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**“Every *Composer* to be his own *Carver*”:
The Manliness of William Billings**

By

Eben Simmons Miller

“I recommend to you the resolution (tho’ not the impudence) of a discarded Actor, who after he had been twice hissed off the Stage, mounted again, and with great Assurance, he thundered out these words: ‘I will be heard.’”

- William Billings, *The Singing Master’s Assistant*¹

¹ Though my name alone heads this piece, writing this essay was not a solitary effort. I thus want to acknowledge Jacob Weir-Gertzog and Molly McCarthy for their encouragement. Thanks, too, to Bruce Dorsey and Tony Rotundo, each of whom helped give this project direction at various stages of research and writing. Jane Kamensky, above all, deserves acknowledgement: the advice she lent along the way proved invaluable, and her scholarship sets an example of the highest order to which to aspire. I dedicate special appreciation to Tracey Guillerault, whose work on Winslow Homer and masculinity inspired this project, and whose support allows and sustains my own composing and carving.

William Billings’ tunebooks are available on microfilm, but in this essay the author cites the recently completed, more accessible, and readable book versions. Karl Kroeger, et al., eds. *The Complete Works of William Billings* (hereafter *Works*) Vol. 11, *The Singing Master’s Assistant* (hereafter *SMA*) (1778) (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia for The American Musicological Society & The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Boston, 1977-1990), n. 17, p. 17.

A favorite story about William Billings (1746-1800) depicts the young man, apprenticed to a tanner, composing psalms on leather hides. Self-taught, having read independently on musical theory from youth (though with occasional instructions from local singer and New South Church choir leader, John Barry), Billings was a lively young genius, his exuberance for song "so great that the walls of the [tanning] shop and many sides of leather became covered with his earliest attempts at musical composition." Nathaniel Gould, a nineteenth-century commentator, knew several of Billings' acquaintances; he, too, invoked this vaguely heroic image when describing early America's foremost psalmist, noting that Billings "wrote his first tunes with chalk, on the walls of the [tannery], while tending the mill to grind bark."²

The early death of his father left Billings' family in an impecunious position. Taking up tanning as an adolescent, he likely worked in order to support his mother and younger siblings. And despite physical disabilities that must have proven inhibiting at some point -- a stunted leg, withered arm, and blind eye could not be shrugged off when a job entails such arduous labor -- Billings was involved with the tanning industry for the greater part of his life.³ Apparently, however, the love of music (of psalmody in particular) competed for the young man's attention.

² Raymond Morin, "'William Billings: Pioneer of American Music,'" *New England Quarterly* (1941), 26; Nathaniel D. Gould, *Church Music in America* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1853; reprinted, New York: AMS Press, 1970), 43; William Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley, D.D., Pastor of East Church, Salem, Massachusetts* (Salem, MA: Essex Institute, 1905-1914), 11, 350; *Columbian Magazine* [Philadelphia] in Hans Nathan, *William Billings: Data and Documents* (Detroit: The College Music Society), 15. It is possible, too, that Gould also knew Billings' descendants. Three of his children, Sarah, William, and Lucy lived well into the nineteenth century. Frank W. Norcross, "The Hide and Leather Trade of Suffolk County," *Professional and Industrial History of Suffolk County, Mass.* (Boston: Boston History Co., 1894), III, 370.

³ Between 1786 and his death in 1800, Billings tanned and accepted civic positions including, but not exclusive to, those concerning the tanning industry. Beginning in 1785, he was regularly appointed to positions such as Trade Inspector, Police Inspector, scavenger, Sealer of Leather, and Hogreeves. *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, containing the Selectman's Minutes from 1776 through 1786* (Boston, 1896), 296-297, 310; *A Report of the Record Commissioners of the City of Boston, containing the Selectman's Minutes from 1784 through 1796* (Boston, 1896), 137, 163, 222, 279, 353, 387, 422.

Tanning was not Billings' love. It was an honest trade -- employment that, while grimy, fetid, and demanding, was honorable nonetheless. And to an extent, overcoming his handicaps probably reinforced Billings' self-esteem and garnered an additional amount of respect from his community. But it was singing that Billings felt most passionate about; the composition and performance of psalmody, both sacred and secular, was the endeavor he most heartily pursued. In a compromise between duty and passion, the tannery, then, also served as the young Billings' composing studio.

As one contemporary remembered, Billings was a man "with an uncommon negligence of person," his mind "as eccentric as his person was deformed to say nothing of the deformity of his habits." Yet Billings, that one-eyed, crooked-legged, withered-armed, snuff-sniffing tanner was also a "singular man... [and the] father of new [sic] England music."⁴ In addition to the regard he commanded as an artisan, Billings was also a popular singing-school master and a prolific writer of psalms, anthems, and fuguing tunes. Reputedly on friendly terms with Samuel Adams and John Hancock, and a sometimes music director at the fashionable Brattle Street Church, Billings also collaborated with Paul Revere in designing the frontispiece of his first collection of music (the first American song-book), *The New-England Psalm-Singer*. The esteem in which contemporary Bostonians held Billings was thus generally high. Today his reputation is that of a Yankee tunesmith and the foremost American composer of the eighteenth century.⁵

⁴ For Billings' physical appearance and tobacco habit, see Bentley, *The Diary of William Bentley*, 350-351; Gould, *Church Music in America*, 46. The definitive biography of Billings is David McKay and Richard Crawford, *William Billings of Boston: Eighteenth-Century Composer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 186-187; see also Gillian B. Anderson, "Eighteenth-Century Evaluations of William Billings: A Reappraisal," *Quarterly Journal of the Library of Congress* 35:1 (1978): 48-58; Margaret Hindle Hazen, "Songs of Revolutionary America," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* (July 1976): 179-195; Mary Gosselink De Jong, "'Both Pleasure and Profit': William Billings and the Uses of Music," *William and Mary Quarterly* 42:1 (1985): 104-116.

