Rediscovering Forgotten Composers with the Help of Online Genealogy and Music Score Databases: A Case Study on African-American Composer Jacob J. Sawyer (1856–1885)

Ponovno odkrivanje pozabljenih skladateljev s pomočjo spletne genealogije in podatkovnih baz glasbenih del: Vzorčna raziskava afriško-ameriškega skladatelja Jacoba J. Sawyerja (1856–1885)

IZVLEČEK


ABSTRACT

This paper describes the reconstruction of life and work of African-American composer Jacob J. Sawyer (1856–1885) with the help of genealogy databases and online collections of music scores. During his life, Sawyer held positions with well-known music ensembles: Haverly’s Colored Minstrels, Hyers Sisters Troupe, and Slayton Ideal Company.
1. The Forgotten Composer Jacob J. Sawyer

For James M. Trotter’s famous book *Music and Some Highly Musical People* (1880), only 13 pieces of music were selected for inclusion; one of these pieces was by African-American composer Jacob J. Sawyer (1856–1885). The inclusion of one of his compositions in Trotter’s book marks Sawyer as an exemplary and well-known composer, despite his young age at the time of the printing (of Trotter’s book), 24 years old. But when I came across the name Jacob J. Sawyer, I knew nothing about him. What I could find in traditional academic databases and publications was very limited. He is now almost forgotten, and only a very sketchy biography published in Eileen Southern’s *Biographical Dictionary of Afro-American and African Musicians* (Westport, CT, 1982, p. 332) reminds us of him. This dictionary entry did not even include the exact birth date or any information about his death. The entire entry reads as follows:

SAWYER, JACOB. Composer (b. c1859 in Boston, Massachusetts [?]; fl. late nineteenth century). Little is known of his career except that he was highly regarded as a pianist-composer during his time. He toured with the Hyers Sisters Company as a pianist in 1878 and wrote songs especially for the company. A press notice in January 1884 referred to him as Boston’s “favorite Professor Jacob Sawyer” when he played on a local concert. Trotter includes one of Sawyer’s pieces, “Welcome to the Era March,” in the 1878 survey. BIBL: Black press, incl. NYGlobe, 19 January 1884. Trot, p.2; 22-25 of the music section.

In addition to this dictionary article, John W. Finson mentioned Sawyer twice briefly in his book on *The Voices That Are Gone* (1994). In his chapter on “Postbellum Blackface Song: Authenticity and the Minstrel Demon,” Finson writes:

"The heightened realism in the music of pseudo-spirituals and the increased attention to “Negro oddities” for their own sake led to even more derogatory songs, as criticism of blacks gave way to deliberate malice. Jacob J. Sawyer admonishes the faithful in “Blow, Gabriel, Blow” (1882):

Darkies pray fo’ de time draws nigh,
Blow, Gabriel, Blow,
We’ll soon be mountin’ up on high,
Blow, etc.
Chicken coops you mus’ leave alone,
Blow, etc.
Or Satan ‘ll catch you shu’s you’s bo’n,
Blow, etc.

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2 Trotter included Sawyer’s “Welcome to the Era” march on pp. 22–25 of the Music Appendix. However, Trotter does not mention Sawyer in the main text of his book.
This advice is accompanied by a strictly pentatonic and highly syncopated tune (Ex. 6.10), which bears a distant resemblance to “Gabriel’s Trumpet’s Going to Blow” as sung by Jennie Jackson of the Jubilee Singers. Presumably Sawyer employed his song in a major production number of the very famous and widely traveled Haverly’s Colored Minstrels, whom he served as musical director.

It is not clear where Finson got the information, since no references to any Sawyer sources are given, but I assume that Finson’s only sources were published scores, several of which identified Sawyer as the “Musical Director of Haverly’s Colored Minstrels.”

