Just over four hundred years ago, Elizabethan England sought to establish itself in the New World. Vessels of lumber rode the wind, and, ship by ship, members of all walks of English society began to populate this vast “new” territory. Soon to follow were enslaved peoples of Africa, other peoples from the British Isles, and an increasing number of people from the European mainland. These diverse groups, which ended up on the North American continent for their own reasons, began to settle the land, moving westward, percolating through the mountains and spilling onto the plains. With each of these groups came unique musical styles and traditions. As in their native land, these many veins of music were passed down through the generations by word of mouth and continued to spread throughout the countryside.

In this diverse, evolving world, music traditions, which never would have met in their homelands, not only coexisted but thrived together. The oral transmission of musical knowledge from one generation to the next facilitated intercultural sharing of musical ideas. As English became the lingua franca of North America and different European-American groups met and intermarried, multicultural musical traditions increasingly emerged. Similarly, slave masters taught their slaves to play the music of their own mother countries, prompting the ad-
adaptation of European musical elements within African musical traditions; in turn enslaved people shared this mixture of European and African music with the lower socioeconomic classes of white Americans.¹ This is evident in the folk music traditions of the Appalachian Mountains, where one might find the banjo, an instrument of African origin, featuring a prominent role in a song of the Anglo-Celtic tradition, or a German tune being sung in English, played on the mountain dulcimer, an instrument with its roots in Germany.² This intercultural web of musical ideas birthed many popular American music genres, such as rock ’n’ roll, bluegrass, jazz, and the blues.

The folk music of America was formed by those who performed it, and enough cannot be said about the importance of the people who created the music and experienced it. However, academic scholarship has had a profound influence on the way we perceive and understand the various forms and iterations of folk music on the North American continent. This paper traces the efforts of many academics and independent song-catchers who traveled the American countryside documenting folk music traditions, thus enabling later generations to enjoy, experience, and experiment with the musical fruit of these traditions.³

Francis James Child laid the groundwork for future academics and “song-catchers” with his monumental collections of British ballads, collected in both the British Isles and North America. Later, Cecil J. Sharp would expand on Child’s work, collecting more ballads, as well as more variations of the ballads identified by Child. The cumulative years of academic interest in British folk tunes resulted in a narrow

²Hay, “Black Musicians,” 3. Gourd-banjos were documented amongst slaves in the Caribbean and North America. The banjo is related to the West-African akonting, and traditional banjo playing styles such as “claw-hammer” are representative of akonting playing technique. Ron Gibson, “A Brief History of the Appalachian Mountain Dulcimer,” Ron Gibson Mountain Dulcimers, last updated 2016, https://gibsondulcimers.com/dulcimer.history.html. Elvis Presley popularized a translated German folk song “Wooden Heart,” in which he sang a portion of the original verses in German.
³“Songcatchers;’ these brave souls [who] ventured into areas of the continent known to be insular, inaccessible, and wary of outsiders . . . to document ways of life thought to be quickly vanishing.” Scott B. Spencer, ed., The Ballad Collectors of North America: How Gathering Folksongs Transformed Academic Thought and American Identity (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 1.
view of American folk music as essentially British. In the early twentieth century, academic song-catchers viewed the Appalachian Mountains as a living museum of America’s “contemporary ancestors.” Its people were romanticized as direct descendants of Elizabethan English colonists, who in their isolation, poverty, and racial purity maintained the oral culture of Anglo-Saxon peasantry. Many scholars, such as Fred J. Hay, have contested this notion and highlighted the immense influence of Africans on the region’s folk music, as well as that of other European ethnicities. Yet in doing so, much of the academic debate over the origins and influence of different ethnicities on American folk music has simply served to lay claim to something that was once deemed essentially British. Scholars have not given attention to how these conceptions of “contemporary ancestors” music arose in the first place. Along the same lines, scholars have debated the selectivity and supposed “bowdlerizing” practices of specific figures within the folksong collection scene. Some scholars have accused Cecil Sharp of seeking to prove the narrative of pure Elizabethan English ancestry within Appalachian people. Other scholars, such as Brian Peters, have defended Sharp, stating he had no narrative to prove and merely pursued British folk tunes out of his own personal interest in the material. However, no one has explored how these influential song-catchers’ cumulative collection practices gradually developed into an exclusively British folk music narrative.

I argue that early folksong collectors and folk music researchers in America, such as Francis J. Child and Cecil Sharp, conducted their research with a specific interest in British folk music. They did so due to their fascination with the vernacular medium of expression and the potential for contemporary folk music to preserve older means of cultural expression. They did not set out to cultivate a vision of Appalachian folk music as a pure Anglo-Saxon survival, yet they did exclude

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5 Hay, “Black Musicians,” 1–19. This article highlights the influence and presence of black Americans in Appalachian traditional music, as well as the genres that grew from it.
the musical traditions of other cultures that did not fall within the scope of their research. A later generation, exemplified by John Powell, would utilize the works of Child and Sharp to promote their vision of Appalachian people as “pure” Anglo-Saxon remnants. To establish this narrative, I will examine the work and motivation of Francis James Child, who through the comprehensiveness and sheer volume of his work laid the foundation for future song-catchers and folklorists. I will also look at the work and motivations of Cecil J. Sharp, who, roughly twenty years after Child, began work in America on a collection of folksongs that would rise to equal prominence within the realm of American folksong documentation. Finally, I will examine the folk revival scene in the Appalachian Mountains during the 1930s by highlighting the works and activities of the influential John Powell, who led the resurgence of the material of these past song collectors under an Anglo-essentialist light.

