Stephen Foster has been described as many things over the years, among them a folk songwriter, a popular songwriter, and an American songwriter. But what many people forget is that he was first and foremost a Pittsburgh songwriter. Without the ethnically diverse population, commerce, heritage, and industry of 19th-century Pittsburgh, beloved songs like “Hard Times Come Again No More,” “Old Folks at Home,” “Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair,” “Camptown Races,” and “Oh, Susanna” might never have existed.

By Kathryn Miller Haines
While modern audiences question Foster’s position towards African Americans based on some of his lyrics using exaggerated dialog, a closer look reveals his compassion for blacks, fostered right here at home. Stephen Foster was indeed a product of his time and place; Pittsburgh’s unique history and culture before, during, and after Foster’s lifetime shaped the content of his work and prolonged the life of his musical legacy.

Nineteenth-century Pittsburgh was a microcosm of the industrial landscape of the rest of the United States. Dubbed the “Birmingham of America” by none other than Charles Dickens, Pittsburgh was an established manufacturer of iron, glass, steam engines, and steamboats at the time of Stephen Foster’s birth in 1826. The city was already wrapped in a heavy pall of coal dust that remained part of its image well into the 1970s. While factories did not make as overt appearances in Foster’s work as they did in Dickens’ novels, Pittsburgh’s industry emerged again and again in Foster’s music, from the steamship in “The Glendy Burk” (“The smoke goes up and the engine roars, And the wheel goes round and round”), to the allusion to mill and factory workers alike left frail and fainting at the door thanks to long, unregulated hours in “Hard Times Come Again No More.”

It was not just heavy industry that lined Pittsburgh’s waterways. The same three rivers that made it a valued defensive outpost during the French & Indian War had come to serve cotton mills that seemed better suited to the South. The mills—along with the riverboats and packets used to transport raw cotton to the city—provided young Stephen Foster with a glimpse of the lives and customs of enslaved African Americans and other dock workers. The mix of people and dialects would ignite in his mind complex questions about race and inspire characters in some of his most beloved songs. Most of all, Foster did not just observe the mills and workers from afar; his first job was sweeping the floor at Pittsburgh’s Hope Cotton Mill.

The city was a welcome port for workers and travelers and as such it grew to accommodate the needs of visitors by providing a wide range of entertainment that would have been expected in Manhattan, but not at the edge of the frontier. The first freestanding theater opened in Pittsburgh in 1813. By the 1860s, Pittsburgh had several dedicated playhouses, 25 stages, a myriad of concert saloons, and four assembly halls. While during Foster’s formative years the performance opportunities were not quite so numerous, the city was home to venues that welcomed touring circuses, theater companies, and big name actors like Edwin Booth and opera impresarios like Henry Russell who made the city a destination on their way to New York via river, canal, and eventually, rail.

For a young boy in a relatively small city, this exposure to entertainments of the highest order not only shaped his own work (Foster parodied Russell in his 1851 song “Farewell, Old Cottage”), but made talent of that magnitude seem like something within his reach. He did not have to stay a regional songwriter any more than the people of Pittsburgh had to restrict themselves to regional talents.

Of course the form of entertainment that had the biggest impact on Foster’s career, and creates the greatest controversy when appraising the composer today, was the minstrel show. These performances featured white men donning black face and aping African American men and women, as well as creating caricatures of Irish and German immigrants and the perceived differences between high and low classes. While one might assume that the minstrel show was conceived in the antebellum South, it was actually born and nurtured in the most rapidly industrializing regions in America: the Northeast and the Ohio River Valley. Foster was exposed to these shows quite early in his life—white men were parodying black men in public performances in the U.S. as early as 1815. By attending these shows, and participating in amateur versions himself, he learned several things that could eventually be applied to his own career: the tropes and themes that made a minstrel song successful, the troupes and performers who achieved the greatest level of success, and the value of having one’s work associated with...
The original of this Stephen Foster portrait, showing him late in life, measures only 1.2 inches high.

