Church, Richmond, Virginia, 1845-1945}, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1946), 380.
\end{flushright}
were illustrative of the Millers’ growing esteem within the Richmond community.\textsuperscript{15} By 1890, Polk Miller and his wife had entered the ranks of Richmond’s bourgeoisie; he presiding over his expanding pharmaceutical empire, and she over a household that now included a teenage son and daughter.\textsuperscript{16} That year, Withers, the Millers’ son, earned a degree in pharmacy and was taken into his father’s business\textsuperscript{17} freeing Polk from some of his professional responsibility, and allowing him time to enjoy some of the rewards of an industrious life.

The previous year, the Millers had moved to Bon Air, a fashionable ascendant neighborhood several miles outside of Richmond in Chesterfield County that boasted a direct railroad connection to the city. Originally a summer resort, the village traced its beginnings to the incorporation of the Bon Air Land and Improvement Company in 1877. Thomas Talcott, president of the company, described the resort in language that made clear the enterprise's targeted demographic. According to Talcott, the Company sought

"[t]o establish a rural village near the metropolis of the State which will afford a convenient and desirable home for some and an attractive and healthy place of resort for others. To invite the presence only of persons whose tastes and habits of life cannot be gratified otherwise than by regulations suitable to insure the prevalence of morality, order, and health."

Bon Air Hotel, the center of the resort, burned in 1889 and instigated the village's shift from a vacation destination to one almost exclusively inhabited by fulltime residents, but the settlement retained its thoroughly middle-class character.

Miller, freshly emancipated from his responsibilities as a shopkeeper sought constructive uses for his free time, but his adult life had been defined by his work. He had had little opportunity to develop a palate for the urbane entertainments of many of his neighbors.

Consequently, he turned to those interests he had cultivated as a young man in the Southside. In

\textsuperscript{15} Blanton, 200,353.
\textsuperscript{16} Withers Miller, \textit{Biography of Polk Miller} (unpublished), Valentine Richmond History Center, Richmond, Virginia.
\textsuperscript{17} Brooks, 218.
\textsuperscript{18} Mary Ann Talbot, \textit{Bon Air}, (Richmond: Mary Ann Talbott, 1969), 7.
1883 he had helped found the Virginia Field Sports Association, an organization dedicated to furthering the interests of the Old Dominion's hunters. That year he was selected as the Association's president, but it appears that his involvement with the organization intensified in the years leading up to his retirement.\textsuperscript{19} Miller capitalized on the prestige of the organization's presidency in order to place his views on hunting before the public, and his authoritative letters were published by national magazines such as American Field, the Sporting Review, and Amateur Sportsman. The proper method of training dogs,\textsuperscript{20} the necessity of stricter game laws,\textsuperscript{21} seasonal hunting prospects,\textsuperscript{22} rifle selection,\textsuperscript{23} and any number of other subjects fell within President Miller's purview. His acumen as an outdoorsman, however, was more than self-important bluster. A June 1891 article in The Amateur Sportsman characterizes Miller as an expert on such matters:

\begin{quote}
To all men who love to ramble through the countryside with dog and gun the name of Polk Miller is familiar. It belongs to a prominent and enthusiastic gentleman, who is recognized by sportsmen as an authority on all subjects relating to field sports or the preservation of game. Mr. Miller is an able writer, on all matters that relate to the dog or gun...\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

Nor did his expertise go unrecognized at home in Richmond. The 26 November 1891 edition of the State related an anecdote concerning two local hunters who bagged an unidentifiable waterfowl in the vicinity of the city. The men brought their kill to the office of the State in order to have the bird's species determined, but it was decided that Miller was the only man in Richmond who could identify the animal. He arrived too late to render his verdict before press time, but a

\textsuperscript{19} "Polk Miller," The Amateur Sportsman, June, 1891, 51. Polk Miller's small scrapbook contains many articles and letters submitted by Miller to sportsman's magazines. Many of these are submitted by Miller acting in his capacity as the president of the Virginia Field Sports Association. It appears that around the beginning of the last decade of the nineteenth century, Miller began spending much more time on these matters. This is consistent with other known facts of his life.

\textsuperscript{20} Polk Miller, "Over-trained Dogs," unidentified newspaper clipping from Polk Miller's Scrapbook, (V.2000.4.16), Valentine Richmond History Center, Richmond, Virginia, 7.

\textsuperscript{21} Polk Miller, "Necessity for Game Laws in Virginia," unidentified newspaper clipping in small scrapbook page 7.

\textsuperscript{22} Polk Miller, "Game in Virginia," American Field, March 29, 1890.

\textsuperscript{23} Polk Miller, "Letter to the Editor," American Field, July 25, 1891.

\textsuperscript{24} "Polk Miller," The Amateur Sportsman, June, 1891, 51.
note in his scrapbook triumphantly declares the bird a "'loon.'"  

Miller's enthusiasm for hunting, however, had always been tempered by a countervailing consideration- "respectability." In the 7 May 1898 edition of the Richmond Dispatch, he explained that love of the hunt had not always been associated with the patrician elites.

A great change has come over our people in the last forty years, too, with regard to hunting. This is a day when those who undertook to cry down athletic sports have been sent to the rear. I remember the time when the man who went hunting had to be as quiet about it as possible, for if a clerk asked for a day off, and got it, and his employer found out he had gone hunting, he would be discharged as a 'good for nothing.' Now, it is a very common thing to see young men and boys walking along our streets dressed in their hunting clothes and one or more dogs following them to the railroad station. I remember the time when I had to take the train on the Manchester side of the river… and in returning from the field, if my train got back before it was plum dark I was afraid to come into Richmond till all the old business-men had gone home.

How long the young Miller had held out before sneaking out of Richmond to hunt is unclear, but by middle-age a liberalized societal attitude toward the pastime had obviated his secrecy. In a similar fashion he had abstained from his other beloved hobby- music. Miller later recounted how, for years, he had wished to resume his childhood musical pursuits.

I was soon so mixed up in 'physics' that I didn't have time to keep up with my music. Indeed, I wouldn't tell anybody that I even “knowed how” to play the banjo because it was looked upon as a 'nigger insterment' and beneath the notice of the cultivated. For years I longed for the time when it would come in fashion, and I could play on my favorite musical instrument without disgracing myself in the eyes of my city friends...

Torn between his creative impulse and his desire to adhere to Victorian standards of decorum Miller sought a "respectable" remedy for his boredom. He eventually succumbed to the lure of music and began playing for charitable events at local churches. Still, the occasional benefit concert did not provide a sufficient outlet for his creativity. On 8 October 1889 he and Mrs. Miller attended their first meeting of the Bon Air Chautauqua Society, an organization

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25 "Polk Miller Called in,” The Richmond State, November 26, 1891.
26 "For People Who Love Dogs,” Richmond Dispatch, May 7, 1898.
27 Brooks, 118.
committed to the discussion of science, literature, and history.\textsuperscript{28} What had been intended as a stimulating diversion for the retiree, however, soon proved to be his entrée into a world drastically different from the one he had always known. Polk Miller, druggist and respected denizen of the South, was poised to leave behind the Victorian parlors of Bon Air for a life on the road.

Perhaps no other fad underscored the turn-of-the-century preoccupation with self-improvement as aptly as Chautauqua. In 1874 Reverend John Heyl Vincent had started a Methodist retreat on the shore of New York's Lake Chautauqua. Originally the retreat was intended as a summer institute focusing on religious life, but by the end of the decade Vincent had broadened its focus to include enlightening diversions as well as non-religious education. Secular entertainments combined with the moral sanction of a religious affiliation caused an explosion in the retreat's popularity and in four years attendance climbed from forty to five-hundred. By 1900 thousands of men, women, and children crowded the banks of Lake Chautauqua for the annual event.\textsuperscript{29}

In 1878 Vincent set out to carry his campaign of public enlightenment to the hinterland with the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle. Intended as a home-study course for those deprived of a formal education, the C.L.S.C. was wildly popular with isolated rural Americans. By 1900 more than 2,500,000 were enrolled.\textsuperscript{30} Despite its appeal to isolated prairie farmers, the C.L.S.C also found adherents among the urban elite who often formed their own local chapters of the "Circle." One such organization was founded in Bon Air in 1885 seeking "to promote a closer acquaintance and more intimate fellowship among the C.L.S.C. readers of Bon Air, to

\textsuperscript{28} Minutes of the Bon Air Chautauqua Society, Albert S. Jahnke Papers Collection, Manuscript 34, Valentine Richmond History Center.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
stimulate and encourage each other [sic], to further the interests of the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, and to extend its works by all proper means. “31

The gregarious Miller likely welcomed the chance to associate with his peers in an environment promising elevation and refinement. The Chautauqua Society’s usual fare, however, failed to excite his imagination. For four years, he remained in the society, but participated half-heartedly and often missed its weekly meetings. On 21 June 1892 Polk Miller performed at the Chautauqua Society’s annual closing ceremony, evidently presenting the banjo tunes and dialect recitals he had so long hidden from his respectable neighbors. The reception was unequivocally positive. Sometime soon after it appears that Miller made his decision to pursue music fulltime. 32

When Polk Miller decided to take to the road he was forty seven years old. He enjoyed the life of a well-respected pharmacist, lived in one of Richmond's most fashionable neighborhoods, and associated with the city's cultural, political, and social elite. In short, he lacked every incitement that generally drives the young and penniless to join the reckless desperate fraternity of traveling entertainers. But he did.

Though Miller had long been hesitant to expose himself as a banjo player this was not his first foray into the music industry. He was already quite popular as a performer at charity events, and in 1890 he had published a song entitled "I'm Going Back to Old Virginnie." It was introduced by George Wilson's Minstrels on 15 August of that year at the Lynchburg Opera House. Miller may have published songs prior to "I'm Going Back," but it appears that this composition garnered a degree of attention unreached by any of his earlier works. Just two days

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31 Minutes of the Bon Air Chautauqua Society.
32 Minutes of the Bon Air Chautauqua Society.
after the first live performance of "I'm Going Back," a Baltimore manager penned him a letter:  

Dear Sir- What is the prospect and on what terms can four persons, two females and two males, be engaged for church and hall concerts?... I can get colored singers here, but desire Southern singers for plantation and jubilee songs... I would like you to form one of them as you are a fine banjo player.  

Miller was amused at being mistaken for an African American, but the letter may have represented the genesis of what would become a consuming ambition on the part of the middle-aged Richmonder. He replied:

...No doubt your [sic] have heard of me through the newspapers as a banjer-picker, and naturally concluded that I was a 'nigger.' I have appeared several times on the stage not for the money that is in it, but because churches for miles around called on me to help a good cause... I must decline your flattering offer, but if I should fail at the drug business, and 'git so ole an' feeble dat I cannot see my way,' I may call on you for a job.  

Less than two years later, Miller handed Polk Miller Drug Company over to the management of Withers and started accepted bookings around Virginia. What follows is a reconstruction of Miller's life from the summer of 1892 until the spring of 1899. Miller's scrapbooks are the primary source for this information meaning that the narrative will suffer from certain inherent biases. First, since his scrapbooks contain mostly newspaper clippings, the events recorded are overwhelmingly representative of his public life. Miller's role as a father and husband, his personal predilections, his non-professional travels- all are largely absent from the record. Secondly, these scrapbooks present a problem in that their contents were selected by Miller. Far from a representative sampling of his press coverage, then, one would expect to find materials which evince approval of the man and his entertainment. Generally, they do. Lastly, it appears that many show dates were not included in the scrapbook, not a surprising revelation given the extent of Miller's travels and the number of dates he played in this period. This schedule, then, makes no pretense to completeness, but will provide an excellent starting point.

33 "Polk Miller, 'Banjo Player,'" clipping from an unidentified Richmond newspaper, Polk Miller's Scrapbook, (V.2000.4.16), 1.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
for further research into Miller's career.

As if testing the waters, Miller initially stuck close to home, performing at engagements around the Old Dominion. On 22 July 1892, he performed at Amelia Courthouse accompanied by a quartet whose members included two of his brothers. The quartet sang several unspecified numbers and Miller delivered his "character delineations." On 31 August, Miller appeared at Buffalo Ridge Springs in Nelson County, Virginia, accompanied by a trio of singers. The entertainment was held as a benefit for the purpose of raising money for a "Virginia Building" at the Chicago World's Fair the following year - the state legislature's appropriation for the project being too little. Oddly, sources do not mention Miller and his trio performing as an ensemble, opting instead for various solo pieces. Again, Miller performed several recitations in African American dialect. On 12 October, Miller performed at a concert at the Petersburg Academy of Music for the A.P. Hill Camp of Confederate Veterans, who wished to raise money for a monument to their namesake. Frank Walker, E.H. Clowes, and Tony Miller accompanied Polk in addition to other unidentified "gentlemen." It appears that on this occasion the Miller troupe did perform in ensemble. The first act of "War Scenes" opens with a nostalgic tableau depicting

...a parlor scene, in which the officers of a southern regiment on their way to the front, pending the transfer of their commands, call upon their friends of the fairer sex. In this scene a very pretty musical programme is rendered ... Every ballad that was sung was either of a sentimental nature, or else suggestive of war times...

These sentimental ballads were performed solo by Miller and others. The second act featured dialect skits by Miller who told jokes, sang songs, and "personated old Uncle Cephas, who 'blonged t' Marse Charley F'od fum Pow'tan County.'" Likewise, Frank Walker rendered his own "negro delineation" through the medium of a character named "Ephram." Finally, "Polk Miller's troupe of darkies sang delightfully, and their break-downs and plantations songs were

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applauded…” The *Petersburg Index-Appeal* identified Miller not only as a performer in this production, but identified him as its manager.37

21 November 1892 found Miller in Danville, Virginia, performing "negro recitations" and "dialect songs" with his "chorus" for the benefit of the Home for the Sick.38 Two weeks later "War Scenes" was performed at the Richmond Academy of Music, but this time for the benefit of Miller's own organization, the Robert E. Lee Camp of Confederate Veterans.39 Around this time, Miller also appeared at Christmas assemblies for the Old-Market Sunday School as well as for the children of Second Presbyterian Church, both in Richmond.40 Miller continued performing at benefit engagements after the first of the year. He helped raise funds to purchase an organ for the Gwathmey Baptist Church on 17 February 1893. The Ashland performance-held at a private residence- was received well. 21 February found Miller at Williamsburg's Cameron Hall performing for the benefit of that city's Methodist Church. The show on that occasion consisted of several solos rendered by Mrs. Knowles, Mrs. J. Emory Shaw, Professor Smith, and Professor Shaw. Miller recited in "negro dialect" between the solos, receiving several encores, during one of which he sang a "plantation song full of rich melody."41

On 8 March, Miller returned to the Richmond Mozart Academy but with an act substantially different from the one he had presented in December. A benefit for the Pickett Camp cottage fund, the show consisted of two parts. The first "comprised of a highly

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40 "The Season's Joys," clipping from an unidentified newspaper, Polk Miller's Scrapbook, (V.2000.4.16), 42.
entertaining variety of plantation scenes songs, jigs, dances and general negro comicalities… interspersed with excellent solo singing by Mrs. Emory Shaw and Miss Taylor… and quartette numbers…”

The second half of the entertainment "opened with a splendid tableaux of the burial of Latané, and closed with a life representation of Confederate camp life, a sham battle, and a tableaux in which the enemy are showing a flag of truce."  

The Clifton Forge Minstrels joined the Polk Miller Combination onstage in Clifton Forge on 21 March 1893 to raise more funds for forthcoming Columbian Exposition. By this date, however, these funds were being intended to ensure proper representation of Allegheny County at the event. The Polk Miller Combination, for this performance, consisted of Polk, his brother Tony, son Withers, Professor H.F. Smith, Shepard Webb, C.H. Jordan, and E.E. Clowes. All sang solos, and Miller performed songs and recitations in dialect. The Combination also reportedly "gave evidence of their skill in handling such musical instruments as the mandolin, the guitar, the banjo, and the zither." Professor Smith was lauded for his acrobatic ability "as his exhibition on the horizontal bar gave proof." Together with the prior performance in Clifton Forge, Miller's efforts helped to raise over $100 dollars. By this time Miller estimated that his charitable work had raised over $12,000 in the preceding fifteen months.  

Miller's final spring performance in 1893 was before a Washington, D.C., audience on 20 April 1893 for the benefit of the Southern Relief Society—an organization dedicated to alleviating poverty among Confederate veterans. The engagement was held at Willard Hall and apparently featured his dialect recitations as well as music—notably a performance by Miller of his own composition, "I'm Goin' Back to Old Virginnie." It was Miller's first out-of-state performance, and both the *Richmond Times* and *Richmond Dispatch* carried articles documenting the hometown hero's first

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42 “For Pickett Cottage,” *Richmond Times*, March 9, 1893.
43 Ibid.
long-distance engagement. 45

Though his performances were wildly successful, Miller initially had little interest in turning professional. On 23 February 1893 an editorial in the Richmond State reported that he preferred to attend to his “business interests” and wished to continue performing as an amateur. 46 The summer of 1893, however, marked Miller's first anniversary on the platform, a milestone that seems to have spurred him into a reassessment of his career as an entertainer. Possibly buoyed by the smashing success of his trip to Washington Miller signed with the Southern Lyceum Bureau, 47 and agreed to several high-profile engagements beginning with a performance before the Atlanta Chautauqua Society on 14 and 15 July. The Richmond elite's excitement at having their own "distinguished fellow-citizen" recognized as a performer of national interest is evidenced by a Richmond State article from 26 May 1893.