**American “Song-Catching”**

Folksong collection in America began in the mid-nineteenth century with an initial interest in folk tunes from the British Isles. By 1857 American scholar and Harvard professor Francis James Child began his lifelong work of documenting all of the English and Scottish ballads and their extant variants that he could find. These ballads became canonized as the Child Ballads, and many scholars continued to analyze them in his wake. Thus the Child Ballads laid the foundation for subsequent academic forays into American folk music, with an emphasis on those originating from the British Isles. English scholar, musician, and folklorist Cecil J. Sharp followed Francis J. Child in influence within the field of British folklore in America. Having previously done extensive work on English Folk music and dance within Great Britain, he continued this line of work in America in 1916.\(^8\) Sharp documented not only the lyrical content of the folksongs he discovered in America, but also provided musical notation for the melodic structure of many of these tunes, preserving their musical content for future generations.\(^9\) Though there had been many Americans who were independently documenting the vernacular music of their region, it was the

\(^8\) Michael Heaney, “Sharp, Cecil James.”

work of this international “expert” in the field that defined this stage of American folksong collection. In subsequent years, with the proliferation of portable audio recording devices, an increasing number of academics and aspiring song-catchers took to the hills in hopes of documenting and preserving vernacular music traditions that were rapidly becoming extinct.

By the 1930s the eastern United States was experiencing a minor folk revival inspired by the material documented by these various song-catchers. With Anglo-American music festivals springing up throughout the eastern mountains, the popularity and awareness of these folk tunes expanded so much that the President invited Appalachian musicians to give performances of their music in the White House, which were then broadcasted internationally. Virginian composer and musician John Powell was at the forefront of the Anglo-American folk revival and was a major force in bringing its music to the masses through his own compositions, as well as concerts and music festivals. The same motivation behind the documentation and preservation of folk music had expanded to public performances of the same material: performers sought to not only document dying traditions but also facilitate their greater exposure to a wider audience while the traditions were still alive.

In this era of revival, especially on America’s East Coast and in the Appalachian Mountains, there was an overt partiality for British-American music and a neglect of other oral traditions. Interest in preserving British vernacular music had expanded into an interest in reconnecting with a romanticized Anglo-Saxon past. It is important to note that those involved in documenting and reviving these folk traditions differentiated English songs from Scottish songs, but at the end of the day their focus was on music rooted in the whole of the British oral tradition as a collective entity, to the exclusion of other traditions.

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10. An example of such an American is Olive Dame Campbell, who Sharp maintained close collaboration with.
11. A notable example would be Alan Lomax, who was the son of a folklorist and song-catcher himself.
At the same as performers sought to revive songs derived from the British folk tradition, the Federal Music Program, a federal program through the Depression-era New Deal, sponsored research into the folk music of many other cultures and regions. Over time, despite earlier song-catchers’ focus on British tunes, the wider public increasingly became aware of vernacular music traditions in America that originated outside of the British Isles and a multicultural view of what constituted American folk music began to emerge. Due to the proliferation of different lineages of folk music, as well as the acknowledgment of the diversity of influence within long-recognized American musical traditions, folk music became widely seen as a unifying force spanning the well of America’s deep and diverse cultural origin, symbolizing its sonic heritage; the Anglo-centric origins of the folk revival movement were largely forgotten.

Francis James Child

Born in Boston on February 1, 1825, Francis James Child grew to be the predominant authority on English and Scottish folklore and balladry. Child attended Boston public schools and, upon graduation, enrolled at Harvard University. There he was described as “the best writer, best speaker, best mathematician, and the most accomplished person in knowledge of general literature.” He graduated at the top of his class in 1846. He went on to continue his studies in Germany, where he studied English drama and German philology at the University of Göttingen and Humboldt University. While there, Child attended lectures

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15 Hay, “Black Musicians,” 13. Pete Seeger, a prominent folk-revivalist from the 1930s to 1960s, wrote a song, “All Mixed Up,” which encapsulates this American melting pot. The lyrics describe the multicultural input that formed the English language and diet of modern Americans and finishes with a strong statement towards celebrating differences and similarities. There is a live recording on his album *Strangers and Cousins*, in which he gives an introduction further describing his worldview of the melting pot.

by the Brothers Grimm, who would leave a lasting impact on him and his interest in folklore. At the age of twenty-six Child returned to the United States and became the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University. In 1876 Child became the first professor of English at Harvard University.

In 1857, nearly 250 years after the first English ballads landed on American shores, Francis James Child began to collect, document, and publish all that he could find.\(^\text{17}\) By the time of his death he had published a monumental five-volume work entitled English and Scottish Popular Ballads, encompassing over 1,200 versions of 305 ballads, as well as other academic research into other forms of English poetry.\(^\text{18}\) This monumental achievement became canonized as the Child Ballads and was the foundation for further research into British folk music. In his song collection, Child included 30 versions of 18 ballads found on the North American continent. He included them to substantiate his distinct focus on the European aspects of balladry and suggested there might be a wealth of ballads yet to be discovered in America.\(^\text{19}\) Indeed, future song collectors would find variations of ballads documented by Child and would refer to them by their number in Child’s collection, expanding the well of balladry he laid down. For example, Cecil Sharp published three more versions of Child Ballad no. 26, “The Three Ravens,” in his folksong collections from the Appalachian Mountains.\(^\text{20}\) Indeed, Child’s own student and protégé George Lyman Kittredge encouraged his own students to venture out into the American countryside and collect further variants of these ballads.\(^\text{21}\)

Having studied under the Brothers Grimm, Child perceived a close linguistic and cultural relationship shared by all European nations of the

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\(^{19}\) Hay, “Black Musicians,” 3.