⁵ Ronald L. Davis, *A History of Music in American Life, Volume 1: The Formation Years, 1620-1865* (Malabar, FL: Robert Krieger, 1982), 73; Morin, William Billings: Pioneer of American Music," 25-33. The ballyhooed 250th birthday celebrations that took place at Boston Common and King's Chapel in October 1996 testify to present-day

This essay about William Billings illustrates that he was more than a one-armed tanner and colorful musician who enjoyed a small share of late eighteenth-century celebrity. His biography offers a unique opportunity to explore Revolutionary era masculinity. Billings did not leave explicit written records explaining the extent to which gender shaped his life experiences. Yet, like other white men in late eighteenth-century New England, Billings lived during an historical moment and in a place with explicit standards of manhood representing a range of acceptable masculinities. From his individual experience, it is possible to demonstrate how these manly ideals shaped Billings, and alternately, how Billings himself authored his own individual sense of manliness. As this essay will explore, the publication of this "Musical Tanner's" first two songbooks, his tenure as a singing-school master, and his attempts to copyright his compositions offer clues as to how Billings' musical life and manhood intertwined.

In light of historians' recent considerations of gender, this essay seeks to understand William Billings' sense of manhood in the milieu of late eighteenth-century New England. Along the way, this essay also seeks to capture a bit of the complexity of late eighteenth-century masculinity and offer new direction in the study of early American manhood. Unfortunately, a gendered reading of Billings' life is made all the more conceptually challenging because of a general lack of "men's history." Although several historians have recently directed their research in this field, there remains relatively little in the study of early American manhood. While there is certainly no dearth of histories championing the heroic deeds of American men, this comparatively small batch of gender studies are not committed to making heroes out of men. The aim, rather, is to study men as gendered beings, to illustrate how manhood, like womanhood, was socially constructed, and to attempt to understand the consequences of masculinity. Glimpsing manliness, though, is further complicated by the fact that men did not as self-consciously document their conceptions of manhood in the eighteenth century as they would in the nineteenth. But this is not to imply that such conceptions went entirely unrecorded. As E. Anthony Rotundo writes, revealed in the written record

appreciation for Billings' music. On the world wide web, see <<http://www.njit.net/~rhutchin/billings96/tunelist.new.html>>; <<http://www.njit.net/~rhutchin/billings96/minutes.html>>.

of late eighteenth-century New Englanders -- in men's correspondence, sermons, magazines, popular literature -- are depictions of "what it meant to be a good man," and other "assumptions about the meaning of manhood."⁶

From this record, historians have constructed paradigms in their attempt to describe Revolutionary era masculinity. Recent scholarship asserts that manly ideals -- paradigms of acceptable manhood, whose traits reflect late eighteenth-century men's economic, religious, and political opportunities and responsibilities -- existed to shape men's gendered sense of self. The two dominant paradigms, *communal manhood* and *self-made manhood*, vied in the late eighteenth century as competing gender ideals. The former emphasized man's responsibility to his community; the latter, man's responsibility to his *self*. Cast in a narrative that places *self-made manhood* as the nineteenth-century successor of eighteenth-century *communal manhood*, this depiction unnecessarily sacrifices details otherwise bolstering a more nuanced understanding of early American manhood.⁷

This scholarship captures something of the essence of Revolutionary era manliness. But it better represents a range of masculinities than it does apply to men who lived during the late eighteenth century. These

⁶ E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 10.

⁷ Rotundo, *American Manhood*; E. Anthony Rotundo, *Manhood in America: The Northern Middle Class, 1770-1920* (Ph.D. diss., Brandeis University, 1982); E. Anthony Rotundo, "Body and Soul: Changing Ideals of American Middle-Class Manhood, 1770-1920," *Journal of Social History* 16 (Summer 1983): 23-38; Bruce Dorsey, *City of Brotherly Love: Religious Benevolence, Gender, and Reform in Philadelphia, 1780-1844* (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 1993); Bruce Dorsey, "History of Manhood in America, 1750-1920," *Radical History Review* 64 (Winter 1996), 19; Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Free Press, 1996). This essay also draws on Joan W. Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91 (December 1986): 1053-1075; Ruth Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs* 13 (1987): no page given; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Dis-Covering the Subject of the 'Great Constitutional Discussion,' 1786-1789," *Journal of American History* 79 (December 1992): 841-873; Toby L. Ditz "Shipwrecked; Or, Masculinity Imperiled: Mercantile Representation of Failure and the Gendered Self in Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia," *Journal of American History* 81 (June 1994): 51-80.

rather prescriptive and dichotomous constructions do not correspond with very many individual men themselves. No single person fits these archetypes perfectly; manhood was much more complex and nuanced than any one ideal, or pair of ideals. These paradigms are thus useful for framing the possible boundaries of men's gendered identities. Paradigms *did* exist for men to aspire to -- and aspire they did. But the task of locating particular men's experiences remains.

As this essay seeks to demonstrate, rather than fitting any specific category, Billings' sense of manhood was borne out of compromises, or pragmatic choices made in life, and defined somewhere between the old mode of *communal manhood* and the newly emerging *self-made manhood*. By virtue of his standing as a tanner and song-master, Billings confirmed his manliness as an artisan. His respective trades -- tanning and composing -- exemplified upstanding, *communal manhood*. As both an artisan and patriotic artist, Billings met his manly, civic obligations to the community. Yet in his prose, music, and in several attempts to patent his musical compositions, Billings also articulated a second, competing gendered sense of self, one which asserted individualism as a manly ideal.