University of Pittsburgh Library System, Center for American Music, Foster Hall Collection.
such a popular form of entertainment. The impact of these lessons became apparent years later in his dealings with E.P. Christy, the leader of The Christy Minstrels, the most popular minstrel troupe of the day. In an 1851 letter, Foster wrote to Christy:

I have just received a letter from Mess. Firth, Pond & Co., stating that they have copyrightied a new song of mine (“Oh! Boys, carry me ‘long”) but will not be able to issue it for some little time yet, owing to other engagements. This will give me time to send you the m.s. and allow you the privilege of singing it for at least two weeks, and probably a month before it is issued, or before any other band gets it… This song is certain to become popular, as I have taken great pains with it. If you accept my proposition I will make it a point to notify you hereafter when I have a new song and send you the m.s. on the same terms, reserving to suit myself in all cases the exclusive privilege of publishing. Thus it will become notorious that your band bring out all the new songs. You can state in the papers that this song was composed expressly for you.

It is the South we think of when we hear minstrel songs like “My Old Kentucky Home” and “Old Folks at Home” (state songs for Kentucky and Florida, respectively), but while that geography is evoked, it is the freed slave’s experiences that Foster captures as he writes about a plantation life that is now “far, far away,” and about loved ones who were left behind to toil while the speaker escaped in hopes of finding a better life. Being situated in a Northern state may have also inspired Foster’s desire to humanize his black characters, as he gradually eschewed stereotyped dialect, and crafted men and women of color who were intended to be empathized with, rather than crude caricatures held at a distance by the audience. He expressed such sentiments in a May 25, 1852, letter to Christy:

As I once intimated to you, I had the intention of omitting my name on my Ethiopian songs, owing to the prejudice against them by some, which might injure my reputation as writer of
another style of music, but I find that by my efforts I have done a great deal to build up a taste for the Ethiopian songs among refined people by making the words suitable to their taste, instead of the trashy and really offensive words which belong to songs of that order. 9

Easy access to transportation not only allowed Foster to encounter people from other regions, it also made it easier to obtain goods that otherwise might not have been introduced into the region until years later. By the time Charles Rosenbaum began manufacturing pianofortes in Pittsburgh in 1815, the first piano had already crossed the Alleghenies. 10 To a young Stephen Foster, the instrument, still foreign in so many regions of the U.S., seemed ubiquitous and exposed him to tools that may not have been available in other areas of the country. In fact, by 1841, when Stephen was barely in his teens, his father, William Barclay Foster, was already describing Foster’s near obsession with music, writing, “his leisure hours are all devoted to musick, for which he possesses a strange talent.” 11

It is the people who make a city and so it was the people who shaped Pittsburgh who had such a strong influence on Foster’s music. Many of the early German and English settlers of Pittsburgh were accomplished classical musicians who passed on their skills to the children of pioneers. The utopian Harmony Society near Zelienople established one of the first orchestras in the U.S., which was said to have performed the first symphony composed west of the Alleghenies. 12 In the 1820s and ’30s, musician immigrants like Henry Kleber and W.C. Peters opened music stores in the city. 13 And by 1844, when Foster was almost finished with his own secondary education, Pittsburgh became the first public school district in Pennsylvania and the fifth in the country to institute required music education. 14 For a boy who struggled to balance what was expected of him with his desire to pursue the arts (while away at school, he made a promise in a letter to his eldest brother that he would not “pay any attention to my music until after eight Oclock in the evening”), he didn’t have to look far to learn that music, while not an income-boosting pursuit, was socially valuable. 15

The immigrant influence did not just shape Pittsburgh’s musical community; it...
Charlotte Susanna Foster
by James M. Edwards, Trustee, Allegheny Cemetery

In a shady vale of Allegheny Cemetery in Lawrenceville is the William Barclay Foster family plot with the gravesite of America’s pioneering songwriter, Stephen Foster. “Oh! Susanna,” America’s best-selling sheet music in the nineteenth century, stands out as his greatest hit. First performed in 1847 at the Eagle Ice Cream Saloon on Wood Street downtown, it became an instant hit among minstrel performers nationwide. A few years later, the song was cherished worldwide.