\(^{20}\) Sharp, *English Folk Songs*, 63–64.

\(^{21}\) “Kittredge co-published some of the first orally obtained ballads from North America . . . among Kittredge’s many students was John Harrington Cox, who in 1925 published a large collection of West Virginia folksong . . . as *Folk-Songs of the South.*” Hay, “Black Musicians,” 13.
Indo-European language family. He set out with a goal to document every traditional ballad and its extant variants to construct the most authentic, unadulterated version, striving to create an Ur-ballad of sorts. Collecting staggering numbers of variants enabled Child to compare them and develop the archetype of each ballad found within the British oral tradition. For example, Child included twenty-eight versions of Ballad no. 173, “Mary Hamilton,” and eighteen versions of Ballad no. 58, “Sir Patrick Spens.” Child examined parallels between the stories of these British ballads and the oral-based literatures of other European nations. This is evident in the vast amount of foreign language sources he used to place these ballads within a wider proto-pan-European folk cultural narrative. Child often noted parallels between these ballads and the stories found within wider Germanic literature, such as the Edda of Iceland. In addition to using many foreign language sources, Child maintained close correspondence with international scholars such as Danish folklorist Svend Grundtvig and relied on his own experience of learning from German folklorists the Brothers Grimm while studying in Germany. Thus, much of Child’s work on English and Scottish ballads extended far beyond regional documentation of these two groups’ folklore. Child’s scholarly field is described, by Sigurd Bernhard Hustvedt in Ballad Books and Ballad Men, as “literary genealogy,” foreshadowing its tenuous relationship with identity.

Child viewed the popular ballad as poetry and the first step of a society towards prose and, what he viewed as, more advanced forms of liter-

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22 Scott, Ballad Collectors, 1. The prefix “Ur” is defined by the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary as meaning the “earliest or original,” an example of this prefix in action of this would be in the word “ur-civilization.”


26 Sigurd Bernhard Hustvedt, Ballad Books and Ballad Men: Raids and Rescues in Britain, North America, and the Scandinavian North since 1800 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930); Scott, Ballad Collectors, 1.

27 Hustvedt, Ballad Books and Ballad Men, 4. Hustvedt examines the various people and schools of thought that approached “popular music,” as well as their correspondence.
ary expression. Having done extensive research on other English poets, most notably Chaucer, Child was fascinated by the potential for preliterate forms of artistic expression, how they might survive within a literate society, and how literature is interwoven with and affects oral traditions as it increasingly becomes adopted by said society. In his own words:

[The popular ballad] is a very distinct and very important species of poetry. Its historical and natural place . . . is anterior to the appearance of poetry as art, to which it has formed a step, and by which it has been regularly displaced, and, in some cases, all but extinguished. Whenever a people in the course of its development reaches a certain intellectual and moral stage, it will feel an impulse to express itself, and the form of expression to which it is first impelled is, as is well known, not prose, but verse, and in fact narrative verse.

This notion of the popular ballad appearing at a specific, more primitive stage of societal development persisted in the romantic views of Appalachian culture perpetuated by folklorists and song-catchers in later years; this idea aided in forming negative stereotypes of the “mountain whites” who sang many of these ballads in the Appalachian Mountains.

Francis James Child thought that within a literate society, the purest versions of vernacular music survived amongst the illiterate and impoverished. Anything passed down orally tended to be altered through transmission, and Child thought this was most liable to happen in the hands of professional singers and publishers, who might add their own artistic twist to a song in order to “improve” it or make it more palatable to listeners. Child asserted that one of the best possible places for an old ballad to end up is in the mouths of children as a game. Child heard a variation of Ballad no. 155, “Sir Hugh,” “from a group of colored children, in the streets of New York City [and traced

30 Hay, “Black Musicians,” 3. The term “Mountain Whites” was commonly used, but it was disliked by those whom it referred to. It was used as a designator in the Library of Congress until Appalachian State University successfully petitioned to change the term to “Appalachians” in 2002.
it] to a little girl living in the cabins near central park [sic].” He asserted that “it is interesting to find the [popular] ballad still in the mouths of children in American cities,—in the mouths of the poorest, whose heritage these things are.” This openness to searching for British ballads in a place that, superficially, seemed unlikely to host them and did not necessarily fall within the framework of a pure British oral tradition, shows that Child was not concerned with any ethnic or racial politics in his research. Instead, he was interested in forms of popular and vernacular expression and how they had shifted with the cultural sands of time.

Child conducted his work in an age when new scientific theories, schools of thought, and domains of discourse sprouted up as fast as one could blink and were often perverted into popular schools of thought. Just as Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution gave way to social Darwinism and eugenics, it is easy to understand how one may stray from Francis J. Child’s worldview of balladry and popular expression to an Anglo-centric one. Discussion of a “national poetry” emanating from a distinct group of people is volatile when conducted in a society that is obsessed with racial distinctions and scientific classifications of social nuances. The work of Child festered in the same minds of people who grappled with theories of social Darwinism and racial hierarchies that persisted during their time; however, the conclusions at which those people arrived were not to be found in Child’s own research.

