



# The First Published Native American (American Indian) Composer

IN 1723 THOMAS SYMMES (1678–1725) claimed an Indian origin for the widely popular psalm tune known in New England as BELLA (“a Tune to the 24th Psalm, which is said to be an *Indian Tune*”). But this claim can hardly be taken at face value.<sup>1</sup> By 1764 Eleazar Wheelock (1711–1779) had taught his Indian charges at Lebanon (now Columbia), Connecticut, to sing in three parts. A Boston merchant interested in Wheelock’s Indian Charity School, the first pupils at which were Delawares, wrote a letter dated May 18, 1764, in which he vouched for their vocal expertise: “I reached the house a little before the evening sacrifice and was movingly touched on giving out the psalm to hear an Indian youth set the tune, and the others following him and singing tenor and bass with remarkable gravity and seriousness; . . . they seemed to have nothing to do but sing to the Glory of God.”<sup>2</sup>

The next year David Fowler (1735–1807), a Montauk Indian dispatched to the Oneidas in 1761,<sup>3</sup> wrote a letter to Wheelock dated September 23, 1765, vouching for his success in teaching members of that tribe living near present-day Syracuse to sing in three parts: “I am yet teaching both Old and Young to sing; they can carry three Parts of several Tunes neatly.”<sup>4</sup> Two years later William Knapp (1698–1768)—the English psalmist who next to William Tans’ur (1700–1783) was the most frequently published anthem composer in America before 1800<sup>5</sup>—sent copies of the latest edition of his *A Sett of New Psalm-Tunes* to both Fowler and the white missionary among the Oneidas responsible for the founding of Hamilton College, Samuel Kirkland (1741–1808).<sup>6</sup> Knapp had heard of Fowler through Samson Occom (1723–1792), the prize product among Wheelock’s Indian trainees.<sup>7</sup> From 1765–1768 Occom toured England soliciting funds for Wheelock’s Charity-School. While

<sup>1</sup>*Utile Dulci, or, A Joco-Serious Dialogue Concerning Regular Singing* (Boston: B. Green for Samuel Gerrish, 1723), p. 54.

<sup>2</sup>In 1686 the BELLA tune had already been printed in *A New and Easie Method* (London: William Rogers, 1686), p. 102. See Stevenson, *Protestant Church Music in America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1966), p. 26, note 79.

<sup>3</sup>W. DeLoss Love, *Samson Occom and the Christian Indians of New England* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1899), pp. 80–81.

<sup>4</sup>Eleazar Wheelock, *A plain and faithful Narrative of the Original Design, Rise, Progress and present State of the Indian Charity-School At Lebanon, in Connecticut* (Boston: Richard and Samuel Draper, 1763), p. 39: “David Fowler, an *Indian* youth, to accompany Mr. *Samson Occom*, going on a Mission to the *Oneidas* . . . for a term not exceeding 4 Months; and that he endeavour on his Return to bring with him a Number of *Indian* Boys, not exceeding three, to be put under Mr. *Wheelock’s* Care and Instruction. . . .”

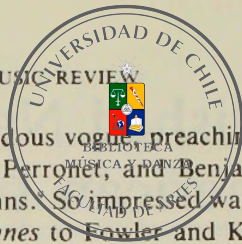
<sup>5</sup>Love, p. 111.

<sup>6</sup>Ralph T. Daniel, *The Anthem in New England before 1800* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), p. 57. See James Cuthbert Hadden, “William Knapp,” *Dictionary of National Biography*, xi, 236, for dates and further bibliography. See also Nicholas Temperley, *The Music of the English Parish Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), i, 159, 180–181.

<sup>7</sup>For data on Kirkland, see *Who Was Who in America Historical Volume 1607–1896* (Chicago: Marquis Who’s Who, 1967), p. 366.

<sup>8</sup>Love, p. 178. Occom studied theology with Wheelock 1743–1747.





there, he enjoyed a tremendous vogue preaching in the pulpits of Martin Madan, Samuel Stennett, Edward Perronet, and Benjamin Beddome—all of whom were especially interested in hymns. So impressed was Knapp that in addition to sending his own original *Psalm-Tunes* to Fowler and Kirkland, he named one of his new tunes *LEBANON* in honor of the Wheelock School.<sup>10</sup> Among others who entertained Occom while in England was the co-author with William Cowper of *Olney Hymns*, John Newton (1725–1807). Hearing of Occom's intent to become the first Indian compiler and publisher of a similar volume of hymns, Thomas Knibb wrote Occom a letter dated February 8, 1768, in which he said: "Understanding that you know music, I here present you with upwards of six score tunes amongst which are several of the Modernest and some of the Pleasantest that are used by the Methodists."<sup>11</sup>

