

OLD TIME TUNE OF THE WEEK, 11-14-14

BOYNE WATER

Attending a workshop and jam with West Virginian fiddler Franklin George was quite a thrill and I wanted to learn one of his tunes in honor of the occasion. After listening to lots of his music I settled upon the tune Boyne Water, named for a battle on an English river in 1690, and I've since discovered it also gave birth to the American song Backside Albany.

Boyne Water is a very old ballad describing the fighting between King James and King Williams. This [Wikipedia article on Battle of the Boyne](#) gives historical details and background. [The original lyrics to The Boyne Water describing the battle](#) ends with the song's last verse praising the brave leadership of King William:

Come let us all with heart and voice applaud our lives' defender
Who at the Boyne his valor showed and made his foe surrender
To God above, the praise we'll give now and ever after,
And bless the glorious memory of King William that crossed the water.

And this link goes into more detail, including the biblical references in the song: [a folklorist's analysis of The Battle of the Boyne lyrics](#)

Samuel Bayard, in his book [Dance to the Fiddle and March to the Fife](#), dates the earliest published source of Boyne Water to a German lute book of 1694. You can read some of its [historical background on the Ceolas site](#). The historic event of the battle near the Boyne River between William and James II in 1690 had deep consequences for Ireland. As Donel O'Sullivan put it in his biography of the famous Irish harpist Turlough O'Carolan, for Ireland this battle was "the beginning of the end." The tune has Irish roots as well, with the melody in such tunes as *Leading the Calves to Pasture*, *To Look for My Calf I sent My Child*, and *One Pleasant Morn Beside the Glen*.

Boyne Water's melody was adopted in another song, Backside Albany, written by Micah Hawkins in 1815 to parody the British defeat in the war of 1812. The first title was "The Siege of Plattsburgh," but was changed to Backside Albany because those were its first words. [Lyrics to Siege of Plattsburgh](#) reveals that it comes from the perspective of a black sailor. One of the historic incidents leading to the War of 1812 was impressment to the British Navy of American sailors in 1807, including four African Americans. An interesting feature of Backside Albany is that it may have been the first time a black-faced performance received widespread favor by popularizing the song in theatres. [Discussion of Backside Albany as the first black-faced minstrel performance](#) includes a historic poster illustrating a minstrel singer performing it.

Franklin George was adept at reading music and learned this from [Howe's Violin Tutor](#) according to Paul Hostetter, a Santa Cruz luthier and BHO member. There's discussion in an archived BHO thread with comments beginning with Paul and including Brendan Doyle, Dan Gellert, and Tony Spadaro

(oldwoodchuck): <http://www.banjohangout.org/archive/117033> I understand Melvin Wine played it, too, and his version came to Cathy Fink via Joe Fallon, but I haven't heard it yet. Please let me know if it's available to hear.

You'll enjoy these versions:

[Cathy Fink's Boyne River](#)

[Bob Blanham's Back Side of Albany](#) (from Gumbo Chaff's Complete Preceptor for Banjo, 1851)

[Paul Draper's Backside Albany](#)

[Timothy Twiss's Backside of Albany](#)

[Clawhammer version](#)

[My clawhammer banjo version](#)

I never realized this tune would be so historically deep, yet it's been a common experience I've had every time when researching a tune for the old-timeTune of the Week. My versions in sawmill tuning are a combination of Franklin George and Cathy Fink's. I hope you'll give it a try and also enjoy learning the dual history of Boyne Water and Backside Albany.