Fascination with a preliterate form of expression is what drove Child to collect these ballads. The anonymity associated with this material, conjoined with its propagation through many generations and shifting cultures, is what pushed Child deeper into his work. Child stated:

> The condition of a society in which a truly national or popular poetry appears explains the character of such poetry. It is a condition in which the people are not divided by political organization and book-culture into markedly distinct classes, in which consequently there is such community of ideas and feelings that the whole people form an individual. Such poetry . . . is in its essence an expression of our common human nature, and so of

34 Hart, “Child and the Ballad,” 756. Child often uses “national poetry” and “popular poetry” in conjunction or sometimes interchangeably.
universal and indestructible interest . . . though a man and not a people has composed them, still the author counts for nothing, and it is not by mere accident, but with the best reason, that they have come down anonymous.35

This idea of the individual as meaningless within the context of folk music, as well as folk music’s ability to transcend class distinction, contradicts any notion that Child pursued this academic inquiry to create class or racial distinction. The concept of a national poetry put forth by Child was attractive to those who viewed society through a nationalistic or ethno-essentialist lens, but this was not Child’s intent; indeed, he evinced great enthusiasm for incorporating the folklores of many wide-ranging cultures. In fact, it was the very act of transmission of musical material within and between cultures that fascinated Child.36 This he chose to view through the lens he was most familiar with and which was most accessible to him, English and Scottish balladry, in order to further Americans’ understanding of an “expression of our common human nature.”37

Cecil J. Sharp

Cecil James Sharp was born on November 22, 1859, in London and dedicated most of his life to the study of English folk music and dance.38 As a child Sharp attended a number of private schools, until he enrolled in Clare College at Cambridge University in 1879.39 Sharp allocated most of his time to music, rather than his study of mathematics, and graduated with a third-class degree in 1882.40 Subsequently his family sent him to Australia. During his Australian years, Sharp juggled his musical interests with various full-time jobs.41 Sharp suffered from typhoid in 1886, the effects of which would haunt him for the rest of his life. Following this experience, Sharp resolved to fully pursue music. He bounced around from various gigs in London and

36 Hart, “Child and the Ballad,” 769. Child in fact notes that the protagonists of many ballads are liable to change nationalities to match that of the singer’s. Where the hero of a ballad is a Scotsman in Scotland, he is French in France.
38 Heaney, “Sharp, Cecil James.”
39 Heaney, “Sharp, Cecil James.”
40 Heaney, “Sharp, Cecil James.”
41 Heaney, “Sharp, Cecil James.” Sharp worked as a clerk for the Commercial Bank of Australia until 1884, when he became assistant to the chief justice of South Australia.
Adelaide, directing and teaching at a number of music conservatories and schools. In 1899, while in Headington, England, Sharp had his first encounter with English folk music and dance. Story has it that Sharp was visiting his mother-in-law when a group of men came walking up the street—one singing and playing the concertina, the others dancing a traditional Morris dance. Sharp met with the singer and documented the songs the next day. Subsequently, Sharp dove full force into the realm of folksong and dance collection. Between 1904 and 1908 Sharp collected more than 1,500 songs from the English countryside. Throughout this whole process, Sharp gave lectures on his findings, published many books, and was a major proponent for the teaching of folksong and dance in English schools, heavily influencing England’s folk culture renaissance. The onset of World War One and conflicts of interest with the English Folk Song Society prevented Sharp, being too old to serve in the military, from finding any sort of sustainable employment within the music industry. So Sharp resolved to seek employment abroad, looking to the United States. Sharp arrived just before Christmas in 1914, and by the time he departed in 1918, he had collected a massive amount of folksong material, which he published in the monumental *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, encompassing 274 songs and their variants, numbering 968 tunes in total.

Cecil Sharp initially came to the United States simply seeking employment, but over time he developed a distinct interest in English folk music emanating from the Appalachian Mountains. Sharp’s initial reason for coming to the United States was to assist a friend in arranging

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42 Heaney, “Sharp, Cecil James.”
43 Heaney, “Sharp, Cecil James.”
44 Heaney, “Sharp, Cecil James.”
45 Heaney, “Sharp, Cecil James.”
46 Heaney, “Sharp, Cecil James.”
47 Heaney, “Sharp, Cecil James.” Arthur Knevett, “Folk Songs for Schools: Cecil Sharp, Patriotism, and The National Song Book,” *Folk Music Journal* 11, no. 3 (January 1, 2018): 47–71. The onset of the Boer War in 1899 and establishment of Empire Day in 1902 served to instill a patriotic fervor in England. Sharp provided folksongs and patriotic songs to be taught in English public schools. Sharp’s disagreement with the English Folk Song Society came over which songs were to be taught; Sharp was vocal in his opposition to their choices.
48 Heaney, “Sharp, Cecil James.”
the music and dance for the play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in New York City. However, early on into his stay he came into contact with Olive Dame Campbell, a North Carolinian who shared her collection of English folksongs she had gathered from people in the Appalachian Mountains surrounding her hometown. Shortly after, the prospect of finding variants of the Child Ballads and other English folksongs in America’s mountains captured Sharp’s attention, and he dedicated most of his time in the US to documenting the English folk tunes of Appalachia. As Sharp had spent his life thus far documenting English folksongs in England, he began his expedition in Appalachia by continuing his past research, with the express purpose of documenting English folksongs; thus, many other prominent folk tunes of other cultural lineages were not expressly sought out in his research. This focus on the English tradition augmented the view of Appalachian culture as essentially English.

Most of Sharp’s song collecting occurred in the mountainous regions of North Carolina, Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee, with a short expedition into West Virginia. To support his family and avoid trekking through the remote areas of Appalachia in the cold, Sharp spent the winter months giving lectures on English folk culture in major eastern cities. Throughout Sharp’s foray into English-American folk music, he was accompanied by Maud Karpeles, who assisted in the documenting and publishing process. Sharp would provide the musical notation of the songs they discovered, while Karpeles transcribed their lyrical content. The notation of the melodic structure of these folksongs marked a departure from Francis J. Child’s more literary views of balladry and was essential in facilitating later adaptations of the material by ethno-essentialists, such as John Powell.