Our distinguished fellow-citizen, Mr. Polk Miller, is billed to lecture before the Atlanta Chautauqua, June 12th… Mr. Miller is one of Richmond's best-known institutions; the pride of all circles and the joy of his own, and is a modern admirable "Crichton." That he will do himself proud at Atlanta no one of his admiring townsmen will doubt, and when he turns his chin music on the cultivated Chautauquans, they will hear English as she was spoken in the good old slavery days way down in old Virginny, and be edified thereby. 48

It is unclear whether the article misquoted the date of Miller's forthcoming Atlanta performance or if the date was eventually changed. What is clear, however, is that his platform career was of interest to at least some people in Richmond. His decision to turn semi-professional, however, necessitated a change in the basic structure of his performance. No longer able to rely on the amateur troupe of performers he had assembled for local bookings, he developed a solo act best characterized as a "lecture" or "address." The skits which had

46 "Polk Miller's Fun," editorial in the Richmond State, February 23, 1893.
47 No materials linking Miller to the Southern Lyceum Bureau exist until later that summer. It seems only reasonable that Miller was booked for a Chautauqua event through the Bureau given the historical linkages between lyceum and Chautauqua. (Chautauqua monograph page 8)
48 "Polk Miller to Lecture," The Richmond State, May 26, 1893.
constituted such a large portion of "War Scenes" were now impossible. His new act would focus
solely on that one theme that had fascinated him since his childhood days in Prince Edward
County—the music and character of the African-American. His lecture, entitled "The Old
Virginia Plantation Negro," was received with intense interest by the people of Atlanta.49

In September of 1893 Miller traveled to Chicago to perform at the Columbian
Exposition,50 an experience that seems to have thrilled the middle-aged pharmacist. From
September 12th to the 14th, Miller performed with Judge F.R. Farrar as "two old-time Virginians"
at the Exposition's Texas Building. Ironically, Miller was still performing for charity, this time
for the benefit of the Virginia Mount Vernon Building,51 which, it was hoped, could be
disassembled and shipped to the Commonwealth to be permanently erected.52 Returning to
Richmond, he described the World's Fair in language that revealed his excitement

> It is beyond human power to give such a description of the World's Fair as to convey an
intelligent idea of its grandeur... Words are inadequate to give the faintest conception of its splendor. I was not only carried away with everything I saw but feel that the people of
Chicago deserve the highest praise for the manner in which they have done their work...53

With his wanderlust temporarily sated, Miller curbed his travelling for the month of
October. He played to a packed house at Lynchburg's Y.M.C.A. on 17 October 1893, delivering
his recitations as well as songs with banjo accompaniment, and on 26 October he played at
Washington's Williams Hall.54 The latter date was another benefit for the Southern Relief
Society and Miller was squeezed onto a bill with several other performers. In Miller's first
contribution to the program he delivered a lecture entitled "What I Know about the Old

49 "The Negro," interview with Polk Miller from The Atlanta Constitution, July 16, 1893. "Good Stories," The
Atlanta Herald, July 16, 1893.
50 Polk Miller's Scrapbook, (V.2000.4.16), pg 89.
51 "Old Times in the South," flyer in Polk Miller's Scrapbook, (V.2000.4.16), 69.
52 "Will Appear at the Fair," clipping from an unidentified newspaper, Polk Miller's Scrapbook, (V.2000.4.16), pg
90.
53 "Polk Miller's Views," The Richmond Times, undated.
54 "Mr. Polk Miller's Entertainment," The Lynchburg News, October 18, 1893. "An Enjoyable Entertainment," The
Lynchburg Advance, October 19, 1893. "Southern Relief Entertainment," program for Miller's October 26, 1893
entertainment in Washington's Williams Hall, Polk Miller's Scrapbook, (V.2000.4.16), page 75.
Plantation Negro: With comparison between the Darkey of the Olden Time and the Darkey of To-day." His second performance of the night was a selection of "plantation songs" played with banjo accompaniment.

For November 1893, documents are only extant for three performances by Polk Miller. On 13 November he shared a bill with the Old Dominion Symphony Club - an aggregation consisting of mandolin, mandola, and guitar players. Despite the looming possibility of inclement weather, Richmond's Corcoran Hall was packed to hear Miller and the Old Dominion Symphony Club perform for the benefit of the Ladies' Aid Society of Third Presbyterian Church. It appears that Miller only lectured at this engagement. On the 16th he performed at a benefit concert for the Capital City Lodge, number 101 of the International Order of Odd Fellows. Staged at the city's Y.M.C.A., the show featured the Polk Miller Quintette, "a number of reputable singers of the city," and the Old Dominion Symphony Club. For their part, the Polk Miller Quintet performed several numbers as an ensemble and solo, while Miller himself delivered a lecture concerning "recollections of the old plantation negro, an original treatise on the characteristics of the antebellum darkey."

December found him taking to the road again. On the fifth, he ventured to Wilmington, Delaware, where he expounded on the nature of the "Old Issue Darkey," at the New Century Club. Staged for the benefit of the King's Daughters, a charity group, Miller's entertainment that night consisted of stories and songs, but also touched on one of Miller's favorite tropes - the inadequacy of most whites in reproducing the idiosyncratic "negro dialect."

[[Miller] said that the writer of dialect stories and especially Northern writers of dialect stories and negro minstrels had made millions laugh with their imitations of the darkey, but their imitations were not always true. "No darkey," he said, "used such expressions as 'dis,' 'He am,' 'She am.' The darkey was naturally a musician and such expressions would offend

55 "Polk Miller Talks," The Richmond Times, November 14, 1893.
Miller's considered his own "negro dialect," however, to be true to form, and one of few that could do justice to the "old-time negro." Nevertheless, at least one observer at the New Century Club that night found Miller's version lacking, writing "[t]he lecture would have been better if Mr. Miller had pursued a more definite plan, and added to his characteristic pronunciation some of the caricature which it has produced." The writer had clearly not understood how important the claim of authenticity was to the Virginian.

His brand of mimicry was evidently more appreciated back home in central Virginia. His next engagement brought him to Petersburg's Academy of Music, where he presented his solo act in that city for the first time on 1 December, 1893. Writing of that performance, a reporter for the *Index-Appeal* stated that "[t]he entertainment was a most decided success, and proves that Mr. Miller can make his delineations of negro dialect and character as perfect in a dress suit as in a disguise of burnt cork." On 12 December he was back home in Richmond performing for the benefit of Laurel Street Methodist Church at the Y.M.C.A. That night's bill featured the "Polk Miller Combination and Centenary Church Choir," but Miller likely performed an act very similar to the solo performance he had been honing while on the road. His next appearance occurred two nights later at Williamsburg's Cameron Hall. The program for that evening featured nine acts and listed Miller's contribution simply as "Negro Dialect." By now he had gained confidence as a performer and seldom appeared as part of a vocal or dramatic ensemble as he had earlier. He continued his string of solo performances at a Bazaar in West Point, Virginia, on 19 December.

A benefit show for Richmond's Free Dispensary, General and Emergency Hospital necessitated the resurrection of "Confederate War Scenes,"—Miller's earlier three act production. On 22 December, the show was again staged before an audience at Mozart Academy, and Miller again performed as "Cephas," an African-American cook during the Civil War. The Hospital benefit was likely Miller's last performance for the year.60

By the end of January 1894 Miller had again taken to the road, performing a string of dates in the Hampton Roads region of Virginia. He gave his "recital on 'The Old Issue Darkey'" and played banjo and sang at Hampton's Armory Hall on 25 January. On the 29th he appeared at Norfolk's Academy of Music for the benefit of McKendree Methodist Episcopal Church. Unfortunately, the audience was disappointingly small due to inclement weather. He ventured inland on 31 January, performing his recitation at Louisa's Piedmont Theater, before returning to the Hampton Roads area two nights later for a performance at Newport News's Johnson Hall.

The entertainments at Hampton and Newport News were both presented under the auspices of the Y.M.C.A. Miller returned home to Richmond with a 6 February performance for the benefit of Christ Episcopal Church's infant room. As was usually his custom when performing in Richmond he was accompanied by the Polk Miller Combination, and a highlight of the evening was the rendering of "Angel Song" by solo guitarist S.R. Crowder.61

In the early days of 1894 he parted ways with the Southern Lyceum Bureau, and was

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henceforth managed by fellow Richmond performer H.F. Smith who also served as the physical instructor to the Young Men's Christian Association. The change of course appears to have done little to slow Miller's momentum. Smith used his connections with the Y.M.C.A. to secure for his client a long string of performances at local chapters, soliciting every Y.M.C.A. in the state with freshly printed promotional materials extolling Miller's virtues.62

As Miller entered into the work of "negro delineation" in 1894 he could only have foreseen more success and public acclaim. He could not have known, however, that before the year had ended an encounter in New York City would redefine his public image forever.

Henceforth, newspaper accounts detailing the curious advent of Miller's fame would focus on his appearance at Madison Square Garden as the event that ensured his success as an entertainer of national importance.

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62 Circular from H.F. Smith sent to every Y.M.C.A secretary in the state of Virginia, small Scrapbook, 117. "He was guided to his post..." The Richmond Dispatch, April 1, 1894.
Chapter Two:
The Indefatigable Polk Miller.

In late February 1894 Miller ventured north to New York apparently for the purpose of appearing at the University Club of New York. At some point, however, he was asked to supplant a sick attendee at the annual banquet of the Southern Society of New York on 22 February. He gave a well-received performance of an unspecified nature at the banquet and then appeared two nights later before the University Club as planned, evidently impressing James Whitcomb Riley who was in attendance. When Miller later attended a performance by Riley and Mark Twain at Madison Square Garden on February 26 or 27 he may or may not have been aware that Riley had told Twain of his prowess as an entertainer. He also may or may not have known that Twain intended to call him on to the stage for a sample of his act. 63

Whether or not he had expected to be called to the stage that night Miller's act, in the parlance of the stage performer, killed. Those attending had come to be entertained. No one had invited him, and the audience did not owe him the deference afforded a performer working for charity. Basking in the approbation of 2,000 discriminating attendees, Miller could not have failed to comprehend the trans-regional nature of his appeal—nor could anyone else. Miller's hit at Madison Square Garden seems to have catalyzed more interest in his act in the north. Following his introduction at Madison Square Garden he returned to the north in late March. At New York's Waldorf Hotel he was a guest at the Saint Nicholas Society's annual Paas 64 on 26 March 1894. He refrained from a full performance, merely delivering a laudatory address on the

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64 The Paas is an Easter celebration of Dutch origin featuring the smoking of clay pipes and the cracking of dyed Easter eggs.
national virtues of the Dutch.\textsuperscript{65} Two nights later, Miller returned to Wilmington, Delaware, for another appearance before the New Century Club. This time the event was for the benefit of the "home for incurable women," and Miller was accompanied onstage by the Webb Quartet of Richmond as well as several other unnamed instrumentalists. Afterwards he and his party were entertained at the home of Mrs. Andrew G. Wilson. The evening of 29 March found Miller back in New York where he entertained the Hamilton Club of Brooklyn.\textsuperscript{66}

Arriving back home in Richmond on 31 March Miller wasted no time in venturing southward, as if to revitalize his waning "southerness," to replenish that which his northern friends had cheerfully siphoned out of him. He set out almost immediately for a tour of North Carolina, beginning with an engagement in Weldon on 2 April where he delivered "songs and dialect negro stories" at Emry's Hall. He appeared in Littleton, on the 3\textsuperscript{rd} and in Henderson on the 4\textsuperscript{th}. A "very large" Raleigh, North Carolina, audience greeted Miller on the 5\textsuperscript{th} at Metropolitan Hall, and the following night he performed at the Salisbury courthouse, finishing his scheduled performances in the Old North State. On this final North Carolina engagement he appeared for the benefit of the Ladies Aid Society of the local Methodist church, earning $51.00 for the charity and performing for "the largest crowd ever attending a lecture in Salisbury."\textsuperscript{67}

A "steady rain" fell all day on 10 February, dampening Miller's prospects for a well-attended appearance in Keysville, Virginia, that evening. Nonetheless, "quite a number" of the people of Keysville turned out at Clark's Hall to greet him. On 11 February Miller was home in

\textsuperscript{65} "Polk Miller's Return," \textit{The Richmond Times}, March 31, 1894, reports that Miller delivered his "recital" on this occasion, but this is contradictory to the story carried in "They are All Cracked Easter Eggs," \textit{New York World}, March 27, 1894. It seems more likely that the \textit{World} would be accurate on these details.


Richmond and visiting with friends, including "Mr. Moody," likely famed Chicago evangelist Dwight Moody. After resting a couple days, Miller embarked on what must have seemed a ludicrously short trip after his weeks on the road. He crossed the James River to perform at Manchester's Leader Hall on 13 April.

Miller performed twice more in the month of April. On the 19th he appeared at Charlottesville, Virginia where his entertainment was greeted with delight by "the entire faculty" of the University of Virginia, and on the following night he was at Staunton, Virginia, where he performed for the benefit of the ladies of the First Presbyterian Church. Rain diminished the entertainment's attendance and the show only made $35 or $40 for the charity.

Miller's incessant touring ensured that his fame would spread throughout the eastern United States, but just as Miller made horizontal inroads in the public mind, so too did his fame spread vertically through society's strata. Though the upper middle class had always constituted an appreciable segment of his audience, by the spring of 1894 he had garnered the attention of many elites. His promotional materials from around that time claim as personal references no less an assemblage of persons than Virginia governor Charles T. O'Ferrall, former Virginia governor Fitzhugh Lee, author Thomas Nelson Page, Norfolk judge Theodore Garnett, congressman George D Wise, and Atlanta Constitution President W.A. Hemphill in addition to other elites.

Miller's scrapbooks only record a handful of further dates for 1895. On 4 May he performed at Suffolk City Hall for the benefit of the Organ Fund Society of the Methodist church.

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68 Dwight Lyman Moody founded religious schools in Massachusetts and Chicago as well as the Moody Church and Moody Publishers. He did much to promote the Y.M.C.A movement and rose to the forefront of the Third Great Awakening with a preaching style that was direct and accessible. "Dwight Moody," New World Encyclopedia Online, http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Dwight_Moody#English_and_American_Revivals
70 Polk Miller's Scrapbook, (V.2000.4.16), 116-117.
and the Christian Endeavor Society of the Christian church, both presumably local to Suffolk. Finally, on 17 August, Miller delivered his "famous lecture" on "Old Times in the South" at Otterburn Springs, near his hometown of Burkeville, Virginia. His scrapbooks are otherwise silent on the subject of his stage career in this period. Though this might suggest only that he neglected to collect relevant clippings, there are at least two reasons to suspect that he abstained from performance during this time. First, while the scrapbooks contain nothing relating to his musical career for this period, they do contain clippings pertaining to other matters. For example, he included a 31 September 1894 article from the Richmond Dispatch entitled "Causes of the War: Great Speech of Honorable Joseph Wheeler of Alabama," as well as a letter from his son, Withers, dated 16 August 1894. Secondly, when the record of Miller's performances resumes in the clippings it is in a second scrapbook, suggesting a "new beginning." Why he would have stepped away from public performance just as his name had steamrolled into the public consciousness is open to conjecture. Sickness, perhaps, or merely a lapse in planning on the part of his manager may account for the yearlong break.