Who was Susanna? No one knows for sure and Foster didn’t say. The lyrics are examined at length in Ken Emerson’s 1997 biography *Doo-dah!: Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture*. Emerson states clearly that Susanna is none other than Stephen’s sister, Charlotte Susanna Foster.

Stephen was born into a large and bustling family. Charlotte, 17 years older, had a profound effect on young Stephen: she had an exceptional singing voice, she played the family piano, and she sang the first songs Stephen ever heard.

When she was 20, Charlotte travelled down the Ohio River to Louisville to visit relatives and spend the summer. She contracted what was probably malaria and died before she could be brought home. A witness said she sang a song the morning of her death. She was buried in Louisville, but two decades later—in 1852, four years after “Oh! Susanna” had swept the nation—her remains were exhumed and brought back to the family plot. Brother and sister are once again together, she one row deeper and four graves east of Stephen himself, the stone almost hidden in the lush sod:

**CHARLOTTE SUSANNA FOSTER**
BORN DECEMBER 14, 1809
DIED IN LOUISVILLE OCTOBER 20, 1829
HER REMAINS WERE REMOVED AND RE-INTERRED
BENEATH THIS STONE SEPTEMBER 10, 1852

can be felt in the slow, mazurka-like tempo of Foster’s temperance song “Comrades, Fill No Glass for Me,” the polka beat in “Oh, Susanna,” the Italian-melody inspired “Beautiful Dreamer” and Foster’s many lyrical and melodic allusions to the work of Irishman Thomas Moore, most evident in his “Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair.” Foster studied the immigrant groups he heard around him and borrowed from their musical styles with the intent of appealing to a wide audience. More directly, despite family claims that Foster was an “untutored genius,” his relationship with Henry Kleber cannot be denied. Kleber was Pittsburgh’s best-known musical performer, composer, merchant, teacher, and concert promoter of the 19th century. Foster dedicated his piano piece “The Village Bells Polka” to Kleber, and included arrangements of four Kleber songs in his *Social Orchestra*. Kleber even provided the music for Foster’s funeral. Foster’s brother, Morrison, admitted in his biography, amidst claims that his brother learned to play the flute unaided and could pick out harmonies on the guitar at two years old, that Kleber was his brother’s tutor. Strangely, Kleber never claimed credit for serving as Foster’s music instructor despite their obvious affection for each other.

It was not Pittsburgh alone that provided young Stephen Foster with an opportunity to experience music. The city’s riverboats and rails allowed easy passage to towns like Cincinnati, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and, of course, New York, where music publishers were rapidly growing thanks to new technologies. Although evidence of such trips is limited, steamship travel may have allowed Foster, like his mother and sisters, to travel south to Kentucky where he witnessed plantation life firsthand. We know Foster took advantage of opportunities to travel around the country. Foster moved to Cincinnati in 1846 to work as a bookkeeper for his brother, Dunning. During his three years there, his first minstrel songs took off in popularity; he signed a professional agreement with the
It is the people who make a city and so it was the people who shaped Pittsburgh who had such a strong influence on Foster’s music.

Henry Kleber, Pittsburgh’s best-known musician of the 19th century.

HHC Detre L&A, Oversize Print Collection.
speaks to his commitment to Lincoln’s cause. Foster’s “Better Days are Coming” further cements his admiration for the Union with lyrics like, “There are voices of hope that are borne on the air, And our land will be freed from its clouds of despair, For brave men and true men to battle have gone, And good times, good times are now coming on.”

These were not the only times he touched on politics (local and national) in his songs. He also wrote about secession in “That’s What’s the Matter” and satirized political parades and processions in “The Great Baby Show,” and, of course, tackled slavery in a myriad of ways, most notably in “My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night.” The song, originally entitled “Poor Uncle Tom, Good Night,” alludes, in its early drafts, to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel. While subsequent drafts removed overt references to the book, the song retained enough of its anti-slavery origins to prompt Frederick Douglass to laud it and other Foster songs for awakening sympathies for the slave and allowing “anti-slavery principles take root and flourish.”

