

*Martha Buck's Copybook:
New England Tragedy Verse
and the Scribal Lineage of the
American Ballad Tradition*

DANIEL A. COHEN

WHEN SCHOLARS BEGAN to collect and analyze early American ballads during the first decades of the twentieth century, they generally conceptualized such folksongs as quintessential artifacts of traditional 'oral culture.' They did so not only on definitional or theoretical grounds but also as a natural reflection of their own research methods. Ballad collectors typically gathered the bulk of their materials from local 'informants,' ordinary men and women

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who provided them with texts and tunes by reciting or singing from memory. Such folk most often reported that their songs had been taught to them years earlier by parents, other relatives, or acquaintances, sometimes in an ongoing process of oral transmission that extended back several generations. Scholars of the South, in particular, tended to assume that widespread illiteracy and cultural isolation—as in parts of Appalachia—helped ensure the perpetuation of ‘oral tradition’ and, hence, the survival of traditional ballads. Perhaps because they were largely interested in the dissemination of transplanted English ballads (and perhaps also because they seldom organized their collections chronologically), folksong scholars rarely noted that the handful of pre-1800 ballads of American origin that endured in ‘oral tradition’ into the twentieth century had all derived from *northern* colonies or states.¹

In New England, where early folksongs often survived on paper, scholars were more prone to recognize the role of printed broadsides and manuscript sources in the dissemination and preservation of ballads. For example, Harvard folklorist Phillips Barry acknowledged the role of ‘ballad printers’ as ‘keepers’ of the folk tradition, and he rejected the view that regions with high

1. For an excellent overview of the history of ballad and folksong scholarship, see D. K. Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1959); for examples of oral transmission over several generations, see John Harrington Cox, ed., *Folk-Songs of the South* (1925; reprint, New York: Dover, 1967), 29, 56, 64, 91, 93, 109, 111, 152, 327, 341, 430, 469, and *passim*; H. M. Belden, ed., *Ballads and Songs Collected by the Missouri Folk-Love Society* (1940; reprint, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1966), xiii, 26, 63, 109, 315, 323. For typical assertions of southern and oral primacy in ballad dissemination and preservation, see Lydia I. Hinkel, ‘Folk Tunes,’ in Cox, ed., *Folk-Songs of the South*, 520; Reed Smith, ed., *South Carolina Ballads with a Study of the Traditional Ballad To-Day* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1928), 7, 74, 76–77; Vance Randolph, *Ozark Folksongs*, 4 vols. (1946–50; rev. and reprinted, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980), 1: 31–34, 37; G. Malcolm Laws, Jr., *Native American Balladry: A Descriptive Study and a Bibliographical Syllabus* (1950; rev. and reprinted, Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1964), 39. For the handful of indigenous pre-1800 ballads that endured in ‘oral tradition’ into the twentieth century, see Laws, *Native American Balladry*, 47–48, 119–21, 162, 221; also see 257–58. Although his book tacitly documents the northern origins of the earliest surviving American folk ballads, Laws does not highlight that pattern. Despite my belief that the indigenous American ballad or folksong tradition has been heavily dependent on print and scribal transmission, I occasionally use the term ‘oral tradition’ in this essay—partly in deference to the usage of most twentieth-century ballad scholars and partly as a convenient label for the corpus of songs that they have collectively recovered and analyzed.

rates of illiteracy, such as the American South, were better able to preserve traditional songs than societies where literacy was more nearly universal. Claiming in 1934 that several field workers in northern New England had quickly identified more traditional English ballads in thinly populated Maine and Vermont than had been collected over many years by researchers canvassing the entire South, Barry concluded that illiteracy was a distinctly 'negative factor' in ballad preservation that diminished the 'chances of survival.' Yet even New England folksong specialists tended to view textual sources as tributaries of the much larger and more important stream of oral transmission; after all, Barry's own definition of a 'folksinger' was a member of the 'folk' who sang a song 'from memory.' And while he often made use of handwritten texts in studying individual ballads, Barry neglected such manuscript sources in his broader theoretical formulations. Indeed, in a piece entitled 'The Transmission of Folk-Song,' he virtually precluded any consideration of scribal dissemination at the outset, flatly asserting that 'the media for transmission of folk-song are two-fold,—first, the folk-singer; second, the printed text.'²

Despite the dominant conceptual dualism of orality and print, modern ballad scholars have regularly consulted manuscript albums, copybooks, and handwritten song sheets in tracing individual texts and have occasionally noted the key role of such scribal sources in their work, albeit only briefly and in passing. In 1922 Louise Pound claimed that some of 'the most important sources' for ballad collectors were 'manuscript' books into which transcribed songs were handed down 'from generation to generation.' In 1939 the Ohio ballad scholar Mary O. Eddy described finding 'manuscript copies' of 'old songs' on 'single sheets,' in 'albums' and 'account books,' and in booklets sewn together by children; that same year, Michigan ballad scholars Emelyn

2. Phillips Barry, paraphrased and quoted in Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship*, 68–73 and 120; Barry, 'What is Tradition?' *Bulletin of the Folk-Song Society of the Northeast* [BFSSN], no. 1 (1930): 2–3; Barry, 'Illiteracy a Negative Factor in Ballad Tradition,' *BFSSN*, No. 7 (1934): 18–19; Barry, 'The Transmission of Folk-Song,' *Journal of American Folk-Lore* 27 (Jan.-Mar. 1914): 67–76, quoted at 67.

Gardner and Geraldine Chickering emphasized the 'importance' of 'manuscript collections' in 'preserving and distributing popular songs.' In a study of Missouri ballads published in 1940, Henry M. Belden noted that 'manuscript collections' are 'especially interesting to the student of folksong.' In 1953 Helen Hartness Flanders and Marguerite Olney reported that many New England informants had sent them 'handwritten verses set down several generations ago in some diary, old letter, ledger, or copybook.' Finally, in perhaps the most thorough analysis to date of the indigenous (as opposed to transplanted English) tradition of American balladry, G. Malcolm Laws, Jr., acknowledged that nineteenth-century 'manuscript' copybooks 'must have played an important part in preserving' old ballads 'by assisting the flagging memories of folk singers.'³

Yet when revisionist scholars again challenged the assumption that Anglo-American ballads originated in oral tradition, they did so within the familiar dualistic framework of orality and print, largely ignoring the role of scribal culture. In a series of essays produced between 1964 and 1975, folklorists Tristram P. Coffin, Mark T. Coffin, and Robert D. Bethke argued that many if not most ballads produced in North America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries either stemmed from or were significantly influenced by the venerable Anglo-American tradition of 'narrative obituary verse.' Encompassing both conventional funeral elegies and topical variants such as verses on executed criminals, such 'obituary' genres typically appeared as printed broadsides or, during later periods, as newspaper poems. According to Bethke, 'as many as 155 of the 256 ballads' of American origin identified by G. Malcolm Laws, Jr., as having survived in 'oral

3. Louise Pound, ed., *American Ballads and Songs* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922), xxv; Mary O. Eddy, *Ballads and Songs from Ohio* (1939; reprint, Hatboro, Penn.: Folklore Associates, 1964), xii; Emelyn Elizabeth Gardner and Geraldine Jencks Chickering, eds., *Ballads and Songs of Southern Michigan* (1939; reprint, Hatboro, Penn.: Folklore Associates, 1967), 26; Belden, *Ballads and Songs*, xiii; Helen Hartness Flanders and Marguerite Olney, *Ballads Migrant in New England* (1953; reprint, Freeport, N. Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1968), 1-2; Laws, *Native American Balladry*, 47.

tradition' into the twentieth century had been 'influenced by narrative obituary verse and related print forms.' Since, prior to 1800, such genres flourished primarily in New England and elsewhere in the Northeast, this argument naturally tended to locate the origins of the American ballad tradition in those regions. Not until later, Bethke claimed, did New England migrants carry such northeastern ballad styles to 'the South and West.' Unfortunately, the arguments of Bethke and Tristram Coffin were presented only in brief preliminary essays, while the fullest exposition of the revisionist thesis, Mark Coffin's 1975 doctoral dissertation, appeared at a time of declining academic interest in early American balladry—and seems to have had relatively little scholarly impact.⁴

Over the past ten or fifteen years, as the subject of Anglo-American folk balladry has languished in the academic backwater, scholars of more elite genres have transformed their fields by rediscovering the significance of scribal or manuscript culture during the early modern period. Rejecting the anachronistic literary-critical tendency to privilege printed texts, several studies of English renaissance poetry, for example, have shown that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century authors often operated in intimate 'scribal communities' whose members actually *preferred* to disseminate their writings in manuscript form. Even more to the

4. Tristram P. Coffin, 'On a Peak in Massachusetts: The Literary and Aesthetic Approach,' in Mody C. Boatright, Wilson M. Hudson, and Allen Maxwell, eds., *A Good Tale and a Bonnie Tune* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1964), 201-9; Robert D. Bethke, 'Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Balladry,' *Journal of American Folklore* 83 (Jan.-Mar. 1970): 61-68, quoted at 65 and 67; Mark Tristram Coffin, 'American Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Balladry' (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1975). Based on a more elaborate study than Bethke's, M. T. Coffin concluded that 75 of the 256 native American ballads identified by Laws were 'closely related to narrative obituary verse' and that 182 of the 256 appear to have been 'influenced to some degree by the funeral poem tradition'; M. T. Coffin, 'American Narrative Obituary Verse,' 166, 180-81. M. T. Coffin was T. P. Coffin's son, while Bethke was the latter's student. Although the designation 'narrative obituary verse' corresponds closely to my own category of 'providential tragedy verse' (defined and discussed below), I have introduced the latter label because I believe that the formulations of Bethke and the Coffins overstate the primacy of funeral elegies as *the* model upon which other types of topical Anglo-American ballads were based; rather, I believe that the authors of American tragedy ballads drew more or less equally—and contemporaneously—upon a wide range of subtypes of early modern English narrative poetry and 'news' balladry.

point, scholars such as Arthur F. Marotti have suggested that highly individuated manuscripts often provide greater insight into the social history of literary production and dissemination than standardized printed texts. Cultural historians such as David S. Shields, Carla Mulford, Catherine La Courreye Blecki, and Karin A. Wulf have led a similar revival of interest in eighteenth-century American scribal culture, particularly as it flourished among provincial elites. Stressing the 'importance' of 'oral and manuscript cultural transmission,' Mulford has assailed the tendency of literary historians to rely solely on 'printed works,' while Shields has noted the complex interrelationship of 'print, manuscript, and oral communication during the early Republic.' Whereas those revisionist scholars of elite literary culture have challenged their discipline's fixation on printed forms, the field of Anglo-American folk balladry requires a corresponding shift in roughly the opposite direction: away from its habitual over-emphasis on oral transmission. In both cases, the old dualism of orality and print needs to be replaced by a more complex paradigm that recognizes the crucial role of scribal or manuscript culture—not simply as a mediating or transitional form but also as an enduring medium of cultural expression in its own right.⁵

Melding the older revisionist insights of Barry, Bethke, and the Coffins with a new attentiveness to scribal sources, this essay's close

5. Peter Beal, *In Praise of Scribes: Manuscripts and Their Makers in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Arthur F. Marotti, *Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995); Marotti, 'Manuscript, Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric,' in W. Speed Hill, ed., *New Ways of Looking at Old Texts* (Binghamton, N.Y.: Medieval & Renaissance Texts & Studies, 1993), 209–21; Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues & Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), quoted at 322; Catherine La Courreye Blecki and Karen A. Wulf, eds., *Milcab Martha Moore's Book: A Commonplace Book from Revolutionary America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997); Carla Mulford, ed., *Only for the Eye of a Friend: The Poems of Annis Boudinot Stockton* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), xv, 1–62, quoted at 7; Shields, 'The Manuscript in the British American World of Print,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 102 (1992): 403–16; on nineteenth-century American manuscript culture, see Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Literary Dollars and Social Sense: A People's History of the Mass Market Book* (New York: Routledge, 2005), xix–xxi, 179–87, 203–205, and *passim*.

microhistorical analysis of a single manuscript traces the emergence of America's indigenous ballad tradition out of the highly literate culture that flourished in New England (and in other northern colonies and states) from the eve of the Revolution to the onset of the Civil War. By the end of the eighteenth century, the men and women of New England had forged a society in which, as the late William J. Gilmore argued, reading was rapidly becoming 'a necessity of life.'⁶ Yet most of the region's residents still lived in a print culture of relative scarcity, without easy access to the abundance of cheap books, pamphlets, and periodicals that would flood the literary marketplace during the 1830s and 1840s.⁷ With their appetites whetted but not yet fully sated by 'ready-made' texts, aggressively literate New Englanders of the early republic took matters into their own hands, creating an active scribal culture in which they not only eagerly consumed whatever printed materials were available but also expressed their new literary tastes and aspirations in countless handwritten letters, diaries, journals, friendship albums, manuscript miscellanies, and commonplace books.⁸ The pages that follow explore the relationship of that culture to the origins of the American ballad tradition, focusing on a small but exemplary group of verses that a young woman from rural Connecticut wrote into her copybook during the 1820s and 1830s. Of course, since no single source can *prove* the existence of broad cultural patterns, I

6. William J. Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life: Material and Cultural Life in Rural New England, 1780-1835* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); also see Gilmore, 'Elementary Literacy on the Eve of the Industrial Revolution: Trends in Rural New England, 1760-1830,' *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 92 (1982): 87-178.

