

### Civil War Treasures: Serving Two Masters in the Election of 1876

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## Feature Essay

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**Rasmussen, Hans** *Civil War Treasures: Serving Two Masters in the Election of 1876.*

As our presidential election ferociously thunders on into the summer and autumn, the uncompromising, partisan nature of modern American politics of which commentators and pundits constantly bemoan continues to cast a depressing cloud of hopelessness over the nation. But rather than curse the darkness, the LSU Libraries Special Collections prefers to spotlight two treasures that together tell a more hopeful story of civic virtue, a tale of two musicians crossing the political divide during the famously contentious presidential election of 1876. The competing campaign songs “We’ll Blow Our Horn for Hayes” and “Gov. Tilden is Our Man” stand out from the rest of the political music of the time not just because they were issued by the same publisher and purchased from the same New Orleans music store, but because both songs were written and composed *by the same guys!*<sup>1</sup>

Until the mid-twentieth century, music specially written to honor candidates was a staple of presidential campaigns, and the election of 1876 certainly was no exception. Its most prolific lyricist was Samuel N. Mitchell (1846-1905), an extraordinarily productive (if poorly remunerated) songwriter during the 1870s who became famous for writing sentimental ballads, especially the tremendously popular “Just Touch the Harp Gently, My Pretty Louise” (1870). A veteran of the 11th Rhode Island Infantry Regiment during the Civil War, Mitchell ultimately penned some 600 songs in his lifetime, including “We Deck Their Graves Alike Today” (1877), which became a standard hymn for Memorial Day ceremonies.<sup>2</sup> He wrote the lyrics to five songs for the election of 1876: three honoring Rutherford B. Hayes and two celebrating Samuel J. Tilden. Mitchell was joined on three of these by the equally ambivalent composer Charles Edward Prior (1856-1927), an amateur musician from Jewett City, Connecticut, who at the time was employed primarily as a bookkeeper and paymaster for a cotton goods manufacturer and as an organist at the local Congregational

Church.<sup>3</sup>

Bouncing, boisterous, but never particularly creative, these Mitchell and Prior collaborations aimed to rally the troops with cheers for the candidate's impeccable character and enthusiastic (if decidedly unspecific) predictions of success when in office. Their tunes for Hayes both celebrated the general's war record and encouraged Republicans to get voters to the polls. "Hayes and Wheeler are Our Choice" tried to quell any doubts among the faithful because "Hayes and Wheeler are a team, That will be hard to beat, And folly 'tis to even dream, Or think of their defeat."<sup>4</sup> "We'll Blow Our Horn for Hayes" became quite a popular piece that reportedly sold 1,700 copies in three days, notwithstanding its rather flat lyrics and drinking song chorus: "We'll give our votes to Rutherford, We'll blow our horn for Hayes, And in the White House he will live A portion of his days."<sup>5</sup> "Gov. Tilden is Our Man" likewise strove to inspire Democratic supporters with bland character affirmations ("Gov'nor Tilden has a mind of the good old fashioned kind") and broad campaign promises ("He will put an end to 'rings' and the other naughty things, That cast such dreadful shame upon the land").<sup>6</sup>

Samuel Mitchell teamed up with other composers for two more campaign songs in 1876. "The Boys in Blue Will See It Through," which we wrote with Hart P. Danks, apparently sought the votes of Union veterans despite making only the vaguest of references to the Civil War. Here only the Democrats were the enemy and they would be defeated by good soldiers from all the sections of the nation: "The North and South, the East and West Will rally to the front, And all will do their very best To make the 'Demmies' grunt."<sup>7</sup> "The Times Are Sadly Out of Joint," which Mitchell wrote with composer H.A. Selington, clearly was his most creative work of the campaign with a message of class struggle that outshone his usual party fight song repertoire. A pro-Tilden ballad emphasizing the suffering of the poor during the Panic of 1873, it cut at the Republicans with references to Grant-era corruption while waxing in selective (albeit apologetic) nostalgia for William "Boss" Tweed, at the time a prison escapee and fugitive from the law: "Now that the old man's on the wing, We state this as quite sure, Though he was boss of a bad ring, He did not hate the poor."<sup>8</sup>