Though his interest lay in folk tunes of English origin, Sharp often

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49 Heaney, “Sharp, Cecil James.”

50 Brian Peters, “Myths of ‘Merrie Olde England’? Cecil Sharp’s Collecting Practice in the Southern Appalachians,” *Folk Music Journal* 11, no. 3 (January 2018): 6–46. Olivia Dame Campbell’s husband was John C. Campbell, who wrote the influential book *The Southern Highlander and his Homeland* (1921), which provided extensive sociological information on the region.


found songs that represented the diversity of the region. Banjo and fiddle tunes, jigs of African origin, songs with clear Scotch-Irish lineage, religious songs, and many strictly American tunes had all entered the folklore of Appalachia.\(^{54}\) Though Sharp did not actively seek out these other folk materials, he was not opposed to documenting them as he came upon them, as well as including them in his resultant publications. In fact, with each successive volume of his famous English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians, Sharp and his assistant Karpeles included more folk tunes of non-English origin. In the 1932 edition, roughly 40 percent of the total material in the book was of American origin, meaning the tunes were not obviously and identifiably related to a Child Ballad, and can only be deduced to have been composed in America. Further, half of all material classified as songs, all the hymns, and all of the jigs were not of obvious British ancestry.\(^{55}\) Sharp made no claims to the superiority of British tunes over American compositions; rather, he simply noted the origin of American tunes as he came across them.

Very early on in his time in the mountains, Sharp realized and grew to appreciate the ethnic and cultural complexity of the region he was investigating. Sharp noted when singers had spent time in black communities and where they learned their songs.\(^{56}\) Sharp frankly described black singers he met, such as Aunt Maria Tombs, who he described as a “rather nice old lady . . . [who] sang beautifully in a wonderfully

\(^{54}\) Peters, “Merrie Olde,” 22.

\(^{55}\) Peters, “Merrie Olde,” 22; Encyclopædia Britannica, s.v. “Minstrel Show,” March 15, 2017, https://www.britannica.com/art/minstrel-show. The jigs most interestingly are comprised of dance ditties of African American or minstrel origin, the latter of which were adaptations of African American music heard on plantations. These were performed by white musicians in blackface, who capitalized on negative African American stereotypes and music in a comedic and theatrical fashion. Minstrel tunes incorporated African American instruments such as the banjo and bones and were a direct window into the musical traditions developed by black Americans in the United States. Songs performed by these black-faced minstrels had transcended the minstrel shows that popularized them, and African American music styles, and entered the oral musical traditions of Appalachia. The minstrel show widely popularized the banjo among white populations, while alienating blacks due to the negative stereotypes enforced by the shows.

\(^{56}\) Peters, “Merrie Olde,” 25. In Peters’s paper, he shows that with each successive trip into the mountains, Sharp documented more material outside of Child Ballad variants, expanding to Civil War and Revolutionary War songs, as well as instrumental fiddle tunes.
Though he recognized this ethnic complexity, he maintained his focus on the British tradition and would avoid areas he did not think would yield British tunes. For example, when visiting the Shenandoah Valley, he was told that the region had been settled mainly by German and Dutch peoples; upon hearing this, Sharp turned away from the region in pursuit of somewhere else that might yield the material he desired. Similarly, Sharp did not actively seek out African American communities to conduct his research, as he did not expect them to yield any great quantity of English folksongs. However, he was not averse to investigating the folklore of such communities when he found himself in one; indeed, Sharp did collect and publish two Child Ballads from black American singers. By the same token, Sharp would not search industrialized areas, as he viewed them as too modernized and out of touch with folk culture to yield what he was after. This idea of poverty and primitiveness harboring a more authentic folk culture echoes Francis J. Child’s views of illiterate cultures maintaining more authentic ballads.

Though Sharp recognized multiculturalism in Appalachia’s music and acknowledged the diversity of the mountains’ population, he still maintained a sort of romanticized view of the area, with hints of “noble savagery.” He described the region as being settled mainly by pure Anglo-Saxon colonists of the Elizabethan era, viewing the region as a sort of living museum of the peasantry of that time. In his own words:

> The region is from its inaccessibility a very secluded one. There are but few roads. . . . [It is] completely isolated and cut off from the rest of the world. Their speech is English, not American, and, from the number of expressions they use which have long been obsolete elsewhere, and the old-fashioned way in which they pronounce many of their words, it is clear they are independent. . . . The mountaineer is freer in his manner, more alert, and less

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58 Peters, “Merrie Olde,” 29
60 Peters, “Merrie Olde,” 17. Sharp did attempt to investigate more urban and industrial areas but did not receive a high quantity of songs of antiquity. Therefore, he avoided them.
61 Child notes: “It is interesting to find the ballad [“The Twa Brothers” (49)] in the mouths of children in American cities . . . in the mouths of the poorest, whose heritage these things are.” Hart, “Child and the Ballad,” 756.
inarticulate than his British prototype, and bears no trace of the obsequiousness of manner which, since the Enclosure Acts robbed him of his economic independence and made of him a hired laborer, has unhappily characterized the English villager.\textsuperscript{62}