7. On the transition in New England from a print culture of relative scarcity to one of abundance, see David D. Hall, 'Introduction: The Uses of Literacy in New England, 1600-1850,' in William L. Joyce et al., eds., *Printing and Society in Early America* (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1983), 1-47, or Hall, *Cultures of Print: Essays in the History of the Book* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 36-78; more broadly, see Ronald J. Zboray, *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

8. American manuscript writing books and booklets of the early republic often combined the content and functions of diaries, journals, school notebooks, friendship albums, miscellanies, and commonplace books, sometimes making it impossible to apply just one such label to a given artifact; in addition, literary scholars occasionally disagree in their

have taken pains throughout to document general claims by drawing extensively on more than a century of Anglo-American ballad scholarship. Fortunately, in that regard, one of the poems recorded in the Connecticut copybook (a piece originally composed in about 1761) was among the very first indigenous ballads to gain a lasting foothold in the American folksong tradition—and, hence, has been quite thoroughly studied by ballad scholars. But rather than start at the beginning, with those famous verses of 1761, I will begin by describing a fitting end that occurred exactly one century later: the death of an elderly Yankee farmer just six weeks after the start of the American Civil War.

On May 23, 1861, Captain Joseph Buck died in Putnam, Connecticut, at the age of ninety-five. A venerable embodiment of his state's proverbial 'steady habits,' Buck had spent his entire life in the same section of Windham County, a rural district in the northeastern corner of Connecticut, bordering both Massachusetts and Rhode Island. In about 1788, while still in his early twenties, Buck married a local woman, Dorcas Fairbanks, with whom he lived on the family farm for some sixty-five years until her death at the age of eighty-five. Together, the couple raised eight of their own children and reportedly adopted three or four others. After Dorcas's death, the couple's youngest daughter, who never married, remained at the old homestead and cared for her aging father until her own demise in July 1860. Two brief biographical sketches published in newspapers after Joseph Buck's death the

definitions of those different terms. For useful scholarly discussions of several of those scribal genres, see Ruth Mohl, *John Milton and His Commonplace Book* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1969), 11–30; Peter Beal, 'Notions in Garrison: The Seventeenth-Century Commonplace Book,' in Hill, *New Ways of Looking at Old Texts*, 131–47; Marotti, *Manuscript, Print*, 1–73, *passim*, 173; Alexandra Gillespie, 'Balliol MS 354: Histories of the Book at the End of the Middle Ages,' *Poetica* 60 (2003): 47–63; Blecki and Wulf, *Martha Milcab Moore's Book*, 30–31, 59–76, *passim*. In this essay, I use the term 'copybook' as a broad, generic label of convenience, partly in order to avoid the definitional tangles associated with a few of the more specialized designations; that said, other scholars might plausibly describe Martha Buck's copybook (cited in the next note) as a 'commonplace book' or as a verse 'miscellany.'

following May, one written by a local Methodist minister for a Boston-based denominational weekly, emphasized that the old man had 'lived and died under the same roof where he was born.'⁹

Despite the seemingly placid tenor of his personal life as a yeoman farmer in an isolated corner of rural Connecticut, Joseph Buck's obituaries emphasized the dramatic public and institutional developments that had transformed the United States over the course of his ninety-five years. As a boy, Buck had seen his father rush off to fight the British at Bunker Hill; on the eve of Buck's death, his countrymen heard 'the booming of rebel cannon' at Fort Sumter. In 1766, the year of Buck's birth, the nation's first Methodist church was established in New York City; during the 1790s, when Buck joined the first Methodist congregation in Windham County, it was still a poor and despised sect; by 1861, the year of Buck's death, the Methodists were one of the largest and wealthiest denominations in the country. Over that same period, one of the obituaries noted, America's population had grown from three to thirty million. And while the nation's territory had grown to more than three million square miles—'a larger empire than Alexander or Ancient Rome'—that vast expanse was now tied together by 'nearly 20,000 miles of railroad' and 'nearly 30,000 miles of telegraph wire.' Still, back at the family homestead in Putnam, presumably shielded by advanced age and infirmity from the booming cannons of war, the rumble of steam engines, and the relentless

9. H. [*sic*; actually: F.?] W. Conant, 'Biographical' [sketches of] 'Dorcas Caroline Buck' [Captain Buck's youngest daughter] and 'Joseph Buck, Senior,' datelined 'Putnam, Conn., Nov. 7,' *Zion's Herald and Wesleyan Journal* [Boston, Mass.], Nov. 20, 1861; 'Reflections on the Death of Joseph Buck, Senior,' *Windham County Transcript* [Danielsonville and Putnam, Conn.], June 20, 1861; both pieces clipped and pasted, without identification, at the front of [Martha Ann Buck Perrin], Manuscript Copybook/Scrapbook [c. 1820s-60s] [cited hereafter as Buck Copybook], unpaginated, in the possession of the author. Joseph Buck refers to three adopted children in a poem entitled 'Lines Composed by Joseph Buck on seeing his children together on feb [*sic*] 1825,' transcribed in the Buck Copybook; for possible genealogical mention of four such children (but without reference to them as adopted), see Ellery Bicknell Crane, ed., *Historic Homes and Institutions and Genealogical and Personal Memoirs of Worcester County Massachusetts*, 4 vols. (New York: Lewis Publishing Co., 1907), 1: 387-88; also see Ralph Dean Clark, 'Samuel Buck and Descendants' (March 25, 1999), typescript, Killingly Historical and Genealogical Society Library, Danielson, Connecticut.

buzz of telegraph wire, Buck echoed older cultural rhythms to the end. 'His memory retained with remarkable correctness whole portions of scripture and whole hymns, which he delighted to repeat from time to time,' the local minister eulogized. 'And it seemed as we listened to him in repeating different portions of the Psalms, that he spoke from the heart.'¹⁰

Buck seems to have been old-fashioned not only in his cultural practices but also in his material possessions. Probated in June 1861, the inventory of Buck's estate was more suggestive of the relatively sparse print culture of his youth than of the city-based literary abundance that had begun to conquer the New England countryside during the last thirty years of his life. With property valued at about twenty-five hundred dollars, he owned the household necessities and modest domestic comforts of a prosperous yeoman farmer, including several items indicative of active literacy: a 'Case of Drawers & Book Case,' a 'Desk and Contents,' another 'old Desk,' some 'papers,' and a pair of 'Spectacles.' Yet the inventory itemized only a handful of books, and those of meager value: 'Family Bible \$.25—Clarks Commentary [on the Bible] .75—lot of old Books 2.00.' Buck's household evidently still conformed to the region's older pattern of literary scarcity.¹¹

10. Conant, 'Joseph Buck, Senior' and 'Reflections,' both in Buck Copybook.

11. Putnam Probate Court Records, no. 1, June 23, 1861, 221-22. Adam Clarke (1762?-1832), a Methodist theologian, produced commentaries on both the Old and New Testaments that were published in numerous versions and editions (some multivolume) during the early to mid-nineteenth century; it is impossible to know which version or edition was owned by Joseph Buck. It is also impossible to know exactly how many or what types of volumes were included in the 'lot of old Books' valued at \$2.00 in the inventory, but assuming that the 'old Books' each averaged less in value than the 'Family Bible' itemized at twenty-five cents, the lot would most likely have consisted of between ten and twenty volumes. Judging from the probate records (and even recognizing the chronological discrepancy), Joseph Buck's wealth would probably have placed him toward the top of the broad category of 'Yeoman Farm Families,' as outlined by William J. Gilmore in his study of social structure and print culture in rural Vermont of the 1780s through 1830s. (Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity*, 225-82, esp. 230-32). Given Buck's extremely advanced age at death and the probable relative stability of his wealth holdings (Buck's real estate was assessed at \$2,000 in the U.S. Census of 1850 [U.S. Census, Killingly, Windham County, Connecticut, 347]), Gilmore's data is not entirely anachronistic in this context; for useful comparative data pertaining directly to the decades straddling Buck's death, see Lee Soltow, *Men and Wealth in the United States, 1850-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 62-91, *passim*. The number of books in Buck's inventory appears to

'At that day, the houses of farmers, even those of the most affluent class, were not overstocked with books,' Boston newspaper editor and Windham County native Joseph Buckingham recalled of post-Revolutionary New England. Most families owned a Bible, of course, but just 'a very few other books and pamphlets, chiefly of a religious character.' In such domestic settings, there was still ample cultural space for alternative forms of spiritual and literary expression, particularly heartfelt vocal performances such as those attributed to the aged Captain Buck. In reminiscences of his upbringing in rural Connecticut during the early nineteenth century, the popular children's author Samuel G. Goodrich recalled that his mother loved to sing mournful verses, especially 'dirge-like' renditions of biblical psalms and hymns of Dr. Watts, while his maternal grandmother captivated him with 'plaintive songs,' 'stories of the Revolution,' 'tales of even more ancient date,' and renditions of old 'poetry,' especially 'ballads.' Like the performances of Goodrich's mother and grandmother, Joseph Buck's pious recitations perpetuated an oral tradition with deep roots in Yankee culture.¹²

At the time of Buck's death, his second-oldest daughter, Martha Ann, was the fifty-three-year-old wife of a well-to-do farmer,

have been roughly typical of the estates of prosperous rural Vermonters several decades earlier; Gilmore finds that 'the average family retained about five volumes until estate wealth rose above \$2,000, when the size of holdings tripled to fifteen volumes per family' (Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity*, 249). The very fact that the appraiser bothered to itemize individual book titles in the inventory may be evidence that Buck's Putnam was an old-fashioned backwater; Robert A. Gross reports that, by 1861, this procedure could be 'seen as a vestige of an older practice' that had largely disappeared by the 1830s or 1840s 'as books became more plentiful and less expensive'; by mid-century, Gross explains, appraisers in Concord, Massachusetts, at least, ordinarily assigned a single lump value to all of the books in an estate (e-mail exchange with Gross, April 11-12, 2005). A tradition of uncertain reliability reports that Joseph Buck was 'blind for many years' (see Crane, *Historic Homes*, 388); if that were true, such a disability might help explain both the relative dearth of books in Buck's house at the time of his death and his focus as an old man on memorization and oral recitation. For a good discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of probate inventories as sources of information on book use and ownership, see Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity*, 402-9.

12. [Joseph Buckingham], 'Croaker. No. VII,' *Boston Courier*, April 9, 1849 [semi-weekly edition]; Buckingham, *Personal Memoirs and Recollections of Editorial Life*, 2 vols. (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1852), 1:15-16, quoted at 16; Samuel G. Goodrich, *Recollections of a Lifetime*, 2 vols. (New York: Miller, Orton and Co., 1857), 1:88-89, 155-57; the reminiscences of Buckingham and Goodrich are also discussed in Hall, *Cultures of Print*, 36-38 and Gilmore, *Reading Becomes a Necessity*, 266.