Regardless, 16 and 17 April 1895 represented another milestone for Miller when he appeared for two nights at the Odd Fellows' Hall in New Orleans following a single appearance in Staunton, Virginia. In characteristic "New Orleans" style, Miller performed for the city's elites, who demonstrated their approval of his performance with bouquets of flowers and formal invitations to private clubs. If this, indeed, was his return to the stage, it proved a dramatic reentry. After a brief break, Miller embarked on a whirlwind tour of the South from April 29th to

72 Polk Miller's Scrapbook, (V.2000.4.16), 143. 
73 Polk Miller's Scrapbook, (V.2000.4.16), 145. 
24 June. Bowling Green, Kentucky; Nashville, Tennessee; Louisville, Kentucky; Saint Louis, Missouri; Houston, Huntsville, and Greensville, Texas, all enjoyed a night of his entertainment—some as many as three.75

A short respite was again followed by a flurry of show dates. In late June or early July, he appeared before an audience in Scotland Neck, North Carolina, followed by an Independence Day performance back in Virginia at Powhatan Courthouse and one in Farmville the next night. He then followed the road further afield working at least seven dates in Kentucky, West Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Alabama, and Virginia before the end of July.76

Miller rested for a few weeks before traveling north to appear before the 1895 meeting of the New York Chautauqua Society, appearing three times between August 14 and 16. In September he appeared at Eastville, Virginia, on the 10th, Cape Charles, Virginia, on the 18th, and Princess Anne, Maryland, on the 24th, followed by several dates in Virginia in the first part of October. He performed at Lynchburg, Radford, and Roanoke, before finishing the tour up with an 11 October show at the Richmond Y.M.C.A.77


Miller next headed south to Greensboro, Georgia, appearing on 14 October at the Thomas Stocks Institute and then proceeded on to Atlanta where he was the guest of one of his colleagues in the pharmaceutical industry, Joseph Jacobs. No show date was scheduled for his Atlanta stay, as it seems that his primary objective in traveling south on this occasion was a visit to the 1895 Atlanta Exposition. Nonetheless, his respite in Atlanta was terminated early by what appears to have been an impromptu decision on the part of Jacobs to host a farewell banquet in his guest's honor on 16 October. Ever the showman, Miller performed at his own banquet and departed the next morning for Cincinnati, likely tired and possibly hung over.78

In Cincinnati, Miller again stayed with friends, this time rooming with Howard Saxby, another stage performer. On 21 October Miller performed at the Odd Fellows' Temple with Howard Saxby's "Thirty Minutes with Thirty Men" as the opening act. The following day, Miller entertained two guests at his host's home. First, a reporter from the Cincinnati Commercial-Gazette conversed with Miller at length concerning the economic prospects of the South. This interview, though, was shortly interrupted by the arrival of Miller's other guest--"Professor Dabney." The professor was Wendell Phillips Dabney, one of Cincinnati's most respected African-Americans. Dabney was a native Richmonder who had left his native Virginia to attend the Oberlin Conservatory of Music. Though a successful student, he withdrew after only a year because of financial strains and returned to Virginia. In 1894 he put down permanent

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roots in Cincinnati and opened a music studio. By the end of his life, Dabney had served as musical instructor to many of Cincinnati's elite families and could boast a number of distinctions including that of Cincinnati's first black city paymaster, and president of the local NAACP. Still speaking with the Commercial-Gazette reporter, Miller revealed that Dabney's father had been a slave on the Miller plantation in Prince Edward County who had purchased his freedom using the proceeds of his prodigious banjo playing. Both Miller and Dabney, then, may have learned the instrument at the feet of the same teacher. Upon arriving in Cincinnati, Miller had immediately tracked down the whereabouts of Dabney. The two proceeded to play several banjo tunes for the reporter before again returning to a discussion of politics.\(^79\)

After his Cincinnati adventure, Miller apparently swung through Kentucky on a "scenic" return trip to the Old Dominion. 25 October found him in Lexington. Miller seems to have taken most of November 1895 off. In the early part of the month he spent time training his hunting dog and hunting in North Carolina with friends. In an interview with the Richmond Dispatch around this same time Miller estimated that he had traveled over 50,000 miles in the past twelve months but gave evidence that he was growing road-weary. Stating that he was often asked if he grew tired on the road, Miller responded: "Well perhaps I would if it was not for the opportunity afforded me of studying and watching the actions of the people who come and go all the time." Many of the anecdotes he related, however, suggested anything except contented amusement with his life as a traveling performer. A rude fellow passenger opening his window on a blustery day, forced proximity with African Americans, indifferent railroad employees– all

An inconvenience that seemed particularly vexatious to him was the ever-present threat of missing one's train or being stranded by a damaged rail. It happened with obnoxious regularity to the traveling performer. In Waco, Texas, for example, he forewent an evening with friends and a comfortable night's sleep in order to catch the train for Sherman, Texas, where he had an engagement. Unfortunately, heavy rains had washed out the rail, preventing his passage to Sherman. Furious over missing his show as well as an evening in Waco with his friends, Miller blasted the railroad employees who he was convinced had been aware of the washout. In July he had been similarly stranded when he missed his train in Burlington. The last stretch of a two-month tour, Miller was flush with excitement at the prospect of returning home to Richmond. Unfortunately he overslept and arrived at the station an hour after his train had departed, cursing the railroad for its scheduling and the hotel porter for not waking him. Nonetheless, he made the best of the situation, observing "the country folks come in and swap peaches for goods at the Racket Store and [biding] his time with patience." The next train did not arrive until seven o' clock that night.

Miller, nonetheless, set out for the road again appearing at a "carnival of trades" in Norfolk on 12 November 1895 before heading south. On 16 November he played for the benefit of the Wirt Society of Auburn, Alabama, and then appeared at the Memphis, Tennessee, Y.M.C.A on 19 November. The 22nd found him at the First Baptist Church of Chattanooga under the auspices of the Chattanooga Library Association. His final performance for the month

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81 "Polk Seen at Home," *The Richmond Dispatch*, November 3, 1895.
82 Clipping from an unidentified newspaper, Polk Miller's Scrapbook (V.2000.04.01a), 9.
was before a Greensville, Kentucky, audience on Saturday 30 November.  

Miller's southern tour continued into December. On the 2nd he brought "Old Times Down South" to Mt. Sterling, Kentucky, and the following night performed for a small private event in Lexington. Conducted in the "rooms of Mr. and Mrs. J. Henning Nelms at the Leland," it is probable that he was, again, performing for the benefit of his local hosts as he had done in Atlanta. Before leaving Lexington, Miller could not help but become embroiled in a national controversy revolving around the identity of a local elderly African American named George Lewis Clark. Claiming to be the inspiration for the character "George Harris" in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Clark had earlier capitalized on his supposed identity by performing with the "Uncle Tom's Cabin Company" a minstrel group that specialized in a staged performance of the famous novel. Stowe vehemently denied that Clark was the inspiration behind the character, but even in 1895 the elderly ex-slave maintained that he had regaled Stowe with stories from his life—stories which subsequently found their way into *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Miller, whose claim to expertise extended to all matters concerning the African American, was likely introduced to the controversy through his host, J. Henning Nelms, who was similarly interested in Clark's identity. Miller decided to get to the bottom of the matter. On 5 December he interviewed the aging gentleman, quizzing him on matters pertaining to the characters of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and decided unequivocally that Clark was who he claimed to be. His willingness to pronounce Clark the genuine article likely had as much to do with Miller's personal motives as it did the strength of Clark's claims. His account of the interview stressed the callous parsimoniousness of those northerners who had supposedly used Clark's *vita* as a

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call-to-arms. Suffering from ill health, Clark daily received mail from northern well-wishers. The missives very seldom contained money. In the course of the interview Miller also managed to extract from Clark that he had only fled slavery for fear of being separated from his master who he loved dearly, and that the people of the south are the greatest friends of the Negro.84

Having satisfied himself that Clark was truly the flesh-and-blood incarnation of George Harris he took to the road again. On 6 December he appeared in Cincinnati, Ohio, at the Odd Fellows' Hall and then may have played a show in Georgetown, Kentucky, on the 9th. Miller performed in Marion, Virginia, on 16 December and then at Wytheville on the 19th and was scheduled to take the following night off, but decided to travel to East Radford in order to perform with the Imperial Quartette, a musical aggregation also hailing from Richmond. While in town Miller chanced to meet Rush Miller, Virginia State gubernatorial candidate and avid banjoist and singer who agreed to appear with Polk and the Quartette that night. In traveling to and from Radford, however, Miller caught a cold and lost his voice. His Lynchburg appearance scheduled for 21 December was postponed until January, and Miller repaired to Richmond to rest. His affliction was mercifully short-lived, however, and Miller managed to travel to Norfolk just before Christmas 1895 in order to participate in a benefit for the University of Virginia. It would be Miller's last performance of the year.85

A Richmond Times interview published on 22 December gave Miller a venue in which to


vent his frustrations, but this time it seemed his humor was buoyed somewhat by the spirit of the seasons.

"I have made quite a hit in Kentucky, I have ten engagements in that State in January, '96." "By the way," said Mr. Miller, "did you ever see such a fellow as Horace Smith? [H.F. Smith, Miller's manager,] I go out with a pocket full of contracts reaching from here to the Mississippi river and back, and then I think, well, I guess I'll lay off for a month, and do you know, fifteen minutes after I had been in my office yesterday morning he handed me a batch of contracts that will start me out January 1st, and keep me busy until the first of March." 86

Miller resurrected his earlier grievances against the railroads, but stripped his complaints of much of the vitriol which his earlier interview had revealed. Surely, the prospects of Christmas and a short rest at home in Bon Air curtailed the middle-aged performer's bitterness at the inconveniences of the platform. 87

Miller wasted no time in making 1896 the busiest year of his platform career to date. On 2 January he gave his promised "rain-check" performance at Lynchburg before proceeding on to a number of show-dates in the Bluegrass State. By the end of the month he had played his way north appearing at New York's Chickering Hall on 31 January. 88 For his February engagements Miller again headed south. Performing with Leo Wheat– an accomplished pianist– he began a six-stop Virginia-North Carolina tour in Pulaski on the 3rd. Traversing the Old Dominion, he performed at Roanoke, Lynchburg, and Danville before crossing into North Carolina for a show in Concord. The tour ended in Charlotte on 8 February. It is unclear whether or not Miller made any appearances between that date and 29 February when he performed before the University Club at Madison Square, New York. 89

86 "He Talks Back at Polk," The Richmond Times, December 22, 1895.
87 Ibid.
In March, Miller remained in North Carolina. Starting in Raleigh on 9 March he embarked on a tour of North Carolina for the benefit of the Zebulon Vance Memorial Fund. Burlington, Salisbury, Morganton, Greensboro, and Henderson followed. On 18 April Miller played Meridian, Mississippi, and followed with another Mississippi performance in Vicksburg on the 20th. The next night he was in Natchez, where he was joined onstage by Mr. S D Baker, the town sheriff, and then he proceeded on to Jackson, where he played on the 22nd. While in Jackson, Miller also managed to organize an impromptu jam session at the Edwards House Hotel. While Miller and others sang and recounted favored anecdotes in room ninety four, the hotel's other guests came to investigate the goings-on, and inadvertently became his audience. Former Mississippi Governor Bob Taylor, his brother Alf Taylor, and State Superintendent Kincannon were all in attendance. Alf and Bob Taylor were also performers and could boast biographies at least as incredible as Miller's. The two had squared off in a race for the governorship of Tennessee in 1886, Alf running as a Republican and Bob as a Democrat. The contest not only pitted the Taylors against each other in the realm of ideas, but also found the two competing with high-flown oratory and their handling of the fiddle and bow! Bob won the governorship in 1886 and would repeat the feat months after his meeting with Miller at the Edwards House.

Heading into the summer of 1896 Miller's scrapbooks grow sparse. Whether this

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represents a more relaxed touring schedule or a more relaxed approach to scrapbooking is unclear. In May, Miller was at Atlanta's Aragon Hotel for a banquet in his honor. Dialect recitals were performed by some of the guests, Judge Andy Calhoun sang "The Bonnie Blue Flag," and Leo Wheat, Miller's former tour-mate, played the piano. Curiously, the *Atlanta Constitution* mentions that Miller performed on the violin on this occasion, one of the few references to Miller playing any instrument other than the banjo. 93 On 31 May in Fort Mill, South Carolina, he delivered a speech that "paid a beautiful tribute to the Faithful Old slave, and with consummate skill moved the immense audience to tears and laughter at will." The occasion was the unveiling of a monument to "the Faithful Slaves of the Confederacy," erected by Captain Samuel E. White and depicting an African American man leaning on his hoe. At the monument's base was "a perfect representative of Old Black Mammy pressing tenderly to her bosom 'Mammy's Little Boy.'" After his speech, Miller led the crowd in singing "The Bonnie Blue Flag." 94

Miller's scrapbooks are, again, silent until 19 July when he appeared before a Bristol, Virginia audience at the Harmeling Opera House. He likely performed at Christiansburg on the 22nd before setting out from that city on the Norfolk and Western railroad the following morning. He stopped at Columbus, Ohio, and Chicago, Illinois, before continuing on to Madison, Wisconsin. It is not entirely clear whether or not Miller performed at all during his northwestern ramble. Instead, it appears that the trip may have been Miller's vacation. In Madison, he visited the state house, noting the Civil War relics and casualty statistics posted there and then returned to Chicago. By 30 July, he had found his way to a resort in Bay View, Michigan, on Traverse Bay. There, he took the time to write a letter back to the *Richmond Dispatch* detailing his trip.

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and noting the scarcity of support that he had found for Williams Jennings Bryan in the Northwest.\footnote{95}{"Polk Miller,” *The Bristol News*, July 20, 1896. “Polk Miller’s Letter,” *The Richmond Dispatch*, August 13, 1896.}

On 9 August Miller again wrote home, this time with an admission that he had been overzealous in his dismissal of Bryan's prospects in the Northwest. Apparently, he had witnessed a small demonstration in support of the candidate in Standish, Michigan, just after mailing his previous letter. The pro-Bryan *Richmond Times* derisively crowed over Miller's published admission. Addressing Miller's earlier statement, the reporter wrote "[w]e guess the problem with Polk is that he rides in Pullman-cars and stops at $5-a-day hotels– places we admit, where the supporters of Bryan are seldom in the majority." For the time being however, Miller was safe from the aggravation of public ridicule. Still apparently enjoying his respite from the platform, his letter was mailed from the Hotel Del Monte in the Adirondack Mountains of New York.\footnote{96}{"Polk Miller on Politics,” *The Richmond Times*, August 13, 1896. “Polk Miller’s ‘Perhaps,’” *The Richmond Dispatch*, August 14, 1896.}

By no later than 17 August, Miller had returned to the platform. He appeared on that night at the Warrenton, Virginia, Town Hall before a crowd of nearly 300 people.\footnote{97}{"Polk Miller,” *The Warrenton Banner*, August 21, 1896.}

Miller's scrapbooks are silent for September of 1896 but resume with an interesting pair of clippings detailing a performance in Allentown, Pennsylvania, on 11 November. A review of the entertainment by the *Allentown Daily Leader* departed dramatically from anything that had been written about Miller to date.

Mr. Miller came and saw, but he didn’t conquer. As an entertainer he is not an unqualified success. He lacks confidence in himself and throughout the greater portion of his occupancy of the Academy stage he spoke in a low monotone that could be heard with difficulty by those in the rear portion of the house. His lecture or whatever he may be pleased to style it, may be excellent of its kind- but what a kind! A succession of negro anecdotes will never appeal to the interest of any average audience representing any degree of intelligence and it is right here that Mr. Miller’s entertainment fails. Before he had half finished, many of his hearers seemed to be exceedingly bored and the applause at all times was very faint and sickly.\footnote{98}{“Not a Success,” *The Allentown Daily Leader*, November 12, 1896.}
A reviewer for the *Allentown Chronicle* was also unimpressed with Miller's show though not as scathing in his criticism. He noted that "[a] large and somewhat disappointed audience greeted Polk Miller in the Academy of Music" the night before and that he "was to delineate negro characters and characteristics." The reviewer decided however that "he wholly failed in bringing out the rich, unctuous humor of [the negro]" adding that "[w]hat Mr. Miller lacks as a public entertainer is a better voice and greater ability as a mimic."99 Miller, indignant at the negative reviews, rebutted the attacks by way of a caption in his scrapbook.

In the two years and a half that I have been on the platform this is my first roast- from Allentown, Pa. And why was I roasted? Simply because my audience was of the "Pennsylvania Dutch" variety; negro haters and South haters too; and they looked up at me with a sort of "I don't care what you do or say, I am not going to be entertained by you" look.100

Miller performed at a benefit for the Bushwick Hospital of Brooklyn at Central Presbyterian Church in that city on 30 November and then headed south, appearing in Alexandria, Virginia, on 1 December. His performance there was held at "the Opera House" for the benefit of the 17th Virginia Regiment Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy. He returned home to Bon Air just briefly before again setting out for show dates, this time for Kentucky where he was engaged to play a dozen shows. In mid-December, he gave his entertainment at the First Christian Church of Paducah, Kentucky, after an uneventful day of hunting with one "Dr. Jim Lang." By 16 December he was in Brownsville, Tennessee, where he was the guest of Judge and Mrs. H J Livingston. On this occasion, it appears that Miller did not perform. The night of 17 December found Miller entertaining at the Merrill Institute in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. Sometime between then and Christmas Eve, he probably returned home to

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100 *Polk Miller's Scrapbook* (V.2000.04.01a), 56.
Virginia retiring from performance until after the New Years.¹⁰¹

As with the year prior, Miller emerged from his winter sabbatical reinvigorated. Starting on 4 January 1897 he embarked on an intense east coast tour playing eight shows in the first nine nights. Between 4 and 8 January he played Portsmouth, Virginia; Cape Charles, Virginia; Centreville, Maryland; Summit, New Jersey; and Glen's Falls, New York. On the night of 9 January he abstained from performing and was the guest of William Teller, the manager of the Metropolitan Hotel in Washington, D.C. He remained a guest of the hotel for several nights, and may have also taken the night of 10 January off, before returning to the platform for a Baltimore performance on 11 January at Lehmann's Hall. The following evening Miller was introduced to an audience at Washington's Lafayette Square Theater by Senator John Daniel of Virginia. He tarried in the city for a few more days, playing one final engagement in the area at the National Rifles' Armory on 15 January.¹⁰²

By 18 January Miller had again turned his attentions north. On that night he performed before the Bachelors' Club of Avondale at West Grove, Pennsylvania. The reception was generally good, though one local newspaper editor took umbrage with Miller's language.

Mr. Miller uses the word "nigger" very generously, which was about the only thing that in any way detracted from his renditions, but he have some wholesome advice concerning the race and made some predictions that caused one to think of the future of the negro.¹⁰³


¹⁰³ "Old Times Down South," clipping from an unidentified West Grove, Pennsylvania newspaper. Polk Miller's Scrapbook (V.2000.04.01a), 60.
Mr. Miller refrained from rebutting this particular criticism with one of his characteristically pugnacious captions. Remaining in Pennsylvania, he had made his way to Westchester by the evening of 22 January. He estimated at this point that he had traveled over 6,000 miles since the beginning of the year.  

