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RESEARCH ARTICLE

“No Place Is So Dear to My Childhood”: Evangelicalism, Nostalgia, and the History of an American Hymn

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Abstract

This article tracks the surprising history of a love ballad about a lost sweetheart that went on to become a celebrated gospel hymn about the rural roots of America’s greatness. Titled “The Little Brown Church,” but sometimes called “The Church in the Wildwood,” the song’s evolution speaks to the ways in which nostalgia became central to the social and religious imagination of those American Protestants call themselves “evangelicals.” Though it first appeared in college songbooks after its publication in 1865, “The Little Brown Church” eventually became a favorite of evangelists, revivalists, and other gospel singers at the dawn of the twentieth century. For these new singers, “The Little Brown Church” spoke to more than just the simple faith they wished to restore. It also illustrated the centrality of white Protestants to the American experience at a moment when the hold these believers had on the nation was beginning to slip. And they would alter both the lyrics and the church’s history to bring the two in line. The process not only reveals how nostalgia for a bygone era became vital to those who think of themselves as evangelicals in the twentieth century, but also how evangelicalism itself is something of a historical construction.

William S. Pitts was away from home and broke. The 34-year-old Upstate New York native had come to Chicago by way of Iowa sometime in the 1860s after having spent much of his adulthood teaching music in country schools. He had come to the city to better his lot, enrolling in Rush Medical College after having apprenticed with a local physician back home. But soon the countryside felt far away, and his tuition bill felt near. To remedy both situations, Pitts took out a song whose words and music he had composed several years earlier and sold it to a local music publisher named H. M. Higgins in 1865.¹

¹Details of Pitts’ background is something of a mystery, but the basic details of this moment can be found in “Origins of a Song,” *Turner County [SD] Herald*, September 7, 1911, accessed via *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/>

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Titled “The Little Brown Church,” but also sometimes called “The Church in the Wildwood,” the song remains a unique contribution to the canon of American Protestant hymnody. In contrast to many gospel hymns, the tune lacks any reference to Jesus or God. In fact, Pitts does not mention the divine at all. Rather, the locus of religious meaning in the song comes from Pitts’s recollections of the church he claimed to have attended as a child and the sense of longing those memories create. As the first verse reads,

There’s a church in the valley by the wildwood,
 No lovelier spot in the dale,
 No place is so dear to my childhood,
 As the little brown church in the vale.

And why was this church so dear? Because the city, where Pitts now lived, was the site of conflict and complexity. It was where change, struggle, and a tuition bill loomed. The simple country church of yore, meanwhile, was where friends, family, and religious harmony once lay. This contrast is implicit, for Pitts never calls out the modern world by name. But the song is deeply nostalgic for a lost, imagined past. Tonally, the music is in a low register, repeatedly shifting downward rather than rising with hope. The song’s somber, four-four pace, meanwhile, resembles something like a funeral march. The lyrics then reinforce this mood by describing a place that is both chronologically and spatially distant. As the sheet music instructs the altos to sing during the song’s chorus while the tenors chant “come, come, come, come,”

Come to the church by the wildwood,
 Oh, come to the church in the dale.
 No place is so dear to my childhood,
 As the little brown church in the vale.²

The song went on to become a sensation. According to the database *Hymnary.org*, “The Little Brown Church” has appeared in close to a third of all Protestant hymnals, while the Mormon Tabernacle Choir has listed it as one of the thirty best hymns in Christian history. Indeed, the song’s importance to local church life is such that the tune has made several appearances in American popular culture. Artists such as June Carter Cash, Ella Fitzgerald, Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, and country music group Alabama all have recorded a version of the song. There even is an entire episode of *The Andy Griffith Show* built around the hymn. In the episode, which aired in 1963, a city slicker stuck in Mayberry is reminded to slow down and enjoy life’s simple pleasures as main characters Andy Griffith and Barney Fife sing “The Little Brown Church” on Andy’s porch. By the episode’s end, the stranded traveler is concocting reasons to stay over in Mayberry having been wooed by the faith and familiarity of his hosts. “You people are living in another world! This is the twentieth century!” the exasperated traveler proclaims before realizing the benefits of Mayberry’s antiquarian rhythms.³

sn2001063133/1911-09-07/ed-1/seq-6/; and Isabella Powers, “‘The Little Brown Church in the Vale’: Its Author and Its Inspiration,” *Annals of Iowa* 12, no. 2 (1915): 102.

²Wm. S. Pitts, *Little Brown Church: Song and Chorus* (Boston: Oliver Ditson & Co., 1865), unpaginated.

³“Man in a Hurry,” *Andy Griffith Show*, season 3, episode 13, originally aired January 14, 1963. On the hymn’s popularity more broadly see, “Little Brown Church,” *Hymnary.org*, Calvin University, accessed

Such popularity has made the rural Iowa sanctuary that supposedly inspired Pitts's song an international tourist attraction as well (see [Figure 1](#)). While a dedicated group of locals comprise a permanent congregation, the church receives tens of thousands of visitors every year. In particular, the site has become a popular wedding venue for white Protestants who desire a country backdrop to their matrimonial photos. According to the congregation, more than 74,000 weddings have been held at the historic site since its founding, including that of Iowa Senator Chuck Grassley. The congregation maintains a small giftshop for these guests, where a freewill donation allows travelers to take home piggy banks, paperweights, postcards, or salt and pepper shakers made in the image of the Little Brown Church. All of it has come to make the church something of an icon for white, Protestant American Christianity. As one recent travel guide put it, "If you're Protestant and were raised . . . in the twentieth century, you likely grew up singing this hymn."⁴

There is just one problem, however. Very little of this story is actually true.

Besides the fact that Pitts never resided in the town where the Little Brown Church now stands, the edifice associated with the song was built almost ten years after he had composed the tune. What is more, the aspiring physician who wrote the song never intended it to become a gospel hit. Rather, Pitts composed it as a love ballad, which he bathed in the tropes of Victorian sentimentality. According to the tune's *original* lyrics—for the version that many sing today contains a new verse—the Little Brown Church is important not because of the lost religious world that it evokes. Instead, the church's significance stems from the fact that next to the sanctuary lays a cemetery that holds the remains of a long-lost love. As Pitt's original third verse reads,

There close by the church in the valley,
Lies one that I loved so well,
She sleeps, sweetly sleeps 'neath the willow,
Disturb not her rest in the vale.⁵

A celebration of faith, family, and the American heartland this is not.

But the affection that many white Protestants have shown for the Little Brown Church is nonetheless revealing. It speaks to a trend that many have observed about that amorphous group of Protestants known as evangelicals. Long thought to be defined by their commitment to a constellation of theological principles rooted in the perspicacity of scripture, the atoning work of Christ, the importance of a personal conversion experiences, and the impulse to convert others, "evangelicals," scholars and journalists now note, have come to be animated by a politics of nostalgia that is often tinged with racial grievance as well. The groundswell of support that President Donald J. Trump

January 7, 2022, https://hymnary.org/text/theres_a_church_in_the_valley_by_the_wil; Mormon Tabernacle Choir, *Rock of Ages: 30 Favorite Hymns* (Sony BMG Music Entertainment, 1992); Richard Thompson, "The Story Behind the Song," *Bluegrass Today* (February 26, 2015): <https://bluegrasstoday.com/the-story-behind-the-song-church-in-the-wildwood/>. Versions of the song recorded by various artists were determined by searching common music streaming services.

⁴It is a contention that I can confirm, for my father sang "The Church in the Wildwood" to me as a lullaby when I was a child. Quote from "Hymn Preceded Church in the Wildwood," *Lexington County Chronicle* (July 24, 2019): <https://www.lexingtonchronicle.com/holy-cow-history/hymn-preceded-church-wildwood>. See also "History," *Little Brown Church in the Vale* website, accessed February 8, 2022, <https://littlebrownchurch.org/the-church/history/>; Grace Boatright, "Landmarks on the Backroads," *Good Day! A Quarterly Publication of the National Grange* 5, no. 1 (2021): 88–94.

⁵Pitts, *Little Brown Church*, unpaginated.



