

James Lord Pierpont

James Lord Pierpont

(1822-1893)

Author of "Jingle Bells"

The colorful James Pierpont was the author of "One Horse Open Sleigh" which was first published in 1857. In 1859, he reissued the song under a new name: "Jingle Bells." It was a "sleighting song" which was a popular topic of the time and had nothing to do with Christmas, or for that matter, Thanksgiving.

James Pierpont was born in 1822, while his father served as the Unitarian pastor of the Hollis Street Church in Boston. His father, the Rev. John Pierpont (1785-1866) was an ardent abolitionist and noted poet. His mother was Mary Sheldon Lord, the daughter of Lynde Lord, Jr. (1762-1813), and Mary Lyman.

Together, they had six children. The Pierpont name has been traced back as far as Charlemagne and the invasion of England by William the Conqueror.

In 1832, at the age of 10, James was sent to a boarding school in New Hampshire. He wrote his mother a letter about riding in a sleigh through the December snow. Four years after that, in 1836, 14-year-old James ran away to sea (aboard a ship called "the Shark"). Some sources indicate that the ship sailed as far as California. If so, it would have been only the first time.

By 1845, he was back on the East Coast, where his father was the minister of a Unitarian congregation in Troy, New York. Sometimes between 1845-1849, James married Millicent Cowee, the daughter of Farwell Cowee and Abigail Merriam. They have two children by the time, Mary and John. Mary was later a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR; Mary Pierpont Barnum, DAR # 17208; see D.A.R. Lineage Books 11-20, Whitney Surname). Rev. Pierpont accepted a position in Medford, MA in 1849.

That same year, Pierpont left his wife and children with his father in Massachusetts to open a business in San Francisco during the gold rush of 1849. It is reported that he also worked as a photographer. The business failed after his goods burned in a fire (there were several fires in the early years of San Francisco: see The Six Great Fires; also see the account of Rev. Albert Williams, who discusses several fires on May 4, 1850, May 4, 1851, and June 22, 1851, with an emphasis on the latter). After the fire, Pierpont returned to Medford.

In 1853, James' brother, the Rev. John Pierpont, Jr. (1819-1879), accepted a post with the Savannah, Georgia, Unitarian congregation. James followed, taking

a post as the organist and music director of the church. To support himself, he also gave organ and singing lessons (the organ is presently in the possession of Florida State University). His wife and children remained in Massachusetts with his father, Rev. John Pierpont. That same year, James had his first songs published in Boston, among them "Kitty Crowe" and "The Colored Coquette." Nothing further is known about either of these songs. Several other songs, however, are known and have been recorded by Mr. Jamie Keena, a noted balladeer and authority on 19th century music.¹ Songs performed by Mr. Keena include "Ring the Bell, Fanny," "Quitman Town March" and "Wait, Lady, Wait" as well as the three Confederacy songs mentioned below. Pierpont is said to have published a number of ballads, polkas and minstrel songs.

Three years later, in 1856, his first wife Millicent died of tuberculosis. A year later, in August 1857, James married Eliza Jane Purse, daughter of Savannah's mayor, Thomas Purse. She very soon gave birth to the first of their children, Lillie. Pierpont's children by his first marriage remained in Massachusetts with their grandfather.

Also in August 1857, his song "One Horse Open Sleigh" was published by Oliver Ditson and Co. of Boston. Two years later it was re-released with the title "Jingle Bells, or The One Horse Open Sleigh". It was not a hit either time.

In 1859, the Unitarian Church in Savannah closed due to its abolitionist leanings, unpopular in those parts at that time. By at least 1860, Rev. John Pierpont, Jr. had returned to the North.

James, however, stayed in Savannah with his second wife Eliza Jane, and at the beginning of the Civil War, joined the Isle of Hope Volunteers of the First Georgia Cavalry (later the Fifth Georgia Cavalry) of the Confederacy. Records indicate that he served as a company clerk. He also wrote music for the Confederacy, including "Our Battle Flag", "Strike for the South" and "We Conquer or Die." His father also saw military service — as a chaplain with the Union Army stationed in Washington, D.C.