On 26 January Miller appeared at the Grand Opera House in Canton, Ohio, as part of the Calvary Popular Lecture Course. Mystifyingly, two reviewers referred to him as "Hoke Miller." The following night he appeared at the opera house at Allentown, Pennsylvania, but was spared the unpleasant reception he was given the previous year. This entertainment was given under the auspices of the Royal Arcanum Council of Allentown, a mutual aid society, and was an invitation-only event. This perhaps explains why the reaction to Miller's entertainment differed radically from the previous year's performance. He likely played Bellevue, Pennsylvania, before leaving the state. In Zanesville, Ohio, he entertained an audience at Memorial Hall on 30 January before setting out for Danville, Kentucky, late the following day.  

On 5 February Miller performed at Bloomington, Illinois, at the Grand. By 9 February, Miller had made his way to Kalamazoo, Michigan, where he played at the parish house of St. Luke's Church. His entertainment was paired with a piano duet by "Professor Fairclough and Mr. Sprague" and he was introduced by "Reverend Claiborne." On the night of 10 February he gave a second entertainment at St. Luke's, this time with a different program. He had most likely decided to remain in Kalamazoo in order to attend the annual meeting of the National

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106 “A Pleasing Entertainment,” The Bloomington (Illinois) Pantagraph, undated. The date given here is conjectural. There is no date given in the clipping detailing his Bloomington appearance, but a notice at the end of the article announces that the next concert in the series will be held on Friday, February 12th. This makes it likely that this was a weekly event held every Friday. Though Miller's appearance may have happened two weeks prior on January 28th, it seems more consistent with his other performance dates.
Game, Bird and Fish Protective Association earlier that day. He departed the following day and performed for the benefit of the Woman's Hospital and Foundlings' Home in Detroit that night. Heartily applauded by the audience who had packed into the Church of our Father that night, Miller extolled the strength of the slave's religious conviction and performed on guitar and banjo.107

On 15 February Miller performed before the Whist Club of Rochester, New York, and Cobleskill, New York, was the beneficiary of his talents on the night of 18 February, when he appeared there under the auspices of the local high school lyceum. On 23 February Miller was at Springfield, Massachusetts, performing at the Court Square Theater, and on the 25th he was again the guest-of-honor, this time at an "impromptu reception" at New York's Hotel Majestic. Held in the private parlor of Joseph Jacobs- who had hosted Miller in Atlanta in 1895- a handful of individuals were present for this reception which featured an informal presentation of Miller's stories and songs.108

Like the year prior, Miller's scrapbooks grow sparse in their clippings as the cold of winter gave way to warmer weather of 1897. No dates are recorded for March of 1897 and only three dates are recorded for April. By the 1st of that month he was, evidently, still in the Northeast as he appeared that evening before the First Universalist Church of Syracuse, New York, and two nights later was at the Saturday Club of Brunswick, Maine. By 19 April he had


made his way back south, delivering his entertainment at the Fayetteville "Firemen's Benefit Opera House." On 10 May he arrived in Washington where he visited the battleship *Indiana* and met "Mr. Ham," a noted Georgia humorist better known as "Snollygoster." The sole June appearance in Miller's scrapbook details a performance at Nashville's Vendome, this time with the help of his sometime accomplice Professor Leo D. White. It is likely that Miller had scheduled his Nashville appearance to coincide with the annual meeting of the United Confederate Veterans who were holding their seventh annual national meeting in that city between June 22 and 24.\(^9\)

The fall of 1897 was a turbulent time for Miller. Around 8 September his father Giles A. Miller passed away after having lived with his son in Bon Air for several years. One can imagine the pensive ruminations of Polk and Tony Miller as they rode into Virginia's Southside, accompanying their father's remains back to their ancestral homeland in Nottoway County. The undulating land girdled by an undulating steel rail led the two across a landscape where the ordered urban geometry gave way to the rural landscape of their youth. His father's passing was not likely a surprise, however. The previous year Miller had performed at Brownsville, Tennessee, on an unknown date- likely in the summer. In a conversation with Mrs. H J Livingston, he mentioned that he was considering retiring from the stage in order to attend to family concerns. After deliberating on the matter for some time, Mrs. Livingston wrote a letter to Miller pleading with him to continue entertaining for the sake of the young people of the South. It is likely that in speaking of these pressing "family claims" he was referring to his aging father whose health was already failing more than a year before his death in the late summer of

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1897.\textsuperscript{110}

In addition to such dramatic events in his personal life, Miller's professional life would be affected by changes equally as pronounced. In what appears to have been an agreement between his manager Horatio Smith and a "Mr. Leath," Miller joined forces with the comedy team of Oscar P. Sisson and his niece Esther Wallace. Leath and Smith were to jointly manage the trio from then on. In a 9 September interview with the \textit{Richmond Times}, Miller stated that the addition of Sisson and Wallace would help to ease his workload, and admitted that he welcomed a chance to rest a little after over 500 solo engagements. Most surprising, however, was the revelation that he would adopt a stage practice that he had often derided as the cheap theatrics of the Yankee pretender. He would don the burnt-cork blackface of the minstrel. Miller provided an outline of the newly revamped stage show for the benefit of a \textit{Richmond Times} reporter:\textsuperscript{111}

The entertainment will be divided into three parts. First, Mr. Sisson and Miss Wallace will give a very pleasing and humorous musical-comedy sketch, in which Mr. Sisson will take the part of a New England country boy and Miss Wallace that of a little Yankee school girl. It is a very funny act and serves to introduce some good singing by Miss Wallace, as well as the clever comedy work of Mr. Sisson. Part II. will be occupied entirely by myself in my usual entertainment consisting of a series of stories and songs, delineating the characteristics of the old plantation negro. Part III. will be a character sketch of about one hour, in which Mr. Sisson and Miss Wallace appear, and I take the part of "Uncle Daniel," an old darkey, who has gone North just after the issuing of the proclamation of emancipation.\textsuperscript{112}

The trio rehearsed through September and gave their first performance on 4 October 1897 at Richmond's Academy of Music. Following this appearance, the newly-formed company embarked on a three-month tour beginning with a round of Virginia cities and then continuing down into the South. The route took them through West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina, and then back to Virginia where the tour terminated with a New Year's Eve performance at Danville. Following a

\textsuperscript{110} "The Death of Notable Men," clipping from an unidentified newspaper, Polk Miller's Scrapbook (V.2000.04.01a), 67. "Wants Mr. Miller to Continue," \textit{The Richmond Times}, August 23, 1896.

\textsuperscript{111} "A Great Trio," clipping from an unidentified newspaper, Polk Miller's Scrapbook (V.2000.04.01a), 87.

\textsuperscript{112} "Three Humorists Together," \textit{The Richmond Times}, September 24, 1897.
ten day rest, the troupe again took to the road, this time heading for New England. Along with a new show, Miller's tour in the winter of 1897-1898 was characterized by increasingly professionalized management. Horace Smith now traveled ahead of the show distributing promotional materials and attending to "local arrangements," while Miller, Sisson, and Wallace were accompanied on the road by Charles W. Rex, an accountant presumably hired by the show's management to arbitrate pecuniary matters pertaining to the act. Before their 4 October show in Richmond, Miller, Sisson, and Wallace were already booked for over 150 engagements.¹¹³

Miller collected few newspaper clippings from these tours, and many of them are undated. Additionally, it appears that Miller may have actively engaged in a process of selection—unconscious or otherwise—in his choice of clippings. One from the *Columbia State* devotes most of the first thirty lines of the column to expounding on Miller's virtues as an entertainer before very briefly addressing the rest of the troupe: "On this tour [Miller] is accompanied by Oscar Sisson, a clever caricaturist and Miss Esther Wallace, whose recitations and songs always please." The *Raleigh News* was even more explicit stating "His company is good, but Polk Miller is a whole company in himself." The extant show clippings suggest that with or without accompaniment, Polk Miller remained the center of attention at every venue at which he performed. Whether that conclusion is more consistent with the facts of the Miller-Sisson-Wallace act, or rather of Miller's perception of it is unclear.

Whether by decree of Miller or his audiences, it appears that he had parted ways with Sisson and Wallace by the end of 1898. He was once again the guest of fellow pharmacist Joseph Jacobs when he attended a 5 December meeting of the Dialect Club of Atlanta, Georgia. Though there were several performers on this occasion, it appears that Miller was the main attraction. Sisson and Wallace were not present. On 15 December he was in Macon, Georgia, at

Wesleyan Female College, where he, again, performed without the benefit of accompaniment.114 Miller continued to perform solo after the first of the year. Three thousand souls were regaled by his "negro recitations" and songs under the auspices of Nashville's Tabernacle Lyceum on 24 January 1899. He remained in Nashville the following night, performing at the Peabody Normal School.115 One final clipping appears in Miller's scrapbook—an item from an unidentified Charlottesville paper, heralding the dialectician's forthcoming 3 April 1899 performance in that city. His career did not end with the coming of a new century, however.116 With all the rash abandon of the medieval millenarians, Miller greeted the new century with a drastic change of course, and in the process, set a precedent for the future of American popular entertainment. Miller's propensity for innovation, though, must not be allowed to obscure the profound linkages between his stage career and the cultural context in which it took place. In the drawing rooms of turn-of-the-century Bon Air, Polk Miller may very well have been considered a singularly unique performer. With the advantage of temporal and geographic perspective, however, one can discern the fairly narrow boundaries in which American popular entertainment had evolved, and situate Miller within that evolution.

116 "Polk Miller to be Here Easter Monday," clipping from an unidentified Charlottesville, Virginia newspaper, Charlottesville, March 14, 1899.
Chapter 3:
Polk Miller in Context:
The Evolution of American Popular Culture.

The United States has, from the beginning, represented an amalgamation that was apparent in the intertwined national lineages of her people as well as the mélange of beliefs, values, principles, and standards that came to constitute her "national spirit." For there to be a quintessentially "American" stage tradition, then, there was nothing to do but wait for the natural course of cultural cross-pollination to yield a suitably miscegenated product.

Theatrical presentations in the American colonies had been primarily an elite affair. Seats were sold to the general public, but actors were very much dependent on the patronage of the gentry who bought most of the tickets and on whose good graces they relied. Aristocratic prerogative, however, created an environment where "watching the play was simply one activity embedded in the more general social event of attending theater." Rakish young men talked incessantly, harassed performers, and even wandered across the stage in the middle of a performance in order to show off their clothing. The sharp class divisions of the Old World were conspicuously enshrined in the theater's architecture, divided, as it was, into boxes, pit, and gallery. The box and pit were reserved primarily for elites, though the pit's physical proximity to the gallery—seating for middling sorts—precluded its appropriateness for elite women. The gravity with which this class segregation was regarded by theater owners and patrons is demonstrated by the row of spikes installed in Virginia's Williamsburg Theater in the mid 1700s. Separating the stage and boxes from the rest of the theater, the strategy was also adopted by

Philadelphia's Southwark Theater several years later. Given the relatively small number of lower-class theatergoers at midcentury, however, this seemingly belligerent gesture was probably little more than symbolic posturing.\footnote{Butsch, 20-25.}

As revolutionary rhetoric spread through the colonies, the theater was increasingly the target of anti-British and anti-elite resentment. Combined with an increased presence of lower-middle class and laborers, the theater became a contentious scene of class tension in the 1770s with occasional instances of violence. By the early years of the republic, elite women had abandoned the ever-coarsening theater to men of all classes. The theater became a battleground for political debate.\footnote{Butsch, 26-43. LeRoy Ashby, \textit{With Amusement for All: A History of American Popular Culture since 1830} (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2006), 5.} By the onset of the Jacksonian period, however, the artisans and laborers had managed to wrest control of theaters, turning what once had been public space reserved for the colonial elite into a thoroughly proletarian setting. Elites would retain a presence in the working-class theater, but the standards of conduct as well as the choice of productions would be henceforth consistent with working-class expectations.\footnote{Butsch, 44. Ashby, 7, 8.} Walt Whitman wrote charitably of New York's Bowery Theater, one of the city's most famous working class theaters: "packed from ceiling to pit with its audience mainly of alert, full-blooded young and middle aged men, the best average of American-born mechanics."\footnote{Butsch, 46.} Writers not given to Whitman's egalitarian romanticism were not as impressed. George Foster described the pit at the Bowery theater as one "which heaves continually in wild and sullen tumult, like a red flannel sea agitated by some lurid storm… the roaring crush and clamor of tobacco chewing, great coat wearing second tier – the yells and screams, the shuddering oaths and obscene songs, tumbling down from the third
In such rowdy working-class theaters of the Northeast the American capacity for creative bastardization produced the first native stage tradition—blackface minstrelsy. An 1854 song folio stated that "[a]fter our countrymen had … confuted the stale cant of our European detractors that nothing original could emanate from Americans– the next cry was, that we had no NATIVE MUSIC; … until our countrymen found a triumphant vindicating APOLLO in the genius of E.P. Christy, who … was the first to catch our native airs as they floated wildly, or hummed in the balmy breezes of the sunny south." Though the folio attributes to Christy the genesis of a thing that he only helped to perpetuate (Christy or someone in his employ authored the document), it is correct in its emphasis on blackface minstrelsy as the first stage tradition to claim American nativity. In his history of early American stagecraft, Laurence Hutton also ascribed to minstrelsy the distinction of being the first native performance style: "In the absence of anything like a complete and satisfactory history of negro minstrelsy, it is not possible to discover its genesis, although it is the only branch of the dramatic art, if properly it can claim to be an art at all, which has had its origin in this country, while the melody it has inspired is certainly our only approach to a national music." For the rest of the nineteenth century blackface minstrelsy would dominate as America's foremost entertainment.

As early as 29 May 1769 white Americans had blackened their faces in order to perform in the guise of African Americans. On that night Lewis Hallam appeared in blackface as Mungo in a performance of The Padlock in New York's John Street Theater. Other instances would follow. Nevertheless, a continuous tradition of American blackface would not be established until the 1800s when solo performers donned the burnt cork face treatment of the minstrel and

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122 Butsch, 46-47.  
began touring regularly, appearing on the kerosene-lamp-lighted stages of the northeast. The performances of George Washington Dixon were among the first such presentations in this vein, and were certainly the first to garner any widespread notoriety. Beginning in the late 1820s Dixon sang songs such as "The Coal Black Rose" and "My Long-Tail Blue" - a reference to the jackets favored by African-American dandies. In the 1830s he introduced his most famous stage persona, "Zip Coon." 125

Despite Dixon's longstanding command of the minstrel stage, his "Zip Coon" did not enjoy unchallenged primacy as a minstrel character. The 1830s also birthed "Jim Crow," the creation of Thomas Dartmouth (Daddy) Rice, who claimed to have modeled the character as well as the dance by the same name, on an African-American laborer he met while on the road. 126 Writing in 1855 of "Jump Jim Crow," the song associated with Dixon's character, Putnam's Monthly demonstrated the cross-class appeal of the tune: "The school-boy whistled the melody... The ploughman checked his oxen in mid furrow, as he reached its chorus... Merchants and staid professional men... unbend their dignity to that weird and wonderful posture... it is sung in the parlor, hummed in the kitchen, and whistled in the stable." 127 Despite Jim Crow's appeal to all strata of American society, Rice and his blackface colleagues were denizens of the working class theater. The New York Mirror described an early appearance by Rice at the Bowery Theater: "When Mr. Rice came on the stage to sing his celebrated song of Jim Crow, [the audience] not only made him repeat it some twenty times, but hemmed him in so that he actually had no room to perform the little dancing or turning about appertaining to the song..." 128

These solo minstrels generally did not provide a self-sufficient entertainment and were

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126 Tosches, 10. Jon W. Finson, The Voices that are Gone: Themes in Nineteenth-Century American Popular Song (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 162, claims that Rice's story was inconsistent, and that he had likely invented the Jim Crow character and dance himself.
127 Butsch, 81.
128 Butsch, 50.
therefore part of a larger production, usually performing between the acts of a play. This changed in 1843 when the Virginia Minstrels provided a template for minstrelsy that liberated its purveyors from the periphery of American entertainment and ensconced them in the ranks of main attractions. In that year, Daniel Decatur Emmet (violin), Frank Brower (bones), Dick Pelham (tambourine), and Billy Whitlock (banjo) joined their talents to become the first known minstrel band. This instrumentation would prove congenial to the tastes of audiences as well as legions of imitators, including Christy's Serenaders, formed by the abovementioned E.P. Christy. In the hands of this first generation of minstrel troupes the minstrel show presented a rather straightforward entertainment. Performers seated themselves in a semi-circle on stage and delivered a rapid-fire succession of songs, dances, and comic dialogue. The expanded lineup of this new minstrel entertainment facilitated a more varied program and consequently, could entertain an audience for a full evening.