Figure 1. The Little Brown Church in the Vale. Photograph by the author.

received from those who identify as born again in particular shed light on what many call “white evangelical nostalgia.”⁶ But a spate of recent work on homeschool history textbooks, evangelical museums, and Christian walking tours of the nation’s capital has also shown just how important this aggrieved historical consciousness has become to this prominent religious community. In addition to their doctrinal commitments,

⁶On the discovery of “white evangelical nostalgia” in the wake of Trump’s rise, see Robert P. Jones, “How ‘Value Voters’ Became ‘Nostalgia Voters,’” *The Atlantic* (February 23, 2016): <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/the-trump-revelation/470559/>; Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “How Nostalgia for White Christian America Drove so many Americans to Vote for Trump,” *Washington Post* (5 January 2017): https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/how-nostalgia-for-white-christian-america-drove-so-many-americans-to-vote-for-trump/2017/01/04/4ef6d686-b033-11e6-be1c-8cec35b1ad25_story.html; John Fea, *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2018); Katherine Stewart, *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020); Kristin Kobez Du Mez, *Jesus and John Wayne: How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2020); Sara Posner, *Unholy: How White Christian Nationalists Powered the Trump Presidency, and the Devastating Legacy They Left Behind* (New York: Random House, 2021).

folks who identify as evangelical are now also likely to believe that the United States is in some indelible way a “Christian Nation,” and that preserving or restoring Christianity’s centrality to American life is a guiding principle of their religious and political engagements.⁷

Yet as much as “The Little Brown Church” corroborates the white evangelical nostalgia that many now observe, the song, the church, and the history between the two also significantly amends this view. The song’s century and a half existence, for example, suggests that the origins of evangelicalism’s nostalgic longings can be found at the dawn of the twentieth century, not the twenty-first. And it is a history that begins not with presidential politics, but with the mass migration of white, native-born Protestants of Anglo-European descent away from the countryside and toward the city in the decades after the Civil War. Protestants a lot like William S. Pitts. Raised amidst largely homogenous populations of fellow white Protestants who paid at least partial deference to their local church, these migrants came to experience their physical relocation as a kind of cultural displacement as well. Their way of living was now one of many ways of being in the city—and a decidedly minority one at that. Addressing this sense of loss and dispossession came to define the social and devotional lives of those who considered themselves evangelical. The Little Brown Church’s rebirth as an icon of white, Protestant Americanism was intimately a part of this trend.

At a much deeper level, however, the history of “The Little Brown Church” also underscores the ways in which modern American evangelicalism is as much a socio-historical construction as it is a theological one. In the absence of any kind of denominational or ecclesiastical authority, those who think of themselves as evangelical have long looked to the past to validate their social reality. The people, places, and events cited by believers as founders of their faith serve as more than simply exemplars. They also endow an otherwise nebulous religious movement with social and historical coherence. In other words, evangelicalism in America is less of a messy, if stable, religious tradition that has existed across time and space. Rather, it is a means of constituting a community through history. The commemoration of specific revivals, revivalists, or other adopted ancestors narrate the contours of a tradition, call forth an imagined community or believers, and establish criteria for membership. Put simply, evangelicalism in America has been bound together not only by the stories told in scripture, but by narratives of the more recent past as well.⁸

⁷On the implicit and explicit Christian nationalism of modern American evangelicalism, see John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016); Randall J. Stevens and Karl W. Giberson, *The Anointed: Evangelical Truth in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2011); Candida R. Moss and Joel S. Baden, *Bible Nation: The United States of Hobby Lobby* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Jill Hicks-Keeton and Cavan Concannon, eds., *The Museum of the Bible: A Critical Introduction* (Lanham, MD: Fortress Press, 2019); Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Lauren R. Kerby, *Saving History: How White Evangelicals Tour the Nation’s Capital and Redeem a Christian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020); Kathleen Wellman, *Hijacking History: How the Christian Right Teaches History and Why it Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021); Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021); and Devin C. Manzullo-Thomas, *Exhibiting Evangelicalism: Commemoration and Religion’s Presence of the Past* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2022).

⁸My use of the term “imagined communities” comes, of course, from Benedict Anderson’s classic work on the ways that nation states foster a sense of belonging in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the*

Hymns, of course, have long been vital to the vibrancy of American evangelicalism. Ever since the Wesley brothers took the Protestant world by storm, revivalists have needed a musical partner in order to create what the pioneering historian of gospel music Sandra S. Sizer called a “community of intense feeling” that amplified and validated the preacher’s message.⁹ But in centering this community upon a sense of social and cultural grievance, “The Little Brown Church” also contributed to evangelicalism’s racialization as the religion of white, Protestant Americanism. For in addition to calling the country to return to the Lord, celebrations of the Little Brown Church and other idioms of evangelicalism that evoke an “old time religion” also articulated a desire to return to a time when white Protestants, without question, ruled.

Like all good myths, details related to the origins of “The Little Brown Church” are muddled and few. About Pitts we know little, save what he shared later in life after his song received a newfound acclaim. About the church in rural Iowa that became associated with the song we know even less. But the decades surrounding both the publication of the “The Little Brown Church” and the construction of a sanctuary that came to bear that name do offer clues as to how the two became intimately—if artificially—linked. It is a story not just of faith on America’s frontier, but also a mix of ambition and boosterism.

Pitts, for instance, was born in upstate New York in August of 1830 and initially migrated to Wisconsin sometime before 1860. Whether he came with his parents in 1847 or in 1849 with only a dream depends on what account one reads. The same is true of Pitts’s musical talent. According to some sources, Pitts received training from a musician associated with Boston’s renowned Hayden and Handel Society. Others, meanwhile, note that Pitts’s mother “was a sweet singer and had much literary ability” who gifted her talents to her son. Whatever the particulars, Pitts did eventually find his way to Rock County, Wisconsin, where he embarked on a career as a music teacher and, eventually, married one Ann Eliza Warren.¹⁰

It is that last detail that proved particularly salient to the Little Brown Church’s history. For as Pitts would later relate in every source, he first conceived of the song while

Origin and Spread of Nationalism (New York: Verso, 1983). But I am also drawing upon Danièle Hervieu-Léger here, who argues that religions, as social bodies, take shape through what she calls a “chain of memory.” For Hervieu-Léger, the “expression of believing” that dominates Western definitions of religion can be described more accurately as a “memory of continuity” that “confers transcendent authority upon the past” through a “legitimizing reference to an authorized version of such memory”—in other words, an official history—that is fashioned by social actors. See *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, trans. Simon Lee (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 87 and 97. My thinking on evangelicalism as the ongoing construction of social bodies is also indebted to Michael J. Altman, “‘Religion, Religions, Religious’ in America: Toward a Smithian Account of ‘Evangelicalism,’” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 31 (2019): 71–82; and Daniel Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated: Books and the Business of Religion in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 8–12.

⁹Sandra S. Sizer, *Gospel Hymns and Social Religion: The Rhetoric of Nineteenth-Century Revivalism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 52. See also Stephen Marini, “From Classical to Modern: Hymnody and the Development of American Evangelicalism, 1737–1970,” in Mark A. Noll and Edith Blumhofer, eds., *Singing the Lord’s Song in a Strange Land: Hymnody in the History of American Protestantism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 1–38.

¹⁰On Pitts’s background, see Powers, “‘The Little Brown Church in the Vale,’” 191–193; “The Little Brown Church in the Vale,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 2, no. 3 (1919): 340–341; United State Census, 1860; Census Place: Union, Rock, Wisconsin; Roll: M653_1431; Page: 712; Family History Library Film: 805431.

on an extended trip to Iowa in the summer of 1857. Some sources relay that Pitts was visiting his fiancé after she and her family had relocated to the state sometime earlier. Others suggest that the music teacher might have been scouting a new school or identifying a physician to apprentice with so he could support his new bride. But they all recount that while on his trip, Pitts stayed for a time in a village called Bradford.¹¹

Located less than a hundred miles from Iowa's northeastern corner not far from the Cedar River, Bradford was then the emerging center of a recently organized Chickasaw County. Like the county itself, the town was as much a dream as a reality when Pitts arrived, with much of the area under construction. According to the county's earliest recorded history, Bradford boasted only a ruddy log cabin courthouse, a clapboard general store, and half of a hotel in the late 1850s, alongside a population that had tripled to about a thousand in just the last year. The growth was such that some in the community hoped that the town might eventually become a regional metropolis.¹² But when Pitts arrived in 1857, Bradford definitely lacked a church. Though a Rev. O. Littlefield had organized the First Congregational Society of Bradford in the fall of 1855, the congregation, by its own admission, was "few in number and poor in purse," which required them to meet in the homes of their members or, when the weather was nice, the lobby of the half-built hotel.¹³

Perhaps it was Bradford's lack of a sanctuary that ultimately inspired Pitts. For as he later recalled, the composer spent an afternoon that summer walking the town's borders when he found himself struck. With "Nature's carpet of green . . . on every side, making the landscape beautiful to look upon," Pitts envisioned a simple country church nestled in a grove of trees next to a cemetery where he someday might bury his wife.¹⁴ Upon his return to Wisconsin, Pitts sat down, composed the tune, and perhaps shared it with Ann Warren before their marriage. But according to Pitts, the tune initially remained unpublished, buried amidst the teacher's other compositions for several years.