5 Jacob J. Sawyer, I’m de Captain of the Black Cadets (Boston, MA, USA: White, Smith & Co., 1881). This score is contained in the digital collection “Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, Ca. 1870 to 1885” by the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

6 Ibid., 219. This example in Finson’s book shows the beginning of the second stanza of Jacob J. Sawyer’s “Blow, Gabriel, Blow”.

7 Ibid., 219–220.

8 See the title pages of Jacob J. Sawyer, The Coonville Guards (Philadelphia, PA, USA: Lee & Walker, 1881); Jacob J. Sawyer, Coonville Guards Parade (Philadelphia, PA, USA: Lee & Walker, 1881); Jacob J. Sawyer, I’m de Captain of the Black Cadets (Boston, MA, USA: White, Smith & Co., 1881); Jacob J. Sawyer, The Awkward Squad of the Famous Black Cadets (Boston, MA, USA: White, Smith & Co., 1881). These scores are contained in the digital collection “Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, Ca. 1870 to 1885” by the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. See also the title page of Jacob J. Sawyer, I’m De Sargent Ob De Coonville Guards (Chicago, IL, USA: White, Smith & Co., 1881). This score also contains the following inscription on its title page: “Respectfully dedicated to and sung with immense success everywhere by Billy Banks & Billy Kersands, of Haverly’s Colored Minstrels.”
Minstrels” or “Musical Director, Haverly’s Colored Minstrels” on the title page underneath the composer's name. (As an example, see Figure 1.) Later in the same chapter of his book, Finson mentioned Sawyer one more time:

*Skits featuring black target companies enjoyed a vogue in many minstrel companies, and for one of the largest, Haverly’s Colored Minstrels, Jacob J. Sawyer wrote “I’m De Sargent Ob De Coonville Guards” (1881), “Coonville Guards” (1881), and “I’m de Captain ob the Black Cadets” (1881).*

While Finson must get credit for mentioning Sawyer and for placing him into a history of minstrel songs, Eileen Southern provided biographical information on Sawyer as far as it was known when I came across the composer’s name in 2011.

### 2. Sawyer’s Published Compositions

About 22 of Jacob J. Sawyer's compositions are listed in WorldCat, a handful of which are available in two to three libraries each and most of them only in one library each. However, the digital collection “Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, Ca. 1870 to 1885” by the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., contains close to 50 of Sawyer’s compositions, which have recently been scanned and are available online. Some of the scores contain information about the composer’s affiliation with a particular performance ensemble, such as Sawyer’s aforementioned position as “Musical Director of the Haverly’s Colored Minstrels” in works published in 1881. These and other affiliations indicated in the publication of compositions by Sawyer are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Affiliation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1879-80</td>
<td>Pianist for the Hyers Sisters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>Musical Director of the Haverly’s Colored Minstrels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>Pianist of the Slayton Ideal Company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1884-85</td>
<td>Musical Director of the Nashville Students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