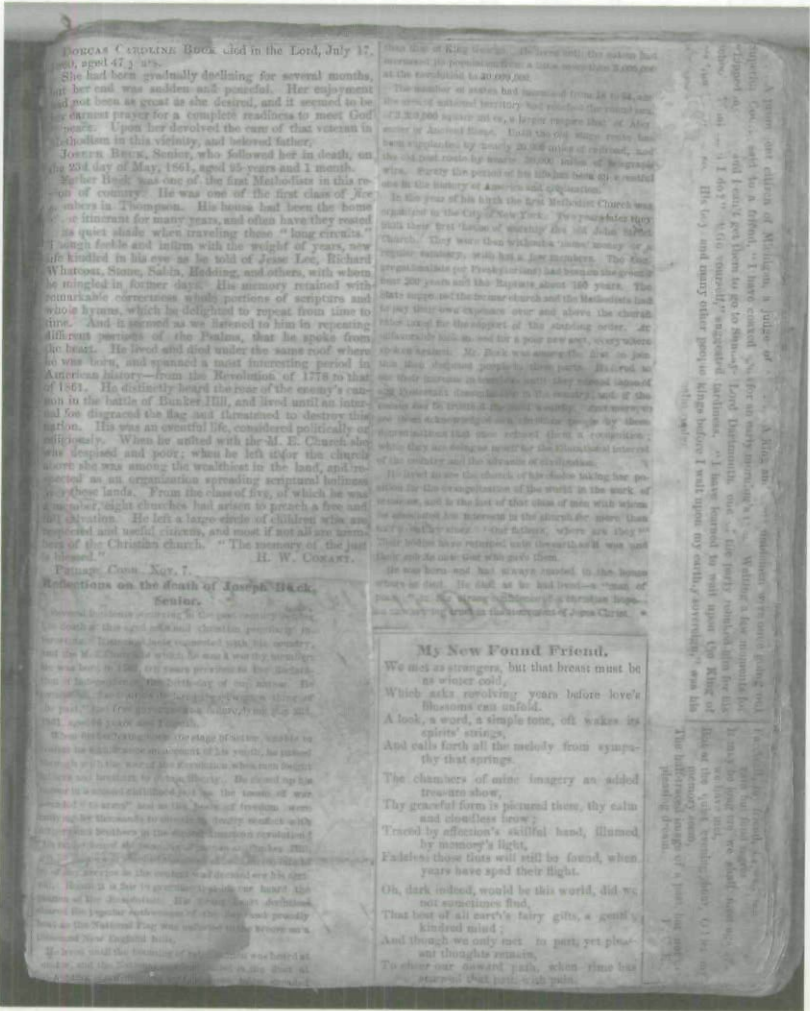


Fig. 1. Newspaper obituaries of Martha (Buck) Perrin's youngest sister, Dorcas Caroline Buck, and father, Joseph Buck, Sr., pasted onto the front page of her old copybook.

John Perrin, living in the neighboring town of Thompson, Connecticut. (Both Putnam and Thompson were originally sections of the much older Windham County township of Killingly, the jurisdiction into which Joseph Buck had been born.) During the sixteen years following her marriage in 1835, Martha Ann Perrin bore eight children, evenly spaced in age; by the spring of 1861, no more than four of her children were still living at home, the youngest nearly ten years old. The death of her youngest sister in July 1860, followed by the demise of her father the following May, probably caused the middle-aged wife and mother to reflect upon her own mortality and harken back to her childhood and youth.¹³

Perrin clipped the newspaper obituaries and decided to save them. Rather than tuck them away in an envelope or drawer, she pasted the mementos to the first page of an old copybook filled with manuscript poetry that she had transcribed many years earlier as a teenage girl and young unmarried woman during the 1820s and 1830s. The handmade volume measured about eight inches in height by six-and-a-half inches in width—typical dimensions for several different types of commercially produced blank books of the period, ranging from cheap paperbound booklets (often filled with school exercises) to much fancier hardbound friendship albums (typically used to record the sentiments of classmates and other intimates of their youthful owners). In its current form, the volume consists of about sixty leaves, but it may have been assembled by tucking and sewing together two or more smaller gatherings, originally completed separately. The book's limp cloth covers, adorned with cut-and-pasted periodical engravings and other paper ornaments, were likely attached at about the same time as the obituaries. Perrin had probably not added much, if anything, to the compilation for about twenty-five years—since before she gave birth to her first child in 1836. But now that her oldest children were out of the house and even the youngest was

13. Glover Perin, comp., *Genealogy of the Perrin Family* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press, 1885), 145; Stanley Ernest Perin, *The Perrin Family of Rehoboth, Massachusetts* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 1974), 74; U.S. Census 1860, Thompson, Windham County, Connecticut, 677.

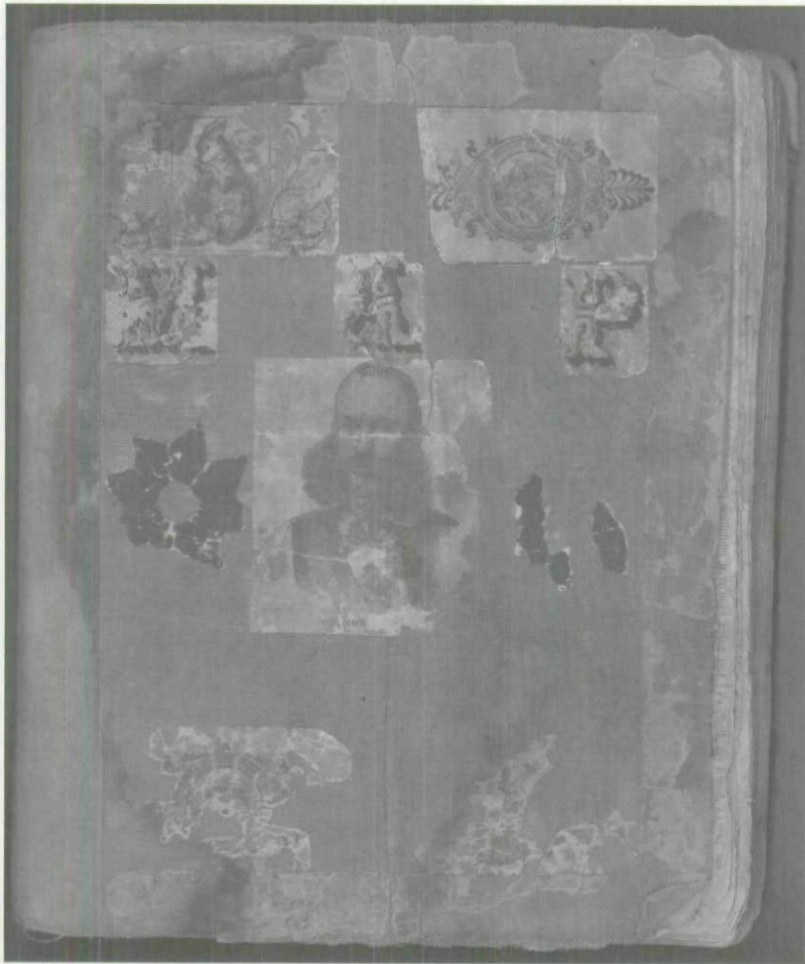


Fig. 2. Martha (Buck) Perrin probably attached this limp cloth binding to her copybook during the early 1860s, at about the time that she began to use it as a scrapbook. The initials of Perrin's married name, 'M. A. P,' appear amid other decorative scraps on the front cover, just above the engraved portrait of, perhaps, Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria.

grown up enough to help out with family chores, she may have finally found some time for puttering. Evidently beginning with the family obituaries, Perrin began to transform the manuscript volume into a scrapbook, cutting out an assortment of short stories, anecdotes, poems, and engravings from newspapers and periodicals, and pasting them onto the old pages. In the process, she covered over some of the verses that she had neatly penned many years earlier.¹⁴

The clippings that Martha Perrin pasted into her volume were typical of the scrapbooks that became a popular diversion for many thousands of Americans during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Cutting and pasting was certainly easier than the older, arduous process of transcribing in copybooks, though the two activities often satisfied similar cultural and recreational impulses. (Of course, many copybooks also served formal educational functions—as repositories for ciphering calculations, calligraphy exercises, and lesson or lecture notes—that scrapbooks did not replicate.) The popularization of scrapbooks among ordinary Americans accompanied the enormous expansion of the publishing industry after about 1830, with the rise of cheap, mass-circulation urban newspapers, the proliferation of other types of periodicals and print ephemera, and the increasing use of attractive illustrations in such inexpensive publications. In short, the new scrapbooks documented the displacement of an early modern print culture of relative scarcity by a distinctly modern mass consumer culture characterized by novelty, innovation, profusion, and abundance.¹⁵

The rise of mass publishing during the mid-nineteenth century was, of course, intricately related to the concurrent revolutions in transportation and long-distance communication embodied in the thousands of miles of railroad track and telegraph wire enumerated in Captain Buck's obituary. Thus, in addition to sentimental poems and didactic short stories, Martha Perrin's clippings include anecdotes about a 'Western' farmer, a 'prominent

14. Buck Copybook.

15. See Zboray, *Fictive People*.

citizen of Michigan,' an enterprising Minnesotan, an 'Aged Hot-tentot,' and a humorous conversation between an 'Englishman' and a 'Chinaman.' Her clipped illustrations feature engravings of a popular New York City clergyman, a European potentate, and an exotic banyan tree. By the 1860s, the ongoing revolutions in print culture, transportation, and telecommunication were bringing an ever-widening array of far-flung cosmopolitan images and anecdotes to the attention of a farmer's wife in Thompson, Connecticut—and into the parlors, and scrapbooks, of countless thousands of other Americans across the United States.¹⁶

Fortunately, Perrin never did get very far with her clipping. She pasted over several pages at the front of her copybook, a few pages in the back, and a small cluster of pages in between, but most of her handwritten poems from several decades earlier remain uncovered. The mass print culture of the 1860s had partially colonized the old copybook but had not conquered it. As a result, one can still explore within its pages the cultural world of a teenage girl and young woman in rural Connecticut of the 1820s and 1830s. Many of the entries are popular sentimental verses of the period, not dramatically different from the later printed poems clipped and pasted by Mrs. Perrin some thirty years later. Quite a few deal with nature and the seasons, sometimes allegorically; these include 'The Gloom of Autumn,' 'The Voice of spring,' and 'A Summers Storm.' Others are lachrymose poems of bereavement and mourning, such as 'The Little Graves' (on the remains of three young children) and 'A Mother's Lament' (on her dead baby). Several more are elegies on specific real-life deaths, including 'Verses Composed on the death of Mary Fuller wif[e] of Elder Turner Fuller of Sutton who died Nov 1. 1824 in the 48th year of her age,' and a short piece, 'Written on the death of Mr. Reuben Harlow who departed this life Oct 22 1825 Aged 26 Yrs,' dated "Thompson May 15th 1826."¹⁷

16. Zboray, *Fictive People*; Zboray, 'Antebellum Reading and the Ironies of Technological Innovation,' *American Quarterly* 40 (March 1988): 65-83; Zboray, 'The Railroad, the Community, and the Book,' *Southwest Review* 71 (1986): 474-87; Buck Copybook.

17. Buck Copybook.

Another group of poems addresses themes of friendship, again with a particular focus on loss or separation, including pieces entitled 'Epitaph on A Friend,' 'Parting with friends,' 'The Parting of Three Friends,' and 'Lines from A friend to A friend.' Most of those appear in the second half of the copybook, near three acrostics whose first letters spell out the names of Martha A. Buck and two of her friends. The acrostic for Buck is dated June 7, 1835, within a few months of Martha's marriage to John Perrin. One or both of her companions also seem to have wed at about that time. Verses on the separation of friends thus probably echoed actual disruptions in Martha's social circle as its members withdrew into new intimate unions. In fact, at the back of the copybook, Buck pasted a spritely little poem on a pink slip of paper written for her by a friend at about the time of her marriage. Evidently marking the end of Martha's life as a single woman, it began: 'I think you very soon will be / The ready bride of Mr P. / Hope you'll prove in wedded life / Faithful true and constant wife.'¹⁸

All of the poems and acrostics described thus far are more or less typical of the copybooks kept by schoolgirls and young women of Martha Buck's generation. There are, however, a number of verses, often clustered together, that appear noticeably different—topically, stylistically, and, in some cases, temporally—from the remaining contents of Martha's copybook. In addition to several ardent Protestant hymns, pious elegies, and homiletic ballads of a type popular during the eighteenth century (e.g., 'The Prodigal Daughter'), these include a total of seven pieces, including one fragment, that can perhaps best be characterized as 'providential tragedy verses': narrative poems evoked by real-life crimes or disasters that combine factual descriptions with didactic commentary portraying the events as examples of God's providential intervention in human affairs. Ultimately derived from

18. Buck Copybook. For the date of Martha's marriage, on March 24, 1835, see Perin, *Genealogy of the Perrin Family*, 145; Town of Thompson, Connecticut, Records of Births, Deaths, Marriages, vol. 1: 259, Town Hall, Thompson, Connecticut. Curiously, the acrostic on Buck (spelling out her maiden name) is actually dated a few months *after* her marriage.

the early modern English broadside tradition of 'news' balladry, such verses first became popular in New England during the third quarter of the eighteenth century. Because they generally consisted of four-line stanzas in one of three widely used metrical patterns—iambic tetrameter, iambic pentameter, or alternating lines of iambic tetrameter and trimeter (a pattern sometimes referred to as common meter or ballad meter)—tragedy poems were easily set to familiar tunes. For example, early pieces in iambic tetrameter were reportedly fitted to 'Old Hundred,' the well known psalm tune. Since they were sometimes sung or chanted, such verses have often been described as ballads or folksongs (though not all were composed with that intent). Indeed, as documented by Bethke and the Coffins, tragedy verses would remain an extraordinarily popular, arguably even dominant, genre in the American ballad tradition well into the twentieth century.¹⁹

