

**Marching Song of the First Arkansas Colored Regiment:
A Contested Attribution**

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Introduction

The Civil Rights Movement highlighted the importance of music and song to a social movement, demonstrating how singing can overcome fears, reinforce new activist identities, and build solidarity. The Civil War also inspired powerful songs that influenced and shaped people's understanding of the times. Such songs as "John Brown's Body" and "Battle Hymn of the Republic" not only boosted morale of the troops but helped the abolitionist movement shift public understanding of the Civil War in the North from a secular struggle to preserve the Union toward a sacred crusade to abolish slavery. The popularity of these songs inspired dozens of parodies (in the musical sense of reworking an established composition) with the lyrical structure of the "Battle Hymn," set to the tune of "John Brown's Body."

Of the Civil War era "Battle Hymn" parodies, only two have been recorded and performed in modern times: "Marching Song of the First Arkansas Colored Regiment," attributed to the regiment's Captain Lindley Miller, and "The Valiant Soldiers," attributed to Sojourner Truth in the post-Civil War editions of her *Narrative*. On close inspection, these turn out to be essentially the same song (which has not been noticed by the songs' preservers and performers), with the eight-stanza "Marching Song" incorporating the six stanzas of "The Valiant Soldiers."

All but forgotten for nearly a century, the songs were revived by musicians and activists who were struck by the powerful early statements of black pride, militancy, and desire for full equality, which seem to anticipate the spirit of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. To a substantial degree, the songs were discovered by distinct communities: the "Marching Song" by a curious combination of Old Left folk music advocates and Civil War scholars, and "The Valiant Soldiers" by feminists, both white and African American, fascinated by the legendary Sojourner Truth.

Can these competing attributions be resolved at this late date? This paper examines the evidence for Miller and Truth as primary authors for the song, recognizing that primary authorship requires first, that the song be documented as appearing prior in time to the other, and second, that the song be shown to have a clear path of transmission from the author to the other writer. Finally this paper asks whether the most important questions may be the significance of the song for the singers in the context of their times, and what we may learn today about the mood and aspirations of the black Civil War soldiers from listening to it.

The First Arkansas and Captain Lindley Miller

In July 1862 the U.S. Congress passed a confiscation act that freed slaves of owners in rebellion against the United States, and a militia act that empowered the President to use freed slaves in any capacity in the army. Concerned with opinion in the four border states that remained in the Union, as well as northern Democrats who supported the war, President Abraham Lincoln opposed early efforts to recruit black soldiers, although he accepted their use as laborers. Only after Union Army reverses in battles over the summer of 1862 did Lincoln settle on the more drastic response of emancipating all slaves in states at war with the Union. In September 1862 Lincoln issued his preliminary proclamation that effective January 1, all slaves in rebellious states would be free. Recruitment of colored regiments began in full force following the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1863.¹

The First Arkansas Volunteer Infantry Regiment (African Descent) began recruiting in the spring, and was officially established on May 1, 1863. The regiment saw action in a skirmish at Mound Plantation on June 24, 1863, and action on June 29 at Goodrich's Landing, where the unit remained for post duty through January 1864. The unit then took up duty at Haines Bluff, District of Vicksburg, until May 1864. The Union Army standardized the varied names of colored regiments under the rubric of "United States Colored Troops" (or U.S.C.T.), and the First Arkansas became the "46th Regiment, United States Colored Infantry" on May 11, 1864.²

Lindley Hoffman Miller received a commission as Captain in the First Arkansas Volunteer Infantry Regiment (African Descent) in November, 1863.³ A lawyer in New York City, Miller had previous military experience with the 7th Regiment, New York State Militia, known as the "Silk Stocking Regiment" for its wealthy elite members. He saw 30 days service in April and May, 1861, when his regiment moved to defend Washington, DC (the regiment's departure march down Broadway was a major event, celebrated by several prints and paintings)⁴, and three months service in the summer of 1862. John Y. Foster's history of Civil War service by men from New Jersey notes "His conduct in several most trying positions [with the First Arkansas] was so well appreciated by his superior officers that he was soon promoted to the rank of Major in a new colored regiment in Missouri."⁵ Miller's biographical sketch in this history makes no mention of the "Marching Song."

Miller never took up his new commission as Major with the Missouri regiment. On leave to his home due to illness, he died on June 30, 1864, at age 30, from a fever he had acquired during his military service with the First Arkansas.⁶ The history of New Jersey men in the Union Army eulogized Miller: "Surrounded by friends, in a promising and lucrative professional position . . . he surrendered all to his convictions of duty, and gave himself, instantly and without hesitation to the cause of Liberty and Progress. Urged by no selfish ambition, tempted by no high position, he simply felt that the cause called him—that his country needed self-sacrificing men—and having a life to give he gave it."⁷ The reality surrounding Miller's military service was both more complicated and more tragic than this account suggests.

Lindley Miller was the son of Jacob W. Miller, who served as U.S. Senator from New Jersey from 1841 to 1853. In 1825 lawyer Jacob Miller married Mary Louisa Macculloch, daughter of wealthy Morristown engineer and businessman George P. Macculloch, who designed and built the Morris Canal. Lindley was the fifth of nine children. A member of the Whig party, Senator Miller opposed slavery and its expansion to western states, was a foreign policy realist, supported colonization of Liberia by freed slaves, and voted against the Compromise of 1850. Split over slavery in the Presidential campaign of 1852, the Whigs collapsed in the wake of the Democratic victory. The “cotton Whigs” joined the Democrats, and the “conscience Whigs” joined the new Republican party, as did Jacob Miller in 1855.⁸ He died in 1862.