As a vital transportation hub, Pittsburgh played an important role in the Civil War, providing war materials and supplies to the Union Army. The Fort Pitt Foundry made mortars, and the Allegheny Arsenal was the primary military manufacturing facility for U.S. Army accoutrements, saddles, and other cavalry equipment, all while turning out as many as 60,000 small arms cartridges a day. Pittsburgh’s operations were so important to the Union’s efforts that the U.S. War Department feared it might be targeted for invasion, which led to the formation of the Department of the Monongahela to provide a military presence for Western Pennsylvania.

Hardly a day must have passed when trains did not travel through the region toting soldiers to the front. While Foster himself was not qualified for active duty, the sights and sounds of the war inspired him to pay tribute to the men at the front and the families left behind with a slew of songs including “Bring My Brother Back to Me,” “Nothing But a Plain Old Soldier,” “My Boy is Coming from the War,” “Kiss Me Dear Mother, Ere I Die,” and others that mourn the senseless loss of life and the empty chairs left back home. He even wrote a song about the “colored” brigades, answering the criticism that African Americans were not fit to fight by showing that all they needed to succeed was commitment to the Union cause:

With musket on my shoulder and with banjo in my hand,
For Union and the Constitution as it was I stand.
Now some folks think the darkey for this fighting wasn’t made,
We’ll show them what’s the matter in the Colored Brigade.

Foster’s music has had remarkable staying power, never falling out of public awareness even as it forgot the name of the composer.
Draft of “My Old Kentucky Home, Good Night,” from Stephen Foster’s sketchbook. The title was later shortened to its more familiar “My Old Kentucky Home.”

University of Pittsburgh Library System, Center for American Music, Foster Hall Collection.

“There are voices of hope that are borne on the air, And our land will be freed from its clouds of despair, For brave men and true men to battle have gone, And good times, good times are now coming on.”
who wrote the tunes. His works were included in songbooks throughout the late 19th century and became part of the touring repertoire of popular acts like Jenny Lind and, much later, the Fisk Jubilee Singers. A half-century after his death, Foster’s songs were heavily represented in *Heart Songs Dear to the American People*, a 1909 anthology that consisted of songs nominated by 25,000 readers of *National Magazine*. Foster’s tunes were among the first recorded on Edison’s cylinders, and received a boost in popularity during the 1941 ASCAP radio strike, when his music, especially “Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair,” received frequent radio play thanks to being in the public domain. With each new musical genre, Foster’s music has been reshaped and rearranged, regaining popularity as vaudeville hits, jazz standards, big band tunes and, eventually, rock and country-western songs. They are also commonly found in film and television soundtracks.

Since Foster’s death in 1864, Pittsburgh has striven to memorialize the composer and further solidify his role in the city’s cultural history. In 1900, the first physical memorial for Foster appeared in the city. A statue by Guiseppe Moretti was erected in Highland Park at a ceremony attended by nearly 50,000 Pittsburghers, including 3,000 school children who were led in a medley of Foster songs by none other than the Pittsburgh Symphony’s principal conductor, Victor Herbert. However, the statue became a point of controversy for its depiction of a seated Foster with his character “Uncle Ned” at his feet, as if showing the composer “above” those he was writing about. As shown here, this was hardly the truth, and the statue would indeed be more accurate if the men were side by side. Nonetheless, repeated criticism and vandalism led to the statue being moved in 1944 to a more visible and safe location in Schenley Park outside Carnegie Library.

*Foster’s music has had remarkable staying power, never falling out of public awareness even as it forgot the name of the composer who wrote the tunes.*
The next major tribute to Foster was the Foster Memorial Home, at the site of Foster’s birthplace, The White Cottage, at 3600 Penn Avenue in Lawrenceville. While the original home Foster lived in was torn down in 1865 by then-owner iron manufacturer Andrew Kloman, the house now at the site was owned and maintained by the city of Pittsburgh from 1916 through the 1930s. Several Foster descendants, including his daughter, lived in the home and operated a small museum in Foster’s honor. Also, three public schools were named in Foster’s honor—in Lawrenceville, McKees Rocks, and Mount Lebanon. In 1926, the mayor of Pittsburgh proclaimed a centennial to honor Foster in the 100th year since his birth. Throughout the year numerous concerts and other public events took place in the city to honor the composer and his accomplishments.