In examining how Billings lived according to these seemingly opposing masculinities, then, what must be considered is the possibility of an ambivalent manhood, the possibility that men in late eighteenth-century New England, men like William Billings, were unlikely to fit any single ideal. Because men had a stake in their individual, gendered selves, they self-consciously and simultaneously pushed the limits of and conformed to manly ideals. A closer investigation of such men as William Billings is necessary to viewing this balancing act, to witness men's attempts to resolve the tension between competing senses of appropriate masculinity. Ultimately, such scholarship will result in a more nuanced understanding of the construction of manhood -- for it was in-between (though in the context of) gender paradigms that men "carved" their masculinity.

In *The New-England Psalm-Singer (NEPS)*, published in 1770, William Billings established his individual voice. In this volume, he first articulated his passion for music and its connection not only to his *self*, but also to his community. It is here that Billings as tanner and as musician first emerged, entwined. Though his contemporaries referred to him as a tanner, or sometimes as the “Musical Tanner,” Billings identified himself otherwise. Tanning was not composing; the tannery was not a musician’s study, but Billings’ true vocation was as a musician. In city occupation lists, Billings throughout his life had himself entered as Singing Master or musician, never as tanner.⁸ How he identified himself may thus seem clear, but Billings the tanner and Billings the composer cannot be so neatly separated.

At the same time Billings was establishing himself as a tanner, he was also beginning his career as a musician. Balancing his life between these two identities, artisan and artist, would have important implications concerning Billings’ manhood. The pecuniary concerns of surviving as a musician were real, but his trade as a tanner would compliment his finances in times of need. The associations, however, were broader than simply monetary: Billings conflated the artisan’s civic responsibilities and the artist’s individual pursuits by focusing his talents and efforts toward community participation and enjoyment of his art. As a composer of vocal music, Billings was keen to the social and political component of psalmody and chorus work: he relished in the combination of voices raising in holy song, and he also met his future wife at a singing-school, instructing her in a community chorus. Furthermore, he invested several of his compositions with explicitly patriotic lyrics, cementing his connection to colonial community. But, importantly, Billings also remained responsible for his individual, gendered self. His attempts to copyright his compositions are the most powerful testimonial to this commitment.

“My Reuben, my first-born,” Billings later wrote of *NEPS*. “Oh! how did my foolish heart throb and beat with tumultuous joy! With what impatience did I wait on the Book-Binder... with what extacy [sic], did I

⁸ For example, see “Assessor’s ‘Taking Books’ of the Town of Boston, 1780” *The Bostonian Society Publications* Vol. 9 (Boston, 1912), 55; “Observer,” “Account of two Americans of extraordinary Genius,” *Columbian Magazine*, April 1788; *A Report of the Records of the City of Boston*, containing miscellaneous papers (Boston, 1886), 212.

snatch the yet unfinished Book out of his hands.”⁹ Unique as the first compilation of solely American music, William Billings had finished his first tunebook by early 1769. But, as he stated in the Introduction, because of British taxes he “deferred the Publication of these Sheets for Eighteen Months, to have them put on American paper.”¹⁰ When sufficient paper was finally available in the fall of 1770, Billings sent his manuscript and newly written Preface to his publishers, Edes and Gill. In December the volumes were complete; following publication he took out an advertisement in the *Boston Gazette and Country Journal* (also published by Edes and Gill).

Billings’ first notice advertising *NEPS* appeared December 10, 1770. In this notice, Billings listed the several Boston locations where one could acquire his song-book as “at Edes and Gill’s Printing Office in Queen Street; at Deacon Elliot’s under Liberty-Tree; at Mr. Josiah Flagg’s in Fish Street; and at Mr. Gillam Bass’, near the Flat Conduit.” Importantly, the advertisement also suggests that in order to ensure the volume’s publication he had first gathered subscriptions. To his subscribers, Billings explained that those who “have Subscription Papers in their Hands, are desired to leave them at Edes and Gill’s Office; and in so doing, they will oblige their humble Servant. William Billings.” Though some of the buyers were apt to be friends, many of his subscribers were probably singing-school pupils or former students. Further indicating Billings’ aspirations for selling this volume, the advertisement, running regularly through May of 1771, even offered information on buying the book outside of Boston. Billings apparently could supply songbooks to those “applying to Capt. Joseph Cushing in Hanover, near North-River Bridge.”¹¹

⁹ *Works (SMA)*, Vol. II, 5-6.

¹⁰ As did other authors of verse and broadsides, in *NEPS* Billings appealed to women, asking them to supply linen to the paper mills. Kenneth Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution: Painting, Music, Literature, and the Theatre in the Colonies and the United States from the Treaty of Paris of the Inauguration of George Washington, 1763-1789* (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1976), 200; *Works*, Vol. I, *The New England Psalm-Singer* (hereafter *NEPS*) (1770), 4.

