

THE FISK JUBILEE SINGERS PLAYED JAMESTOWN ON THEIR FIRST TOUR

In 1871 Jamestown was a village of about 5,400 inhabitants. About a third of them were Swedes. None were Italians. Fewer than 50 were black. There were ten or twelve churches, two daily newspapers, a printer, three banks, “three first-class hotels and several other good ones,” two pre-Broadhead woolen mills, three cabinet factories, two cane seat chair factories, a piano factory, four lumber mills, two sash, door, and blind makers, two foundry and machine shop combinations making both small parts and heavy equipment, a wooden butter pail maker, a cooperage which also made pumps (probably the wooden chain pumps) and pipe (perhaps the archaic wooden “pump logs”), five carriage and wagon makers, a cigar box factory, two grist mills, three manufacturers of wooden hand powered washing machines, a stave factory, a firm making wooden dry measures, a wool carder, a small plant making steel wheeled wooden wheelbarrows, a broom factory, an edge tool maker (primarily axes), and a sash balance (window counterweights) factory. The factories were powered by three dams, a few steam engines, and mostly by human muscle.

The big international news stories of 1871 were the ending of the Franco-Prussian War and the meeting of Stanley and Livingston in Africa. In this country, the Chicago fire had killed 250 people. The corruption of the Tweed Ring in New York City was in the news and the Apache Wars broke out.

The only fatal accident in the history of Chautauqua Lake steamboating took place August 14 when the explosion of the steamboat Chautauqua at Whitney’s Bay killed six and fatally injured two. Chautauqua Institution and the transformation of the lake into a resort destination were a few years in the future but the first Chautauqua Lake Camp Meeting at the location that later became Chautauqua Institution had been held that summer.

On February 1 most of two downtown blocks in Jamestown were destroyed by fire. On August 20 the second murder in the history of the county was discovered in the brewery at the location now Occupied by the south corner of 13th street (not yet existing in 1871) and North Main, Jamestown. The perpetrator, Charles Marlow, had tried to burn the body in the brewery furnace.

Otherwise Jamestown was concerned with a couple of major infrastructure developments and the taxes that went with them. The big one was the proposal to build a water system for fire protection and domestic use. The question was whether to build upon an existing new north side private system drawing from springs, wells, and a reservoir – a system powered by a windmill, or to adopt the steam powered filtered river water Holly system then sweeping the country. The other project was the building of a stone bridge on Main Street (completed in 1872. It was rebuilt in 2015.)

Automobiles, telephones, and power grids had not yet been invented. Jamestown also lacked such improvements as streetcars (even horse drawn ones), a sewer system, and paved streets. It had only rickety wooden sidewalks. The main annoyance the sidewalks and streets produced was their ability to motivate the ladies to lift their long skirts to heights that both the women and the polite men found distasteful.

The age enjoyed a more stern moral climate as a young couple in Bemus Point found out that year when, like so many in the late 1960's, they decided that a piece of paper was not necessary for a good marriage. Things had gone well until a birth provoked questions from the older generation followed by legal actions.

Many lighter subjects occupied the minds of the villagers amidst the mud, murders, and moral transgressions. Horse racing and yacht racing were popular in the summer. Baseball in its recently formalized new manifestation was a fad. There was an ice rink for winter sports. Sleighing was popular in the winter too and social visiting was more common than at present. Sports on the whole were less organized and popular than at present but music seemed to exist with diversity, organization, and popularity well beyond that found in much larger communities today. That with no means of electronic amplification, keep in mind.

In addition to being a home for informal dance bands, church and fraternal choirs and instrumental groups, and a brass band, Jamestown also welcomed traveling professional ensembles. In just the month of November, for example, three such units visited Jamestown. Early in the month the "Hibernian Minstrels." To the relief of the Journal's previewer, proved to be Hibernian but not minstrel in style and repertoire. On the 11th, Horton's Grand Orchestra and Operatic Company came to town with an array of large and very peculiar looking invented instruments and a few female vocalists. On the 27th the Mendelssohn Quintet Club of Boston gave a more conventional performance.

In the first full week in December Jamestown enjoyed three performances by a new group of Black students from the Reconstruction South who were destined to make both musical and racial history. The accounts from the Jamestown Journal make an important addition to the established, partly inaccurate, record.

The American Missionary Association, an agency of the Congregational Church, founded Fisk University for the education of former slaves in 1865. Classes started in January, 1866. George L. White, a music teacher at the school, thought a concert tour of picked students would bring the school desperately needed money and prestige. Disregarding the opposition of trustees, faculty, and students, White put the original nine singers on the road October 6, 1871. George White had been born in Cadiz, Cattaraugus County. He retired to Fredonia and is buried there.