So why did these two men compose for both sides in the election? In a word—money. Mitchell complained into middle age of how little he made from his songs and how others profited handsomely from them, estimating he earned no more than \$7,000 from all his 600 works while others grew rich, even by

outright theft. By his mid-forties he was reduced to working as a mailing clerk for the *Pawtucket Evening Times*, resigned never to write ballads again. Although Prior would go on to a successful career in banking and fame as a compiler of Sunday School singing books, in 1876 he was twenty years old and struggling as a bookkeeper and church organist with a new bride to support. Whatever their personal political views—Prior later would describe himself ironically as “a Republican with independent tendencies”—the need to support themselves and their families clearly settled any qualms over party loyalty, creative contradiction, or the naggings of conscience.<sup>9</sup>

While nineteenth-century journalism infamously exhibited a bald-faced partisanship, political songwriting apparently was a more mercenary endeavor. After all, Mitchell and Prior were not the only songwriters playing for both teams during the 1876 election. The German-born composer Edward Mack wrote four marches for Hayes and one for Tilden. A musician named R. Goerdeler likewise wrote marches for both candidates. Phil P. Keil arranged the “Tilden and Hendricks Polka,” as well as writing the music for the “Hayes and Wheeler Polka.”<sup>10</sup> Samuel Mitchell’s sometime collaborator, Hart P. Danks, showed a Republican partiality by writing songs for Grant, Hayes, Harrison, and the Union dead, but he broke ranks to compose for Winfield Scott Hancock in 1880, proving that even seemingly loyal musicians could be lured away for ready cash.<sup>11</sup>

Mitchell and Prior paired up one other time that year for “If Washington Was Living Now,” a positively painful song for the nation’s centennial that was panned for being too hokey even for its time. After quoting some of its awful verse imagining the first president approving modern American progress, one reviewer complained, “The writer of this is probably not a poet highly gifted with fancy and imagination, but he is able to rhyme ... He merely ground out his verses; and as his mill was a poor one, the verses were not only without feeling, but in ridiculously bad taste, not to say nonsensical.”<sup>12</sup> In the end, the election of 1876 would be the only campaign to inspire the mediocre words and melodies of these two decidedly independent musicians. Neither Samuel Mitchell nor Charles Prior ever wrote another presidential campaign song again.

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<sup>1</sup>Sheet music for these two songs is available in Presidential Campaign Songs, Mss. 2600, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU

Libraries, Baton Rouge, La. A writer for *Life* magazine first noticed this peculiarity about these two songs in 1948, see *Life* (October 4, 1948), 23.

<sup>2</sup>*The Day* (New London, Conn.), Dec. 11, 1890, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>*Men of Mark in Connecticut: Ideals of American Life Told in Biographies and Autobiographies of Eminent Living Americans*, ed. N.G. Osborn (Hartford: William R. Goodspeed, 1907), 3:60.

<sup>4</sup>“Hayes and Wheeler are Our Choice: Campaign Song and Chorus,” words by Samuel N. Mitchell, music by Charles Ed. Prior (Boston: Oliver Ditson, 1876).

<sup>5</sup>“We’ll Blow Our Horn for Hayes: Campaign Song and Chorus,” words by Samuel N. Mitchell, music by Chas. Ed. Prior (Cincinnati: F.W. Helmick, 1876); *The Christian Monitor* 15 (October 1876): 479.

<sup>6</sup>“Gov. Tilden is Our Man: Campaign Song and Chorus,” words by Samuel N. Mitchell, music by Chas. Ed. Prior (Cincinnati: F.W. Helmick, 1876).

<sup>7</sup>“The Boys in Blue Will See It Through: Campaign Song and Chorus,” words by S.N. Mitchell, music by H.P. Danks (New York: S.T. Gordon & Son, 1876).

<sup>8</sup>“The Times Are Sadly Out of Joint,” words by Samuel N. Mitchell, music by H.A. Selington (New York: J.L. Peters, 1876).

<sup>9</sup>*The Day* (New London, Conn.), Dec. 11, 1890, p. 3; *Men of Mark in Connecticut*, 3:60-64.

<sup>10</sup> Danny O. Crew, *Presidential Sheet Music: An Illustrated Catalogue of Published Music Associated with the American Presidency and Those Who Sought the Office* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2001), 429-30, 434, 448-50.

<sup>11</sup>“We Deck Their Graves Alike Today: Memorial Quartet for Male Voices,” words by S.N. Mitchell, music by H.P. Danks (New York: C.H. Ditson, 1877); Crew, *Presidential Sheet Music*, 109, 431, 515, 625.

<sup>12</sup>“If Washington Was Living Now: Centennial Song and Chorus,” words by Samuel N. Mitchell, music by Chas. Ed. Prior (Cincinnati: F.W. Helmick,

1876); *The Galaxy* 22 (September 1876): 436; *The Christian Union* 14 (July 26, 1876): 69.