¹¹ *Boston Gazette*, 10 December 1770, p. 3, col. 2. On printing, publishing, and subscribing in the late eighteenth century, see Cathy Davidson, *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986),

Billings' efforts to sell *NEPS* did not, however, surpass the energy he devoted to producing this unique compilation. His work habits are not known, but fitting a pattern he would follow in later publishing experiences, he probably wrote this volume over the course of several years while employed as a tanner and while instructing singing-schools. And because of its girth -- *NEPS* contains 126 compositions in all, including 118 psalms and hymn tunes and eight anthems and canons -- as well as its lengthy introduction on the fundamentals of musical theory, it is safe to heed Billings' claim in his Preface that "this Composition hath cost me much Time and Pain." In fact, it is reasonable to assume that work on the project started as early as the mid-1760s. Further attesting to Billings' "Time and Pains," an advertisement printed in *NEPS* itself indicated that another volume of "Anthems, Fuges [sic] and Chorus's" was to be ready soon -- although these pieces were not published until 1781.

Billings had thus undoubtedly spent the second half of the 1760s honing his musical craft, lending at least some credence to the story that he composed on leather hides. Yet, it is more likely that he cultivated much of his music by teaching his own compositions in singing-schools. A result of "the regular singing movement" launched by clergy in the 1720s to encourage orderly singing, rather than "improvisatory and uncoordinated singing by ear," singing-schools became an important social activity in New England.¹² Advertised in broadsides or in newspaper announcements, singing-schools would convene in a church, school, or other public place once or twice a week for about a month. At the completion of instruction, community members (mostly teenagers and young adults) would have learned to sing their psalms correctly, their efforts culminating in a final concert. And the instructor, if he was a clever entrepreneur, would have either sold his own song-books to his

esp. 26-27; William J. Joyce, et al., eds., *Printing and Society in Early America* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1983); Michael Warner, *Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

¹² De Jong, "William Billings and the Uses of Music," 105; Laura L. Becker, "Ministers vs. Laymen: The Singing Controversy in Puritan New England, 1720-1740," *New England Quarterly* 55 (1982): pp. 79-96; H. Wiley Hitchcock, *Music in the United States: A Historical Introduction* 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1988), 7-9.

students to learn from, or at least have had himself potential subscribers if he were to ever actually publish such a collection.

Billings' first experiences with singing-schools were undoubtedly as a student. By his late teens and early twenties, though, he taught the art of vocal music, particularly psalmody, in Boston and its environs. The earliest evidence of Billings leading a chorus appears in an October 2, 1769 advertisement run in the *Boston Gazette and Country Journal*. "John Barrey & William Billings," reads the notice,

BEGS Leave to inform the Publick that they propose to open a Singing School THIS NIGHT, near the Old South Meeting House, where any Person inclining to learn to Sing may be attended upon at said School with Fidelity and Dispatch.¹³

It is probable that Billings had been teaching for several years by 1769. If so, he undoubtedly had tried out dozens of his own compositions. By the end of 1770, with the publication of *The New-England Psalm-Singer*, he had his first songbook to peddle.

Billings lived for these moments, for the opportunity to share his creations. In his prose, he described his exhilaration, though it was often written indirectly, through praise of song. "He who finds himself gifted with a tunable Voice, and yet neglects to cultivate it," Billings wrote in his Preface to *NEPS*, "not only hides in the Earth a Talent of the highest Value, but robs himself of that peculiar Pleasure, of which they only are conscious who exercise that Faculty."¹⁴ In order to help his readers rationalize along with him, Billings cited the most prominent text available, directly appealing to scripture in order to support his zeal for psalmody. In the frontispiece to *NEPS* he quoted James 5:13 as an epigraph to the volume: "Is any merry? Let him sing psalms."¹⁵

¹³ *Boston Gazette and Country Journal*, 2 October 1769, p. 1, col. 2. The advertisement also ran on the 7th and 16th.

¹⁴ *Works (NEPS)*, Vol. I, 3.

¹⁵ *Works (NEPS)*, Vol. I, 3. In future works, Billings continued this theme. For example, he cited in his "An Encomium on Music" eight biblical precedents for music in public worship. Also, in his "A Musical Creed; In Imitation of St. Athanasius,"

And yet even as Billings recognized the “Usefulness and importance” of psalmody to the community, music was also a medium through which Billings tested his independence and his individualism. While “any Rules for Composition laid down by any that went before me,” did not restrict him, Billings also asserted that “neither should I think (were I to pretend to lay down Rules) that any who came after me were any ways obliged to adhere to them any further than they should think proper.” Citing “musical license,” Billings decided “Therefore, upon this Consideration, for me to dictate or pretend to prescribe Rules of this Nature for others, would not only be very unnecessary, but also a great Piece of Vanity.”¹⁶

These words, concluding his *NEPS* advice-piece, “To all Musical Practitioners,” suggest that Billings deeply appreciated the connection between music and life. The characteristic marking both was a unique individualism -- an independence with which he chose his own boundaries and yet refused to set others’. In another epigraph to the song-book, Billings quoted Matthew 21:16, “Out of the Mouth of Babes and Sucklings thou hast perfected Praise.” This sentence captures not only the precocity of the young man, but also some of his self-confidence and his spirit of individualism. Billings recognized in himself a youthful verve, and humbly (yet unabashedly) presented himself publicly through his music and prose.

In addition to his individualism, Billings’ biographers, musicologists, and other commentators have been fond of emphasizing the nationalism that marked *NEPS*. Nathaniel Gould, in particular, was greatly interested in Billings’ patriotism -- especially in light of his relationship with Samuel Adams and the lyrics to some of his songs. “[Billings] was a zealous patriot,” wrote Gould, “much attached to the *great* patriot, Gov. Samuel Adams, who was also an ardent lover of music.” Further, according to Gould, Adams used to “stand side by side with Billings” while singing in

Billings wrote that the “heavenly Science” of music originated with God. Secular tunes, too, won voluminous praise from Billings. Music was simply good for one’s well being, certainly better for good health than “the nauseous drugs of the Apothecary” -- according to Billings, music could even neutralize tarantula poison. *Works, (SMA)*, Vol. II, 21, 21-22, 31-34.