19. As already noted, the genre of 'providential tragedy verse' overlaps heavily with the earlier conceptual category of 'narrative obituary verse,' as defined by Bethke and the Coffins. On the popularization of such verses in New England during the third quarter of the eighteenth century, see Bethke, 'Narrative Obituary Verse,' 63–65, with additional discussion and documentation in my text and notes. For evidence that many such verses were sung or chanted as ballads or folksongs, see the works by T. P. Coffin, M. T. Coffin, and Bethke, cited above, and the scholarship on 'Springfield Mountain,' cited below. On the probable singing of early examples to the tune of 'Old Hundred,' see M. T. Coffin, 'Narrative Obituary Verse,' 25–26; T. P. Coffin, 'On a Peak,' 205. There is a vast scholarly literature on the early modern English tradition of 'news' balladry; for several important collections or studies, see W. Chappell and J. Woodfall Ebsworth, eds., *The Roxburghe Ballads*, 8 vols. (1869–1901; reprint, New York: AMS Press, 1966); Hyder E. Rollins, 'The Black-Letter Broadside Ballad,' *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 25 (1919): 258–339; Rollins, ed., *Old English Ballads, 1553–1625* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920); Rollins, ed., *A Pepysian Garland: Black-Letter Broadside Ballads of the Years 1595–1639* (1923; reprint, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971); Rollins, ed., *Cavalier and Puritan: Ballads and Broad-sides Illustrating the Period of the Great Rebellion, 1640–1660* (New York: New York University Press, 1923); Rollins, *The Pack of Autolykus or Strange and Terrible News . . . in Broadside Ballads of the Years 1624–1693* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927); M. A. Shaaber, *Some Forerunners of the Newspaper in England, 1476–1622* (1929; reprint, New York: Octagon Books, 1966); Leslie Shepard, *The Broad-side Ballad: A Study in Origins and Meaning* (Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, 1962); Natascha Würzbach, *The Rise of the English Street Ballad, 1550–1650*, trans. from German by Gayna Walls (1981; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Although the point is beyond the scope of this essay, several Anglo-American print genres of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries—including funeral elegies, 'remarkable providence' poems, military ballads, and gallows verses—appear to have provided both topical and stylistic links between early modern English 'news' ballads and the providential

Significantly, Martha Buck's tragedy verses do not recount events that took place during the years when she was writing in her copybook; rather, they memorialize deaths or natural disasters that took place between 1761 and 1815. Thus, the earliest of the incidents occurred several decades before Martha Buck had even been born, while the latest transpired when she was only eight years old—probably about five years before she began writing in her book. Because these poems do not appear to be organized in any meaningful sequence within the volume, I will resume this essay's archaeological method of examining successively earlier layers of popular culture, describing the pieces in reverse chronological order:

Thoughts Occasioned by the wonderfull display of the power and goodness of god in september 23 AD 1815 and On The september Gale 1815.

These two poems, situated nearly adjacent to each other in Martha Buck's copybook, address the great gale of September 1815, one of the most famous and destructive storms to hit New England during the first half of the nineteenth century. The gale caused severe damage in port towns up and down the coast and was widely described in newspapers and in other contemporary publications. The first poem, 'Thoughts Occasioned,' is heavily providential in thrust, with many of its twenty-one stanzas characterizing the storm as God's unleashing of his anger against sinners ('If god commands the clouds obey / And bear his Vengeance down / If he but hides his smiling face / All Nature feels the frown').

The second poem, 'On The september Gale,' offers a similarly pious gloss on the storm, but its sixteen stanzas provide more factual details concerning the damage inflicted on Providence, Rhode

tragedy verses popularized during the third quarter of the eighteenth century. On the extensive publishing history of *The Prodigal Daughter*, including more than a dozen eighteenth-century American chapbook editions, see d'Alté A. Welch, *A Bibliography of American Children's Books Printed Prior to 1821* ([Worcester and Barre, Mass.]: American Antiquarian Society and Barre Publishers, 1972), 342-57.

Island, the large port about twenty miles east of Killingly. Not only was there serious urban flooding ('The houses with water began to fill / The people were like to drown, / They saved themselves by boats and scows / And from chambers were let down'), but the storm's destruction extended into the rural hinterland—the author's own implied location ('Nor did this town suffer alone / We all have felt the stroke / Oh see the orchards all laid waste / Behold the mighty oak'). Of the tragedy poems contained in Martha Buck's copybook, the two on the gale of 1815 are the only ones that address an event that she herself probably experienced, albeit as an eight-year-old girl, and perhaps remembered as she transcribed the verses many years later. No other trace of these two poems has been located in print or scribal sources, or in the tradition of folk balladry recovered by twentieth-century scholars.²⁰

On the death of Mr Noadiah Fay of Reading Vt who killed himself on the morning of October 13th 1809.

Consisting of twenty-seven stanzas, this is the first and longest of the tragedy verses that Martha Buck wrote into her copybook; it is also the most graphic and dramatic. The opening stanzas hurtle breathlessly, without strict regard for rhyme or meter, through a sudden and shocking chain of domestic events:

I
 The cry of suicide doth sound
 From house to house from town to town
 Listning to hear the tale thats told
 Which makes the very blood run cold.

20. Buck Copybook; on the gale of 1815, see *Providence Gazette*, Sept. 23, 30, 1815; *Boston Gazette*, Sept. 25, 1815; *Independent Chronicle* [Boston], Sept. 25, 1815; *Rhode Island American* [Providence], Sept. 26, 1815; *Columbian Centinel* [Boston], Sept. 27, 1815; *Providence Patriot*, Sept. 30, 1815; David M. Ludlum, *Early American Hurricanes, 1492-1870* (Boston: American Meteorological Society, 1963), 77-81.

2

Before sunrise on friday morn
This man arose without alarm
And to his cupboard did repair
And took his razor as we hear.

3

He spoke A word or two as though
There was to be some overthrow
His wife then sprung from her bed side
Mistrusting his mind was suicide.

4

She quickly seized him by the arm
And loudly screamed the dread alarm
She applyd her strength with earnest mind
To wrest the razor from his hand.

5

She still did strive to gain her cause
Till the third time she wounded was
Twas vain to fight he sprung from her
She then cried out murder murder.

6

Then quickly springing to the door
She heard the blood gush on the floor
With his right hand he gave the stroke
And mortaly did cut his throat.

The middle section of the poem offers a detailed account of Fay's death and burial, with some discussion of the suicide's state of mind. The last nine stanzas provide pious advice to all, 'both old and young both great and small.'²¹

21. Buck Copybook.

The provenance of this poem remains a mystery. There is no evidence to suggest that the verses were printed or that they ever entered into the folk-ballad tradition. Indeed, contemporary Vermont newspapers yield no reference to the suicide itself and, unfortunately, local court records for Windsor County, Vermont, have not survived. Yet some tantalizing clues concerning the case, and the possible origins of the poem, may be embedded in local and genealogical records. A published family genealogy confirms that Noadiah Fay was born on November 25, 1770, probably in Westborough, Massachusetts, and died (of unspecified causes) on October 13, 1809, in Reading, Vermont—the date and place recounted in the poem. Noadiah was the twenty-second of twenty-five children born to Samuel Fay by two wives over a span of about forty years beginning in 1727. During the 1780s and 1790s, several members of the enormous Fay clan moved to Reading, Vermont, among them the ill-fated Noadiah.²²

It is probably significant that the Fays had ties through marriage to the Bucks' hometown of Killingly, Connecticut, and that relatives of Martha Buck lived in Reading, Vermont. One of Noadiah's paternal aunts and one of his older sisters both married into the same Killingly family. Conversely, Joseph Buck's younger brother (Martha's uncle), Benjamin Buck, had moved to Reading as a youngster in 1780 and was soon followed to that frontier community by several other members of the Buck clan of Windham County. One or another of those multiple ties of the Fay family to Killingly and of the Buck family to Reading may help

22. In a fruitless search for references to the suicide of Noadiah Fay, I scanned contemporary issues of the following newspapers: *Reporter* [Brattleboro, Vt.]; *Vermont Centinel* [Burlington]; *Middlebury Mercury*; *Vermont Herald* [Rutland]; *Spooner's Vermont Journal* [Windsor]; *Windham* [Conn.] *Herald* and *Massachusetts Spy* [Worcester, Mass.]; the name Noadiah Fay does not appear in Marsha Hoffman Rising, ed., *Vermont Newspaper Abstracts, 1783-1816* (Boston: New England Historic and Genealogical Society, 2001); I was informed of the destruction of Windsor County's court records by Randolph Roth in an e-mail communication, May 6, 2003; Orlin P. Fay, *Fay Genealogy: John Fay of Marlborough and His Descendants* (Cleveland: J. B. Savage, 1898), 173-74; details concerning the migration of several members of the Fay family to Vermont are included on a genealogical web site at freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~fayfamily/alvah.html.

account for the transcription of a poem on the suicide of Noadiah Fay into Martha Buck's copybook—though the precise avenue and medium of transmission, whether oral, written, or printed, will probably never be known.²³

A Poem on Jason Fairbanks Who inhumanly Murdered Miss Elizabeth Fales.

This twelve-stanza poem—short on factual detail, long on moral indignation—addresses what was one of the most highly publicized murder cases in early nineteenth-century New England. On May 18, 1801, twenty-one-year-old Jason Fairbanks allegedly assaulted and killed his sweetheart, eighteen-year-old Elizabeth Fales, in a grove of trees near her parents' home in Dedham, Massachusetts ('But fairbanks void of evry good / Drew his dear partners vital blood / The intended consort of his life / The maid he oft had named his wife'). Fairbanks was convicted of the crime and executed in September 1801, despite his claim that Fales had stabbed herself to death following a lovers' quarrel.²⁴

The Fairbanks-Fales 'courtship murder' case evoked greater newspaper coverage than almost any previous homicide in the region, and local printers issued more than half a dozen separate publications on the case, some of which went into multiple editions. Three different poems on the case survive in the form of broadsides, but the verses in Martha Buck's manuscript are not among them. Eight of the twelve stanzas in Buck's copybook are, however, appended to a prose account of the Fairbanks case, also published as a broadside. Perhaps the entire poem appeared in a newspaper or on a separate broadside that

23. Fay, *Fay Genealogy*, 173; Gilbert A. Davis, *Centennial Celebration, Together with an Historical Sketch of Reading, Windsor County, Vermont* (Bellows Falls, Vt.: A. N. Swain, 1874), 57.

24. Buck Copybook; for an overview of the Fairbanks-Fales case, see Daniel A. Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace: New England Crime Literature and the Origins of American Popular Culture, 1674-1860* (New York: Oxford, 1993), 167-94.

7. When these frail tabernacles shall die
 Then we shall lay our school books by
 To reign with master Jesus then
 Glory to god glory amen To heart and hand ^{we will go} to heaven

8. Born on Jason Fairbanks Who intemperately murdered His
 Elizabeth Gales
 When friendship wiles the human breast
 It makes the subject wise and blest
 Benevolent in every scene
 For good to all the race of men.

9. Each act or wish for human good
 Assimulates the heart to god
 In offices of social love
 Like saints who sing in worlds above
 Best fairer than root of every good
 Ours his dear partners vital blood
 His intemperate consort of his life
 He said he oft had married his wife.

10. With bellicious views far worse than Cain
 By which his dearest friend was slain
 Faded ashamed might cheer the scene
 And not forgive the heinous stain.

11. More savage than rapacious beast
 He pierced a tender female breast
 After sweet friendships scarce'd smile
 With more than diabolic guile

12. Sternest love is due to good
 For such as spill a partner's blood
 The balance but a small reward

Fig. 3. The opening stanzas of 'A Poem on Jason Fairbanks' as transcribed in Martha Buck's copybook.