Lindley Miller clearly inherited an anti-slavery outlook from his father, but I have found little evidence exactly where on the spectrum of abolitionist opinion his political views lay. Given his enthusiasm for the “Marching Song” and his willingness to serve as an officer with colored regiments, it seems reasonable to agree with Thomas DeBlack’s surmise that Miller was an “ardent abolitionist.”⁹

After an unsuccessful attempt to obtain an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Lindley Miller read law, was admitted to the bar in 1855, and established a successful practice in New York City. Even as a young man he was a noted orator, and also wrote poetry. No longer interested in a military career, he enlisted as a private in the 7th Regiment, New York State Militia, after President Lincoln’s proclamation of war in April 1861. He married Anne Huntington Tracy (known as “one of the beautiful Tracy girls”) of Manhattan in May 1862, just before his three months’ service with the 7th regiment that year (Foster’s history writes that “he left his bride at the altar to obey the order,” at least a slight exaggeration).¹⁰

In the summer of 1863, Anne Tracy Miller was pregnant and close to delivering their child. When the Draft Riots broke out in July in New York City, her father took her out of the city to the Catskills, as Lindley Miller was serving with his guard unit at the armory. In August, Anne Miller died after childbirth, at age 24, and their infant child died a week later. To assuage his sorrow, Lindley Miller decided to seek a military commission, and agreed to serve as an officer with a colored regiment.¹¹

The “Marching Song of the First Arkansas Colored Regiment”

“John Brown’s Body,” the inspiration for so many parodies, demonstrates how rapidly popular songs could spread at this period. The song had its origin with the men of the 12th Massachusetts Regiment, who improvised verses to the tune of an old Methodist hymn, “Say, Brothers, Will You Meet Us?” attributed to William Steffe. Verses consisted of such single lines as “John Brown’s body lies a-mouldering in the grave,” “He’s gone to be a soldier in the Army of the Lord,” and “The stars above in Heaven are looking kindly down,” repeated three times, followed by a fourth line “His soul goes marching on” and a chorus of “Glory, glory, hallelujah” borrowed from the Methodist hymn.

On July 18, 1861 the 12th Massachusetts sang “John Brown’s Body” as they marched through Boston on State Street, and later sang the song on July 24 as they marched down Broadway in New York City, heading for Washington, DC, creating such a sensation they became known as “The Hallelujah Regiment.” The song spread rapidly through the Union Army.

In November 1861 Julia Ward Howe accompanied her husband, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, from their home in Boston to Washington, DC, for a meeting of the Sanitary Commission, which had responsibility for military hospitals. While returning to Washington past Union Army encampments after observing a skirmish between Union and Confederate forces, the Howes heard soldiers singing the familiar “John Brown’s Body.” A member of their party, the Reverend James F. Clarke, urged Mrs. Howe to write more suitable lyrics to the song, a suggestion she welcomed.

Julia Ward Howe, an aspiring poet, was well suited for the challenge. She and her husband were dedicated abolitionists. Dr. Howe was one of the “Secret Six” who gave financial support to John Brown, which he used for his attack on the federal arsenal at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, on Oct. 16, 1859, in a failed attempt to inspire a slave insurrection. Brown was executed on Dec. 2, 1859, and became a martyr for the abolitionist cause.

Back at the Willard Hotel in Washington on the evening of November 18, Julia Ward Howe slept and awakened early, with the words to a song running through her mind. She quickly wrote out six stanzas in near darkness. After returning to Boston, she showed the poem to her friend and *Atlantic Monthly* editor James T. Fields, who featured a five-stanza version in the February 1862 issue under the title “Battle Hymn of the Republic.”¹²

Howe’s “Battle Hymn” soon became wildly popular with the general public in the North, inspiring numerous parodies with the non-repetitive, poetic stanza structure of the “Battle Hymn.” Abolitionist publisher William Lloyd Garrison was one of many who tried his hand at a version.¹³

The “Marching Song of the First Arkansas Colored Regiment,” the most memorable of the “Battle Hymn” parodies of that era, is known to us today through the broadside or song sheet issued by the Supervisory Committee for Recruiting Colored Regiments in Philadelphia. The “Song of the First of Arkansas” was one of at least seven broadsides issued by the Committee for recruitment purposes.¹⁴ The song was introduced to a Twentieth Century audience by Irwin Silber (editor of *Sing Out!* from 1951 to 1967)¹⁵, who encountered the broadside in his research and included it in his *Songs of the Civil War*, a collection published in 1960 in anticipation of the Civil War Centennial observance from 1961 to 1965.

The original broadside has eight stanzas, written in dialect, which prompted Silber to comment, “The representation of Negro speech in these stanzas seems much closer to the blackface minstrel interpretation of Negro dialect than the real thing.”¹⁶ Silber

counted that as a point supporting authorship by Miller, although he thought it likely that the song represented a collaboration between Miller and his troops. Silber acknowledged that the dialect may have been Miller's attempt to write down what he heard, but Silber edited the song to standard English and titled it "Marching Song of the First Arkansas (Negro) Regiment."¹⁷ Silber reported to this writer that he has never been aware of the Sojourner Truth version, "The Valiant Soldiers."¹⁸

Two recordings based on Silber's edition of the "Marching Song" were issued soon after his book was published, one by Pete Seeger and Bill MacAdoo on the album "Songs of the Civil War," released by Folkways Records in 1960, and the other by Tennessee Ernie Ford on the album "Tennessee Ernie Ford Sings Civil War Songs of the North," released by Columbia Records (along with a counterpart "Civil War Songs of the South") in 1961. Both recordings of the "Marching Song" were abbreviated, with the Seeger-MacAdoo folk song version including three stanzas, and Ford's gospel quartet version including four stanzas. Both recordings skipped the fourth stanza with its potential for controversy.¹⁹

The broadside of the "Song of the First of Arkansas" published by the Supervisory Committee had this brief introduction: "The following song was written by Captain Lindley Miller, of the First Arkansas Colored Regiment. Captain Miller says the 'boys' sing the song on dress parade with an effect which can hardly be described, and he adds that 'while it is not very conservative, it will do to fight with.' Captain Miller is a son of the late ex-Senator Miller, of New Jersey."²⁰ Silber's published version is as follows:

Marching Song of the First Arkansas (Negro) Regiment

Words ascribed to Capt. Lindley Miller
Music: "John Brown's Body"

1. Oh, we're the bully soldiers of the "First of Arkansas,"
We are fighting for the Union, we are fighting for the law,
We can hit a Rebel further than a white man ever saw,
As we go marching on.