9 Finson, *Voices That Are Gone*, 225.
11 See footnote 7.
12 See Jacob J. Sawyer, *My Lord is Writin’ Down Time* (Chicago, IL, USA: National Music Company, 1883); Jacob J. Sawyer, *Ise Gwine to Git Home Byme Bye* (Chicago, IL, USA: National Music Company, 1883); Jacob J. Sawyer, *Ring Dem Chimin’ Bells* (Chicago, IL, USA: National Music Company, 1883); Jacob J. Sawyer, *Yes, I'll be Dar* (Chicago, IL, USA: National Music Company, 1883). All of these scores are contained in the digital collection “Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, Ca. 1870 to 1885” by the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Although each song is published as a separate soft cover, they all are published under the main “collection” title *Quintette of Beautiful Jubilee Songs*, and all song titles are listed on the main title page of the collection. I have not been able to find a copy of the fifth song of this collection that is listed first on the collection title page: *De Golden Chariot*.
13 This affiliation can be found on Jacob I. [sic] Sawyer, *Hear dem Evening bells* (Portland, OR, USA: D. W. Prentice, 1884). This score also contains the inscription “Sung Nightly with immense success by Miss Kitty Brown”. The following year, the inscription “Sung Nightly by the Nashville Students with Immense Success” can be found on the cover of Jacob J. Sawyer, *Listen to dem Ding, Dong Bells* (Cleveland, OH, USA: S. Brainard’s Sons, 1885), which lists Sawyer as “Prof. Jacob J. Sawyer”. Both scores are contained in the digital collection “Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, Ca. 1870 to 1885” by the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.
Since Sawyer turned 23 years old in 1879, and since he died in 1885, it can be assumed that this list of affiliations is complete, or that these affiliations are at least the major affiliations that Sawyer had. The Hyers Sisters were well-known singers and pioneers of African-American musical theater\(^\text{15}\), while Haverly’s Colored Minstrels was a successful black minstrelsy group owned and managed by Jack H. Haverly (1837-1901)\(^\text{16}\). The Slayton Ideal Company was a jubilee troupe by African-American actor and singer Sam Lucas (died 1916\(^\text{17}\)). Finally, the financially successful and very popular Kansas-City-based “Nashville Students and Colored Concert Company” was managed by the African-American Preston T. Wright (1857-1898); it toured nationally, performing vocal and instrumental music, dance, and comedy\(^\text{18}\).

Numerous publications of Sawyer’s music also contain dedications. Information on the individuals to whom his music has been dedicated is subject to further research.

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\(^{14}\) Jacob J. Sawyer, *Out of Bondage Waltz*, Op. 2 (Cincinnati, OH, USA: Geo. D. Newhall & Co., 1979). This score is contained in the digital collection “Music for the Nation: American Sheet Music, Ca. 1870 to 1885” by the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. While the cover page of the score lists “waltzes” in plural, the title inside the score lists “waltz” as singular. Indeed, the score only contains one waltz.


\(^{17}\) Sam Lucas’s date of birth is unknown.

3. **Genealogy and Newspaper Databases for Rediscovering Forgotten Composes**

I found it intriguing that a composer whose compositions were widely published and even included by James M. Trotter would be largely forgotten. Not even his date of birth and date of death were known to Eileen Southern. To find more biographical information, I turned to the standard databases for research in music as well as in humanities in general – to no avail. I searched on the internet, which proved to be difficult, as “Jacob Sawyer” was a common name. I finally subscribed to several commercial genealogy and newspaper databases: www.genealogybank.com, www.ancestry.com, and www.newspaperarchive.com.

Before turning to these databases, I had already searched in academic newspaper databases, such as *19th Century US Newspapers* by Gale-Cengage Learning, in which I could not find Jacob Sawyer. The much larger and richer commercial genealogy databases, however, contained numerous documents about Sawyer. Searching in such databases is a task that requires much time and patience, as the vast majority of search results were either about other Jacob Sawyers, or the search results were faulty because “Jacob” may have appeared in one name and “Sawyer” in another on the same page of the document. In addition, not all documents are indexed correctly, as the optical text recognition may have been incorrect.

Most difficult was the initial search for the ‘correct’ Jacob Sawyer, as Eileen Southern’s information provided a relatively large (and incorrect) window for Sawyer’s birth. The name “Jacob Sawyer” appeared in many census records, and I could only identify the correct Sawyer after weeks of going through many census records and many newspaper articles by noticing the name “Ellen Sawyer” in a newspaper article about the Nashville Students and Jacob Sawyer19, which I could then match to one of the census records that listed Ellen underneath Jacob’s name as his sister. Thus, I could finally identify Sawyer in three census records (1860, 1870, and 1880).20 At this point, I had not yet found any information about Sawyer’s death, nor the date of birth, and so I continued looking for documents on Sawyer beyond the 1880s, up until the mid-20th century, to no avail. By comparing the dates on which the census information were taken with Sawyer’s age listed in the census records, the three census records enabled me at least to narrow his possible date of birth to “between 30 July 1856 and 4 June 1857”. It was not until many months later that I could find the birth record (see Figure 3) on www.ancestry.com, listing his date of birth as 5 November, 1856. While Sawyer is listed in this birth record as “Jacob A. Sawyer”, the middle initial must have been an error or possibly an abbreviation for a middle name later not used or changed; all other information in this record, including the names of Sawyer’s parents, match with other records on the composer.