Like every other Iowa farm town, Bradford eventually did get itself a church. But the sanctuary that emerged did so independent of Pitts's initial vision. In 1859, two years after Pitts first composed his tune and while he still lived in Wisconsin, a Rev. J. K. Nutting took the pastorate of Bradford's struggling Congregational society. According to Nutting, the congregation not only continued to meet in various locations when he arrived, but they also soon asked the preacher to take a pay cut after a number of townsmen enlisted to fight in the Civil War. The preacher agreed to the reduction in pay, but only on the condition that the congregation finally commit itself to building a proper place of worship. Construction began shortly thereafter, with the war repeatedly delaying the endeavor. But in December of 1864, the congregation formally dedicated the First Congregational Church of Bradford's new home.¹⁵

¹¹Powers, "The Little Brown Church in the Vale," 191–193; *Nashua Reporter*, February 14, 1901.

¹²W. E. Alexander, *History of Chickasaw and Howard Counties, Iowa* (Decorah, IA: Western Publishing Company, 1883), 125–126, 187, 191–195.

¹³*The Little Brown Church in Story and Song* (Bradford, IA: The First Congregational Church, Bradford, c. 1918), unpaginated.

¹⁴Powers, "The Little Brown Church in the Vale," 105. Some sources suggest that Pitts wrote the song in memory of his deceased first wife—hence the cemetery. And while searches for Pitts's marriage records turned up no results, the composer never mentions a deceased wife in any source in which he is cited. See, for example, *Nashua Reporter* January 24, 1901 and February 14, 1901.

¹⁵Powers, "The Little Brown Church in the Vale," 109–111; Alexander, *History of Chickasaw and Howard Counties*, 290–294.

It is at this point that the Little Brown Church's history becomes particularly shrouded by the opaque mists of myth and memory, for Pitts managed to miraculously reenter the sanctuary's history at this exact moment. According to Pitts, he returned to the region in 1862, settling with his family in a town called Fredericksburg so he could work under the observation of a local doctor named E. H. Olmstead.¹⁶ But according to legend, Pitts also received an invitation from the good people of Bradford to teach a music class at the town's private academy. The physician-in-training agreed, and supposedly was astonished to find a church in the exact spot where he had long ago envisioned one. In some sources, Pitts immediately gathered his students inside the church's unfinished walls to sing his tune. In others, Pitts makes an appearance at the church's dedication itself. But all claim that the first public singing of "The Little Brown Church" occurred in the shadow of the First Congregational Church of Bradford and suggest that the church's providential construction inspired Pitts to sell the song to a Chicago music publisher in 1865.¹⁷

The tale is certainly plausible. Bradford was only a day's ride from Fredericksburg, and the former's reputation as a potential city meant that the invitation would have carried a measure of prestige. Yet while the occasion is possible, it is also highly unlikely. For starters, the history of the Bradford Academy where Pitts claimed to have led a singing class throws the chronology into doubt. Chickasaw County mug books date the Academy's founding to at least the fall of 1865, the year of the song's publication and months after the church's dedication. The Academy's extant records, moreover, do not begin until 1867.¹⁸ But even more revealing is the fact that the Rev. J. K. Nutting makes absolutely no mention of Pitts or the song in any of his recollections about his ministry. In fact, Nutting recalled that the First Congregational Church of Bradford's dedication "proved extremely unfavorable." Only one of the dozen or so ministers that Nutting invited deigned to attend the affair, while the church clerk made no record of the event in the society's minutes, considering it "a failure, of which the less said the better."¹⁹

¹⁶I am indebted to Rush Medical School archivist Nathalie Wheaton for helping me understand the rhythms of nineteenth century American medical education. Wheaton to author, e-mail, February 10, 2022. See also *Twenty-Fifth Annual Announcement of Rush Medical College, Chicago, Illinois, for the Session of 1867-68, with Catalogue of Previous Sessions* (Chicago: George H. Fergus, 1867), 14; Alexander, *History of Chickasaw and Howard Counties*, 222; Powers, "The Little Brown Church in the Vale," 105-106. For other tales of the song's publication, see Bert Howdeshell, "The Author of a Once Popular Song," *Midland Monthly* V, no. 4 (1896): 310-311; Powers, "The Little Brown Church in the Vale," 105-111; "The Little Brown Church in the Vale," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 340-341.

¹⁷Powers, "The Little Brown Church in the Vale," 106; "The Little Brown Church in the Vale," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 340-341; *The Little Brown Church in Story and Song* (1918), unpaginated; Robert Herd Fairbairn, *History of Chickasaw and Howard Counties, Iowa* (Chicago: S. J. Clark Publishing Company, 1919), I: 228-231; *Montpelier Examiner* [SD], September 29, 1911, accessed via *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86091111/1911-09-29/ed-1/seq-3/>.

¹⁸It is also worth noting, however, that the Bradford Academy began in a building that once housed a county school. So, it could be that Pitts taught music in the building that became associated with the Academy, which still stands across the street from the Little Brown Church today. But the thrust of other evidence still places this in doubt. Fairbairn, *History of Chickasaw and Howard Counties*, I:226-227; *Unveiling of the Bronze Memorial Tablet at the Little Brown Church* (n.p., 1925), 12; Bradford Academy Records, 1867-1904, BL 160, folder 25, Iowa City Historical Library Manuscripts, State Historical Society of Iowa. My gratitude to archivist Allison Johnson, who made the Bradford Academy's records available to me from afar.

¹⁹Powers, "The Little Brown Church in the Vale," 114. See also Alexander, *History of Chickasaw and Howard Counties*, 290-292.

The song's publication history also works against the tale that Pitts sold his tune as an homage to the church, for the song initially was destined for popular songbooks and not Protestant hymnals. Pitts dedicated the first edition of the sheet music to his wife, whom he called "Nann," while artwork for later editions emphasized the tune's focus on conjugal love. An 1865 printing published in Boston includes a cover that foregrounds a courting couple and a young man grieving at a grave, while the church itself is pushed to the background, shrouded by the trees of the vale²⁰ (see Figure 2). In the decades following its publication, advertisements for Pitts's tune were found only alongside love ballads with titles such as "Kiss Me, Darling" and "Good Bye, but Come Again"—not religious music.²¹ The tune appears to have been particularly popular among university singing groups, for college songbooks were the only collections to feature the song at this time. One 1882 rendition by the Yale Glee Club went so far as to add a verse that leaned into the song's romantic qualities. As the club's additional verse reads, "Come to the church in the wildwood, / For there's where my love used to be; / She could dance, she could sing, she could turn a handspring, / She could climb up a sycamore tree."²²

Perhaps the greatest piece of evidence against some special relationship between the church and the song is the fact that "The Little Brown Church" was but one of many tunes that Pitts sold in order to finance his education in medicine. In fact, Pitts became something of a popular songwriter in the decade after the Civil War, producing at least a dozen other ballads dedicated to life and young love. Songs such as "Ally Ray," "Bonnie Kait," and "Nellie Wildwood" swooned over the virtuous qualities of pure young women, while "Angels Took Her Home" and "The Isles Beyond the River" continued Pitts's interest in mourning love lost. Though Pitts did author a handful of Sunday school tunes and temperance hymns, the bulk of his work reveled in young love, celebrated the valor of Civil War soldiers, or set the poetry of William Cullen Bryant to music. Indeed, though he was a lifelong Congregationalist, Pitts does not seem to have been particularly devout at all.²³

As much as local lore suggests that the Bradford church's providential construction helped catapult the songwriter to fame, it was more likely the other way around. Because within a few years of the tune's publication, the First Congregational Church of Bradford found itself in something of a crisis. In 1867, the same year that the Rev. Nutting retired from his pastorate, the Illinois Central Railroad bypassed Bradford in its construction and built a depot north of the Cedar River in a town called Nashua. Soon, much of Bradford's people and businesses began to gravitate northward, driving both the church and the town into decline. A string of ministers then followed, as the

²⁰William S. Pitts, *The Little Brown Church: Song and Chorus* (Chicago: H. M. Higgins, 1865); Pitts, *Little Brown Church: Song and Chorus*. My thanks to Mary Hale of the Newberry Library in Chicago for bringing the song's first edition and its dedication to my attention.