The most significant effort made to keep Stephen Foster’s memory and music alive must be the Oakland memorial that shares his name. Conceived in 1927 by the Tuesday Musical Club (a women’s organization of semi-professional musicians) and supported through the University of Pittsburgh’s generous gift of land to situate the building, the Stephen Foster Memorial was intended to be a place where Foster’s music could be heard and enjoyed. Those plans changed when Josiah Lilly, president of Indiana Pharmaceutical Company, Eli Lilly & Company, learned of Pittsburgh’s plans. A long-time devotee of Foster’s music, Lilly had assembled an impressive collection of “Fosteriana,” all of which he stored in a small building on his property that he dubbed Foster Hall. Working with Fletcher Hodges, Jr., the collection included manuscripts, photographs, personal artifacts, every known edition of Foster’s songs, and countless other valuable materials that helped to track the composer’s career and inspirations. When he learned of Pittsburgh’s efforts to create a building in Foster’s honor, he donated the entire collection, and arranged for Hodges to be its curator, all housed in the new facility.

Plans were altered to allow the building to be not just a concert hall, but a museum and archive dedicated to Foster. Work on the building began in earnest in 1932 and was completed in 1937, but the work was hardly done. The staff continued to acquire Foster-related materials and also continued Lilly’s efforts to disseminate information about Foster and his career to anyone free of charge. In the Memorial’s formative years, this meant the creation and distribution of 1,000 first edition reproduction sets of his complete works, plus thousands of songbooks, articles in countless publications about Foster’s work, assisting with Hollywood productions of Foster biopics, and answering hundreds of thousands of reference questions from people all over the world who wanted to learn more about the composer. The Memorial also began a relationship with Allegheny Cemetery, the site of Foster’s grave, including initiating an annual service to commemorate Foster’s death.

In the 76 years since its creation, the Stephen Foster Memorial has established Foster’s rightful position as the father of American popular song and its library, the Center for American Music, as the principal repository for all materials related to Stephen Foster. The Center has also continued Lilly’s efforts to research, educate, and preserve
materials related to Foster’s life and career and has worked on many high-profile Foster projects over the years, including a critical edition of his complete works, numerous documentaries on his life, and a Grammy-award winning album of his songs. The reasons for sustained interest in Stephen Foster are complex, just as are the changing interpretations of Foster’s lyrics, but much like the city that strongly influenced his writing, the songs have at their heart a distinctly American quality. As musicologist Charles Hamm put it in his book Yesterdays: Popular Song in America, "Never before, and rarely since, did any music come so close to being a shared experience for so many Americans." Foster’s music speaks to what it means to live in a country that was shaped by innovation and industry, advantageous geography, and creative and hardworking people. The American experience—and, more specifically, the Pittsburgh experience—may have changed over the years in certain ways, but the same qualities define the region and continue to make it unique. This is at the heart of why Foster’s songs still resonate: they, like the land bisected by rivers and the neighborhoods divided by cultures, still reflect who we are today.

Kathryn Miller Haines is the Associate Director for the Center for American Music at the University of Pittsburgh. Among its holdings is the Foster Hall Collection, which continues to be the principal repository for all materials pertaining to Stephen Collins Foster. Visit http://www.pitt.edu/~amerimus to learn about Foster and the Center.

Len Barcousky, “Recounting Abraham Lincoln’s only trip to Pittsburgh, 150 years ago The president-elect arrived by train 150 years ago on Valentine’s Day before inauguration,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 13, 2011.


Emerson, 11.


“No Letup,” *Time Magazine*, January 27, 1941.

For more information on Foster’s extensive use in these mediums, see his entry on the Internet Movie Database website, imdb.com.

Hamm. 2:593.