Chorus:
Glory, glory hallelujah.
Glory, glory hallelujah.
Glory, glory hallelujah.
As we go marching on.

2. See, there above the center, where the flag is waving bright,
We are going out of slavery; we're bound for freedom's light;
We mean to show Jeff Davis how the Africans can fight,
As we go marching on! (Chorus)
3. We have done with hoeing cotton, we have done with hoeing corn,

We are colored Yankee soldiers, now, as sure as you are born;
When the masters hear us yelling, they'll think it's Gabriel's horn,
As we go marching on. (Chorus)

4. They will have to pay us wages, the wages of their sin,
They will have to bow their foreheads to their colored kith and kin,
They will have to give us house-room, or the roof shall tumble in!
As we go marching on. (Chorus)
5. We heard the Proclamation, master hush it as he will,
The bird he sing it to us, hoppin' on the cotton hill,
And the possum up the gum tree, he couldn't keep it still,
As he went climbing on. (Chorus)
6. They said, "Now colored brethren, you shall be forever free,
From the first of January, Eighteen hundred sixty-three."
We heard it in the river going rushing to the sea,
As it went sounding on. (Chorus)
7. Father Abraham has spoken and the message has been sent,
The prison doors he opened, and out the pris'ners went,
To join the sable army of "African descent,"
As we go marching on. (Chorus)
8. Then fall in, colored brethren, you'd better do it soon,
Don't you hear the drum a-beating the Yankee Doodle tune?
We are with you now this morning, we'll be far away at noon,
As we go marching on. (Chorus)²¹

The exuberant spirit of the black soldiers is evident in the first two stanzas. They are rejoicing in their acting as the co-authors of their own freedom, and bragging they can hit a rebel "further than a white man" and will show Jeff Davis they are formidable fighters. Not only are they fighting for the Union, they are fighting for the law, which offers equal treatment to all it covers. As soldiers, the third stanza portrays, they are striking out for new occupations, leaving behind "hoeing cotton" and "hoeing corn."

The fourth stanza develops perhaps the most radical change the black soldiers anticipate. Not only do they expect legal and vocational equality, but social equality as well: "They will have to bow their foreheads to their colored kith and kin." This is a clear assault on the mores of the antebellum South – the rebels will not only have to acknowledge a common humanity, but also their actual blood relations among the former slaves! There is a clear sense of a debt owed: "They will have to pay us wages, the wages of their sin" (this may have a double meaning, as the Bible reminds us that the "wages of sin is death" – Romans 6:23). We have an early demand for reparations: "They will have to give us house-room, or the roof shall tumble in!"

In stanzas five and six, the Emancipation Proclamation has been issued, and slavery is abolished once and for all. There will be no return to the old oppression. Lincoln is described as “Father Abraham,” a title that conflates the President with the Old Testament patriarch, further emphasizing the religious sanction to the abolition of slavery. All in all, this song is one of the best outlines we have concerning the hopes and expectations of the black soldiers of that era. No wonder that years later a Civil War veteran told Norman B. Wood “he once heard a black regiment sing it just before a battle and they made the welkin [heavens] ring, and inspired all who heard it.”²²

Sojourner Truth and “The Valiant Soldiers”

Sojourner Truth’s version of the song, “The Valiant Soldiers,” which appears in the 1878, 1881, and 1884 editions of her *Narrative*,²³ is practically identical to Silber’s edition of the “Marching Song,” containing stanzas one through five plus stanza seven. Only the first line of the first stanza is different: “We are the valiant soldiers who’ve ‘listed for the war.” Stanzas six and eight are unique to the “Marching Song.” They are also the only two stanzas containing the words “colored brethren,” suggesting a common and possibly separate author.

Irwin Silber wrote in his notes on the “Marching Song” that the phrase “sable army of African descent” from his seventh stanza was a “literary artifice” hard to imagine being used by a black soldier at that time (and implicitly by a woman not formally educated like Truth), thus suggesting a point in favor of authorship by an educated person like Miller.²⁴ However, “sable” was a favorite term of Frederick Douglass, whose speeches and writings were well known to Truth, and several of the colored regiments, including the First Arkansas, were widely known to use “African Descent” in their titles, so this is not a strong point of argument against authorship by Truth or by an anonymous black soldier.

In a communication to this writer, Truth biographer Carleton Mabee reflected on the possible clues to the author in the wording of the song: “A question that has occurred to me before is this. Why would Sojourner, who up to 1863 when she is reported to have sung this song for colored soldiers in Detroit, had never lived in the South, or as far as we know even visited it, write a song with references to “cotton” (in the 3rd and 5th verses), and with a reference to “possum up the gum tree” (in the 5th verse)? I understand cotton, possums, and gum trees are common in the South, but not in the North. Arkansas is a cotton state. Is that significant?”²⁵

Of course, this comment could apply to Lindley Miller as well as Sojourner Truth, but might point to authorship by an anonymous person from the South, such as one of the black soldiers in the First Arkansas. On the other hand, this may not be a compelling objection, as these elements of Southern folk life would be relatively well known to anyone who had paid attention to writing and speaking about the issue of slavery and life generally in the Southern states.