This idea of the mountaineer as strong and independent falls directly in line with romantic views of Appalachian culture as Elizabethan peasantry incarnate, in which vestiges of English village culture and life escaped to the mountains of America before the Enclosure Acts could take the peasantry’s land and drastically alter English society and its folk traditions. This is a further continuation of the standing belief that illiteracy, poverty—here seen as “economic independence”—and isolation harbored more authentic folk material. In this way, Appalachian people were perceived as doubly likely to carry on the English folk tradition due to their Elizabethan ancestry and isolation abroad. Sharp continues: “Their language, wisdom, manners, and the many graces of life that are theirs, are merely racial attributes which have been gradually acquired and accumulated in the past centuries and handed down generation by generation, each generation adding its quotom to that which it received.”\textsuperscript{63} This romanticized view of Appalachia as a relic of pure Anglo peasantry is now known to be false, but it is an offshoot of the views of folk cultural purity Sharp maintained and promoted in England.\textsuperscript{64}

In his arguments for folksongs to be taught in schools, Sharp thought that songs purely cultivated by the culture of the children they would educate were best suited; in this concept of purity of folk lineages, Sharp’s romantic views lie. It is important to note the historical context in which Sharp spoke. The discussion of folk music comes with a great deal of discussion of race and ethnicity. Sharp, conducting his work in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth used language that offends our twenty-first-century sensibilities. The language used to describe such identity traits in his time had not developed into the vast sensitive vocabulary we use today. In Sharp’s time, such terms and

\textsuperscript{62}Hay, “Black Musicians,” 5.

\textsuperscript{63}Hay, “Black Musicians,” 5. Attacks have been levied on Sharp on all fronts. Some academics are upset at his exclusion of music hall songs in his collections in England, and in America he has been chastised for a lack of emphasis on African and Celtic musical traditions.

\textsuperscript{64}Knevett, “Folk Songs for Schools,” 52.
concepts of “mongoloid” and “negroid” were legitimate anthropological terms. These terms carry an immensely foul weight now, but in the time of Sharp this was not so. It is easy for our contemporary minds to extrapolate a more heinous meaning than an author may have intended to convey. When Sharp talked of a people’s “racial inheritance,” his message was more akin to “cultural inheritance.”

Sharp’s critics, such as David Whisnant and Henry Shapiro, accuse him of bowdlerization in order to promote an Anglo-essential view of Appalachia, specifically, and America as a whole, in which the true America was descended from Anglo-Saxon forebears. However, this view was a result of how later folk music enthusiasts applied his work. As stated before, Sharp was not averse to including the folk materials of other cultural origins that made their way into the wider Appalachian cultural narrative. Sharp had caught a whiff of the artifacts of the English folk culture he held so dear that persisted in the Appalachian Mountains: English folk culture is what lured him into the mountains, and that is what he focused his research on. He included songs originating outside of the English oral tradition and incorporated them into the framework of the existing English oral culture that had adopted them. This approach was compounded by the “monumental misnaming” of his resultant publications of the material as English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians. Yet, when the material within his book is investigated, the massive presence of non-English material is evident.

1930s Revival Scene

The work of Francis J. Child birthed a massive influx of researchers and collectors of British folksongs in America. The Child Ballads were at the center of the early song collection scene. As song-catchers spread throughout the eastern United States in the 1920s and 1930s, they discovered other non-British folk material. While some of this

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66 Peters, “Merrie Olde,” 31. This term of the “monumental misnaming” comes from Fiona Ritchie and Doug Orr’s book Wayfaring Strangers: The Musical Voyage from Scotland and Ulster to Appalachia, which examines the Scotch-Irish origin of Appalachia. Proponents of the Scotch-Irish origin of Appalachia have initiated their own line of attack against Sharp for his characterization of Appalachia as English. Today, some lump Appalachian music under the “Celtic” genre.
material was neglected, what they did document was incorporated into the framework of a British oral culture abroad that either adopted songs of other cultural origin or developed new songs in a new American context, as displayed in the work of Cecil Sharp. The influence of other cultures on the vernacular music of the region, such as that of African Americans, was either ignored or diminished due to a lack of attention. By the 1930s, a narrow view of the folk culture of Appalachia as essentially British persisted amongst those interested in the region. This warped view, compounded with the popular pseudoscientific theories related to race and society at that time, presented the image of Appalachia as a living museum of America’s “contemporary ancestors,” who in their isolation, poverty, and “racial purity,” upheld the cultural practices of America’s colonial ancestors. Historian John Williams summed up the contemporary view: “Mountain people were not just white, but the right kind of whites: bearers of ‘Anglo-Saxon blood.’” These idealized conceptions of Appalachians and their supposed pure racial inheritance infiltrated discussions of folk music.

By the 1930s the research and documentation of American folk music since Francis J. Child had spawned performance revivals throughout the Appalachian Mountains. Famed composer, classical pianist, and influential Virginian John Powell was a major proponent for the revival of “Anglo-Saxon” folksongs and tradition at this time. He incorporated folk melodies into his many compositions and was an avid collector of songs; he also gave many lectures. Powell was very well respected within the many folksong and folkdance societies throughout the Appalachian Mountains; he helped coordinate many festivals and was invited as an honored guest to many more. One such society, the American Folk Song Society, “incorporated under the laws of

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67 Hay, “Black Musicians,” 5. The words “racial purity” and “contemporary ancestors” come from William Goodell Frost, president of Berea College from 1892 to 1920. Berea was the only racially integrated school in Kentucky until the passage of the Day Law in 1904, which outlawed racially integrated schools. The latter quote comes from Appalachian historian John Alexander Williams and is a summarization of Frost’s views on “Mountain Whites.”

68 The Papers of John Powell, 1888–1978, University of Virginia Special Collections, Charlottesville, Virginia. See, for example his At the Fair: VI. Banjo-picker. In 2006 pianist Nicholas Ross released an album of Powell’s piano works entitled John Powell: Early Piano Works.