White had trouble securing bookings and even greater trouble finding accommodations for his Black students. They played at least 20 engagements, many for collections, in a little more than two months before they reached Jamestown. Sometimes they had to sleep in railroad stations.

The members were: Minnie Tate (contralto, the only member who had not been a slave), Green Evans (bass), Jennie Jackson (soprano), Ella Sheppard (soprano and pianist), Benjamin Holmes (tenor), Eliza Walker (contralto), Isaac P. Dickerson (bass), Maggie Porter (soprano), and Thomas Rutling (tenor).

At first they sang no spirituals, but it was only after they added one or two spirituals to their program that they began to draw crowds. One of White's strengths apparently was an ability to notice and exploit the taste of the public. At the end of October he gave the group its

now immortal name, The Jubilee Singers. The Jubilee year for the ancient Hebrews came every 50th year. They were not allowed to sow or reap and all slaves were set free at the sound of the ram's horn marking the beginning of jubilee. (Leviticus 25)

Black Song: the Forge and the Flame by John Lovell, jr., my source for much of the above information, says the group sparked controversy in Jamestown by performing on the Sabbath. This is not true.

They went to New York City later on the tour. There on December 18 they sang in the famous Plymouth Church of Henry Ward Beecher. This was their big break. In another year and a half they were in Europe where they sang for Queen Victoria and many other audiences both royal and common.

If the students had trouble with accommodations or anything else in Jamestown, the *Journal* failed to mention it. They were scheduled for a free (collection) performance on Tuesday, December 5 in the Congregational Church which is the same building standing today as The Spire Theater on East Third Street. The following evening they performed in Institute Hall, the third floor auditorium in the old high school building that stood from 1867 to 1934. Admission was 25¢, 15¢ for children. There were a brief advanced announcement and highly favorable day after reviews in the *Journal*, but no paid advertising. Despite terrible winter weather, attendance was good for both shows and the group was held over for another performance at Institute Hall on Thursday. Again the weather was bad and the crowd was good.

On Friday they performed in Elmira to a big crowd and a good review.

On Saturday Jamestowners moved on to a new musical attraction at Institute Hall, a ballad concert by Amy Jenner formerly of the Alleghenians and Swiss Bell Ringers.

Norman Carlson

January 1993, revised 2025

JAMESTOWN DAIL JOURNAL – WEDNESDAY DECEMBER 6, 1871

The Praise Meeting Last Night

This meeting was held in the Congregational House, and considering the extremely severe weather was very well attended. The exercises were extremely interesting. While the singing did not of course evince what is called high art and the music was simple, it was melodious, was sung in good taste, and evidenced rare musical capacity. Some of the old camp meeting melodies were wild and weird, and heard by a torch-lit congregation amid the swaying branches of forest trees, could not fail to soften for a time at least the hardest heart, and powerfully magnetize the

more impressionable. We don't wonder after hearing these children, at the manifestations of the "Power" so frequently exhibited in the Camp Meeting of the South. Harriet Beecher Stowe prophesied in "Uncle Tom's Cabin" that when the chains of slavery were broken, and the light of education beamed with full effulgence upon the African mind, the civilization resulting would possess a gorgeousness and magnificence beyond what had ever been seen, and that in music especially the children of Africa would excel. This prophecy seems in the process of fulfillment.

These singers are all colored people, pupils of Fisk University at Nashville, Tenn, and a high school at Athens, Ala. They range from eight to twenty two years of age, are some of pure African and some of mixed blood, and have had but a few months special training in music. They are all natural musicians, and doubtless have sung from childhood, like mocking birds because they could not help it. Some of the Soprano and Contralto voices were peculiarly pure and rich, and do not lack for volume, while all the parts are well sustained.

The concert this evening is to be at Institute Hall and we hope to see a large audience. The programme will be more varied than that of last evening, and embrace some "plantation songs." This is perhaps the last opportunity many of our people will ever have to hear these songs of slavery which are rapidly passing away with the state or condition that gave them birth. All these singers were born slaves – chattels personal. Enfranchised by the emancipation proclamation they are now pupils in a University, successfully acquiring an education not only for their own benefit but for the benefit of their race.