Eight years later Occom published (texts only) his 119-page *A Choice Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs; Intended for the Edification of sincere Christians of all Denominations* (New London: Timothy Green, 1774), the success of which elicited a second edition in 1785 and a third (with additions) in 1792.<sup>12</sup> His preface to both first and second editions begins thus: "There is a great Engagedness, in these Colonies, to cultivate Psalmody; and I believe it to be the Duty of Christians to learn the Songs of Zion, according to good Method or Rule." Not only does he align himself with the many singing schoolmasters who then ranged New England seeking to make fluent sight singers of their pupils, but also he advocates "new Tunes" (page 4) to suit "uncommon Measures" and to suit "new Singers."

So far as the different editions are concerned, the same hymns in the same order prevail in all three, Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley proving throughout his favorite authors. From Watts he selected such still familiar favorites as "From all who dwell," "Alas and did my Saviour bleed," "When I can read my Title clear," "There is a Land of Pure Delight," "Join all the gracious Names," "He dies! the Friend of Sinners dies," "'Twas on that dark," and "How sweet and awful"; from Charles (or John) Wesley "Jesus the Sinner's Friend," "Ho, every one that thirsts," "Come Sinners to the gospel," "O for a thousand Tongues to sing," "Hail holy, holy, holy Lord," "Hark, the herald angels sing," "O Love Divine," "Hail the Day," "Blow ye the Trumpet," "He comes, he comes," "Rejoice the Lord is King," "Lo, he comes with clouds descending," "Arise my Soul"; from John Cennick (1718–1755) "Children of the Heavenly King"; from Johann J. Winckler (1670–1722) as translated by John Wesley "Shall I for fear of feeble man"; from Robert Seagrave (1693–1760?) "Rise, my soul"; from Alexander Pope "Vital Spark"; and from Nahum Tate, "While Shepherds watched."

Just as with the pioneer hymnal (texts only) edited by a Black, Richard Allen's *A Collection of Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (Philadelphia: T. L. Plowman, 1801),<sup>13</sup> so

<sup>10</sup>Madan (1726–1790) published the first edition of the so-called *Lock Hospital Collection* in 1760; concerning him see Temperley, 1, 211, 385–386. Stennett (1728–1795) grandson of the earliest English Baptist whose hymns are still sung, wrote "Majestic sweetness"; Perronet (1721–1792) wrote the text of "All hail the power"; the Baptist Beddome (1717–1795) also wrote several hymns still current.

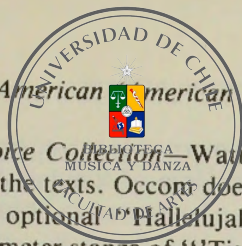
<sup>11</sup>Love, p. 178.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 179. Love credits this letter to the Connecticut Historical Society, Indian Papers.

<sup>13</sup>Evans 13507, 19152, 24641; all by the same printer (Timothy Green & Son in 1792).

<sup>14</sup>Copy at American Antiquarian Society, Worcester. First edition, *A Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns* (Philadelphia: John Ormrod, 1801); copy at Garrett Biblical Seminary, Evanston, Illinois. See Ralph R. Shaw and Richard H. Shoemaker, *American Bibliography, A Preliminary Checklist for 1801, Items 1–1702* (New York: The Scarecrow Press, 1958), p. 5 (items 38, 39).





also with Samson Occom's *A Choice Collection*—Watts, the Wesleys, and other eighteenth-century whites supplied the texts. Occom does deserve credit for having preceded Allen in introducing an optional "Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Amen" refrain after each common meter stanza of "'Tis Heav'n on Earth, Christ's Love" (no. 100 in 1774, 99 in 1785 and 1792). Also, Occom anticipated Allen when he provided a two-line "chorus," so designated, to follow each stanza of the hymn "Farewell to my Pain, and farewell to my Chain" (no. 103 in 1774). Eileen Southern credits Allen with precisely these innovations in the "first hymnal for an all-black congregation."<sup>14</sup> But when she praises Allen for being the first to include a "hymn-with-chorus" before such were "yet admitted into the repertory of official Protestant hymnody," she overlooks the prior steps taken by Allen's Indian predecessor.<sup>15</sup> Allen obviously knew and used Occom. Two of the hymns in the second, enlarged printing of his 1801 *A Collection* are Occom's: "Lord! when together here we meet" and "What poor despised company." Southern recognizes Allen's having taken at least one of these from Occom.