69 The Papers of John Powell, UVA Special Collections.
Kentucky,” solicited John Powell in 1933 to join their general commit-
tee. In the invitation, they described their activities as:

[The American Folk Song Society’s] purpose is to perpetuate the authentic interpretation of American folk song and music and to inspire in the hearts of every American a profound love for this—our precious heritage. Each year the Society presents an American Folk Song Festival. . . . At this festival only those singers who have had the ballad handed down to them by word of mouth, and only those musicians who have learned their art from our Anglo-Saxon forbears participate in the program.71

John Powell promoted folksongs of English descent as the essential American folk music. He viewed them as superior to folk music of any other stock, and he believed that they were lodged somewhere, and somehow, deep within the cultural memory of any “true” American who was a rightful descendant of English colonists.72 A friend who was setting up a folk music festival near Harrisonburg, Virginia, asked Powell: “If we do [the festival] I don’t believe there will be room for the folk music of other nations do you? Why don’t we keep the whole thing sacred as you have started it? It would take ages to exhaust the field of sacred folk music, and by that time we can think of something else for it!”73 Interestingly, and perhaps ironically, Harrisonburg lies within the Shenandoah Valley, a region that Cecil Sharp disregarded wholesale upon hearing it was settled by German and Dutch peoples. Whether intentional or not, this location symbolizes the incorporation of the moniker “Anglo-Saxon” into the rhetoric of many folk revivalists in the Appalachian Mountains at the time. English folk tunes were being performed in a largely Germanic area, representing the intended meaning behind the hyphenated identity Anglo-Saxon—the incorporation of English culture into a larger, romanticized Germanic framework. This also reflected the wider shift in perceptions of race at the time, which drew upon contemporary anthropological and linguistic research to formulate tribal distinctions. An example of this is how

70 The Papers of John Powell, UVA Special Collections.
71 The Papers of John Powell, UVA Special Collections. The letter stated that Powell would not actually have to do any work for the society; they just wished to include his name on official documents.
73 The Papers of John Powell, UVA Special Collections.
Nazi officials associated themselves with the “Aryan race,” a concept that corrupted academic research into the development of European cultures and languages from a common Indo-European ancestor.

John Powell’s racial ideologies mirrored his musical ideologies. In the same way that he viewed Anglo-Saxon music as superior—“[Anglo-Saxon folksongs] are unsurpassed by the best folk tunes of other peoples and compare favorably with the noblest of composed melodies,” he said—Powell viewed the “Anglo-Saxon” blood that birthed these tunes as superior. Powell was described by a friend as being severely against interracial marriages, and, in conjunction with the many Anglo-Saxon clubs that revered him, he lobbied for the outlawing of interracial marriages in the Virginia state legislature. John Powell also aligned himself with the growing eugenics movement in Virginia. In a series of lectures given in Houston, Texas, Powell asserted that

if the present ratio were to remain permanent, the inevitable product of the melting pot would be approximately an octoroon. [An octoroon was a person who was one-eighth black by descent.] It should not be necessary to stress the significance of this point. We know that under Mendelian law the African strain is hereditarily predominant. In other words, one drop of negro blood makes the negro. We also know that no higher race has ever been able to preserve its culture, to prevent decay and eventual degeneracy when tainted, even slightly, with negro blood.

The logic of this quote is ironically contradicted by the use of the banjo, an instrument originating in Africa, in the many “pure folksongs” Powell revered. The banjo represented more than a literal drop of African musical blood in the Anglo-American oral tradition.

John Powell was so successful in his propagation of supposed Anglo-Saxon folksongs that he caught the attention of Eleanor Roosevelt.

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74 The Papers of John Powell, UVA Special Collections.
75 Kushner, “Powell: Racial Ideologies,” 7. Powell and his accomplices also lobbied for racial registration at birth of every resident of Virginia, the markers being white, black, brown, yellow, and red. Racial registration was never enacted, however, Virginia governor Elbert Lee Trinkle signed the Racial Integrity Act into law in 1924, which forbade interracial marriage amongst whites.
77 The Papers of John Powell, UVA Special Collections.
in 1933. Mrs. Roosevelt, an ardent supporter and fan of folk music, invited John Powell and a selection of folk musicians of his choosing to perform at the White House. They performed in front of an audience of one thousand that was radio broadcasted to the whole nation, as well as Great Britain and Germany; the choice of these two nations again displays the Germanic link in the hyphenated moniker Anglo-Saxon. Powell’s five performers, all from the mountainous areas of Virginia, performed a selection of banjo and fiddle tunes, ballads, and sea chanties. John Powell, in charge of the concert, gave an introduction on folk music research before beginning the show. He reminded his audience that in looking back at the lives of our pioneer ancestors there is danger in assuming that they spent their time exclusively in the arduous clearing of forests and in warding off ferocious attacks by savage red-skins. . . . They [our pioneer ancestors] were very close to the great reign of Elizabeth with its magnificent richness of life coloring the activity of the high and low alike. They brought with them the traditions of a deep culture, with its roots in the far-off beginnings of our race. Those literary and musical traditions have been handed down in an unbroken line until today.

By drawing upon a warped view of the research of past folksong collectors, this introduction very plainly states the idea that the people of Appalachia are America’s colonist ancestors in the flesh, harboring a long-lost musical tradition, indicative of a true American race. The racially charged folk revival of the Appalachians had proliferated Anglo-American folksongs to such a degree that they had reached not only a national, but international stage, via the federal government.