ENSI-
of
Har-
Savarre,
at Pa-
HIGGS—
was the
said to
ME!
spired—
the EX-
PAL exi-
pieces of
FAIRBANKS
to a for
the adja-
ner paid
of some
the Cove-
nancy and
to induce
a pair of
SCENE
suspen-
Fundan-
to the mist
S!
t. (long'd
left Miss,
sing their
toment ex-
m"—Cap-
ALL—yet
white and
the FE-
many more
and fond
ment, how
line, with
young Lady
for CHAR-
as a fanta-
Which
more have

A POEM
ON JASON FAIRBANKS,

WHEN Friendship rules the human
breast.
It makes the subject wise and blest,
Benevolent in every scene,
For good, to all the race of men.
Each act or wish for human good,
Assimilates the heart to God;
In offices of social love,
Like saints who reign in worlds above
But Fairbanks void of ev'ry good!
Drew his dear Partner's vital blood!
Th' intended comfort of his life
The Maid he oft had nam'd his wife!
What hellish views! far worse than
Cain!
By which, his dearest friend was slain;
Judas ashamed, might shun the scene,
And ne'er forgive the horrid stain;
More savage than rapacious beasts!
To pierce a tender female breast!
After sweet friendship's sacred smile,
With more than diabolic guile!
Eternal fire, is far too good,
For such as spill a partner's blood!
The halter's but a small reward,
For crimes so great, or hearts so hard
Th' effect of disappointed love,
May sickness, death, or phrenzy prove
But murder!! hard to be express'd!
Was ne'er design'd by social breast!
See! how the hardest monster dies,
A grief to all below the skies!
Prest, with a vast internal load
Of guilt! and endless wrath of God!

AND A
if a Cic-
e whole
of that
the un-
onceive

Fig. 4. 'A Poem on Jason Fairbanks,' as appended to a popular broadside account of the Fairbanks case entitled *Biography of Mr. Jason Fairbanks and Miss Eliza Fales* (Boston, 1801). This printed variant includes eight of the twelve stanzas included in Buck's copybook, with minor differences in wording, spelling, and punctuation. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

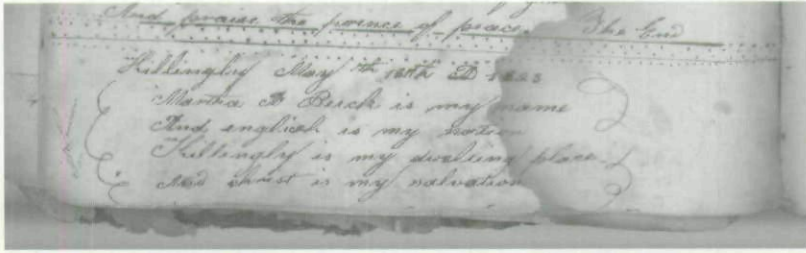


Fig. 5. After completing her transcription of 'A Poem on Jason Fairbanks,' Martha Buck filled out the page with this formulaic sampler verse. Note that the date, May 18, 1823, is an anniversary of Elizabeth Fales's violent death.

has not survived. In any case, given the nearly verbatim correspondence of eight of Buck's stanzas with the verses published in 1801, it seems highly probable that her poem is ultimately derived, directly or indirectly, from a published source dating to the time of the case. Indeed, one of the only discrepancies between Buck's transcription of the poem and the earlier printed version—her use of the word 'consort' in place of 'comfort'—would more likely have stemmed from carelessness in reading than in hearing (particularly if the original printed or written source used the long 's' that is virtually indistinguishable from a lower-case 'f').²⁵

One other significant detail should be noted concerning Buck's transcription of the Fairbanks poem: Martha began the verses near the top of one page and ended about an inch and a half from the bottom of the next. Rather than leave that bottom section of the second page blank, she drew a decorative divider to mark the end of the poem and inserted a new dateline, followed by a simple stanza: 'Martha A Buck is my name / And english is my nation / Killingly is my dwelling place / And christ is my salvation.' During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,

25. Buck Copybook; *Biography of Mr. Jason Fairbanks and Miss Eliza Fales* (Boston: [Nathaniel Coverly, Jr.?], 1801), broadside; on the many publications generated by the Fairbanks-Fales case, see Cohen, *Pillars of Salt, Monuments of Grace*, 167–94, passim; Thomas M. McDade, *The Annals of Murder: A Bibliography of Books and Pamphlets on American Murders from Colonial Times to 1900* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 88–90.

that little doggerel was one of the formulaic verses most often stitched by schoolgirls onto the decorative textile samplers that they produced to display their needlework skills. What is more interesting in this case, however, is the dateline that precedes the little poem: 'Killingly May the 18th AD 1823.' Presumably Buck wrote her sampler rhyme at the same time as the Fairbanks poem, which is itself undated and makes no mention of the date of the murder. If so, both were written on the anniversary of Elizabeth Fales's death: May 18. Evidently, someone in the Buck household remembered the exact date of a murder that had taken place twenty-two years earlier—six years before Martha had even been born.²⁶

Verses composed upon the suden [sic] and awful death of Oliver Hall of Steventown who was Accidentaly shot by his brother Gideon Hall 179[8?].

This tragedy poem appears only as a fragment in Buck's copybook. Amid several sentimental pieces on friendship, Martha entered its descriptive title, along with the poem's first two verses ('O evry one both old and young / That are of adams race'), but then apparently changed her mind and crossed them out. Her abortive transcription is almost certainly based, directly or indirectly, on a published thirty-stanza poem entitled *Verses, Composed Upon the Awful and Sudden Death of Oliver Hall, Son of Rowland Hall, Esq. of Stephentown [New York]; Who was Accidentally Shot, By His Brother, Gideon Hall, the 11th of March, 1798*. The piece was written by one Naomi Rogers and published as a small chapbook in Troy, New York, not long after the tragedy. A few of the stanzas provide details of the fatal accident ('The gun he took, and did not look / To see what was therein—/ But fir'd so straight, it

26. Buck Copybook. On the popular sampler verses, see Ethel Stanwood Bolton and Eva Johnston Coe, *American Samplers* (1923; reprint, New York: Weathervane Books, n.d.), 248. In such stanzas, American girls of the early republic often identified their 'nation' as 'English'; even after the Revolution, 'Englishness' still evidently served some Americans as an appropriate marker of race, ethnicity, and/or cultural heritage.

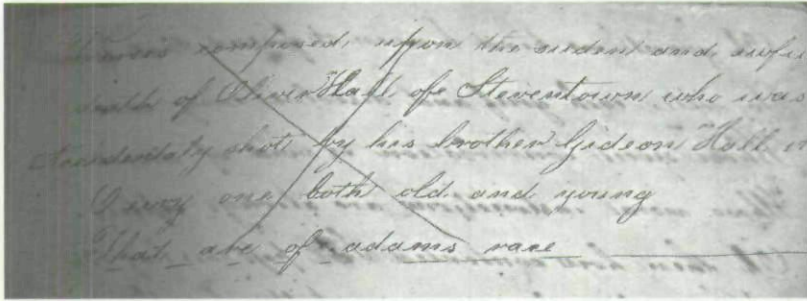


Fig. 6. Martha Buck began to transcribe 'Verses composed upon the awful and sudden death of Oliver Hall' but evidently changed her mind, crossing out the descriptive title and first two verses; she filled the remainder of the page with the opening stanzas of another poem, entitled 'Friendship.'

prov'd the fate / Of his dear brother then'), but most of the verses offer spiritual advice and consolation to the victim's surviving family members and to readers more generally ("Then turn to God, and kiss the rod / With which he smiteth you; / And own him just, and in him trust, / And he will comfort you").²⁷

No other published editions or manuscript copies of Rogers's poem are known to survive, nor is there any evidence—aside, perhaps, from its presence in Buck's copybook—that the verses ever entered into folk tradition. It may be significant that the first two lines of the published version ('Ev'ry one, both old and young / That are of Adam's seed!') differ slightly from the opening lines in Buck's copybook ('O evry one both old and young / That are of adams race'). Those minor discrepancies, along with the inversion of the words 'awful' and 'sudden' in Buck's manuscript version of the title, are enough to suggest that Martha was probably not transcribing directly from the published pamphlet but rather wrote either from a variant print or manuscript copy, from memory, or from someone else's oral recitation.²⁸

27. Buck Copybook; Naomi Rogers, *Verses, Composed Upon the Awful and Sudden Death of Oliver Hall, Son of Rowland Hall, Esq. of Stepentown; Who was Accidentally Shot, By His Brother, Gideon Hall, the 11th of March, 1798* (Troy, N. Y. : Jeremiah Rogers, n.d. [c. 1798]).

28. Rogers, *Verses*.

VERSES,
COMPOSED UPON THE
AWFUL AND SUDDEN DEATH
OF
OLIVER HALL,
Son of Rowland Hall, Esq. of Stephentown;
WHO WAS ACCIDENTALLY SHOT, BY HIS
BROTHER, GIDEON HALL, THE
11th OF MARCH, 1798.

By NAOMI ROGERS.

—○○○○○—
TROY:—PRINTED FOR
JEREMIAH ROGERS.

Fig. 7. Title page of the only other known version of the poem on the accidental shooting of Oliver Hall. There are several slight variations between this text and the abortive transcription in Buck's copybook, suggesting that Martha may not have been working directly from this printed source. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.

The hurricane that hapned on the 23 day of august 1776.

This fourteen-stanza poem concerns a hurricane that struck an unnamed locale, probably somewhere in New England, during the mid-1770s. The storm evidently destroyed much property ('The hiderous [*sic*] roar through buildings tore / And flung abroad the goods') and killed at least one girl or young woman ('Miss susan brown she was struck down / So quick and sudden too / I heard her tell the world farewell / And all her friends adieu'). Aside from those basic facts, the piece is largely homiletic, with most of the stanzas drawing spiritual or providential lessons from the event rather than describing the hurricane itself in much detail. A scan of several New England newspapers of the period—as well as other sources—has yielded no reference to any storm in the region that matches the events described in the poem, even allowing for a considerable margin of error in dating the incident. Nor have I found any other trace of this poem in print, manuscript, or in the folk-ballad tradition.²⁹

On The Death of Timothy Merit.

This is not only the earliest of Buck's seven tragedy poems but also the only one that would be familiar to folksong collectors and ballad scholars, who would recognize it under its more commonly known title: 'Springfield Mountain.' Among the very first in a flurry of providential tragedy verses that appeared in New England during the third quarter of the eighteenth century, scholars have long considered it to be one of the oldest ballads based on an American event to establish a lasting place in the nation's folksong tradition. The short poem, consisting of just eight stanzas, recounts the untimely demise of a young man named Timothy Merrick (alternately, Mirick or Myrick), who died after being bitten by a

29. Buck Copybook. In a fruitless search for accounts of a storm that corresponded to the one described in this poem, I scanned Ludlum, *Early American Hurricanes*, 26–40, and pursued possible leads by scanning issues of the following newspapers, among others: *Providence Gazette*, *Continental Journal* [Boston], and *Connecticut Journal* [New Haven].

The verses on the snake-bit youth were in all likelihood composed in the immediate aftermath of the episode; in fact, Josiah Gilbert Holland's *History of Western Massachusetts* (1855) transcribes an early version of the ballad supposedly preserved in manuscript by members of the young man's family. The content and irregular orthography of that text are certainly consistent with its having originally been composed during the early 1760s, shortly after Merrick's death. The next earliest surviving version of the poem appears in a manuscript songbook kept by a young woman named Betsey Gaylord, probably from Connecticut, during the first decades of the nineteenth century (now in the collections of the American Antiquarian Society). Judging from internal evidence, Gaylord appears to have copied the ballad on Merrick's death into her songbook in about 1809, some ten to twenty years before Martha Buck's transcription.³¹

A close textual comparison of the Merrick (c. 1760s?), Gaylord (c. 1809?), and Buck (c. 1820s?) versions of the ballad reveals substantial consistency in its basic structure and content, albeit with many small verbal variations. The accompanying columns [see next page] juxtapose three stanzas from each transcription of the ballad: the first stanza, a middle one, and the last. Note that Buck has garbled the young man's name, while the year given by Gaylord for the tragedy is off by a full decade. None of the versions agree on the particular day in August when Merrick was bitten; the family version places the episode on August seventh, while Gaylord has it on the nineteenth, and Buck specifies the seventeenth. (Not surprisingly, local records, including a gravestone transcription in Wilbraham, confirm that the early Merrick version

31. Laws, *Native American Balladry*, 220; T. P. Coffin, 'On a Peak in Massachusetts,' 202-5; Ireland, 'Springfield Mountain,' 2; Holland, *History of Western Massachusetts*, 2: 161-62; 'Song 293d,' Betsey Gaylord Ballad and Tune Book, 1798-1821, American Antiquarian Society manuscript, 427-28; cf. Barry, 'Springfield Mountain,' *BFSSN*, 8: 5; 9:10; and 12: 7. For a very close variant of Holland's version (probably derived from the same early Merrick family manuscript), see Stebbins, *Historical Address*, 206. Another relatively early copy that is probably close to the original was transcribed on a loose sheet of paper in Wilbraham, Massachusetts, in 1849; see Barry, 'Springfield Mountain,' *BFSSN*, 7: 4-5. On irregular orthography as a characteristic of scribal, as opposed to print, culture, see Love, *Scribal Publication*, 121-22; Marotti, *Manuscript, Print*, 284.