Occom taught his songs wherever he traveled. Several excerpts from his diary will illustrate.<sup>16</sup> On October 24, 1785, as he approached the David Fowler home at Brotherton, a refugee Indian settlement near Marshall, Oneida County, New York (peopled by remnants of coastal tribes), "I heard a Melodious Singing, a number were together Singing Psalms Hymns and Spiritual songs . . . we sat down awhile and they began to sing again." Five days later "Hymns Psalms and Spiritual Songs [occupied] the biggest part of the Time, finish'd in the evening—and after supper the Singers Sung a while, and then dispersed." The next day was Sunday October 30. "In the evening we had Singing a long while." After a marriage ceremony the following Thursday, November 3, "we Spent the Evening in Singing Psalms Hymns and Spiritual Songs"—and November 4, "The Young People put on their best Clouths, and went to a Neighbours House, all on Horse back . . . they had some Pleasant chat and agreeable conduct, some Singing of Psalms Hymns and Spiritual Songs." On Tuesday November 8 Occom visited the nearby Stockbridge Indians, while with them spending "Some Time in Singing of Spiritual Songs." On Sunday November 13, "in the evening we had some singing."

The Brotherton Indians, who in 1785 took up residence on a tract donated by the Oneidas "fourteen miles south of where the city of Utica, New York, now stands,"<sup>17</sup> began moving to what is now Calumet County, Wisconsin (east bank of Lake Winnebago) in 1831. By 1839 they were ready to accept full United States citizenship. Thomas Commuck, their historian, was a Narragansett born at Charlestown, Rhode Island, January 18, 1805. Before the age of 21 he emigrated to Brothertown, New York, there receiving the west half of lot 85. This he sold in 1831.

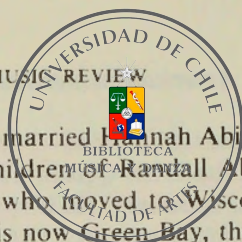
<sup>14</sup>*The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), p. 86; *Readings in Black American Music* (same publisher and date), p. 52.

<sup>15</sup>*The Music of Black Americans*, p. 89. Occom also contributed to Joshua Smith's *Divine Hymns and Spiritual Songs* (Norwich: T. Hubbard, 1784), the sixth edition of which was reprinted at Albany in 1804. See Love, p. 179. At least seven Allen choices (items at pp. 26, 86, 51, 40, 80, 21, 17 of second enlarged printing) duplicate Smith choices (Portland 1803 edition, pp. 87, 16, 8, 129, 125, 5, 96). The first three and sixth Allen choices may have been picked up from Smith, since Southern knows of no other sources.

<sup>16</sup>Love, pp. 249–250.

<sup>17</sup>Thomas Commuck, "Sketch of the Brothertown Indians," *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, IV (Madison: The Society, 1906 [reprint of Original Issue of 1859]), p. 293.





On July 31 of that year he married Hannah Abigail, born August 21, 1814. She was the eldest of the eleven children of Randall Abner (1789–1852, a Pequot born at Stonington, Connecticut, who moved to Wisconsin in 1831 and died in Kansas). After a stopover at what is now Green Bay, the Commucks settled at Brotherton, Wisconsin, where he became the first postmaster and first Justice of the Peace. Apart from his "Sketch of the Brothertown Indians" published the year of his death, Commuck contributed also a "Sketch of Calumet County" to *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, 1 (1855/1903), 103–106. He drowned November 25, 1855, "through a hole in the ice, near his residence, in Calumet County—whether by accident or design, is not known."<sup>19</sup> His wife survived him and was still alive in 1899. Of his ten children the fourth died in Libby Prison February 1, 1863 (member of Company E, 21st Wisconsin Volunteers). His second child served as a soldier also.<sup>19</sup>

In American Indian music history, Commuck rates as unique. *Indian Melodies. By Thomas Commuck, a Narragansett Indian. Harmonized by Thomas Hastings, Esq.* (New York: G. Lane & C. B. Tippet, for the Methodist Episcopal Church, 200 Mulberry Street, James Collard, Printer, 1845) is an oblong collection of vi + 116 pages, containing 120 tunes named for the most part after chiefs or tribes (PONTIAC 33, POWHATAN 52, POCAHONTAS 64, PHILIP 75, TECUMSEH 84, FLATHEAD 10, PASSAMAQUODDY 36, ALGONQUIN 48, PENOBSCOT 89, OSAGE 94). In the year of publication, Hastings, harmonizer of the tunes, shared with Lowell Mason the greatest fame of any American sacred composer. Already 23 years earlier it had been Hastings who in his 228-page *Dissertation on Musical Taste* (Albany: Websters and Skinners, 1822) had at page 219 been the first in the young republic to publish any Indian airs—in this instance *Canide iouue* and two other of the Tupynambá airs collected by Jean de Léry near Rio de Janeiro around 1557.