¹⁶ *Works (NEPS)*, Vol. I, 3, 20.

church and in concert. It was here that patriotic songs like Billings' "Chester," songs "that breathed the spirit of the day," were sung. Billings' songs, "some of which S. Adams probably had, to say the least, *seen* before they were published," Gould hints were not only Billings'. Gould suggests, albeit in vague language, that Adams - known elsewhere as "Samuel the Publican, alias The Psalm-singer, with the gifted face" -- had somehow collaborated with Billings to create patriotic music.¹⁷ The implication is that Adams had a hand in the composing of "Chester"; but it is more likely that he encouraged Benjamin Edes (of Edes and Gill), himself sympathetic to anti-British sentiments, to publish Billings' work. Billings' compositions, especially the patriotic songs, likely complimented much of what Edes printed, hence advertisements for *NEPS* in Edes' (and John Gill's) mouthpiece for Boston's radicals, the *Boston Gazette*.¹⁸

Billings' public pledge of loyalty to the colonies, in the form of patriotic music, further points to his commitment to community. It is clear that conceptions of "public virtue" in Revolutionary era America included a sense of patriotism. Virtue indicated an uncorrupted sense of patriotic duty, and was manifest not only in soldiers themselves but in an who supported the colonists' war efforts. Men's writings in this period, moreover, show that the archetypal patriot was one who invoked martial courage as a citizen-soldier; but a heroic orator could also achieve the patriotic ideal. In whatever capacity, "Firm and manly support" of the

¹⁷ Gould, *Church Music in America*, 43-44; David McKay, "William Billings and the Colonial Music Patent," *Old-Time New England* 63:4 (1973), n.12, p. 106. David Ewen goes as far as to submit that Billings and Adams performed frequent duets together and Kenneth Silverman states that the two collaborated on song lyrics. David Ewen *Great Men of American Popular Song: The History of American Popular Song... from William Billings... to the "Folk-rock" of Bob Dylan* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 6; Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution*, 198. Description of Adams is in *Boston Chronicle*, October 2326, 1769. See McKay, "William Billings and the Colonial Music Patent," n.12, p. 106.

¹⁸ Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution*, 144; Oliver M. Dickerson, ed., *Boston Under Military Rule 1768-1769 as revealed in A Journal of the Times* (rpt. New York, 1970). See also, Edmund S. and Helen M. Morgan, *The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1953), 160, 240; Allen Johnson and Dumas Malone, eds., "Benjamin Edes," *Dictionary of American Biography*, Vol. VI (New York: Scribner's, 1931), 17-18; "John Gill," *Dictionary of American Biography*, Vol. VII, 284.

war effort, according to Boston's Phillips Payson, was the duty of "virtuous Americans." Billings did not fight in the war, presumably because of his deformed arm and leg, and lack of vision in one eye. But some of the music he wrote for *NEPS*, composed amid the imperial tensions of the late 1760s, as well as several songs actually penned during the war, he meant to resonate with American patriots.¹⁹ His sarcastic epigraph to *NEPS* notwithstanding -- "O praise the Lord with one Consent, and in this grand Design, Let Britain and the Colonies, unanimously join." -- a few songs in the volume warrant a patriotic reading.²⁰

The most famous such song is "Chester." A Revolutionary War anthem, "Chester" has been called the "Marseilles of the American Revolution" because of its imagery and for its ultimate popularity.²¹ To be sung as a hymn, its *NEPS* incarnation had only one verse, which read:

Let tyrants shake their iron rods,
And slav'ry clank her galling chains,
We fear them not, we trust in God,
New-england's God forever reigns.²²

¹⁹ The fact of *NEPS*' delayed printing is thus also intriguing when considering Billings' gendered connection to community. That he waited for the availability of American paper to avoid a British tax levied through the Stamp Act suggests a seriousness about patriotism -- and manhood. On patriotism and masculinity, see Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," 44-45; Phillips Payson, *A Sermon Preached before the Honourable Council... of the State of Massachusetts Bay* (Boston: John Gill, 1778), 32.

²⁰ These lyrics are from his "Europe" which in *NEPS* was placed opposite "Chester," Billings' most famous paean to American patriotism. ("Chester" is discussed more fully below.) The contrast between the two songs is striking -- and deliberately so, as Billings meant "Europe" to be quite sardonic. *Works (NEPS)*, Vol. 1, 321-323.

²¹ "Chester" is to have rivaled "Yankee Doodle" as the Revolutionary anthem. Soldiers sang the song during military parading and even carried the song-book "'from camp to camp.'" Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution*, 396; Hazen, "Songs of Revolutionary America," 189; Ewen, *Great Men of American Popular Song*, 6.

²² *Works (NEPS)*, Vol. I, 321.

Fitting the lyric standard, which emphasized liberty and freedom, characterizing other Revolutionary songs, Billings' tune was unique for its piousness and brevity. But while the *NEPS* version represented a general indictment of the tyranny colonists suffered before 1770, four more explicitly anti-British stanzas were added, probably written and performed by Billings during the war. Billings reprinted this version of "Chester" in his 1778 tunebook, *The Singing Master's Assistant*.²³

Howe and Burgoyne and Clinton too,
 With Prescot and Cornwallis join'd,
 Together plot our Overthrow
 In one Infernal league combin'd.

When God inspir'd us for the fight,
 Their ranks were broke, their lines were forc'd,
 Their Ships were Shatter'd in our sight,
 Or swiftly driven from our Coast.