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19 See “Our Hub Letter”, New York Globe (Saturday, January 19, 1884), p. 4. Accessed on February 20, 2015, via www.genealogybank.com. This is also the article that names Jacob Sawyer as “our favorite Prof Jacob J. Sawyer” that Eileen Southern mentions in her 1882 article (see footnote 3).

20 These census records were found via www.ancestry.com.
With the newly gained information, the exact date of birth, I could eventually also find the death record (Figure 4), listing the date of his passing as June 3, 1885, and identifying the cause of death as tuberculosis.

Figure 3: Birth Register, Listing Jacob Sawyer Second-to-Last on this Excerpt.21

Figure 4: Birth Register, Listing Jacob Sawyer Second-to-Last on this Excerpt.22


The first newspaper articles mentioning Jacob Sawyer are from Cincinnati in 1879, when he applied for a music teacher position. In the context of Sawyer’s candidacy for the music teacher position, a misunderstanding by a reporter led to the publication of a local newspaper article in which Sawyer was mentioned as being a candidate for a college position; more specifically, Sawyer sent a letter (“card”) to the newspaper to clarify that his candidacy was for a music teacher position, not for a college position (see Figure 5); because of this “card”, we learn that Sawyer was examined and recommended for the music teacher position and that he was studying or taking lessons in music theory and violin at the College of Music of Cincinnati at that time. The Education Board meeting notes were regularly published, so that the newspapers reported about Sawyer’s candidacy for the music teacher position and that he was ultimately not chosen.23

![Figure 5: Sawyer Letter to the Cincinnati Daily Gazette (August 20, 1879)](image)

Interestingly, one of the other applications for the teacher position had bribed a Board member, which caused an investigation, about which, in turn, was reported in

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23 See, for example, “Music Teachers”, *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* [Cincinnati, OH, USA] (Tuesday, August 26, 1879), 6; “Board of Education”, *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* [Cincinnati, OH, USA] (Tuesday, November 4, 1879), 3. Both accessed on February 20, 2015, via www.genealogybank.com.

the newspaper. As part of the investigation, all applicants, including Sawyer, were questioned, and thus mentioned in articles reporting on the investigation.\textsuperscript{25}

While Sawyer was in Cincinnati, Ohio, he also caused a minor disturbance and was charged with “disorderly conduct”, which was reported in a newspaper article: as part of a Quartet, returning from a church choir rehearsal late at night, he and his friends serenaded “The Gravedigger’s Sigh”, which was heard by a police officer and resulted in their arrest (see Figure 6).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure6.png}
\caption{Cincinnati Daily Gazette Article (August 20, 1879).\textsuperscript{26}}
\end{figure}

Other newspaper articles reported on the publication of new music, for example the publication of Sawyer’s \textit{Seventh Exposition Grand March} in 1879\textsuperscript{27}, the publication