This move toward professional self-sufficiency on the part of minstrel troupes was the first step in minstrelsy's full separation from traditional theater. The final dramatic stroke sundering high and low culture occurred on 10 May 1849 at the Astor Place Opera House of New York. Performing there that night was William Charles Macready, a British actor whose disparaging comments about the laboring class had made him a much-loathed figure among American workers. When police arrested several ticketholders for disturbing the entertainment, a crowd of five-thousand assembled in the street outside the theater. The militia was called and violence erupted soon after, with twenty-two protestors killed as a result. The Astor Place Riot marked a turning point in American Theater, giving impetus to a drive by elites to re-establish traditional theater as a "respectable" entertainment. Increasingly, minstrel shows and other forms

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129 Finson, 176.
of "low brow" performances would become the only entertainments associated with rowdy behavior.\textsuperscript{131} Though traditional theater was henceforth cordoned off as a sacrosanct symbol of bourgeois leisure, the minstrel show, too, would slowly succumb to the increasing pressure of middle-class expectations beginning in the 1840s.\textsuperscript{132}

By the time Polk Miller was likely learning his first banjo tunes, the minstrel show had expanded greatly, and some troupes featured dozens of performers. The format of a minstrel entertainment had also undergone changes, expanding from one to three acts and proceeding in a neatly formulaic succession that was similar for all troupes. The first act represented the persisting legacy of the earliest minstrel bands with the cast seated in a semi-circle facing the audience. The second act—called the "olio"—was presented in front of the curtain and featured a number of novelty acts from "acrobats, to musical saw players to song-and-dance routines."\textsuperscript{133} While the olio was being presented, the stage was prepared for the third and final act, usually a one act play or skit.\textsuperscript{134}

Post-bellum minstrelsy was characterized by even more expansive casts and spectacular productions, but it pushed the eclectic spirit of "variety" past its breaking point. Nor would minstrelsy persist as the domain of the working-class. In an attempt to draw elite audiences back to their shows, minstrelsy subsumed elements from other entertainments. Eventually minstrel shows became indistinguishable from competing entertainments save for the persisting burnt-cork facial applications.\textsuperscript{135} Thus tamed, latter-day minstrelsy indeed proved congenial to middle-class audiences. James McCabe described the goings-on at Bryant's Minstrel House in New York in 1872, claiming that Bryant had raised "minstrelsy to the dignity of a fashionable

\textsuperscript{132} Ashby 41, 52-57.
\textsuperscript{133} Finson, 184.
\textsuperscript{134} Finson, 184, 185.
\textsuperscript{135} Ashby, 85.
amusement and has banished from it all that is coarse and offensive. Men worn out from business cares go there to laugh… Families come by the score to laugh at the vagaries of the sable minstrels, and the mirth of the little folks is one of the heartiest and healthiest sounds.”

Audiences, both working class and elite, would soon abandon the minstrel show. When Polk Miller dusted off his grip and bought his train tickets for his first tour, minstrelsy had already declined precipitously in popularity with the rise of Vaudeville.

The historical literature addressing blackface minstrelsy is a predictably heterogeneous body of works. Indeed, the first studies of the phenomenon were written well before the last minstrel had wiped off his last burnt-cork appliqué sometime in the mid twentieth century, ensuring that the earliest studies of minstrelsy were written without the benefit of historical "distance." These treatments invariably reserve their critical assessment for one aspect of minstrelsy—its supposed similitude to black culture. From the nineteenth century into the 1960s the historiography of blackface minstrelsy focuses on the entertainment itself. Like fish in water, these early historians of the minstrel show were unable to perceive the ethereal fibers of culture that still bound them to the phenomenon. While "who," "when," "what," and "where," assert themselves quite forcefully in this early literature, "why" is conspicuously absent.

In Fun in Black (1874,) Charles Day assessed the progress of blackface minstrelsy, and submitted that the form had steadily improved since its advent in the forties, referring undoubtedly to the marked increase of professionalization among minstrel troupes after the War. Colonel T. Allston Brown's contribution to Day's volume was an essay entitled "The Origin of Negro Minstrelsy," which sought to expound on the African-American figures associated with early minstrelsy in order to substantiate its claim to cultural authenticity. Implicitly, both men

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136 Butsch, 93.
137 Finson, 200.
vouch for a degree of authenticity in the origins of blackface minstrelsy.\textsuperscript{138}

Of course, Day and Brown approached the question of authenticity more critically than their own predecessors had. Thirty years earlier in \textit{Knickerbocker Magazine} James K. Kennard, Jr., answered the calls for peculiarly American art forms with an article entitled "Who are Our National Poets?" In it, he dismisses the notion of a peculiarly American stage tradition through \textit{reductio ad absurdum}, uncritically asserting the African American provenance of domestic stage innovations.

Messrs. Crow and Coon could not be spared from the hoe, but they might be introduced to the great world by proxy! And so thought Mr. Thomas Rice, a "buckra gemmen" of great imitative powers, who accordingly learned their poetry, music and dancing, blacked his face, and made his fortune by giving to the world his counterfeit presentment of the American national opera; counterfeit, because none but the negroes themselves could give it in its original perfection.

Kennard admits a distinction between the minstrel performance and its plantation antecedent, but any difference in the two, in Kennard's reckoning, is more so a product of bastardization than of interpretation. The minstrel's imperfect representation is the invariable result of trying to mimic a people whose natural propensity for song and poetry is immeasurable, if misdirected. Further, if an American entertainment can be cultivated only by those with such provincial sensibilities, he argues, it would best be an abandoned cause:

\begin{quote}
What are the prerequisites of national poetry?... Certainly, liberal education and foreign travel cannot assist him in attaining this desirable end; these denationalize a man; they render any but the narrowest soul cosmopolitan. By these means the poet acquires a higher standard than the national... [W]e must keep our poets at home, give them a narrow education, and allow them no spare money by which they might purchase books, or make excursions into other ranks of society than their own.\textsuperscript{139}
\end{quote}

The slave, then, is the perfect candidate for a "national poet," a conclusion that Kennard feels


delegitimizes the very concept.

Carl Wittke's *Tambo and Bones* (1930) is representative of this first historiographical phase in its focus on the cultural provenance of its forms and practices rather than its sociological context. Wittke proves less credulous than his nineteenth century forebears, however, noting the dubiousness of minstrelsy's claims to represent black southern culture.\(^{140}\) Regardless of its failure to recreate the lives and art of Southern blacks, Wittke finds value in early minstrelsy's preservation of *some* genuine folk elements, as well as the synthetic creativity represented by its origins in both white and black culture. His preface encapsulates the tone of the work:

> The minstrel show was a unique development, a purely native form of entertainment, and a distinctively American contribution to theatrical history... This study was inspired by more than a professional interest in social history. Happy memories of the burnt cork semi-circle, gathered during barnstorming student days, are responsible for an abiding interest and a real love for the old-time minstrel show.\(^{141}\)

In Wittke's hands the minstrel show is stripped of most of its antisocial content—its racism, its misogyny—and becomes an avenue for cultural dialogue. His discussion largely ignores the social, political, and economic context of that dialogue. Instead, the garish caricatures of blacks presented on the minstrel stage come across in Wittke's account as merely poor copies of the original. Sambo, Zip Coon, and Jim Crow were not so much representations of white attitudes toward blacks, but rather honestly attempted, if poorly effected, imitations.\(^{142}\)

Delving briefly into the sociological reasons for minstrelsy's appeal, Wittke also touches on a theme that will be elaborated on in great detail by later literature: "The point of many [minstrel jokes] depended on that curious American trait which disdains even the appearance of too much intellectuality, and somehow, likes to see the triumph of the 'low brow' over what it

\(^{141}\) Wittke, vii.
\(^{142}\) Wittke, 8–9.
chooses to call the 'high brow.' The crowd likes nothing better than to see a half-wit get the better of a pompous intellectual." The trope of populism becomes central in later treatments of minstrelsy.

Hans Nathan's *Dan Emmett and the Rise of Early Negro Minstrelsy* (1962) approaches the subject with a markedly more dynamic methodology, but fails to break free of the paradigm set by its precedents. Beginning his discussion with eighteenth-century England, he charts the course of "blackface delineation," approaching the subject both historically and musicologically. Like much of the earlier literature, however, *Dan Emmet* still evaluates much of blackface performance through a lens of "authenticity" de-emphasizing the role of the minstrel in forging his art. The stock minstrel character "Zip Coon," he concludes, surely hews close to its flesh-and-blood subject because one can compare him to contemporary accounts of such black urban dandies. He neglects to address the fact that both Zip Coon and the black urban dandy have usually passed through the same filter on their way to the historian--the white observer. Like Wittke, Nathan's account is largely one of cultural appropriation and artistic syncretism.

In the 1960s the historical literature surrounding blackface minstrelsy responded to shifting trends in the field, addressing the sociological factors that shaped the phenomenon. Gender, class, and, of course, race were harnessed as potential lenses through which to view minstrelsy, offering alternatives to the relatively uncritical approaches of early scholars. Robert Toll's *Blacking Up* (1974) addresses much of the territory neglected by his predecessors by placing the minstrel show in the context of American popular culture. The minstrel and his entertainment, for Toll, are largely audience-constructed, their success growing directly out of their ability to answer the demands made by the gallery and pit. Toll's emphasis throughout the

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143 Wittke, 139.
study is on the mutability of minstrelsy, its ability to supply its audience with exactly what it wanted. For its early blue-collar audience, this included a rambunctious spectacle strongly reminiscent of the folk forms of rural entertainments. Also, minstrelsy's depiction of the southern plantation appealed to the new urbanites of Northeast cities, and caricatures of blacks satisfied their curiosity about southern African-Americans.  

Alexander Saxton approaches the phenomenon similarly in "Blackface Minstrelsy and Jacksonian Democracy" (1975.) He reverses the flow of agency, however, attributing to the blackface minstrel what Toll had attributed to his audience. Focusing on the process of "masking," Saxton asserts that blackface served to extend to its wearer carte blanche, allowing him to criticize the status quo with impunity. Like the "holy fools" who leveled criticism at the autocrats of Czarist Russia, the minstrel's damning lampoons of bourgeois standards were made acceptable by the supposed "lowness" of their author- in the case of minstrelsy, a "negro."  

The "social history" approach to minstrelsy scholarship served as the historiographical context in which another generation of historians approached the subject. Generally, this latest round of literature jettisons what its authors consider the stiff orthodoxy of race, class, and gender, as well as the economic determinism that characterized earlier treatments. Eric Lott's groundbreaking study Love and Theft (1993) addresses these earlier works:

This study grew out of dissatisfaction with erstwhile modes of racial critique, which in their political disapprobation, dovetailing with aesthetic disdain, were unwilling to engage with the artifacts and social realities of popular life, too ready to dismiss the mentalite of the popular classes, finally impatient with politics itself.  

Lott's study disregards a concrete socio-political "explanation" for blackface minstrelsy, but wishes instead to convey "understanding." Consequently, the portrait he offers is of minstrelsy

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145 Toll, 25-37.
146 Saxton, 5, 11.
as an institution structured around several disparate and sometimes conflicting impulses in the minds of its purveyors and appreciators. Politically naïve treatments, Lott asserts, have focused on minstrelsy's obvious racist components without addressing the conspicuously non-racist aspects of the show. This includes, notably, the claims of authenticity made by minstrels and the positive reception of supposedly authentic black culture by white audiences.\textsuperscript{148}

W.T. Lhamon Jr.'s \textit{Raising Cain} (1998) also focuses on the inherent contradictions of minstrelsy, but finds in it the textual vestiges of nineteenth century "fugitive culture."\textsuperscript{149} Lhamon asserts that the bundle of actions, ideas, images, and performances that formed blackface minstrelsy constituted a folklore cycle that encapsulated the culture of the "peripheral labor" class—the transient, unorganized laborers of the nineteenth century Atlantic world. The advent of minstrelsy in the urban Northeast, he argues, is an historical consequence of the Erie Canal's construction, which brought legions of these workers to New York.\textsuperscript{150} The stark contradictions of minstrelsy, including overt racism juxtaposed with elements sympathetic to the black plight, are results of two separate dynamics. First, the group of people for whom this entertainment contained meaning were, individually and in aggregate, self-contradictory in their views.\textsuperscript{151} Secondly, minstrelsy was imbued with another cultural component when it was appropriated by the middle class in the 1850s, absorbing a set of values that was sometimes patently antithetical to its original significance.\textsuperscript{152} In total, the result of Lhamon's study is a portrait of a cultural phenomenon that stresses complexity over simplicity, and contradiction over structural consistency.

The theme of internal inconsistency also characterizes Robert Nowatzki's \textit{Representing}

\textsuperscript{148} Lott, 5.
\textsuperscript{150} Lhamon, 62.
\textsuperscript{151} Lhamon, 62.
\textsuperscript{152} Lhamon, 75-76.
Nowatzki's reckoning, however, minstrelsy's inconsistency is less a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth than a fully integrated aspect of the entertainment speaking directly to its raison d'être. For Nowatzki, the texts of minstrel shows and abolitionist "performances" (whether written or staged presentations,) demonstrate a fascination with black bodies that he characterizes as sexual. The presentation of "authenticity" then, is hemmed in by a constricting pattern of conventions that allows this alluring "blackness" to be exhibited in a way that does not threaten white observers. In the case of abolitionist "performances" Nowatzki notes the sensationalist use of sadomasochistic themes within slave narratives (written and staged,) allowing the exhibition of black bodies, but notes the marginalized role of the black narrators who were forced to adhere to the conventions established by whites. Similarly, the minstrel show was marked by claims of authenticity which were militated against by the entertainment's increasing conventionality. Nowatzki asserts that, here again, the aim was to exhibit "blackness" in a context that ensured white control of the performance.153

Nowatzki's approach demonstrates the focus on "contradiction" characteristic of the latest round of minstrelsy scholarship, but unfortunately indulges in the sort of counter-intuitive cultural history claptrap that has become de rigueur recently. While he does successfully demonstrate that slave narratives and minstrelsy contained elements of prurient appeal, he is unsuccessful in asserting that this sexual content represented a forbidden desire for black bodies per se. The abundance of these sexualized elements in early minstrelsy (when blackface representations were markedly more "working class" and less racist,) and their dearth later in the century is telling. It is likely that sexuality in the minstrel show represents a relative unconcern

with matters of race in the realm of sex. Offering lyrical examples of miscegenation and
 interracial sex in minstrelsy Nowatzki concludes that "[t]he humorous context of these verses
 helped white audiences quell their anxiety about miscegenation, but fascination may have lurked
 underneath their nervous laughter." It seems doubtful, however, that the rowdy working class
 audiences of early minstrelsy would have hidden any feeling beneath nervous laughter.

 William Mahar had earlier taken arguments such as these to task on empirical grounds.
 Succinctly refuting these arguments in his *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, (1999) he writes:

> Blackface comedians have sometimes been unfairly diagnosed as sharing 'a contaminated
> form of interracial desire' or an adult fixation on childhood fantasies in which the 'smearing
> of soot or blacking over the body represents the height of polymorphous perversity, an
> infantile playing with excrement or dirt.' The evidence from minstrel songs, playbills, and
> analyses of the contents of typical shows does not support the notion that whites really
> wanted to be black or took great pleasure in imagining the effects of changing places with a
> race they generally sought to suppress.\(^{155}\)

> Where Nowatzki discerns a systemic desire to exhibit black bodies for white
> consumption, Mahar presents a frame of reference for minstrelsy anchored at several points
> within the dominant culture. Addressing the practice of "blacking up" specifically, he argues
> that the practice was, first, a "racial marker" intended to indicate the performance of ostensibly
> black culture. Secondly, he echoes Saxton's argument that the mask served to disguise the
> minstrel who often engaged in social satire; Lastly, he argues that blackface shielded the wearer
> from identification with his character.\(^{156}\)

> This study does not presume that recent historiographical developments are inherently
> superior to older scholarship, and in fact, this author often presumes just the opposite. It does
> appear, however, that the "cultural history" tendency to focus on systems of meaning rather than

\(^{154}\) Nowatzki, 33.
\(^{156}\) Mahar, 1.
on some sort of deterministic functionalism should prove particularly applicable in the realm of popular culture. Further, this allowance for contradiction means that the arguments of earlier literature may be successfully co-opted, instead of dismissed outright.

Despite the unsound conclusions arrived at by Nowatzki, it appears that the evidence supports a complete image of blackface performance that straddles his and Mahar's depictions. A fundamental difference between these two portrayals is their take on questions of "authenticity." Mahar contends that blackface was merely a stage convention used to signify the black provenance of the entertainment, but Nowatzki argues that the makeup transformed its wearer's identity. He became black. Quoting J. Martin Favor, Mahar writes that "[m]instrelsy suggests at its core that 'race' is performable, if not always performed. That is, with the proper makeup, a white person could be 'black,' and by removing pigmentation a black person could become 'white.' 'Race' is theatrical—it is an outward spectacle—rather than anything internal or essential."157

**Early Minstrelsy: The Era of Authenticity**

The similarities between actual slave culture and the performances of minstrels are outside the purview of this study. We will concern ourselves with the *perception* of authenticity among early minstrel audiences, for which there is a wealth of evidence. To that end, Nowatzki's assertion that blackface effected a metaphysical change of identity seems more congruent with early minstrelsy than does Mahar's contention that the mask served merely to mark a performance as "negro." The literature on these early shows is replete with accounts of racial confusion. Minstrel Al G. Field recalled that he had mistaken the performers for actual African

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157 Nowatzki, 25.
Americans at his first minstrel show, and the Ethiopian Serenaders were flummoxed when English audiences accused them of being white in 1846. Minstrel performer Sam Sanford's recollection of touring in Kentucky included the assertion that "[m]any, many people really thought us black, and would wait after the performance to see the 'Niggers' come out, some asking 'say' do them chaps sleep in Hall, them Nigger chaps." On another occasion, Sanford's troupe stayed at a boarding house, where discussion of their forthcoming performance excited the curiosity of the landlord. Returning to the boarding house after the entertainment, Sanford was surprised to find that the landlord had come to the Hall, but had been disappointed to find a troupe of "negroes" performing instead of his tenants.