The Foe comes on with haughty Stride,
 Our troops advance with martial noise,
 Their Vet'rans flee before our Youth,
 And Gen'ral's yield to beardless Boys.

What grateful Off'ring shall we bring,
 What shall we render to the Lord,
 Loud Hallelujahs let us Sing,
 And praise his name on ev'ry Chord.²⁴

²³ On Revolutionary War songs, see Hazen, "Songs of Revolutionary America," 179-195. The popularity of *The Singing Master's Assistant*, also known as "Billings Best," and Billings' own special regard for the volume, Kenneth Silverman explains, "came in part from the many patriotic songs." These included "Philadelphia," "Columbia," "Washington," and "Retrospect," among others. Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution*, 396.

²⁴ *Works (SMA)*, Vol. II, 72-73.

With images of “martial noise” and “beardless boys,” Billings self-consciously played with gendered imagery in the lyrics to “Chester.” Here he patriotically invoked the manliness of colonists’ military valor, juxtaposing this with an unmaning of the British army in the final two lines of the penultimate stanza. But also important is his employment of slave imagery. The iron bonds of slavery were understood as a serious threat to manhood -- they had the ability to eliminate a man’s independence, his individuality.²⁵

“America,” an anthem honoring the colonies’ attempt to wrest freedom from British oppression, “to Rights secured by Equal Laws,/From Persecution’s Iron Claws,” and “Liberty,” the ironic hymn to “our gracious King,” too, were Revolutionary songs. But Billings’ recreation of Psalm 137 reads as the true apogee of his patriotism. The anthem, “Lamentation over Boston: By the Rivers of Watertown,” first published in 1778, is an anti-British description of the 1775-1776 British occupation of Boston. In the first two stanzas of the song, the singer weeps on the banks of the Charles river while recounting Boston’s “Bondage,” decrying the British army’s “thirst for American Blood.” But it is in the last lines of the song that Billings most convincingly confirms a personal connection between patriotism and manliness. The final stanza reads:

If I forget thee, yea if I do not remember thee
Then let my numbers cease to flow
Then be my Muse unkind.
Then let my Tongue forget to move
& ever be confin’d.²⁶

Rather than a simple, generic condemnation of the war, Billings’ final stanza indicates a deeply felt, personal allegiance to the American side. The imperative to remember the British occupation was to be upheld; the consequence of forgetting meant losing freedom of speech. Not a loose

²⁵ For slave imagery and late eighteenth-century conceptions of independence as a masculine characteristic, see Smith-Rosenberg, “Dis-Covering the Subject of the ‘Great Constitutional Discussion, 1786-1789.’”

²⁶ *Works (SMA)*, Vol. II, 136-147.

abstraction or fashionable patriotism, the significance of this responsibility to memory had important ramifications for Billings' sense of manhood because it was in language -- speech, prose, and music -- that he "carved" his manliness. Ultimately, protecting the memory of the war, and the effort to protect individual liberty was for Billings a way to affirm his gendered self.²⁷

Billings' collaboration with Paul Revere on his frontispiece, and with Benjamin Edes, whose *Boston Gazette* was an organ of the patriots, as well as some of his song lyrics, then, are unmistakable in this context. More than just circumstantial evidence, these connections imply that Billings conformed to or helped to invent the masculine conceptions of virtue and patriotism (and community), even at the expense of waiting a year and a half to publish his first song-book. Prolonging publication of *NEPS* was a trifling consequence he proudly endured, and this gesture undoubtedly contributed to the high esteem to which he would generally be held the rest of his life. Yet Billings also remained committed to a gendered sense of independence, as his attempts to copyright his music attest. Billings thus balanced both an obligation to community as well as a dose of self-assertiveness, meaning his sense of manhood did not perfectly fit either manly ideal, *communal manhood* or *self-made manhood*. His was somewhere in-between, and of his own composition.

²⁷ For the connection between the speech act and masculinity, see Jane Kamensky, "Talk Like a Man: Speech, Power, and Masculinity in Early New England," *Gender & History* 8 (April 1996): 22-47; Jane Kamensky, *Governing the Tongue: The Politics of Speech in Early New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

After *NEPS* appeared in 1770, Billings did no more publishing until 1778. This did not mean, however, that he took a leave of absence from music during this period. Three separate times, in 1770, 1772, and finally in 1778, Billings pursued patent protection for his music. Not only intending to protect *NEPS*, Billings also sought copyrights for the future projects he had in mind, and in 1778, for his textbook for singing-school masters, *The Singing Master's Assistant (SMA)*. In a break from the Puritan notion that writing was merely a reformulation of what everyone already knew -- the author thus deserving little credit -- individual acknowledgment of originality was essential to Billings' gendered self-conception. While many authors insisted on remaining anonymous, writing for Billings was self-affirming. Hence his concern for proper acknowledgement, and more importantly for earning a living, his insistence that he be properly remunerated for his efforts.²⁸ In *SMA*, Billings included in his Introduction a notice that the work presented, unless otherwise noted, was *his own*: "I have been very careful, to give credit for words, and where no credit is given, the words are written by the Author." Sensitive to the possibility of plagiarism, or "piracy," as he described it, Billings wished to have "alone" control of his work. Though he would fail in his individual attempts to patent his music, copyright law was eventually passed by Massachusetts in 1783 (and federal legislation followed in 1790), offering Billings' compositions protection from devious anthologizers.²⁹

While Billings occupied his twenty-fourth birthday in October 1770, by writing the Preface to *NEPS*, he probably devoted the remainder of the month to drafting a petition to patent his forthcoming songbook. Conscious of others "pirating" his compositions, he wished to protect his work from unscrupulous compilers who reprinted music in anthologies without authors' permission or intent to provide compensation to them.