Two of Commuck's tunes were later to be borrowed by Theodore Baker for publication at page 75 of *Über die Musik der nordamerikanischen Wilden* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1882),<sup>20</sup> but, however, without any acknowledgment of their Commuck source. For its title, Commuck called the first of these two melodies so unceremoniously borrowed by Baker OLD INDIAN HYMN. At the bottom of page 63 Commuck added this explanatory footnote.

The Narragansett Indians<sup>[21]</sup> have a tradition, that the following tune was heard in the air by them, and other tribes bordering on the Atlantic coast, many years before the arrival of the

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 298, note by Lyman C. Draper, secretary of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin 1854–1886.

<sup>20</sup>All biographical details not otherwise credited in this paragraph come from Love, pp. 338–339. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, iv, 591, was the first encyclopedia to include an entry on Thomas Commuck.

<sup>21</sup>A facsimile edition was published, New York, AMS Press Inc. 1973. Three years later appeared a facsimile interleaved with English translation. *On the Music of the North American Indians*, translated by Ann Buckley (2707 Buren, Netherlands: Frits Knuf, 1976 [Source Materials and Studies in Ethnomusicology, General Editor, Frank Harrison, ix]) contains an occasional critical note (pp. 73, 89, 90, 139), but none on Songs xxxvii and xxxviii (pp. 132–133), the sources of which the translator failed to acknowledge.

<sup>22</sup>Commuck did not himself claim any knowledge of the Narragansett tongue. In 1855 he remembered only six words: suck-wish (come in), we-quo-sen (good morning), much-a-chucks (boy), tau-but-nee (thank you), chee-boy (evil spirit), and quett-hunk (a stick to poke the fire with). These six words "were taught me by my grandmother when I was a little boy. She died in 1825, aged 84. The words were taught her, by her mother, when she (my grandmother) was a little girl." See Commuck's "Sketch of the Brothertown Indians," p. 297.



whites in America; and that on their first visiting a church in Plymouth Colony, after the settlement of that place by the whites, the same tune was sung while performing divine service, and the Indians knew it as well as the whites. The tune therefore is preserved among them to this day, and is sung to the words here set.

*♩ = ♪ (original major third lower)*

My — soul — doth ma — gni — fy — the Lord, My spir — it doth re —  
 joice In — God — my Sav — iour and — my — God: I hear — a  
 joy — ful voice. Hal — le — lu — jah, hal — le — lu — jah, Ho — san — na, ho — san —  
 na, Hal — le — lu — jah, hal — le — lu — jah, Ho — san — na, — ho — san — na.

This stirring melody, printed as example xxxvii in Baker's dissertation, had the good fortune to attract MacDowell, who used it entire in "From an Indian Lodge," fifth of his *Woodland Sketches*, op. 51. All the more interesting, then, what Baker had to say concerning it. Not only did Baker garble what Commuck had written of his melody—making Commuck's footnote say instead that the Atlantic coastal folk who had heard it before the arrival of the whites always regarded it as a ghostly gift-song to be sung only at high feasts—but also Baker made the note apply not to the above melody but rather to the other song borrowed without acknowledgment from *Indian Melodies*, a tune that Commuck had called SHOSHONEE and that he had designated as suitable for Hymn 587 by Charles Wesley in the Methodist hymn book, "Lord, dismiss us with thy blessing, Bid us now depart in peace." To insure its lasting fame SHOSHONEE (published by Baker as item xxxviii) was also to catch the eye of MacDowell, who based the third movement of his *Indian Suite*, op. 48, on it—but of course without suspecting Commuck to have composed the melody. Would he ever have used it had he but known that it was a composed hymn tune rather than anything traditionally tribal?





Five staves of musical notation in treble clef. The first staff has a key signature of one flat and a 3/4 time signature. The second staff has a key signature of one flat. The third staff has a key signature of one flat and a 3/4 time signature. The fourth staff has a key signature of one flat and a 3/4 time signature. The fifth staff has a key signature of one flat and a 3/4 time signature.

For comparative purposes, Baker published the Songs xxxvii and xxxviii thus:

xxxvii. xxxviii. The block contains two musical examples. The first, labeled "xxxvii.", consists of three staves of music in treble clef, one flat key signature, and 3/4 time. The second, labeled "xxxviii.", consists of five staves of music in treble clef, one flat key signature, and 3/4 time. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and repeat signs.