After the war, James moved his family to Valdosta, Georgia, where he taught music and made many friends (and was involved in a local scandal). According to Savannah author Margaret DeBolt and researcher Milton J. Rahn, Pierpont's son, Maynard Boardman, was born in Valdosta. The 1870 Lowndes County Census lists: "Pierpont, James 48, Eliza J. 38, Lillie 16, Thomas 8, Josiah 5, and Maynard B. 4." Note that if Lillie is 16 in 1870, she was born in about 1854. The record, of course, could be in error.

In 1869, Pierpont moved to Quitman, Florida. There he was organist in the Presbyterian Church, gave private piano lessons and taught at the Quitman Academy, retiring as the head of the Musical Department.

In 1880, Pierpont's son, Dr. Juriah Pierpont M.D., renewed the copyright on "Jingle Bells" but he never made much money from it. It took considerable effort to keep his father's name permanently attached to the song after the copyright expired. More information about Dr. Pierpont can be found at Pensacola Medical Heritage in St. John's Historic Cemetery web page.

Pierpont died in 1893 in Winter Haven, Fla. At his request, he was buried in Laurel Grove Cemetery in Savannah beside his brother-in-law Thomas who had been killed in the first battle of Bull Run.

Stories Concerning The Origin of "Jingle Bells:"

In short, both Massachusetts and Georgia claim ownership of "Jingle Bells."

There are many stories circulating about its origin. Here's a sampling.

Massachusetts: One day in 1851, James Pierpont went to the home of Mrs. Otis Waterman, who let him play a piano belonging to William Webber, a Medford music teacher. Mrs. Waterman owned the Seccomb boardinghouse, which became better known later as the Simpson Tavern and was eventually torn down [hence the origin of the story that Pierpont wrote the song in a tavern].

After he played the piece for her, Mrs. Waterman replied that it was a very merry little jingle, and he should have a lot of success with it. Pierpont then wrote the lyrics about the one-horse open sleighs — also known as "cutters" — that young men raced on the one mile route from Medford to Malden Squares. It has been said that Pierpont was a rebellious musician with a bad reputation. To underscore the point, Medford Mayor Michael McGlynn has been quoted as saying: "James Pierpont was a bit of a rogue." The Mayor evidently had a gift for the understatement.

Georgia: Savannah musical researcher, Milton Rahn, concluded that 'Jingle Bells' was most likely written in Savannah, in a house located near Oglethorpe and Whitaker Streets, which has since been torn down. It has been speculated that the song was composed by Pierpont, probably at a time when homesick, as he recalled his youthful days in New England.

Another popular version gives authorship (either in Boston or in Savannah) for a Thanksgiving church service. It is said that was so well received that the children were asked to repeat the performance at Christmas service and it has remained a Christmas standard ever since.

This version of the song, more or less, is repeated in:

Albert J. and Shirley C. Menendez, *Christmas Songs Made In America* (Nashville, TN: Cumberland House, 1999). According to the book the song was written "for his father's Sunday school class on Thanksgiving 1857." They also note:

"Recent evidence...suggests that he might have borrowed lines from a song by Stephen Foster or from another song popularized by Christy's Minstrels."

Ace Collins, *Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001): "Around 1840 young Pierpont was given the assignment to write special music for a Thanksgiving service."

William Studwell, *The Christmas Carol Reader* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1995): "'Bells' was probably composed in Boston ... for a Sunday school program...."

William L. Simon, ed., *Reader's Digest Merry Christmas Songbook* (Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest, 1981): "James Pierpont wrote it in 1857 for a Thanksgiving program at the large Boston church where he taught Sunday school."

None of these sources cites authority for their position. Note that in 1857, Pierpont was in Savannah, not Boston.

And some have expressed doubt that the song could be written for a children's church choir. Margaret W. DeBolt, a Savannah historian, wrote that "The references to courting would not have been allowed in a Sunday school program of that time, such as 'Go it while you're young'". As such, it could not have been written as a church song. Instead, it was just a "sleighing song" – fast sleighs and pretty girls. Some things never change.

So, what's the answer? Beats me. Take your pick...but nobody probably knows for sure.

According to sources I've read, "Jingle Bells" was recorded by the Edison Male Quartette in 1898 (on an Edison brown wax cylinder, number 2218). It was also recorded by the Hayden Quartet in 1902. There is another recording by the Shannon Quartet (Date unknown, but possibly Victor #19791, 1925, or on Columbia in 1928). One source states that the quartet was founded by Victor records in 1917; they were popular in the 1920s, and were later known as the "Revelers."