Even those observers who knew better were wont to speak of minstrelsy in terms that blurred the distinction between the performer and his character. A New York editor described a performance by Thomas "Daddy" Rice in the summer of 1840:

> Entering the theatre, we found it crammed from pit to dome, and the best representative of our American Negro that we ever saw was stretching every mouth in the house to its utmost tension. Such a natural gait!- such a laugh!- and such a twitching-up of the arm and shoulder! It was the Negro, par excellence. Long live James Crow, Esquire!"  

Perhaps most surprising is the manner in which minstrels chose to present themselves. An announcement in the New York Herald touted a forthcoming appearance by the Virginia Minstrels as "an exclusively minstrel entertainment combining the banjo, violin, bone castanets and the tambourine, and entirely exempt from the vulgarities and other objectionable features which have hitherto characterized Negro extravaganzas."

Notice that "Negro" remains unqualified.

The covers of early minstrel song folios are particularly demonstrative of the conflation

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158 Toll, 38-40.
159 Lhamon, 172.
160 Wittke, 31.
161 Wittke, 45.
of performer and performance. A copy of "Zip Coon" from the 1830s featured the eponymous top-hatted and coat-tailed rascal himself bracketed by the following copy: "Zip Coon: A favorite Comic Song. Sung by Mr. G. W. Dixon." One who had no foreknowledge of George Dixon's proclivity for blackface "delineations," would be entirely reasonable in assuming that Mr. Dixon was, in fact, the African American man which the sheet music seemed to portray.

The confusion over the racial identities of minstrels is an unintended consequence of a quite deliberate focus on "authenticity" by its blackface purveyors. This focus on authenticity, must, in turn, be understood as a reaction to middle-class theater, with its conspicuous focus on representation, on performance. Blackface performances in the mainstream theater had not relied on claims of authenticity since blackface makeup was merely one of an innumerable array of thespian devices used for centuries to help the actor assume his role. A 1768 illustration depicts what appears to be an African American man, above a caption reading "Mr. DIBDEN in the Character of MUNGO in the Celebrated Opera of the Padlock." Charles Dibden, a white Englishmen authored The Padlock and appeared on stage as the character Mungo in blackface. As the caption makes clear, however, the actor remained quite distinct from his character.

Minstrels occasionally found it necessary to assuage any confusion that may have arisen from their ambiguous racial identity. Curiously, they often attempted this by distancing themselves from their subject, rather than acknowledging that they were the "negroes" on stage in blackface. An 1844 folio of "Songs of the Virginia Serenaders" features the troupe in blackface playing their instruments. Beneath each blackface minstrel is a depiction of the selfsame performer without blackface and dressed in respectable middle-class fashion. Though the purpose of this device is clearly to demonstrate that the Virginia Serenaders are white, a

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162 Toll, 123.
163 Nathan, 20-22.
certain ambiguity lurks therein. None of the cover's copy offers an explanation for the juxtaposed quintets, an apparent attempt to capitalize on that axiom of human nature which says, "that which remains unsaid remains unreal." More ambiguity lies in the simple fact that the blackface characters appear next to their white counterparts, effecting that separation of the two identities which they could not achieve in reality.

The subtextual tension of this depiction is symptomatic of a conflict endemic to the entire field of early minstrelsy. The minstrel offered himself as an authentic African American and audiences and perhaps even performers appear to have, at least temporarily, believed that race is fundamentally transmutable. In constant conflict with this ethos of "authenticity" was the minstrel's desire to remain "respectable." A common thread in much of the historiography surrounding blackface minstrelsy is the focus on "masking," but the process by which these performers became "black," is almost always addressed as a positive assumption of identity. This focus neglects to address the process of negation that is implicit in assuming an identity. For a white performer to become an "Ethiopian Serenader" or a "Congo Melodist" he must, necessarily, cease being white, if only temporarily.

Early-twentieth-century performer Eddie Cantor exemplified the annihilation of self that the mask could engender. In his autobiography entitled *My Life Is in Your Hands*, he wrote that the blackface mask had "become an inseparable part of my stage presence, and I feared that the day might come when I could never take it off. I would always be Eddie Cantor, the blackface comedian, but if I ever tore the mask off I'd be nobody at all." Ralph Ellison echoed this sentiment in his 1958 study:

*When the white man steps behind the mask of the [blackface] trickster his freedom is*

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164 Tosches, 15.
circumscribed by the fear that he is not simply miming a personification of his disorder and chaos but that he will become in fact that which he intends only to symbolize; that he will be trapped somewhere in the mystery of hell… and thus lose that freedom which, in the fluid, "traditionless," "classless" and rapidly changing society, he would recognize as the white man's alone.\textsuperscript{166}

The blackface performer, then, was trapped between his desire to present "real black culture," and his personal claim to whiteness and respectability. In the earliest minstrel shows, the desire to present "authenticity" prevailed, as evidenced by the widespread confusion over minstrel's racial identity. Throughout the nineteenth century, however, it appears that another dynamic was increasingly at work--the waning importance of "authenticity," (as conceived by performers and audiences,) in favor of respectability.

\textbf{Latter-Day Minstrelsy: Respectability and Spectacle}

Latter-day minstrel George Thatcher recalled of the late nineteenth century: "We were looking for novelty and for a change tried white minstrelsy, singing and dancing in 'Shakespearean costumes' and 'Louis XI court dress.' Lew Dockstader, also a minstrel, lamented that "They have refined all of the fun out of it. Minstrelsy in silk stockings, set in square cuts and bag wigs is about as palatable as amusement as a salad of pine shavings and sawdust with a little salmon, lobster, or chicken."\textsuperscript{167} In the 1870s another veteran of blackface passed judgment on the new state of affairs:

\begin{quote}
The time was when the black faced troubadour sang the pensive melodies of Stephen Foster, or all hands united in a stirring walk-around of Emmett, as is the wont of the plantation darkie in festive times. Nowadays the end man ditties a catch from a London music dive, and in the olio instead of negro life as found way down South, we have a few city barbers and devotees of 4-11-44 pictured for our edification.\textsuperscript{168}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{166} Lott, 25.
\textsuperscript{167} Ashby, 85-86.
\textsuperscript{168} Wittke, 122. 4-11-44 were numbers favored by African American players of "policy"– illegal gambling rackets that were the forerunners of the modern lottery.
Wittke cites the opinion of M.B. Leavitt, a veteran performer and theater manager, who asserted of latter-day minstrelsy that: "There was an ever-widening gap between the mimicry of pre-Civil War days, with its typical, simple Negro songs and dances, and the 'Punch and Judy costumes,' 'stale newspaper jokes,' and 'mere foolish and unmeaning cackle' of later years. As early as 1857 The New York Clipper lamented the deteriorating "negro" element of minstrel shows. Comparing the ostensibly authentic Bryant Minstrels to their competitors the editor wrote

"...other companies are making higher flights of fancy in the regions of darkness, and are slowly taking leave of those old style entertainments in the black art, it is gratifying to find that we have yet among us those who will not suffer the original type of Negro eccentricity to die out altogether... The connecting link between the days of minstrelsy of old, and those of the present time, are the Bryant Minstrels."\(^{169}\)

Their claims that early minstrelsy had been "authentic" notwithstanding, these critics appear to have presented an accurate appraisal of the entertainment's drift away from "negro" mimicry." So much so was the case, that by the Civil War many troupes were presenting "Ethiopian Renaissances" as an element of their stage show. These Ethiopian Renaissances presented the audiences with at least one section of the show "delineating the legitimate plantation festivities as distinguished from the pseudo operatic style now so much in vogue."\(^{170}\)
By the 1880's these features became a common element of minstrelsy.\(^{171}\)

The literature assumes a variety of stances concerning this drift toward middle-class propriety. In The Making of American Audiences (2000), Richard Butsch attributes the shift to the economic vicissitudes particular to post-bellum popular culture. He notes that the competition for audiences increased as respectable theater increasingly attracted the middle class, and saloons and variety acts attracted the working class. In order to compete with these

\(^{169}\) Wittke, 122.
\(^{170}\) Toll, 155.
\(^{171}\) Toll, 155.
entertainments, minstrelsy appropriated a wide range of "inauthentic" components from these other entertainments.\textsuperscript{172}

Leroy Ashby also sees the mechanisms of the "dismal science" in minstrelsy's post-bellum shift. His \textit{With Amusement for All} (2006), however, focuses on a wider range of influence, positioning minstrelsy within larger trends apparent in the late nineteenth century economy. Ashby notes the institutional changes that occurred to the minstrel show, namely that of large-scale consolidation of troupes and a focus on spectacular presentations. Just as "robber barons" closed their fingers around industry after industry, the impresarios of blackface increasingly bought out smaller troupes and expanded the size and splendor of their acts. Among latter day innovations in minstrelsy, Ashby notes a "Chinese giant and an 'African dwarf,' a strongman, a champion wrestler, people who posed as 'Roman statuary,'… and extravagant costume skits about, for example, a 'Turkish Barbaric Palace in Silver and Gold.' In some cases they even dropped blackface itself."\textsuperscript{173} The economic climate was conducive to such opulence, but its impetus, according to Ashby, lay in minstrelsy's pursuit of novelty. In this argument, then, the seeds of minstrelsy's "fall" were planted with the birth of the blackface tradition.\textsuperscript{174}

Toll had earlier articulated the economic motivation for the shift toward gentility under competition by new forms of entertainment, and added that the acts were calculatedly stripped of risqué material in order to capture as large an audience as possible.\textsuperscript{175} Toll, does offer another facet to the debate in suggesting that the advent of stage productions featuring African Americans encouraged minstrels to avoid "negro delineation." These new competitors would obviously have an inherent advantage in presenting black culture, and competition with them

\begin{footnotes}
\item[172] Butsch, 93.
\item[173] Ashby, 85.
\item[174] Ashby, 85-86.
\item[175] Toll, 135.
\end{footnotes}
was futile. This mechanism may provide an interesting avenue for further exploration, but it does have its limitations. The opinion that minstrelsy had strayed from its roots clearly predated the Civil War. Consequently the widespread advent of black stage performers could not have been the sole impetus for the shift away from "negro delineation." It very likely could have intensified the motivation for such a change. Conversely, the relative success of post-bellum blacks on the stage could have been a consequence of blackface's shift away from "blackness."

As white entertainers became less likely to sate their audiences' curiosity about blacks, African Americans may have stepped forward to fill the void.

While the entertainment had clearly become more "refined," minstrels (usually) continued to blacken their faces. In *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, William J. Mahar provides a discussion of blackface masking that may be particularly helpful at this juncture.

> [Blackface makeup] served as a racial marker announcing that a single actor or an ensemble offered what were selected aspects of (arguably) black culture…. The makeup was also a disguise for white performers who chose parody and burlesque as techniques to satirize majority values… Minstrel performers made blackface a vehicle for the creation of an American style of commercialized popular culture… Finally, burnt cork was a masking device allowing professional and amateur entertainers to shield themselves from any direct personal and psychological identification with the material they were performing.  

All four aspects of Mahar's argument converge on a single premise that places it in sharp contrast to Nowatzki's thesis— they all emphasize the non-identity between the actor and his character. His second and fourth points— blackface as disguise, and masking device, respectively— actually stress a view of blackface quite contrary to Nowatzki's assertion that the mask transformed its wearer. A "disguise," by definition, implies the simultaneous existence of two identities, the actual and the dissembled. Similarly, a "masking device" here suggests that the white man behind the mask must be shielded from any association with his onstage character. Both of these points contradict Nowatzki's contention that, for the minstrel and his audience, race

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176 Mahar, 1.
was fundamentally "performable." Rather, like the dramatists of "respectable" theater, the latter-day minstrel was a performer, serving as the conduit for "blackness" but not becoming "black."

Mahar's first point—blackface as a racial marker—also stresses the non-identity of performer and performance, but the emphasis has now shifted to the audience. As a racial marker, blackface makeup alerted audiences that the performer thusly-accoutered presented material with a black provenance. For blackface masking to work in this way, of course, it is not necessary to assume that audiences perceived in minstrelsy the presentation of actual African Americans or African American identity. Maher's estimation of blackface, then, provides a useful lens through which to examine latter-day minstrelsy. Given northern whites' stereotypes of African Americans, there was little likelihood that minstrels in powdered wigs would be mistaken as African Americans, nor that performers were maintaining any pretense of authenticity. What then, were the aims of blackface minstrelsy in the second half of the nineteenth century?

The early minstrels had placed authenticity at the fore, often to the detriment of their own claims to "whiteness" or "respectability." As the entertainment matured, however, its purveyors had gained status as performers within an accepted (if not quite elevated) stage tradition. As both a cause and effect of minstrelsy's increasing respectability, the entertainment jettisoned the trappings of "authenticity" on which its early fortunes had depended.

An up-to-date genealogy of this pop-culture cycle would include many twentieth-century counter-cultures predicated on "authenticity" that eventually "sell out" to the economic and social advantages of middle-class respectability. Early country musicians and their promoters quickly learned the value of fabricating "authenticity," doffing their usual Sunday best to perform in tattered work clothes. As country music garnered popular success, overalls gave way
to sequined "cowboy suits," and by the turn of the twenty-first century many country singers were sartorially indistinguishable from their pop music counterparts. Similar to minstrelsy, country music performance also underwent significant changes. Descending from the rural string bands of the American South, the earliest aggregations of country musicians shunned percussion and horns. But in the 1930s Bob Wills appropriated jazz instrumentation for country music, adding drums, horns, and even electric instruments to his lineup. In the 1960s, Nashville producers like Chet Atkins fused country music's traditional instrumentation with orchestral strings and horns to produce a thoroughly marketable style dubbed "countrypolitan." By 2000, country music had collected a wide variety of disparate musical elements largely snatched from other styles—heavy guitar distortion, synthetic instruments, hip hop drum beats. Steel guitar and fiddle—to many the defining characteristic of American country music—disappeared from many bands, and where they remained, often suffered diminution at the hands of the soundman or recording engineer.177

Similarly, punk rock and hip hop have drifted from forms emphasizing their authenticity as a reflection of proletarian life. By the end of the twentieth century, both of these styles had made the long journey from downtown to the suburbs. Like minstrelsy, the march toward respectability of country, punk rock, and hip hop follows a dialectical pattern. The increasing popularity of an entertainment attracts middle class enthusiasts who—as performers and audiences—in turn reshape the entertainment. The more accessible variant proves amenable to the tastes of other bourgeois and the cycle begins anew. Inevitably, the style of the entertainment becomes "inauthentic" as it assumes the trappings of success.

Just like any dialectical process, though, the new carries with it the essence of the old.

The purveyors of these forms of entertainment all professed authenticity long after their performances had manifestly departed from that standard. In the case of minstrelsy, this can be seen in the persistence of blackface long after ostensibly "black" material had passed from the minstrel's repertoire. As Mahar argues, the mask served as a racial marker. But as minstrelsy became less "black" in the eyes of audiences, the mask became that much more important. As a "performer" the minstrel is a mere conduit through which the creative achievement of another flows. "Performers"—such as those found in "respectable" theater—have forfeited their right to self-determination. They are inextricably bogged in that old world paradigm of hierarchy and deference against which the Astor Place rioters had railed. To the latter-day minstrel, blackface was many things. Certainly, it often represented a meaningless stage convention, applied more out of habit than necessity. But it was just as often a desperate claim to the supposed authenticity on which minstrelsy had been founded, and which it had forsaken somewhere along the way.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century the preeminent American stage tradition was at a crossroads. Torn between middle class and working class, nostalgia and innovation, creativity, mimicry, high art, low art, fear, love, pity, loathing— the minstrel show sought legitimacy in a conflicting tangle of diametrically opposed value systems. Floundering about in this metaphysical morass, minstrelsy ceased to entertain, and was soon supplanted by other entertainments. It was into this unsettled environment that Polk Miller injected his own take on the American pastime of black mimicry.

Let us return to our genealogy of American popular culture. There appears to be one other element of this American cultural dialectic, that when examined, parts the brackish cultural waters of the late nineteenth century just enough to give Mr. Miller standing room. We have
demonstrated that American vernacular culture invariably tumbles uphill from blue-collar disrepute to opera halls, but that the ethos of authenticity is never fully expunged. In fact, the farther removed from the front porch an art form becomes, the more strident its purveyors' claims of authenticity. The resolution of this apparent tension can be found throughout the twentieth century in the culturally reactionary camps of "revivalists" and "traditionalists" that flower in response to every perceived deviation from "folk" purity. In the 1970s, the decadence of the Nashville-style incited the defection of Willie Nelson and others to a more aggressive counter-cultural approach to country music they termed "outlaw" country. Punk rock—earlier cited as an example of proletarian culture gone bourgeois—had been, itself, a product of reaction. With fists full of Chuck Berry double-stops, early punk rock acts restored to rock and roll the simplicity (and tempo,) they believed was lacking in late-70s rock music. Similarly, jazz, the quintessential American music, evolved from mood music for the red light district to art fit for Carnegie Hall in a single generation. It has demonstrated a remarkably tenacious resistance to cultural retrogression, but has spawned legions of "backlash" movements nonetheless. From Dixieland revivalists and the acoustic jazz atavism of Wynton Marsalis, to the remarkably danceable (and marketable) neo-swing bands of the 1990s, musicians have responded to the increasingly refined jazz mainstream by looking to its earlier, "purer" incarnations for inspiration.