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} See “Educational Music”, \textit{Cincinnati Daily Gazette} [Cincinnati, OH, USA] (Thursday, September 4, 1879), 8; “Board of Education”, \textit{Cincinnati Daily Gazette} [Cincinnati, OH, USA] (Thursday, September 4, 1879), 10; “The Bribery Investigation”, \textit{Cincinnati Daily Gazette} [Cincinnati, OH, USA] (Tuesday, September 23, 1879), 10; “Educational Music”, \textit{Cincinnati Daily Gazette} [Cincinnati, OH, USA] (Tuesday, November 4, 1879), 3. All accessed on February 20, 2015, via \url{www.genealogybank.com}.
\item \textsuperscript{26} “Oh! The Gay Troubadours”, \textit{Cincinnati Daily Gazette} [Cincinnati, OH, USA] (Thursday, August 14, 1879), 6. Accessed on February 20, 2015, via \url{www.genealogybank.com}.
\item \textsuperscript{27} See “New Publications”, \textit{Cincinnati Daily Gazette} [Cincinnati, OH, USA] (Monday, September 15, 1879), 11. Accessed on February 20, 2015, via \url{www.genealogybank.com}.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
of *Lotta March* in 1881\(^28\), the publication of his *Lotta Schottisch* in 1882\(^29\), or the publication of *Little Sweetheart Schottische* in 1882\(^30\). And other newspaper articles reported about performances by Sawyer (Figure 7).\(^31\)

*Figure 7: Concert Review in the Daily Gazette (Rockford, IL) (November 15, 1879).*\(^32\)

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\(^31\) See for example an untitled review of a performance by the Hyers Sisters, Sam Lucas, and Jacob Sawyer, the latter of whom performed his *Out of Bondage Waltz* that night, in the *Daily Gazette* [Rockford, IL, USA] (Saturday, November 15, 1879), 4. Another example is the untitled announcement of a performance by Sam Lucas, Ellen and Jacob Sawyer, and other musicians in the *Boston Herald* [Boston, MA, USA] (Sunday, September 10, 1882), 3. Accessed on February 20, 2015, via www.genealogybank.com.

\(^32\) *Daily Gazette* [Rockford, IL, USA] (Saturday, November 15, 1879), 4.
4. Jacob J. Sawyer’s Revised Short Biography

While his early death from tuberculosis let him sink into oblivion, it was with the help of online genealogy and music score databases that some of his biography could be reconstructed. While not long, the following biography contains much more information than E. Southern’s entry in her biographical dictionary mentioned earlier.

Pianist, composer, teacher, and arranger Jacob J. Sawyer (Jacob J. A. Sawyer) was born on November 5, 1856, in Boston, Massachusetts. He was the son of Jacob and Elizabeth Sawyer. From at least 1879 through 1880, he was the pianist for the Hyers Sisters Troupe, which brought him to Cincinnati, Ohio, no later than mid-1879. There, he took lessons in music theory and in violin at the College of Music of Cincinnati. He also composed a piano march (1879) for the Seventh Cincinnati Industrial Exhibition in 1879. He applied for a music teacher position in Cincinnati, but was not chosen. Sawyer returned to his home in Boston, where the 1880 census lists him as “Laborer.” An African American composer, he wrote songs for the Haverly’s Colored Minstrels, of which he was the Musical Director at least in 1881. A series of his compositions published in 1883 lists him as the pianist for the Slayton Ideal Company. Several documents from 1884 and 1885 name Sawyer as the Musical Director of the Nashville Students. All of Sawyer’s known professional engagements resulted in extensive touring as well as in compositions specifically written for those ensembles. His work comprises numerous vocal compositions with piano accompaniment as well as dances for solo piano. James M. Trotter reprinted one of Sawyer’s marches in his 1880 book *Music and Some Highly Musical People*. Sawyer died from tuberculosis at age 28 on June 3, 1885, in Boston.

5. Selected Works by Jacob J. Sawyer

**Vocal Compositions:**

*Awkward Squad of the Famous Black Cadets* (lyrics by J. J. Sawyer) for voice and piano, 1881.

*The Coonville Guards* for voice and piano, 1881.

*Coonville Guards Parade* for voice and piano, 1881.

*I’m de Captain of the Black Cadets* for voice and piano, 1881.

*Let Your Tears Kiss the Flowers on My Grave* (lyrics by W. King) for voice and piano, 1881.

*Hark, Baby, Hark* (lyrics by W. Welch), 1881.