Sweet Honey in the Rock recorded Truth's song in 1993 on their 20th anniversary album, "Still on the Journey."²⁶ Bernice Johnson Reagon reported that she did an initial arrangement of "The Valiant Soldiers" for the "sound score of a documentary film by Orlando Bagwell during the late 80s. I had it sung by a group of male voices for that track and later looked at it for my own performance work with Sweet Honey. For this latter purpose . . . I named it 'Sojourner's Battle Hymn.'"²⁷ Erlene Stetson and Linda David described the song as "rousing, brashly defiant, irreverent and joyous," and characterized Sweet Honey's version as "stirringly performed."²⁸ Sweet Honey's a *cappella* rendition gives the best intimation of why Captain Miller could accurately say the impact of its singing by the black regiment had "an effect which can hardly be described."

In the post-Civil War editions of Truth's *Narrative*, "The Valiant Soldiers" is introduced by this sentence by Francis Titus: "The following song, written for the first Michigan Regiment of colored soldiers, was composed by Sojourner Truth during the war, and was sung by her in Detroit and Washington."²⁹ How likely is it that this remark is accurate, and that Sojourner Truth was the original author of the six-stanza version of the song?

The broad outline of Sojourner Truth's life is now well known.³⁰ Born in slavery about 1797 as Isabella, she was a domestic servant in a Dutch family's household in Ulster County, New York, some ninety miles north of New York City. Her first language was Dutch. Between age nine and thirteen she was sold three times, finally settling for sixteen years with the Dumont family, during which she married another slave of the Dumonts and had five children. Enduring abuse from the Dumonts, she finally fled the family a year before the gradual emancipation of slaves enacted by the state of New York would have freed her in July 1827. When the Dumonts sought her return, her freedom was purchased by the Van Wagenen family, whose name she took.

Isabella Van Wagenen followed a Pentecostal form of Methodism, and had a visitation of the Holy Spirit in 1827, which she experienced as a spiritual rebirth. She moved to New York City the following year, where she lived for fourteen years, doing household work and often preaching and singing at revivals. During this time she spent two years living with the communal Kingdom of Matthias, a religious cult that collapsed in scandal in 1835.³¹ On June 1, 1843, the Pentecost, Isabella experienced a call to become an itinerant evangelical preacher and take the name Sojourner Truth.

Her wanderings led her north to Massachusetts, where she settled at the communal Northampton Association, founded in 1842 by abolitionists Samuel Hill and George Benson, the brother-in-law of William Lloyd Garrison. There she met Garrison, Frederick Douglass, and other noted New England reformers. After the Northampton Association disbanded in 1846, Truth hoped to finance the purchase of a house by publishing the story of her life, as Frederick Douglass had just done to considerable success with his autobiography.

Unable to read or write (biographer Carleton Mabee suggests her illiteracy was a consequence of a learning disability),³² Truth dictated her autobiography to her friend Olive Gilbert. The *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* was published in Boston in 1850 by Garrison's printer on credit, and was sold by Truth at her public lectures. She became a powerful and popular speaker on such reform topics as anti-slavery, woman suffrage and temperance, often including songs in her presentations. She spoke at one of the first women's rights conventions in Worcester, Massachusetts in October 1850, and delivered her acclaimed and often mythologized "Ar'n't I a woman?" speech at Akron in May 1851.

In 1860 Truth left Northampton for Battle Creek, Michigan, where she gathered some of her family around her. As the Civil War began, Truth continued to travel and lecture. Her fame as a speaker and singer was greatly enhanced by an article by Harriet Beecher Stowe in the April 1863 *Atlantic Monthly*, which romanticized Truth as the "Libyan Sibyl." As portrait photography became available at that time, Truth began to sell her *cartes-de-visite* at lectures in addition to song sheets of her favorite songs and copies of her *Narrative*, which had been her regular sources of income.³³

Around Thanksgiving 1863 Truth collected food in Battle Creek and delivered it to the First Michigan Colored Infantry being organized during the fall at Camp Ward in Detroit. Truth biographers report she sang "The Valiant Soldiers" either on this occasion or during another visit to the soldiers in February 1864, although neither they nor I have found any contemporary sources that verify this.³⁴

Assessing the Contributions of Truth and Miller to the "Marching Song/ Valiant Soldiers"

After an initial review of the background to the songs, my hypothesis had been that Truth wrote the six stanzas of "The Valiant Soldiers" and that the song traveled to Miller, who added two stanzas and rewrote the song in dialect as the "Song of the First of Arkansas." Although I have not been able to definitively disprove this thesis, I have come to doubt it. The crucial evidence came from reading microfilmed copies of the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* for February 1864. I had hoped to find in the letter from Truth in the February 13 issue a comment that she had sung "The Valiant Soldiers" in Detroit (no such comment is there). Instead I over-wound the microfilm and found myself paging back through the Feb. 27 issue when, to my surprise, I stumbled upon the "Marching Song of the First Arkansas," which Lindley Miller had sent to his brother-in-law, who had forwarded it to the abolitionist newspaper.

Let's review what is known and what remains uncertain. There is a fairly narrow window of time during which the "Marching Song/ Valiant Soldiers" could have been composed and disseminated -- running at the outer limits for the eighteen months from the Emancipation Proclamation in January 1863 through the death of Miller in June 1864. In reality the window must be far narrower. The First Arkansas was organized in April 1863 and officially established in May. Lindley Miller did not assume his officer position with the regiment until late November, when it was in the field in Louisiana.