For a picture of a one-horse open sleigh by Peter Guttman, see Fodors.

"Jingle Bells" became the first song ... and first Christmas carol ... performed in outer space when the duo of Wally Schirra and Tom Stafford gave us a rendition on Dec. 16, 1965 during the flight of Gemini 6. There are additional

notes under Jingle Bells.

A number of sources give the name "James S. Pierpont." This seems to be an error. Likewise, attribution to "John" Pierpont is also in error. James was the uncle of the financier J. Pierpont Morgan (whose mother, Julia, was the sister of James).

Notes:

1. Mr. Keena is also a teacher in the elder hostel program at Armstrong State College. According to a videotape from the Georgia Historical Association, the cassette tape is available from Historic Images, 606 Glenbrook Rd, Savannah, GA 31419 (925-1334). Return

Unitarians who've written songs associated with Christmas:

Lydia Maria Child: Over The River And Through The Wood (by coincidence, Ms. Child was born in Medford, Massachusetts)

James Lord Pierpont: Jingle Bells (One Horse Open Sleigh)

Rev. Edmund Sears: It Came Upon A Midnight Clear

Sources:

Albert J. and Shirley C. Menendez, Christmas Songs Made In America (Nashville, TN: Cumberland House, 1999)

Ace Collins, Stories Behind the Best-Loved Songs of Christmas (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001)

William Studwell, The Christmas Carol Reader (New York: Harrington Park Press, 1995)

William L. Simon, ed., Reader's Digest Merry Christmas Songbook (Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest, 1981)

Peter Ames Carlin, "Snowed by 'Jingle Bells'" (The Oregonian, Portland, Oregon, December 20, 2003)

Bells on Bob-tails Ring": James L. Pierpoint and Jingle Bells, Best Read Guide: Savannah [Page has disappeared]

Our Jingle Bells Connection, Unitarian Universalist Church of Savannah, Georgia (which contains a photograph of the "Jingle Bells" plaque in Savannah)

Virtual Sheet Music

The Unitarian Church in Savannah (with a photograph of the church)

"Jingle" by Molly-Ann Leikin, Songwriting Consultants, Ltd.

"A Savannah church, a Christmas song, a Beaufort minister" by Gerhard Spieler, Nov. 27, 2001, The Beaufort Gazette

J.S. Pierpont, The Songwriters Hall of Fame

The Yankee transplant who gave the world 'Jingle Bells' by Albert Pendleton,
The Valdosta Daily Times, Sunday, December 23, 2001, on the web at
Valdosta-Lownes History (with a photograph of James Lord Pierpont).

Unitarian Universalist Church: A Brief History Of The Congregation by Margaret
DeBolt and Milton Rahn from Our Coast: Savannah

For diversity, affordability, and doughnuts, there's no place like Medford By
Ed Siegel, The Boston Globe, 9/20/2003

Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography, O-Z; Articles on James and
John Pierpont are pending (as of December 20, 2003).

Jingle Bells, Miss Emily Barlaston's Repertory of Songs

Dr. Juriah Harris Pierpont, Pensacola Medical Heritage in St. John's Historic
Cemetery

Unitarian Universalist Church, Medford, MA (mentions both James Lord Pierpont
and Lyria Maria Child, author of "Over The River And Through The Wood")

Ringin' debate over origin of 'Jingle Bells' by Larry Katz, The Boston Herald,
Boston, MA, Dec 24, 2001 (available by subscription only)

"The Life and Music of James Lord Pierpont," a 30-minute videotape
presentation from the Georgia Historical Association. Introduction by Dr.
Roger Warlick of Armstrong State College; historical content by Ms. Margaret
DeBolt and Mr. Milton Rahn, with musical content by Mr. Jamie Keena.

The Story of the Jingle Bells Song from the Santa Barbara News-Press, at Ink
Slingers, Inc.

'Jingle Bells' author honored with marker at cemetery, Savannah Morning News,
web posted Thursday, August 9, 2001

Historic Houses of Worship from Armstrong University

Jingle Bells from Sound of the Rockies

Jingle Bells: James Pierpont, 1859 from Christmas Songs, Phillyburbs.com

Christmas Songs

Jingle Bells from The Christmas Guitar

Jingle Bells (aka The One Horse Open Sleigh), comments by From Marc De Bruyn

All sources accessible as of 20 December 2003.