Polk Miller related to the popular culture of his day in a manner similar to the manner in which the Ramones related to arena rock, or how Waylon Jennings related to Nashville country music. For the more discriminating, the sentimental posturing of sooty-faced white men bore but a pale resemblance to the authentic stage "darkies" of their childhood. Peering back through the decades, one was sure to recall those early minstrels as wrapped in the slippery racial
indeterminacy for which they had been famous. One was likely to remember them as real African Americans. One was also apt to yearn for that kind of "authenticity" once again. Into the breach stepped Polk Miller.

Miller ironically achieved "blackness" by foregoing the blackface makeup to which, for decades, minstrelsy had clung as its last claim to authenticity. The early minstrels rejected the thespian's role as a vessel for a character and "became" African Americans. Similarly, Miller reunited performer and character once again, by pronouncing himself a "negro delineator." Latter-day minstrels pretended to be black, but Miller did no such thing. Instead, he performed as himself, under his own name. His impersonations of blacks were not proffered with the intent of "transforming" himself into an African American, but were delivered as a demonstration. The didactic nature of his show satisfied the nineteenth-century emphasis on recreation as self-improvement, but it did more. By placing his mimicry in the context of a demonstration, Miller made clear his separation from the "old issue darkie" and did away with the impotent pretense of the minstrel.

There is another aspect of Miller's appeal. In the nineteenth century "authenticity" was achieved through the audience's perception that the men onstage were not portraying characters, but were rather putting their own personal identities on display. American popular entertainment, however was entering a phase where much more would be asked of its performers.

In the twentieth century, the mass-marketing of popular music would necessitate a streamlined approach to the way music was presented, perceived, and sold. One of the products of this commercialized musical paradigm was a neat taxonomy imposed on records and sheet music that simplified marketing and encouraged repeat customers: genre. The fertile river of the
American musical tradition thus crossed into the twentieth century splitting off into discrete, imposed genres—blues, jazz, hillbilly, and others. Once the presumably passive process of compartmentalizing American music was effected,\textsuperscript{178} it was a small step for record companies to take an active hand in sharpening the appeal of their products, tailoring a record's marketing for specific audiences. Now, the appeal of a record was determined not only by the likelihood of it producing a pleasing musical experience, but also by the success of its promotional materials in invoking an aesthetic that confirmed the purchaser's self-aware conception of himself as a fan of blues, or jazz, or hillbilly music.

By the middle of the twentieth century this dynamic was well-understood and had been applied to the marketing of every genre of American music. Pop idols concealed their marriages to preserve their appeal to teenage audiences, while the sleeves of jazz records featured swaths of muted pastel greens, reds, and blues, an appeal to the modernist sensibilities of the genre's increasingly sophisticated and urban fan base. Rock music would eventually push the primacy of aesthetic to the extreme, as acts capitalized on everything from long hair to satanic imagery to establish themselves as exemplars of a freewheeling reckless lifestyle calculated to resonate with teenage fans.

The entertainment that Miller provided was commonplace enough for turn-of-the-century America. True, the available sources are nearly unanimous on the opinion that he was particularly charming on the platform. But his appeal lay not only in his entertainment—his songs, jokes, and negro delineations—but in his capacity to weave this performance into the cloth of a readymade universe. It presented his audience with a satisfying view of themselves and

\textsuperscript{178} In actuality the process of assigning genres impacted the music itself. The repertoire of many legendary blues artists, for example, included a wide variety of music outside of that genre. The record industry's decision to ignore these elements of their repertoire gave rise to the notion of the "bluesman"—a musician who only plays blues. A generation of future musicians imbibed the sound and aesthetic of this record-industry fabrication and grew up to become its flesh-and-blood manifestations.
their society, but more importantly it apotheosized Miller, making him the living embodiment of that universe's value system. It is in this regard that his role as an innovator becomes manifest, with Miller appearing not so much like an aberration of the nineteenth century, but rather as a portent of the twentieth. Like the heavy metal warlocks, punk rock anarchists, and glitzy pop divas a century later, Miller would wrap himself in myth. Fortunately for him, there happened to be one on hand.
Chapter Four:  
Polk Miller and the Old South Quartette.

Of course Miller’s mythopoeia, as with most Southerners of his day, manifested itself in a very specific form— the Myth of the Old South. The roots of this myth lay in the exhausted soil of the antebellum South, when little more than self-deluding rationalizations could grow. In the face of mounting Yankee criticism, Southerners proclaimed theirs a land not on par with the industrialized north, but indeed, superior to it in every measure. Painting Dixie as the true inheritor of Old World aristocracy, Southern elites, against all evidence, presented the south as a land of cultural refinement and artistic achievement. Slavery, rather than a moral abomination, was a benevolent and innocuous institution, intended more for the uplift of slaves than the aggrandizement of their masters. After Appomattox, the myth persisted, but now provided the crestfallen South with a golden age to salve the sting of defeat, and a path to the moral high ground over their Yankee conquerors.

The Old South, then, was a composite of several constituent myths. Miller, however, consistently returned to the Myth of Benign Slavery. In an undated contribution to the Richmond Dispatch, Miller contrasted the condition of blacks before and after the war:

[We] weep over the changed condition of things which has brought the poor negro from a state of perfect happiness and contentment into one in which the battle of life has to be fought and instead of being the rollicking, ever-smiling, ever-ready to go ‘possum-and coon-hunting, sleep-losing creature that he was, he’s thinking ‘bout suppin’ to eat for hiself an’ fambly.179

Miller continues on to suggest that the overcrowded conditions at Central State Hospital— at the time a mental institution for African Americans- were the result of emancipation.

179 Polk Miller's Scrapbook (V.2000.4.16), Valentine Richmond History Center, Richmond, Virginia, 45.
Similarly, Miller told a Washington audience, "the worst thing that was ever done for the Southern negro was to set him free… the emancipation of the negro was the best thing that ever happened to the Southern people."\(^{180}\)

The Myth of Benign Slavery pervaded his stage show as well. A lecture entitled “The Old Issue Darkey,” a mainstay in Miller’s act, extolled the bonds of affection that had linked master and slave before the war and presented a portrait of the prewar African American as friendly, loyal, happy, and eminently unthreatening. At a performance in Washington in April, 1893 Miller regaled his audience with a story “about the hare chase on the old plantation, when master, slaves and dogs all joined in the sport.”\(^{181}\) In Wilmington, Delaware, that December Miller lectured on the antebellum South, “when it was the Garden of Eden for white man and black man alike,” and asserted that the white men of the South thought “the best, the dearest and the truest friends they ever had were the colored boys with whom they played on the farm.”\(^{182}\)

But what is one to make of Miller’s comment that emancipation was "the best thing that ever happened to the Southern people?” Surely, his use of the phrase "Southern people," is exclusive of African American Southerners. Superficially, it appears to represent a classic case of sweet lemons rationalization— the ego-stroking process of convincing others (and one's self,) that a perceived insult, injury, or loss was, in fact, beneficial to one's self. But one could also interpret the remark as a natural corollary to the Myth of Benign Slavery. If slavery had been—as many claimed—a boon to slaves and a detriment to masters, the sundering of all black dependence on whites could only be viewed as a reversal of that state of affairs. The enfranchisement of African American Southerners represented one more stage in that process. Blacks were now responsible for their own economic as well as political destinies, and would be

\(^{180}\) “Polk Miller in Washington,” *Richmond Times*, April 29, 1893.
\(^{181}\) “Polk Miller in Washington,” *Richmond Times*, April 29, 1893.
deprived of the informal network of *noblesse oblige* under which they had flourished and whites were hamstrung.

In a broader context, Miller's perspective on the desirability of black independence fits well with another ideological strain with much currency in the turn-of-the-century South—(and North,) that of the New South. The New South began as a prescription for ameliorating the region's historical inadequacies, but very quickly became a self-congratulatory ethos of Southern triumphalism. In both regards it proved far more compatible with the Myth of the Old South than would first appear evident. Largely the brainchild of *Atlanta Constitution* managing editor Henry Grady, the "New South" envisioned a South set free from its historical inadequacies in the realms of agriculture, industry, and culture. Proponents of the New South styled themselves as iconoclasts and excoriated those Southerners who clung too tenaciously to the ideas and institutions discredited at Appomattox. The New South ethos, however, aimed directly at that end which Lee had failed to achieve—Southern political self-determination. If only liberated from the shackles of poverty, ignorance, and technological backwardness, the South could assert herself in the restored Union and reclaim the dignity denied her since 1865.183

Of the Old Southern ideas which the New South shunned, none was more vociferously denounced than the pigheaded antebellum tendency toward narrow regionalism. This regionalism, they reckoned, contributed significantly to the Civil War and its unpleasant consequences, but also threatened to hobble the South in its future progress. More cynically, it would benefit Dixie little to adopt a progressive attitude toward industry and society if she alienated northern capital.184 In his interview with the *Cincinnati Observer Gazette*, Miller

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184 Gaston, 92, 95.
professed some interesting views on these matters.

There is no city in the United States so well situated geographically or otherwise, to control the Southern trade as Cincinnati. But I am sorry to say there is a feeling in many sections where Cincinnati trade should penetrate that Cincinnati people are prejudiced against the South. That territory is Cincinnati’s, and this condition should not be allowed to continue. 185

The interviewer asked, "What would you suggest as a remedy?" Miller responded:

Muzzle a few fools who seem to forget the war is over, and cultivate friendly relations. Every time you get things started nicely some irresponsible person says something offensive, and the good work is all to be done over again." 186 Miller not only throws his support behind an effort toward regional reconciliation but clearly associates the idea with material progress for the South.

The South is booming, and she is going to continue doing so. There is a great deal of Northern capital in the Southern states and they are clamoring for more. Why, the other day I went through a great cotton mill down in South Carolina that represented a capitalization of $7,000,000 and not a cent of it was Southern money. 187

As a successful Southern pharmacist, of course, Miller presented the ideal emissary of this New South creed. The interview concludes with a return to Miller's favorite subject- race.

The only salvation for the negro in the South... is for him to quit spending all his money for whisky, tobacco, and ginger cakes... The members of the race make enough money. The trouble is they don't save what they make. The country merchants get rich off their purchases. The negro is peculiarly fitted for agricultural work, and he performs it successfully, and if the race would only learn to be provident, it would soon control or own the agricultural interests of the South. 188

Here, Miller is again speaking very much in the vein of industry and thrift but has now applied these New South panaceas to the question of Southern race relations. Ironically, the sentiments expressed here are wholly consistent with those of Booker T. Washington, who had limned his program for black progress in an address at the Atlanta Exposition little more than a month prior to Miller's October 1895 interview. Stressing independence, vocational training, and

185 "Polk Miller in Ohio," Cincinnati Observer-Gazette, undated, Polk Miller's Scrapbook (V.2000.04.01a), 20.
186 "Polk Miller in Ohio," Cincinnati Observer-Gazette, undated, Scrapbook (V.2000.04.01a), 20.
187 Ibid.
188 Ibid.
hard work, Washington urged African Americans to forego the push for political equality and to instead focus on economic progress. The "Atlanta Compromise," as it was called, galled radical blacks such as W.E.B Dubois, but met with widespread approval by whites and many middle-class African Americans.\textsuperscript{189}

That Miller would approve of such a program is unsurprising. His preferred model of race relations, however, lay not in the New South, but in the mythologized Old South, when white supremacy and black deference were the unquestioned order of the day. His depictions of race relations and blacks in the Old South were predictably lauded throughout the South. The \textit{Park City Times} of Bowling Green, Kentucky, hailed Miller’s show as one that “can be thoroughly enjoyed by everybody who knows anything from experience or tradition of the Southern plantation negro,” while an unidentified Alabama publication declared that “as for imitating the Negro of the olden time, he cannot be surpassed.”\textsuperscript{190} In Virginia, Miller enjoyed the approbation of Dr. Moses Hoge, pastor of Richmond’s Second Presbyterian Church, who wrote to him that his performance was characterized by a “true and faithful depiction of your subject.”\textsuperscript{191} Reverend A.C. Bledsoe, of Norfolk’s Cumberland Street Methodist Episcopal Church, praised his recital on the “Old Issue Darkey,” not merely as entertaining but as a “clean, humorous and interesting attraction.”\textsuperscript{192}

Such hearty endorsements by whites were printed in every corner of the South, but northerners were equally as likely to approve of Miller’s entertainment. The \textit{Cincinnati Tribune} reported that his 6 December 1895 “Southern negro dialect recital…attracted and delighted an

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{190} “Polk Miller…,” \textit{Park City Times}, April 29, 1895.
\textsuperscript{191} Promotional circular, Polk Miller's Scrapbook (V.2000.4.16), 116.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid.
\end{flushleft}
immense audience” in that city.\textsuperscript{193} And a performance in New York the following month enthralled a large audience who “listened and laughed for nearly two hours to Polk Miller’s inimitable negro dialect stories and songs.”\textsuperscript{194} Northern receptivity to the Old South Myth had been primed long before the arrival of Miller. Even before the Civil War, Dixie’s critics were often as vulnerable to a romantic perception of the region as were her supporters. Following the Great Compromise of 1877 a national sentiment of reconciliation encouraged both northerners and Southerners to look past narrow regionalism. In the north this was facilitated by an endless stream of melodramatic literature and music presenting a version of the antebellum South very much in line with the Myth of the Old South.

Of course, African Americans rejected Miller’s elysian depiction of slavery and took umbrage with his contention that blacks had fared better before emancipation than after. Though few blacks ever attended a performance of “Old Times Down South,” Miller’s many published statements did place his views before African Americans. The Southern News, a black newspaper published in Richmond responded to Miller’s abovementioned letter to the Richmond Dispatch:

\begin{quote}
...Mr. Miller is very wrong when he says that the poor Negro has been brought from a state of perfect happiness and contentment into one in which, the battle of life has to be fought, etc. When did slavery ever produce happiness? When did the barter and sale of human beings produce contentment? Is it possible that the gentleman is hankering after those dark and bloody days when the overseer’s whip was wet with blood and the clank of the slave dealer’s chains could be heard?\textsuperscript{195}
\end{quote}

The handwritten caption beside this item in Miller’s scrapbook dispassionately identifies it as a clipping from “the Southern News, a negro paper published in Richmond.” The name of the city, however, is underlined as if to declare “Here! Of all places.” Miller probably never considered responding to the article because it was printed in a black newspaper, but when

\begin{footnotes}
\item \textsuperscript{193}“Polk Miller’s Recital,” \textit{Cincinnati Tribune}, December 7, 1895.
\item \textsuperscript{194}“In Slavery Days,” \textit{The New York Herald}, February 1, 1896.
\item \textsuperscript{195}“To Mr. Polk Miller,” \textit{The Southern News}, undated, Polk Miller’s Scrapbook (V.2000.4.16), 46.
\end{footnotes}
African American objections found their way into the white press Miller had had enough.

On 16 August 1895, Miller had performed before an enthusiastic audience of 8,000 at the New York Chautauqua Society. Unlike most of his performances, however, this entertainment was also attended by a number of African Americans, some of whom were deeply offended by his characterization of slavery as well as his assumed “negro dialect.” In a letter to Chautauqua leaders, a committee of offended African Americans requested an opportunity to publicly redress Miller’s hurtful representations. Insightfully, they recognized not only the offensive nature of Miller’s show, but also the broader societal reverberations it engendered. They wrote:

His picture was not that of the aspiring negro of the South, thousands of whom fill the schools supported by the churches and philanthropists of the North. We feel that a great injustice has been done those negroes and those who are members of the Chautauqua in having only that grotesque and illiterate side of the negro presented, and by one who is not his friend, and who is responsible for the sad and deplorable state of affairs which he depicted....Such impressions, made with no opportunity of removing them greatly handicap us in the work of progress, in which work we have all along thought we had the cooperation of the Chautauqua in forwarding.196

The New York Chautauqua Society refused their request for a public forum, and the committee summarily mailed copies of the letter to the press. Before publishing the letter the Richmond Dispatch asked Miller for a comment:

I want it distinctly understood that in my talks I have no reference whatever to the young negroes of today. I do not pretend to know anything of them. They seem to prefer to separate themselves from the white people of the South, and I have no means of knowing people who will not permit us to associate with them. ‘Poor white trash’... and the educated negroes will never mix, but the old time darkey and the Southern white, old and young, are good friends, and will live in peace and harmony.197

Miller’s response to his African American critics is telling, offering not only a dismissive retort to detractors but an assessment of society influenced by his background as an elite Virginian. By blaming the racial discord of the South partly on poor whites, Miller acknowledged the historical complexities that considerations of class had injected into the

197 Ibid.
region’s racial politics. Mississippi arch-patrician William Alexander Percy also exemplified this elite attitude toward poor whites and related the hostility between them and their black neighbors. In *Lanterns on the Levee* (1941) he wrote:

> Intellectually and spiritually they are inferior to the negro, who they hate. Suspecting secretly they are inferior to him, they must do something to him to prove to themselves their superiority. At their door must be laid the disgraceful riots and lynchings gloated over and exaggerated by negrophiles the world over.198

This elite antagonism toward poor whites is evident in many of Miller's recorded statements in the press, hinting that his entertainments may have not only been targeted to white audiences, but white *elite* audiences.