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78 The Papers of John Powell, UVA Special Collections.
79 The Papers of John Powell, UVA Special Collections. Powell has written a thirty-plus page account of the experience, from the choosing of the singers to the actual concert itself. On the singers, the youngest of the five of them was sixty years old; the oldest, eighty. Two of them were brother and sister.
80 The Papers of John Powell, UVA Special Collections.
81 The Papers of John Powell, UVA Special Collections. The sea chanties came from the youngest singer, “Sailor Dad” Hunt. Hunt ran away to sea at the age of eleven and at the time of this concert was living in the mountains of Southwest Virginia.
82 The Papers of John Powell, UVA Special Collections.
Conclusion

The popular music of America has its roots in the sounds of the American countryside, where the musical traditions of its diverse populations coalesced into the popular genres of the blues, jazz, bluegrass, rock 'n' roll, funk, and everything in between. Many of these genres can trace their influences back to localized vernacular music traditions. Academic inquiry has done a great deal to shape our understanding of American folk music and preserve it for future generations. It began in the mid-nineteenth century with the work of Francis James Child. Child was interested in the lyrical content and poetic nature of the English and Scottish ballads he collected and sought to place them into a pan-European framework by examining the similarities within the stories told in the songs he documented and in the folk literatures of other European nations. Child maintained a worldview of popular and vernacular literature occurring at a specific, more primitive stage in societal development and was deeply interested in how these oral cultures might survive and interact within literate societies. Child explored this interest by incorporating Scottish and English ballads into the growing anthropological and linguistic research of contemporary folklorists and philologists, such as the Brothers Grimm and Svend Grundtvig. In the wake of Child’s work, many other song-catchers investigated the vernacular music traditions of North America, with a heavy emphasis on the British oral tradition previously explored by Child.

Further emphasis was placed on the English-American musical tradition as English folklorist and song-catcher Cecil Sharp continued the song collection practices he had conducted in the English countryside and now applied in the Appalachian Mountains. Sharp conducted his research with the express desire to shed light on an English folk culture abroad. While Sharp did include folksongs representative of the diversity found in Appalachia, such as those of African American origin or songs entirely developed in America, he placed them within the context of an English oral culture that adopted them, further augmenting the view of Appalachian folk culture as essentially English.

As the folk revival movement began to take shape in the 1930s, the wealth of literature on an English folk culture in Appalachia mixed with the romantic views of Appalachia’s inhabitants as America’s living colonist ancestors in such a way that Anglo-Saxon purity became intertwined with the folk music of the region. Proponents of this racially pure view of Appalachia, such as John Powell, drew upon the work of previous song collectors and exploited musicians and singers who specifically fit their narrative. The romantic view of Appalachia as a British oral culture incarnate became commonly held, and this racialized aspect of the American folk revival was absorbed into the larger folk revival movement, its origins largely forgotten. Many scholars since, such as Fred J. Hay, Ron Eyerman, and Scott Barretta, have investigated the origins of the greater American folk revival and other related American musical genres. Similarly, academics have sought to debunk the notion of Appalachia as purely descended from English colonists by highlighting the extensive influence of African Americans, Germans, and Scotch-Irish in the region. This paper has demonstrated how the ideas of Appalachia as a living museum of America’s Anglo-Saxon colonial forebears developed in the first place.

In summary, each successive song-catcher that entered the Appalachian Mountains pursued his or her own interest within the field of American folk music. Early song collectors, such as Francis James Child and Cecil J. Sharp, focused on English folk traditions in Appalachia due to their personal interest in English folk music as a whole and their desire to explore the relationship between contemporary folk music and older forms of cultural expression. They did not set out to create a vision of Appalachian folk music as a pure Anglo-Saxon survival, but in their focus on the English origins of Appalachian folk music, they excluded other cultural input into the music. A later generation of song collectors and folk music enthusiasts, exemplified by John Powell, used the collections of Child and Sharp to develop and promote an explicit vision of a “pure,” “Anglo-Saxon” Appalachia. The process can plainly be summarized by a quote from scholarly folklorist Sigurd Hustvedt on the study of balladry, “Anonymous poetry offers no very sound footing for the literary genealogist,” and in our case, even less so for the pseudo-anthropologist.

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As we move further away from the American folk revival movement and learn more about the diversity of input that shaped American music, a further line of comparative investigation should be conducted on the different folk revival and preservation movements that occurred throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From the Brothers Grimm’s collections of pre-Christian folklore in Germany to Fernando Ortiz’s research on the convergence of African and Spanish culture in Cuba, the impetus to preserve decaying folkways has greatly shaped the popular culture of the regions in which the preservation and research occurred. This is exemplified by notable cultural figures such as J. R. R. Tolkien, whose application of early Germanic and Celtic folklore in his fantastical world of Middle Earth marked the inception of the epic fantasy genre and continues to influence Western popular culture today. This influence is felt through individuals like George R. R. Martin and his novel A Game of Thrones or avant-garde composer and ethnomusicologist Béla Bartók, whose adaptations of Hungarian folk music into his compositions earned him world renown within the classical music community. Examining the commonality among these preservation and revival movements would provide great insight into how intellectual interest in and application of folklore can affect popular culture. This is especially relevant as leading musicians of popular folk styles seek to transcend their regional genres with the proliferation of the “world” music genre, such as forefront banjoist Béla Fleck’s collaboration with African and Asian musicians, or classical Indian tabla player Zakir Hussain’s collaborative project with Celtic musicians entitled Distant Kin. Examining the commonality in the various folk preservation and revival movements that have already affected popular culture could yield great insight into how further proliferation of folkways onto a world stage might affect future culture.


88 See Bela Fleck’s Throw Down Your Heart: Tales from the Acoustic Planet, vol. 3, Africa Sessions, or Tabula Rasa. Bela Fleck is also coincidentally named after Béla Bartók.
Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


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