²¹"Book Notices," *Southern Planter and Farmer* 2, no. 4 (1868): 253; *American Phrenological Journal* 49, no. 7 (1869), 287; "Fairy Echoes," *Church's Musical Visitor*, March 1875, 12.

²²Francis B. Kellogg, *Yale Songs: A Collection of Songs in Use by the Glee Club and Students of Yale College* (New Haven, CT: Shepard & Kellogg, 1882), 31.

²³W. S. Pitts, *Nellie Wildwood: Song and Chorus* (Boston: Oliver Ditson & Company, 1868), unpaginated. For Pitts; other publications see H. M. Higgins and W. A. Pitts, *The Old Man and His Harp* (Boston: Oliver Ditson & Co., 1878); Wm. S. Pitts, M.D., *Sabbath Bells* (Fredericksburg, IA: Wm. S. Pitts, 1879); Wm. S. Pitts, *Our Brave Boys in Blue* (Chicago: H. M. Higgins, 1865); Wm. S. Pitts, *Ally Ray* (New York: J. L. Peters, 1864); "W. S. Pitts, Tunes," *Hymnary.org*, https://hymnary.org/person/Pitts_William?tab=tunes, accessed March 20, 2023.

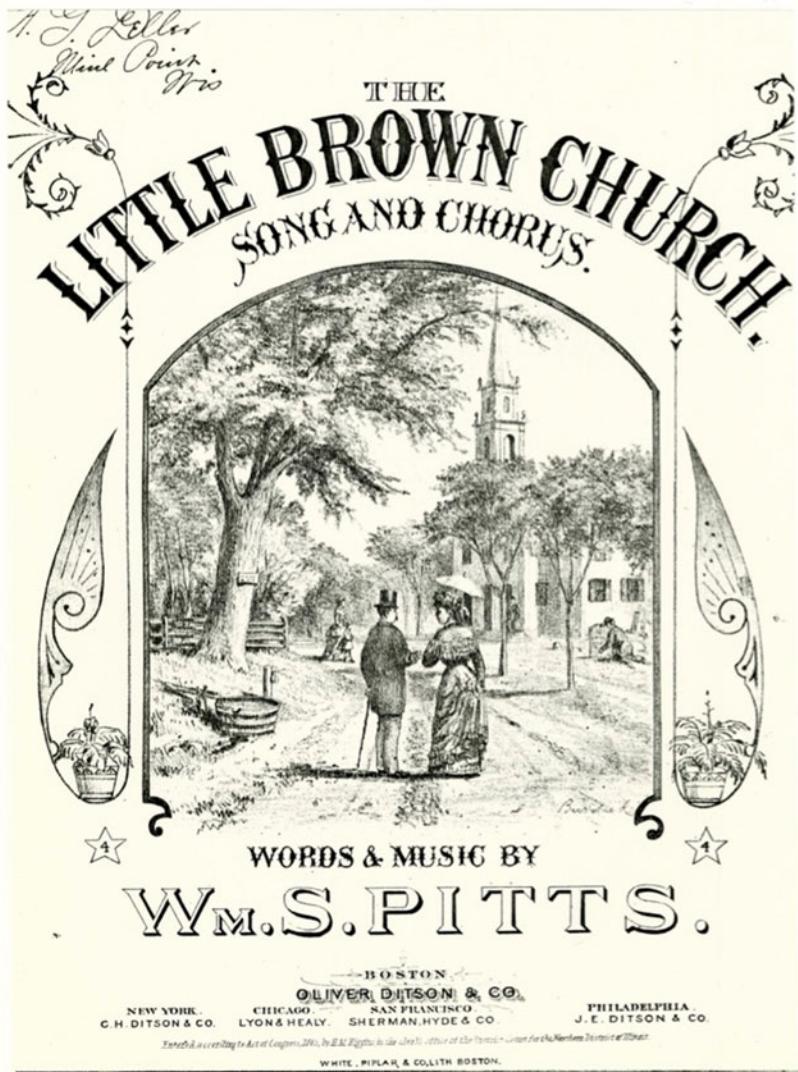


Figure 2. Cover of *The Little Brown Church Song and Chorus* (Boston: Oliver Ditson & Co., 1865). Image courtesy of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries.

church struggled to sustain a congregation over the next twenty years. Though documentation for this period of the church's history is particularly sparse, it appears that at some point during the church's struggles a particularly innovative minister decided to harness the song's popularity to save the congregation. By the early 1880s, locals proclaimed without explanation that Bradford's church had been made "immortal through that beautiful song."²⁴ But it was all for naught. For in 1888, after the latest minister

²⁴Alexander, *History of Chickasaw and Howard Counties*, 195.

resigned from his post, the First Congregational Church of Bradford—now known more broadly as the Little Brown Church—simply folded. Though local ministers sometimes held services or organized a Sunday school in the sanctuary as a ministry to Bradford's few remaining residents, the church itself was destined for obscurity, and perhaps even demolition.²⁵ It was only the song's rebirth as an icon of white Protestant Americanism that ultimately saved the physical building. It was a process was driven less by hope and more by some of the darker impulses that animated the nation's religious landscape.

If the "The Little Brown Church" first arose out of aspirations for the future, its enduring presence among American Protestants stems from their longings for an imagined past. As usual, details surrounding both the song and the church's rediscovery are murky at best. But the tune's popularity in college song books seems to have played a role. According to one strand of evidence, an unnamed individual who had traveled to Des Moines, Iowa, for a music teacher's conference made a side trip to Bradford to try and find the church that had inspired their favorite tune.²⁶ A more likely story credits one music educator specifically. In 1896, a Charles A. Fullerton became a professor of music at the Iowa State Normal School in Cedar Falls, rising eventually to become president of the National Music Teachers Association. A native of New Hampshire who had moved to Iowa with his family as a child, Fullerton had grown up singing "The Little Brown Church" with his brothers. When the professor learned that a church by that name lay some thirty miles to the north of where he now taught, he immediately took an interest in the site.²⁷

Whoever it was, someone made a trip to Bradford long after Pitts and his work had drifted into obscurity, and what they found proved disheartening. By 1900, Bradford had been all but abandoned. The post office had closed in 1899 due to a want of business, while most of the village's buildings stood in varying states of disrepair. Even the famed Bradford Academy was trying to offload its deteriorating property onto to the county after it had ceased admitting students back in 1877.²⁸ The Little Brown Church fared no better. In addition to being no longer put to regular use, the church also was painted a color other than brown.²⁹ In this "deserted village," wrote one former resident after a visit, "the people, the times, the conditions of the days before have gone," leaving only a "few vacant buildings . . . and the traditions which yet linger in the minds of the few remaining pioneers."³⁰

The discovery catalyzed a response, as a group of locals gathered in 1900 to form a Society for the Preservation of the Little Brown Church in order to save the sanctuary. Composed, according to local reports, of both "church people and those outside of

²⁵Alexander, *History of Chickasaw and Howard Counties*, 195, 290–293. On the first of First Congregational Church of Bradford, see *The Little Brown Church in Story and Song* (1918), unpaginated.

²⁶"Origins of a Song," *Turner County Herald* [Hurley, SD], 7 September 1911, accessed via *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn2001063133/1911-09-07/ed-1/seq-6/>.

²⁷Hazel Gertrude Kinsella, "'Little Brown Church in the Vale': The Oldest Community Center of West," *Musical America*, October 13, 1917, 31. On Charles Fullerton, see "Charles Alexander Fullerton," obituary, Special Collections and University Archives, Biographies, *University of Northern Iowa*, <https://scua.library.uni.edu/university-archives/biographies/charles-alexander-fullerton>, accessed January 22, 2022.

²⁸Fairbairn, *History of Chickasaw and Howard Counties*, I:227–228; Stockholders Meeting, Dec. 12, 1903, Bradford Academy Papers; *The Nashua Reporter*, May 4, 1899 and February 26, 1920.

²⁹*The Nashua Reporter*, February 14, 1901.