The earliest record of Captain Miller mentioning the song is his letter from Vicksburg, MS, to his mother, Mary Louisa Miller, in Morristown, NJ, dated January 20, 1864. In it he writes, "I wrote a song for them to the tune of "John Brown" the other day, which the whole Regiment sings. I sent a copy of it to Anthony which he will probably receive before July 4th next. You will not like it I fear."³⁵ "Anthony" is Lindley's brother-in-law, Anthony Quinton Keasbey (U.S. attorney for New Jersey from 1861 to 1868, appointed by President Lincoln), married to his older sister, Edwina. Lindley apparently wrote Keasbey on January 18, 1864, including his song, as this date appears together with the location "Goodrich's Landing," on the copy of the "Marching Song of the First Arkansas" that appeared in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* of February 27, 1864. Keasbey must have sent the song to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* (or possibly to the Supervisory Committee for Recruiting Colored Regiments in Philadelphia), but we have not located any written record of this.³⁶

In the Jan. 20 letter to his mother Lindley uses the term "brethren" (speaking of his soldiers favorably as "more modest than some of their learned white Brethren"), which appears in the two stanzas of the "Marching Song" not found in Truth's "The Valiant Soldiers," strongly suggesting his authorship of at least those two verses. Lindley's comment to his mother, "You will not like it I fear," suggests others in the family may be uncomfortable with the militant "black pride" sentiments in the song. His mother's family (the Macculloch's) had owned a few household slaves in the period before New Jersey's emancipation laws took effect,³⁷ and that could be a possible source of discomfort. Lindley's curious comment in his letter to Anthony Keasbey, quoted in the broadside introduction, that "while it is not very conservative, it will do to fight with," also anticipates discomfort on the part of some readers. These reservations suggest that Silber may be correct in thinking that the more militant lines and stanzas in the song were composed by black soldiers in the First Arkansas and incorporated by Miller in the "Marching Song."

Truth is not claimed as singing "The Valiant Soldiers" (to the First Michigan) until November 1863 at the earliest (which would be prior to Miller writing his "Song"), or alternatively in February 1864. In the post-Civil War editions of Truth's *Narrative*, immediately following the reprint of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Atlantic Monthly* article, "Sojourner Truth: The Libyan Sibyl," there appears an account of Truth's visit, around Thanksgiving 1863, delivering packages from Battle Creek, to the First Michigan Regiment of colored soldiers, titled, "Gala Day at Camp Ward" (taken from the *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*). Described as a woman "who carries not only a tongue of fire but a heart of love," Truth delivered "a speech glowing with patriotism, exhortation and good wishes, which was responded to by rounds of enthusiastic cheers."³⁸ But the article makes no mention of her singing any songs. Nor does any of her correspondence from that period mention singing that song (or any others).³⁹ That's not proof she didn't sing "The Valiant Soldiers" before publication of "Marching Song of the First Arkansas" in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, but it doesn't help verify the case for Truth as author of the song, or explain how her song could have reached Miller in Louisiana. Further, one would think the appearance in the *National Anti-Slavery*

Standard, just two weeks after a letter from her, of a song she wrote, but with a different title and credited to another author, would have elicited some comment from Truth that would have been recorded by one of her friends.

Could Truth have written the song earlier, in the spring or summer of 1863, thus allowing time to reach the black soldiers in Arkansas? Rather than wait for the First Michigan regiment to be organized in the fall, Truth's grandson James Caldwell enlisted in 54th Regiment Massachusetts Infantry (Colored), the unit portrayed in the 1989 film "Glory," along with Frederick Douglass' sons, Lewis and Charles. The 54th Massachusetts was organized and mustered in on May 13, 1863, and left Boston for Hilton Head, South Carolina, on May 28.⁴⁰ (Caldwell and the Douglasses survived their regiment's deadly assault on Fort Wagner on July 18, but were taken prisoner). It's possible to imagine the enlistment of her grandson as an inspiration for Truth's composing "The Valiant Soldiers," but again we have no evidence to support this conjecture.

What accounts for the delay in publishing "The Valiant Soldiers?" Ten years after the Civil War, her Michigan friend and amanuensis Frances Titus put together an expanded edition of Truth's *Narrative* by adding a section of letters and articles Truth had collected in the scrapbooks she called her "Book of Life." The first edition was published in Boston in 1875, and did not contain "The Valiant Soldiers." Subsequent editions in 1878 and 1881, printed in Battle Creek, have the song inserted on what was a blank page between the original "Narrative" and the "Book of Life" sections. Titus's note, written 14 years after the fact, that the song was composed for the First Michigan regiment, could have been one more of the several minor inaccuracies she introduced into her editions of the *Narrative*. Truth was still singing the song, or a variation of it, in 1879 to the black settlers in Kansas known as the exodusters.⁴¹ After Truth's death in 1882, Titus published an edition in 1884 that added a "Memorial Chapter" of eulogies and articles in tribute to Truth.

Without closely dated information about the first time Truth sang "The Valiant Soldiers," we remain in the realm of speculation, but the evidence tips strongly toward Miller as the primary author or compiler. How the song could have traveled from Truth to Miller is difficult to imagine, whereas the line of possible transmission from Miller to Truth is clear. I have been unable to locate any copies of a song sheet for "The Valiant Soldiers," and none of the leading researchers on Truth have reported seeing copies, if any ever existed.⁴²

Truth biographer Nell Irvin Painter commented, "Who knows which way the borrowing actually went—Sojourner Truth was a very smart woman, and I can believe she made up the song, then borrowed by others without attribution to an older black woman. But I can also imagine other routes of travel."⁴³ The appearance of the "Marching Song of the First Arkansas" in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in late February 1864, together with the broadside issued by the Supervisory Committee, can easily account for the spread of the song from Miller to numerous colored regiments as well as to Truth. Her contribution may have been limited to changing the first line of the first stanza to a more

generalized version, making it possible for any colored regiment to sing the song as its own.