Miller’s success on the platform was the result of two separate facets of his entertainment which spoke to the psychological needs of his audiences. First, he had created an entertainment which allowed him to display "authenticity," through the device of "negro delineation." Instead of pretending to be black– a ruse that had lost its charm through a half-century of minstrel bastardization– Miller performed as Polk Miller, and in the process convinced audiences that they were not watching the dissimulation of an actor, but instead a kind of ethnographic presentation on "the old issue darkey." In this way, he managed to effect the authenticity that, for whatever reason, seems to be the hallmark of American popular performance.

This authenticity hearkened back to the earliest days of blackface minstrelsy, which itself represents the earliest manifestation of American popular culture. The second component of Miller's success prefigures the state of American performance as it would develop in the twentieth century. Having achieved the union of performer and performance, Miller went one step further, wrapping his identity in a myth amenable to the prejudices and assumptions of his audience. The Old and New Souths, and the Myth of Benign Slavery– all projected through a

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middle-class lens– supplied Miller's performance with an aesthetic which stuck to the ribs so much more effectively than mere joke-telling and banjo-strumming. Perhaps realizing the fundamental importance of authenticity to his success, Miller eventually attempted to capture the thrill of the "real thing," onstage, a decision which proved ill-advised. Myth-augmented authenticity had been the secret to Polk Miller's success on the platform. Paradoxically, the same alloy of truth and fiction proved his undoing.

The Old South Quartette

“Old Times Down South” had always emphasized Miller’s penchant for speaking, featuring a healthy measure of his dialect stories and jokes. That music was merely one element of his program is evidenced by the language in which it was described by the press. “Lecture,” “talk,” “recitation,” “entertainment,” “performance;” all of these terms were appended liberally to accounts of a Polk Miller appearance, but almost never was the evening’s entertainment referred to as a “concert.” Miller’s supposed status as an “unparalleled delineator of the negro character,” notwithstanding, a single performer with a banjo could do little to convey the ensemble nature of black music. In order to properly portray it to his audiences, Miller needed help.

Apparently conscious of this fact, he took every opportunity to bolster the musical portion of his show with additional musicians. One of Miller's early attempts to better reproduce the music of his childhood came in the form of a musical aggregation he cobbled together from among his close associates. “The Polk Miller Combination,” a troupe of seven including Miller’s brother, his son, and his future agent, Horatio Smith, entertained at Clifton Forge in March 1893 and “gave evidence of their skill in handling such musical instruments as the
mandolin, the guitar, the banjo, and the zither." He made several appearances with the Polk Miller Combination, but his troupe was generally restricted in ability to travel with the retired pharmacist. As his tour schedule expanded to include outings of several weeks duration, the Polk Miller Combination was not able to perform. If music was to become more than a peripheral aspect of his act, Miller would need to find fulltime musicians.

In the early twentieth century, elite white Virginians were emphatic that the Old Dominion represented the very ideal of race relations. Black Virginians, they argued, were the aristocracy of their race, a claim that paralleled white Virginians' insistence on their own cavalier past. The "best people" of both races, they reasoned, could surely forge a reasonable *modus vivendi*. Elite whites lobbied city governments for improvements in black neighborhoods, condemned the violence and racist radicalism of their neighbors to the south, and helped fight excessively discriminatory legislation against blacks. In exchange for this help, white expectations were that African Americans would abstain from demands for political equality, and submit to an unspoken policy of "separation by consent."200

It is no coincidence that the nadir of the African Americans’ political status since the Civil War corresponded with the period which whites perceived as the acme of post-Emancipation racial harmony. Confident and assured of their superiority by social convention, many white Virginians exhibited an affability to their black neighbors unheard of in regions where the intricacies of racial politics were not so well-defined. In this climate of relatively relaxed white anxieties Polk Miller made a decision that shocked audiences across the country and scored an indelible mark on American musical history. He added a black quartet to his

199 "The Polk Miller Combination," clipping from an unidentified Clifton Forge newspaper, March 23, 1893.

In discussing Miller’s performances with these men, one returns to Miller’s intended message and his audience’s reception of that message. A promotional leaflet produced for the act succinctly captures the essence of what Miller believed his quartet brought to the entertainment.

**Genuine Negroes**
**They Look, Act, and Sing Like the “Old Times”**

With a view to giving the general public a true and faithful reproduction of Plantation life and scenes before the war, Mr. Polk Miller, of Virginia,… has organized and drilled for the purpose a quartette of the best negro singers ever heard on the platform…”  

Consistent with Miller’s professed aim of educating his audience, the claim that the quartet represented “genuine negroes,” prefigured the obsession with authenticity that would creep like kudzu into every strain of twentieth century American music. Of course, his claims of authenticity also reverberated with the echoes of the early minstrel shows. The year before his death Miller looked back on his musical career with the quartet and again emphasized its educational value:

...I do try to give to the older people something that would take them back to their childhood, and to give to the younger generation an insight to the happy past under the old regime in Dixie, and, when I fail in that, then I'll bid farewell to platform work forever.  

Miller’s stated purpose then, was to present what he perceived as the truest possible representation of the music of the antebellum African American, but implicit in the very nature of the program was Miller’s prescription for an ideal social order. Emanating from his background as an elite Virginian, these performances declared that proximity, familiarity, even affinity between Southern blacks and whites were the natural state of affairs, but only in an environment of white supremacy. That the Old South Quartette performed some songs with Miller merely looking on cements the symbolic parallel between Polk Miller and the antebellum

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201 Ibid.
202 Promotional flyer for the Old South Quartette, Polk Miller's Scrapbook, (V.2000.4.16.), 3.
plantation master.

The evidence regarding the Old South Quartette’s reception in the black press is fragmentary, as only the *Richmond Planet* appears to have taken much notice of their career. The perspective offered by these gleanings, though, provides a fascinating insight into black reception of the quartet. In June 1902 an advertisement ran in the *Richmond Planet* for an entertainment to be held on the 17th featuring “Polk Miller’s Old South Quartette.” Interestingly, the night’s program was to include both “plantation melodies and up to date songs.”

The promoters of this event *may* have miscalculated. Several other engagements by the ensemble were advertised in the Planet’s pages over the next decade, but the troupe was never again touted as the “Old South Quartette.” In a February 1903204 announcement they were billed as “Polk Miller’s Famous Quartette” and in June 1909 as simply the “Polk Miller Quartette.”205 This last engagement was before the Knights of Pythias. A week later the *Planet* gave an account of the proceedings:

> When the Polk Miller Quartette was introduced, there was prolonged applause and as the members of it sang, there was a commotion among the listeners. The old time melodies awakened memories of the past and caused an enthusiastic outburst of applause, as those who had listened clamored for more of the same kind. They would not be denied and again the soft melodies of the singers floated away out over the audience and then died upon the air.206

It is unclear whether or not Miller himself appeared before these African American audiences, but it is inconceivable that the ensemble would have publicized themselves as the "Polk Miller Quartette," if they intended to present anything antagonistic to their employer's ideology. The "old time melodies" which earned the approbation of the audience, then, were very likely those same songs presented by the quartet on any other night. It is tempting to

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204 *Richmond Planet*, February 7, 1903.
205 *Richmond Planet*, June 12, 1909.
disregard this incongruity, to attribute the audience's enthusiasm to the quartet's celebrity status, but there is also reason to suspect that the black audiences of Richmond rejected only those elements that smacked of white nostalgia. References to the "Old South," immediately suggested a white historical perspective, including the "Myth of Benign Slavery," explaining why black audiences may have preferred "Polk Miller's Quartette" to the "Old South Quartette."

Mindful at all times of the barbarity of antebellum Southern society in regard to blacks, older African Americans may have nonetheless embraced the music of their youth. In accordance with the nature of Virginia race relations, predicated as it was on cooperation between blacks and white elites, many African Americans in the Commonwealth may have taken a less than hostile stance toward such cultural vestiges of slavery.

Miller's appearances with the quartet received equally positive reception from white audiences in the Old Dominion. The Big Stone Gap Post in Wise County, reported that their entertainment put the audience "in an uproar of laughter from the time the curtain rose until the close of the entertainment" and hailed Miller as "one of the best entertainers in the South." An appearance by Polk Miller and the Old South Quartette was bundled with cultural meaning instantly decipherable to those familiar with the nature of race relations in Virginia. Neither physical proximity nor professional collaboration implied social equality. Instead, Virginia audiences perceived in "Old Times Down South," a working model of Virginia race relations with a clear implication of white superiority and black deference. The professional arrangement between the five men merely represented the acceptable domain of interracial cooperation-economic opportunity.

It is revealing, therefore, that Miller and the Old South Quartette would run afoul of public opinion when they attempted to perform outside the relatively hospitable environment of

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207 Big Stone Gap Post, September, 29, 1909.
the Commonwealth. On 29 September 1905 the *Weekly True Democrat*, of Tallahassee, Florida, ran the following article.

**Had Negroes in his Company…**

Several days ago when Polk Miller... was preparing to leave his Virginia home for Atlanta to appear for the benefit of the First Baptist Church... he was notified that on account of the requests of local managers of cities where he was to have appeared all his dates had been cancelled. The reason given for the cancellation was that the patrons of the Alkahest attractions did not wish to go to see an attraction where negroes had a part... 208

Similar incidents apparently followed because by 1912 Miller disbanded the quartet, citing the irrational hostility of audiences north and south. Emphatic that the Old South Quartette was merely an educational device, he appeared genuinely confused at the negative response of some audiences.

The better class of white people knew that I used these negroes for a purpose— to illustrate my work. They could see that my negroes knew what they were there for, as they entered heartily into the spirit of my work; that they were subservient to my will, but the commoner classes could not understand why Polk Miller, who posed as a gentleman, could bring a lot of 'niggers' there to entertain white people. The educational feature of my work, in my effort to reproduce the negro of bygone days, could not be seen by that class. They looked upon my performance as a 'show only, entirely overlooking the fact that my men were not there as 'companions,' but as my servants, and as much so as the men who are in my employ at my home in Bon Air. 209

Miller emphasizes the role of class in his audience's reaction to the black quartet, but makes it clear that they were better received at home stating: "I could get a dozen quartettes from the good singing material among the negroes in the tobacco factories here, and for local purposes (entertaining at home), I will perhaps organize a good one, but I shall never again take a negro quartette on the road with me." 210 The negotiated middle ground of black deference and elite

208 "Had Negroes in His Company," *Weekly True Democrat*. (Tallahassee), September 29, 1905.
210 Ibid.
patronage on which his understanding of race was predicated was wholly foreign to most places outside of his native state. In many cities, north and south, blacks asserted themselves unfettered by "separation by consent" and to working class whites, the mere presence of African Americans was potentially threatening. Further, Miller's appearance with African Americans onstage, may have been suggestive of social equality.

In 1909 Polk Miller and the Old South Quartette had recorded for the Edison Phonograph Company of New Jersey. The seven recordings produced that day were dismissed by Edison managers as eminently unremarkable. They can hardly be blamed for their skepticism. The Miller records presented the listener with a performance that was rustic in every connotation of the word; an accompanist who demonstrated little of the virtuosity then in vogue for banjoists; a lead singer whose approach departed radically from the accepted operatic tone of the era's popular singers; and worst of all the ensemble was biracial in makeup. One can imagine their surprise, then, when the records sold extraordinarily well upon their release in 1910. Miller had unwittingly stumbled across a formula for popular music that would achieve full fruition decades later when white and black music merged to form rock and roll. The ever-prescient Mark Twain understood the music enshrined on these wax cylinders better than anyone else, once calling the music of the Old South Quartette "about the only thing the country can furnish that is originally and utterly American." Dazzled by a recent performance Twain spoke of his two favorite Polk Miller songs, "Old Dan Tucker," and the "Watermelon Song." " Possibly, [America] can furnish something that is more enjoyable but I must doubt it until I forget that pair of musical earthquakes."212

Conclusion

It is unclear whether or not Miller ever organized the promised final incarnation of the Old South Quartette. He died less than two years later on 20 October 1913, never realizing the sheer incompatibility of his vision to the realities of the emerging American racial landscape. If Miller had trouble adapting to the new state of affairs, he can hardly be blamed. American society was evolving at an unprecedented rate, and even his hometown of Richmond, Virginia—capital of the Confederacy and bastion of the Old Guard—had contracted the frenetic, twitching "disorder" of change. In 1905 Richmond had gotten its first skyscraper in the Mutual Assurance of Virginia building. The streets were increasingly the domain of the automobile, and the alleys of urban gangs with names like the Butchertown Cats and the Shockoe Hill Cats, who did battle with brutally elementary weaponry for control of the city's neighborhoods. Richmond had "arrived" in the sense that it warranted its own muckraking journalist, socialist ideologue Adon Yoder. His pamphlet, The Idea, rankled feathers in the city and landed Yoder in the downtown lockup. Nickelodeons lined Broad Street, causing consternation among adults who fretted about their effect on youth, and irritated police who monitored the crowds they attracted on sidewalks.213

But for all the change that had taken place in Richmond before Miller's passing, he was spared the shocking dissolution of the old order that soon transpired in the River City and elsewhere. In 1929 the city passed a residential segregation ordinance that represented not the triumph of white supremacy in the Old Dominion, but its desperate grasping for an institutional handhold. The racial modus vivendi in Virginia had been predicated on what the Richmond

213 Harry Kollatz Jr., Richmond in Ragtime: Socialists, Suffragists, Sex & Murder, (Charleston: The History Press, 2008.)
News-Leader's editor, Douglas Southall Freeman, had termed "separation by consent." With the growing racial tension brought about by increasing urbanization, the informal, voluntary system of segregation broke down, and law stepped in where custom had once sufficed. Of course, this edifice of discriminatory legislation provided a conspicuous target against which later generations of activists could take aim.²¹⁴

The two phases of Miller's performing career provide windows into the cultures they served and failed to serve. The pre-quartet Miller performances clearly communicate to the historian a national fixation with authenticity, perhaps a legacy of the early minstrels whose stock-in-trade was their claim to accurate "negro delineations." It is equally manifest that the latter day minstrel show failed to live up to the very standard its blackface forebears had established, creating a vacuum which Miller was able to exploit. His second masterstroke was the construction of an "aesthetic," an enveloping myth which surrounded his show and his identity with a transcendent quality that made an evening with Polk Miller somehow more than the sum of its parts. It is doubtful that Miller was so deliberate in his strategy as to have calculated the appeal of this aesthetic, or even to realize the innovation it represented. Like most examples of evolution, cultural or otherwise, the process was probably unconscious.

Miller's career with the Old South Quartette also presents the historian with a vista on the past. The success which Miller experienced with his black quartet was relatively brief and geographically limited. "Separation by consent"—where and while it survived—made the presentation of blacks and whites on the same stage acceptable to audiences. Outside of the Old Dominion, however, this convention was less known, and audiences north and South balked at the implication of social equality which they perceived in the Old South Quartette. Had Miller and his quartet managed to survive into the 1920s their Richmond appearances would likely have

²¹⁴ Smith.
been greeted with the same hostility.

Though the Old South Quartette represented the logical direction for Miller to take his entertainment, it was his least successful onstage venture. Ironically, this era of his career was documented by sound recordings ensuring the attention of future generations. His role as a solo musician and dialectician has passed into relative historical obscurity. This study has sought to illuminate this lesser-known facet of Miller's career, and to make sense of his performances as a manifestation of popular music at the intersection of major sociological and cultural trends in American history.

Polk Miller lies in Richmond's Hollywood Cemetery, far from the front gate, and the roaring James River at the graveyard's rear, off of the main thoroughfare that conducts Hollywood's visitors to the famous tombs in President's Circle— an ideal spot to sleep off the worries of the road.
Images

Polk Miller Drug Company full-page ad.
From Richmond Times-Dispatch, April 4 1909.
The Millers' Home in Bon Air
From Talbott, 30.

Polk Miller, circa 1890.
Image provided by Greg Kimball at the Library of Virginia.
Polk Miller, later in his musical career. Image provided by Gregg Kimball at the Library of Virginia.

Marginalia from Miller's scrapbook.
From Polk Miller's scrapbook, V.2000.4.16, Valentine Richmond History Center.

Showbill.
From Polk Miller's Scrapbook, V.2000.4.16, Valentine Richmond History Center.
Member of the Old South Quartette, circa 1900.
From VCU Digital Collections, http://dig.library.vcu.edu/

The Old South Quartette, Circa 1900.
From VCU Digital Collections, http://dig.library.vcu.edu/
Songs of the Virginia Serenaders, 1844.
Image provided by Greg Kimball at the Library of Virginia.
Sheet music folio depicting George W. Dixon as "Zip Coon," Circa 1832. From Finson, Illustration 5.2.

Illustration of Thomas "Daddy" Rice as Jim Crow. From PBS online, www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part3/3h489b.html
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