³⁰*The Nashua Reporter*, February 26, 1920.

churches,” the Society initially approached the building as a vital piece of local history whose preservation might breathe new life into the community.³¹ To fund their efforts, the society organized an annual “Brown Church Reunion” to bring folks “home.” Held one Sunday every June, these days of food, fun, and festivities invited those who had left the area to return and see not only the old building, but their relatives as well. With the money raised from these and other activities, the society then not only restored the church, but also reopened it for regular worship. In what the local paper described as “one of the most joyous reunions ever held in the community,” the Society used the fiftieth anniversary of the church’s original dedication in 1914 to install a new permanent minister. Former residents from as far away as Arizona returned home for the event, which even featured a surprise address by an aged Rev. J. K. Nutting. Pitts, however, remained conspicuously absent.³²

As word of the Society’s successes began to spread, however, the meanings attached to the Little Brown Church began to change. Newspapers as far as Maryland and New Mexico carried reports of the church’s restoration, reintroducing readers to the song. This, in turn, grew the Brown Church Reunion into something of a regional affair. By 1916, thousands of visitors from across the Midwest were coming to Bradford every year in order to celebrate a church they likely had not attended.³³ To this expanded audience, the Little Brown Church was less of a curious feature of northeast Iowa history. Instead, the edifice became an icon that extolled the virtues of America’s rural, Protestant roots. As one article on the Society’s work put it, the Little Brown Church stood “as a monument to the enterprise and devotion of the pioneer Christians.” Preserving the edifice was vital, for in addition to connecting those who had left the area with those who “can remember still further back when the panther, wolf and deer roamed through this ‘valley by the wildwood,’” the church and its commemoration of Protestant Americanism also ensured that future generations would learn to “worship God and teach their children the importance of Christian living and Christian service.”³⁴ Where Pitts had first envisioned the church as the steward of his lost love’s remains, these new Little Brown Church enthusiasts looked upon the building as the mausoleum for something much greater.

Fueling this new narrative of the church’s significance was a tectonic population shift toward the nation’s urban centers at the twentieth century’s dawn. When Pitts first

³¹Quote from *The Little Brown Church in Community and Song* (1918), unpaginated.

³²*The Nashua Reporter*, June 18, 1914. On the Society’s work and the Brown Church Reunion see “The Little Brown Church Holds a Reunion,” *The Continent*, July 27, 1916, 1008; *The Nashua Reporter*, August 16, 1900, August 15, 1901, June 5, 1902, August 31, 1905, June 5, 1913; Powers, “The Little Brown Church in the Vale,” 115–117; *The Little Brown Church in Story and Song* (Nashua, IA: Nashua Reporter, 1925), unpaginated.

³³I tracked interest in the society’s work through articles that appear in the Library of Congress’s *Chronicling America* archive. For examples, see *The Citizen* [Frederick City, MD], September 8, 1911, accessed via *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn89060092/1911-09-08/ed-1/seq-6/> and *Las Vegas Optic* [NM], February 3, 1913, accessed via *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn92070417/1913-02-03/ed-1/seq-6/>. On the Brown Church Reunion growing audience, see “The Little Brown Church Holds a Reunion,” *The Continent*, July 27, 1916, 1008.

³⁴Quotes from *The Minneapolis Journal*, January 14, 1904, accessed via *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045366/1905-01-14/ed-1/seq-20/> and *Montpelier Examiner* [SD], September 29, 1911.

composed his song in the late 1850s, fully eighty percent of America's population lived in towns not unlike Bradford. By the time folks started to take an interest in the Little Brown Church again, nearly half the country lived in a city. Immigration from Europe, of course, drove much of this demographic transformation, as cities like Chicago soon reported that the overwhelming majority of their residents had at least one parent born abroad. But the story of America's urban centers is also one of an equally consequential influx of white, native-born Protestants of Anglo-European descent at the turn of the century. At the same time the population of Midwestern cities boomed, more than half of rural townships in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin saw their communities decline. As one 1910 survey found, as many as one in five city residents had spent at least a portion of their life on a farm.³⁵

Such conditions made nostalgia for smalltown life an intimate part of the modern, urban experience, and the Little Brown Church's revival was a part of this trend. Revived interest in the song's lyrics followed the writings of regionalist authors such as famed Indiana poet James Whitcomb Riley who made celebrating "the golden olden glory of the days gone by" a dominant feature of literature and art of the time. The Society's Brown Church Reunions, meanwhile, mirrored the rise of homecomings, family reunions, and old settlers' days as well.³⁶ For many, this desire to reconnect with a home left behind served—and continues to serve—as the Little Brown Church's greatest appeal. "Harking back to the old days when the family used to all prepare for the Sabbath worship at the crossroads," wrote one minister of the song, the Little Brown Church "urges America to recall the days of its youth."³⁷

But for an emerging network of white Protestants who desired to evangelize this new, urban nation, the Little Brown Church held even greater significance. The song's ability to imagine a world where a Protestant church stood at the center of not only an individual's life but the community they inhabited as well proved a powerful illustration of the kind of faith that evangelists wished to revive. In 1911, for instance, the Men and Religion Forward Movement selected "The Church in the Wildwood" as its official anthem. A year-long, nationwide ecumenical revival campaign, the Movement, as the name suggests, sought to promote greater male participation in local church life. According to organizers, irrelevant rituals, "effeminate" worship styles that lacked virility, and women's prominence in the pews had all combined to drive an estimated three million men from the urban church. This exodus not only threatened

³⁵On the urbanization of the American population more broadly, see Zane L. Miller and Patricia M. Melvin, *The Urbanization of Modern America: A Brief History*, 2nd ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace, 1987), 79–83.

³⁶James Whitcomb Riley, "The Days Gone By," in *Old-Fashioned Roses* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), 5–6. On nostalgia, homesickness, and the panged historical conscience of turn-of-the-century America, see Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973); Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877–1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 133–140; Timothy Spears, *Chicago Dreaming: Midwesterners and the City, 1871–1919* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); David Glassberg, *American Historical Pageantry: The Uses of Tradition in the Early Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Susan J. Matt, *Homesickness: An American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

³⁷*The Omaha Sunday Bee*, December 21, 1919.

the health of local churches; it diminished the Protestant church's standing in American culture as well. The Movement sought to reverse both trends. Through a series of evangelistic meetings held in metropolitan areas across the country, some one million men partook not only in prayer and bible study, but also in a variety of reform campaigns that were intended to reinscribe white, Protestant power upon an increasingly diverse urban environment. The campaign in Philadelphia sought to convert immigrant labor organizers to a more pro-market Protestantism; the effort in Detroit sought to outlaw the saloon in its city. And every meeting began with a rousing rendition of William Pitts's song. "The message of the Men and Religion Forward Movement is in that hymn," lead organizer Fred B. Smith told the thousands of men who gathered for the Detroit campaign in the fall of 1911. In addition to reminding men where they "began their Christian experience away back in boyhood," the tune also challenged them to make "the religious fervor and ideals of earlier manhood" a reality once again.³⁸

A host of ethnic and religious concerns simmered just beneath these evangelistic employments of "The Little Brown Church." At a time when the arrival of Catholic and Jewish immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe was at its peak, the Little Brown Church came to serve as proof of the singular contributions that white Protestants of Anglo-European descent had made to the nation's growth. Authors now portrayed Pitts's family as "typical New England people, strictly brought up in Puritan ways, which was a dominant force in their character," while old Bradford went from being a hamlet on the rise to a village "of the New England type" filled with "a class of people who stand for moral, intellectual and religious development."³⁹ Some even went so far as to point out that the music professor who helped revive interest in the song was himself of "a sturdy Scotch family."⁴⁰ Where locals once looked to the church as a reminder of the home they had left behind, the Little Brown Church's broader fanbase increasingly viewed both the hymn and the church as the "fruitage of that westward movement of the frontiers of American civilization which is the most significant feature of our history."⁴¹

This ability to cultivate a certain Protestant sensibility that melded evangelism, nativism, and a nostalgic form of nationalism proved to be the Little Brown Church's greatest asset to those who most vigorously embraced the tune. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the life of one of the two figures who proved most vital to the song's resurgence, Billy Sunday. A native of rural northeast Iowa himself, Sunday had, like so many others,

³⁸Quotes from *Detroit Times*, October 24, 1911, accessed via *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*, Library of Congress, <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83016689/1911-10-24/ed-1/seq-6/>. On the Men and Religion Forward Movement and its white, nativist, middle-class impulses, see Gail Bederman, "'The Women Have Had Charge of the Church Work Long Enough': The Men and Religion Forward Movement of 1911-1912 and the Masculinization of Middle-Class Protestantism," *American Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (1989): 432-465; Ken Fones-Wolf, *Trade Union Gospel: Christianity and Labor in Industrial Philadelphia, 1865-1915* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 172-177; Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 137-143.

³⁹Quotes from Powers, "'The Little Brown Church in the Vale,'" 101; and *Montpelier Examiner* [ID], September 29, 1911.