Future Research

Although I believe the question of primary authorship of the “Marching Song” is resolved, there may be additional evidence to be found by a researcher who is very diligent, very lucky, or both. On the Miller side, one might add more details by searching extensively for letters from Anthony Keasbey in the family correspondence in the Macculloch-Miller Family Archives at the Macculloch Hall Historical Museum⁴⁴ in Morristown, NJ, and the materials on the family in the nearby Morris Town and Township Free Library; Miller and Keasbey letters in the New York Public Library archives; and archives in the State Library of New Jersey. One might also track down surviving descendants of Senator Jacob W. Miller to see whether anyone retains letters from Lindley Miller or Keasbey about the Civil War and the “Marching Song” that have not been placed in formal archives. In addition, there may be records of the Supervisory Committee for Recruiting Colored Regiments at locations besides The Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

On the Sojourner Truth side, one could carefully search all the relevant archives for song sheets of “The Valiant Soldiers” and any letters that might put them in context. Microfilm of the various abolitionist papers could be combed in detail for mention of any fragments of the song in the issues of 1863 and 1864. Two of the three scrapbooks that Truth gave to Titus for the “Book of Life” section added to her *Narrative* subsequently disappeared, reducing the possibilities for documentation.⁴⁵ But there may be additional Truth materials yet to turn up in Michigan or other Midwest states.

It is also possible that awareness of this contested attribution could lead researchers to discover comments in the letters or diaries of people on the margins of this story, or even find song sheets of earlier anonymous versions of the song that may have been developed and transmitted substantially through an oral folk process among black soldiers and used by Miller or by Truth.

Conclusion

Unless someone can produce solid evidence that Truth wrote or sang “The Valiant Soldiers” prior to January 18, 1864, we have to grant that Lindley Miller wrote – or at least compiled – the “Song of the First of Arkansas.” The extent to which he may have borrowed lyrics from his black soldiers composing parodies on “John Brown’s Body” or the “Battle Hymn” is not likely to be known.

Regardless of authorship credit, the song’s greater significance may be its meaning for the black soldiers in the Civil War, and what we may learn today about their hopes and visions for the future from reading and listening to it. Whether “Marching Song” or “Valiant Soldiers,” the song is a vital document of racial pride, confidence, optimism, and sheer joy in having a hand in the defeat of the Confederacy which had held so

many of them in bondage. True, this vision of political, economic, and social equality was only partially realized, and then only for the brief dozen years of Reconstruction, before white supremacy was restored and the Jim Crow system of legal segregation began to be imposed across the South following the Compromise of 1877. But the song testifies to an underlying determination in African Americans that would continue to build until it burst out again during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Arkansas has acknowledged the value of this resource by including it in the exhibit “Our Own Sweet Sounds” at the Old State House Museum in 1995-1996, and again in the expanded “Our Own Sweet Sounds II” exhibit in 2003-2005 and the companion book to the exhibits.⁴⁶ As the nation approaches the Civil War Sesquicentennial,⁴⁷ it is a particularly appropriate time to revive the memory of the First Arkansas Volunteer Infantry Regiment (African Descent). Arkansas has a special claim to its “Marching Song,” and ought to use it proudly – in all its versions, including Sweet Honey in the Rock’s inspiring “Sojourner’s Battle Hymn” -- in educating today’s students about this crucial period in the long struggle for equal rights for all citizens.

Notes

I greatly appreciate the encouragement from Patrick George Williams for my research from the early stages of this project. My thanks to Archie Green for his comments on a draft of this paper.

¹ Dudley Taylor Cornish, *The Sable Arm: Negro Troops in the Union Army, 1861-1865* (1956; New York: W.W. Norton, 1966), 29-111; and James M. McPherson, *The Negro’s Civil War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1965, 161-239.

² Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System:
<http://www.itd.nps.gov/cwss/soldiers.cfm>

³The November 5, 1863, letter of appointment is in the New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives Section, Personal Miscellaneous, Macculloch-Miller Family Papers. See also the letter from General Lorenzo Thomas to L. H. Miller, from Vicksburg, MS, dated November 6, 1863, noting Miller’s appointment as captain in a regiment of colored soldiers; and the letter from Lindley Hoffman Miller to Lorenzo Thomas, Adjutant General, U.S. Army, Washington, DC, from New York, accepting the appointment, dated Nov. 19, 1863. These letters are in the Macculloch-Miller Family Archives at the Macculloch Hall Historical Museum, Morristown, NJ. My special thanks to executive director David Breslauer and archivist Jane R. Odenweller for their patient assistance in helping me understand the Macculloch-Miller family and for identifying relevant documents in their collection and elsewhere.

⁴ See, for example, “*Departure of the 7th Regiment N.Y.S.M. Friday April 19th 1861, View of Broadway, Cor. Courtland St.*,” Lithograph of Sarony, Major & Knapp, 449

Broadway, N.Y., for D.T. Valentine, *Manual of the Corporation of the City of New York*, 1862. Thomas Nast also painted the departure march; his painting is in the collection of the 7th Regiment.

⁵ John Y. Foster, *New Jersey and the Rebellion: A History of the Services of the Troops and People of New Jersey in Aid of the Union Cause* (Newark: R. Dennis and Co., 1868) 764-765. My thanks to Maureen O'Rourke of The New Jersey Historical Society, who located the information on Lindley Miller in this volume.

⁶ Obituaries, *The New York Times*, July 1, 1864. Foster, *New Jersey and the Rebellion*, has Miller's date of death as July 2, 1864, but according to *The New York Times* obituary that was the date of his funeral.

⁷ Foster, *New Jersey and the Rebellion*, 764-765.

⁸ See Donald S. Spencer, "Hawks and Doves in the 1850's: Stockton vs. Miller," *New Jersey History* 88 (Summer 1970): 99-109. My thanks again to Maureen O'Rourke of The New Jersey Historical Society, who identified some of Senator Jacob W. Miller's speeches in slavery debates during the 1850s. See also Michael F. Holt's definitive study, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), with references to Jacob Miller on 487 and 709.

⁹ Thomas A. DeBlack, *With Fire and Sword: Arkansas, 1861-1874* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 87.