Manuscript Variants of "Springfield Mountain" (selected verses)

Merrick Version (c. 1760s?)

On Springfield mountains there did dwell
 A likeley youth was known full well
 Lieutenant Merrick onley son
 A likeley youth near twenty one.

So soon his Carfull father went
 to seak his son with discontent
 and there hes fond onley son he found
 ded as a stone a pon the ground.

The seventh of August sixty one
 this fatull axadint was done
 Let this a warning be to all
 to be prepared when God does call.

Gaylord Version (c. 1809?)

On Springfield mountain there did dwell
 A sprightly youth 'tis known full well
 Lieutenant Merrick's only Son
 A sprightly youth nigh twenty one

The day being past night comeing on
 His father went for to seek his Son
 And there his only Son he found
 Dead as a stone cold on the ground

On the nineteenth of august night seventy
 one
 When this sad accident was done
 May this a warning be to all
 To be prepared when God doth call

Buck Version (c. 1820s?)

On springfield mountain there did dwell
 A likely youth twas known full well
 Lieutenant Meritis [sic] only son
 A pretty youth near twenty one.

His aged father then he went
 To seek his son with discontent
 There his only son he found
 Dead as a stone upon the ground.

The seventeenth of august sixty one
 This sudden accident was done
 Let this a warning be to all
 To be prepared when god doth call.

On the Death of Timothy Merit

- 1 On Springfield's mountain there did dwell
The worthy gentleman was known full well
Lieutenant Merit's only son
A pretty youth near twenty years.
- 2 Last Friday morning he did go
Into the meadow for to mow
His coat and trousers then he did fetch
A poisonous serpent at his heel.
- 3 Soon as he received the deadly wound
He cast his self upon the ground
And straight for home was his intent
Calling aloud still as he went.
- 4 Then all around his voice was heard
But there did none of his friends appear
Thinking he did his workmen call
So Timothy alone did fall.
- 5 He laid him down composed to rest
With both his hands across his breast
His mouth and eyes were closed fast
So this poor man breathed his last.
- 6 His aged father then he went
To seek his son with discontent
There his only son he found
Dead as a stone upon the ground.
- 7 Then with concern he viewed along
The place he saw across the ground
And every step that he did go
He seemed to stagger to and fro.
- 8 The seventeenth of August early morn
This sudden accident was done
But thus it happened be the will
Of he prepared when good does will.

Fig. 9. 'On The Death of Timothy Merit,' probably transcribed by Martha Buck during the early to mid-1820s.

has the correct date.) For examples of other small verbal variations, note that the first stanza of the Merrick version characterizes Timothy as 'likeley,' Gaylord's describes him as 'sprightly,' while Buck presents him as both 'likely' and 'pretty.' Similarly, in the last stanza, the Merrick version calls the accident 'fatull,' Gaylord describes it as 'sad,' while Buck characterizes it as 'sudden.'³²

Those sorts of minor verbal variations in names, dates, and adjectives are entirely consistent with the gradual evolution of a ballad that had survived primarily through oral transmission—that was sung, chanted, or recited, by one person to another—over a period of several decades or more. On the other hand, the fact that listeners occasionally transcribed, and saved, what they heard in copybooks or on loose pieces of paper may help account for the relative stability of the text as a whole over that same extended period of time. Indeed, there is no persuasive evidence that *any* version of 'Springfield Mountain' appeared in print until the mid-1830s, about seventy-five years after Timothy Merrick's unfortunate death. At that point, comical, sentimental, and theatrical versions of the ballad began appearing on sheet music and in songsters under such titles as 'Love and Pizen,' 'The Pizing Sarpent,' and 'The Pesky Sarpent.' By then, the sad, providential tale of a young rustic brought down by a snake bite had become something of a joke, suitable for clever Yankee parody.³³

32. Holland, *History of Western Massachusetts*, 161–62; Gaylord *Ballad and Tune Book*, 427–28; Buck *Copybook*.

33. Ireland, 'Springfield Mountain,' 5–8; Barry, 'Springfield Mountain,' *BFSSN*, no. 10: 6–8; 11: 13–15; and 12: 6–7; but, with respect to a possible earlier broadside printing, see Barry, 'Springfield Mountain,' *BFSSN*, no. 8: 5; Nason, *Gazetteer of Massachusetts*, 555; Stebbins, *Historical Address*, 66. On the satirical versions, also see Richard M. Swiderski, 'Springfield Mountain in Valley and Bay,' in Peter Benes, ed., *The Bay and the River: Proceedings of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife* (Boston: Boston University, 1982), 93–100. A satirical version of 'Springfield Mountain' was reportedly the 'favorite American ballad' of the famous nineteenth-century Swedish singer Jenny Lind, always bringing 'tears of merriment to her eyes'; see Harold W. Thompson, *Body, Boots and Britches* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1940), 370–71. For excellent discussions of ballad variation through oral transmission, see Laws, *Native American Balladry*, 71–82; Laws, *American Balladry from British Broadside: A Guide for Students and Collectors of Traditional Song* (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1957), 94–122; but also see Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship*, 276–84; Edward D. Ives, *Joe Scott: The Woodsman-*

THE
UNITED STATES SONGSTER.

A

CHOICE SELECTION OF ABOUT
ONE HUNDRED AND SEVENTY OF THE MOST
POPULAR SONGS:

INCLUDING NEARLY ALL THE SONGS CONTAINED IN THE

AMERICAN SONGSTER.

AS SUNG BY

Miss C. Fisher,	Mrs. Austin,	Mr. Matthews,
Miss Rock,	Miss Petrie,	Mr. Anderson,
Mrs. Knight,	Mrs. French,	Mr. Jefferson,
Miss Gillinghams,	Mrs. Wood,	Mr. Phillips,
Miss George,	Mrs. Barnes,	Mr. Pearman,
Miss Kelly,	Mr. Wood,	Mr. Simpson,
Miss Penton,	Mr. Cowell,	Mr. Braham,
Miss Free,	Master Cowell,	Mr. Nicholls,
Sen'a Garcia,	Mr. Sloman,	Mr. Eberle,
Miss Jefferson,	Mr. Keene,	Mr. Hyle,
Miss Stephens,	Mr. Sinclair,	Mr. Inledon,
Mrs. Sloman,	Mr. Horn,	Mr. A. Drake

TO WHICH IS ADDED

THE PIZING SARPENT,
SETTIN ON A RAIL; JIM BROWN,

AND A NUMBER OF NEW AND ORIGINAL SONGS,
WRITTEN EXPRESSLY FOR THIS WORK.

CINCINNATI:

PUBLISHED BY U. P. JAMES.

1837

Fig. 10. Title page of a popular nineteenth-century pocket songster. Note that 'The Pizing Sarpent,' a satirical version of the old tragedy poem on the death of Timothy Merrick, is prominently featured in the subtitle. Courtesy American Antiquarian Society.



Unlike the far-flung anecdotes and images cut and pasted by Perrin during the 1860s, the seven tragedy verses recorded decades earlier in her copybook all apparently originated within the geographical and cultural sphere of greater New England. Indeed, leaving aside the unlocated hurricane of 1776, all of the incidents occurred within about one hundred miles as the crow flies of centrally located Wilbraham, Massachusetts, the site of Timothy Merrick's famous snake bite. Thus the events recounted in those tragedy verses would not have seemed remote or exotic to the Bucks of Windham County, Connecticut. To the contrary, Martha and her kin may have found them all the more compelling precisely because they dealt with people very much like themselves, in social and geographical settings that were well within the bounds of their own experience.

Yet, aside from the two poems on the storm of 1815, none of the tragedy verses in Martha Buck's copybook describe events that she could possibly have encountered or comprehended at the time that they occurred. Four of the other five tragedies happened before she had even been born, while the fifth (the suicide of Noadiah Fay) took place when she was just two years old. How, then, did she come to memorialize such outdated events in her copybook? Perhaps she learned them from one of her parents, whose own lives would have more nearly overlapped the verses' half-century of disasters. When early collectors and scholars went out into the field to gather old ballads from ordinary folk, such informants most often claimed that their own mothers or fathers had taught them the songs.³⁴ Late-nineteenth-century folk informants even reported that 'Springfield Mountain' had been sung by parents

Songmaker (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 420-24; W. Edson Richmond, 'Some Effects of Scribal and Typographical Error on Oral Tradition,' in MacEdward Leach and Tristram P. Coffin, eds., *The Critics and the Ballad* (1961; reprint, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), 225-35; Gardner and Chickering, *Ballads and Songs of Southern Michigan*, 18-21; Gordon Hall Gerould, *The Ballad of Tradition* (1932; reprint, New York: Oxford, 1957), 163-88; Smith, *South Carolina Ballads*, 37-72.

34. See many of the citations to Cox, *Folk-Songs of the South*, and Belden, *Ballads and Songs*, in note 1, above.

to young children as a lullaby.³⁵ Since Martha's father, Joseph Buck, was born in 1766, just five years after the death of Timothy Merrick, he may well have been taught the poem on the snake-bit farmer by one of his own parents. Later, at the time of the hurricane of 1776, he would have been a ten-year-old schoolboy, surely old enough to have memorized a timely little ballad on a frightening current event. And by the times of the Hall shooting of 1798, the Fairbanks murder of 1801, the Vermont suicide of 1809, and the gale of 1815, Buck would have been a middle-aged husband and father in his thirties or forties.

There is no question that Joseph Buck had an interest in topical verse. Two of his own compositions are actually included—and explicitly identified as his work—on facing pages of Martha's copybook. The first, a five-stanza poem entitled 'Lines Composed by Joseph Buck on seeing his children together on feb [sic] 1825,' conveys the delight that he felt at a family reunion ('Here's all our children nine / Around our hearts do twine'). The second, 'Lines Composed by Joseph Buck in 1826,' is an expression of enduring faith in the face of personal misfortune ('My arm is broke A heavy stroke / By me to be lamented / Lord give me grace to spend my days / And make myself contented'). While not as deadly as a snakebite, a gunshot wound, or a cut throat, a broken arm certainly was a domestic tragedy of sorts for a sixty-year-old farmer. Further, Buck's two recorded poems are somewhat similar to the copybook's tragedy verses in theme, diction, meter, and rhyming pattern. It is even possible that *he* might have been the original author of one or more of those other tragedy poems as well; he certainly appears to have been influenced by that genre in constructing his own simple verses.³⁶

One other key piece of evidence might also tend to link the copybook's tragedy verses to Martha's father. Recall that the local Methodist minister who eulogized Buck in 1861 had emphasized the old man's extraordinary ability to memorize and recite religious

35. Newell, 'Early American Ballads,' 12: 242 and 13: 107-8; on 'simple Connecticut ballads' being 'taught . . . in the cradle,' see Goodrich, *Recollections of a Lifetime*, 263.

36. Buck Copybook.

Lines composed by Joseph Buck in 1826
1 My arm is broken & heavy stroke
By me to be lamented.
Lord give me grace to spend my days
And make myself contented.
2 I know of late this is my fate
I have become a cripple
O may I live while here I breathe
And see the true disciple.
3 To god may I both live and die
And see the rain before me
That when I've done below the sun
I may ascend to glory.
4 Then I shall see above the skies
With joy and peace, and comfort
To praise the lord with all our voices
And join the church triumphant.
5 There we shall sing and praise our king
Shall sing the song of Moses
The theme will be eternally
A song that never closes.
6 Redeeming grace and saving love
We all shall sing to god above.