⁴⁰Kinsella, "The Little Brown Church in the Vale," 31.

⁴¹*Unveiling of the Bronze Memorial Tablet*, 10. On ethnic anxieties around European immigration at the turn of the twentieth century, see Nell Ivrin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 190-228; David R. Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, 2005).

migrated to the city in order to embark upon a career off the farm. For Sunday it was initially professional baseball, which he played until the late 1880s when a conversion experience outside of a Chicago rescue mission set him on a path to becoming an evangelist. By the first decade of the twentieth century, Sunday had become the era's most widely known revival preacher. His histrionic preaching style and background in baseball enthralled the urban audiences he tried to convert. But the revivalist chose to present his message as a call to revive the rhythms of a mythic pastoral past. Like other evangelists of the time, Sunday described himself as "an old-fashioned preacher of the old-time religion," and he bathed his ministry in bucolic tropes.⁴² He bragged of being "a hayseed," spoke often of his work on the farm, and, most famously, invited the lost to walk the "sawdust trail" home. That latter phrase often referred to the woodchips that lined the aisles of Sunday's outdoor, big-tent tabernacles. But the expression actually originated among Northwest loggers who used trails of sawdust to find their way out of the wilderness. "The metaphor appealed to the American public," wrote one of Sunday's many biographers, "which relishes all that savors of our people's most primitive life."⁴³ These rural invocations were vital to evangelists like Sunday. In addition to reminding urban churchgoers of the faith they might have had as a child, the idioms also justified a vision of America that placed their particular view of social and religious life at the center of the nation's past, present, and future. "They call us the 'melting pot,'" Sunday preached in one sermon that described immigrants and interracial marriage as threats greater than irreligion. "Then it's up to us to skim off the slag that won't melt into Americanism and throw it into hell or somewhere else."⁴⁴

And when Sunday looked for a hymn that would embody the spirit of his revival campaigns, he found it in "The Little Brown Church." The discovery came by way of a barbershop quartet called the Weatherwax Brothers who, like Sunday, hailed from rural Iowa. The troupe had been widely known ever since Republican William McKinley featured them as part of his 1896 presidential campaign. But the brothers had become famous on the Chautauqua circuit by drawing upon their Iowa roots and taking advantage of the Little Brown Church's return. Though natives of Charles City, which was a bustling factory town that lay some twenty miles north of the Little

⁴²Quote from Elijah P. Brown, *The Real Billy Sunday* (Dayton, OH: The Otterbein Press, 1914), 173. Sunday's story is widely told, and for more on his background and style of presentation, see Lyle W. Dorsett, *Billy Sunday and the Redemption of Urban America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991); Kathryn Lofton, "The Preacher Paradigm: Promotional Biographies and the Modern-Made Evangelist," *Religion & American Culture* 16:1 (2006): 110–114; William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism: Charles Grandison Finney to Billy Graham* (New York: Ronald Press, 1959); John Fea, "'The Town that Billy Sunday Could Not Shut Down': Prohibition and Sunday's Chicago Crusade of 1918," *Illinois Historical Journal* 87, no. 4 (1994): 242–258.

⁴³On the origins of the "sawdust trail" and Sunday's affinity for rural idioms more broadly, see William T. Ellis, *Billy Sunday: The Man and His Message* (n.p., 1914), 22–32, and 158–166. For the tension between modern business practices and pre-modern religious beliefs in American evangelicalism, see Lofton, "The Preacher Paradigm," 110–114; Timothy E. W. Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); B. M. Pietsch, *Dispensational Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Daniel Vaca, *Evangelical Incorporated: Books and the Business of Religion in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

⁴⁴Quoted in Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 125. Sutton's text as a whole deftly situates evangelicalism's call for revival within the context of their racial and religious fears.

Brown Church, the brothers claimed that they had been raised amidst the pines and taught to sing by William S. Pitts himself while attending the Bradford Academy. The claim is impossible to verify, but it made the brothers' decision to end every performance with a heartfelt rendition of "The Church in the Wildwood" all the more meaningful. Sunday saw the quartet perform in 1914 at the moment he was preparing for a campaign of major cities along the easter seaboard, and found the brother's celebration of their rural roots to be the perfect score for his revival message. The Weatherwaxes then joined Sunday for at least the next year, helping to transform "The Little Brown Church" into "a universal favorite" of the Christian world, according to Sunday's music director Homer Rodeheaver.⁴⁵

Of course, the Little Brown Church's resurrection as a symbol of Protestant Americanism did present certain problems. First was what to do about the discrepancies between the song's composition and the church's dedication. The issue actually came up at one of the early meetings of the Society for the Preservation of the Little Brown Church when a former church member pointed out that the group was, in fact, preserving the First Congregational Church of Bradford. The Society commissioned a group to study the question, which began to circulate stories about Pitts singing the song within the church's unfinished walls or at the church's dedication.⁴⁶ The church also posted various dates of construction above its front door, ranging from 1859 to 1864, so that the building might be just a bit closer to the song's composition or publication.⁴⁷

The second issue concerned the lyrics. Because if "The Little Brown Church" was to serve as a monument to Protestantism's singular contributions to the nation's development, then something would have to be done about the song's focus on a dead lover lying in a grave. This, perhaps unsurprisingly, proved the easiest problem to solve, for evangelists, gospel musicians, and hymn composers simply rewrote the lyrics to make the song more appropriate for the Sunday school crowd. Indeed, no fewer than ten new renditions of the song appeared in the first decade of the twentieth century. Some replaced the references to the gravesite with new material. Others added verses that rounded out the song's message. But they all brought the hymn in line with the newfound interest in the song as a memorial to the country church of white, Protestant America. Composer Thoro Harris's 1906 arrangement, for example, which is perhaps the earliest version of the song to appear in a Christian hymnal, simply turned the lost lover into a generic lost loved one. As Harris' rewritten third verse reads, "And safe in our Father's kind keeping / Lies one whom we cherish full well; /

⁴⁵Quote from Home Rodeheaver, *Twenty Years with Billy Sunday* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1936), 77–78. On the quartet, see *Weatherwax Brothers Quartet* (n.p., c. 1916), Redpath Chautauqua Collection, Special Collections Department, The University of Iowa Libraries; "The Little Brown Church in the Vale," *The Lyceum News* V, no. 3 (1915): 5; "The Little Brown Church in the Vale," *Iowa Masonic Library* XVIII, no. 1 (1917): 9. On the industrial nature of their Charles City home, see *History of Floyd County, Iowa: Together with Sketches of its Villages, Cities, and Townships, Educational, Religious, Civil, Military, and Political History, Portraits of Prominent Persons, and Biographies of Representative Citizens* (Chicago: Inter-State Publishing, 1882), 675–683.

⁴⁶*The Nashua Reporter*, January 24, 1901; February 14, 1901; August 31, 1905.

⁴⁷The church's evolving dates of construction can be found in "The Little Brown Church in the Vale," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 340; *The Chicago Tribune*, October 24, 1965; *The Little Brown Church in Story and Song* (1918), cover; *The Little Brown Church in Story and Song* (1930), cover; Walter F. Lindemann, "The Little Brown Church in the Vale: A Sketch of the Song, its Composer, and the Church," *Epworth Herald* 32, no. 41 (October 8, 1921): 991–992.