¹⁰ The description of Anne Huntington Tracy is from "A Brief Biography: Lindley Hoffman Miller (March 26, 1843 – July 1, 1864)" in the brochure for the exhibit "Lindley Hoffman Miller: A Noble Cause, A Tragic Ending," Macculloch Hall Historical Museum, Morristown, NJ, February 18 – May 19, 1996. The comment "left at the altar" is in Foster, *New Jersey and the Rebellion*, 764-5.

¹¹ Exhibit brochure for "Lindley Hoffman Miller: A Noble Cause, a Tragic Ending."

¹² Among many sources, see Julia Ward Howe, *Reminiscences, 1819-1899* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1899); Boyd B. Stutler, *Glory, Glory, Hallelujah! The Story of "John Brown's Body" and "Battle Hymn of the Republic"* (Cincinnati: The C. J. Krehbiel Co., 1960); Deborah Pickman Clifford, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Biography of Julia Ward Howe* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1978); and Sarah Vowell, "John Brown's Body," in *The Rose and the Briar: Death, Love and Liberty in the American Ballad*, ed. Sean Wilentz and Greil Marcus (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 83-89.

¹³ See Henry Mayer, *All on Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 537.

¹⁴My thanks to Jack Gumbrecht of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia for reviewing materials in the Register, Scrapbook and 1864 Report of the Supervisory Committee for Recruiting Colored Regiments, and sending me copies of the broadsides. The Society's archive does not contain any files of the Committee's general correspondence, nor any other information on Captain Lindley Miller.

¹⁵ Ronald D. Cohen, *Rainbow Quest: The Folk Music Revival & American Society, 1940-1970* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 74-75 and 264-268.

¹⁶Irwin Silber, comp. and ed., *Songs of the Civil War* (1960; New York, Dover Publications, 1995), 12. An earlier important compilation of military songs, Edward Arthur Dolph, *"Sound Off!" Soldier Songs from the Revolution to World War II* (1929; New York: Farrar & Rinehart, Inc., 1942), in its introduction to "Battle Hymn of the Republic," quotes the first verse of the "Marching Song" with no title or attribution, only the note that "The colored soldiers had words of their own for this tune. Here is one stanza that they used to sing:" p. 242.

¹⁷ Silber, *Songs of the Civil War*, 26.

¹⁸ Silber, telephone interview with the author, July 15, 2006.

¹⁹ Seeger and MacAdoo's "Songs of the Civil War" is Folkways FH 5717, now a Smithsonian Folkways Recording. Ford's "Civil War Songs of the North" was available from 1961 to 1964; the "Civil War Songs of the South" was available until 1970. Both albums were briefly made available by Capitol Records in 1975, and then were issued on a CD in 1991 in conjunction with Ken Burns' PBS series "The Civil War." It quickly went out of print, but is available again on a CD from Bear Family Records, "Songs of the Civil War," BCD 16635 AS, with an excellent booklet of notes on the music that supplies the above history of recordings. In its introduction to the "Marching Song," the booklet notes, "Silber believes Miller collected his men's verses and added lines and stanzas of his own." (p. 45). Keith and Rusty McNeil also recorded a 3-stanza version of the "Marching Song" in their 3-CD set of "Civil War Songs," a part of their "American History Through Folksong," a 15-CD set aimed at the secondary education market. The song is also in their self-published Civil War Songbook (Riverside, CA: WEM Records, 1999), pp. 68-69; the order of the stanzas is scrambled for no apparent reason. The song is attributed to Captain Lindley Miller, but they also note that Sojourner Truth often sang the verse that begins "We are done with hoeing cotton."

²⁰ The broadside can be seen in the "American Memory" web pages of the Library of Congress: [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/amss:@field\(DOCID+@lit\(cw105500\)\)](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?ammem/amss:@field(DOCID+@lit(cw105500)))

²¹ Silber, *Songs of the Civil War*, 26. For reasons unknown, a seven-stanza version of the "Marching Song" (omitting the fifth stanza beginning "We heard the Proclamation") was printed in *The Annals of America: 1858-1865, The Crisis of the Union* (Chicago:

Encyclopedia Britannica, 1968) 9: 472-473. This is the source from which DeBlack obtained the seven-stanza version he reprinted in *With Fire and Sword*, 87-88 (email from Thomas DeBlack to the author, July 25, 2006).

²² Norman B. Wood, *The White Side of a Black Subject: A Vindication of the Afro-American Race* (Chicago: American Publishing House, 1897), 247-248, quoting Sojourner Truth's "The Valiant Soldiers." His source makes no mention of the regiment involved, or where or when.

²³ I'd like to thank the following for checking post-Civil War original editions (1875 through 1881) of the *Narrative* for me: Susan Snyder, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; Glenda Insua, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan; Geraldine Strey, Wisconsin State Historical Society; Kasey Mattia, Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library, Duke University; Susan Stekel Rippley, James Ford Bell Library, University of Minnesota; and Clark Evans, Rare Book and Special Collections, Library of Congress. One anomaly was noted: the 1878 edition of the *Narrative* at the Bentley Historical Library of the University of Michigan did not have "The Valiant Soldiers" on p. 126 (emails from Glenda Insua to the author, August 7, 2006, and September 8, 2006). However, the song was present in copies of the 1878 edition at the James Ford Bell Library at the University of Minnesota and the Rare Book and Special Collections of the Library of Congress.

²⁴ Silber, *Songs of the Civil War*, 12.

²⁵ Email from Carleton Mabee to the author, Dec. 13, 2006. He also noted "I had never heard before that [Truth's "The Valiant Soldiers"] is similar to an Arkansas song attributed to Capt. Lindley Miller."