Fig. 11. 'Lines Composed by Joseph Buck in 1826,' one of two short topical poems that Martha Buck attributed to her father and transcribed on facing pages in her copybook.

texts of various types: 'His memory retained with remarkable correctness whole portions of scripture and whole hymns, which he delighted to repeat from time to time.' Perhaps the old man interspersed providential tragedy poems or ballads among the religious hymns, psalms, and biblical passages that he enjoyed singing or reciting to family and friends.³⁷

The hypothesis that Martha obtained the tragedy verses from her father might help solve a few other puzzles as well. First, it could explain why the tragedy poems generally appear in Martha's copybook in close proximity to militant Protestant hymns and eighteenth-century-style homiletic ballads, two other genres that might reasonably be ascribed to someone of Buck's generation. Second, the desire of a concerned father to warn his fifteen-year-old daughter against the dangers of early courtship might explain how a poem about a 'sweetheart murder' that had taken place more than twenty years earlier came to appear in the girl's copybook in the spring of 1823. And third, the hypothesis that Buck was the source of the tragedy verses and adjacent hymns transcribed by his daughter during the 1820s and 1830s might also help to explain why, many years later, in 1861, Mrs. Martha Perrin chose to dig up her long-abandoned copybook and paste the two obituaries of her father onto its front pages. She may well have associated the handwritten volume with fond images of her late father singing or reciting verses of heavenly faith and human tragedy around the family circle. Ironically, the sad but surely not unexpected news of her aged parent's death may have sent Martha Perrin leafing through the old verses by which her father or others like him had, many years earlier, woven far more shocking pieces of news into the sturdy fabric of collective memory and meaning.³⁸

37. Buck Copybook; Conant, 'Joseph Buck, Senior.'

38. For a perceptive discussion of other types of manuscript sources—diaries and personal letters—through which New Englanders of the early republic sought to convey information about, and make sense of, highly publicized tragedies, see Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, "'Shocking News!'" A Historical Ethnography of Early nineteenth-century Newspaper Readers' Ritual Response to Tragedy,' paper presented at the



As we have seen, three strata or phases of popular culture are embedded in the copybook of Martha Buck. The latest period is represented by the miscellaneous assortment of periodical clippings cut and pasted by Mrs. Perrin into her old manuscript during the 1860s. The middle stage consists of sentimental verses on nature, death, and friendship, along with the acrostics of Martha and her friends, mostly dating from the early 1820s through mid-1830s. The earliest phase is embodied in seven providential tragedy poems of the 1760s through 1810s, and perhaps also in several elegies, hymns, and homiletic ballads of similar tone and vintage—a cluster of verses that Martha Buck probably obtained from her father or from other older relatives.

One might be tempted to link those three sets of literary artifacts to three successive regimes in the formation and dissemination of American popular culture. According to such a schema, the clippings of the 1860s would represent the prolific print culture—characterized by novelty, cosmopolitanism, and abundance; by cheap publishing, mass-circulation newspapers, and lavishly illustrated magazines—dominant during the mid-to late nineteenth century. The poems and acrostics of the 1820s and 1830s would represent the thriving scribal culture—a regional culture of mass literacy, widespread reading, and popular letter-writing; of diaries, journals, and copybooks; of academies, lyceums, and debating societies—that flourished in the northeastern United States, and especially in New England, during the first half of the nineteenth century. Finally, the tragedy verses of the 1760s through 1810s would embody a residual early modern oral or folk culture, in which even the most urgent news, public information, and moral messages were still often conveyed, disseminated, and perpetuated—

Founding Conference of the Cultural Studies Association (U.S.), Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, June 8, 2003; for an important study of the various media used to disseminate news in early America, see Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge Is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

from person to person, from community to community, and from generation to generation—through those most ephemeral and yet resilient of human instruments: voice and memory.

Yet such neat distinctions between print, scribal, and oral culture are belied by the heterogeneous content of Martha Buck's copybook, which, after all, interspersed texts associated with all three cultural regimes. Sharp distinctions between print, scribal, and oral are also belied by the evidently mixed, if uncertain, origins of Buck's tragedy verses. At least two of them, 'Verses composed upon the sudden [*sic*] and awful death of Oliver Hall' (1798) and 'A Poem on Jason Fairbanks' (1801), appeared in print very shortly after the events that they memorialized. By contrast, the weight of more than a century of scholarly research tends to confirm that the famous verses on the death of Timothy Merrick in 1761 probably did not appear in print until more than seventy years after the event that they described but, rather, were preserved for many decades by some combination of oral and scribal dissemination. The origins of the other four tragedy verses transcribed by Martha Buck are not known, but evidence concerning dozens of providential tragedy verses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries suggests that the genre regularly straddled, crossed, and recrossed the putative divides between oral, scribal, and print culture. Some of those verses were printed but never sung; others were sung but never printed; still others were composed by shocked or saddened witnesses, neighbors, relatives, or survivors—scrawled on loose scraps of paper, or penned neatly into copybooks—but were never printed, never sung much if at all, and never destined to enter into the enduring tradition of American folksong.³⁹

39. It should be noted that some tragedy verses of the early republic were produced by professional, or quasi-professional, authors or poets, who composed them with a view to publication; yet even they generally wrote their verses first on paper before arranging to have them set in type. On the career of one such quasi-professional poet, see Isaac B. Choate, 'Thomas Shaw of Standish: "A Down-East Homer"' (1887), in Windsor Daggett, *A Down-East Yankee from the District of Maine* (Portland, Me.: A. J. Huston, 1920), 57-74. For vague references in 1864 and 1874 suggesting that the ballad on Timothy Merrick may have appeared in print prior to the 1830s, see Stebbins, *Historical Address*, 66; Nason,

Venturing further beyond the evidence embedded in Martha Buck's copybook, any notion of a simple chronological development from oral to scribal to print is belied by the rootedness of even the earliest of New England's tragedy verses in that region's long-established print culture. While 'Springfield Mountain' may have been sustained for more than seventy years by oral and scribal diffusion, most of the other very early surviving examples of providential tragedy verse appeared in print. Of fourteen such poems produced in New England between 1759 and 1774 (a cluster that arguably marks the inception of the genre as a distinctive regional style), ten survive today in the form of contemporaneously printed broadsides or pamphlets—and at least one of the exceptions was reportedly printed at the time, though no copy remains extant. Indeed, the providential tragedy verses that flourished in New England during the third quarter of the eighteenth century adapted themes and motifs from similar genres long familiar to the region's readers, printers, and booksellers. Delving even deeper, every key element of the genre, including the providential motifs, can be traced back to broadside news ballads produced by English authors and printers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁴⁰

Gazetteer of Massachusetts, 555; but see also Barry, 'Springfield Mountain,' no. 8: 5 and other citations in note 30 above; after more than a century of scholarly investigation, no pre-1830 printed version—or contemporary evidence of such a printed version—has yet surfaced.

40. For early tragedy verses that survive in print, see *A Poem on the Rebuke of God's Hand In the awful Desolation made by Fire In the Town of Boston, On the 20th Day of March, 1760*. . . . (Boston: Fowle and Draper, 1760); E. Remington, *A short Account of Three Men that were killed by lightning, at Suffield*. . . . (New London: Timothy Green, 1767); Consider Tiffany, *Relation Of the melancholy Death of six young Persons, who were kill'd by Lightning in the Month of June, 1767*. . . . (n.p.: n.d., c. 1767); *A Mournful Elegy, On the Death of Martin Willcocks and James Rois, of Gosben, in Connecticut, in New-England, who was kill'd with Lightning, on the 6th of June, 1767*. . . . ([Hartford?: Thomas Green?], 1768); *A few thoughts on the death of Mr. Luke Rich of Western, who was killed on Coy's hill by his cart wheels, April, 1768*. . . . (n.p. n.d., c. 1768); *A few Thoughts compos'd on the sudden & awful Death of Mrs. Fessenden, wife of Mr. Nathanael Fessenden, of Cambridge, who was shot May 30, 1770* (Boston: [Seth Adams and John Kneeland], 1770); *A Poem Occasioned by the late sudden and awful Death, of a Young Woman, who was found drowned, in Medford River, July 14th, 1771* (Medford, Mass.: 1771); B[enjamin] T[each], *The following composed on the lamented Death of Michael Griswold, Junior, of Killingworth, who was killed at a Raising, in the Year 1771* (n.p.: n.d., c. 1771); *A Funeral Elegy, occasioned by the Tragedy, At Salem, near Boston, on Thursday Afternoon, the Seventeenth of June, 1773, at which Time the following Persons, Seven Women and Three Men were*

Yet even given the genre's deep roots in Anglo-American print culture, scholars cannot hope to understand early New England tragedy verses without recognizing the central role of scribal culture in their creation, dissemination, and prospective recovery. First, most such poems initially took form when an individual writer put pen or pencil to paper in response to a dramatic or shocking event. Contrary to the old myth of 'communal composition,' according to which folk ballads emerged from an alchemy of collective consciousness and group improvisation, the weight of both primary evidence and modern scholarship suggests that Anglo-American ballads and related verse genres have almost invariably been composed by individuals—even though the authors' names are often unknown and the original manuscripts almost never extant.⁴¹ Indeed,

drowned. . . ([Boston?]: n.d., c. 1773); *A Poem, Occasioned by the sudden and surprising Death of Mr. Asa Burt, of Granville; who was mortally wounded by Falling a Tree [sic], on the 28th of January, 1774.* . . . (Hartford: n.d., c. 1774). For those that survive in manuscript form, see T. D. Seymour Bassett, ed., 'A Ballad of Rogers' Retreat, 1759,' *Vermont History* 46 (Winter 1978): 21-23; 'On the Death of Timothy Merit [Merrick] / 'Springfield Mountain' (1761?), in sources cited in notes 30 and 31 above; 'Elegy on the Death of a Child Who was Lost in Temple, New Hampshire' (1769), in Henry Ames Blood, *The History of Temple, N. H.* (Boston: Geo. C. Rand and Avery, 1860), 14-18, 179-82; 'An Elegy upon the fall of 53 Men, at Wilton September ye 17 1773,' in Charles E. Clark, *The Meetinghouse Tragedy: An Episode in the Life of a New England Town* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1998), 66-81, 109-16, but also see 117-20 for an 1818 broadside edition. There were many other broadside poems on similar themes published in New England during those same years. A scattering of earlier broadside poems published in New England prior to the cluster between 1759 and 1774 might also be considered 'providential tragedy verses'; see, for example, W[ait?] W[inthrop?], *Some Meditations Concerning our Honourable Gentlemen and fellow-Souldiers, in Pursuit of those Barbarous Natives.* . . . (1675 [?]; reprint, New London, 1721); Deodat Lawson, *Tbrenodia, or a Mournfull Remembrance, of the much to be lamented Death of the Worthy & Pious Capt. Anthony Collamore.* . . . (Boston: Bartholomew Green, 1694); *The Lancaster Tragedy: A Mournful Elegy.* . . . (Boston: [Fleet], n.d., c. 1740). Tragedy verses, and similar narrative poems, also began to appear both in manuscript and in print in the mid-Atlantic region during the mid- to late eighteenth century (with a scattering of earlier examples); however, the genre does not seem to have become quite as widespread as in New England, and mid-Atlantic verses typically included less 'providential' content; for a few examples, see Robert W. Venables, ed., "'Genl. Harkemer's Battle': A Poetic Account of the Battle of Oriskany," *New York History* 58 (October 1977): 471-77; Thompson, *Body, Boots and Britches*, 314-17, 333-35. On the early modern English tradition of broadside news ballads, see sources cited in note 19 above.

41. On the prolonged scholarly debate over 'communal composition,' see Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship*, 3-122; for the 'communalist' position, see Francis B. Gummere, *Old English Ballads* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1894); for a persuasive modern statement of the opposing position, see Laws, *Native American Balladry*, 39-47, 93-94. Even poems written for publication generally appeared first in writing; as David S. Shields

the scribal basis of such poetry is often implied by formulaic titles describing 'Lines Written' or 'Lines Composed,' as in 'Lines Composed by Joseph Buck in 1826.' Second, as occasionally acknowledged over the years by other ballad scholars, scribal transcription appears to have played a crucial role in the preservation of early tragedy poems over time and in their dissemination over space. It seems doubtful, for example, whether 'Springfield Mountain' would ever have survived long enough to gain new life in print during the 1830s had the original verses not occasionally been copied down, over a period of several decades, in the manuscripts of literate New Englanders such as Betsey Gaylord and Martha Buck. Third, as Martha Buck's copybook demonstrates, the surviving artifacts of scribal culture can allow modern scholars to trace the temporal and geographical diffusion of early ballads—and to identify the particular social settings in which they flourished—with greater precision, and with richer contextual detail, than typically provided by oral or printed sources alone.