She's sweetly and peacefully sleeping / By the little brown church in the vale."⁴⁸ Famed organist Peter P. Bilhorn similarly made a link between the rural church and family history in his 1913 rendition, which reminisced how "I remember the scenes in the wildwood, / And the dearest loved spot in the dale, / I remember the last hymn we chanted, / In the little brown church in the vale."⁴⁹

While some songwriters continued Pitts's focus upon people in their new versions of the tune, most built upon the rural visions that "The Little Brown Church" could evoke and used them as a commemorative counterweight to the polyglot city. Composer James Rowe's 1911 version is perhaps the most revealing in this regard. Born in England, Rowe worked for the railroad after immigrating to the United States before giving his life to gospel music. His most famous hymn, "Love Lifted Me," is said to describe his conversion experience. But Rowe also drew upon the image of a country church—an institution it appears he himself never spent much time in—to describe a faith he hoped to make manifest. "For too long we have wandered after pleasures / And ignored the sweet plea of the Lord," Rowe claimed in a new fourth verse, "Let us strive for the heavenly treasures— / Let us work for the blessed reward." And what was that work one was to undertake? It was the struggle to make the world envisioned in Pitts's song a reality once again. For in Rowe's rendition, Pitts's lost love is replaced by a battle to promote Protestant values, and the Little Brown Church becomes the fortress from which the armies of the Lord would march from. "Brothers, now for the Savior let us rally, / Let us serve Him who never will fail," sings Rowe's new third verse, "Gainst the foes of the truth let us sally / From the little brown church in the dale."⁵⁰

Indeed, by the 1920s the association between "The Little Brown Church" and a kind of nascent white, Protestant nationalism had become so pronounced that a revived Ku Klux Klan adopted the hymn for one of its songbooks. In the Klan's rendering, the church becomes a fiery cross, a symbol of white-hot American hate, calling singers to stamp out those citizens whose histories did not begin in places like the Little Brown Church in the dale. "There's a cross that is burning in the wildwood," the Klan's first verse reads, "Its beauty reflects to the skies. / At its base you will find thousands kneeling, / Praying that its meaning never dies."⁵¹

⁴⁸*Inspiring Songs No. 1: For the Sunday School* (Chicago: Meyer & Brother, 1906), 163. I tracked the later publication history of "The Little Brown Church" using the hymnal database Hymnary.org. All hymnal citations come from the database's digitized collections. For more information see "About Hymnary.org," *Hymnary.org*, <https://hymnary.org/about>, Calvin University, accessed June 1, 2022. On Thoro Harris, see "Thoro Harris," *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*, Canterbury Press, accessed June 1, 2022, <https://hymnology.hymnsam.co.uk/t/thoro-harris>.

⁴⁹"The Church in the Wildwood," *Voices of Victory* (Chicago: Bilhorn Brothers, 1913), 157. On Bilhorn, see John Perry, "P. P. Bilhorn," *Hymnary.org*, Calvin University, accessed June 1, 2022, https://hymnary.org/person/Bilhorn_Peter.

⁵⁰"The Church in the Wildwood," *Calvary's Praise* (Chicago: Charles Reign Scoville, 1917), 196. On Rowe, see Charles H. Gabriel, *The Singers and Their Songs: Sketches of Living Gospel Hymn Writers* (Chicago: The Rodeheaver Company, 1916), 32–33.

⁵¹Danny O. Crew, *Ku Klux Klan Sheet Music: An Illustrated Catalog of Published Music, 1867–2002* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2003), 34. To be fair, the KKK repurposed a number of Protestant hymns in their promotion of white supremacy. But this, again, underscores the racial politics of nostalgia that animated conservative Protestantism at the dawn of the twentieth century. On the religious and racial visions of the second KKK, see Kelly J. Baker, *The Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915–1930* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2011).

By far the most popular rendition of the “The Church in the Wildwood,” however, came from composer E. O. Excell. Born in 1851 into a family led by a German Reformed minister in rural Stark County, Ohio, Excell worked a number of odd jobs before attending music school. After working as a vocalist for evangelists Sam Jones and Gipsy Smith, Excell then joined the faculty at the Moody Bible Institute. He also launched his own publishing company at this time, which revolutionized the religious music industry. Where gospel singers had, like Excell himself, long worked with individual revivalists to seel their tunes, Excell later turned to working with major denominations such as the Methodist Episcopal Church to sell his songs. The innovation helped Excell dominate the religious music market. At his peak, Excell’s company sold more than a million hymnals a year, which helped ensure that his arrangements of “Joy to the World” and “Amazing Grace” would remain the most widely published versions of the song today.⁵² But he also drew upon popular tunes like “The Little Brown Church” in order to steer American Protestantism toward his evangelistic understanding of the faith.

Of all the versions of Pitts’s 1865 song, Excell’s 1910 rendition is the most nostalgic. Through a series of subtle, but significant, edits, Excell effectively shifted the song’s focus away from an individual and toward a particular time and place. Where Pitts imagined that he would one day “rest by the side of her tomb,” Excell instead invited everyone to “weep by the side of *the* tomb.” While a burial chamber remains, the occupant is unknown. The new phrasing, of course, evokes the image of Mary Magdalene’s reaction to Jesus’ burial. But where Jesus’ tomb became a symbol of resurrection, Excell uses the idiom to ascribe a sense of permanent loss to the world of the country church. For it is a simpler time that is now gone, and the social world that made that time possible. As Excell’s rewritten third verse reads,

From the church in the valley by the wildwood,
When day fades away into night,
I would fain from this spot in my childhood,
Wing my way to the mansions of light.

Though not as aggrieved as other versions of the song, Excell’s rendition nonetheless validated the sense of loss or dislocation that many white Protestants of Anglo-European descent claimed to feel in the urban world. It also affirmed the desire some had to make their memories a reality so that the latter days might match those of old—to resurrect the Little Brown Church in the same way Christ emerged from the tomb.⁵³

In short order, Excell’s rendition came to fill American hymnbooks. According to the database *Hymnary.org*, not a single Protestant hymnal carried “The Little Brown Church” before 1900. Just twenty years later, fully a third of such books featured the tune.⁵⁴ An

⁵²On Excell and his impact see J. H. Hall, *Biography of Gospel Song and Hymn Writers* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1914), 299–304; “Edwin O. Excell,” *The Canterbury Dictionary of Hymnology*. Canterbury Press, accessed June 2, 2022, <http://www.hymnology.co.uk/e/edwin-o-excell>; Charles H. Gabriel, “An Appreciation of E. O. Excell,” *Moody Bible Institute Monthly* XXI (August 1921): 517; D. Bruce Hindmarsh, “‘Amazing Grace’: The History of a Hymn and a Cultural Icon,” in Mark A. Noll and Edith Blumhofer, eds., *Sing Them Over Again To Me: Hymns and Hymnbooks in America* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006), 12–13.

⁵³“The Church in the Wildwood,” *Make Christ the King* (Chicago: The Glad Tidings Company, 1911), 46.

⁵⁴“The Little Brown Church,” *Hymnary.org*, Calvin University, accessed June 2, 2022, https://hymnary.org/text/theres_a_church_in_the_valley_by_the_wil.

Ngram, or trendline, of the appearance of the phrases “little brown church” and “church in the wildwood” in Google’s corpus of digitized texts similarly tracks the song’s integration into American Protestant life (see [Figure 3](#)). After an initial wave of publications in the 1870s and 1880s when the tune first appeared in college songbooks, both phrases quickly decline in use. But shortly after 1910, the appearance of these phrases eclipses their original use.

There is a certain irony that innovations in modern media practices allowed the story of an old church to become a national icon. In the same way Excell’s publishing practices helped transform the song into a hymn, it was the syndication of news stories that first helped word of the Society for the Preservation of the Little Brown Church spread. But in many ways, this was exactly the point. The return of “The Little Brown Church” helped many singers mourn, process, adapt to, and even challenge the changes wrought by America’s westward expansion, industrial development, and urban growth. And in many ways, it remains so to this day.

William S. Pitts was still practicing medicine in Fredericksburg, Iowa, when word of his song’s newfound fame finally reached him. Initially, Pitts reveled in the public’s interest in his work. When a journalist found him in 1896 and inquired about the song’s origins, the composer regaled the visitor with the tale of his 1857 trip to Bradford. “This portion of the Cedar Valley will always be beautiful, but it was doubly so then,” Pitts relayed.⁵⁵ When the Society for the Preservation of the Little Brown Church tracked him down some years later to cement the relationship between the church and the song, Pitts again played along. “These are the facts connected with the song and the church so far as I know,” the composer hedged, as he confirmed that he had, indeed, once taught at a “brick building called the ‘Academy,’” and that his performance in the “building now known as ‘The Little Brown Church,’” was the first “before an audience in the Cedar Valley.”⁵⁶

But when an intrepid librarian from the State Historical Society of Iowa tracked Pitts down in 1915 and asked him to relay once again the story of how his song had helped found a church, the composer finally lost his patience. By this point, Pitts was nearing the end of his life, living in retirement with his son in Brooklyn, New York. His song, meanwhile, was entering its second life as a gospel hymn whose popularity was tinged with certain ethnic and nationalistic grievances. It all appears to have been too much, for when the librarian asked Pitts to tell the story of the church and the song once again, the composer snapped. “Now do you ask how I came to write the song, ‘The Little Brown Church in the Vale?’” Pitts barked. Why, the composer wondered, had no one asked “How I came to write the songs, ‘Little Fred,’ ‘The Isles Beyond the River,’ ‘The Old Musician and His Harp,’ ‘Ally Ray,’ ‘Nellie Wildwood,’ ‘Angles Took Her Home,’ ‘Lilly Bell,’ ‘Our Brave Boys In Blue,’ ‘Sabbath Bells,’ ‘Nellie is Sleeping by the Rill,’ ‘Bonnie Katie,’ ‘Jimmie is My Name’ and others?” These were also Pitts’s “legitimate children born of poesy and song.” But they had drifted to obscurity. As a child, an exasperated Pitts continued, he had hoped that “The day will come when my music will be sung around the world.” But this was clearly not what he had in mind.⁵⁷

⁵⁵Howdeshell, “The Author of a Once Popular Song,” 310–311.