²⁶ Redway, CA: EarthBeat! Records, 1993. The song is also mentioned in Bernice Johnson Reagon and Sweet Honey in the Rock, *We Who Believe in Freedom* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993), 22-23, that also notes they sang the piece in January 1991 "for a film on songs from the Civil War period produced by Jim Brown and Ken Burns for PBS." For reasons Reagon no longer remembers, she changed the first line of the first verse to "We are colored Yankee soldiers who've listed for the war" (emails to the author, Aug. 6 and Aug. 18, 2006). In 2006 the Sojourner Truth Institute and Heritage Battle Creek produced a CD, "Am I Not a Man and a Brother? Songs of Freedom North and South," with talented local singers and musicians from Battle Creek, MI, including a rendition of "The Valiant Soldiers" by Carolyn Ballard, which may be as close as we will get to imagining how it may have sounded to hear Truth sing the song. My thanks to Mary Butler for sending me the CD.

²⁷ Reagon, email to the author, August 6, 2006.

²⁸ Erlene Stetson and Linda David, *Glorying in Tribulation: The Lifework of Sojourner Truth* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994), 141.

²⁹ The song is on p. 126 of the 1878, 1881 and 1884 editions of the *Narrative*, and such facsimile reprints as *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1878; New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1968). In the definitive reprinted edition, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, edited and with an introduction and notes by Nell Irvin Painter (1884; New York: Penguin Books, 1998), the song is on p. 86. The only other 19th Century source I am aware of that quotes the entire song is Norman B. Wood, *The White Side of a Black Subject* (1897), 248.

³⁰ See Carleton Mabee with Susan Mabee Newhouse, *Sojourner Truth: Slave, Prophet, Legend* (New York: New York University Press, 1993); Stetson and David, *Glorying in Tribulation* (1994); and Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1996).

³¹ Paul E. Johnson and Sean Wilentz, *The Kingdom of Matthias: A Story of Sex and Salvation in 19th Century America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

³² See chapter 5, “Why did she never learn to read?” in Mabee, *Sojourner Truth*, especially 62-63.

³³ See chapter 20, “Truth in Photographs,” in Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 185-199. Stetson and David, *Glorying in Tribulation*, portrays on its front and rear end papers a fascinating handbill for Truth lectures which concludes “At the close of her discourse she will offer for sale her photograph and a few of her favorite songs.”

³⁴ Mabee, *Sojourner Truth*, 117, has Truth singing the song to the First Michigan around Thanksgiving 1863; Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 183, dates the event as February 1864. Neither cites a contemporary source that verifies the song as being sung; both apparently extrapolate from Francis Titus’s 1878 note to “The Valiant Soldiers” in her expanded edition of the *Narrative*.

³⁵ Copy in the Macculloch-Miller Family Archives; original letter in the New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives Section, Personal Miscellaneous, Macculloch-Miller Family Papers. The broadside issued by the Supervisory Committee is undated, but conventionally attributed as 1863; this is certainly wrong. Our research suggests 1864 as the publication date.

³⁶ “Marching Song of the First Arkansas,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, February 27, 1864, p. 3 (a publication of the American Anti-Slavery Committee, headquartered in New York, with an office in Philadelphia). Anthony Q. Keasbey’s papers were apparently discarded by a descendant vacating the family home despite efforts by the Macculloch Hall staff to save them (telephone interview with archivist Jane R. Odenweller by the author, February 17, 2007). Keasbey was clearly close to Lindley;

three years after Lindley's death he and his wife named their newborn son Lindley Miller Keasbey:

<http://www.allerdice.net/Genealogy/jkaweb/pafn06.htm>

³⁷ Telephone interview with archivist Jane R. Odenweller by the author, February 17, 2007.

³⁸ The passage is found at p. 173 in the original and facsimile editions of the *Narrative*, and on p. 117 of Nell Irwin Painter's 1998 edition of the *Narrative*. These passages are not dated or clearly attributed, but are from the *Detroit Advertiser and Tribune*, Nov. 24, 1863, p. 3. My thanks to Mary Butler of Heritage Battle Creek for verifying this reference.

³⁹ For example, there is no mention of any song in her "Letter from Sojourner Truth" appearing in the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* on Feb. 13, 1864, just two weeks before publication of "Marching Song of the First Arkansas" in the same paper. Nor is there any mention of any song in her letter from Detroit to William Lloyd Garrison, dated April 11, 1864 (reprinted in Stetson and David, *Glorying in Tribulation*, 213-214).

⁴⁰ Civil War Soldiers and Sailors System; Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 182. See also William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 223-227. And see the film review by James M. McPherson, "The 'Glory' Story," *The New Republic*, January 8 & 15, 1990, 22-27.

⁴¹ Nell Irwin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 247.

⁴² Glenda Insua checked Berenice Bryant Lowe's Sojourner Truth Collection at the Bentley Historical Library of the University of Michigan, but found no song sheets (email to the author, September 8, 2006). Mary Butler of the Heritage Battle Creek Research Center also knows of no song sheets in the Battle Creek collections of Truth materials (Butler, telephone interview with the author, October 16, 2006). Truth biographer Carleton Mabee writes that he has never seen any song sheets of "The Valiant Soldiers" (email to the author, December 13, 2006).

⁴³ Painter, email to the author, August 18, 2006.

⁴⁴ <http://www.maccullochhall.org/index.html>

⁴⁵ Sojourner Truth Institute, Battle Creek, MI, web page, Bibliography note 7(i) at: <http://www.sojournertruth.org/Library/Archive/FamilyofSojourner.htm>

⁴⁶ Robert Cochran, *Our Own Sweet Sounds: A Celebration of Popular Music in Arkansas*, 2nd ed. (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 2005), 11-12. Professor Cochran kindly offered to check the works of Ozark folklorist Vance

Randolph, which he knows so well, to see whether Randolph had commented on the “Marching Song.” Apparently he hadn’t.

⁴⁷ See the National Park Service’s Sesquicentennial Initiative at:
<http://cwar.nps.gov/civilwar/abcivwarSesqInit.htm>