As it turned out, Martha Ann Buck Perrin outlived her father by nearly twenty years. She died in Thompson, Connecticut, in April 1880, at the age of seventy-two; her husband died just one month later. Curiously, the inventories of the Perrin estate, valued at over \$10,000, made no mention of any books at all—suggesting that, aside from ephemeral publications (such as the newspapers and periodicals clipped and pasted into Martha's copybook), the old rural pattern of literary scarcity may have persisted in their household for another generation, at least. Two of Martha Perrin's sons, both solid Yankee farmers like their father and maternal grandfather before them, continued to live in Thompson for many years, until their own deaths in September 1915 and January 1926, respectively. Two of Perrin's daughters achieved similar longevity; both were listed in the federal census

has pointed out with respect to eighteenth-century print culture: 'Printing depended on writing. Every new book, every original article in every newspaper or magazine, every law, every first-run advertisement derived from manuscript copy' (Shields, 'The Manuscript in the World of Print,' 404).

of 1920, and one, Martha's youngest, even appeared in the census of 1930. Assuming that one or another of Perrin's long-lived children (or their progeny) inherited Martha's old copybook, she would have succeeded in transmitting tragedy verses produced as early as the 1760s to family members who lived well into the twentieth century. Indeed, she has enabled them to be conveyed, through this essay, to readers of the twenty-first century as well.⁴²

Ever since the formative period in the study of Anglo-American ballads during the early 1900s, scholars and laypeople alike have tended to view such works as quintessential artifacts of traditional folk culture, transmitted orally and sustained by memory from one generation to the next. Assuming the primacy of oral transmission, many scholars have naturally seen the southern Appalachian highlands—with their relative ethnic homogeneity, demographic stability, social isolation, cultural conservatism, and widespread illiteracy—as the American region in which, as Reed Smith put it in 1928, 'the conditions for ballad preservation were (and are) ideal.'⁴³ The first settlers of the eighteenth-century southern backcountry may indeed have succeeded in perpetuating dozens of medieval or early modern British ballads by handing them down to successive generations of descendants, even into the twentieth century. Yet those same early southern pioneers, relying heavily and often by necessity on oral transmission, did not succeed in forging their own contemporary domestic tragedies into new verses or ballads that could survive the test of time.

42. Town of Thompson, Records of Births, Deaths, Marriages, 4: 500; 6: 24; 7: 10; Town of Thompson, Probate Records, 5 (1874–80): 554, 564–65, 576–77; 6 (1880–86): 16–19, 21–23; 13 (1913–16): 440–42, 468–69; 17 (1924–28): 238–39, 263, 421, all located at the Town Hall, Thompson, Connecticut; U.S. Census 1920, Dudley, Worcester County, Massachusetts, sheet 14B (Martha J. [Perrin] Brayton) and City of Waukesha, Waukesha County, Wisconsin, sheet 14B (Mary E. [Perrin] Huntington); U.S. Census 1930, First Ward, City of Waukesha, Waukesha County, Wisconsin, sheet 1B (Mary E. [Perrin] Huntington). Although the estate inventory of William H. Perrin, the son of Martha and John who died in Thompson in 1926, counted a 'Bookcase' among his household possessions, it listed unspecified 'Books' valued at a total of just one dollar—suggesting that the old rural pattern of literary scarcity may have persisted among the descendants of Joseph Buck well into the twentieth century.

43. Smith, *South Carolina Ballads*, 7, 74 (quoted), 76–77; also see Hinkel, 'Folk Tunes,' 520.

Only a handful of indigenous eighteenth-century ballads evoked by specific, verifiable events—events that occurred in North America prior to 1800—managed to gain a lasting foothold in the 'oral tradition' of American folksong. Of those, none appear to have originated in the southern colonies or states; rather, all came either from New England or from other northern regions.⁴⁴ Likewise, of the many dozens of eighteenth-century tragedy verses that have survived in print or manuscript sources, only a few describe events in southern colonies or states, and at least one of those was written by a native New Englander who subsequently returned to his home region.⁴⁵ Finally, many of the tragedy ballads that later flourished in the South, and in other American regions, during the nineteenth century and thereafter featured themes and motifs—and assumed print and scribal forms—that would have already been familiar to generations of Yankee readers and singers.⁴⁶ Indeed, the emergence

44. See Laws, *Native American Balladry*, 47–48, 119–21, 162, 221, 257–58.

45. John Leland, *A True Account, How Matthew Womble Murdered His Wife*. . . (Stockbridge, Mass.: Richard Lee, 1793); for more on the Womble case, a Virginia familicide of 1784, and the tragedy verse that it generated, see Cohen, 'Homicidal Compulsion and the Conditions of Freedom: The Social and Psychological Origins of Familicide in America's Early Republic,' *Journal of Social History* 28 (Summer 1995): 731, 757 notes 30–35. Leland was a Baptist clergyman from Massachusetts who lived in Virginia during the 1770s and 1780s. Somewhat similarly, several ballads spawned by the North Carolina Regulator movement between 1765 and 1771, surviving in fragmentary form in print and manuscript sources, were apparently written by a schoolmaster who had moved to the region from the North, possibly New Jersey; see Henry M. Belden and Arthur Palmer Hudson, eds., *Folk Ballads from North Carolina* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1952), 645–55; A. P. Hudson, 'Songs of the North Carolina Regulators,' *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 4 (Oct. 1947): 470–85.

46. For numerous examples of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century tragedy ballads from outside the Northeast, many with 'providential' motifs, see M. T. Coffin, 'American Narrative Obituary Verse'; Laws, *Native American Balladry*, 146–228, passim; for several such ballads from a single southern state, see Alton C. Morris, *Folksongs of Florida* (1950; reprint, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1990), 101–7; for evidence of print and scribal transmission of folk ballads outside of the Northeast, see Jean Thomas, *Ballad Makin' in the Mountains of Kentucky* (1939; reprint, New York: Oak Publications, 1964), 70, 100–101, 117, 136–38, 154; Gardner and Chickering, eds., *Ballads and Songs of Southern Michigan*, 7, 26, 485–89; Belden, *Ballads and Songs*, xiii; Eddy, *Ballads and Songs from Ohio*, xii; Randolph, *Ozark Folksongs*, 1: 33–34; Laws, *Native American Balladry*, 44–47; Ruth Ann Musick, 'The Old Album of William A. Larkin,' *Journal of American Folklore* 60 (July–Sept. 1947): 201–45. Even in areas such as Appalachia with stubbornly high rates of illiteracy, early twentieth-century folk ballads often reflected the increasingly pervasive presence of print culture (and sometimes of even more modern forms of mass media)—as in the following stanzas from two Kentucky murder songs recorded by Jean Thomas (the second is from a ballad on the kidnapping and murder of the Lindbergh baby in 1932): 'They sent for a reporter, / His name was Arodent. / He

and diffusion of indigenous southern tragedy ballads appear to have roughly coincided with the gradual decline of illiteracy and spread of print and scribal culture in that region.⁴⁷

The importance of print and scribal transmission outside of New England is amply documented in several state or regional ballad collections, including Henry M. Belden's *Ballads and Songs Collected by the Missouri Folk-Lore Society* (1940). In gathering traditional texts, Belden's informants occasionally drew upon printed song-sheets or paperbound songsters, such as those peddled by travelling performers. In one rural county, Belden also located a battered, incomplete copy of *The Forget-Me-Not Songster*, a popular hardbound compilation—featuring many old English and early American ballads—repeatedly issued or marketed by publishers in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and even St. Louis during the 1830s through 1860s. But he made even greater use of more than a dozen manuscript sources gathered from throughout Missouri and neighboring states, mostly handwritten 'ballad-books' produced by individuals during the 1860s through 1890s. As Belden explained, folk enthusiasts in 'a (more or less) literate population' often 'set down the words' of their favorite songs. While insisting that many verses in manuscript ballad-books had been transcribed 'from hearing or from memory,' Belden acknowledged the integral role of print and manuscript sources in the dissemination of traditional folksongs—even in rural districts of the old southwest.⁴⁸

printed it in the paper / And around the world it went'; 'What daily papers tell us / Surely must be so / I read it in the papers / And heard it over the radio' (Thomas, *Ballad Makin'*, 152, 154).

47. According to estimates by Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, the white adult illiteracy rate in the South as a whole declined from about 40 or 50 percent in 1800 to about 19 percent in 1840; by contrast, in the latter year, the illiteracy rate in the Buck family's home state of Connecticut was an infinitesimal .3 percent. Soltow and Stevens, *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the United States: A Socioeconomic Analysis to 1870* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 148–92, esp. 159, 175–76, 189.

48. See Belden, *Ballads and Songs*, xiii, 3, 9, 20, 42, 51–52, 76–77, 104, 106, 125–27, 142–44, 146, 156, 161–62, 207, 211, 218–20, 222–23, 235, 240, 251, 273, 275, 280, 288–89, 318–21, 349, 353, 357, 372, 379, 397, 413–15, 461, 488, and *passim*; it may be worth noting that one of the older manuscript sources used by Belden was originally compiled by an informant's grandmother in Vermont (*Ballads and Songs*, 3, 104). For similar

Indeed, well into the twentieth century, southern tragedy ballads were still straddling the divide between old and new media, appearing not only on sheet music, radio, and phonograph albums but also on small handbills or broadsides—and they were still entering into the so-called ‘oral tradition.’ For example, one of the most successful ‘hits’ of the Reverend Andrew (‘Blind Andy’) Jenkins of Atlanta, Georgia, a pioneer in commercial gospel and country music during the 1920s and 1930s, was ‘The Death of Floyd Collins,’ a providential tragedy ballad about a young man who died in 1925 after becoming lost in a Kentucky cave (‘Young people oh! take warning / From Floyd Collins’ fate / And get right with your Maker / Before it is too late’). The inspiration for the piece reportedly came to P. C. Brockman, a ‘scout’ for Okeh Records, as he sat on the veranda of a Florida hotel in April 1925; Brockman immediately wired his idea to Jenkins, and the resulting song was published as sheet music by Shapiro, Bernstein & Company of New York. Sometime later, according to the early Appalachian ballad collector Jean Thomas, a printer in the Kentucky backcountry issued copies of the ‘song-ballet’ in the form of crude handbills that he sold to ‘wandering fiddlers who, in turn, sold their wares to eager listeners who gathered at the courthouse on Court day.’ The mountain men who purchased the printed song would then take it home to their women and ‘youngins’ and ‘learn it word for word.’⁴⁹ As with other Yankee cultural innovations ranging

references to scribal or print sources in discussions of individual songs in other regional collections, see Cox, *Folk-Songs of the South*, 28, 65, 141, 189, 244, 255, 441, and *passim*; Gardner and Chickering, *Ballads and Songs of Southern Michigan*, 477–83, 485–89, and *passim*. For scholarly transcriptions of mid- to late nineteenth-century manuscript songbooks, see Musick, ‘Old Album’; Harold W. Thompson, ed., *A Pioneer Songster: Texts from the Stevens-Douglass Manuscript of Western New York, 1841–1856* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1958); W. K. McNeil, ‘A Schoharie County Songster,’ *New York Folklore Quarterly* 25 (March 1969): 3–58; Jean F. Gravelle, ‘The Civil War Songster of a Monroe County Farmer,’ *New York Folklore Quarterly* 27 (June 1971): 163–230.

49. The Reverend Andrew Jenkins (words) and Irene Spain (music), *The Death of Floyd Collins* (New York: Shapiro, Bernstein and Co., 1926), sheet music; Thomas, *Ballad Makin*, 117–19; Laws, *Native American Balladry*, 51; Wayne W. Daniel, ‘Andrew Jenkins (1885–1957),’ *The New Georgia Encyclopedia*, online at www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-887. For additional evidence that ‘The Death of Floyd Collins’ and other tragedy ballads by Jenkins entered into ‘oral tradition,’ see Gardner and Chick-

from newspapers to shape-notes to common schools, tragedy verses like those that first flourished in Revolutionary New England would later take root in places far removed from northeastern Connecticut—and among folk very different from Martha Buck and her kin.⁵⁰

ering, *Ballads and Songs of Southern Michigan*, 25, 307–8; Laws, *Native American Balladry*, 188, 223–24, 273. The term ‘song-ballets’ refers to small handbills or broadsides on which ballads were printed or written; see Belden, *Songs and Ballads*, xiii; Randolph, *Ozark Folksongs*, 33–34; Laws, *Native American Balladry*, 44–47.

50. On newspapers, see David Paul Nord, ‘Teleology and News: The Religious Roots of American Journalism, 1630–1730,’ *Journal of American History* 77 (June 1990): 9–38; on shape-notes, see George Pullen Jackson, *White Spirituals in the Southern Uplands* (1933; reprint, New York: Dover, 1965), 3–24, but cf. Emily Laurance, ‘The Young Convert’s Pocket Companion and Its Relationship to Migration Patterns of American Religious Folk Song,’ in Peter Benes, ed., *New England Music: The Public Sphere, 1600–1900, Proceedings of the Dublin Seminar for New England Folklife* (Boston: Boston University, 1998), 127–38; on common schools, see Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (1983; reprint, New York: Hill and Wang, 1990); Soltow and Stevens, *Rise of Literacy*. It should be noted that New England’s cultural ‘innovations’ typically had roots in earlier English cultural forms.

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