⁵⁶Emphasis added, for the phrasing suggests Pitts may have performed the song elsewhere before its publication. *Nashua Reporter*, February 14, 1901.

⁵⁷Powers, “The Little Brow Church in the Vale,” 105.

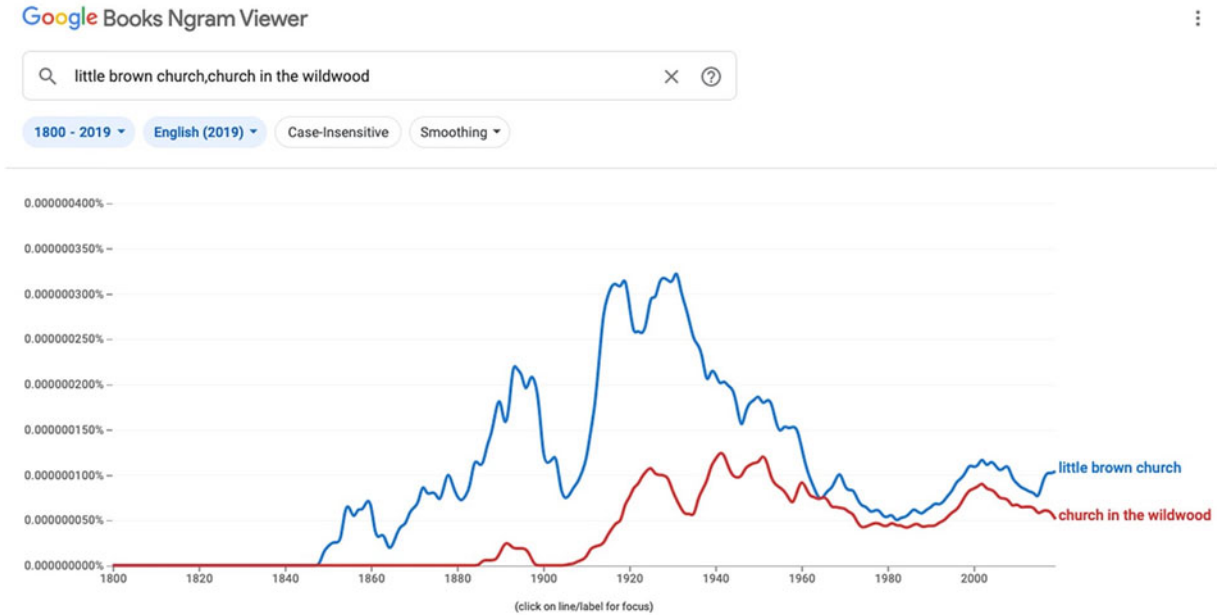


Figure 3. Appearance of the phrases “Little Brown Church” and “Church in the Wildwood” in Google’s corpus of digitized texts. Full results can be found at https://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=little+brown+church%2Cchurch+in+the+wildwood&year_start=1800&year_end=2019&corpus=26&smoothing=3&direct_url=t1%3B%2Clittle%20brown%20church%3B%2Cc0%3B.t1%3B%2Cchurch%20in%20the%20wildwood%3B%2Cc0.

Though the afterlife of “The Little Brown Church” appears to have frustrated Pitts, it proved a boon to the sanctuary that bore its name. By the time of Pitts’s death in 1918, the reopened sanctuary had become a tourist destination that annually welcomed thousands of guests. Many, of course, came to see what they believed was a memorial to America’s old-time religion. But a growing number also came to wed. As early as 1919, local papers reported how the Little Brown Church had become “a mecca for brides” that was “most liberally patronized by bridal parties of any church in Iowa.”⁵⁸ National papers would report the same in ten years’ time, as couples from as far away as New York and California came to tie the knot at this “matrimonial shrine.”⁵⁹ Fees collected from these ceremonies helped the congregation retire debts associated with the church’s restoration, and they continue to keep the relatively small congregation afloat today. On some summer weekends, the church hosts as many as eighteen ceremonies in a day, while an annual renewal of vows ceremony draws hundreds of couples to the church grounds every year. On some Sundays, more than half of the church’s congregation are visitors. As one reporter put it, the church’s full-throated embrace of Pitts’s song proved to be itself “a perfect marriage.”⁶⁰

At first blush, the Little Brown Church’s final transformation into a temple of holy matrimony might appear like a return to the site’s original meaning. A church first envisioned as the steward of a lover’s remains is now a site known primarily for its celebration of marital bliss. But what continues to compel many couples to wed in this unincorporated corner of northeast Iowa is often a nostalgia for a preurban world of religious harmony. “Marriages solemnized in the plain little prairie church are supposed to be especially blessed,” wrote one journalist in 1966. The church itself was a reflection of the “dignity and character” the nation once held, the reporter continued, and simply being there was enough to restore just a little bit of this bygone era.⁶¹

The same was true of the broader evangelical movement of which the Little Brown Church was now a part. Though long identified by their commitment to a number of doctrinal principles, evangelicalism in modern America coalesced around a nostalgic historical consciousness as well. We can see this in part in the tendency evangelists have had in describing their ministry as “old-fashioned” and their message as true to the “old-time religion,” even when it is broadcasted across the newest media. But we can also see it in the celebration of places like the Little Brown Church and other overlooked sites in the collective memories of modern evangelicalism. In the absence of any governing doctrinal authority, those who think of themselves as evangelical have often looked to Billy Sunday’s home, Park Street Church, or the places John Wesley slept to illustrate their faith.⁶² More than just a product of the past, evangelicalism is just as often fabricated through the selection of historical precedent as well.

And beyond reflecting the ways in which those who think of themselves as evangelical actually talk about their faith, this attention to history also sheds light on one of the more complicated features of American evangelicalism—its relationship with race.

⁵⁸*Nashua Reporter*, July 13, 1919.

⁵⁹*New York Times*, January 16, 1927.

⁶⁰*New York Times*, May 15, 1966. See also *The Little Brown Church in Story and Song* (c. 1930s), unpaginated; *New York Times*, October 21, 1928; November 17, 1929; August 24, 1947; and June 23, 1957.

⁶¹*New York Times*, May 15, 1966.

⁶²See, for example, Manzullo-Thomas, *Exhibiting Evangelicalism*; Margaret Bendroth, *The Last Puritans: Mainline Protestants and the Power of the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Thomas Tweed, “John Wesley Slept Here: American Shrines and American Methodists,” *Numen* 47, no. 1 (2000): 4–68.

Because if evangelicalism truly was a religious movement defined by its theological commitments, then we could expect to see the movement evince a great deal of ethnic and racial diversity since many Black, Latinx, and Asian-American Protestants often hold such doctrines dear. But survey after survey consistently shows that the overwhelming majority of those Christian who identify as “born again” also identify as white.⁶³ There are, of course, many sources for this demographic disconnect, as a growing body of scholarship makes clear.⁶⁴ One of these factors has been the stories that those who think of themselves as evangelical employ when describing who they are and where they come from. Because too often evangelicals have reached back into the remarkable diversity that is the history of Christianity and pulled out places like the Little Brown Church to explain their faith. Not only does such a move explicitly root the history of evangelical Christianity in the lily-white homesteads of the American Heartland, but it also implicitly denigrates those whose history begins in the deep south or abroad. It also completely erases the Sauk, Fox, Sioux, Iowa, Omaha, and Ho-Chunk peoples who occupied the Cedar Valley before Little Brown Church’s “Christian pioneers” displaced them. For some, this is exactly the point. But for those who wish to expand the Christian church, it might be worth singing about other churches as well.

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⁶³“Racial and Ethnic Composition among Evangelical Protestants” table, found in Pew Research Center’s Religious and Public Life’s *Religious Landscape Study* (2015): <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/evangelical-protestant/>.

⁶⁴On evangelicalism’s fraught relationship with whiteness and race, see Carolyn Renee Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945–1975* (New York: NYU Press, 2015); Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021); Randall Balmer, *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021).

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