²⁸ This analysis relies on Davidson's work on authorship in early America. Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*, esp. 29-35.

²⁹ On the copyright laws, see Karl Fenning, "Copyright Before the Constitution," *Journal of the Patent Office Society* XVII (May 1935): 379-385; Frederick Richmond Goff, "The First Decade of the Federal Act for Copyright, 1790-1800," in *Essays Honoring Lawrence C. Wroth*, ed. Frederick Richmond Goff et al., eds., (Portland, ME: Anothoensen Press, 1951); and Ruth Leonard, "Bibliographical Importance of Copyright Records," *College and Research Libraries*, 7 (January 1946): 34-40.

On November 7, 1770, Billings sent the Great and General Court a request for legal protection, “praying that he may have the exclusive Privilege of selling a Book of Church-Musick, compos’d by himself, for a certain Term of Years.” His petition was immediately considered, with a November 13 decision to grant Billings “leave to bring in a Bill.” Three days later, though, the assembly read “A Bill for granting to William Billings the sole Privilege of Printing and Vending a Work of his own Composition, consisting of Tunes and Anthems suitable to be used in Religious Assemblies” twice and “referred [it] to the next session.” They took no further action on the bill, effectively denying Billings’ petition.

Billings actually had little reason to expect that the Commonwealth would grant him the patent. Considering the loose conceptions of authorship that prevailed in the late eighteenth century, members of the legislature may not have seen the use for a patent. Moreover, as many deemed writing a “vanity business” in the early national period, the assembly possibly viewed debating the economic rights of the author as frivolous. Also, considering Billings worthy of copyright protection was itself suspect. While Billings himself entertained little doubt as to his own merit, his reputation as a composer was not yet widely recognized. At least one member of the legislature seriously questioned whether or not Billings was actually “the real Author of the Book [*NEPS*],” or was himself a sly impostor seeking to defraud the *real* William Billings.³⁰

His next petition did not suffer the same flaws. In it he argued in the clearest of terms about his need for a musical patent. Eighteen months after his first request was denied, Billings submitted once again on his own behalf. On May 27, 1772, the legislature received from him a carefully worded and reasoned petition asking for patent protection. Whereas his identity as a composer was slightly obscure in 1770, the publication of *NEPS* and its subsequent popularity ensured his recognition. Billings deliberately pointed to this. His “Book... consisting of Psalm-Tunes, Anthems & Canons,” he wrote, “which has been found upon Experience, to be to general Acceptance; & which Composition is made much use of in many of our Churches, & is more & more used every

³⁰ *Journal of the Massachusetts House of Representatives* (1770), 143 [for Nov. 7]; 155 [for Nov. 13]; 165 [for Nov. 16]; McKay and Crawford, *William Billings of Boston*, 221-222; Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*, 30; Rollo G. Silver, *The American Printer, 1787-1825* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1967), 98.

day.” Apprehensive, too, about the fate of future work, Billings cited “a 2d: Vol” soon to be published. In consideration of his already popular collection and forthcoming song-book, he complained in the deferent third-person: “that an unfair Advantage is about to be taken against him, & that others should have been asham’d, to have exposed himself, by publishing any Tunes, Anthems, or Canons, composed by Another.” It was unlikely, according to Billings, that others would have such humility. He thus felt his work was in serious danger of plagiarism, at great expense to him and to the unfair profit of others. “[B]y the indulgence of this Honbl Court,” Billings concluded, he hoped that he would “be favor’d with the alone Privilege, of printing his own Composition.”³¹

The legislature favorably recognized the cogency of his argument on June 9. They granted permission “to bring in a Bill,” and on June 14 the “William Billings Copyright Act” gave Billings the sole right “of printing and vending a Book by him Composed consisting of a Great variety of psalm-tunes Anthems, & Canons in two Vols.” Obviously moved by his predicament -- composition having “cost him much pains and application and has also been very expensive to him” -- and impressed with his “supplication,” the legislature decided to protect Billings’ work for a term of seven years (the word fourteen is crossed out here and replaced with the word seven³²) with the penalty for ignoring this copyright set at a hefty ten pounds per offense. Later that day, with the bill thrice read, passed, and engrossed, Billings’ petition was in position to become law. But the act never left Governor Thomas Hutchinson’s desk. The Governor’s refusal to sign the bill thus killed Billings’ second attempt at patent protection. Frustrated, he did not resubmit a “prayer” on behalf of *NEPS*, but he did plead once more for a music patent once he had new material in the publication process.³³

³¹ *Massachusetts Archives*, Vol. 58, 598-599.

³² Fourteen years would have been consistent with the protection given by British law. Nathan, *William Billings: Data and Documents*, 25.