*Mary’s Gone with a Coon* (lyrics by W. Kersands), 1881

*Oleander Blossom’s Birthday Party* (lyrics by J. Sawyer) for voice and piano, 1881.

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34 This work list was assembled with information from online (digital) score collections, library catalogs, and newspaper articles. Some of these compositions were only mentioned or listed in documents for which I have not yet found the actual scores (in either electronic format or hard copy).
The Old Kentucky Home, 1881
Our Educated Feet (lyrics by C. Crusoe) for voice, piano, and dance, 1881
Pity the Poor Ones Who Wander the Streets (lyrics by W. King) for voice, SATB choir, and piano, 1882.
Blow, Gabriel, Blow for voice, SATB choir, and piano, 1882.
De Coon Dinner for voice and piano, 1882.
Hilo Hale for voice, SATB choir, and piano, 1882.
Oh Mother, Mother Shoo the Hens (Comic Ditty) (lyrics by F. H. Evans) for voice and piano, 1882.
Old Uncle Sheppard for voice and piano, 1882.
Put on de Golden Crown for voice, SATB choir, and piano, 1882.
We Never Speak as We Pass by: Song and Chorus for voice and piano, 1882.
Gwine to Ring dem Hebenly Bells (lyrics by S. Lucas) for voice, 4-part chorus, and piano, 1883.
Hail, Jerusalem Morn (lyrics by J. J. Sawyer) for voice, 4-part chorus, and piano, 1883.
Hand Me Down dem Golden Shoes for voice, SATB choir, and piano, 1883.
I'se Gwine to Get Home Bye Bye for voice, SATB choir, and piano, 1883.
My Lord Is Writin’ Down Time for voice and piano, 1883.
Ring dem Chimin’ Bells for voice, 4-part chorus, and piano, 1883.
Yes, I’ll be Dar for voice, 4-part chorus, and piano, 1883.
De Golden Chariot, 1883.
Hear dem Evening Bells for voice, SATB choir, and piano, 1884.
Heart’s Ease (lyrics by E. P. Smith) for voice and piano, 1884.
Little Sweetheart, Say Good Bye (for J. J. Sawyer) for voice, SATB choir, and piano, 1884.
Norah Clare [arrangement] (lyrics by S. Bradbury, melody by S. Gavotte) for voice and piano, 1884.
When the Robins Come Again: Waltz Song for voice and piano, 1884.
Listen to dem Ding, Dong, Bells (lyrics by J. J. Sawyer) for voice, 4-part chorus, and piano, 1885.

Compositions for Piano:
Welcome to the Era (March), 1877
Out of Bondage Waltz [op.2], 1879
Seventh Exposition Grand March [op.3], 1879
All the Rage (Grand March), 1880
The Bijou (March), 1882
Etta Polka, 1882
Jersey Lily Waltzes, 1882
“Little Sweetheart” Schottische, 1882
Lotta Schottisch, 1882
Old “49” Schottische, 1882
Operatic Medley [arrangement], 1882
Patience Lancers, 1882
Rosebud (Gavotte), 1882
Return of Spring (Polka), 1882
Bob-o-link (Mazurka), 1883
The Rankins’ March, 1883
Passion Flower Waltz, 1884
Bicycle Waltzes, 1885

6. Final Remarks

Commercial genealogy databases as well as digitized (online) collections of music scores were the main sources for rediscovering, and reconstructing the biography of, Jacob J. Sawyer. While this research project is not yet completed, the main biographical facts and the composer’s affiliations with important musical ensembles have been uncovered. Future research may continue with searching for literature and documents on the well-known musicians that Sawyer was associated with, such as the Hyers Sisters, Sam Lucas, the Haverly’s Colored Minstrels, and the Nashville Students. Some publications of music by Sawyer may still be found in archives or antiquarian music stores. Furthermore, the music itself needs to be analyzed, performed, and recorded.

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