The question of slavery thank God is no more a party questions, and we hope no democrat will stay away tonight from any prejudice against the negro. Go and see from these specimens what a terrible crime against humanity slavery was, and be thankful that even through blood and treasure the foul system has been abolished. For ourselves we rejoice that all we have written or said upon this question has been upon the side of freedom. As early as 1848 we left the democratic organization in the Free soil movement, and ever since the Republican party has had an organization we have been an active and efficient member. In the light of history and to-day we feel that we and all such have a right to be proud of our record.

Come out to the Praise Concert to-night and get the full value of your money in genuine soul and heart music, which can be understood without a libretto and appreciated by all.

JAMESTOWN DAILY JOURNAL – THURSDAY DECEMBER 7, 1871

Praise Concert

Notwithstanding the severe storm a large audience assembled last evening at Institute Hall to hear the Praise Concert. Although we had heard them on a previous evening at the Congregational House, and therefore expected a fine entertainment, our expectations were more than realized. The greater variety in the programme called out a higher degree of histrionic and vocal ability than we were looking for from the singers. The concert last night showed culture and the power to execute difficult music, which is a marvel considering the brief opportunity these vocalists have had for the scientific study of music.

The terrible weather of the past few days has been distressing to these children of the South, to whom the snow has heretofore been almost a curiosity, and has produced some colds and hoarseness.

The parts throughout were well sustained. The young Miss who gave the first solo has a remarkably sweet voice. She appears to sing almost without effort, and yet the liquid tones of her melody were distinctly heard in all parts of the Hall. The other ladies, also, who from time to time took prominent parts in the concert, displayed good musical taste and capacity, and the young lady who played the Piano handled that instrument well.

The young gentlemen in the comic portions of the programme entered heartily into the spirit of the pieces and acquitted themselves creditably, while Master George, as a preacher, outdid himself. We don't say that "he can preach any preacher we have in town right out of his boots," but this we will say that we have not for years listened to a sermon of which we can so distinctly remember the text as we can the one preached by Master George last evening. As a general thing our preachers are inclined to wander occasionally from the text, but with Master George the text was a prominent feature. We commend his example in this respect to his clerical brethren.

We are informed that upon request of numerous citizens these singers will remain over to day and give one more concert this evening at Institute Hall, performance to commence at 8 o'clock. We trust that all both old and young will avail themselves of this opportunity to enjoy a rare musical treat. The old camp meeting melodies are most inspiring, and "Go down Moses" alone, as sung by these singers, is worth the admission fee. We know that nearly all who heard them last night will turn out again, and hope and believe that hundreds whom the storm drove away last night will gladly be present at this positively last concert.

Tomorrow they go to Elmira and thence to New York City.

The Concert Last Evening

Although the night was dark and windy and the streets very slippery, Institute Hall was crowded to hear the last concert of the colored children. It was a critical audience and at first very chary of its applause. They seemed to say – “We have heard a vast deal of blowing from the Daily Journal and various citizens about these singers. In all probability these “puffers” have allowed their zeal in a benevolent cause to outrun their judgment; now bring on your blackbirds, we’ll see if they are anything more than common.” It is high praise for these Southern Mocking Birds to say, that despite the unfavorable weather for vocal performance and their hoarseness, they held the vast audience well from the beginning to the end of the long and varied programme. Their music came from the heart and went to the heart. The cultivated musician listened with pleasure to their wild sweet melodies, and little children sat spell bound till the close of the concert.

Without desiring to particularize among singers so generally good, we may say that Miss Minnie Tate has a voice which for purity of tone and sweetness is not excelled. As she stood upon the stage so plainly attired, so modest in her demeanor, with her dark wavy hair and large glorious eyes, the warbling welled from her lips without effort, and the pure bird-like notes of the “Dream” filled the air with rich music.

The darkest one of the Sopranos “though black she is comely,” (see Song of Solomon 1:5) has a fine voice and sang with good taste. We take pleasure in recommending these singers wherever they may go, as well worthy of the patronage of the music loving public. And we make this recommendation entirely independent of the cause they represent or the circumstances under which they have appeared before the public. We say distinctly and emphatically that as vocalists and upon their merits, with their, to the North, novel and weird repertory of music they are worthy of, and should receive the patronage of the public.

There is only one thing about the concert last night with which we have any fault to find. That is a portion of the audience during the singing of the last piece commenced to crowd for the door so as to get out before the close. No gentleman or lady will annoy an audience who are listening, or desire to listen, to the performance of a piece of music by any such exhibition of mean and contemptible selfishness. We find upon inquiry that these small potato operations were confined wholly to a few hired girls and their beaus who had received orders to be at home at precisely

half-past nine o'clock. The most we are sorry about is that their boots and shoes have such thick soles.