³³ Though speculative, it is entirely possible that, as David McKay opines, Billings’ friendship with Samuel Adams impeded the bill’s progress. Gov. Hutchinson and Adams were hardly on amicable terms, especially after a legislative imbroglio between 1770 and 1772 that pitted the two (Adams was the Speaker in the legislature at the time) in opposition to one another. It is possible, then, that Billings’ patent was denied

Billings' third and final petition came in June, 1778, with the publication of his second song-book, *The Singing Master's Assistant*. Asking for patent rights for "the space of ten years," Billings reiterated his concern for protecting his music: "[Y]our Petitioner is apprehensive that some avaricious Person, or Persons, will, in a Piratical manner, intercept & copy said Composition to the great Prejudice of your Petitioner."³⁴ Denied once again, this rejection seems to have finally settled the matter for Billings. He did not again petition the legislature, even though he published *Music in Miniature* in 1779, and *Psalm-Singer's Amusement* in 1781. But after the Massachusetts legislature enacted a copyright law in 1783, protecting work for twenty-one years and carrying a fine between £5 and £3,500, Billings did patent his final two volumes, *Suffolk Harmony* (1786) and *Continental Harmony* (1794). Billings' earlier works, however, remained unprotected -- probably because of confusion as to what could be patented. Billings may have assumed that because he published the books prior to the passage of the law the legislation provided no protection. Unfortunately, as he never registered these volumes, anthologizers plundered *NEPS* and *SMA* in particular during the 1780s.³⁵

As these attempts to patent his craft clearly attest, music to Billings was not produced simply for the benefit of the community and the uplift of song -- although these were indeed important reasons to compose. Billings' compositions represented hard labor, his own, exclusive product, as he asserted in his song-book prefaces and patent petitions: "your petitioner [has] been at great Labour & Expence, in composing, & printing." Billings saw his music as a commodity. He published with the intent to sell for a profit, and broadly advertised to generate the widest consumer response. Billings accurately emphasized his "great Labour & Expence." Printing a songbook proved an expensive venture, virtually impossible without buyers already lined up. If Billings could not get subscribers, then in all likelihood the expenses incurred during publication

because of a personal feud only indirectly involving him. McKay, "William Billings and the Colonial Music Patent," 103.

³⁴ *Massachusetts Archives*, Vol. 58, 598-599.

³⁵ McKay, "William Billings and the Colonial Music Patent," 104.

became his debt, not the printer's.³⁶ As Toby Ditz has recently shown, merchants in late eighteenth-century Philadelphia conceived of commercial success and failure in conspicuously gendered terms. Rather than recognizing that the cause of economic inequity was the function of an impersonal market, they deemed failure effeminate; for manly strength of character allowed men to prevail in the precarious, emerging capitalist marketplace.³⁷ Underscoring this fact, when Billings appealed to the Commonwealth he sought to protect his independence, ironically, by explaining how vulnerable his masculinity was. As Philadelphia merchants did in appeals for legal or financial support, Billings unmanned himself in a supplicant's plea for protection, and as a show of the danger he faced.

This gendered emphasis on the individual's autonomy corresponds to Billings' attempt to copyright his music. If Billings' finances were uncertain, the blame was his. To protect himself, he endeavored to gain copyrights for his compositions. Those lurking "pirates," as they undercut Billings' ability to earn a living by stealing his potential profits, thus threatened his individual ability to support himself and family.³⁸ They threatened his manhood -- a sense of manliness predicated on individual virtue as well as responsibility to community. While he conceived of music as a holy gift meant to encourage community, Billings songs were also his own. They were his livelihood, an extension of his gendered self.

³⁶ Davidson, *Revolution and the World*; Warner, *Letters of the Republic*.

³⁷ Ditz, "Shipwrecked; Or, Masculinity Imperiled," 51.

³⁸ Billings did indeed have a family to support at this point. He married Lucy Swan of Stoughton in July 1774. By 1778, Lucy had delivered two baby girls: Rachel, born September 30, 1775, died the following August, and Abigail Adams-Billings was born April 27, 1777. Abigail lived well into the nineteenth century. *The Record of Births, Marriages, and Deaths and Intentions of Marriages in Stoughton and Canton* (Canton, 1896), 140; page from the Billings family bible in Frank J. Metcalf, *American Writers and Compilers of Sacred Music* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1925; reprint Russell & Russell, 1967), 54.

A close reading of William Billings' life both complicates and compliments the manly ideals, *communal manhood* and *self-made manhood*, that historians have described. While these paradigms of manhood existed, Billings did not merely conform: he also actively shaped his own individual, gendered self. He testified to this in his own writing. Beyond the novelty of Billings' irreverent literary voice, the "sauciness" of which Kenneth Silverman has remarked on, one notices his sense of individuality. He considered himself not "confined" by the standards his predecessors set or by the rules his contemporaries followed, writing "I come as near as I possibly can to a set of rules which I have carved out for myself." While written in defense of his music, his most famous words, urging "every *Composer* to be his own *Carver*" also reflect his gendered sense of individualism.³⁹

Significantly, though the study of Billings' music and life are particular to Billings, his individual experiences have broader implications about early American manhood. Because Billings balanced competing masculinities, his life underscores the ambiguity of late eighteenth-century manhood. Billings' gendered sense of self challenges historians' strict paradigms of early American masculinity. It is possible that, like Billings, many men followed this pattern of individually fashioning their own sense of manhood -- though, to be sure, within the context of a range of acceptable masculinities.⁴⁰ An ideal, after all, was just an ideal; no one could truly, fully embody it. But in trying, a man likely balanced the standards of any number of masculine ideals. Further investigation into men's *experiences* will thus undoubtedly uncover a manly pragmatism: men, at some level aware of gendered paradigms, attempted to define their own sense of manhood through experience, through the individual lives they lived. Though manly ideals may help historians to conceive of possible manhoods, exploring the individual experiences of men like

³⁹ Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution*, 203; *Works (The Continental Harmony)*, Vol. IV, 32; *Works (NEPS)*, Vol. I, 32.

⁴⁰ Two examples are Benjamin Franklin and William Cooper. For Franklin, see Dorsey, *City of Brotherly Love*, 234; on Cooper, see Alan Taylor's *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Knopf, 1995).

William Billings will further enhance the understanding of how late eighteenth-century men “carved” their masculinity.